What else can I say that has not already been said? The culmination (whirlwind?) of three years worth of editing *The Chestatee Review* has made me a mere shell of the man I was. I feel like a writer trying to complete the final edition of a trilogy while finding that all my good ideas have already been used. I am still amazed at how different the process was each year and how surprisingly unprepared I always felt at every exciting new challenge.

That said, it has been a fantastic ride working with some of the most talented and enthusiastic people I have ever met. A huge “thank you” goes out to all the editors and faculty who supported me when I grew despondent and wanted to spontaneously set everything on fire. Changes in this year’s edition include customized headers by Margaret Amoss that, just as lighting a room, set a certain tone for the magazine’s personality.

The art department has also been invaluable for this year’s publication. Special thanks go out to John Amoss and Meredith Short for doing a wonderful job collecting artwork and formatting the magazine itself. Groveling profusely is not enough to express my gratitude for all the hard work that was selflessly given in pursuit of perfection.

This year’s edition of the magazine represents what I would almost call a “new era,” which is the result of a new partnership between the English and Art Departments. For the first time, the layout of the magazine has been designed and managed by graphic artists John Amoss and his student Meredith Short. The new look of the magazine is really exciting and, I believe, a much more sophisticated showcase for student artwork and literary selections.

Finally, to Tana Suggs, my unofficial coeditor, thank you so much for all the hard work and taking up the slack on virtually everything and always doing it with a smile.

— Jack Taylor
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The Matryoshka Doll
Tia Lynn Lecorchick

Violet’s eyebrows slant sharply inward, abandoning their usual half-moon shape. “What do you mean you are going to have a baby?” she demands. “Wonderful, just go off and have a new baby.” Violet tosses her hand of cards across the table, knocking over a pile of poker chips. “But don’t expect me to have any part of it!” she yells as she stomps up the stairs. Iris winces at the sound of Violet’s bedroom door slamming shut.

“You come back down here right now, Violet! Violet!” Lily beckons from the bottom of the staircase. She throws her arms in the air, reluctantly accepting defeat.

Tiptoeing from her room, Violet cautiously navigates her path to the top of the stairs. She silently sits, stooping her head low to better hear the conversation between her mother and grandmother.

“Well, that went well,” jokes Iris, looking regretfully at what could have been a promising hand.

“Mother, please, I knew my pregnancy would be hard for Violet, but she is behaving like a spoiled brat.” Lily marches into the kitchen and pours herself a cup of coffee. Before feeding her caffeine addiction, she remembers her doctor’s warning about too much coffee. She reluctantly dumps it into the sink, watching yet another sacrifice swirl down into the metal abyss.

“She’s sixteen,” Iris says, startling Lily, “Remember how it felt to be sixteen, dear? Everything is a drama.” Iris removes the orange juice from the fridge and sets it down next to Lily.

“Well that may be, but it’s no excuse for Violet to lash out like that. I could really use her support right now,” Lily says as she pours juice into a glass. “I’ve devoted my whole life to Violet, and she knows that! I gave up my education, my freedom ... my youth for that girl! How she can throw a tantrum like that ... it’s unbelievable how ungrateful she is!”

A familiar pang burrows through the lining of Violet’s stomach. The deadening feeling that Violet’s mere existence has ruined her mother’s life crawls beneath her skin. She repeatedly shakes her head in an unsuccessful effort to ward off the inner accusation.

“Just give her some time to digest that she’s going to have a brother or sister, and a stepfather. It’s a big adjustment. She’ll come around,” Iris says.

“Yeah, stepfather,” Lily mutters before gulping down her orange juice.

Iris’s dark brow ascends near the middle of her forehead as she thoroughly inspects her daughter. “You are planning on marrying Derek, aren’t you Lil?” Lily turns to refill her glass, escaping Iris’s inquisitive glare. “Lily?” Iris presses.

“Yes Mother, OK? I was planning on it! Derek, on the other hand, is not ready to be a husband, or a father for that matter,” Lily confesses.

“He’ll come around, just give him some time to take it all in,” Iris reassures.

“Time? Everybody needs time! Violet needs time! Derek needs time! What about me? I’m pregnant now whether I like it or not. I don’t get any time!” Lily says.
“Well, maybe ...”

“Enough, Mom! We broke up, alright? He doesn’t want to marry me and he most certainly doesn’t want to be a father to this baby!” Lily’s voice cracks. “He asked me to ... to ... abort ‘it.’” Lily’s proud face surrenders to sorrow. “He called our baby an ‘it!’” she sobs.

Iris embraces her only daughter, stroking Lily’s long onyx mane. “Oh sweetie, don’t cry,” she says. “We’ll get through this. Men like Derek should be castrated, going around spreading their seed with no regard for the consequences,” Iris says, remembering her own experience of single motherhood.

“Mom, I just don’t know if I can go through it all again. It was so hard with Violet, raising her without a father. I just don’t know if I can do it.” Lily buries her tear-soaked face in her mother’s beckoning shoulder. After she collects herself, Iris softly squeezes Lily’s hand.

“C’mom, one more hand, I feel a lucky one headed my way,” Iris says.

Slinking back into her room, Violet regrets the decision to eavesdrop. She glances around her room, the only room she can call her own in the only home she’s ever known. She grimaces at the lavender walls and the floral comforter lying on the bed she so rarely sleeps in. In a burst of anger, she rips the covers off of her bed. She flips over her end-table, rattling the beauty products displayed on her dresser. Breathless, she lifts the end-table and chucks it against the wall, sending a self that holds all of her favorite stuffed animals and dolls into orbit. She watches souvenirs from her childhood scatter randomly about the room.

The unleashed rage is hindered by the distinct sound of hollow wood thudding against the floor. Her eyes frantically search the ground. She picks up a hand-sized Russian matryoshka doll. It is the largest member of a trio set, with a plump, kind-eyed lady painted on a case of wood. She opens it, and two smaller replicas are found inside. Each one of the matryoshka dolls wears a deep sapphire bonnet, a ruby dress, and an emerald apron. Violet had nearly forgotten how she used to love to play with the set when it sat on her mother’s nightstand. The fond memory quickly vanishes as Violet’s mind races back to the night she removed the smallest of the wooden ladies and hid it in her room. Violet checks for any nicks and scratches. Relieved that the doll is unharmed, she hides it beneath the crowded array of colored socks in the top drawer of her dresser. She stares for a moment, but is startled by the voice of her mother coming from the other side of the bedroom door.

“Violet Brennan, what is going on in there?” Lily demands to know.

“Nothing! Just leave me alone! I just want to be left alone!” Violet says.

“Unless Hurricane Katrina is renting out your room, there is no reason for such a ruckus! Just come downstairs so we can talk this out,” Lily pleads.

Biting her lower lip, Violet suppresses her tears. “No!” she manages to get out. “I don’t want to talk about it. I already know I ruined your life. Now, you can start all over with the new baby. Maybe this kid won’t put you in a rundown nursing home when you get old, like I would!”

“Don’t talk like that, Violet. You know that none of that is true!” Lily insists.

“It is true. It is! Just go away!” Violet pleads.
Violet opens her bedroom window, letting the breeze dry her face. She pulls the blanket and pillow off her bed, plopping them out on the roof, and climbs out onto her shingled sanctuary. Out here, she often does homework, plays solitaire, and observes town life unfold before her.

The Brennans live in a busy town. The sound of parties, traffic, and police sirens can be heard at all hours of the night. They are the only real family left on the street. Their neighbors change every fall with a new breed of students. Always college students; seven or eight college juniors crammed into three-bedroom houses. More and more every year, they come, louder and messier than the year before. The town has become a giant crumb upon which cockroaches continually feed, infested with bars, eateries, and coffee houses. Violet can’t fully stretch out her arms between the tight-packed rows of houses on her street.

Peering down from her haven, Violet observes the double-life lived by her college student neighbors. By day, they are studious, serious young adults, preparing to be the future pillars of society. By night, they are drunken, scantily-clad partiers, absorbing every cheap thrill at their disposal. To Violet, the whole town is a jumbled parade of bookbags, baseball caps, and beer bottles. When she was twelve, she would toss water balloons from her roof down onto the intoxicated crowd bellowing beneath her window in the wee hours of the night.

Now Violet lies on her roof, finding comfort in the constant commotion that irritated her as a child. It’s like living near the beach, growing accustomed to the feral waves relentlessly crashing upon the shore. Violet looks out beyond the small realm of her neighborhood and focuses on the enormous hotel towering over the town. When the sun sets, she watches the golden beams of sunlight reflect off the giant sheets of glass. She thinks that it’s the only beautiful sight in her town. A large gang of crows has occupied the hotel’s roof, and they waddle back and forth on the ledge, bobbing their heads, occasionally peering over, as if assessing whether or not to take the steep plunge. Inevitably they always do. They gracefully dive into the air, descending in circular swoops before vigorously flapping their way back to their concrete pedestals. Violet watches as, over and over, they venture toward the ground, faithfully changing their mind before co-mingling with the wingless common species. Violet’s eyes are heavy, and the last image she sees before drifting into slumber is the sight of a crow fearlessly plummeting off the hotel’s roof before spreading its wings to soar.

****

Lily silently retreats downstairs to neutral territory after Violet’s hurtful outburst. "Is everything alright with Violet?" asks Iris.

"Not now, Mom," she answers. Lily closes her bedroom door, crawls beneath her favorite quilt, and stares at the ceiling. Her eyes fix upon a small star-shaped paint splatter as her hand travels to her slightly swollen stomach. Lily had lain in this room before and stared at the same spot with a life and a strong sense of worry growing inside of her. She
thinks over the days when she found herself pregnant with Violet.

Sixteen years earlier, Lily had run through the back door of her house and rushed into her bedroom. She took a pharmacy bag out of her purse and stumbled into the bathroom. She wrapped her pin-straight, raven-black hair into a bun before opening the pregnancy test. She was due to start her junior year of high school in just four days.

“Ten minutes!” she said aloud in dismay as she read the directions. She never thought she could invest so much anxiety into a six-inch piece of plastic. She impatiently waited, cracking her knuckles and tapping her feet. She never removed her eyes from the test. It was like trying to see inside a crystal ball that would reveal her future. One of her mother’s favorite clichés popped into her mind. “A watched pot never boils,” Iris always said to an impatient Lily. Lily’s attention was diverted for a moment when she heard squeaking hinges. The faint sound of rustling grocery bags was soon followed by, “Lily, can you come out here and help me put the food away?” Iris called.

“I’ll be out in a minute, Mom!” she shouted. When she returned her attention to the pregnancy test, she saw the color pink staring back at her. All the fears and stress she had built up over the last week were confirmed by a single pink line. She wrapped the test thoroughly in toilet paper and threw it in the trash. She lifted her shirt and stared at her flat belly in the mirror. “I wonder how long it will be before I start to show,” she wondered.

Lily returned to her bedroom. The figure of Iris looming in the doorway caught her off guard.

“Lil, those groceries are not going to put themselves away,” Iris chided. Avoiding eye contact, Lily walked past her mother. “I’ll do it right now,” Lily said. “Geesh.” Iris followed Lily into the kitchen, watching her daughter clumsily fumble through a grocery bag. Lily dropped a box of cereal on the floor, bent over to pick it up, and bumped her head on the kitchen table. Then she removed a tub of ice cream and placed it in the cupboard.

“Lily, have you lost it? That ice cream won’t last five minutes in there in this heat,” Iris said.

“Huh?” Lily hypnotically asked. “Oh, sorry Mom, I wasn’t thinking.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Iris said as she assessed her daughter. “Honey, is there anything you want to talk about?” Lily stood still with the freezer door wide open, praying the cold air would freeze the feelings welling up inside of her. But it was no use; she couldn’t control the tears. They mercilessly departed from her eyes, before she could even attempt to suppress them. Then it came. A quiet whimper escaped from her mouth. Iris, suddenly alarmed, took Lily by the shoulder and spun her around so she could see her face.

“Lily, what is it? You’re scaring me,” Iris asked.

“Oh Mommy!” Lily sobbed. “I ... I ... really messed up.”

“What’s the matter? Are you sick? Did you wreck the car? What? Tell me this instant what’s happened!” Iris’s sapphire eyes were thirsty for answers. Lily broke away from her mother’s grip, clutched her stomach and stared down at it for a moment before locking her eyes with Iris’s. She didn’t have to say a word. Iris slumped into one of the kitchen-table chairs in disbelief.

“Oh Lily, no, not a baby. You’re just a baby!” Iris said, breaking the awkward
silence. Iris put her head in her hands and repeated over and over, “A baby, not a baby.” Lily knelt beside her mother.

“Mommy, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen. Please Mommy, don’t cry,” she pleaded.

Iris collected herself, wiped her face, and looked her daughter square in the face. The red, irritated skin around her eyes gave her a look of ferocity. “What are we going to do about this, Lily?”

“There’s not much we can do,” Lily answered, not understanding the question.

“Lily,” said Iris soberly, “Have you thought about ... are you going to ... do you want to ... to ...” and then in a lowered voice, “to terminate this pregnancy?”

Lily leapt to her feet and wrapped her arms around her torso. “And kill my baby?! I could never!” she insisted.

Iris, in spite of her grief and disappointment, felt strangely proud of Lily. “What remarkable courage comes with youth’s naiveté,” she thought.

“No one is going to kill your baby. We’ll get through this together,” Iris said, half to Lily and half to herself.

*****

Now, sixteen years later, Lily finds herself in need of her mother’s reassurance yet again. Lily rolls over and looks at her nightstand. An alarm clock sits beside a framed picture of her mother, herself, and Violet, and a Russian matryoshka doll. Lily has had the doll since she was five or six years old. The set of three originally belonged to Iris. After much begging for it, Iris agreed to let Lily keep the set, as long as Iris could keep the largest wooden lady. It still dwells in the living room, reigning atop her mantle-top kingdom, ruling her subjects of snow globes and bells. Lily kept the other two dolls until about ten years ago, when the smallest figure went missing. She has often wondered what became of her. She reaches for the remaining doll and looks at her exaggerated face, plump hips, and the exuberant ruby, sapphire, and emerald hues that brighten her wardrobe. Lily remembers the first time she ever played with her longtime friend.

