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The Sad Kitchen and Song of Neon: Two Novellas

John Paul King

Western Kentucky University, johnpaul.king384@topper.wku.edu

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THE SAD KITCHEN AND SONG OF NEON: 
TWO NOVELLAS

A Thesis
Presented to
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

By
John Paul King

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THE SAD KITCHEN AND SONG OF NEON:
TWO NOVELLAS

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Dr. David Bell, Director of Thesis

Dr. Tom Hunley

Dr. Kelly Reames

Cheryl O. Davis 6/27/19
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research  Date
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The Sad Kitchen, a work of magical realism, tells the story of a saintly woman named Helen. She opens an underground kitchen where people who feel guilty can come to be comforted and nurtured in the middle of the night. The story is, at its heart, a reflection on forgiveness. Song of Neon, also of the magical realist genre, is an existential work about a nurse named Avery and her husband, an owl house maker, named Saul. Their town, Milliard, is under a trance. Avery and Saul struggle with their respective identities in the quiet, vacuum the town has become.
Introduction

The two novellas that make up this collection are connected by the magical realist genre, which I first began to love from reading Garcia Marquez, but which began to influence my own writing when I discovered an author named Judy Budnitz. She has a collection of short stories titled *Flying Leap*, and I still remember the first sentence of the first story I read titled, “Skin Care”: “My sister went off to college and caught leprosy.” Good books exceed or at least meet our expectations, but great books seem to rewrite our expectations from the inside out. They alter us as readers. Budnitz altered me as a reader and, therefore, as a writer. Without studying Budnitz, it would never have occurred to me (and even if it had occurred to me, I wouldn’t have had the confidence to go through with it) to have a tree grow up through the floor of a prison cell. When I began writing *The Sad Kitchen*, I had no clue why the tree was going to grow through the prison cell; I just knew that I wanted it to do so, and I wound up saying something more meaningful and more powerful than I possibly could have with hard realism. I’ll go ahead and discuss both *The Sad Kitchen* and *Song of Neon* in more specifics, but with the stipulation that Garcia Marquez and especially Judy Budnitz are partially to thank (blame?) for what this collection of novellas has become.

*The Sad Kitchen*

There is a woman in my hometown of Columbus, Ohio named Rachel Muha. Her son Brian Muha was assaulted and then murdered when he was eighteen years old, and she forgave the murderers and now visits them in prison. She was very open about her decision to forgive the murderers—it was because of her Catholic faith. Later, she opened
a foundation for young people called Run the Race. My mom has volunteered there several times. Basically, children who come from broken families—like the two men who murdered her son—go there to be fed and nurtured after school. Contemplating Rachel Muha’s story, I have begun to understand the meaning of the word “witness.” I’ve determined that to be a witness means to live one’s life in a way that only makes sense through the matrix of a crucified Christ and would be otherwise completely ridiculous.

Anyway, something mysterious inspired me to render Rachel Muha’s story, the same way, I suppose, that Bubba decided he should try to tell Helen’s story. So that’s that. Miss Helen is inspired by what I know about Rachel Muha.

The main thing I wanted to accomplish was to write a story that only made sense if what Jesus of Nazareth did and said was the truth. In other words, I wanted the story itself to be a witness—something completely nonsensical from a worldly perspective. My gut feeling is that I succeeded. The main reason I think I succeeded is that every single day, at random intervals, I second guess myself by saying things like: No, a child rapist should not be forgiven by society! No, a young girl would not be willing to give birth to a child spawned by a rape act! You are an apologist for murderers and rapists! You are glorifying forgiveness!

And on and on like that…

When I think these thoughts, I am thinking like a human being does, not like a witness to the truth. The point is, as long as I keep having these doubts, I am confident that the story is actually saying something, actually asking something of myself and other readers. The whole point is to try to make people—myself included—totally and completely uncomfortable the same way the things that Jesus of Nazareth said and did
made people uncomfortable to the degree that they decided they probably ought to go ahead and crucify Him.

I also should mention that I don’t think I really understand everything that is going on in *The Sad Kitchen*. Nevertheless, it feels like I said exactly what I was trying to say. I certainly don’t have anything helpful to add. But let me say this: I do think I have managed to tap into a mystery that could only be rendered through magical realist fiction, and I do think there is something Truthful about it.

