I think Sam knows

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I Think Sam Knows

by

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Abstract

This story is about Sam and Oran, who are two lower class people entering adulthood and gaining fiscal independence by working as cashiers at a large store. They are struggling to accept their respective childhoods and trying to make peace with the way people are or at least appear to be. They cope with the difficulties of their loneliness, limited resources and troublesome interactions with various meditative activities. Still, they cannot escape the tension between their internal and external environments.

Sam and Oran find in each other common ground, namely the tendency to live inside their heads and to analyze others. When they begin working together, the prospect of a relationship beyond that of acquaintanceship forces them out of their comfort zones and creates a conflict between the comforts of plutonic breakroom conversions and the risks of a deeper emotional connection that might become physical.

The customers that go through Sam’s and Oran’s lines pressure them in different ways. Oran is barely surviving each interaction and subjecting himself to constant criticism and anxiety. He cannot seem to carve out a rightful place for himself in any social hierarchy. Sam, on the other hand, is curious to know the backstory of each customer and finds a welcome escape in such considerations. But she, too, has a fragile ego and a history of subservience. And, although meditative leisure activities help them to cope with immediate anxieties, the sense of an empowering self-esteem continues to elude them.

For Sam and Oran, the everyday grind of minimum wage workers is not a mere concept; it is reality, in which they are forced to live. Before either of them can find the motivation and direction needed to seriously pursue their ambitions, his or her life must become an event as
opposed to the demoralizing and redundant process in which they are bound. Any means to
greater fulfillment must start with an inner rhetoric of self-esteem.
The Protrusion

Fiction writing is a convoluted creative process that only a combination of practice, study and intuition can begin to clarify. All one can do is keep writing, thinking and, for inspiration and guidance, consult those who have already suffered through the process. *I Think Sam Knows* is an effort to learn how to tell a cohesive story that is longer than, say, twenty pages. Before planning my effort, I had to choose and read the accomplished writers who proved most instructive to my standing poetic sensibilities. The writing of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Jean Toomer, James Joyce, Elizabeth Strout and Sherwood Anderson all affected my poetics for stylistic or structural reasons. But even with their examples on hand and a story and characters in mind, I had to have a sense of where to begin. Of all of the difficulties to fiction writing, actually getting words on the page, though not necessarily the hardest, is the strangest. All writing is doomed to be inaccurate and is destined to test the resolve of any author who fights too hard against the discrepancies among his ideas, ambitions and prose. Hemingway found that beginning a story with “the first true simple declarative sentence” helped him “get it going” (qtd. in Phillips, Hemingway 28). In other words, to “get it going,” you have to put words on paper and worry about what is not good or accurate enough later. This advice may seem simple, but, before a story is started, the satisfactory arrangement of numerous, conflicting and sometimes unorthodox ideas in one’s thoughts can seem impossible.

My research, as far as this story’s subject is concerned, was an observational and experiential odyssey within the environments in which I was interested. All of my characters have attributes that I have seen in living persons. Although their stories and all of the details of their lives, including their names, are imagined, Oran and Sam are modeled after people who
have cashed me out. When I went grocery shopping, I paid attention to the interactions between the cashiers and customers. I also drew from my conversations with family members and friends who have had similar jobs. Sam and Oran are intended to be representative of a large demographic of service workers with whom one might exchange a greeting but never see again or remember. These cashiers, who excited my imagination, must have a backstory and a personality behind the iteration of themselves that haunts their stores, and this is what inspired the exploration of the lives of Sam and Oran. I sought to explore my social biases as I mapped out their lives. I sought to put my characters on display without succumbing to a series of excuses and Romanizations. I wanted flawed characters not pitiable or deplorable characters. These people, though typically not formally educated beyond high school and subject to the same degree of prejudice and vice as those who are, are not without ample knowledge, experience and wisdom. The first question that drove my character creation was this: of what might Sam’s/Oran’s milieu consist? From there came two more questions: from which reference points do they engage with the world? And how might the places they inhabit and ways in which they pass their free time best be used to present their views without too much skewing on the part of the narrator?

The search for guidance on style and structure, as mentioned above, brought me to twentieth and twenty-first century American literature, with the exception of Joyce. All of these artists have modernist themes and strong, clear prose in their texts. The selections from these writers are but a few of the examples of effective writing that have naturally run through my memory and on to my pages. Larry W. Phillips’ compilations of commentary on writing by Hemingway and Fitzgerald proved an invaluable resource for investigating the decision-making processes behind the production of quality prose. I chose each of these authors for the
successfulness of their rhythm, characters and/or world-building. Hemingway is a particularly
important influence both because of the flow of his prose and his knack for communicating
themes by leaving so many would-be symbols out and avoiding or only lightly brushing against
any explicit discussions of them.

With a loose idea of style and subject in the making, I then had to solidify Sam and Oran
into believable characters through whom I could begin telling the story. Characters are, after all,
the story. They are the conduits through which all of the meaningful information or knowledge is
distributed. Indeed, whenever I begin to sculpt characters, I think of the knowledge Hemingway
calls the “the underwater part of the iceberg,” which is the portion of the story indicated by the
sliver on the surface of the page (qtd. in Phillips, *Hemingway* 75). I must determine when I will
show the small above-water portion, the protrusion as it might be called. Then I must consider
when the purpose of a protrusion should be defined clearly and when it should be enigmatic.
Should the reader see, just under the water, the bent angle of ice merging with unknown
darkness? Should the reader see nothing but reflected light on a silver surface? So, simply
compiling intriguing questions, problems and ideas regarding particular subject matter will not
become productive if the characters and their relationships with each other are unconvincing and
uninspiring.

Flannery O’Connor’s final scene in “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” which
exemplifies character development in the short story form, has staying power, the ability to stick
with the reader (me) as a moment, because it navigates its protrusions so well. The tension
created by Julian’s insensitivity to his mother’s difficulties with current social developments,
compiled over the course of the story, which is laced with his disgust and elitism, explodes into
action in the final scene, and the readers see what they know is there but may not have expected
to have burst from between the lines. The reader does not feel the explosion at the striking of the African American woman’s fist but in the moment Julian finally realizes how helpless and broken his mother is as she again falls to the sidewalk, wearing “a face he had never seen before” (O’Connor 420). Ironically, he does not see her true face before the incident but only after she is punched in it.

O’Connor’s plot is telling, as well, because her characters’ actions form the story and the very light with which the reader attempts to see it. Not to say the plot in O’Connor’s story or in others is unimportant, but the connotative qualities, which give a story an identity, come from people reading about people. The plot is an excuse whose job is to not be differentiated from the characters. Whatever happens in the story should be what happens among and within the characters. The happenings in the plot are a means to put characters in the scenarios that make them struggle in some way; they must think and act, verbally or otherwise, within a frame of circumstance. So plot is a tool not unlike the paper or computer on which the story is written. It is the stage on which the actors star and not the star itself. Any aspect of the plot and the settings the plot traverses must refer to an intention or purpose relating to the characters and their environment. Though racism is the dominant social theme, the conflict among those of different generational and individual perspectives on racism, as shown in excruciating detail in a strained relationship between a mother and her son, makes “Everything that Rises Must Converge” instructive, compelling and, therefore, worth reading.

Of course, you cannot have characters without a plot. That being said, significant occurrences within the plot, such as whether someone lives or dies, as gripping, as thought-provoking, as they may be, are themselves hollow shells that the author must fill. In “Eveline,” James Joyce explores both the psychology of Eveline, a young woman who seems to be at a
crossroads, and the Irish people she represents. That Eveline must choose between going to “Buenos Ayres” with Frank and staying in Dublin with her father is scaffolding for the central mystery within the story. Why does she “clutch the iron [railing] in frenzy” instead of following Frank onto the ship (29)? Joyce does not answer this question; instead he provides intimations of her passivity and sense of duty that offer possible reasons for her anxiety towards escape. The story begins with a narrative of leaving home and ends with one of clinging to it. In desperate need of guidance, Eveline “pray[s] to God to direct her, to show her what [is] her duty,” but the final image of her is “passive, like a helpless animal” rather than one of divine empowerment (29). So the strength of the story rests with her passivity and its implications not with what she does or does not do. In my stories, I attempt to keep similar focus on the characters’ psychology as the driving force of the narrative. The depth of Eveline and “Eveline” are one and the same, and this is what I strove to achieve with Sam, Oran and my narrative as a whole.

Joyce is careful to maintain a productive mystery by hinting at absences, which take the physical form of Ernest and his mother (both of whom are deceased), with a connotative and suggestive surface. He avoids confusion by giving the plot and the surface elements of the story an all important task; they balance the murk and the clarity of the story in a way that makes them both productive. Eveline’s dilemma is obvious; it is substantial and real, but there is an element of the uncanny (in both the surreal and striking variety) in the way she entertains the escape plan with desperation only to dismiss it with greater desperation. How much does she care for Frank before she refuses to go with him? After? Was she ever truly, her beliefs either way notwithstanding, going to go through with the departure? Is it even a possible action for her to taken given her history of passivity towards her father?
Joyce’s “The Dead” exemplifies the way in which I distributed mentions of the main themes in *I Think Sam Knows*. On the first page we learn Pat Morkan is dead, yet Gabriel invokes his name when referring to Patrick Morkan the elder, who is also dead. Julia Morkan, the daughter of one Patrick Morkan and sister of the other, Gabriel later gleans, “[will] soon be a shade with the shade of Patrick Morkan and his horse” (191). Death, named Patrick, overshadows Gabriel’s aunt’s annual dinner party as well as his early morning retirement with his wife, Gretta, to their rented room. Death also surfaces in Gretta’s tale of the tragic demise of Michael Furey, in Gabriel’s speech acknowledging past generations and in Kate’s recollection of Parkinson. The story concludes by linking the fate of the living and the dead with the image of snow “falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead” (192).

In *I Think Sam Knows*, I repeat the theme of coping by presenting it in different forms, such as painting, laying on the ground, caring for plants, getting lost in the ambiance of a club and listening to music alone. Just as Joyce ends “The Dead” with a scene regarding the dead, I end my story with a scene dedicated to a meditative moment. In my estimation, the last scene has the greatest chance of leaving a lasting impression on the reader. Therefore, the theme is strengthened not only through repetition but by being returned to in some fashion at the end of the text.

Maintaining an informed sense of mystery is essential to a productive theme. Fiction writing is dependent on our struggle with the unknown. There should be no alleged answers waiting at the theme’s crux, though there must be a distinguishable crux. Hemingway helps here: “True mysticism should not be confused with incompetence in writing which seeks to mystify where there is no mystery but is really only the necessity to fake to cover the lack of knowledge or the inability to state clearly” (qtd. in Phillips, *Hemingway* 8). His criticism of poor writing
mechanics and inadequate knowledge uncovers the essence of good literature, which is its ability to make readers feel they are learning. The author’s responsibility is to try his or her hardest to make certain upon revision that every idea they consciously present is as well-founded and well-stated as written art will allow. If the idea proves too elusive, the author will do well to change it, cut it or put it aside. This requires honesty and self-awareness on the author’s part. A beautiful sounding line or illusionary inference of meaning, however much feeling or satisfaction it may induce, will not last.

Doling out the best information at the best time is a maddening affair to consider. What do I know and how much of it do I want to indicate? What might my readers be expected to know based on this hint or that juxtaposition? What might they know before reading the story? Characters are formed from packets of information, which readers not only interpret but expound on and use as filters to process the rest of the information in the story. Authors can only try to lead readers to certain conclusions, which they may or may not agree with. In fiction attempting at realism, the author does not create a hero or a villain but presents a case-study through which the reader can make classifications. But the same can be said for setting, which is itself a character or several characters. The human characters are in a context, a world with mental and physical bearing composed of themselves and their environment. If everything, then, acts on everything, everything is a character. And the setting, the character consisting of an assortment of places and moments in which the story happens, must have a presence that complicates, reinforces, suppresses or intensifies the story’s emotional and philosophical stakes; the setting, then, is simply another form of information that the author must ambiguously disclose.

As for the psychological and emotional aspects of literature, tension, drama and hurt, to name a few, will manifest as the characters begin to interact according to how the author tunes
the information with connotation, intensity and juxtaposition. These reactive qualities must be managed and, often, understated. The author must ask: How can I create tension or portray the dramatic without cheapening or misrepresenting the intended emotional and philosophical content? You do not create or replicate truth when you write; you allow as likely a possibility as you can for readers to believe you. Since readers know real pain when they see it and know whether the pain on the page is potent enough to act like real pain off it, the author is contending with acute “shit detectors” waiting to reject false feeling the moment it appears (qtd. in Phillips, Hemingway 8). Make too many mistakes and readers will question the accuracy of your “shit detector,” and the quality of the plot and language will be diminished by association. An uncomfortable subject can be broached in however indirect a way as desired so long as the implications, nuances and observations, the recognitions, admissions and gut ripping insinuations regarding the subject, are somewhere detectable on or in the iceberg. The inside of the iceberg indicates the complexity of meaning as an exercise in relativity. How far perception is expected to penetrate the exterior of the ice determines to what degree the author must shatter it.