Lily’s father had just left Iris. Iris told Lily that Daddy was on a long vacation and would be back, but Iris’s dark, swollen eye and bruised arms said something different. Iris was bedridden for weeks with grief.

Lily had taken the matryoshka doll from the display case, gotten out her Lincoln Logs, and sat down in front of the stairs, where she had begun building a cottage for the ladies to live in.

The neighborhood babysitter sat reading a book on the couch. “Mommy is resting and is not to be bothered,” the babysitter told Lily. Lily worked diligently on the cabin, hoping the woman would let her show the finished product to her mother. Lily heard the sound of slippers shuffling across the upstairs hall, and caught a glimpse of her mother entering the hall bathroom at the top of the stairs.

As Lily put the final touches on the roof of the cottage, a loud crash sounded from
The babysitter rushed past Lily, knocking over the cottage in her hurry to get up the stairs. Lily watched as the babysitter knocked frantically on the bathroom door.

“Iris? Iris?” she called. “Is everything alright in there?” No answer came. “Please, Iris, just open the door and let me in.” The babysitter violently shook the doorknob, banging her hip against the hollow door and forcing the lock to break. The door swung wide open. The babysitter stood in the hall and thrust her hands against her face. She screamed out, “Oh Iris, what did you do?! What did you do?!” The babysitter disappeared into the bathroom.

Lily sat frozen as her mother came into view. Her pretty white robe was drenched with maroon splotches. The babysitter led Iris downstairs, holding a towel around Iris’s arms. Lily barely recognized her mother. Iris’s normally porcelain skin was puffy and blotchy. It looked as if the crystal blue in her eyes had been drained out, leaving grey voids in the sockets. There was barely any life left in them. The babysitter sat Iris on the couch and pulled the saturated towel away from her arms. Iris had become a stone fountain statue, a crimson stream gushing from her. Blood squirted uncontrollably from her wrists and splattered the carpet. The babysitter quickly made a tourniquet out of the sleeves of her jacket. She yelled at Lily to run to the neighbor’s and stay put. Lily obeyed and ran, unaware that the matryoshka doll remained tightly clasped in her hands.

A full month passed before Lily saw her mother or set foot in her home again. The only familiar presence was the soothing face of the wooden lady. When Iris finally recovered, Lily returned home with her only friend, the doll. Iris, feeling guilty for all Lily had endured, agreed to let Lily keep the doll—except for the largest lady.

When Lily was twenty-two and Violet was six, Lily fell deeply in love with a pre-med student, Patrick Harris. He had a tall muscular build, sandy hair, and a slightly crooked nose. They were inseparable, spending every free moment together. Lily worked as a receptionist and attended night school. Almost all of her free time went to Patrick. He was the first man to show interest in Lily since Violet’s father. He did not seem scared off by the fact that Lily had a child. Violet would stay home with Iris on the weekends, while Lily and Patrick deepened their relationship. For eight months Lily felt young and carefree. She came home one night and heard Violet calling, “Mommy?!” Lily peeked her head in Violet’s room and said, “Yes hon?” Violet had a puzzled look on her face.

“I was calling my other mommy,” Violet said shyly.
“She’s Mommy Number Two,” Violet giggled.
“Well Mommy Number One is here now, baby. What do you need?” Lily asked.
“My nose is stuffy and I forgot how to blow it,” Violet said.

Lily carried Violet into the bathroom, set her on the counter and handed her a tissue. “Ok, just cover your nose with the tissue and blow as hard as you can,” Lily instructed.

“But Mommy, I don’t want all my brains to spill out!” Violet argued.
“Your brains aren’t going to spill out, now just blow.” Violet blew as hard as she could and Lily discarded the soiled tissue.

“Mommy, now my nose is runny,” Violet complained.
Lily grabbed another tissue, and twisted one of the corners, forming it into the perfect shape for a child’s nostril. “I’ll get it all out, Hon, with my trusty nostril drill!” Violet playfully screamed, and then began laughing hysterically. Lily crept closer, approaching Violet’s nose, making the sound of a drill. “Brrrrrrrrr. Brrrrrrrrr.” She made the drilling sound as she cleaned out each nostril. Violet clapped and said, “Do it again, Mommy, do it again!”

“I think you’re all cleaned out, now let’s get you to bed.” Lily tucked Violet in and headed down to the kitchen.

“When did Violet start calling you Mommy?” Lily pointedly asked.
“You’re just now noticing that Violet calls me Mommy?” Iris asked as she methodically sifted through the flipping pile for a game of solitaire.

“I never heard her call you that before,” Lily said.
“Well, maybe that’s because you’re never here long enough to hear her say much of anything,” Iris said harshly.

“And just what is that supposed to mean?” Lily asked.

“Now, that little girl is my world; I cherish every moment I spend with her, but you have completely shunned your responsibility to her. No matter how much time I spend with her, it’ll never make up for the time you’re missing,” Iris said.

“Mom! That’s not fair. I was just up there with her!” defended Lily as she tucked her long hair behind her ear and placed her hands on her hips, preparing for a verbal sparring match.

“Yeah, that was the first time you put her to bed in months,” Iris said.

“I work all day and go to night school. Patrick is the only luxury in my life. He is the only man that isn’t intimidated by the fact that I have a child,” Lily fired back.
Iris angrily rose from her seat, forsaking the solitaire game. “Well maybe that’s because he doesn’t have to deal with Violet at all. You never bring her with you when you’re with him. He doesn’t have to feed her, bathe her, or entertain her. He’s not intimidated because he only knows you as his girlfriend, not as a mother!” She paced back and forth and then pointed to the ceiling. “Violet asks every weekend where you are and when you’ll be back. She’s always asking where you are. I can’t bear to look into her little eyes and disappoint her anymore. You’re going to have to make some changes, Lily.”

Lily’s face flushed with anger. “You’re overreacting! You’re just jealous that I have Patrick and you’re alone! You hate that I have someone to rely on besides you. You can’t stand the fact that I might have found someone that will take care of me,” she yelled in her mother’s face.

Iris grabbed Lily by the shoulders. “Do you hear yourself? ‘Me, me, me!’ Well, I got news for you Lily, you’re no longer a me—you’re an us! You need to consider Violet’s needs in all of this.”

“I do ... I do consider her needs! Once Patrick and I get really serious, I’m sure he’ll
be more than willing to play a role in Violet’s life!” Lily insisted.

“Lily, you have to make your own choices, but you better not break that little girl’s heart,” Iris warned.

“Ugh! I’ve had it. I’m spending the night at Patrick’s. I can’t stand to be in this house one more minute!” Lily rushed out of the house and slammed the door. She drove straight to Patrick’s apartment.

Lily saw Patrick’s roommate in the hallway of the apartment they shared. “Oh hey, Lil,” he said.

“Patrick is home tonight, right?” Lily asked.

“I think so; he didn’t mention going out.” The roommate opened the apartment door and let Lily walk in first. The apartment was dim.

Lily approached Patrick’s bedroom and heard music. She knocked softly on the door, but there was no answer. She cracked the door and gazed into the candlelit room. Her eyes immediately landed on the long blonde hair pressed up against Patrick’s bare chest. Stunned, she stood in the doorway, shooting a mental snapshot of Patrick’s betrayal. Lily released the doorknob, and the door slowly swung open on its own. Patrick suddenly looked up and leapt out of bed, wrapping a sheet around his exposed body.

“Lily, I can explain,” he insisted.

Lily glanced over at the embarrassed blonde in Patrick’s bed.

“No,” Lily whispered, “I’ve seen and heard enough. I... I... have to go.” She turned around and bolted out of the apartment. As she jumped into her car, she heard Patrick yelling from the apartment building’s entrance.

“Lily! Lily! Wait. Don’t leave it like this!” he yelled.

Lily peeled out of her parking spot, smacking into a curb, and sped off into the unknown night. “How could I have been so foolish?” she thought. “Of course he’s seeing another girl. I will never find a man willing to commit to a twenty-two-year-old single mom! How stupid to think Patrick loved me... that... that... he could love Violet one day!”

Lily cautiously slipped into her sleeping house. As she sat in front of her vanity mirror, she stared at the dark circles forming beneath her sapphire eyes. She replayed the harsh words she had spoken to her mother, and the sound of Violet calling Iris Mommy. “I’ve ruined my life, I’ve ruined my life,” she moaned.

Disgusted with herself, Lily pounded her clenched fists against her own reflection. The mirror shattered and fell in glistening pieces all over the floor. She became entranced with the shards of glass that lay before her feet. As she stared at her multiple reflections in the tiny pieces of glass, the voice that had haunted her as a child came out of the silence. “Iris, what did you do?! What did you do?!” Over and over, louder and louder, the unrelenting voice erupted. She could not escape it. Lily picked up one of the larger shards of glass and sliced open each of her wrists. The air felt crisp on her exposed wounds. Blood splattered across the pieces of broken mirror, across her view of her own shattered reflection. As Lily drifted far from reality, frantic footsteps stomped down the stairs.

The bedroom door flew open. “Lily! What did you do? What did you do to yourself?” cried Iris. She frantically called 911, and the operator told Iris how to suppress
the bleeding until the ambulance arrived. Iris cupped Lily’s face in her hands.

“Stay with me now, Lily. I need you to get up and come with me into the kitchen. You’re going to be fine. You’re going to be just fine,” Iris reassured. As Iris guided Lily out of the bedroom, she thought she heard a faint noise behind her, but she was too preoccupied to investigate. As the red and blue lights from the ambulance poured through the shades of Lily’s bedroom, Violet, dressed in her mother’s heels and jewelry, sat wide-eyed and trembling in her mother’s closet, with the ladies of the matryoshka doll strewn about her feet.

****

The final days of Lily’s pregnancy are before her. Lily lays flat on her back, wishing she could still lie on her stomach. Today is her first day of maternity leave. The much-welcomed distraction of work is no longer there to keep her mind from fear, worry, and loneliness. Lily heaves herself to her feet and goes into the kitchen.

“Ma, ya feel like playing a few hands of poker?” she asks.

“You know I’m always up to take you for all you’re worth!” Iris learned to play poker before she could speak in full sentences. When she became a single mother, she taught Lily the fine points of the game. It took Lily years to hone her bluffing techniques, for Iris was quite the card shark. Violet, on the other hand, learned quickly; by the time she was twelve, she was giving Iris and Lily a run for their money.

As Lily listens to the familiar rhythm of shuffling cards, the front door opens.

“Violet, is that you?” Lily calls.

“Yeah, I’m home,” sounds the monotone voice of her daughter, who has recently become quieter, more introverted. The tantrums have ceased, the yelling has subsided, and the tears have dried up.

“Grandma and I are playing poker. We can deal you in,” she offers.

“No thanks. I’ll be in my room,” Violet declines. Her life, since the news of Lily’s pregnancy, has consisted of school and hiding out the roof. She hardly speaks, only when asked a question. Lily even longs for some of Violet’s teenage sass, anything, just to gain some inkling as to what’s going on inside her head.

Violet sits upon her shingled throne, listening to music and reading a magazine. Her mind wanders to the new baby that is to arrive, to take her place, in a few days. Her mind rekindles the words she’s overheard her mother say: “I gave up my youth, my life for Violet”; “I don’t think I can raise a child alone again”; “I ruined my life.” The words continue to come out of the silence; over and over they emerge without Violet’s permission. “Why does Mom think she can’t raise another child again? Was I that terrible? Would this be easier for her if I had been better behaved? I know I wasn’t planned, but was I really a mistake?”

That word, mistake, has always consumed her, no matter who used it or what the context. How she loathes the word. A teacher once told Violet, in front of the whole class, that she had made a mistake on her math problem. The teacher sent an embarrassed Violet
back to the chalkboard to refigure the problem. Violet stood frozen, feeling the entire class ridicule her with their endless stares. The teacher said, “Violet, mistakes must be corrected.” Violet isn’t sure why, but that incident has always remained with her.

“Is it my fault Mom hasn’t gotten married?” she thinks. In a few days everything will change. A baby will be born. Violet will be too old to play with it, to connect with it. “This is mom’s chance for a new life, her re-do.” Violet returns her attention to her magazine.

****

The next morning, Violet awakens early for the last day of school. After she dresses in her green-and-white plaid uniform, Violet grabs a picture of her grandmother and mother. She opens her sock drawer and removes the tiniest of the matryoshka dolls. She stuffs the items into her bookbag and heads down the hall. She enters her grandma’s room and observes Iris peacefully sleeping. Violet stealthily slides over to her and kisses her forehead, whispering, “Love you, Mom.” Then Violet makes her way down to Lily’s room. She carefully opens the door, only to find Lily wide awake. Violet clumsily says, “Oh, I didn’t know you were awake.”

“I didn’t sleep well through the night, so I just decided to stay awake. Did you need something, hon?”

“Oh. Uh, no, I was just going to leave for school and I thought I left my keys in here, but I just remembered they are in the kitchen,” Violet babbles.

“OK dear. Have a good day at school,” Lily says.

Violet turns to exit the room, then pauses. With her back turned towards her mother, she says, “Bye Mommy,” then quickly leaves. Lily hasn’t heard Violet use the word “Mommy” in many years.

Violet drives straight past her house after school without even glancing at it. The hotel that towers over her crowded town comes into full view. She puts the picture and the matryoshka doll into her purse, locks her car doors, and enters the hotel. When family from out of town come in, they always stay at this hotel. As she steps into the elevator, she remembers how she used to get in trouble because she’d ride the elevator for hours when she came to see the visitors. “You’re going to break it, Vie,” warned her great-uncle. Violet hits the button that will take her to the roof.