How did the story come to sound so simple? In a not-rhetorical way, I ask myself this question all the time—every time I sit down to write, in fact. I’ve tried to write other things as simple as *The Sad Kitchen*, but it doesn’t work. It always winds up sounding flaky and phony, or else very convoluted. My best guess as to the reason the book is so short and simple is that it is the truth. There is something about the truth that is very straightforward and liberated of all the voluminous decoration and circuitous rhetoric. When I was writing *The Sad Kitchen*, I felt like I could just tell the story exactly the way it was, and I didn’t have to shade anything. It was liberating, and I’ve never had any other writing experience even remotely similar in that sense.

There is a line in the book spoken by Karen, the lawyer, which I suspect might stand as a microcosm of the whole thing. She says, “In a courtroom, the truth is a matter of consensus, but in here, it’s just the opposite. In here, consensus is a matter of truth.” The thing Karen was able to grasp, in all her lawyerly insight, was the inevitable inadequacy of worldly justice. In this vein, one effect I hope the tree in the prison cell has is to make people who are tirelessly devoted to worldly justice feel squeamish and angry right off the bat. The genius of Miss Helen and of Izzy, the reason they are decidedly not
squeamish and angry people, is that they have come to understand justice as foremost an eternal concept that has been established by the Truth. “Consensus is a matter of truth.” In other words, the gathering consensus of the Sad Kitchen is that its patrons have come to recognize themselves as wounded sinners in need of divine Mercy, people who can’t save themselves in this world and are no longer given to the illusion that they might be able to if they can only accomplish this or that. In this way, the Sad Kitchen is “sustained by its own failings”—another observation made by Karen who, through the course of the story, is clearly pondering these things in her heart and has come to be bestowed with a degree of wisdom.

The process of writing *The Sad Kitchen* and the process of having to come to terms with how shamelessly Catholic it is has been edifying for me. It has implemented a sort of moral standard in my life whereby I come to ask myself on a daily basis whether I am living up to the truth to which the book itself is a testimony. What could be more duplicitous than to have written this story and then to go off making an ass of myself by mercilessly judging people in real life? I would have to be unbelievably prideful to view the writing of this story as anything more than responding to a ticket of my own—direct from Miss Helen. In this regard, I find it useful to view myself as not only as the writer of this story, but also as a participant. Allowing myself to participate in the story, I have come to understand the sad truth of the fact that there is nothing substantial that differentiates Vern’s crime from my own crimes, from the rest of our crimes. “Why them and not me?” Pope Francis always asks himself about prisoners. The writing of this story has helped me to understand the Pope’s sentiment from the inside. We are all participants in Vern’s crime, we are all equally culpable, and as long as we are unwilling to forgive
people, we will go on welcoming hatred and evil into our own hearts, and we will begin to live with hearts of stone rather than hearts of flesh. Vern’s crime was evil, and the way we respond to an act of evil determines whether the evil gets to go on bringing death into the world with us as its mules. Miss Helen was in the business of purging our hearts of hatred and translating our hearts into love.

*Song of Neon*

I wrote *Song of Neon* last year in the months directly proceeding my August 2018 wedding. It was born out a fear of two things: 1) the fact that my home state of Ohio was (still is) going through an opioid epidemic and 2) the way my monkish devotion to writing fiction was going to impact my soon-to-be wife.

At the time, I had just read a very silly novel called *Daniel Fights a Hurricane*, which was this totally outlandish miniature-epic about a guy journeying far and wide in a fantastical battle against meteorological forces. I don’t remember the book very well other than to say it was a shameless, absurd, and sometimes humorous metaphor for global warming and for a guy going through a breakup. It certainly must have inspired my writing of *Song of Neon*, which is slightly embarrassing because it was such a silly, ridiculous book. Nevertheless, I used the formula of *Daniel Fights a Hurricane* to write *Song of Neon*: take an enormous societal crisis (the heroin epidemic) and marry it with an intimate human relationship issue (my impending marriage).