In fiction, contextualization multiplies information into worlds. The details, the orientation character’s life through glimpses, trigger the imagination and perhaps trick it into a sense of reality. The collage structure of I Think Sam Knows is similar to Strout’s Olive Kitteridge, which uses compilations of short pieces of fiction to create richly layered patchwork worlds. Elements of the setting become tropes as they repeat in various contexts, and the character development benefits from the various angles from which characters are studied. Olive finds herself in numerous distinct environments to wonderful effect. In “Starving,” Nina finds herself at Daisy’s house, and Olive knocks on the door. Olive enters the world, the context, that Nina, Harmon and Daisy have just formed; the inside environments in which these people live
are as important as the outdoor setting of Maine. Olive is confronted with Nina’s eating disorder while eating a donut meant for Harmon’s wife, Bonnie, who does not know Harmon visits Daisy.

We know from previous stories that Olive is dealing, among other problems, with the marriage of her son to the detestable Dr. Sue. But now she has entered a moment centered on the problems of others; Harmon is on the path to cheating on Bonnie; Nina is struggling with a life threatening disorder. And this intertextual portrayal of Olive’s difficulties and those of her acquaintances layers them upon her. And at the sight of Nina, “there [Olive sits], large and big wristed, her mouth quivering, tears coming from her eyes” (96). This moment could not properly exist (not like it does here) in an isolated short story nor could it in a novel constructed to follow Olive’s actions and experiences exclusively. “Starving” is different from “Basket of Trips,” which is different from “River,” and none of these pieces of Strout’s collection are quite the same as they would be by themselves when they are read together. Strout places Olive at the nursing home with Henry, at her son’s apartment in the city, on a walk by the river and in numerous other places with a wide swath of people in various circumstances. The overall story, in this way, becomes comprehensive; it needs not be loyal to a particular plot but can jump into the lives of the residents of Crosby, Maine with Olive acting as the familiar face, the reader’s compass or reference point. Though my technique is not the same as Strout’s—my main characters are always present—Oran and Sam do benefit from jumping around to different scenarios, and the layered effect I wish to create is one and the same with hers in Olive Kitteridge.

As an aside regarding my concern with the distribution of information in fiction, and before I move on to aesthetics, it is worth iterating that readers should work as hard as the author. They should not feel they are making up for the author’s deficiencies, but they should be trusted to read closely. And, though the determination of what is deficient is subjective, the effect of a
narrative lacking consistent purpose and execution will reveal itself to these close readers as an ungrounded feeling or as an inexpressible disappointment. There is little more frustrating than nearing the end of a puzzle only to find you are missing pieces or cannot make heads or tails of the overall composition.

My poetics are more concerned with moments than the actual events that take place to make them plausible. And realism is one of my criteria, because when one resists the incredible and risks the boring, one can direct the bulk of one’s attention to the characters and not have to make palatable or plausible a pretty (as Hemingway might call it) lie or a jarring improbability. Characters do need motives, but they need not be derived from an extraordinary dilemma. The mundane in the lives of Oran and Sam is, to my mind, extraordinary, because the mundane is always extraordinary if taken as such. “If I do not raise the money by June I will lose my house” might be a story, but so might virtually any day in anyone’s life. For example, Sam’s problems with her mother do not rest on any one dilemma but take a more general course of events from which I may pick a focal point. Ordinary is just a name for extraordinary results that repeatedly occur.

Poetry, if it can be brought to bear on the people and places in the story, induces the reader to give the mundane or boring the close attention required for its inherent exceptionalness to be seen and contemplated. The plot in the waiting room at the auto repair shop can tell us as much about ourselves as the plot filled with death, crumbling families, daring escapes or other exciting or terrifying trials. Sam and Oran are significant to but few out of billions; no one else knows they exist. It is my job to entreat more people to get to know and, hopefully, care for them. They will not commit serious crimes. They will not make love or run away from the lives they live. Maybe they will someday, but there is little to no intellectual purpose in forcing them
to (or not to) or slinging them about the world or emotional gamut to get a rise out of my prospective audience when independence for them still means earning a small wage with which to keep a modest apartment. So a close look, when infused with poetic diction, syntax and humanist sentiment, makes their lives worth viewing and animating.

Another consideration is what diction thinking, intelligent people use to discuss difficult concepts when they do not have in their archive any terminology or foundational theories from the literary, religious or philosophical canons. They still think, and they still have profound moments, but there is a tendency for articulating these experiences associatively and meditatively, not in learned vocabulary or allusions. I mention this because I had to constantly remind myself of it while I was writing these stories. Voice. It is voice that presents the greatest challenge to me. Baseness and formal language have equal potential to obliterate an otherwise working sentence. While I am at liberty to use recherché terms in an essay (depending on audience and desired accessibility), fiction constrains me to improvised ventriloquism. If my lips are seen moving, if my voice cracks or fades into its natural inclinations, the viability of my dragons and giant, scimitar wielding chipmunks is lost no matter how vividly I animate them. And, while successful characters have their own voice, they are always in danger of becoming distinct to the point of being caricatures of themselves. The delicacy of voice lies in that much of what a characters says—the language, phrasing and subject matter—will likely be similar or identical to the other characters’ diction but will come from a particular viewpoint that produces a lens through which to read nuanced distinctions. Let the voices be subtle, contextual and natural. I rarely meet someone who speaks in so different a vernacular from everyone else in their milieu that he or she would have to be written entirely in their own dialect.
Phonetics is a required discipline for fiction writers, because the phonetic properties of language are powerful and do not disappear when translated into text. When revising, grammar is lower in my hierarchy than sound. Dictionary meanings flicker, stretch, crystalize, dissolve and dilute in the physical world, the world of sound. An understanding of the way in which we make sonic associations, not necessarily a Saussurean theory but a fluid one that is obtainable from one’s own experientially informed deductions, allows the author greater command of language, though the thought of another realm of revision is frightening in its complexity when one considers the infinite abyss of the meaning of the written word can be made yet more complicated by doing what its phonemes command. Dirt and earth make dearth. A dearth of earth or a dearth of dirt? A dearth of soil? Rhyme, alliteration or neither? Of course earth, dirt and soil have more than phonetic differences, but those minute differences, as gigantic as they are as variables in the equation of meaning, are appropriated and shaped by context. So I can make dirt work if I like the way its sounds sound with the sounds of the other words in a sentence. Hemingway’s diction and syntax, when it is in its simplest and purest form runs down the page to the steady beat of a drum:

“He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees. The mountainside sloped gently where he lay; but below it was steep and he could see the dark of the oiled road winding through the pass. There was a stream alongside the road and far down the pass he saw a mill beside the stream and the falling water of the dam, white in the summer sunlight.”

Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, page 1

The verbs “lay,” “blew,” “sloped” and “winding” orient and sweep forward the reader. Indeed, in a letter to his son, Fitzgerald writes that “all fine prose is based on the verbs carrying the sentences” (qtd. in Phillips, *Fitzgerald* 53). He goes on to write that verbs “make sentences move” and cause one to “race through” and “scarcely notice” the line or sentence (53). This
running, this gliding pace, elevates the language and draws in the reader. The action synchronizes with the words, so that the words are not noticed as words but as the action they represent. The following sentence from “At Rest,” the last story in my collection, exemplifies my effort to create rhythm: “Passing cars cross her consciousness like fingertips drawn across hanging leaves” (73). The verbs and sounds, I hope, do a great deal of work. Speaking of the work verbs do, Fitzgerald praises the following line from Keats’ “Eve of Saint Agnes”: “The hair limped trembling through the frozen grass” (53). He says the “movement” in this line “color[s] the whole poem” (53). His letter is supposed to be “[a]bout adjectives,” but he writes about verbs instead! This is all that needs to be said regarding the importance of verbs compared to that of adjectives. Point taken. In deference to Fitzgerald, I dedicated a section of my revision to-do-list to verbs.

Of course precision is as much the reason for the strength of prose as rhythm, and the temptation to use a specific term can do the opposite of what it is supposed to accomplish. Fitzgerald had a telling rule for the use of “unfamiliar word[s]” which elucidates the complexity of thought that goes into selecting a word (45). “You ought never to use an unfamiliar word unless you’ve had to search for it to express a delicate shade—where in effect you have recreated it. This is a damn good prose rule I think. . . . Exceptions: (a) need to avoid repetition (b) need of rhythm (c) etc.” (45). That’s right, “etc.” Word choice is unlimited, but there are only guidelines to help us narrow the selection. As he alludes to, if you know you need a better word than what you have and cannot think of one in your vocabulary, find one. Vet it, learn it, use it. The first two exceptions are more complicated than he no doubt is aware but needs not mention in the letter. Never should “repetition” and “rhythm” be considered without connotation and voice, both of which “unfamiliar words” can muddle. That aside, these exceptions feel solid and
sensible. And exception (c), though it does not remove the limitations of (a) and (b), illustrates in as little space as possible the limits of any alleged rule. Writing rules are merely the stronger among the guideless. To tie this together with his stance on verbs: I might use a verb I have just learned for the very purpose if it carries the sentence I wish to improve. Ah. After all of this careful consideration, would the verb in question still be as “unfamiliar?” Will it be at all “unfamiliar” when it carries many more of my sentences as a permanent term in my vocabulary? Of course not. In writing and elsewhere, problems teach.

This project is an experiment of technique. I may have, in my inexperience, failed. Good. I am educating myself. Vocabulary expands through the need of another synonym. Technique develops through the need of another technique. So, if I am not satisfied with what I have written, it is all the better.
Coworkers

The cashier is talkative, which makes Oran more nervous. He feels pressured to respond to her amiable disposition and is embarrassed of his embarrassment. He is reminded of his inability to convincingly fake a smile and an enthusiastic response. She is small, cute but not immediately attractive. Her shape is alluring, gently curving beneath her blue vest. She has clean but disheveled hair and wears a nametag that says “Sam.” He wants to know what she thinks of herself when she looks in the mirror. If she is satisfied with her hair, she has either low standards, a lack of awareness or, more likely, a certain admirable wisdom. Perhaps she does not have room for skills as useless as hair brushing. He pulls himself from these thoughts in time to hear another cashier making rude remarks to an elderly woman, who is having difficulty with the card reader.

“Be kind. This is a customer service job,” she shakes her head.

“Right. Being kind is the most important part,” he says. He cannot help but feel like a rephrasing parrot.

“I try to talk to people and make the transaction go faster. Do you want the milk in a bag?”

“No thanks.”

She rings out more items absently. Oran suspects her mind is making calculations much more complex than bagging or scanning. She feels awkward, he thinks. His fault, he knows. He is not failing because he is unattractive or uninteresting. The unfortunate truth is that he must speak to be heard. He would have something to say if he were not so nervous. And, if he were not paralyzed with self-awareness, whatever he said might have come naturally, maybe even with confidence. Her comfort and enjoyment are both intimidating and inviting. Her
attentiveness, her apparent emotional intelligence, incite in him an excruciating longing to know
her. She navigates the transaction so effortlessly that Oran shuts down. The silence—lack of
conversation for thirty seconds—mounts with every beep from the register and stray word from
passersby. Oran shrinks in it, because he thinks in it. Sam interrupts his self-awareness by
triggering something somewhere between a black out and an instinctual acquiescence to good
will.

“Oh, I love these. My mother has a Bart Simpson one. Is this your first?”

The chia pet is a gift.

“Yes,” he says.

“They’re easy to care for,” she says excitedly, sensing she has hit on relevant
conversation and feeling more natural. He nods, expecting her to continue. But she has already
lost interest, leaving him to flush, with relief, the unused responses he had concocted, which he is
sure she would have thought were trivial and boring.

“$2.99 is such a good deal. I bought five of these yesterday when I got paid.”

He flashes a tentative smile at the fellow Doritos lover.

“Do you only like regular or something?”

“Yeah. Cool Ranch is gross,” he says with feigned sincerity, even though he is telling the
truth. His words are spoken without the correct emphasis, hiding the genuine sentiment in him.
His stomach lurches and the rhythm is off and he cannot re-inter the conversation without this
knowledge—this apprehension pulling his thoughts into each other. His attention is on
withstanding the roiling of his stomach as it drops into a pit. He stands blank-faced, blank and
ready to accept whatever she does or says next as fair punishment. Can she see him shake? He is
not sure if he is shaking visibly or not.
“Those’re my favorite. But there’s nothing wrong with nacho. And, oh, I like these too,” she says tossing a package of Twix in a bag. If she is opening a path to another connection, he wants badly to keep it open, to have that success.

“Best candy. So good. The peanut butter ones too,” he forces out in an unintentionally accusatory tone of which he is immediately aware. Nothing ever comes out the way he intends, and, once he first uses the wrong tone, his nerves always seize him. His face reddens and his mouth fills with desiccant. She does not seem to notice his embarrassment and proceeds with the light conversation. Light, easy words hers are, and his laboriously sputter through cracker crumb lips, the final syllables silent, only reaching Sam through the indication provided from those preceding.