The elevator opens onto a concrete floor and a warm summer breeze. She walks out, wrapping her arms around herself. She paces back and forth and peers over the edge to take in the sight of the town she grew up in. From all around, she can hear horns, sirens, and cars, the endless murmur of city life. The houses look much smaller, so insignificant. A crow ascends toward the opposite end of the ledge. It rests for a moment before taking another dive. Violet notices water on her neck. Tears have been streaming down her face without her knowledge. She takes out the picture of Lily and Iris and places it in her plaid skirt pocket. She grasps the doll in her left hand and climbs onto the ledge. Looking down, Violet feels dizzy. She tells herself, “Mistakes must be corrected. They must be corrected.”
Violet repeats this mantra to herself. She wiggles her way to the very edge, clasping her doll and shutting her eyes tightly. She stretches her arms all the way out, feeling certain that she can and must do this.

Her concentration is broken by the sound of her favorite tune. Her cell phone is ringing in her purse. She climbs down from the ledge, nervously digs through her purse and answers the phone. “Violet, where are you? I’ve been calling the house; I thought you’d be home from school by now!” Iris says anxiously.

“I ... uh ...” Violet stammers.

“You mother had the baby!” Iris interrupts. “Meet me at the hospital, OK?”

“What did she have?” inquires Violet.

“Violet, you have a little sister.” Violet stands quietly for a moment in disbelief that the baby is actually here. She forces away the memory of asking her mother for a little sister when she was a child.

“Tell Mom congratulations,” Violet says flatly, “but I’m going to be staying at Alexis’s house this weekend.”

“Violet, your mother just gave birth. Don’t you want to meet your sister?” Iris asks angrily.

“Mom, please. I’ll see her when they get home from the hospital; just don’t make me go there now,” Violet says in a cracking voice.

Iris can’t remember the last time Violet has sounded so vulnerable, or when she even attempted to spend time with her friend. “Fine, Violet. Just know that your mom has been asking for you,” Iris concedes.

“Mom, I promise, I’ll see them soon,” Violet says thankfully.

“I love you, little girl. You call me tomorrow, got it?”

“Got it. Love you, too. Bye.”

Violet hangs up and looks at the ledge. She realizes that she will not be able to work up the courage to peer over the fateful drop again. She gathers her things and leaves.

Alexis answers the door. “Hey Alex, do you think I could stay here for a while?” Alexis’s face smiles a huge grin and she hugs Violet. “Of course! I was beginning to think you hated me. You haven’t been over in months!”

“I’m sorry, I’ve been preoccupied, family stuff, ya know?” Violet says.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. There’s a scary movie marathon on we can watch together!” Alexis pulls Violet into the house. “Mom, Dad! Violet’s here!” Alexis yells.

Mrs. Casey serves dinner while Mr. Casey reads the paper. As Violet eats her supper, she stares at the vivid lines on Mrs. Casey’s face. Violet’s mother has no such lines. Mr. Casey looks over his newspaper and engages in conversation with Alexis and Violet.

“So, what are all the cool kids listening to these days? I hear that Puff Diddy is all the rage,” he says as he scratches the top of his balding head.

“Dad, really! Don’t embarrass me!” Alexis pleads.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Hey Violet, would you like to see Alexis’s baby pictures. I think there’s a nice shot of her first time using the potty. It’s a Kodak moment!” Mr. Casey teases.
“Daddy!” Alexis squeals.

“Alright, that’s enough teasing. Dinner is ready,” Mrs. Casey chimes in.

Violet watches Mr. Casey tease Alexis through dinner. He clearly enjoys each and every shade of red that colors Alexis’s face. Violet laughs and laughs, which makes him do it more. Violet didn’t have the chance to experience a father’s presence very often, so she cherishes every minute of the time she spends with Alexis’s family. Violet cons and stalls her way into staying with the Caseys for a whole week, before going home to face her new life.

She stops in front of her porch and takes a deep breath. She is immediately struck by the smell of dinner upon entering the house. She notices a bassinet in the corner of the living room. She glances into the kitchen and sees Iris and Lily cooking supper. As Violet walks closer, the floor creaks. Iris and Lily look up. “Violet, you’re home!” announces Iris. Lily standoffishly says hello and then continues stirring the sauce. Violet knows she’s hurt her mother by staying away so long.

Iris walks over to Violet, takes her by the hand, and says, “There’s someone who’s been waiting to meet you, Vie. Here, sit in the rocking chair.” Violet does as she’s told. Iris lifts what looks like a bundle of blankets out of the bassinet and carefully places it on Violet’s lap. Iris instructs Violet to “rock her while your mother and I finish dinner,” and returns to the kitchen.

Violet looks at her sister’s face, without spot or blemish. As she examines the baby’s hands, the baby grabs hold of Violet’s finger. Violet finds it strange how soft the grip is, yet so forceful, too. She looks up and stares at her mother as she stirs the sauce and chops vegetables. Violet can’t believe her mom is finally learning how to cook. When Violet was little, Iris did all the cooking. Whenever Lily attempted to cook something, it usually wound up requiring a fire extinguisher and take-out menus.

As Violet sits and thinks about how impressed she is by the fact that her mother is successfully cooking, she is suddenly struck by Lily’s age. Violet thinks of the distinct lines on Mrs. Casey’s face. When Violet was younger, she loved introducing people to her mother. Lily was always prettier and more trendily dressed than the other mothers. No one ever believed that Lily could be Violet’s mother. Violet always thought that was because they looked nothing alike. Violet inherited her father’s face, fair skin, and uncontrollable, wavy bronze hair. Lily was dark Irish all the way, with pin-straight hair, just like Iris. It has never occurred to Violet until now that maybe people couldn’t believe they were mother and daughter because Lily looks too young to be her mother.

Violet has never thought about how old Lily must have been when she gave birth to her. She does the math in her head. “Let’s see, Mom is thirty-two and I’m sixteen, so ... she was ... sixteen when she had me,” she figures out. “Sixteen, no, that can’t be right. That’s how old I am now. She couldn’t have been my age when she had me.”

Slowly, it dawns on Violet that the age gap between her and her newly born sister is almost exactly the same as the age gap between her and her mother. This horrifies Violet. “This baby could be mine!” she thinks. As she sits with a tangible baby in her arms to validate her fantasy, she cannot fathom being a mother at her age. Things like work,
marriage, sex, and diapers are far from her thoughts. “But Mom must have had to think about all those things when she was pregnant with me.” The thought of dropping out of school, working full-time, and trying to maintain her friends while waking up at three in the morning to breastfeed is too much to bear. Violet looks again at her mother cooking in the kitchen.

The fog that has blurred Violet’s view of Lily is wiped away. The sacrifices Lily has made are in plain sight. She thinks, “All Mom sacrificed for me would have been in vain if I had flung myself off that hotel roof!” Violet gently squeezes the baby that lies sleeping in her arms, rises to her feet, and places the child back in her bassinet. She walks over to Lily. “Mom, she’s beautiful. What did you name her?” Lily hears the sincerity in Violet’s voice. The flat, monotone chains have loosened from her daughter’s voice.

“Aurora. I named your sister Aurora,” Lily says proudly.

“I think that’s a pretty name, Mom. It fits her. What can I do to help with dinner?”

“No, hon, It’s just gotta simmer for a while now. You could get a diaper out of my bedroom for me, though, if you don’t mind,” requests Lily.

“Sure, Mom,” Violet answers.

Violet sees the diapers inside a bin beside the nightstand. As she lifts it up, her eyes drift to the middle matryoshka doll displayed there. Violet feels the tiniest lady safely tucked away in her pocket. She pulls it out and stacks it inside the other doll. She heads back out into the living room with a diaper and the matryoshka doll set. She sets the diaper down beside the bassinet and reaches for the largest lady of the matryoshka doll, in its spot up on the mantle. She opens the doll up and returns the rest of the set to its rightful place, within the womb of the matriarch doll. Violet closes the doll up and places the completed matryoshka doll back on the mantle, above the baby’s bassinet. “Watch after Aurora,” Violet whispers. Violet hears the sound of poker chips plinking on the kitchen table. Iris and Lily bet candy as they assess their cards. Violet lightly brushes Lily’s back with her hand and sits down at the table.

“Deal me in,” she says.
The Penny Pincher:
A Cautionary Parable—of Caution.
Gonzo Von Kauffman IX
(Stephen Reszetylo)

A long time ago there was a man who, through some extreme degree of self-experimentation, discovered that if he placed a penny up his ass, he could by the next day, rather painlessly, produce a nickel. This man said to himself thus: “Verily! Though the act be disagreeable, the return be nothing to sneeze at, indeed!” Let it be noted here that our protagonist, in some deranged sort of greed, directly set about wasting an entire paper dollar seeking the same result, only to find that this strange trickery only worked on the aforementioned penny.

Through further trial and error the man learned that his unique gift could work on even more than one penny at a time (up to and including fifty pennies at a time, for admittedly more than fifty pennies a day was rather cumbersome). In this way the man went at changing fifty cents into two dollars and fifty cents daily, until one day he noticed just how wealthy he had become. The reader must remember that this particular story takes place many years ago: $2.50 accrued daily for a number of weeks was quite the sizable sum...inflation and such. The man thought to himself: “Verily! It is high time that I indulge in the fruits of my labor!” To be sure, he had worked very hard that month.

Very soon, the man had the finest material goods the land had to offer: illustrious raiment of silk and silver imported from The Orient, plush four thousand thread count Egyptian cotton bed linens, a solid gold Belgian waffle maker, even a carriage carved from pure ivory that was pulled by twelve beautifully-maned stallions of the purest color. Our character was quite elegant, indeed. As he was an arrogant and solitary man, he from time to time would let loose a chuckle upon reflecting where all his riches had come from. “Tee-hee! These provincial fools of the town and country-side haven’t the least idea from whence comes the change that buys their bread!” Misguided though he was, he was correct in his deigning glee, for it came to pass that nary a tenth of the money spent in the kingdom hadn’t originated from his ass.

For a long time, he lived happily insulated in his gloomy mansion set atop the highest hill in town. When he grew bored or weary of his wealthy solitude, he would throw lavish parties, gala events, for nearly all the people of the town. Sadly though, it was not often that he felt the need to be among the people, for in all truth, he was really in love with his money, his financial superiority and the influence it gave him. On one of the rare occasions where he was casually strolling through the market place, a meager peasant passed by him and said, “Money can’t buy Happiness, you know!” Slightly taken aback that a peasant would dare risk speaking to him, he nonetheless coyly replied,

“Verily! And Happiness can’t buy money, you know!” One could explain the flaw in his logic, but alas, that is a matter for another time.

Around the same time that our hero was accumulating his vast wealth and introducing himself to luxury and decadence, there came to be a former acquaintance of
his from bygone school days who quickly grew envious of his old chum’s mysterious, newfound wealth. This jealousy was perhaps created solely by the singular fact that the former school chum was never invited to any of the gatherings at the mansion upon the hill, not even one. This was easily explained, for the pair had not spoken in many a year. In what seemed like another life, they had been the best of friends; exchanging jokes, telling tales, but one day they began to quarrel bitterly over some petty, inconsequential detail, and then ceased to be friends altogether.

One day while the rich man was ambling through the marketplace preparing to purchase yet another ornament, his old friend gathered the courage to approach him, with the intent to inquire as to the secret of his vast wealth. “Excuse me; though it has been quite some time since last we spoke, I sometimes recall how we were once the closest of friends, so I will reach my point directly: you were once but a banker, and I am still but a shopkeeper. How is it, old friend, that you have suddenly come to know such wealth, while I still toil here in the market? Did not we both come from the same humble beginnings? Share with me, if you will, the secret to your vast wealth, so that I may know what it is to be so rich.”

Though the shopkeeper inquired purely in earnest, the banker spitefully took it upon himself to finally and completely insult his old friend once and for all, for to be sure, he had always felt a sense of bitterness and resentment for the fashion in which the pair’s friendship had ended. Loudly (so that the others in the marketplace would be sure to hear) and condescendingly (so that the others in the marketplace would not mistake his intention) the banker spoke thus: “Verily! Why must there be a secret? Is not it understood among all of the thinking people that not all men are created equally?” With this he laughed in the shopkeeper’s face and spun on his heel, smugly content with the way he had handled the shopkeeper’s question.

The shopkeeper was not one to take such an insult lightly. Later that evening he said to himself, “How dare he place himself on such a false pedestal? I’ll show him who is the more clever and cunning!” For you see, the shopkeeper had heard tales of a certain corrupt woman so beautiful and so guileful that she could with the greatest of ease convince any man to do absolutely anything for her. The shopkeeper retrieved all of the money that he had saved for the harsh winter, and set about scouring the land for this woman. It was not long before he found her, and even shorter still that with his last pennies (which were getting scarcer and scarcer these days) he convinced the woman to win the banker’s heart and entice him to give up the secret to his vast wealth—for the shopkeeper had a sneaking suspicion that the banker’s gains were, indeed, ill-gotten. This was a simple task for a female possessing her power to persuade, and within little time the observant banker noticed this, and was always asking the woman what he could do to make
her happy, for he simply couldn’t fathom what could make a person happier than material goods. The woman finally succumbed to his constant questioning, and explained that she simply wanted to know what had caused the banker to become so rich.

“That is all? Verily! That is but a simple thing to explain!” He then proceeded to describe to her in full detail how he had come to possess so much money. With this information learned, the woman left the banker, with no intention of ever seeing him again. Her next action was to return to the shopkeeper and tell him all that she knew of the banker’s secret to financial success. Of course the shopkeeper wasted no time spreading this damaging information all about the village, and soon word had reached the king himself. The king was quick to enact a nickel washing campaign of a magnitude never before seen. Contrary to what others may teach, this was actually the beginning of the usage of the term “money laundering.” The king’s second act was to decree that no one in the kingdom would ever again accept any money from the banker, in any form, under penalty of death. The banker found himself with no possible way of spending even a cent of his odd-gotten gains. This was a rather perilous predicament for our protagonist, as yet another of the kingdom’s notoriously bitter winters would soon be arriving. The banker had nothing to do but sit in his cold, gloomy mansion set atop the highest hill in the village. He was surrounded by stacks of money, but he could not convince a soul to sell him even the slightest scrap of bread, and after having been so thoroughly insulted, not even the most charitable or sympathetic of the villagers would provide him with a free meal. The banker soon thereafter starved to death on the second coldest night of the winter, just after having learned that one must be careful what one does for the sake of material gain.