In *Song of Neon*, Saul is a self-absorbed owlhouse maker the same way I am a writer, and Avery is a nurse the same way my wife Hannah is a nurse. In their relationship I attempted to explore the shared psychology of a husband and wife trying to
deal with each other and with the world when one of them (me) is crazy—as well as the world, of course. The story, I think, reeks of absurdism in a very authentic way. There is nothing very edifying or unifying or even hopeful about it, which I think is pretty legitimate—at least from a pragmatic standpoint—when you consider the sad fact of the opioid epidemic. But it’s almost as if I went out of my way to ravish the story of being hopeful or even making sense. In this vein, it is interesting to read this story alongside The Sad Kitchen, which goes out of its way to be redemptive and edifying in an equally hopeless situation. Song of Neon was written directly before the period of time which I am now comfortable calling my spiritual conversion, while The Sad Kitchen was written during and after. But as I read Song of Neon, I see a lot of evidence of an author searching for a unifying principle or code in his writing and, especially, in his life. There is a lot to predict what was about to happen to me spiritually. I am thinking about the way, in the midst of her crisis, Avery attempted to go to church, but the church was empty—which a lot of Catholic churches are these days—and so she left. I am thinking also of when, at the end of the story, she was speaking to her husband, the owl, and was becoming delirious from being chained to the pole, and she said, “All my life I keep thinking that there’s some magical mindset or…or…or rule-of-thumb that, if I can just find it, it will make everything better. But I don’t think such a mindset exists.”

Finally, and probably most damningly prophetic of what was about to happen to me spiritually, I am thinking of the way Avery attempted to make a very fact-based checklist called “Let’s Get This Straight” concerning her observations of the crisis, only to ultimately drop a logical fallacy that undercut the fact-based logic which had been her comfort:
When I get scared, I will always have scientific facts to fall back on.

Statement one is a philosophical statement.

When I read this now, I can see so plainly what was beginning to change about my worldview; and in a lot of ways, I think this story is reducible to the introspections of an author who knows internally that life is meaningful and yet his external experience is so absurd as to contradict any chance at discerning a meaningful life. Indeed, Avery was dealing with a sort of spiritual dissonance: she clearly wanted to believe in something (or was at least inclined to), but considering her circumstances, why would she? And that is the horrible power of something like the opioid crisis: this idea that masses of humans can so readily turn over their mind, body, spirit—their very souls—to a life-devouring substance. What sense does any of it make? Where is God in such a deplorable situation? That’s what I was wrestling with at the time I wrote this story.

The duality of Avery’s identity—or rather the duality of her experience of her identity—at the end of the story might be interpreted many ways, but my interpretation is that, even as the Delivery Man was captured and the town restored to “sanity,” she experienced a death of all the hope which had, until this point, to a varying degree, sustained her. She was now reducible to her occupation as a nurse in an emotionally detached “wellness facility” in Bolander. In one of her final letters to Detective, while she is still barely emotionally alive, she says, “Don’t you realize that if you have to restore harmony then there was never any harmony to begin with!” Even though it is cynical and I’m not sure I believe it, I really love that line. It’s sort of like the ultimate slogan for cynicism and it is an attitude which I think would be really easy to adopt after waking up.
from “The Dream of the World,” which is a pretty on-the-nose reference to the idea that this life, this world, wants us to believe that it is meaningful.

In the End

In the end I would like to thank the reader and I hope these stories can serve as a tree through the floor of your respective prison cell.

The Sad Kitchen

Chapter 1

The Sad Kitchen is a friendly place. It is a diner where people who are sad come in the nighttime, and I am their waiter. Back in the kitchen my wife does the cooking and makes
the tickets. She’s the angel of this operation. Helen. We serve only breakfast at the Sad Kitchen and are open all night.

Tonight, Vern is here. Vern is a frequenter of the Sad Kitchen. Vern was in prison once, but they let him go very early in his sentence because a tree grew up through the cement floor of his prison cell (he tells me), a tree which was so strong the guards couldn’t chop it down. They tried to take it down with a chainsaw, but the chainsaw was only a back-scratch for the tree. You could practically see the tree smiling when they put the chainsaw to it, claimed Vern.

The parole board thought the miraculous occurrence of the tree in the prison cell meant Vern was an innocent man even though he told them in no uncertain terms that that wasn’t true. He was guilty of it. But they gave him early parole anyway, and very quietly. The story was kept quiet to avoid humiliating the justice system, Vern claimed. Now Vern comes to the Sad Kitchen with much frequency. It’s a very strange story, but he sure sticks to it.