She looks at him for a moment, saying nothing. He realizes it is time to pay. She smiles and agrees that Twix are good, and he, his stomach sinking with the notion that she has been being polite and has no particular interest in him beyond the average customer, swipes his card with an iron focus as though to block out reality. She was making the same level of conversation she does with all of her customers, nothing more. He walks to his car disappointed in himself for being imperceptive, for mistaking her amiability for romantic interest. He has received no misleading warmth, no special treatment from the cute cashier and should not feel or have felt like he had and should not act like he should have. She is good at her job, and that is not her fault. But it is his fault that he is making a problem out of it by being so disappointed in his own imagination.

Sam continues with her day. She is content behind the register. She is not there for the money, though it helps. No, not that nine dollars an hour is not a factor. Her road trip from coast to coast will cost about two thousand. But she wants to see people every day, different people,
and wonder about them and their lives and ask them questions. It is such a wonderful deal for her that she has been a loyal employee for two years. She has been there since she was eighteen and living with her mother and step-father. He is not technically her step-father because he and her mom are not married. Still, she has known him her entire life.

Mike was sometimes fatherly with Sam. On her tenth birthday, she and her friends had a sleep over and broke her mother’s favorite drinking glass.

“Get away from it,” he said, “You’ll cut yourselves.” He then bent down and picked up the larger pieces.

“Hand me the broom and dust pan, will ya?” He said. He swept up the glass carefully and said, “You need to listen to yer mom and not climb on the counters. Use a tumbler from the lower shelf.”

Bumped it getting his beer mug, he told Trish. They were a pain in his ass, but it was all right watching them. The cake was ready. No, it was not too late to have it. Yes, she would like her gift. He never gave her or anyone a dime, but he never gave her or anyone a raised hand or biting insult. His harsh words, when he did have them, were generic, expressive of his frustration and never quite hurtful. Sam grew to love his steady, simple presence. She learned what to expect and what not to expect, and, for the most part, she considered her and her mom lucky. He is not complete, she knows that much. Not crazy or anything. He just does not seem to fully engage with the world—checked out like on drugs—but is always just drinking. Sam figures it would be redundant for him to use anything else. He is the house hobo. He likes the same company and a good chair and the radio, but he can drift too and be okay with that.

Trish is Sam’s mother, her world and leading example. So long as Sam follows Trish’s “do as I say and not as I do” mantra, the two get along well. She always says she does what she
can to pay the bills, always says it drunk or sober. She had always kept a roof over Sam’s head, claims as much and is not wrong. So Sam does not think of her as anything less than a good mother. Drunk mother, sober mother, good mother and a roof over her head. Using mother, snoozing mother and a roof over her head. She never hit her or ignored her and always kept not the same roof but a roof over her head. There is, however, a minor problem with money. It is hard to turn down her mom when all she wants is a few dollars. It is easy to fall into the old habit of giving. Sam had paid her mother rent since she was fourteen, and none of them, not Trish, not Mike, not Sam, were finding the transition easy. Sam figures she will save the two thousand dollars and give her mother nothing. Maybe something. But how much? Regardless, it is only money, and she does not necessarily need it more than her mother.

In the following weeks, Sam notices that Oran shops often and always goes through her line. Today, she watches him walk through the automatic doors and drift past the greeter with what might generously be called an acknowledging dip of the head. He scans the produce to his right and the wall of stacked beer to his left. He scratches his nose, which she guesses he does not do to relieve an itch. He is a nervous man, distraught with a routine trip to the store, agitated by the presence of others because he cannot accept the weaknesses he fears he has in greater proportion to everyone else. He turns down the frozen food isle, and she turns to a customer with two carts full of what looks to be a month’s worth of groceries for a large dog owner who prefers soda and frozen pizza to everything else. She remembers all of her customers. They each leave an imprint of their tendencies, which her judgement assigns, if not correctly, perceptively and without lingering or unnecessary malice. She begins scanning items and assessing the customer, who is a tall, bald man whom she has never seen in the store. He refuses to make eye contact but
does appear friendly enough for her to start a conversation. The man is soon on his way, and several more greet her and thank her and leave the store with their goods, some with better manners than others.

During this time, say five minutes, Oran has been looking for ice-cream, which he browses in its entirety before settling on his first choice, fudge swirl. Sam, who has been absorbed with her customers, does not notice him approaching until he enters her line. She had told him about her cats the last time he came in, a memory which manifests the moment she searches for a conversation starter. She is surprised when he speaks first.

“Hi. How are the cats,” he says, wearing the foolishness he perceives in the greeting in the form of a forced smile that disappears the moment the lips crest in wrinkles on his cheeks.

“Sadie has a cold, I think. And Jet is as nuts as ever. He jumped on me off of the top of the refrigerator yesterday when I got home.”

He laughs, remembering the ambushes he had weathered from his childhood cats. She smiles at him, creating a moment where he pauses and she pauses and neither one knows how to continue. There appears to be an opportunity for him to ask her out to dinner, but he has not asked if she has a boyfriend and will stick to that excuse before admitting that he is scared she will say yes. Frightened as he is of the disappointment in rejection, the pressure of having plans with her is what is paralyzing. He is happy with the moment as it is and does not want to ruin it. He is entirely unsure of where they would eat or what they would talk about, and he is already worried that he would not be able to live up to her standards in a boyfriend. So he does not ask. He does not mention he will be her coworker either. He picks up his bags and, with a ‘see ya,’ turns for the door. But she stops him with a word of welcome.

“Good luck. I see you’re on tomorrow,” she says with a smile. “I hope you like it.”
“Thanks. See ya,” he calls over his shoulder as he hastens his step. He should have mentioned his getting a job there. They had, after all, seen each other in passing yesterday, in matching vests. He shudders with the thought that she might think he applied at her store so he could get closer to her. It is an unbearable misunderstanding when all he wants is for her to like him. He has been awkward again, failing to mention his new status, forcing her, though in a kind and unassuming way, to call him out on his neglect. He hurries for his car, sick with embarrassment.

Oran needs the independence of an hourly salary, and it does not hurt that of all the occupations for him to attempt it is the least compatible with his personality. His first months suck him out of his comfort zone like a black hole. He is fully spaghettified every shift. He dies where Sam thrives. She is a model cashier. He finds himself inclined to talk to her, some, and she seems not to mind. In a fantasy that is not a wish, a sort of desired non-happening, he wants to screw her, screw away every ounce of pain, whatever that may be, she has ever had and he has ever had. He keeps this thought a precious secret in his own reality, to be separate from the physical fact but real enough in his mind. He needs it not to happen. He could not touch her and have her still be her. She knows he is uncomfortable around her, around everyone. She watches him squirm and makes him squirm, and he does not avoid her. It is cute how he cannot quite hold eye contact with her. He gives her the feeling he could love her. Maybe it could be True Love. The kind without an agenda. She wants to know him better, but is not sure he ever will be accessible. There is a pleasure for both of them in this social discomfort, from which, agonizing though it is for them at times, they can feel a profit emerging. It is a relationship that neither of them are certain would exist beyond the store, and for a time there is no effort in that direction. They are two fascinated parties who see in each other a foreign internal environment, an
unknown life theory, a looming confusion tinged with the suggestion of knowledge. In short, they are mutually intrigued, but from a safe distance.

**Shelled**

Oran avoided looking in anyone’s direction until he spoke or was spoken to, and then, if he did make eye contact, he stared so intensely into peoples’ eyes they thought he was being standoffish. His face was flushed red, and his gelled blonde hair was combed straight back on top and was short on the sides. He was of average height and of a sturdy build, making his t-shirt and vest fit well. A young couple were cashing out at his register. He scanned and bagged their items in silence. His deliberate actions—him putting the food in the bags, then leaning over the counter to place them in the cart—hid him in plain sight; in the glaring fluorescent cascade of department store customer service, he tried to work without being seen. Why work there? His silence said, “here’s your receipt, I hate you and I don’t want to be here or talk to you.” But he came to work every shift, four days a week.

He glanced at the man and mumbled what was probably “how are you doing.” All the man said was “good,” and Oran did not acknowledge the man again. He handed him his receipt like he was putting it into a paper shredder, while checking the time on his watch.

The couple might have understood enough about him to give him a pass had they known about the memory that had just lurched into his head. It was supposed to be a memory, anyway. But it came as someone else’s. It was a matter of belief whether it was an imagined or recollected experience.

He is six, and a cigarette is bending, pressing against his arm with the smoke wafting upwards and pain radiating and receding into a cruel numbness.
The couple does not know how the smoke twisted in blue ribbons nor had they felt numbness fall over their arms and bodies and minds. They had not sat undisturbed as the cigarette was relit by a hand and arm and mind that was, too, numb. That smoke and those searing sounds and sickly smells, though evidenced by his cratered arm and visible when he reaches for items to lift them off the conveyor belt and drag them across the infrared light, were not in line with them.

How could he tell them while he punched in the code for their avocados, that he had been routinely kicked in the balls, had slowly sunk to the kitchen floor, had the feeling his testicles would burst, that acute throb, which he had told himself would pass? Just lie down and hold them and the pain will pass. You are lucky tonight, he thinks, because the pain will pass. Jay is going to bed now. Stay on the floor for another five minutes; your balls are feeling better enough to get up; and you are not that hungry. There is spaghetti in the refrigerator in an uncovered soup bowl, maybe enough to cover the bottom. Take it out and eat it with bread and butter. Do not bothering to microwave it. Drink a couple gulps of hard water from the sink faucet. Your balls still hurt, because they are squeezed by your jeans when you walk. The pain is a pulse that enters your abdomen rhythmically. It is there. It is there. And it is there. And again, there. Your eyes linger on a pizza box. You may have what is left in there tomorrow. Until then, it is his, and the pain is there. It is there. And it is there, and you had better not touch that pizza.

That guy is worthless, the man says to his girlfriend after they leave the store. He wonders why they did not put him in the warehouse or have him stocking shelves. He asks her if she saw the way he handed him the receipt. She says that he is probably just an asshole or jealous of them or something. She says he scowled at them as they walked across the front of the store and out the automatic doors.
Had they watched one of his dad’s girlfriends burn him for writing on her white pants, maybe they would not want him in the back if he did not want to be there. They might have smiled at him as he looked over their shoulders and at their bodies and anywhere but their eyes for too long. They would have said he should be right there in the front, in the front where everyone could see him and acknowledge him and confirm him with polite interaction. They would have known that what he needed was to be convinced, persuaded over time, that he deserved to be up there, and that he was all right to be there and need not feel otherwise. He could be left alone to do his job in the lucent air among the busy people.

They are not responsible for knowing or doing anything about him or his life. They expect quality customer service. He is on the clock, not them. He is already helping the next in line, mangling the painful interactions together into what is a usual shift. They are driving away, soon to forget the slights they feel they have suffered.

Sam’s Day

The linoleum floors are peeling and the blue carpet is worn flat and black in spots. A 40” flat screen TV sits on a black particle board stand with an open compartment where a cable box sits with its green lights saying its ten past eight o’clock. The air in the small kitchen is moist with steam from boiling pasta. Sam turns the top off a jar and dumps half its contents in a bowl. She takes the pasta off the stove, tips the pan sideways over the sink and pours out as much water as she can without the pasta spilling. She holds a fork abreast of the lip of the pan to maximize her effort. She tips the pan over the bowl, dumping the spaghetti into the red sauce. With a turn of the fork, she completes her dinner. All the while, her cats are watching her from the floor,
with their heads craned up and tails swaying. She turns out the kitchen light. With the exception of the pulsing glow and steady drone of the television, it is dark and quiet in the apartment. With a plate in one hand and a glass of cola in the other she sits in front of the TV on the couch, which is worn smooth and bowing in the middle. Jet jumps in her lap, and she brushes him off onto the adjacent cushion. Sadie watches them intently from atop the refrigerator in the kitchen. Sam changes the channel to a show about people who are looking for their dream homes. She is bathed in the dim light of a young couple with three kids who are choosing among three houses in the Bahamas. Their maximum budget is four thousand a month. She likes to watch these people and cheer for them and think about what it would be like to live someplace she has never been to. Her roommate is at work, leaving her with the apartment to herself for the fifth time this week. The spaghetti and soda make her feel full, and the heat kicks on to make her feel warm, and the TV talks to her and makes her feel welcome. She slides her feet against the carpet. Her socks slide below the balls of her feet and back over them, and she is relieved by the pressure and friction this motion creates. She is tired but will not sleep just yet. Two more episodes come and go before she walks across the living room and opens her bedroom door. She pauses to look at her unmade bed. It is a stack of two mattresses in the corner with a purple comforter half on the floor and a purple sheet holding on by three corners. Her two pillows are propped against each wall. There is, in the space to the right of her bed, a small metal stand. It has wheels, and on its two shelves are several small cacti and bamboo plants, individually potted. The plants, like her cats, relax her. Caring for them is peaceful, therapeutic and inexpensive.