Meanwhile, the shopkeeper was finding that the food in his humble cupboard was growing rather sparse. He had spent his last penny sending his rival into ruin, and after charging such inflated prices at his shop for so many years, he certainly knew better than to try and beg a meal of one of the villagers. The shopkeeper soon thereafter died on the coldest night of the winter, just after having learned that one should be careful what one does for the sake of achieving his goals.
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her happy, for he simply couldn’t fathom what could make a person happier than material goods. The woman finally succumbed to his constant questioning, and explained that she simply wanted to know what had caused the banker to become so rich.

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The Reluctant Machine

Bill Hayes

In perfect conditions the M40A3 sniper rifle is capable of putting a bullet through a quarter at a thousand yards. But that’s in a perfect world. Shooting conditions here in Iraq are far from perfect. I’ve been told the desert crosswinds and glare from the sun can make even a 500-yard shot seem impossible. So far, the only action I’ve seen out here has been my own personal war against an infinite army of sand particles on a never-ending quest to overrun my clean rifle. In this desert, my rifle is never truly clean. Trying to keep it spotless is an exercise in futility, but I try anyway.

Before I go to sleep at night, I like to get on top of the large sand berm outside my trailer and stare at the lights of Baghdad. It’s not uncommon to see tracer rounds fly up from the city into the night sky. The distance to the city from where I’m standing is nine miles, but the night sky often plays tricks on me. Sometimes the city looks close, and sometimes the lights of Baghdad blend in with stars on the horizon as if the city is not there at all. Tonight it looks close. There is no moon, and there are no stars. It might be the darkest night I’ve ever seen.

“Corporal Weeks.” The voice belongs to Sergeant Ford. I answer to only one man over here, and that’s him. He’s been a sniper for six years. He has seven notches on the butt stock of his rifle; each one stands for a confirmed kill. A “Marine’s Marine” is what people call him. He was born for this job. He knows things.

“Yeah, sergeant,” I reply.

“Caught you listening to your iPod again, huh? Let me guess – Pink Floyd – ‘Comfortably Numb’?” How he knows that I have no idea.

“I might be,” I say, trying to sound unimpressed with his omniscience.

“Did you clean your rifle this evening?” he asks.

“Of course I cleaned it.”

“That’s good,” he says. “You might actually get a chance to use it for once. I know you’ve been dying to blow some terrorist’s head off.” He says that so nonchalantly that it bothers me. How does he know I want to kill someone? Maybe I do, maybe I don’t.

Sergeant Ford goes on to retell me the story of last week’s ambush on a convoy in Baghdad, and how Delta Company is going on a vengeance patrol in the morning. He says if they run into any trouble that he and I will be the first to go in and help. We’re a sniper team. Together we form the call sign “Cobra-3.”

“I’ll be ready,” I say to Ford as he walks away. Of course I’ll be ready. That’s all Ford and I do-- we just hang out and act ready. Everyone else on this base goes on patrols, looks at intelligence, fixes vehicles, or at least looks busy doing something. Not Ford and I. In our four months here at Camp Victory, we’ve been off the base only three times.

The last time we left the base was two weeks ago. We were told that we would be watching over a courtyard where several insurgents were going to have a meeting, but no one told the insurgents that. Instead, Ford and I spent three days in isolation watching a bunch of teenagers play soccer. We should have come out of hiding from our rooftop...
position and joined the fun. At least then we would have accomplished something.

On that rooftop two weeks ago, Sergeant Ford asked me a question that really pissed me off. "Do you think you could kill one of those boys down there playing soccer?" he asked me out of the blue. I wanted to say yes, but for some reason I couldn't say anything. I didn't join the Marines to blast away tenth graders five thousand miles from home. The oldest player down there could not have been more than sixteen.

"Of course I could," I managed to lie.

"That's good, Weeks," Ford replied. "I don't tell this to many people, but the first confirmed kill I ever had came off a kid no older than that goalie down there. I'd say fifteen or sixteen years old. The guy decided he wanted to spray our base with an AK-47. Needless to say, I had to put a stop to it. Little dudes like that really don't handle a .308 round very well."

That conversation is over two weeks old now, but it's still as fresh in my mind as if it had happened yesterday. I guess I had never really thought about shooting someone before. And if I had, the image was always of me valiantly taking out Saddam Hussein or Bin Laden seconds before they initiate Armageddon. But out here in the desert, it can be a lot different. Here, the enemy can be a fifteen-year-old kid stoned on peyote with an automatic weapon. In another time and another place, I called guys like that my friends.

After chain-smoking a few more cigarettes and playing "what if" games in my head, I decide it's time to get some sleep. Sergeant Ford might just be right about tomorrow. The last time we sent patrols in that area, the terrorists decided to bloody our noses a little bit.

Walking into the trailer, I see that Ford is already under his covers and reading a magazine. Our third roommate, Corporal Smith, is gone. Smith is probably riding in a convoy somewhere. That guy is always busy.

"How you doing, Weeks," asks Ford as I enter the room. I want to tell him I'm not doing well. I want to tell him the thought of shooting someone makes me throw up in my mouth a little bit, but instead I choose the easier route.

"I'm doing fine," I lie. "You know," he says. "I got that feeling." There is a long pause, and I decide to play along.

"That feeling," I say back to him. "Yeah – that feeling. There is going to be some action tomorrow. I know it. I can't explain how, but I just know."

His tone is more serious than usual. I can't help but believe him. "That's good," I say. "I'm tired of sitting around." Sergeant Ford does not answer.

Maybe tomorrow morning the time will finally come. I've been in the Marines for almost three years. All three of those years have been designed to teach me how to kill another human being with a sniper rifle. I've probably shot five thousand rounds during training, but all at fake targets. I wonder what the difference is between the five thousand rounds shot on the range and the lone bullet that takes another man's life. The more I think about it, the tighter my stomach gets.

"Sergeant Ford," I blurt out.
"What?" he says.
"How do you kill another human being? Don't you ever think about the morality of it? I mean, how morbid and wrong it is."
"Come on, Weeks. It's too late in the ball game to decide you want to be a conscientious objector. You put a bullet in him, plain and simple. Killing can become as natural as breathing or sleeping after a while. Now get some sleep."

Sergeant Ford’s late-night pep talk is not very reassuring. I toss and turn, but I can’t seem to clear my head long enough to let myself drift to sleep. It’s going to be a long night of wrestling with my demons.

At exactly four in the morning some prick kicks our door three times as hard as he can. I’m already awake. I have the door open before he can kick it a fourth time. "Are you okay, man?" says a voice I do not recognize.
"I’m on cloud nine. What do you want?" I reply.
"How the hell did you answer the door so fast?" the stranger asks. I want to tell him that I’ve been wide awake all night and that I’m a nervous wreck, but I decide not to.
"Hey, buddy, it’s four in the morning – cut to the chase!" screams Sergeant Ford from across the room. Sergeant Ford likes his sleep.
"Sorry, guys. I’m Lance Corporal Rosas, the radio watch. The C.O. wants both of you guys in the command post immediately. My guess is he wants you to support Delta Company in their assault today."

I close the door behind Rosas and grab my things for a mission. It appears that Ford’s instincts are right. Today we will be leaving the wire, and if his instincts stay right, we will probably get some action, too. Despite not getting any sleep in the past twenty-four hours, I’m wide awake, but I reckon that’s a good thing.

I don’t attend the briefing. The commanders want only sergeants and above present, so I’m left outside the tent with even more time to reflect. I don’t like those types of things anyway. Looking at my watch, I see that it’s only five in the morning. The sun is starting to crest the horizon in the east. It turns a tank on the skyline into a beautiful silhouette. On top of the tank, several doves are feasting on something, probably a meal someone left on the tank last night. It looks like a seventy-ton bird feeder.

The command tent finally starts to empty, and I catch Sergeant Ford emerging from the crowd. The giant scope on his rifle gives him away. I hold my sniper rifle way up in the air to flag him down. It’s a gesture we have come up with that’s impossible to miss. Ford spots me immediately; we walk towards each other. He walks faster than usual.
"So," I say. "Is it going to be World War Three?"
"Something like that," he says. "Delta is going to go in there and basically try and start a fight. Kind of a search and destroy type thing, I guess." He says all this as he fumbles with his map of downtown Baghdad. "You and I are going to get in an over watch position right here," he says as he points to an X on the map.
“Is that a building or something?” I ask.

Ford smacks me across the head with the map. “That’s the warehouse we were at two weeks ago, genius. That position will give us a good line of sight on all of Delta’s movements. Anyone tries to start something and they’re dead,” he says. As he talks, I notice he’s managed to find time to shave in the short hour we had to get ready. I never even thought about shaving.

It’s a two-hour excursion from Camp Victory back to our spot on the warehouse roof. Two Humvees take us down a dirt road code-named Route Mobile and drop us off next to a large drainage ditch. This ditch leads directly into the city and to the warehouse. It’s a perfect way to sneak in and out without anyone noticing. Sergeant Ford leads the foot patrol to the building, just like last time.

Only two weeks have gone by since we were last on this rooftop, but looking out across the courtyard and southern Baghdad, I can’t help but notice that it does not feel the same. The palm trees are too still. The sun looks too bright. Maybe all this comes from my lack of sleep.

“Where the hell is everybody?” whispers Ford to me. That’s what it is, I suddenly realize. There is no one in the courtyard. There are no cars zigzagging on the streets below. The last time we were here, the traffic was gridlocked at this time of day. Now only a few stray dogs break the stillness.

As the sun rises, it becomes unbearably hot. It is two hours past noon now, and the temperature must be around 120 degrees. Sweat from my forehead collects on my rifle scope and runs into my eye, causing me to blink involuntarily. The salt from the sweat burns. We’ve been on this roof for five hours and haven’t seen anything yet. Delta Company prides itself on killing people, not on being on time.

“Here they come,” says Sergeant Ford. To my left I see Marines clearing houses out in the distance probably four hundred yards away. Ford decides it’s time to do another radio check.

“Comanche, this is Cobra-3. Radio check over,” he says.

The radio beeps and a voice comes back saying, “Loud and clear Cobra-3. Be advised that we are finding plenty of weapons but have encountered no enemy at this time. Give us a sit-rep of your position, Cobra-3.”

Ford keys the radio. “Same Comanche,” he says. “We have seen no personnel, Cobra-3 out.” He is constantly squinting and looking through his binoculars, even as he talks on the radio. I notice that if I look through my scope and pull my face back just a little, I can see my reflection in the glass – like a mirror. The guy staring back at me is sweating a lot. He looks lost.

“Man, this is it – I can feel it,” says Ford. He has the binoculars to his face, infatuated with another warehouse out in the distance. The building he fixates on is rust brown and riddled with bullet holes. It blends right in with the rest of Baghdad. By now, the sun is directly overhead, and I’m too thirsty and tired to finish the conversation. I just remembered I haven’t eaten anything since yesterday morning.
A lone gun shot finally breaks the silence of the tranquil afternoon. Ford turns towards me and our eyes meet. He smiles from ear to ear. “Accidental discharge?” I mutter as a question. But before he can answer, the lone gunshot is followed by a dozen more. I look to my left just in time to see tracers go flying in all directions. Delta has kicked a hornet’s nest.

The radio beeps again and a voice follows. “Cobra-3 – Cobra-3, be advised we are in heavy contact. The enemy is being pushed towards your position over. Twenty, maybe thirty insurgents. Do you copy?”

“Loud and clear,” Ford responds. Sweat is gushing from my hands, and my heart is beating faster. I say something to Ford about how I would kill for a cigarette right now. He reminds me I might just get my chance. My stomach tightens as the irony sets in. Another explosion goes off to the left. Delta really has the enemy on the run. An orchestra of gunfire fills the air. I can feel water building up behind my eyes.

“Weeks,” Ford says, almost shouting. There is no need to whisper now with all of the gunshots and explosions. I don’t say anything, I just look at him.

“Two hundred yards,” he says. “Two hundred yards.” Without even thinking, I adjust the scope for a two-hundred yard shot. I’ve done this in training plenty of times. 

*Click-click* goes the scope.

“There, ready,” I say.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see something. It’s movement by the warehouse where Ford has been looking all morning. As soon as I look there, it’s gone. I put my eye back behind the scope and scan the warehouse for more movement.

“South side of the warehouse, two hundred yards,” mumbles Ford. I shift the rifle so I can check out that location. Bingo. Right there in front of a door is a man with a gun. I look at him through the scope. He can’t be any older than twenty-five, no – twenty. Damn it – maybe he’s only fifteen. Who the hell cares? He has a beard on his face, or at least part of a beard, but it’s not full yet. There is a bandoleer of rifle magazines across his chest. He seems to be waiting for something.

“Shoot him,” says Ford.

Without saying anything, I switch the safety onto fire. *Click.* A sweat bead has formed on my brow, but I don’t dare adjust myself to wipe it off. I focus even harder through the scope. The crosshairs are right on the man. Mechanically, my finger begins to squeeze back on the trigger. The crosshairs cut him perfectly into four equal parts. Textbook shot. The rifle is steady as I squeeze more and more.

“Target down, nice shot,” says Ford.

“Huh?” I respond. I never even heard the gun discharge. I blink and put the scope back to my eye. I look through it just in time to see a pair of doves fly away from the warehouse. The man’s body lies motionless. There is no movement in the scope. He is dead, and I have trouble looking away.

“Comanche, this is Cobra-3,” Ford says.

“Send your traffic,” replies Comanche.

“We have one enemy KIA, time now, over.”
The radio falls back into silence. I haven’t moved a muscle since I pulled the trigger. My breathing is calm and relaxed. I twist my head to look at Ford.

“Well, how did it feel?” he asks.

“What?” I respond.

“How did it feel to pull the trigger?”

I lick my lips as I prepare to answer. My mouth is dry, and I can barely move my tongue. “All I felt was recoil,” I say as I push the rifle back into my shoulder and look for another target.
Selected Works for 2006-2007 by
Art Majors at Gainesville State College

Daniel Scott, featured cover artist.