In all other aspects of conversation, I’ve found Vern to be a serious and levelheaded fellow. “Plate of eggs and potatoes and something for the children,” was Vern’s order tonight. “And some coffee, sad.”

So I went back and got Vern’s plate and his ticket from my wife. Helen was delighted to give him something for the children. Her joy was made apparent to me by the way she stopped what she was doing and put the back of her hand on her hip.
After a little bit of gentle contemplation, my wife scribbled on a greasy ticket and handed it over so I could deliver it to Vern. Vern’s ticket had something to do with writing a children’s book about the tree in his prison cell that could make a little child smile.

“This is a tough one, Bubba,” said Vern, folding the ticket and putting it in the breast pocket of his tired, old flannel shirt at two in the morning, which is the time he normally comes to the Sad Kitchen. The Sad Kitchen is busiest at the hours when people wake up and can’t go back to sleep. “A good one but sure a tough one,” said Vern taking his first sip of coffee.

After Vern finished his meal, he stepped out into the dark street but came back a few minutes later. “Bubba?” he said.

“Yeah, Vern?”

“Is the story supposed to make the little child smile in the book, or is the book supposed to make some other little child smile—some child not in the book.”

“Might be either, Vern. Might be you could make it a book that makes a little child smile in the book, and it will make a little child smile not in the book, too.”

There was a nervous or overwhelmed look in his eye.

“Say Vern, I can go ask my wife if you would like some clarification.”

“That’s okay,” he said in a very definite way that made me fear he still didn’t quite understand. “Tell Helen I am grateful,” Vern said and headed out.
Helen used to visit folks in prison. That was how we met. I was a prisoner in the ward she used to visit. I was released from prison not because of a tree growing up through the floor of my cell, but for the normal reason people are released from prison.

When folks used to ask what I was in prison for, I would say, “THE unspeakable crime.” Those were back in the days when I had a little more energy to devote to being a jokester.

The Sad Kitchen is a gentle place. Around 3 a.m. Mike with Tourettes comes in yammering. At the counter he flails his limbs as I fill his coffee cup, sad, and he yammers on and on. “I socked her,” he says. “I got her with a quick jab and then I put my knee to her gut. Then I took her by the throat. And all of this was right in front of my little daughter.” On and on like that goes Mike. He’s done this for five years now, the same spiel. My wife has explained to him that it’s not necessary, but he insists. Each night he does it.

Then he grows quiet, hunches over his coffee cup as if to let the steam warm his face.

“What’s my ticket tonight, Bubba?” asks Mike after his ritual.

Karen comes in before work, around 5 a.m. She’s a lawyer in one of the skyscrapers. I don’t know why Karen comes to the Sad Kitchen. It is difficult for me to imagine the reason folks with jobs in skyscrapers would come to a place like this. My wife encourages me not to spend too much time speculating on it. Helen always says remorse feels exactly same regardless of what caused it. Helen also always says that the tricky
part about the phrase *What Would Jesus Do?* is that the most difficult time to do what Jesus would do is after you’ve already done something He would NEVER do. But it’s also the most critical moment, she says. And the idea behind the tickets at the Sad Kitchen, says my wife, is to help folks with this very critical moment. Sometimes this critical moment can last many years.

I’ve asked Karen (and some of the other skyscraper customers—we have a few accountants and a banker) what the city looks like from way up high. “It looks sad, Bubba,” they tell me. “You would never know that anything is getting accomplished up there or that any sort of progress is being made because, day in and day out, the view is always the same and it never changes. You can stand at the window and watch the world become part of the sky, and it never changes.”

Valli with the underbite comes in at unpredictable times. Often she arrives drunk or worse at the Sad Kitchen. She lives on the streets of downtown, and the streets of downtown have become her.

If I wasn’t careful when I looked at Valli the only thing I saw was a gray downtown street corner set against a huge gray building under a low gray sky, and the wind whips across the sidewalk with grates out of which steam rises and swirls into nothingness, like a ghost of all the people who walk past Valli, bundled up around her paper cup.