She remembers to brush her teeth and does so in the bathroom before wrapping herself in the comforter in her room, where a gentle light reaches for her from the far wall outlet in the shape of an elongated star. Her hair is squished between her face and the pillow on one side and
draped over her face on the other. She remembers that she has to go home the next day to pick up a few of her belongings, mostly clothes, and does not fall asleep for another hour. She has not seen her mother in two weeks, which is the longest she has ever been without seeing her. It has been an encouraging and quiet two weeks. Still, she needs the rest of her clothes and, therefore, must break the calm, the surreal independent streak, with a visit to her mother’s. Between the sleep and the visit lies the safest part of her life, a standing room only space behind a machine that stores thousands of dollars, and separates her from those who give them to the machine—sometimes freely, sometimes reluctantly—though never without the cordial enthusiasm of her custodianship. They could be anybody and have done anything, but in her line, they are customers, her customers and, therefore, to be treated with great respect. They talk to her and smile at her. Some are even funny, while others are incredibly rude. They are her livelihood and her greatest source of joy, which is a difficult fact for those who observe her to understand.

The morning is an unconscious routine. She gets herself cleaned and dressed in ten minutes and, after a fifteen minute drive, arrives at work early. She takes a moment to eat her yogurt in the break room in the back of the bustling warehouse called a department store, then takes her post at the register. The store is a world unto itself, with its floors sprawling as though they are the ground itself, a gray ground growing shelves of canned and boxed provisions. It yields furniture and a great many DVDs and TVs and toys and lamps and fishing poles and all of the popular mid-shelf beers. The fluorescent lights beat on her, revealing brown eyes with pinpoint pupils and hair almost black but washed over in a brown effervescence where the light directly strikes it. Loose strands on top of her head glow and dance as she shifts from side to side, cracks her knuckles and greats her first customer. The woman buys a fruit cup and a water. She gives a terse thank you and self-consciously picks lint off her black blouse, when Sam tells
her she loves her pencil skirt. The skirt is ordinary, solid black. Sam can see the woman, perhaps thirty five years of age, is distracted and solemn and, as she was constantly adjusting and rolling her eyes, not at all amused to be dressed this way. The next is more cheerful but lingers too long, says too much. Not too much for Sam but for the man waiting in line behind him, who looks back and forth between her and the gregarious man with an agitated quickness. The chatty man is probably fifty, and is on his way to work. His crew is putting the finishing touches on a house they had been building for a newlywed couple all summer. Sam enjoys the small talk, noticing the pride in the man’s smile, which swells like his large chest does when he leans backward to stretch his back, which causes his stomach to stress the buttons on his taught flannel shirt. But this is a job for those who like the quick-and-over-and-on-to-the-next social experience, so Sam wishes him luck, turning to the impatient man with a fresh tailored smile while the contractor’s words are still in the air.

She passes her fingers, with blue chipped nails, through her tussled hair and smiles faintly. She moves at a measured pace, scanning the items without rushing. She plots her next move, studying him with an indirect gaze. She does this within the scanning of the first five items in the transaction and decides to try a typical greeting and proceed from there by feel. The more he talks, the better she can read him.

“Good morning,” she says to break the silence.

“Good morning.”

“It’s beautiful out today. The sun is already intense and it smells like summer.”

“Yes. Nice day,” the man says, looking away and back at her and shifting his weight rapidly from one leg to the other.
“You know,” she begins, startling the man, obliging him to listen, “we’re going to have a sale on lawn furniture. Oh! I love these dresses. They’re cute. Are these for your kids?”

“Yes,” the man smiles broad and toothy, “Birthday dresses.”

“Yeah? Are they twins? You have to hit yes before you can put in your pin.”

The man nods.

“Really? Wow. Twins? That’s exciting!” Her voice grows louder and higher with each word. She had always thought it would be fascinating to have a twin.

“Keeps me busy,” he says, still shifting from foot to foot.

“I had a dress like them when I was little, but it was purple.” She hands him his receipt.

“Oh yeah? Thank you. Take care. Bye,” the man says, without looking at Sam or really hearing her.

The day goes on like this, and she does not know when people are not listening to her. She smiles, she compliments, she usually listens, though sometimes she is so excited about making conversation she forgets to listen and just blurts out her next thought. People think she is strange. Some think she is stupid and, when they leave the store, they make fun of her hair and her enthusiastic comments. She is ignorant, so wonderfully ignorant and happy to put herself in front of their ire for nine dollars an hour. She does not endure her shift the way many of the others do, because she does not, cannot, look at her customers without empathy. She is also perfectly aware that the time she spends with them, at least at any given transaction, is short. There is always the next in line.

Aaron, who she is newly dating, meets her at work when her shift is over. He is a tall, thin boy of twenty two. He wears tight blue jeans, chucks and a band t-shirt. He gets in the
passenger seat of her Sunfire, and she drives them to her apartment. She is unsure if she should be doing this on date three. But it is just a movie. Really.

When they get to her house, she does not bother to give him a tour. He is excited and talks about his job at the movie theater. She is in the presence of an assistant manager. He is polite, all thank you for the soda and may I sit next to you. He slides closer so their thighs are touching and puts his arm around her and cringes inside until she rests her head on his shoulder. She presses play on the remote. He talks during the movie, and she gets annoyed with his comments. He would have made better decisions and would have beaten up half the men in the movie. These annoyances may have slid if he had not slipped a necklace in her hand and refused to say how much it cost, and if he had not called her his girlfriend and believed it. She knows she should cut him off here before he gets his hopes any higher.

“Well, I have to go to my mom’s, so I’ll drop you off at your house?”

“Okay, same thing tomorrow?” He gives her a blissful look. She looks away and back at him, and before she can think says, “Okay. Yeah.” He gets up and takes her hand to walk with her. She lets him hold it. They walk by Jet, who has Sadie backed into a corner. Sadie lunges at him, grasps his shoulders with her claws, bites the back of his neck and streaks out of the kitchen. Jet shakes his head and walks over to his food dish. Sam looks at Aaron and says “Um.” He looks at her again with that blissful look, waiting for her to speak. His hand is on the door knob.

“Did you see that? My cats are crazy.”

She pulls into her mother’s driveway around seven, thumbs her steering wheel for a minute, closes her eyes and turns off the engine. The driveway is sixty feet of uneven dirt,
spotted with potholes and oil stains. Crabgrass thrives in patches in the center between tracts of tire worn earth. The sun glows partly behind the house, shrouding it in an aura obscuring the chipped white paint and cluttered front porch. Broken bicycles, plastic toys, a truck plough and a bird bath that is now a mosquito hatchery are apparitions gathering on the lawn, rising from the tall grass. They give Sam a chill, a dark sensation worthy of the dead. She runs to the door, the sensation gaining on her with the increase of her speed, the wind in her ears drowning out the moan of the pursuant departed.

She walks in to a duet of clanging dishes and old country music. Mike walks past with an empty soda can, spitting into it before he says hello, yelling so as to make Sam’s mother aware of the visitation. He is a tall, thin man in his fifties. He is bald but has a hoary mustache and bushy black hair on his swarthy arms. He says it is good to see her, sincerely smiling, as he slowly, almost gingerly, walks back toward his chair.

“Hey, Sam,” Trish says, emerging from the kitchen. Mike has made it to his chair in the living room. They can hear him change the radio station and turn down the volume.

“Your clothes are in your room. I folded them and put them in a basket for you.”

“Okay.” Sam begins walking down the hall toward her old room.

“How’s your place?” Trish says, following her.

“Okay.”

“Daniel said it is seven hundred a month with everything included.”

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. I’m no worse off.”

“We are. If you have ten bucks, I’ll give it back to you next Friday.”

“I had to buy a lot of stuff. I’m broke.”
“I know. But Mike is out of medicine. Let’s see . . . we are out of ketchup and toilet paper, too. Twenty would be better, actually.”

“I don’t have twenty.”

“Ten will still help.”

“I have to buy food. I need lunches for—”

“I’ve got extra peanut butter I can give you. And you and Daniel have bread at the apartment, right? And I picked up some baked goods today. They’re still fresh, should last quite a few days. I’ll give you some that you can take with you for lunch.”

Sam pulls a five and three ones out of her back pocket and hands them to her mother. It is the last of her money for the next week, exactly the price her guilt demands. She had moved out a month ago, taking her income with her—mostly. Six years of earning a living had made her appreciate every dollar she had, but twenty years of living with her mother had taught her not to grow attached to them. Oh well, she has a whole year to save money to go on a road trip next summer, which, she thinks, is plenty of time to save if she can avoid her mother for that long.

Sam lifts the basket off her bed and turns to reenter the hallway. Trish stands in the doorway.

“You’re not going to stay and visit?”

“No, Mom.”

That show about people looking for homes will be on all evening, and she will go back to her apartment and watch it with her cats and tell herself that next week she will hang onto the eight or maybe twenty or so dollars left over from her paycheck. Trish and Mike will spend the eight dollars before she gets home. Mike will do without his medicine, and Trish will do without ketchup, and the two will combine the eight dollars with the three or so dollars in bottle deposits,
which are hanging in store bags from the knobs of their kitchen cabinets, and use the money to buy a liter of cheap vodka.

Trish thanks her for the money and for dropping by. Mike, who is busying himself with putting in another pinch of chew, hesitates with the dark tobacco strings pinched between his thumb and forefinger a hands width from his mouth. He proceeds to hook the dark lump into his bottom lip, deep against his gums, and says nothing. He says thanks you. She says he is welcome on her way out the door.

**Intrusions**

Oran was exhausted by the time his shift ended. He walked to his car, swinging his name card by the lanyard. The sun was high, and it was hot on the asphalt, making him sweat from the short walk. He got in the car feeling beaten down by the sun and the customers and his worn out shoes. The car rolled slowly out of its spot, cut across several rows of empty parking spaces and turned onto the street. Inside the car Oran assessed how his shift had gone, as he always did on his fifteen minute drive home. The customers had been no worse than usual. The managers had been professional and stepped in whenever he had needed them to address customer complaints and questions. He had spoken to customers when necessary and without incident. His car, which was rusted around the wheel wells, stopped a few feet behind an extended cab pick-up truck. He waited for the light to turn; he sat too low in his car to see it turn over the cab of the truck, so he took the truck’s revving engine and forward movement as a sign that the light had changed.

The seats had cigarette burn holes in them and white smears from caked on and rubbed in food. The dashboard was covered in dust. Oran could no longer smell the stale, dry rotted odor that shot out of the air vents with a steady, cool, voluminous regularity. A potato chip bag lay
trampled on the passenger side floor with a smattering of crumbs protruding from its crinkled opening. Oran rubbed the side of his neck and rested his arm on the door with his elbow hanging slightly outside the car. His chest felt tight, and his stomach felt hollow. He was panicking about his performance, feeling guilty about his shortcomings in customer service, which he knew were as much a product of his lack of effort as his fear of people. But his insides fluttered when he, keeping pace with the pick-up truck as it accelerated through the intersection, remembered that he had the next two days off. Warmth and good will and even sexual desire exploded within him. He was free of his performance. There was no one to perform for at home. His sanctuary, dirty and small and altogether modest as it was, awaited him. A studio apartment could be a world, a buffer where others’ opinions could not follow except in one’s own head, where they could be sorted and forgotten and explained and doubted without the cruel eyes that had borne them. No intelligence staring back, making him doubt his own. No comfort either. No back rubs. No laughter, except his own. He laughed freely, like a madman, when he was alone. When he was alone, he was on to something, a secret he could not tell himself when he left his sanctuary. He hated himself outside the sanctuary. That idiot that could not bring the other self forward to face the eyes that had the opinions he knew he could overcome if he were always the madman that lived in his apartment.

Inside, he changed out of his work clothes, putting on a pair of running shorts and a white t-shirt. Though his car and apartment were untidy, he was always neat. He got his hair cut every three weeks and shaved every morning. His clothes fit well on his full, firm frame. He heated two slices of left over pizza in the microwave and ate them both within five minutes. It was only six o’clock. He had the whole evening and night and next two days to himself. He had to take it one activity at a time. What would he do now? What would he do now? And so on. He watched
the first ten minutes of a movie but lost interest. He turned off the TV and picked up *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and read the last one hundred or so pages, and lay on the couch and thought about how peaceful it must be to lie on the pine needles on the forest floor in Spain. Eating and sex and fighting were all better in books. If he could, he would read a scene where someone eats instead of eating. That is why he read about dying. It is better to read about it. You can take it back after you decide you like the idea of dying. You can die with the character or watch them die. You can read the book again and die again or decide the character is wrong to want to die. But it was eight thirty and time to pick the next activity, as is the benefit of solitude. He did something for a half an hour that, afterword, made no difference whether he had done it or not but, as he was acutely aware, had allowed him relief and a promise of future relief all alive and dead and leading to no lasting satisfaction.

He did not drink alcohol. He never had. No drinking parties. No drunken sex. No *you're old enough, son. Have a drink.* He poured some Mountain Dew into a mug—he did not know why he always did that, bothered to use a cup, given that he never had visitors besides his uncle and aunt for a few minutes — and sat at his small kitchen table and looked across it out the window. He saw nothing because it was dark and the kitchen light glare and blackness fought over the pane, which was half covered by a crooked white blind. He was relaxed in the solitude, hidden and relieved, though there was an aching in his tensed shoulders that would continue to bother him for the rest of his life.