Wink
Afraid
Afua Ntiwa

You will be afraid, they said,
of the big streets and cars
zooming at the speed of light.
Surely the tall buildings and loud city noises
will scare you.
You’ve never seen anything like it,
not here.

I smiled and nodded politely, thinking
“How naive do they think I am?” Afraid
of streets and cars and buildings and noises?
Pshaw! I have seen lots of those –
on Commando and Rambo II.

They were kindly, that couple from
San Diego, visiting a small West African country,
taking the time to talk to a black-eyed, wide-eyed neophyte
about to embark on the journey of her life.
But they were wrong when they said
I would be afraid.

I was not afraid when I got to New York.
Not of the zooming cars, or the buildings that
touched the sky, not of huge planes that flew so
low their bellies almost kissed rooftops.
Not even of the cold wind that pressed so hard it left
fingerprints on my skin.
I was not afraid of the streets that thundered with activity,
and teemed with people busy and successful and fiercely independent,
because I became one of them.

I wish I could see the San Diego couple again,
so I could tell them that they were right after all.
Because lately I have been afraid.
Not of cars and streets and planes and machines
and people.
I have been afraid
that I have been so busy creating my own world
that I am losing my identity--
that of a black-eyed, wide-eyed neophyte
who does not belong to herself but to a community.
And who is humbly
dependent on God and family and the stranger
on the street who also happens to be Ghanaian

If I could see the couple,
I would ask them,
“How do I stop being afraid?”
Ancient arrows
Former slayers in the wars of men
Now mounted on the walls of their dens

Useless arrows
Too impractical for the modern age
There are easier ways to pierce a flesh-bound cage.

Savage Arrows
Too uncivilized for the modern man
You lack the dignity of the bombs in our hands.

Hang shrouded in mystery
Teach us something of our history.

You are a senior citizen of war
Knocking on death’s door,
But we’re keeping you on life support
So we can have our indignant thrill.

Show us how far mankind has come
As we polish our efficient guns,
Those brutal savages knew none
Of the civilized ways to kill.

Hang shrouded in mystery.
Teach us something of our history.
Tucked away in the shadows of self,
I fall further and further
from what is me.

Two visions,
    One blinded by the other’s need,
I see this, I know this,
yet can’t grasp exactly what this means.

Questions are answered but quickly forgotten
Or more often I am overlooked by me,
Overrun by thoughts of pleasure
and thoughts of pleasing others.
Decisions are made based purely on this.
Why can I not make decisions for me?
I know I’m wrong,
But cannot stop feeding the me that others perceive

I want to be I, but have to be me.
Controlled and conformed
by the me others know and expect

It is I that rests in me, trying to break free
From the me that resonates in other’s minds.
I am constantly smothered by me
Suffocating the thoughts
Of who I really am.
Prostitute
Nancy Mendez

Gives the pleasure,
and nothing you ask in exchange
if not just some wretched coins.
You don’t expect to be loved,
respected,
nor someone take care of you.
You don’t deceive anybody,
you are honest,
upright,
perfect;
you advance your cost.
You don’t discriminate the older persons,
the criminals,
the stupid ones,
and the other colors,
because you endure
the aggressions of arrogance.
You are the confidant of the drunk,
and the refuge of the persecuting.
San Pedro
Nancy Mendez

Anytime I start dreaming,
I remember San Pedro,
the “colonia” where I lived.
I look around me and I can’t see
the kids playing in the streets.
The sun now is crying, and the sky is sad.
I try to find that street where I have always been.
Where is the street?
Where is the humble street where
the poverty lives, and the school of hunger and pain?
I can’t feel my grandmother’s hug,
and I can’t see my great-grandfather smile.
Where is the noisy sound of the crazy cars?
I look back to my past, and I can’t find my life.
I am a dark rose in a desolated area
trying to be with its friend,
but nobody is there.
I am still hearing the “donde vas?”
of my grandmother,
and “te quiero” of my parents.
The day is like the night, dark all the time,
and I don’t want to wake up.
Sometimes I sadly sing a song of my soul
because I want to see the sun smiling
and not crying.
I want to come back to my land;
I want my life back.
The Hitman
Robert Cocco

Six foot three and no expression,
in two hours his target will know the lesson.
So he waits and he waits, but no one shows,
until that last little second: the one that slows
to an hour or more, but never quite there.
Then his body decides to raise his hair
end after end the adrenaline pumps
and his heart keeps jumping, thump after thump.
His palms become clammy and Charlie is called
to send all his angels on a mission from God.

A bullet named Betsy, with five little friends
who know pain and agony, which they all send.
And Charles, Betsy's pusher, the uncaring slob
will show the way for Betsy's next dirty job.
But Betsy, with the wandering mind of her own
will never look, care, feel, but most importantly: hone.
The mortar behind cracks and falls to the ground
but her target, bravely, still does not fall down.
Blink...

once...
twice...
three times to be sure.

Charles can't believe it, "Are those images pure?
I send Betsy on her way, because that's what I do,
but she doesn't touch glove, hat, jacket, or shoe?"
With that black veneer over his grimy appearance
he cocks his head back just so he can hear his

Bang!

Kaboom!

Susie goes this time to try,
to see if her curves will make his veins cry.
To watch tears drop to the floor and dry crimson red,
is one thing about Betsy that no one has said.
The target falls down, falling farther some more.
His body, with a thud, firmly lands on the floor.
The Hitman breathes a sigh of relief, but for some reason he knows his job has not ceased. More to be slaughtered and more to be killed now his hand is shaking, “Do I have the will?”
Tonight She Is
Caitlin Carlan

Turning the wheel once again down this street,
A beautiful empty-pocket fantasy,
The exact same drive offers new potential.
This trip becomes her dream.

Her dream is to believe.
He knows how to dream, but
His dream is the weekend
--a 3 inch glass--and hot sweet liquid like religion
but without the aspiration.

She slowly navigates the parking lot
Through
children unattended, speed bumps, broken shards of bottles.
It's the glass that will be her downfall,
First her tires
Then her soul.

Time for her next fix--
Not a fix of drugs or alcohol.
With this addiction to government housing
She runs, head in hands, from her cul-de-sac life
To sleep on a concrete floor beside
All of her false hopes
The ones that snore and sometimes touch her.
Issues
Caitlin Carlan

It’s something she will not show
It’s somewhere he will not go

It’s in his mind-- It’s in her mood
Constantly covered up by food

Food becomes a reason to be
Food becomes their way to flee

“I cooked you dinner, sweet man”
Means she wants him to touch her hand

“Let’s go get ice cream, baby girl”
Means he doesn’t want to face the world

“Honey, strawberries or whipped cream”
Well, I guess you know what that means

Feeling guilty, he buys her chocolate
Feeling guilty, she eats all of it

For with this tasty fast food pace
We eat what we refuse to face
Ovation
Brian Baumann

They called out my name
And began to applaud
And at that moment I stepped into fame.
I looked and I saw
All the smiling faces
Praising my actions so raw,
Which deep down I knew
I didn’t deserve.
I wish I could be humble,
but that would make the audience bored.
The people stood and shouted
Their hands like bullets of rain
exploding against the window pane.
I lifted my trophy high
In the air.
Tears brimming in my eyes but who’s to care?
It was my moment,
My shining moment.
Not moments--
Moment.
Moment so small.
Moment
I laughed with joy for working so hard.
For
The
Moment
I won the race--
For the
Moment.
And as my spirit soared, I dropped to my knees and cried out for more
Moment.
Motionless and unrepentant,
for a decade he has known his fate.
The sun has set, the sky is red
his hour is getting late.

Appearing beside his cell,
A guard says, “Hope you enjoy your last meal.”
Midnight pardons all exhausted,
This time it’s for real.

On the way to the chair, no one speaks.
“Is this a dream?” he wonders.
A guard yawns as he passes a sign
labeled, “Volts: 2,500.”

Silent and stoic for ten years,
He wonders, “What’s the point now?”
As his feet are strapped to the footrest,
His eyes blink involuntarily.

“No,” he mumbles under his breath.
“I won’t go quietly. I’ll revolt!”
But before he can scream for his life,
His body becomes a lightning bolt.
Falling Through Doors

Jackson Taylor

The veneer fits better on you,
When you brushed past
People in the hallway.
Shaking their hands with congratulations
Tap dance the melody that works
And hold the tune so they can hear.
Opening the door on hot summer days
Aroma knocking you on the reeds
Somewhere else.
Squinting in the light,
Push through the tall grass
Kicking off your shoes
And say hello to people in the clearing.
Mowing the grass, doing their work,
Straw hats protecting heads, brim low,
And live there instead.
Plant your garden filled with tomatoes
Mint, sweet peas, wet earth,
Gardenias stronger than conscience
And keep your toes in the brook, squishy.
Splashing in spring water
Find a face in the reflection
Rippled from disturbance, smudgy blue eyes.
Focused for a moment, something
Reaching, wavy, smiling,
Perfect
But don't look back at me,
Starring back from the mirror
Adjusting the rearview.
Keys rattling, turning,
'Cause by the car I'm gone.
"She is now inside that prism and knows something even the teacher does not know, that the prisms colors are voices, voices that swirl around her head like a crown... and she becomes part of the river."

-God placed him in a slower river
And for a while he danced
In the shallows.
Needing nothing but the water beneath,
Cooling his feet,
Pressed against the smooth stones.

But the water rose,
And the current became swifter
And still he danced.
Not minding the water to his knees,
The sun still hot on his head.

As the new waves became white
Rippling around his hands
The boy traced his fingers on the surface
Forming shapes
That followed his steps, the form he had mastered
And lay down below the current
Upon the river bed
And was washed away by the water
And became part of the river.

Ten years later a boy came,
Stopping beside the river bank.
And watched the water swirling
Forming shapes on the surface.
And made a sailboat of paper
Floating it into the dance, the grooves,
And chased it into the waves.

So God lowered the water,
Calmed the foam to stillness
And the boy danced awhile
Following his creation.
Broken Trampoline
Jackson Taylor

When I kill you I can love you
And bury you in the ground
Where no one can see.

So no one remembers what I know
And time eats the whiteness.

Waking, I find myself shorter,
Reaching to grab the cup off the shelf.
I see the bike, feel the scrapes,
Swinging the nine iron in the afternoon
Like you.
And listen to what happened, your eyes bleeding,
The crushing humanity of it;
Smiling and hoping you’d smile back.
Wanting words that smelled like grilling out again
And driving fast around curves, hand out the window,
Grabbing air, breathing.

You telling me happiness, words to fight hard
When I tied the cord around my neck
And tripped the crate.
Bouncing off the trampoline you put under my feet, laughing,
Me too;
I grabbed the atmosphere above the sky
When I was able,
Knowing my strength.
Bringing you with me, tasting the colors
On happy pink clouds.

But I stood beside the fire in the backyard
Singeing the grass in a circle, perfect.
Nodding when you nodded
And watched you throw in the bouncy thing
The little trampoline
Helping you throw it in.
And watched you fall beside the fire, burning.
Hollow, nothing.

White

When I kill you I can love you
And bury you in the ground
Where you can’t see.
(Scene I)

The stage is dark. A voice is heard:

NATHAN: Today is the last day of my life. So was yesterday. Come to think of it, every
day as far as I can remember has been the last day of my life. It never happens
differently. No matter what I try to say, it’s as if the words I’m screaming aren’t
in the script. The actors don’t know how to react and say their lines the same
anyway... No, that’s not a fair metaphor. If there was an audience, we would be like
actors. That would be better. But being alone... I can’t even amuse myself anymore.
The exterior of part of a trailer coming from off upstage right. Downstage left is a
large oak tree that grows beyond the proscenium. The backdrop is abstract woods
and colors.

NATHAN: It starts...

The blinds in the trailer window separate and NATHAN’s eyes are seen. He steps
out onto his old porch, pauses, then scurries back inside. Enter NATHAN’s mother,
MARIE, with hands in the air. She is followed by NATHAN’s father, JOSEPH, who
is holding a shotgun to her back.

JOSEPH: Hey! Nathan, get out here!
MARIE: Nathan! Do what your father says! Wake up, hon.
JOSEPH: Come out, son. I’ll give you anything you want after this. Just humor me.
NATHAN: Oh! I just remembered. We do this everyday.

He emerges again.

JOSEPH: Remember? I told you “anything” last night, but first we have to do this.
NATHAN: Today I want donuts. Do you have glazed donuts? Of course you don’t.
JOSEPH: (Responding to unseen action.) There you are.
NATHAN: For some reason, no amount of sprinkles or frosting could beat a nice
regular glazed.
JOSEPH: Whoa, now. Don’t be afraid. I just want to talk.
NATHAN: You loved donuts, you gluttonous pig. Never left any for me or Mom,
but I guess Mom wouldn’t have touched them... God! I need something to do.
If you would have just given me more time, I could have done so much. Kill
me at supper next time.
JOSEPH: C’mon now! I won’t wait much longer for you.
NATHAN: How about this tree: What cruel twist of irony made it so big
around and the limbs so high that I couldn’t climb it? I know that’s
what it actually was like, but I want to climb it every day. I want to
ascend for just a second to see how far I could get if the world didn’t
loop every morning… At what point did I realize that none of this was
real? Nothing is *déjà vu*. This place is hell. It must be. I’m being
punished because I—FARDELS falls from the tree.