Helen still serves Valli when she is drunk or worse. Valli hardly eats anything anyway. She just wants some sad coffee and her ticket and the warmth.
Valli looks to be about 45 years of age, and I would therefore estimate her to be approximately 30 years of age. Valli has approximately as many strands of hair as most people have teeth, and approximately as many teeth as a newborn baby.

By 6:30 a.m. each morning we get a few final Sad Kitchen customers mixed in with real customers, along with a fellow named Jack.

What I mean by “real” is folks who aren’t customers of the Sad Kitchen, but are actually customers of Jack’s Diner.

Jack’s Diner is the Sad Kitchen during the daytime, and Jack’s Diner has paying customers all throughout the day until 7 p.m. when the alley outside grows dark and lonely and grim, like the last place on earth a flower would grow or a unicorn would make its existence known to mankind. Instead of a flower or a unicorn, Helen comes and the Sad Kitchen is open again for another night.

Jack’s Diner is in the phone book and has a mailing address and some revenue.

The owner of Jack’s Diner is an old friend of Helen’s, Jack. Jack is the father of Helen’s dead son, although Jack and Helen were never married, and that is something Helen has come to terms with. Jack lends Helen the space and is also a proud customer of the Sad Kitchen.
The day’s seventh hour is the only hour where Jack’s Diner customers and Sad Kitchen customers overlap. It is during the day’s seventh hour that Jack himself goes from being a customer of the Sad Kitchen to being the owner of his own operation: Jack’s Diner.

If Helen is the angel of this operation (which she is), then Jack is the providing father.

It is quite a dramatic and abrupt shift for Jack, but he handles it modestly. At the bottom of the day’s sixth hour he is sitting at the counter of the Sad Kitchen searching for answers in his coffee, sad, and by the top of the next hour he is writing the day’s special on a chalkboard. Lasagna, pot pie, chili, alfredo, these sorts of things. His ticket is perpetually the same: *Lend us your kitchen, dear friend!* And he always does.

We never ask folks to explain their presence at the Sad Kitchen.

Folks hear about the Sad Kitchen and they come.

The Sad Kitchen is not a secret operation, but it is funny the things that remain secretive because folks are looking elsewhere.

If it is the day’s seventh hour, I face the task of determining whether a customer needs a normal Jack’s Diner ticket or a special Sad Kitchen ticket. If they need a Sad Kitchen ticket, they say, “What’s my ticket?” with sadness in their eyes. Really the art of
determining which ticket a customer needs is no art at all. I know the face of remorse like an old friend.

It was midnight the following night when Vern entered with his book—just a messy bundle of papers. Valli with the underbite sat at the end of the counter and brought her coffee mug to her bottom lip with a blunted sense of astonishment, as if the cup were a chalice that she didn’t quite understand.

“Kind of early to be seeing you, Vern, isn’t it?” I said as I poured him some coffee, sad.

“I’ve been up all day and night working on this little book,” said Vern. “I didn’t even bother to try to sleep tonight. I was too worked up. Say, Bubba, I want Helen to read it.”

I went through the bat-wing doors into the back to grab my wife, who was in the midst of cracking eggs for a long night.

Helen came out and read Vern’s mess of papers and, on the final page, a tear sprouted from her eye. With this, Vern also grew misty. “Well, shoot. It was supposed to make a little child smile, not make an old lady cry!”

We have moments like this at the Sad Kitchen from time to time. Now a tear dripped from my chin. I am never aware that I am crying until a tear drips from my chin.

“I want to see!” blurted Valli now from her place at the end of the counter.

So Helen brought the book over to Valli and said, “Here you go Sweetie.”
Valli took the bundle of papers and it was as if she were taking a newborn child. She had no clue what to do with it, but she knew that it was magnificent. She started getting the pages all mixed around and Vern stood from his seat, “Wait, that’s not—”

But Helen held up her hand to shush Vern and said to Valli, “Hey Valli, how about Vern reads his book to you?”

I guess my wife had deduced something that Vern and I had overlooked: Valli didn’t know how to read.

“That’s something I’d be proud to do, Miss Helen,” said Vern.

So Vern and Valli went into a booth and Vern read his book to Valli and sure enough after a few minutes Valli was not crying, but giggling.

My wife looked on like a proud mother.

I have heard Valli laugh before. She has a very deranged laugh that could wilt a flower on the spot. But this laugh was different as she listened to Vern’s book. This laugh was just a giggle, just a teacup filled with her childhood.