Until he was eighteen, when his dad was put in prison, he had lived from meal to meal, now he lived week to weekend. He had gotten the cashier job and the cheap apartment right after, not wanting to stop and mourn and think of anything but a job and the sanctuary he could get with it. He wanted everyone to leave him alone and let him take care of himself as he had
done, mostly, since he could remember. He flipped open his computer, which was charging on the table, and streamed classic rock, tapping the table and rocking his head up and down to the drums. He closed his eyes and receded into the guitar, which spoke in notes like poetry, in meanings only felt and never twice the same. He hurt and soared, cringed and writhed to the baritone vocals. In the meter, time was neither a concept nor reality; it was simply the means for the sounds to change and became one and separate and fade and draw him out of his body while he sat alone in his kitchen chair, where solitude was not unfavorable. His elbows rested on the edge of the table, and his forearms angled upward, and his hands made fists, the left of which he pressed his forehead against hard enough to feel his knuckles against his skull, but not so hard as to feel pain. His head lifted, eyes still closed, and swayed right and down until the side of his chin pressed into his right shoulder. His shoulders were tense but the tension was altogether different because it was noticeable when it happened and voluntary. It was a counter tension, a tearing of the nervous binding that until a few hours ago had been his day. He pulled his head back and dropped it down. He pulled his head up and his phone vibrated three times in his front pants pocket. He opened his eyes and brought the phone to his face. His uncle had just pulled up out front and was going to come up. He turned off the music, walked to the door and listened for the footsteps on the stairs. Like a startled deer, he stood still, steeled in anticipation of an encounter.

It was great that his uncle and aunt and their two kids stayed in touch, but their regular entreaties for him to move in with them made him more evasive than he was already inclined to be. He, now caught without an escape plan, answered the door. His conversation with his uncle turned where it always did.

“Come over for dinner tomorrow. We’ll make whatever you want, man.”
“No. I’m okay.”

“I know. It’d be fun though.”

“I have to get ready for work.”

“You’re off the next two days, right?”

“Overtime, man. I picked up a three to eight.”

“I know you like being by yourself, but you’ve always lived with other people, right? I think that was your balance. You shut yourself in your room knowing there was usually someone downstairs.”

“I have downstairs neighbors.”

“Oran—what are their names?”

“I don’t know. I’m okay, Uncle Drew.”

Drew stood up and shook his head, and Oran remained on the couch, looking at the floor with his hands between his knees.

“Oran. Fuck, Oran. You’d think you were in prison,” Drew said, with a defeated, groveling tone. He licked his lips and raised one hand to the side of his head and dragged it across his forehead. He waited for Oran to say something.

“You know what tomorrow is?” he added.

“Saturday.”

“Yeah, Saturday—and?”

“And it’ll be two years.”

“You have to work tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

Drew left without another word.
Oran waited a minute, until he could be sure Drew was gone, and undressed and went to bed. He loved his uncle. He liked his uncle. But he did not want his uncle or his aunt or his cousins to know him any better than they already did. And he did not want to know anybody any better than he already did. He did not want to bear the shortcomings of others. Oran’s uncle had not, as far as Oran knew, stained himself with an irredeemably immoral act, nor had his Aunt Suzanne. It had to stay that way even if it was not true. Everything his father did to him was to better him; he was not what Drew said he was; he was not a killer because he made a stupid decision and was unlucky at the same time. Jay taught Oran to defend himself, and that’s what he did two years ago. He must have hit that guy just right, they said. Oran had not been at the bar. He had not seen his father accuse the guy of stealing his jacket. He had not seen the guy say “Fuck you, man. I didn’t take nothing” and get caught in the temple by the violence at the end of the punch. The only way to get along with Drew and Suzanne was to keep them in a separate space from his, as they had seemed to want before.

He pinched himself on the thigh hard enough for it to hurt and held the stinging fold of skin between his fingers and thought of how no one could ever teach him anything more important than the difference between pain and its absence. All he needed to do was keep control, administer the doses, both physical and mental. All to remind himself of the duality of comfort and suffering. So he pinched harder and took a deep breath when he released. This was his way of saying goodnight to himself, an understated ode to his childhood.

But the problem with solitude is loneliness. Obviously. Since dating was not Oran’s forte, nor socializing in general, he painted model figurines. He hunched over his desk under the lamp light, poking the tiny pieces of plastic and metal with fine brushes, some with only a few bristles. A completed piece, perhaps a proud knight in gold armor, gave him tremendous satisfaction.
There was labor in beauty, strength in those pieces of artwork brandishing swords and poleaxes and crossbows. The orcs and goblins had sea green skin and wore orange war paint on their faces. Every figure was meticulously detailed, dry brushed to bring out the shadows between the muscles, folds in clothing and plates of armor. Oran believed he could only paint well when he thought about his present work and nothing else. Every ounce of paint that dried to the shields and helmets and spears of those miniatures was worth more liquor and therapy than he could afford on a year of his salary. And he did not drink or talk to people anyway.

They fought wars on his kitchen table. Sometimes the orcs and humans would skirmish late into the night, with Oran looming over the mayhem like Ares and the Sisters of Fate in one body. With his lust for carnage, he would press the attack. With a roll of the dice, lives would be as easily saved as they would be ended. Kurt, a stocker who worked the same shift, unleashed his elves at the local comic shop. He invited Oran regularly, but that war, the one with another god, was never to be. Oran painted and battled alone. He fought for his loneliness, his thoughts were his addiction. Why not? He had them, kept them and hid them. Secrets were more valuable if he was the only one who knew them. He did not want to know anyone else’s secrets. That would be stealing. It would be unfair for him to take people’s secrets and not give them his in return. He had his own conversations about abuse. He did not want to hear victim’s stories. He had his own details, and they were his and that was enough. His guilt was his. And that was enough. He did not have the capacity for anyone else’s, and he knew it.

A Great Leader

Brian’s face is covered in popping pustules that ooze with puss when he speaks. He asks Oran how he is doing, brandishing a fake smile that is almost purposefully fake, ridiculous to the
point he has to be aware of it. A pustule on his cheek bursts as his lips curl upward, flashing evil. Oran says he’s all right, lingering to see if Brian wants anything else from him.

“You’re—ah—doing a little better. Keep it up.”

“Oh, good. Thanks.”

“I wish you’d be more talkative with the customers, but the good news is we aren’t getting any complaints. Anyway, I want to talk to you about something.” He smiles again, waving Oran into his office with a sweeping gesture of his rotting, clawed hand.

Oran enters the lair obediently. He will survive because he can hide in plain sight. He can conceal his power too, mask his intelligence. He knows when not to argue. He sits in front of Brian’s desk in a plush office chair with his hands in his lap. Brian leans back in his chair, his clawed fingers interlocked on his corpulent body. His powder blue dress shirt must be enchanted because the puss and blood never stain it.

“We made some changes to the schedule. We put you on Monday through Wednesday evenings, ten to six.” Oran, who has been working 36 hours a week, says nothing while he panics.

“You were already working Mondays and Tuesdays. So you’re really swapping Wednesdays for two extra days off.” Oran nods, starring at the desk, which is covered with neat stacks of paper. Brain keeps his eyes on him, waiting for him to protest so he can offer him a solution. He is thoughtful in that way. Brian is a skilled negotiator, always beginning with ambitious requests, though they are actually intended to evolve into modest demands.

“I’m losing twelve hours. I can’t lose twelve hours,” Oran says, quietly, as though there were no one else in the room.”

“You can pick up some hours unloading trucks. We can use you for sure.”
“Okay.”

“What works for you? We need help on Friday and Sunday. If you do both you’ll be back around 36. We’ll give you seven on Friday and seven on Sunday, or is that too much?”

“Okay. I’ll do that. Thank you.”

“No problem, Oran. Let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you. You’re doing good. You’ll like unloading, I think. You’ll make more money. If you like it, I can give you 36 hours unloading and stocking. That’d be around a hundred more a week for you.” He studies Oran’s face to see how these new terms are affecting him, to see if there might soon be another negotiation.

Oran does the math and diplomatically leads Brian to believe there is a chance he will take to unloading. Around a hundred a week at 36 hours means a three dollar an hour raise. He is making nine fifty now, so that would put him at twelve fifty. He knows unloaders are starting at fourteen and going up to fifteen after a year. Brian could be calculating the wage increase after deductions, but that is not how he works. He is an income-incubi, a dollar-demon, the Belial of budgeting.

Oran likes Brian. Though he sees his misinformation and illusionary carousing, his insincerity, as indicators of a master manipulator—and, considering the context, the greater good is not a likely motive—he knows Brian is merely selfish. He imagines him as a disgusting creature but that does not unmake him as a well-groomed, profit driven man whose sense of duty as manager restrains him from outright savagery. This deceiver is limited to a sort of pressuring somewhere between persuasion and coercion. He maintains a pleasant façade, or façade of a façade, for the optimistic, but he does what he says he will do. His trick is to get you to agree to what he says he will do and then to do it as though he is doing you a favor. Oran routinely
pretends to be fooled. He plays the game because Brian appreciates the power trip and is given to useful acts of generosity in those moments of confirmed supremacy. Oran sees his own claws and boils come out from time to time and cannot commit to the self-righteous persecution of the greedy man.

Sam hates Brian. She would not admit as much, but she hates his very face. She walks into his office, head up and smile on. When she had been a new employee, three weeks on the job, she had overheard him telling another manager she was a dumbass because she had kept having off counts. He has been a blank head to her ever since, one that made sure she got paid and trained and held her errors over her. He is the dumbass. The dumbass with no face because all expression ceases to be real on it. He had told her then that she was on six months’ probation, in other words, she could be terminated at any time or for any excuse. She had taken all the hours he asked and managed to reduce her mistakes to one during those six months.

“Hi, Sam. How are ya?” he says. He has no face. He has a head with a front facing part that makes noises until it gets its way.

“Good. How are you?” She says. The face is already making another noise.

“I just wanted to touch base with you and give you your quarterly performance review. Here it is. You see you got a perfect rating in customer service. You talk to ‘em. They like that. Everything else is good, as you can see,” he runs his finger down the page. “The only thing to be aware of is that—hold on,” he picks up the ringing phone. The head sounds change, get louder, go up an octave, sound friendly. He thanks the person on the other end for filing in on such short notice.
“You’re doing good, like I said, except you’re short sometimes. I see, uh, two times this quarter. $37.50. Is there anything you think you could do to prevent it?”

“I always pay it back.”

“I know but what happens if it’s a hundred or five hundred.”

“I’ll pay it back.”

“I know you would if you could. I’d have to fire you,” the head says.

“I’m sorry. It will never be that much,” she said to the blank oval on a man’s shoulders.

“I know you like working here, Sam. I’m not trying to threaten you, but I do want to make sure you understand. I know they are honest mistakes. I sympathize with you. But this is a job, you know?”

“Oh, put on the pressure, make it worse than it is, so I can do you a favor to make up for it. Give me whatever schedule is most convenient to you, you shit head,” is what she would like to say, but she does relish her time behind the money machine where she can talk with all of those different, laughing, scowling, beautiful people.

“Okay,” is what she says out loud.

Pity Party

Sam came home to a mess. Danielle had some friends over for drinks and games. They were playing king’s cup and had been for hours. Sam was tired from a ten hour shift at the register. All of her tact had run out. She walked past the table everyone was setting at without a wave or word. They were laughing at Tim, who had himself fallen out of his chair laughing. Laughter was fire to beer’s oil. Danielle smiled at Sam, but to no avail. She watched her
roommate retreat down the hallway but soon returned her smile to her guests. They all drank, with Danielle leading; they didn’t stop until she did, which was about thirty seconds later.

Sam’s almost boyfriend, Aaron, was still texting her. She had been kind to him all through the disengagement, but he took it as encouragement. She remembered how she let him down and knew right away, by his reaction, she had made the right decision and that there might be ensuing difficulty with the heartbroken kid. That is what he was, a kid when it came to that kind of thing.

She thought of the way she had let him go before it had had a chance to become worse.

“I want to go out,” she said to him.

“I thought you wanted to stay in and watch movies,” he said just loud enough for her to hear over the TV. Brushing a few dangling hairs behind her ear, she turned her head to make eye contact with him. He glanced at her then at the floor.

“I’m going out.”

“I don’t usually go out. I guess, if you want to, we can go,” he said.

It was wet under her eyes, which stared blankly at the TV, flickering with the images, growing, swelling, but holding fast to a sense of composure. They had been dating for four days, four dates in four days to be exact. He had gone through her check-out line and asked her out. She had surprised herself by saying yes, shaking afterwards with fear and excitement. She was again surprising herself, this time with the way she coldly dismissed him. He was, to her disappointment, as inexperienced with dating as she was, and although he had tried to be a gentleman on the first three dates and had followed her leading pace, he had just been caught misreading her signals. She had her head on his shoulder and was running her thumb nail over the texture of his jeans, just above the knee. He had his arm around her, and he kissed her on the
mouth, and she was already sure it was over. But he wanted to move ahead and fast, and indeed his hand moved fast, and he did not know it was too fast for her or himself. She brushed his hands off her chest, gently pushing them to the side the way she would have done with her cats.