FARDELS: AHHH! Oof! (moans)
NATHAN: What the hell… Something new!!
FARDELS: Oh ow… Hello!
NATHAN: Hi!
FARDELS: Sorry, I think I interrupted your dramatic scene there.
JOSEPH: Good boy. Come right over here.
NATHAN: Oh, no! Not at all!
FARDELS: Are you sure, I mean you were narrating and everything. I can go
somewhere else for a while…
NATHAN: Oh yeah, no it’s uh…
JOSEPH: Now son, your mother and I have been having some “discussions.” She
thinks it’s time to leave me. She wants to leave *me*!
FARDELS: Wow. Gee. Doesn’t that bother you?
NATHAN: Oh no. Not anymore. I’m over it. And he didn’t hurt her. He sure got
me, though.
FARDELS: And you’re here now.
NATHAN: Yeah. But if you know a way out—I mean, I would—Do you?
FARDELS: What? Oh, no, no. Nope, sure don’t—
NATHAN: You don’t?
FARDELS: No—
NATHAN: You don’t know?
FARDELS: Nope–
NATHAN: Don’t know at all–
FARDELS: Uh, no–
NATHAN: You said, “uh!”
FARDELS: Yeah, but… no.
NATHAN: Son of a bitch.
JOSEPH: That *bitch* was gonna leave us!
NATHAN: I wasn’t talking *about* me or *to* you! (To FARDELS) Well, how the hell
did you get here, then?
FARDELS: It’s different every time.
NATHAN: Every time?
FARDELS: Yeah. I sort of do this often.
NATHAN: You often sneak into people’s individual hells?
FARDELS: Hell?
JOSEPH: Hell, if I was half a man, I’d have just shot her myself.
FARDELS: This isn’t hell.
NATHAN: Then what is it? Why am I here?

FARDELS: I don’t know why, exactly. You do know you’re not dead?

NATHAN: What!

JOSEPH: What did you say to me son?

FARDELS: Jesus Christ! Is there anywhere else we can go?

JOSEPH: If you have something to say, spit it out, boy! What’s wrong with you?

NATHAN: Nah, we’d better talk here. I don’t have very long, anyway. So what happened then?

FARDELS: Hell if I know. I mean—not hell, but—You know.

NATHAN: No, I’m afraid not. I’ve sorta been out of the loop and in this one for—

FARDELS: Yeah, yeah. Ok. So I don’t know what it is. These places are like dreams, and they happen all the time. I think it has something to do with thinking you’re dead. And if the spirit thinks it’s dead, well, there you go. I just kinda watch these things. I got in through the tree up there, only it wasn’t a tree when I went in.

JOSEPH: Oh, is that how it is?

NATHAN: (Looking up into the tree.) Can we get out that way?

FARDELS: No. I always get back when the dream reBoo. The brain knows that I’m out of place, and—POOF— I’m gone.

NATHAN: Ok, well, look: I’m about to die again. So whoever you are and however you got here, can you do it again?

JOSEPH: What are you doing?

FARDELS: Well, I guess—But I’ve already seen most of this one, and I’ve never been caught, so…

NATHAN: Look, I don’t care! I have to get out of here.

JOSEPH: Let go of the gun, son. (struggles with the invisible NATHAN)

NATHAN: Please.

FARDELS: I don’t think so…(watching JOSEPH) I always love it when the main character doesn’t participate. He looks so funny!

NATHAN: Well, it’s about to get less funny, and I have to keep living this!

You’re the only hope I’ve seen in all this time.

Gunshot.

FARDELS: Oh. That was you…

NATHAN: Yes.

FARDELS: So I guess it’s over.

NATHAN: Not quite. Will you come back?

FARDELS: Yeah… No, I don’t think so. Wait, he’s still struggling.

NATHAN: Why the hell not?

FARDELS: Who’s he fighting with now?

NATHAN: It’s still me. Well, I guess this is it. I’m Nathan. I never got your name.
FARDELS: It’s Fardels. Nice to have met you.

\[ \text{FARDELS offers his hand to NATHAN. NATHAN grabs it with both hands, refusing to let go. JOSEPH, struggling with the invisible NATHAN, finds the gun turned towards him.} \]

\[ \text{Blackout. Gunshot} \]

(Scene 2)

NATHAN: (Lights up. The blinds separate and we see NATHAN’s eyes again. FARDELS is the only thing that hasn’t moved. NATHAN comes running outside.) You came back!

FARDELS: Oh shit!

JOSEPH: Hey!

NATHAN: Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

JOSEPH: Nathan, get out here!

FARDELS: NO!

MARIE: Nathan!

NATHAN: NO!

MARIE: Do what your father says! Wake up, hon.

FARDELS: No, you son of a bitch! Let me out of here!! (FARDELS advances upon NATHAN threateningly.)

NATHAN: Ahhh!

NATHAN dodges behind Joseph.

JOSEPH: Come out, son.

FARDELS chases NATHAN around and between JOSEPH and MARIE

NATHAN: What? What?

JOSEPH: I’ll give you anything you want after this. Just humor me.

FARDELS: This is your mind! You used knowing my name to trap me here! I should’ve known!

\[ \text{FARDELS catches NATHAN by the back of the shirt.} \]

JOSEPH: There you are.

NATHAN: Stop!

JOSEPH: Whoa, now. Don’t be afraid. I just want to talk. (NATHAN slips away running headfirst into the tree.)

NATHAN: OW! My eye!

FARDELS: (NATHAN flees from FARDELS again.) Come back here. Ack! You selfish—(FARDELS grabs NATHAN in a bear hug. NATHAN kicks his feet in the air furiously. FARDELS’s back gives out. He drops NATHAN, who turns and kicks him in the shin.) AHH! Oh you... Owwwwwwwwww—wah!

NATHAN: Fardels? You ok?
FARDELS: NO!
NATHAN: But are you hurt?
FARDELS: No, I guess not.
JOSEPH: Good boy. Come right over here.
NATHAN: I’m sorry, Fardels, but I had to do something.
FARDELS: Oh God, why me?
NATHAN: I’ve just been here too damn long.
FARDELS: I can’t stay here. You have to let me go.
NATHAN: C’mon this will be good for you. Maybe you can stop voying and start helping them escape.
FARDELS: I’m not an angel.
NATHAN: I never said you were.
FARDELS: Well, see that you don’t.
JOSEPH: Now son, your mother and I have been having some “discussions.” She thinks it’s time to leave me. She wants to leave me.
NATHAN: Ok. The fact is that you are the only way I can think of to get out of this. Since you’ve come here, I’ve gained a limited control of this place.
FARDELS: You can’t get out of here.
JOSEPH: That bitch was gonna leave me!
FARDELS: You’re here for a reason: something you need to learn before you can get out. But only you can figure that out. I have nothing to do with this!
NATHAN: But you can help me!
FARDELS: You don’t understand. My wife is gonna kill me! I’m supposed to be back by five! Oh, and if Jesus finds out, I’m dead! Absolutely dead. Not just piddling in my subconscious.
NATHAN: Jesus?
FARDELS: Not that one.
NATHAN: Oh.
FARDELS: He’s my lawyer. I’m supposed to be in court. Somebody else suing me for “messing with their dreams.” Don’t you see? Debra’s gonna kill me.
JOSEPH: Hell, if I was half a man, I’d have just shot her myself.
FARDELS: Don’t give me any ideas.
NATHAN: Maybe that’s why you’re here: Karma! To help me get out and make up for—
JOSEPH: If you have something to say, spit it out, boy!
NATHAN and FARDELS: Oh, will you just shut up!
JOSEPH mouths the rest of his line. For the rest of the scene, JOSEPH and MARIE finish the scene in silence, miming the action.

NATHAN: It worked!! (He dances about.) Ha ha ha! Oh, thank you! Look what you’ve done for me already.
FARDELS: I hate to tell you this, but about ninety percent of the subconsciouses I’ve been in, the people can already do that. Without me.
NATHAN: You’re so negative. Since you’ve come, my world has improved two-hundred percent!

FARDELS: Look, kid, I can’t get you out of here. But one day you’ll get out. I promise.... Now, can I please go?

NATHAN: I really can’t allow that. (FARDELS stands, poised to attack.) Whoa!

Back off, buddy. I might just figure out how to take off your arm with my mind. (Defeated, FARDELS sits.) Ok, so first: What do you know about my condition in reality?

FARDELS: What is reality but a perception of the mind?

NATHAN: That’s not--

FARDELS: I don’t know! Ok? I don’t know you! The other guy was in a coma. For all I know, you could be, too. Or you might be just knocked unconscious.

NATHAN: But I’ve been here for years.

FARDELS: Don’t even start. Everyone knows that dreams have no concept of time.

NATHAN: So this is a dream.

FARDELS: Like a dream. You’re doing this to yourself.

NATHAN: Here comes the loop again.

*Lights out.*

(Scene 3)

*Lights up. Neither FARDELS or NATHAN has moved. The looping scene reoccurs in silence.*

NATHAN: Wow, I didn’t even move that time!


NATHAN: So, how did you get in here from the physical world?

FARDELS: I didn’t.

NATHAN: C’mon, Fardels.

FARDELS: I didn’t!

NATHAN: Please?

FARDELS: I don’t belong in the physical world. I mean, come on! Nobody’s named Fardels! I’m an idea. Listen, somewhere somebody said, “Who would these Fardels bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life?” Then another person heard that, stole it, put it into a play, called it *Hamlet*, and ever since, people have heard this line and said, “What the hell are Fardels?” I’m the sum of their imagined ideas of the meaning of Fardels. Got it?

NATHAN: I’ve never seen *Hamlet*.

FARDELS: I’m not surprised.

NATHAN: So everybody’s an idea where you’re from?

FARDELS: Not necessarily. My wife Debra is a stereotype.

NATHAN: Uh-huh. But how did you get here?
FARDELS: I got here through a portal in our wardrobe.
NATHAN: You’re kidding.
FARDELS: Well what do you expect when you put an idea and a stereotype together? My son’s name is Everykid for God’s sake! At least we think it’s a boy—
NATHAN: I see.
FARDELS: Like I said, I really don’t know how to help you. I’m just a guest.
NATHAN: You mean an intruder?
FARDELS: Whatever.
NATHAN: Look, you’ve already helped me more than you can possibly know.
FARDELS: How?
NATHAN: I don’t know. I just said that because it sounded good in my mind. I want you to stay! I can’t stand being here alone.
FARDELS: But I defeat the whole purpose of a personal journey.
NATHAN: So what? I mean... I need you here.
FARDELS: How sweet.
NATHAN: Look, you showed me that I could control certain aspects of this world. I locked you in here; I muted them, so I must be able to do more. Maybe I can do anything!
FARDELS: I’m not so sure—
NATHAN: That would be great! What if all of this time I could do anything I want with this world? Let’s try something! Um... Flying! YES! (He tries to fly.)
FARDELS: Very amusing.
NATHAN: (Still trying to fly) Come on, now! Help me out.
FARDELS: What? This is your mind.
NATHAN: Come on, give me a boost.
FARDELS: Bad back. Remember?
NATHAN: I’ll fix it with my mind! (NATHAN runs and jumps on FARDELS’ back knocking him down.) I don’t think you’re trying.
FARDELS: Ow!
NATHAN: Ok, last try. (He gets up on the porch and jumps off, falling flat on his face. He lifts his head off the ground.) Obviously I’m missing something here.
FARDELS: Perhaps you should try something a bit more tangible.
NATHAN: Good thinking!—Like what?
FARDELS: Well, try moving something with your mind.
NATHAN: Good thinking! Um... (He runs inside, then returns with a lamp. Sets it down and tries to move it with his mind.) Why isn’t this working, Fardels?
FARDELS: I don’t know. Are you picturing it moving?
NATHAN: Yes!
FARDELS: I don’t think you need the arms out.
NATHAN: Damn!
FARDELS: Well, this is your subconscious. Perhaps you can’t consciously move it without first altering the perceived reality of this world that your subconscious has created.

Silence.
NATHAN: Huh?
FARDELS: Try imaging how that lamp might be realistically moved without you doing it physically.
NATHAN: Um... (He thinks briefly. Nothing happens.)
FARDELS: Well, I guess that doesn’t work...
NATHAN: I got it!
FARDELS: Great! What? (FARDELS stands up awkwardly.) What are you doing?
(He retrieves the lamp, walking stiffly.) Stop this at once!
NATHAN: I can control you because I can imagine you moving the lamp!
However, I must not be able to realistically perceive the lamp moving on its own.
FARDELS: This is very wrong, and I wish you would stop it at once. Please?
NATHAN: I’m sorry, but this is all so new. (Releases him)
FARDELS: Why not work with them instead?
NATHAN: Good idea. (He positions himself in front of JOSEPH. Raises his arms and focuses in on his father.) Ok, Dad.
JOSEPH: Ok, son.
NATHAN: What?
JOSEPH: What, son?
NATHAN: You’re conversing with me.
JOSEPH: Well, hell, you “con-versed” with me first.
NATHAN: But you’re not real!
JOSEPH: The hell you mean I’m not real? I’m right here in front of you.
NATHAN: No, this is my mind; you can’t be real.
MARIE: You’re father’s right. We’re real.
NATHAN: Mom?
MARIE: Yes, Nathan?
JOSEPH: So what do you want, son?
MARIE: Is it money again?
JOSEPH: We told you. There ain’t no more money for you. You’re gonna have to get a job.
NATHAN: I have a job.
JOSEPH: A real job. Not a girl’s job.
NATHAN: I have a real job! I told you! Cutting hair’s not just a woman’s job. Men do it too. Remember barbers?
FARDELS: You cut hair?
NATHAN: Yes!
FARDELS: Wow.
NATHAN: What?
FARDELS: Nothing.
NATHAN: No! What!?
FARDELS: Well, it’s just—
NATHAN: Yeah?
FARDELS: The idea of Men Cutting Hair...
NATHAN: What?
FARDELS: I know him.
NATHAN: You know the idea: Men Cutting Hair?
FARDELS: Yes, I know him. He’s my neighbor, and he’s... well, um, he’s a little sweet.