That night brought a normal flow of customers to the Sad Kitchen. My wife was feeling generous and especially touched by Vern’s book, so she made all the tickets easy: Sit and listen to Vern’s book.

Fireman John Rogers, whom I’ve never heard utter a single word, came in around one in the morning, his usual time, and, with his usual stone-faced, public officer’s scowl, listened to Vern’s reading.

But afterward, Fireman John Rogers came back up to the counter, very shy, and spoke the first words I have ever heard him speak. “May I speak to Miss Helen?”
I grabbed my wife and they went over to a corner where nobody could hear their conversation. John Rogers was sheepish about whatever he wanted to discuss with my wife. I watched them out of the sharpest corner of my eye while I served the other customers. Afterward, my wife told me what Fireman John Rogers had discussed with her: he wanted a copy of Vern’s book so he could bring it home and read it to his little daughter.

And Fireman John Rogers wasn’t the only one to request a copy, either. Mike with Tourettes had the same request, although he was less discrete about it. Mike is discrete about nothing. “I need me a copy of that! I’ll read it to my little girl!”

We had about six or seven more requests that night. Folks were very interested.

During a quiet period around five in the morning, Vern read his book to me. He was just sitting in the booth with nobody to read to, so I said, “Hey, Vern, I haven’t heard the story yet.”

So he came up to the counter and read it to me. It was five in the morning at the Sad Kitchen and there is nothing else for me to report, so I will take this opportunity to mention briefly what Vern’s story is about. I will try to do a good job, but I fear I will lack Vern’s magic touch. Nevertheless, here goes:

The story begins when a young bunny rabbit named Vernon was hopping along the grass with his mother and they came across a lovely sunflower in a garden. Vernon, the young rabbit, wanted to pick the sunflower and bring it home into their rabbit hole,
but his mother, very stern, told him “No, Vernon,” because the sunflower belonged in Miss Johnson’s garden, and it was Miss Johnson’s sunflower, and if Vernon took the flower with him then nobody else would get to see how lovely it was. Vern pouted and pouted all the way home.

Well that day while Vernon’s mother was busy cleaning the rabbit hole, Vernon snuck out and plucked Miss Johnson’s sunflower and brought it home—a very sneaky little rabbit. But, as these things always seem to go for us thieves, when Vern’s mother was cleaning the rabbit hole later that day, she found a lonely yellow petal on the floor and knew right away what Vernon had done. She came into Vernon’s bedroom and, sure enough, little Vernon was in the middle of hiding Miss Johnson’s sunflower in his bedroom. So Vernon was sent to timeout in the darkest part of his mother’s office in the coldest nook of the rabbit hole.

This next part is where I stopped wiping the counter and was all ears as Vern (the human) read his story. While little Vernon (the bunny) was shivering-cold and lonely in his timeout, a tree suddenly sprouted from below and carried Vernon out of timeout and through the ground and into the sky. Now he was all of a sudden among the tree’s highest branches and was warm in the sunshine and felt very free: ecstasy for little Vernon!

Little Vernon started hopping around and swinging from branch to branch—a very happy rabbit.

But by and by something sad occurred. From up in the tree, Vernon could see Miss Johnson mosey across the lawn and into her garden. Her flower was gone. Vernon had a perfect view of her sad face. There was nothing he could do but watch Miss Johnson’s sadness become itself.
Vernon suddenly felt very alone and very scared up in the tree. He realized that he didn’t know how to climb trees, so he wasn’t sure how he would get down. Plus, he noticed a hungry hawk with a narrow eye beginning to swoop past the tree, closer and closer to Vernon’s branch. Vernon’s mother had warned him about hawks.

Vernon wanted to call for his mother, but if he shouted her name, the hungry hawk might hear his shouts.

Vernon was about to start crying when, out of nowhere, a lovely dove came and landed on Vernon’s branch. “Are you a friendly dove?” asked the scared little rabbit. But the dove didn’t answer, just came and put a wing around Vernon’s shoulder.

“I did something very bad,” said Vernon, trembling under the dove’s wing, “and now I’m scared.”

The dove held Vernon closer in his wings—very precious.