“Thank you,” she said, “for a wonderful time. I want to go meet my friends.” She sat there on the couch with her hands at her sides, pretending to watch TV, wondering where she had pulled the excuse out of.

“Okay,” he said, shaken and embarrassed. “I’ll give you a call tomorrow? Or you can call me?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean—uh—you don’t know?”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. Please. I’m sorry. Let’s slow down. I love you!” At this she could have thrown up. She kept her eyes fixed on the TV and let her stomach do its backflips.

“No. I don’t know you. I’m sorry. Goodbye,” she said, grappling with the urge to say the date was back on. She thought it would be easy considering he would not dare put the moves on her again. She could be nice to him tonight and let him down the rest of the way over the phone. No. It was too late to go back now. He stood in front of her, not sure if he should leave or further plead his case. The only human thing to do was finish him.

“Really, goodbye. I’m sorry and goodbye.” And, with that, he left, or rather withered from her and was sucked out the door into the lonely night.

Back in the present, she lay in bed shaking. She gritted her teeth and clamped her eyelids shut, squeezing moisture into her lashes. Good god, she lay there and rotted. Rotted on two stacked mattresses. Rotted there on top of her blankets and sheets, right there in front of no one,
while her roommate partied with her friends. Her roommate, who had the same job she did but had had a two year boyfriend, was out there now making everyone laugh while she was writhing and hating herself.

Danielle excused herself and walked carefully, conscious of her drunkenness, through the living room and down the hallway to Sam’s room.

“Knock, knock,” she said, opening Sam’s door.

“Hi.”

“Party’s just started. Everyone got here maybe two hours ago. Take some shots and take a seat at the table. We’ll start a new game.”

“Nah. You guys look like you’re having fun, and I don’t feel like it.”

Danielle reached out with both hands, asking for Sam’s. Sam placed her hands on top of the waiting palms, and Danielle pulled her off her bed. Sam feigned resistance, going limp momentarily so her friend had to pull with all her strength to keep her from slumping back down on the bed. Sam could feel Danielle’s desire to see her happy. They heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Tim shouted an obscenity, and Danielle shot one back, craning her head up and yelling as though to project her voice over her head and behind her. Sam was now laughing and standing under her own power. Tim stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips and his chest puffed out. He wore a blue knit scarf around his neck and swimming goggles on top of his head. He said he was the Red Barron. Sam said too bad the scarf was blue. Danielle wanted to know what he was doing in her closet. Yes, Danielle knocked on her door and walked in and pulled her out of her self-rot without making it seem so. Daniele pulled her down the hall and placed her at that kitchen table and in those lights with those people with an air of inevitability like Tim, Kara, Kevin, Theresa and Rob had been waiting for her to walk through that door and
smile wide and shy, to sing with her eyes of all the love in that room with those drunk young people. Nobody knew another soul in that room well enough to feel the unconditional affection Sam felt for them all. They could not know they saved her life, or, to be more accurate, her night.

After the game was over, Sam found herself alone with Kevin. Danielle had insisted he stay and that she had to go to bed. Everyone else had left. He was a twenty two year old delivery boy for a Chinese restaurant. He was tall, six four, with a narrow frame. He was a gaggle of arms, hands, beard and legs. He had green eyes like slits above his gaunt cheeks. You had to watch his eyes for their expression, because his beard and mustache covered everything from his cheekbones down. He spoke in a low, clear cadence.

“This is not awkward,” he said with a grin somewhere in there.

“Hmm,” she said, avoiding his face. He was slumping against the counter, feet spread apart, holding a can of beer against the slant of his stomach. He took a sip of his beer and looked around the room. The others had done this on purpose; he knew, and he was sure she knew it too.

“So are you the only person who’s not Chinese that works at the restaurant?”

“Yeah. I consider it a great honor.”

“I like your shirt. Do you watch the show?”

“I was not aware there was a show.”

“It’s called Cowboy Bebop. That’s Spike, the guy on your shirt. He’s cool. You should watch the show. I have it if you want to borrow it,” she said.

He asked her about the show, and she gave him a synopsis with enthusiasm that surprised him. She was getting excited, so much so that she finished her beer faster than she had intended. She went to the refrigerator and bent down to get another can. She asked, muffled though her
voice was, if he wanted another. He did, and she turned around with a can for him in time to notice he was making swatting motions in front of himself with one hand while he gripped an imaginary butt with the other. He kept doing it after she had turned around, and he was chuckling. She handed him the beer in a panicked thrust, so he would stop swatting. He thanked her, cracking the seal with the butt grabbing hand, and all she could do was stammer you are welcome and sit down like it had never happened. Her phone vibrated against her leg, and she took it out only to see that it was Aaron saying he did not know what he had done wrong. Nothing, she wrote. Nothing wrong in general, anyway. You should slow down next time and—.

She said the rest out loud while she typed it: “I’m not in the mood, I’m done talking to you.” Kevin was quick to apologize.

“Sorry. I was just carrying over the joking from the game. I didn’t mean to be an ass.”

She forced herself to consider that the sophomoric gesture was innocent. But she could not overcome the joke. It felt too much like taunting or, what is worse, asking.

“It’s fine. I get it. It was a joke.”

“I’m sorry you aren’t laughing,” he said. He was still leaning against the counter, she sitting at the table with her back to him.

“Me too. I’m gonna go see how Danielle is doing. She was really drunk.”

“She’s probably snoring away in there. Wanna play rummy or something?”

“Sure,” she said, ignoring another text. He sat down across from her and began shuffling the cards. He stopped and looked at her for a moment.

“Who’s that that keeps texting you?”

“Well, he’s sort of my ex. We were never a couple. Honestly, we dated a few times and he got weird. I think it was because he had no idea what he was doing.”
“I do,” he said with a quick grin lifting and dropping his beard.

“Oh. I don’t. I don’t want to either.”

“Because you’ve never tried it. At least I’m guessing you’ve never tried it.”

She looked up at him; half of her irises were behind the tops of her eyelids and her lips were pressed together and hooked down in a slight frown. She took a drought of her beer and slammed it down, all in one motion.

“Sorry. But am I right?”

“Yeeee-up.” She stared straight through his eyes, wishing she had laser vision so she could light his beard on fire.

“Here. I’ll deal,” he said, gliding a card in her direction. It stopped against her hand, which was resting on the table. He had not dealt her a second by the time she had stood up.

“Come on. Let’s play. I was only trying to get you to laugh and give it back to me. Come on? What do you got? The beard’s gotta give you some ideas,” he said looking up at her and raising his palms to his shoulders. “I mean she was hooking us up. I think— I thought. I thought we were having fun. Don’t worry about that guy. Let’s get this game going.”

“I’m not.”

“Not what?”

She got up and walked passed him, toward her room. As she left the kitchen, Kevin said he was sorry and just trying to have a good time. That’s okay, she said, shuffling across the living room carpet with the can of beer dangling from one of her drooping arms. Kevin muttered to himself that it was not his fault she was a downer. The potential had been nice while it lasted.
The sun is out, high and bright, making her sweat simply by being outdoors. She walks along the edge of a small pond, a large mud puddle with small fish and large frogs. The water is warm when she dips her fingers in it to rinse off the slime from a bullfrog she had found in the middle of the road. The water smells rich; it smells like the frogs and fish and mud and weeds, a perfume distilled from the ether of the ecology. She sits on a bench, which is under a red maple tree and facing the pond. The night before was a fact she already knew, a prophesy she could have told herself then had she wanted to. She has mud on the bottom of her work shoes, black sneakers worn flat and smooth on the insides. She will be late if she does not get back in her car right now and drive fifty miles per hour.

It does not matter if he was joking or if he wanted her. Either way, she will be late if she does not get going. The customers will not wait for her to feel better about herself. Her boss will not accept an excuse—well, he would, probably, considering she has never been late to work, but he would hold it over her for more than it was worth—and Mellissa, the woman she is relieving, would be polite but thinking to herself how some people just do not care whom one has waiting at home for them, who needs them, whom they need. She stands up, looks at the mud on her sneakers with feigned disgust and slinks down the dirt footpath to the dirt pull off where her car is waiting in the sun with its windows up, absorbing heat. She will not tell Danielle what happened. The fact that it happened the way it did when her friend was trying to do her a favor is embarrassing enough, awkward enough, and it does not matter.

She is flush with relief, sitting in the air conditioned breakroom with another one of the cashiers. His name is Oran. He is shy and solemn, stout in the body and fragile in the eyes. With an insult, you can hit him hard in the chest and knock him down like he were a boy. The two see each other regularly now, but this is the first time they have been alone together. He is eating an
egg salad sandwich and sipping on a can of Sprite when she speaks to him, compelling him to look up from the table.

“You’re working in the back now?”

“No. Not all of the time. I’m still working the register.”

“Do you like the register?”

“Yeah. It’s not too bad. I’m used to it now. When I first started I didn’t think I’d be able to go as fast as you vets . . . How do you like it?”

“The register?” He nods. “I love not knowing who is going to walk through that line.”

“A lot of ass—rude people walk through those lines. Sorry.”

“That’s okay. Putting up with assholes is a part of the job. I call them goofy goobers sometimes.”

“What?”

“Goofy goober takes the edge off of the insult. Asshole is true, but strong, real. Goofy goober is fun.” She scratches the top of her head. Her hair is in its usual state of disarray. Oran is infatuated with her playfulness, the genuine character of her presence. She can sit there with that hair and that look on her face like she is riding a contact high from you talking to her. She can overbear and overwhelm while actively pursuing the opposite. So unassuming she is, this Sam. Three months ago, when he started working there, she was no more than proof of his predicament, no more than one of the people he was forced to endure. Now he hopes she has not been enduring him the whole time.

“I don’t know. You got to find a way to laugh somehow,” she says straight faced.

Yes you do, he thinks. Because, they march through that line, some stoic, some judging you from every angle they can concoct, some smiling so sweet it will make you sick. It will
make you dizzy knowing it is a lie and you do not know for what purpose their faces have one expression while in their minds manifests another. Even if the lie is to help you or them or someone else, it does not help you to know what you should say or if you should act too. And the moment you are considering whether you should act, you are already acting and cannot stop—because you know the customer is expecting a particular behavior pattern and it would disappoint them if you acted differently than you looked or expressed the emotions they gave you just by walking through that line. He cannot tell her this. It is too dangerous to be genuine. She is lying about calling the customers goofy goobers. Who can prove her claim? She does not laugh. No. And that is just it. He has never seen her laugh. When she makes jokes, when she hears jokes, she does not laugh. Her smiles cannot all be genuine, but she never fakes a laugh. He has never seen her laugh for real or otherwise and here she is telling him how to laugh. Of course, he is not an expert on the subject either.

“I try to remember that we don’t know what some of those people are going through. Some are having a bad day or a bad life, for that matter,” he says before taking another bite of his sandwich. He becomes aware of the openness of his last statement. He was, just then, not caught in his head. This happens to him occasionally. He carries a conversation, or part of one, as though he were normal. Self-consciousness is terror incarnate if you care what other people think as much as Oran does. It is in those moments when he forgets himself that he is himself. All other social interactions are performances, complete with stage fright and sweat and reviews he cannot decipher without a negative bias.

Sam is stricken by Oran’s insinuation. Some people are having a bad life, she thinks, but are the lives of those people any worse than hers? Not that her life is so terrible, but how can a
cashier be expected to rise above the muck that is the entanglement of human compassion mixed with self-absorption, a conflict of interest squeezing the purity out of any decision?

“All you can do is be your nicest, even if that means being quiet,” she says, trailing off into a murmur, as though, just then, her words running ahead of her, she had unintentionally let the word quiet escape. She half-smiles at him, her lips pursed, one end of her mouth curling up into a point.

She does not have to try to be nice. People assume she is, which is accurate and insulting to her. Her face is harmless, soft and round. And her fingers are small and thin. Her voice is airy and high, clear and often in a hushed volume as though it is of the upmost importance that it only travels as far as it must. Yesterday, a middle-aged woman told her at the register that she was cute. She thanked the woman for the compliment, then wondered, for the remainder of the day, what made her cute. She was upset over her breakup and, for once, could think of nothing worse than being in front of strangers all day smiling and exchanging pleasantries. She needed a break from people as much as anyone else, and she was sure her expression hung on her face as a warning not to expect an excess of cordiality. Or, perhaps by then, her scowl had softened into a plea for anonymity. Either way, the woman saw through the scowl. After all, her small soft round cute face and tussled swirling waving dark long hair and soft voice do not all disappear when she is angry. Oran has to be big, powerful looking, and has to wear that thick neck and that aggressive upper body, no matter how much of a shivering, sniveling boy he is, curled up inside the man frame, straining his weak limbs to operate the slick haired beast that looks like it is or can be so much more than it actually is. *My looks undermine me,* she thinks. *I can’t be fake or strong or real or frightening to people. I’m too soft and sweet. But I’m not. Not really.*

“I guess,” Sam says, rising from her chair, “you have to roll with it.”
“Endure?”