JOSEPH laughs hysterically.
MARIE: We told you, Nathan. We tried to tell you.
NATHAN: He’s gay?
FARDELS: Yes.
NATHAN: And he’s not a stereotype?
FARDELS: No, he’s pretty much the realistic collective idea of—
NATHAN: That’s great! That’s really great. So there is no hope for straight men cutting hair to ever be perceived as normal!
MARIE: That’s why Lynne left you.
NATHAN: Shut up!
MARIE: And Cindy.
FARDELS: I’m sorry, Nathan.
NATHAN: Sorry doesn’t change the ridicule I’ve put up with.
MARIE: And Theresa.
NATHAN: I made her up!
MARIE: Well—
NATHAN: Yes! I lied to you, Mom. Don’t act so surprised. You deserved it. You lied about everything!
JOSEPH: Don’t talk to your mother like that!
NATHAN: What do you care? You tried to kill her. And me! And you sent me here!
This is all your fault.
JOSEPH: Don’t you talk to me like that!
MARIE: He’s always been ungrateful.
JOSEPH: We paid for you to go off to college and you became a “beautician.” Went to “beauty” school.
MARIE: We tried to tell your brother that you were studying law enforcement like him, but he found out.
JOSEPH: My son the beautician. What a pansy.
NATHAN: I hate you! (He attacks JOSEPH who easily stops him and throws him to the ground. NATHAN lies on the ground, defeated and in pain.) I always hated you....
JOSEPH: And now you’re crying. Pathetic.
MARIE: We tried to love you, son.
JOSEPH: He can’t even afford his own place. He has to live in a trailer down the driveway from our house!
MARIE: Lay off the boy, Joseph. You’re making him cry.
JOSEPH: No, Marie! He’s a damn disgrace! You hear me, boy? You’re worthless.
FARDELS: Nathan...
JOSEPH: WORTHLESS!
MARIE: A disappointment.
FARDELS: Nathan, you’re doing this to yourself—
JOSEPH: PANSY—
FARDELS: You’ve gotta stop.
JOSEPH: Failure—
MARIE: Unloved—
JOSEPH: Weak—
FARDELS: Nathan! You can not bear this much longer. You’re going to kill us both under this weight.
JOSEPH: Pathetic—
MARIE: Unwanted—
FARDELS: Nathan!
JOSEPH: Disgusting. Useless. No son of mine! I—
NATHAN: Stop. (JOSEPH freezes completely. Long pause. NATHAN looks at JOSEPH. Beat. JOSEPH slaps himself. Beat. He slaps himself again. Beat. NATHAN looks at MARIE. She punches JOSEPH several times. He takes the blows but doesn’t react emotionally. Finally NATHAN gets tired of it and they stop.) I’m tired of this place. I’m tired of the way it looks. Get rid of that. (JOSEPH and MARIE move the trailer off.) And that. (They go to move the tree, but it goes off on its own. He looks upstage at the backdrop and it flies out. Behind it is a backdrop of a starry night sky. NATHAN sighs and walks upstage, looking at the sky.) Fardels, you may go. I want to be alone.
FARDELS: Are you ok?
NATHAN: I release you.

Blackout
(Scene 4)

 Lights come up on NATHAN sitting on a throne on a raised platform upstage. His clothes have changed from the first three scenes into a flowing, elegant robe. Before him are JOSEPH and MARIE in neutral costumes, kneeling, heads to the floor. Enter FARDELS.

NATHAN: Fardels!
FARDELS: Hey.
NATHAN: My God, how long has it been?
FARDELS: About four days.
NATHAN: Wow, really? Felt like at least a week.
FARDELS: My, um, my lawyer won the case. We made up testimony for a witness we called Nathan saying that I helped him escape his nightmarish subconscious, and the jury gave us a sympathy ruling. So I wanted to say thanks... for that. I, uh... I also wanted to see how you were doing.
NATHAN: Oh, great! Yeah, things are terrific.
FARDELS: I see you’ve redone the place a bit. Very minimalistic.
NATHAN: Yeah. And I kept the night sky. It seems to suit my mood most of the time. I’m thinking of adding a moon on Wednesdays. Only I don’t seem to have days of the week yet. I could, though. I think I might just have four. Saturday, Wednesday, Friday, and Natesday.
FARDELS: Natesday?
NATHAN: Why not? It’s practically everyday already. I think with one official day a week, it’ll be less monotonous. All in favor?
JOSEPH and MARIE: Yes.
NATHAN: They always love my ideas.
FARDELS: I see.
NATHAN: So what brings you back?
FARDELS: Are you sure you’re alright?
NATHAN: Yeah! Great! Couldn’t be better.
FARDELS: I just thought--
NATHAN: Oh! Because of last time. No, I told you. I’ve moved past all of that. I’ve had my revenge. I must have killed my father twenty times since you left. After a while, I got bored of it, so I made them my slaves instead. Every now and then, though... Oh, what the hell, why not?
JOSEPH: UGH!!! (dies)
NATHAN: Heart attack? Must have been all of those donuts, you gelatinous sloth. Would you like a drink? Mom would be happy to get you one. I made a mansion down the road a bit. You can stay awhile.
FARDELS: Oh, I really shouldn’t. Debra hates it when I stay out drinking.
NATHAN: Well, doesn’t the time pass faster here?
FARDELS: Oh yeah. That’s true. Sure I’ll have, uh, whatever.
NATHAN: Mom. (She exits.) Well, what do you want to do?
FARDELS: I, oh, I um--
NATHAN: We can do anything, you know.
FARDELS: Look, Nathan. I took some time off from work to go the real world.
NATHAN: Your work? What do you do?
FARDELS: Doesn’t matter. I found you there. You and your father are both alive.
NATHAN: He’s alive? I thought I shot him.
FARDELS: You did.
NATHAN: Then how?
FARDELS: God only knows. I'm no doctor. But Fate had it in store for you to be here. You're both in the hospital recovering.
NATHAN: Is he in his subconscious too?
FARDELS: I can't say.
NATHAN: Wow... I don't know what to say.
FARDELS: I just thought you should know. It's something you'll have to deal with when you get back.
NATHAN: Get back? (Remembers.) Oh yeah.
FARDELS: Remember? You're trapped here.
NATHAN: Well, ever since I got control of this world, I haven't minded it so much. I mean, I have so much more here than I ever did there.
FARDELS: But it's not real. And one day you'll have to go back. You were sent here to learn something, and you're not learning anything.
NATHAN: I learn stuff.
FARDELS: Like what?
NATHAN: Why, just the other day I learned how to make a cat!
FARDELS: You made a cat with your mind?
NATHAN: Yeah!
FARDELS: Where is it?
NATHAN: I forgot about it. Now it doesn't exist anymore. But it did! For a day!
FARDELS: Look, Nathan, I can appreciate Ultimate Power as much as the next idea, but you've got a real life. You need to take control of that. You can't let burdens bring you down and trap you in your mind.

A pause.

NATHAN: Fardels, don't worry about me. I'm happy here. Now you've given me even more reason to stay. I don't want to wake up and face my father again. The man's a torture to be in the same world with. Unless, of course, you have control over him. Oh yeah. I almost forgot. (JOSEPH gasps in a breath and comes back to life.) How you holding up there, big guy. (JOSEPH coughs loudly.) Fantastic. (MARIE enters with glass containing liquid.) About time. Whiskey ok?
FARDELS: Yeah. I guess.
NATHAN: So what do you want to do? It can be anything!

Lights down
(Scene 5)

Lights up on NATHAN sitting at his throne. He stares for a bit. Then he gets up and tries to fly again. Still unsuccessful, he gives up. He snaps his fingers.
and MARIE and JOSEPH enter. They pick him up and fly him around. He pretends but loses interest quickly. They put him down. He claps his hands and music plays. They all dance. The music becomes disjointed and broken. It trails off. NATHAN sighs. Sits in his chair. JOSEPH dies again. But NATHAN just stares. JOSEPH gets back up. MARIE and JOSEPH exit. NATHAN sighs.

Lights down
(Scene 6)

Lights up on NATHAN sleeping on his throne. He’s wearing a long-haired, ratty-looking wig and fake beard. Enter FARDELS.

FARDELS: Nathan!
NATHAN: Fardels! My old friend! Excuse me. I’m so tired these days. Where have you been?
FARDELS: I had work.
NATHAN: Well! Constant work for a decade, you must be exhausted. Come we’ll imagine our entertainment again, and I’ll get you a drink. (He snaps his fingers.)

FARDELS: Nathan, it’s only been a month on the outside. You must be losing time in your mind. Why do you have on a fake wig and a beard, though?
FARDELS: You look ridiculous.
NATHAN: I feel so old, Fardels. So tired.
FARDELS: Your mind is tired. Your body’s still asleep.
NATHAN: I couldn’t remember music anymore. I tried to so bad, but it kept fading. And everyday there’s less and less. There’s nothing new here. Only you, friend. But I can barely see you.
FARDELS: It’s time to—Let’s just take these off. (He removes NATHAN’s wig and fake beard.) It’s time to go back, Nathan. We have to get you out of here.
NATHAN: No, I don’t want to go back. I hate life. I have no control there.
FARDELS: But you can have control, Nathan, you can!
NATHAN: How? If Dad’s still alive...
FARDELS: He can’t control you anymore. Nobody can. But you’re losing all control here.
NATHAN: I have complete control here!
FARDELS: Then where is your mother, Nathan? Your father? When you snapped your fingers, why did nothing happen?
NATHAN: I don’t know... I don’t know! (A pause.) Ok, yes, I want to go back. I’ve always wanted to, but I don’t know how. I don’t know what I’ll do. What if Dad just shoots me again? I’ll never be accepted by them, I still won’t be making any money, and I still won’t have a life— at least not one that’s worth
piss. So what’s the point of going back?

FARDELS: Ok, so your life sucked. Ok! So you had awful parents and maybe your father tried to kill you at least once. I’m sorry all of that happened to you. But the fact is: you’re still alive! You’ve still got all of your fingers and toes and at least one good kidney! You have no idea how much you have! I’ve seen so many nightmares, Nathan. So many “personal hells.” People torture themselves over what they cannot control while they completely miss the fact that there is a whole world of opportunities that are in their control. There is always a worse story, Nathan. This happens to be yours, I know. And I understand that that’s all you know. But here’s what you miss when you think like that: Other lives! Other people to love, to hate, to fill you up, to empty you out. Life is interactions. Life is interpersonal connection, Nathan. Dreams are fleeting. A mere second’s worth of terror or bliss, a confusing story, a blurry image of what your subconscious interprets from the brain’s extraneous activity. Dreams are great for the imagination, but when it comes time to wake up, you can’t imagine the possibilities the real world offers. Because there’s more to experience out there! Every day there’s something new. And all of those other minds, each one you meet, rich with culture, ideas, and a unique imagination, adds something new and incredible to your story. So stop missing that! Stop letting your burdens drag your eyes to the ground. Just get out there and live the life you want to live.

Silence.

NATHAN: Ok.

FARDELS: Ok?

NATHAN: Ok.

FARDELS: OK?

NATHAN: OK! ...But what if...

FARDELS: Ah ah! Don’t worry about “what if.” Welcome “what if!” Let “what if” be your day-to-day adventures.

NATHAN: Well, how do I get out, then?

FARDELS: Bring back the tree. *(NATHAN looks stage left and the tree slides onstage.)* I’ll give you a boost; you grab the first branch and keep climbing.

NATHAN: The answer was up there the whole time. And you knew it? You... *(They fight playfully.)* Why couldn’t you lift me up earlier? Bad back, right?

FARDELS: I couldn’t! Seriously, Nathan. Until you understood that you can step over your burdens, rise above them, I wasn’t allowed to. That’s my job, do you see?

NATHAN: I get it. You tricky idea, you!... So I guess this is it, then? I’m going back. *(FARDELS helps NATHAN up to the first branch. He scrambles up.)* I’m never going to see you again, am I?

FARDELS: Sure you will. I’m in a production of Hamlet this Wednesday just two blocks from the hospital you’re in. Make sure you come. I’m in act three: “to
be or not to be... blah, blah, blah, ME!” Take care, Nate. And maybe you should make that Natesday after all.

NATHAN: Ha! Maybe I will. See you 'round. (NATHAN climbs higher; disappearing. FARDELS sits on the throne. He smiles.) Hey! There’s nothing up here! Oh, never mind, there it is. Goodbye, Fardels!

Lights down.

FARDELS: Farewell.
Twisted
Patty Tacuri

Characters: SALLY- age 33
LENNY- age 39
DUSTIN- age 16
RYAN-- age 9

Setting
Takes place in a luxurious living room with a couch and loveseat on the right side of the room. There are family pictures on a bookcase and on a coffee table. There is big portrait of SALLY’s deceased husband. It’s in the afternoon.

SALLY has just come home from jogging, and she walks over to the portrait and talks to it.

SALLY: Milt, baby (Touching his portrait) I miss you so much...you have no idea how--

Doorbell rings.

SALLY: Wasn’t expecting nobody, hmm...wonder who it is?

Goes to open door and LENNY enters.

LENNY: Miss me much?
SALLY: You’re the last person I expected to see. How did you even get past security?
LENNY: Does it matter?
SALLY: I really don’t have time for this (Takes out checkbook and a pen to write a check.) Okay, how much do you want this time?
LENNY: This isn’t about your money.
SALLY: What? (Puts hand to heart as if honestly shocked.) Lenny Williams, not interested in MY money...ain’t that a shock? Um...Okay, you have five minutes to tell me what you want before I call the security.
LENNY: You bitch! Always throwing your damn money in my face like you is so much more damn superior to me!

SALLY looks at her watch.

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SALLY: Four minutes.
LENNY: Alright, I come in peace. I just wanna see my boy.
SALLY: What? You gotta be kidding...right? Don’t you remember the deal we made? I remember Milt used to say, it was the best deal we’d ever made in our lives.
LENNY: In the first place, I made that deal not with you but with that decrepit old piece of shit, Milton, and now that he’s dead, I figure the deal is off, and I wanna see my son—
SALLY: You sure weren’t worried about your son when you took that check outta Milt’s hand. In fact, Milt said that he’d never seen a happier man in his whole life.
LENNY: What? Is that what he...oh never mind. Look, I need to see my son, and I ain’t leaving til I do—
SALLY: I’m sure for the right price you’ll leave.
LENNY: How many times do I ha ve to fricken tell ya? This ain’t about your damn money...Believe it or not there are things in this world bigger than you or your damn money.
SALLY: What are you talking about?
LENNY: I’m talking about the fact that not all of the money in the world could save your husband, could it? He still got cancer, and he died no matter what—
SALLY: Stop it—What does that have to do with you?
LENNY: More than ya think. I’ll tell you my situation, and afterwards, you decide whether you want me to stay or not.
SALLY: Okay, I’m listening.

Both LENNY and SALLY sit down; LENNY takes out a picture from his wallet to show her. The scene fades out.

Scene 2: LENNY is sitting on the loveseat, and SALLY is sitting on the couch. They are facing each other.

LENNY: Man, I sure appreciate you lettin’ me see Dustin after all these years.
SALLY: Well, ya know ...what kind of monster would I be if I didn’t let you see the boy, especially now.
LENNY: I’m glad I was able to convince you to let me stay...I sure will be glad to see him...I wonder if he’ll—
SALLY: I should warn you, don’t expect him to be especially happy when he sees you. After all, it’s been 10 years since last time—
LENNY: Yeah, yeah, I know but still ya know—I’m still his old man no matta what, and he can’t deny his blood...besides, me not seeing him ain’t entirely all my fault, ya know.
SALLY: You bringing that up again? Let’s not get started on that. Right now is not
the time to talk about—
LENNY: What, huh? The fact that you—
SALLY: Like I said, right now ain’t the time to bring up old shit.
LENNY: Okay, okay. At what time again is he comin’?
SALLY: He should be here soon. He was supposed to drop off Ryan at a friend’s house right after school.
LENNY: RYAN...that’s the golden boy right?
SALLY: There you go again; I’m warning you, Len, that if you—
LENNY: Ya know I’m just teasing. There’s no need for you to—

**DUSTIN and RYAN enter.** Once he sees LENNY, DUSTIN has a dumbfounded look on his face that turns into anger very quickly.

DUSTIN: What the hell is he doing here?
RYAN: Who is he?
LENNY: Hey, is that any way to treat your old—

**LENNY and DUSTIN are looking at each other as if sizing each other up.**

SALLY: Friend, yeah, Ryan honey, this is Lenny. An old friend of the family.
DUSTIN: *(Mutters under breath.)* An old friend, alright.

**SALLY gives DUSTIN an irritated look.**

RYAN: Nice to meet you. *(Extends his hand for LENNY to shake and LENNY takes it to shake it.)*
LENNY: Nice to meet you too.
RYAN: Lenny, right? I’ve heard that name before. Were you one of Daddy’s friends?

**DUSTIN lets out a chuckle.**

SALLY: *(Looks at RYAN.)* Sweetie, I thought that you said you were going to spend the night at Barlow’s tonight.
RYAN: I was, but he’s sick, and his mom didn’t think it’d be a good idea if I came...said he’s contagious. I hope he ain’t too sick...we’re suppose to play ball on Saturday at Ricky’s house.

**SALLY looks at RYAN and gives him a hug.**

SALLY: I’m sure he’ll be alright, baby.
RYAN: Man, I sure do hope so.
DUSTIN: So mom, what is your Old Friend doing here?
SALLY: We'll talk 'bout that in a few minutes *(Motioning her head towards RYAN)* but first—
DUSTIN: Whatever...don't think I wanna hear it anyways. In fact, a drive sounds
like a pretty good idea right now. Wanna come, Ry?
RYAN: Sure.

*Ryan heads towards Dustin; Sally gently pulls him by the shoulder.*

SALLY: Actually, Ryan, why don't you go to your room and play some video
games or watch TV or somethin'.
RYAN: Video games on a weekday? Are you losin' it, Mom?
SALLY: Go, before I change my mind.
RYAN: Alright.

*Ryan leaves the stage quickly.*

DUSTIN: Well, guess I better go.

*Dustin heads towards the door; Sally stops him.*

SALLY: Not so fast buddy. C'mon and sit down. Me and Lenny gotta talk to ya
'bout something.
DUSTIN: Me and this donor ain't got nothing to talk 'bout. I better go before I—

*Lenny heads towards Sally as if to confront her.*

Lenny: Donor, huh? What kinda trash have you been telling the boy 'bout me?

*Dustin gets in the middle of them facing Lenny.*

DUSTIN: She hasn't been telling me anything that I couldn't come up with on my
own.

*Sally gets in between them.*

SALLY: Now boys, let's settle down and talk like the civilized people that we are.
Lenny: Fine.
DUSTIN: Whatever.

*Sally sits down on the sofa on the right side, and Lenny sits down on her left
side. Dustin sits on the love seat, which is located next to the side that Sally is
sitting on.

DUSTIN: So. Why did you let this good for nothin’ in Daddy’s house?
LENNY: God, Sal, you sure did raise a smartass.
DUSTIN: Well, at least she stuck around long enough to raise me…not like some other cowards who—
LENNY: Dammit, Sal, what the—
SALLY: Enough already. Now, Dustin, for my sake, stop with the name calling and just listen to your …uh…to Lenny for a minute here.
DUSTIN: (Sarcastically.) Let me guess. He heard that dad left me part of his inheritance, and NOW he decides that he wants to spend some quality time with his long lost son.

LENNY gets up and faces off with DUSTIN.

LENNY: Listen, boy, if you don’t stop with that smart mouth of yours, I’m—

DUSTIN gets in LENNY’S face.

DUSTIN: You’ll what, huh? Hit me? Go ahead, deadbeat; I’ve been looking forward to the day when I could have you in front of me to beat the shi—

SALLY gets in the middle of both of them. Grabs ahold of DUSTIN’s shoulders and motions for him to sit down.

SALLY: I know you’re upset cause he’s here, but believe me he wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think what he has to say is pretty important.
DUSTIN: Fine, I’m listening.
SALLY: Go ahead Lenny, say what you gotta say and be outta here…don’t you see the boy’s upset?
LENNY: Fine. Dustin, I have a daughter who’s your half- sister. She’s sick, son. Very sick. She needs a transplant and up til now…there ain’t been no luck with anybody in the family being a match…but you see we haven’t tried everybody and so—
DUSTIN: Are you suggesting I test for a match?
LENNY: Yes, son. You may be her only—
DUSTIN: Are you out of your fricken mind? You come in here after 10 years and then suggest that I test to match for a sister that I didn’t even know I had—
LENNY: Tell him Sal.
SALLY: No, no, I can’t.
DUSTIN: Tell me what?
LENNY: Tell him Sal—
DUSTIN: Tell me what, Mom? What’s this dumbass talking about, huh?
LENNY: Tell him, Sal. He may be Priscilla’s only chance.
SALLY: Why? It won’t make any difference now.
LENNY: You know damn well it could. Now tell him, before I do it myself.
SALLY: Fine, okay. Dustin, sweetheart, it isn’t Lenny’s entire fault that he’s been absent for so long.
DUSTIN: What are you talking ‘bout? He’s the one that walked out on us and left us for that heifer and—
LENNY: Is that what you told him? No wonder the boy has no fricken respect for me and here I thought you woulda told him some part of the truth—
DUSTIN: Mom? (Looks at her with a questioning look)

SALLY walks around with her head down.

LENNY: Tell him--
SALLY: Fine, okay. It was my fault. I was the one that left Lenny—
DUSTIN: What are you talking about? Dad always said that—
SALLY: He lied to you, son. You see, me and Lenny were so young when we got married, and I was so unhappy and miserable and poor, and then I met Milton and well—
LENNY: She basically got herself knocked up with that old man’s baby and saw her way out of the miserable life she was supposedly stuck in.
DUSTIN: What?

DUSTIN goes to sit down with his face in his hands, and SALLY goes to put her hand on his shoulder:

SALLY: I had to do it, Dustin. I had you and me to think about...I just wanted a good life for us, son, surrounded by nice things.
DUSTIN: (Pushes her hand away from him.) Get away from me; I don’t know who you are anymore.
LENNY: Now, son, to be fair, I should tell you that Ryan’s dad did give me a fair amount of money to pay me off.
DUSTIN: What the hell kind of people are you?

DUSTIN walks off the stage.

SALLY: Dammit, I knew it wasn’t a good idea to let you stay here.
LENNY: Just give the boy some time to come around.
SALLY: Are you out of your fricken mind? He’s made it very clear he wants nothing to do with us, especially now.
LENNY: And you’re just gonna let him—
SALLY: What? He’s upset. He won’t listen to reason.
LENNY: You have to convince him. It’s her only chance!
SALLY: Look, we’ve already tried, and it just made everything worse.
LENNY: But you have to... you just—
SALLY: I understand what you’re going through, but there’s no other way he’ll listen and you know it.

LENNY kneels and begs, facing SALLY.

LENNY: Please, SALLY, I’m begging you.
SALLY: (Walks away.) Stop it. I can’t.

LENNY gets up and walks towards SALLY.

LENNY: But, SAL—

SALLY turns around and faces LENNY.

SALLY: I think you should leave.
LENNY: SALLY... for once in your life have some—
SALLY: NO! You need to just go.

DUSTIN enters with a suitcase in his hand.

DUSTIN: Don’t bother.

DUSTIN heads towards the door.

SALLY: But, sweetheart.

DUSTIN ignores her. LENNY grabs his shoulder, and DUSTIN shrugs him off.

DUSTIN: Don’t touch me!
LENNY: Son, please, tell me something!
DUSTIN: What?
LENNY: Will you do it?

Dustin turns to the audience.

DUSTIN: What do you think?

Curtain comes down.
Contributors

Zachary Burke is a student at Gainesville State College. His play *Farewell, Fardels* won second place at the 2007 Southern Literary Festival. Zach plans to transfer to UGA and major in theatre.

Caitlin Carlan received her AA degree from Gainesville State College and is currently an English major working toward her BA at Georgia State University. She hopes to continue writing and possibly work toward a career as an editor or in the publishing industry.

Robert Cocco is a sophomore at Gainesville State College and has been writing for about a year, but only about six months successfully. Writing poetry is cathartic for Robert and he cannot believe the amount of positive feedback his work has received.

Matt Creemen is currently attending UGA as an Art major. He plans to graduate in the next two years. His general interests include soccer, snowboarding, playing drums and writing.

James Dimitoff is a graduating Art Major at Gainesville State College. He plans to transfer to UGA and get a BFA in Studio Art or Advertising. Other interests include seeing live music, boarding, and living life to the fullest.

Bill Hayes spent four years in the U.S. Marine Corps as an M1A1 tank crewman. He received an Associate of Arts degree from Gainesville State College in December, 2006 and is currently enrolled at the University of Georgia majoring in Telecommunication Arts and International Affairs.

Tia Lynn Lecorchick is a Gainesville State College student majoring in Journalism. She plans to transfer next year to UGA. Her hobbies include singing and playing guitar. Tia Lynn’s goal is to work at a newspaper or magazine and eventually have her own column in a Christian magazine.

Nancy Mendez was born in Mexico and has been living in the United States for about 5 years. She started high school without knowing any English. This is Nancy’s second year at Gainesville State College. Her major is Pre-Medicine, and she plans to specialize in Gynecology and Surgery.

Afua Ntiwa was born in Ghana, West Africa, and moved to the U.S. in 1996 for college. She graduated from Stanford University in June 2000 with a degree in English and French Literature and is currently enrolled in Gainesville State’s Pre-Nursing program.

Erin Parrish is graduating Gainesville State College in May 2007 with an Associates Degree in Art. She is transferring to Brenau University to study Interior Design. Erin currently works for Lancome cosmetics and is also earning her real estate license. She resides near Lake Lanier with her husband.

Stephen Reszetylo is a history major, Trotskyite, and free-lance musician who currently resides in a fortified compound somewhere in the North Georgia mountains. He enjoys composing self-indulgent film scores while consuming gallons of coffee, plotting the demise of Neil Cavuto, and um...kittens.

Amanda Ross is working on her Art Degree at Gainesville State College. She plans on transferring to the University of Oregon to get her masters. She would like to be a college professor. She enjoys doing tattoos and roller skating.

Daniel Scott is currently attending Gainesville College and Gwinnett Tech. He is an art major and hasn’t decided on his next college destination. His time outside of work and school is generally consumed by music, photography, exploration of the world, with his newest interest being mountain biking.
Megan Smith is presently attending Gainesville State College. She graduated from GSC with an Associates of Art in Art and is continuing at GSC for her Bachelors of Science in Early Childhood Education. Megan enjoys graphic design, pottery and ceramics and traveling throughout as much of the world as she can.

Richard David Smith is a skateboarder. His declared major is English, and he enjoys listening to records, reading anything, and working on his balance. A few of the people he looks up to and respects are James Yancey, Madlib, Paul Thomas Anderson, Daniel Anderson, Kurt Vonnegut Jr, and Hayao Miyazaki.

Emily Stephens is currently an art major at Gainesville State College planning to transfer to North Georgia or UGA this fall. Her other interests include photography and pottery.

Patty Tacuri has recently transferred to UGA from Gainesville State where she is majoring in English. In her free time, she loves to write, listen to music and spend time with her family and friends.

Jackson Taylor has just completed his third year as the Editor of the Chestatee Review. The 2006 Outstanding English Major at Gainesville State College, Jack plans to transfer after graduation to UGA.
Gainesville State College Writing Contest Winners
2006 – 2007

Short Story

1st place: “The Matryoshka Doll” by Tia Lynn Lecorchick
3rd place: “The Reluctant Machine” by Bill Hayes

Poetry

1st place: “Broken Trampoline” by Jackson Taylor
2nd place: “Prostitute” by Nancy Mendez
3rd place: “Paper Boat” by Jackson Taylor

One-Act Plays

1st place: “Farwell, Fardels” by Zachary Burke
2nd place: “Twisted” by Patricia Tacuri
3rd place: “Choices” by Patricia Tacuri
Awards Received

The Southern Literary Festival
One-Act Play

Second Place
Zachary J. Burke
2007

The Southern Literary Festival
One-Act Play

Second Place
Ronnie O’Brien
2006

Community College Humanities Association
Literary Magazine Competition

Honorable Mention
2004
*The Chestatee Review*

Community College Humanities Association
Literary Magazine Competition

Third Place Winner
2000
*The Chestatee Review*
Awards Received

The Southern Literary Festival

Second Place
1999
The Chestatee Review

Community College Humanities Association
Literary Magazine Competition

Second Place
1997
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