“The trick is to not suppress the highs. I mean, live when you can.” She walks out of the breakroom, leaving Oran to his sandwich. He is chewing quite the mouthful.

The next day, they find themselves having the same conversation. For no apparent reason, she starts laughing. Her head is propped up in her hands, and her elbows are on the table and she chuckles. Oran looks up from his sandwich, and chews a little slower. She looks around the room and chuckles some more. He glances from her to the table, her to the table, the clock, her, the table.

“What?” He says.

“Sorry, nothing. I’m losing it. Oran, do you want to go with me and my friends to Howl at the Moon? The club. Sorry to scare you. I’m really losing it.”

“Yup—I mean I’ll go,” He says.

“Really? Okay. Right after my shift I have to get changed, then stop by my mom’s. We are meeting there at eight o’clock.” Oran nods and she adds, “There is no cover charge tonight.”

“Oh. To get in the club? They charge? Don’t they get enough money selling drinks?” The invite has loosened his overactive filter.

“You would think. By the way, Mike, my mom’s boyfriend, basically my dad, fell off the roof today trying to fix a couple of shingles. He’s okay. That’s not why I was laughing. I was laughing at something my mom said. Yeah. But . . . I don’t know why I told you that.”

“Wow. I bet that was scary. I’m glad he’s all right. He didn’t break anything?”

“No, he’s good at not getting hurt.” She does not say that he was drunk. And it does not matter to her. She has seen him perform great feats of balance and dexterity with a bottle in his
hand and a cigarette in his mouth, all without a spilled drop or ash. The truth is, he tripped on a lead cord he probably would not have forgotten about if he had not been on his fourteenth beer. The truth is, he would not have been good for anything if he had not been on at least his sixth.

She directs the conversation back to the evening.

“Do you know how to get there?”

“No. I’ve never been there.”

“You know where Lawrence comes out onto Catherine?”

“Not really.”

She thinks for a moment and looks him in the eye.

“You want to ride over with me? Danielle is DDing anyway. There’s room for you in her car. That way you also don’t have to worry about a ride home. She can take you back to your house after. You drop your car off at your house after work. I will follow you there. Then you can ride with me to my house. Then we will ride with Danielle!” Her eyes, the very balls themselves, twitch once and remain on his in anticipation. This plan is not too forward, she hopes.

“Okay,” he says. He does not mention that he does not drink. What a whirlwind. He is almost more excited than he is nervous and decides he had better go along with whatever she says. He, for the time being, forgets about her laughing.

The truth is, it was about a favor. Her mother called to say she thinks Sam owes her thirty dollars for gas she had used while her car was in the shop for three weeks. That was almost a year ago, when her mother still had a car. Sam thought her mother, who had not mentioned it until today when she called her to tell her about Mike’s accident, had given her the gas. Sometimes people surprise you when they do what you should expect, and you can only laugh at
yourself when they let you down, and it may as well be hilarious to think that people can invent their own history like they are remembering it.

Oran busies himself at the register. It takes all of his focus not to fall apart in anticipation of the evening. He wore a longing on his face like the night was already over.

There is a tendency for customers to judge those who serve them. They remind themselves that “they are a lawyer, and you are a server.” And this means? Be careful now. Oran once wanted to be a police officer. If he had been one, he could have walked through her line and been in uniform and she could have been in her blue vest and he could have felt superior. Now, he had uniformed officers go through his line, like the one who now tells him to cheer up.

“You could be digging ditches,” he says with raised eyebrows and a pat on the upper arm. He slings the fifty pound bag of dogfood over his shoulder and walks out the sliding doors, smiling politely, making eye contact with everyone he passes by. There is a confident man, Oran thinks. Though he admires the officer, his presence has erased the minor confidence boost he has acquired from Sam. If Sam were to choose, how could she pick Oran over the officer? He figures that the officer would not be interested in Sam, but that makes him feel worse. It is proof that royalty still rules the world. King’s blood is unpredictable, skipping generations, sometimes entire family trees; not all king’s sons and daughters are princes and princesses. And a family can be comprised of all peasants, could have been that way as far as anyone remembers, then, one day a queen is born. Perhaps the queen’s daughter becomes a queen and her son a king, and the luck ends with them. Oran recognizes the presence of royalty, those who are motivated, capable and sure of themselves—those unabashed risers and social mavens. The officer has the bearing of a duke. Oran’s shoulders droop in his absence, but his head rises.
The goblins on his table all have an olive green base coat. They wait for him, drying in the stale air in his spare bedroom. He is looking forward to painting their weapons, armor and clothes. He will paint their shoes leather brown. Some of them are barefoot, wearing only ragged loin cloths and sinister grins. They will wait for him. They will be there tomorrow or later tonight if things do not go well. The officer could paint those goblins, probably as well as Oran, but he could not understand them, appreciate them. He would say they were not real, not productive, taught you nothing. But Oran knows this is not true. Plastic and paint are as real as guns and cars, and a roll of the dice is as real as crime and punishment. The distinction between the armies of plastic and those of flesh is fluid. Reality is inescapable, so there is no sense in debating what is real. And what might become real tonight is too incredible to bear. He tells himself to go with it, to go with her and have the experience. That is all that is guaranteed, he reminds himself, the experience.

**Easter**

Oran was not as fast at the register as he could be because he either thought too much or thought at the wrong time. When he painted, he did not think. He took his time but worked efficiently by moving in a hyper-focused slow motion, so his strokes and dabs where guided equally by hand and eye. There was no gap between decisions and actions, no gap between one action and the next. The feeling of an aching hunched neck and of dry strained eyes were evidence, to him, of his effort. His hobby was work just as a runner’s or a builder’s was work. He tried to work at the register with like intensity, but the need was not there. He did not have to work hard at punching in the numbers, and the work he put in managing the customers was base
and draining the way he imagined the work of the slaves building the Egyptian pyramids must have been.

Oran had to meet his aunt, uncle and cousins for Easter breakfast on Sunday, which was another kind of work and one he enjoyed and one that gave him great anxiety. At nine in the morning, Oran knocked on the door. Worried he had not knocked hard enough, he was on the verge of knocking again, slightly louder, when his aunt opened the door. She greeted him with bright mother’s eyes that looked into his with love and made him feel like the boy he had never been. She held open the tall arched white door and placed her hand on his back as he stepped into the mudroom. She took hold of his wind breaker when his left arm was still in the sleeve, pulling it off the rest of the way, and hung it on the coat rack.

“Everyone’s in the dining room. The kids haven’t looked in their baskets yet. We were waiting for you,” she said before kissing him on the cheek, without the need to stand on tiptoe. He and she were the same height. Oran saw her, as comfort, a lioness as strong as she was gentle. They walked through the doorway to the dining room, which was off the living room, which was the first left after entering the mudroom.

“Oreo!” Russel struck the pose of a martial artist, thrusting his left palm forward while making a fist with his right hand and cocking it back behind his head. Izzy was sitting in front of her basket with her hands on the table, overlapped. She looked over at Oran and back at her basket.

“Are you gonna say hi, Izzy?” Oran said, smiling.

“Hi,” she said without looking away from her basket. Russel was still in his ninja pose, waiting for Oran to make a move. Oran pretended to punch and kick at him. Russel squealed and laughed with excitement and ran to the other side of the table, picked up a plush football and
threw it at Oran. Oran caught it and bounced it off the back of Izzy’s head. She yelled, “Hey,” slid down from her chair, scooped the ball off the floor and pelted Oran with it. It bounced off his side as he pretended to recoil in fear. She giggled.

“Dad, Oreo’s here!” she yelled with a set of lungs like an air horn.

“Be right out. Hey, Oran. I got the bacon going. How are ya?”

After breakfast and baskets, the kids busied themselves trading candy on the floor, and Oran found himself cornered by his aunt and uncle. Kristen and Drew sat across from him, on the loveseat. He leaned forward from the edge of the plush chair. The coffee table, of clear glass and black metal frame, separated him from them. He squirmed from the attention and the anticipation. They had to make sure he was doing all right. Duty was an insulting word for Kristen and Drew. They wanted Oran to live with them because they loved him and knew better than to think he was happy living alone. They had had this conversation before. The phrasing would change but not the meaning.

“I don’t know,” Oran said.

“Maybe not tomorrow. In a few days or weeks,” Kristen said.

“I signed a lease.”

“We can get you out of it,” Kristen said. Drew nodded in agreement.

Oran said nothing. He was floating, recoiling in plain sight, waiting for them to continue the conversation until they reached the part where he would respectfully decline. He would say as little as possible on the subject and go home, he thought.

“You would have a lot more spending money, and the kids would love having their Oreo around. You are a part of this family. I mean this family, not extended family. Why live alone and pay all that rent when we are begging you to be here?” Drew said.
“I’m just going to say it. We’re proud of you, but we think you are doing too much,” Kristen said.

“Too much?”

“Too fast, is what we mean. We don’t expect you to live here forever, but right now we think it’s best for you to be with family.”

“I will visit more,” Oran said, with an evasive glance at the floor. And the conversation was over. Kristen and Drew looked at each other, agreeing in silence not to press him. They, of course, had not given up for good.

That night, Drew rolled over to face Kristen.

“He’s tough, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” she said. “He’s getting better.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“He’s our nephew. It isn’t hard to figure out. He’ll forgive us, more and more, bye and bye.”

“He’ll forgive me. It’s not your fault. If I wasn’t there, how could you be?”

“Well, we are now.”

“You can really pull teeth.”

“Only the rotten ones. It’s a wonder you have any left.”

**Pity Party Part II**

Sam called Trish and said she and Oran, a guy she works with, had to stop by the apartment real quick to get her dress and then they would be over with the money. She could meet Danielle at the club and leave her car there overnight and ride home with Danielle then get
her car in the morning. That would have been fine except Trish wondered if Sam would mind running to the store with Mike to get his tobacco. Sam said her backseat was full, but Trish said she did not mind if Oran stayed and visited. Sam agreed but first had to go down the hall to use the bathroom, leaving Oran to fend for himself.

“Nice to meet you, Oran,” Trish said.

“Nice to meet you,” Oran said.

“So you work with Sam, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s great ain’t she?”

“Yeah she is.”

“Well sit down, handsome,” she said with a smile.

Mike walked in and introduced himself, giving Oran a handshake and a nod, almost a bow. He said he hoped Oran was liking it at the store. Oran said it was okay.

Oran sat there, stiffed cheeked, with a smile pushing upward as though pulled by hook and line. Mike got two beers out of the fridge and brought him one. Trish, who was sitting across from him, lit a cigarette and leaned forward on her elbows. The smoke streamed and hovered in clouds about the room. She offered him one, and he said no thank you. He popped the tab on the beer and took as small a taste as he could and gave a quick look to Mike to see if he approved. But Mike was rummaging through his pockets for his dip and looking up at no one knows what. Sam popped her head in and said she was ready, and she and Mike hurried out, and Oran and Trish were alone.

Trish asked a lot of questions to which Oran gave short answers. She was of the methodical and good-natured social type, a conversationalist too seasoned and comfortable to
succumb to the pressure to relent. So she asked him more questions, and Oran gave more short answers. Oran was polite and clean-cut, which went a long way with her. She assured him Sam would be back in five minutes, and the two could be on their way to their date. Oran did not bother to correct her. He was a quick learner. Better to let the subject die on its own than resurrect it by trying to kill it. He thought Trish and Mike were nice people if a bit presumptuous. The questions flowed on.

“You sure you don’t want one.”

“No. I don’t smoke.”

“So, Oran, are you and my Sammy getting serious?” She put the cigarette down in the tray and leaned forward. Oran could not think of anything to say.

“No. Maybe not. She’s a little shy about that stuff, ya know. You’re a shy guy too, I see.”

“Yeah,” he said, “We are going out as friends—or we work together and are going out with some of her friends. I—we don’t talk much, not at all outside of work—until now. She asked me to go.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well she doesn’t invite boys, sorry, men, out unless she likes them.”

Oran’s face blazed with embarrassment, and hope echoed in his chest and came out his mouth in an “Oh yeah?”

“Aww!” She reached across the table and patted him on the arm. “You want a soda?” She looked at his neglected beer. “You don’t have to drink it. Mike should have asked first. And don’t be so shy. Speak up. Oh I can’t believe it!” She laughed and looked over his shoulder, towards the door. “I think they’re back. Well, I hope you two have fun, Oran!”

“Me too,” he said, wishing right after he had said something else. She gave him a knowing look right as Sam and Mike walked into the kitchen.
“Okay. Ready, Oran?” Sam said.

“Thank you, Sam,” Trish said before he could speak. Mike nodded his agreement as he shook his new can of tobacco.

“Yup,” Oran said, rising with relief.

“Sam, he’s a keeper,” Trish said, causing Mike to laugh in a deep wheeze.

“Goodbye, guys,” Sam said without looking at or seeming to address anyone.

“See ya. Nice to meet ya. Thanks again,” Mike said.

“It was very nice to meet you, and I hope you two have a good time,” Trish said. Then she pressed her lips together and curled the edges of her mouth into a smile as though to keep from saying anything else. She savored the moment. Mike could tell she was happy for her daughter and cracked a smile too.

Sam and Oran were out of there and on the road. They were alone is all Oran could think. He had never been under so much pressure in his life and had never been so afraid. He glanced at her, and she kept her eyes on the road and was too beautiful for him to take. After meeting Trish and Mike he felt closer to her and like he knew much more about her life. But he could not think of a way to start a conversation with her that he thought would lead to them getting closer. They were isolated from each other in that small car. He was not thinking of his vow of loneliness. Maybe she could be his girlfriend. After five straight minutes of silence, he spoke.

“Your mom’s nice. And Mike,” he said.

“Yeah, they’re a pain,” she said, as though she did not care either way or there was no weight to his opinion. He did not mean to talk with her about her mom and Mike as though he knew them. He was being honest and trying to make conversation to save himself from shutting down before the night out started. He was not sure if she was agitated or embarrassed, so he tried
another compliment. He did not realize she was adding the day’s decisions together and getting a sense of speed and confusion.

“I like your dress,” he said. The clichéd remark tore from his throat. The sound of it made him wish he had not said it.

“What did my mom say to you?”

Oran quietly panicked and said nothing.

“It’s okay. It’s not a big deal. I mean I love my mom and all. I don’t really mean she is a pain, and I’m glad you like her. I just don’t want her thinking—getting the—”

“Wrong idea?” Oran whispered as though to himself.

“Right. She’s a nut! How did you fend her off, I mean, I don’t know. What did she say?”

She looked over at him and back at the road. All Oran wanted was to go home. Not her but to go home. As beautiful as she was and as much as he thought of her and admired her and as wonderful a presence as he felt from her, he could not take the deferral; he had not learned to wait. She did not love him! He was livid with himself for not insisting to Trish that Sam was not interested in him. Shouldn’t he have? Shouldn’t he have said no, no, no, your daughter is just a coworker who pities me? And the cars drove by so fast and the window was down and the air came in too fast and they were running out of road. How could they be going so fast with so little road? He had the fear some passengers have during a routine landing when they think the plane is going too fast and will keep going after the runway ends and crash.

Sam saw his eyes, the white flashes in the streetlights, the intense darting from the road to the speedometer and out the window.

“Are you okay?”
“I can’t go. I just don’t feel good,” he said, starring straight forward, telling himself he was fine now and he would be fine if he went home.

She did not ask any questions about why he did not feel well. She knew the reason was too personal. They barely knew each other. Still, she could not leave him to himself without some comforting advice that avoided saying what she thought was happening to him. And she did not know. Well, she knew he was having an anxiety attack of some kind, and that she was scared to know the cause.

“Well, when you get home find a relaxing place to rest. You’re doing great at work, and I can tell my mom and Mike like you. Sorry about the beer. You don’t drink right? Good.” She put her hand on his shoulder. Pure, rare plutonic love. “You’re off at six tomorrow, right? We can do something else another time. Hey, we’re getting all the green lights. Like I was saying, just rest, close your eyes and think about your power and, I don’t know, goodness. I do that when I am not feeling good. I’ll lie down just about anywhere. The floor. Doesn’t matter. And breathe slow, or whatever. You don’t have to listen to me, but just know you’re a good guy and I like that.” She took her hand off his shoulder, and he could have fallen asleep.

Ten minutes later he was on his living room floor resting and relieved to be home. He watched the fizzing grey particles in the dark space in the room between him and the walls. He had been at that table with Trish. Mike had given him that beer. Sam had driven him home. They were almost strangers. And so was he to them.

He got up, walked to the table populated with his figurines and turned the light on. Either antique white or blanched almond would suit the hide skinned shields held by his goblin infantry, but all he had that was close was bisque, which was too dark. The glue on his general’s right arm had not held; the arm, made too heavy by a ghost white bone club, dangled from the armored
shoulder. The open mouth and crinkled nose on General Graa the Soul Smasher, or Brian for short, now looked more like a look of surprise than rage. He would have to clean the glue off the arm and off the indent in Brian where the arm was supposed to be attached. He would hold the arm in place longer this time before leaving it to gravity. He scanned the table for his craft knife and modeling glue, but the sight of his vest hanging on the back of the opposite chair broke his surgical trance. The vest and the empty chair and the silent army between him and them drew his eyes to the door, the door he had just come in to escape from rejection. Yes, rejection. No, fear. He had never asked her out. That was the pang in him that made him sit down under the kitchen light at nine in the evening with no plans. He thought of going to bed. No. That arm had to be attached. No. The bisque might work all right for now. No. A no from Sam would have worked just fine.

The speakers vibrate with a boom boom boom—a boom boom boom. It is warm, but the air moves, and, in it, smoke and conversations linger, cross ears and breaths, and disappear into the music that shakes the haze. It is dark in the gaps among people and in the distance behind them. The bartenders are all busy, talking and pouring in circles. No action is distinctive. Sam leans on a tall table top with a beer rolled up in her fingers. It is quiet in the din. No sound interrupts the others, so as to create a smooth sonic flow; even the changing songs are no more than expected adjustments running end to end. She watches two women order drinks. They are talking about a dark haired man with tight fitting clothes, who pretends to be absorbed with his friends. One of the women is probably thirty eight, and the other probably ten years younger. Either are welcome future projections of Sam. They are wearing deep necked dresses tight around the tops of their thighs, one pink, one blue. The man approaches as though he will walk
past, then remembers he needs a drink and needs to get between the women to access the bar. He is polite but overt with his intentions. He invests himself in the younger woman, seems to see nothing else in the haze. Sam anxiously awaits the older woman’s reaction. But she begins talking to the man’s friend before Sam can imagine her removing her makeup, which covers her maturity not her age, and going to bed alone.

Daniele and Kim return, laughing together.

“What’s up?” Sam says.

“We were hit on! Hey! Were you hit on?” Kim says.

“No,” Sam says.

“You will be. It’s early, girly,” Kim says.

“Where’s that guy you invited?” Daniele says. She sits on her stool and rubs her coaster through a circle of condensation.

“He wasn’t feeling well.”

“Cuz he met your family?”

“No. He liked them, they got along, actually. He never goes out though. He’s really shy and not used to this,” she says with a smile and upturned palm.

“Oh, got ya,” Danielle says.

They are floating in the haze; and Sam can see it. In the boom, to the boom and away from the boom, they—all of these people—are suspended. They are breaking from the stunning sun of day, that shine in the eye, that glare gotten gloom. They are pretending to live fearlessly on the dance floor, in the bathroom and in the parking lot out back; they are partying time to an apparent stop and drinking their excitement by the bottle. Sam knows every single one of those people, whether they are having fun or not, will go home with a faint regret. A regret for hooking
up. A regret for not hooking up. For being mean. For being nice. Sam is a watcher, and in the pit of her stomach manifests a particular pang of regret in the form of an unassigned longing for all the directions she has forsaken. She sees the men losing ground—the women wearing amused smirks. The women excuse themselves from the men, pay their tab and disappear into the places among the people dancing and serving drinks and staggering without the self-awareness for shame. Sam sips her beer, and, around her, the light and dust dance in the haze. And she sits in the haze with Kim and Danielle, safe from the spaces among the people of the bar, safe from the people who try to live in the haze as though it does not exist. Oran was shot down before ever lifting off, and she did it. Yes. Why did she do it, cut him off with easiness? He needed encouragement, and she knew it and did not give it. She did not lead him on. He took the lead. He met her mom. He was dressed up and ready to go to the club like a fool. Seeing what? The opportunity of a lifetime? She could not keep it going for him. There was too much pressure on him, but it was a new kind of pressure, which might do him some good. There was an awful lot on her, too.

Sam’s drink is empty and getting another one is no better or worse than not. She studies the bartender, whose face she imagines sliding off. No one seems to notice. His eyes bulge in their sockets. The unmasked eyes are penetrating, round with pinpoint pupils. The long toothed jaw moves up and down as though to laugh and chatter. As this faceless face serves drinks to its unsuspecting customers, as its straight black hair, hanging partially over one eye, bounces with the vigorous wiping of the countertop, Sam gets up to meet it. She returns its—his—face and, walking, takes, this time, as her subject of interest a man leaning over the side of a pool table in the far corner of the bar. At the end of the table stands another young man with his back turned to her. The leaning man draws back to shoot and shoots and the balls crack, and Sam, who
cannot hear the crack or the excited clap of the shooters hands when the ball goes in the side pocket, wonders how the world would operate without sound. And if none of these people have ever heard her, what would they be missing? Is it enough that the patrons are seeing her tonight, looking in her direction with brains that dutifully note her shape, her spatial relationship with the table and chairs and with the drunks in the heavy air? Her hair neatly frames her neck, and is straight and full with the bangs pulled back into a smooth bump on top, which does not make her anyone’s girlfriend. Not that she has never been in a relationship. She has. It ended after a bewildering four days. Okay, it was more of an acquaintanceship on her part, but nonetheless taxing. Kim’s voice, a moment ago loud at their table (to Sam’s embarrassment), does not carry to the next. They are all going safely unnoticed, Sam thinks with comfort. They are obscured by the dense atmosphere as viewed through dense lenses.

Sam inserts her slender shoulder into a succession of gaggles, slicing through them on her way to the counter. When she gets there, she gently slides her empty bottle to the far side and awaits the bartender’s attention, which she soon receives, though in a disingenuous fashion. His lips curl on one side. Ah, yes! He can smirk now that he has lips again, lips to express the hatred in the bones beneath. But he is flashing a charitable smile, a mask behind which he can look confident and, perhaps be, polite. To Sam’s eye, he is good at his job in a way she, a cashier, can appreciate.

“Another Coors?”

“No. Let me try that brown ale.”

“It’s strong.”

“That’s fine. How’s business,” she says before going on to answer her own question as he turns his back to her to draw her pint from the tap.
“Must be pretty good. Um—”

“Be right with ya!” He yells to another patron, before turning to her with a full glass of impenetrable murk.

“You have a tab, right?”

“Yeah. Sam Peeler,” she says, making a conscious effort to hold eye contact with the former skeleton man. He nods and turns with a smile, almost to the beat of the music, naturally. She cannot make the exchange awkward. He is too good a bar tender.

Sam returns to the table and sips her beer. It is strong and bitter but with a creamy texture and caramel note, which makes the brew not altogether unpleasant. Kim and Danielle are observing the response to her sip and ask her what she is drinking. She lets the taste linger on her tongue and mix with the air, cringing a little at the bitter aftertaste.

“Brown ale. Try it.”

Her expression, the rankling of her nose at the taste of the substance, is enough to persuade them to decline. During this sampling, two men approach the table, tapping each other on the side with the backs of their hands and chuckling. One of them turns around as if to bail on his friend, but the other puts his hand on his back and says something funny and endearing, and the two take the final few steps to Sam’s table. They stand at the open space in the small round table between Sam and her friends, who sit across from her. The men—young, well kempt and both dressed in polo shirts and khaki shorts—ask if any of them would like a drink. And “sure” Kim says; and Danielle will have a ginger ale; and Sam says she has one already; and the men say that it is fine—there are only two of them anyway; so Sam soon finds herself an odd number at a couples’ gathering. Being an extra is fine. It gives her time to herself, an opportunity to enjoy the thick atmosphere of others while reflecting as though she is alone. She is there and she
is not, and, thankfully, nobody cares. The bartender was personable enough and certainly had
great command of his face. Oran did not. His upper lip quivered. He blinked rapidly. He fought
to look at you, his eyes eager to fix themselves just past you or on the floor or on an object of
feigned interest. It is too much for him to look at her longer than a few seconds. His eyes only
meet hers in flashes of uncertainty and anguish. She imagines him there, ordering drinks, yelling
across the dance floor to get the attention of a friend, with a broad smile cutting the dark, with
white hungry teeth and bright swallowing eyes. But it is easier to order a beer from the animated
dead than to give him a careless face.

At Rest

Lying in the gravel behind her car, smelling the heat and rubber and metal, feeling the
dust in her lungs and nose, Sam meditates. The sun radiates through her. She is at rest, with her
hands crossed over her chest and eyes closed. An energy rises to the top of her skin, with the
steadiness of a pulse. She focuses on the sensation of movement born in her stillness. Passing
cars cross her consciousness like fingertips drawn across hanging leaves. They are disturbances,
shakes interrupting an oblivious stasis. Tires crunch rocks on the road, pull themselves off the
sticky blacktop as they roll forward when the light changes. And there she is, on a pull off, by the
highway, resting. She opens her eyes to a spinning world. Everything is pulled together while
standing still. Everything, by virtue of its existence, is a sensation. Can a moving person, a
customer perhaps, feel the relative movement? No. She feels calm today. She—with a sweet
feeling in her core, churning with the warm air of her deep, slow breaths—determines that
feeling is entirely separate from experience. The air, like shifting pressure, moves her hair, and
she can feel it at the roots.
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