“What am I going to do?” cried Vernon. “I ruined Miss Johnson’s lovely sunflower and now I’m stuck up in this tree when I’m supposed to be in timeout. And there is a hungry hawk flying around out there!”

“Hop on my back and I will bring you safely back to your mother,” said the dove.

Vernon was very grateful for the dove’s kindness. But one thing was still bothering him. “I don’t know how I can face my mother after what I did to Miss Johnson’s sunflower.”

“I know what you can do,” said the nice dove, very elegant.

The dove returned Vernon to the ground and Vernon invited the dove into the rabbit hole and introduced the dove to his mother.
Of course, Vernon’s mother was suspicious (“Aren’t you supposed to be in timeout, young man?”) but she was impressed by Vernon’s new friend, the dove, who had good manners. Together, Vernon and his friend the dove told Vernon’s mother the plan.

The dove taught Vernon and his mother how to find seeds in the eye of the sunflower that Vernon had plucked from Miss Johnson’s garden, and together they went out into Miss Johnson’s garden and planted some seeds. The story ends on a page with no words, just a lousy but wholesome drawing of three new sunflowers in Miss Johnson’s garden, and the dove is flying into the sun.

I can see I’ve failed. I told the story as truly as I could, but there was more to Vern’s story than just the story itself.

There were the drawings, of course, (lousy but wholesome) but there was more than that too.

The truth is: it is impossible to tell a children’s story in the middle of a story that is otherwise so distant from childhood.

The truth is: the reason Vern (the person, not the rabbit) was in prison was that he raped a young girl about eight years ago when he was working as a plumber. The little girl’s name was Izzy, and she bore a little son as a result of the attack. Eight years later, Vern has never met the son. Vern has spent the rest of his life, these eight years, trying to figure out whether the concept of forgiveness is too good to be true. “What’s the catch?” he has asked my wife many nights at the Sad Kitchen, his voice and his posture absolutely crushed by the aggregate of eight years’ remorse.
Helen takes him into the corner booth and talks to him about how the Holy Spirit is at work in him, and usually they are able to sort through all that strangling, suffocating guilt until, together, they find what they are looking for: the love of the Holy Spirit at work in Vern. And Helen gives him his ticket for the night.

That night, Vern left his book with my wife so she could make a few copies. On the drive home that morning I said to Helen, “Well I guess we better make a few copies of Vern’s book.”

Helen laughed and agreed. It had been so well received by folks. We went to a print shop near our home and Helen went inside to make some copies while I took a nap in the car. I’m always dog-tired after my Sad Kitchen shifts.

Helen came back into the car and I woke up.

“Where are the copies?” I asked her. “Are you looking for someone with a strong back and a weak mind to haul them out here?”

“They said they would bind them for me and we can pick them up this evening, isn’t that nice? I ordered fifty copies.”

“Fifty!”

“It’s a special book, Bubba.”

That evening we stopped by the print shop on the way back downtown, and during that night’s shift we passed out 12 copies of Vern’s book. A few folks asked Vern to sign the book—just as a joke. At first Vern was endorsing his small fame, albeit in a very modest and pleasant way.
“Man Vern!” yelled Mike with Tourettes while Vern signed his copy. “You’ve got one helluva imagination!”

It got to where Vern didn’t know what to say. “Shoot,” he’d say and sign the book and look away, sheepish.

“You okay Vern?” I asked during a rare moment of peace that night as I filled his coffee, sad, and noticed Vern’s downcast eyes.

“Hey, Bubba, can you grab Miss Helen a moment?” said Vern, nervous.

I went through the bat-wing doors and fetched my wife, who was standing over the industrial-sized skillet dealing with some hash browns.

“Hi, Sweetie,” said Helen to Vern. “Everything okay?”

Quiet, Vern said, “Folks all think I used my imagination to make that book. But really it happened just the way I told it.”

“I believe you,” said Helen, patting Vern’s hand on his coffee mug, sad.

“I believe you too, Vern,” I chimed in, figuring I might as well, just for the heck of it, even though I wasn’t sure I believed Vern’s ridiculous tree-in-the-prison-cell story.

“It’s not that,” said Vern. “No nothing like that. I just feel funny that folks think I’m imaginative when all I did was tell it how it really was. I don’t deserve any of these crazy accolades.”

“You’re a good man, Vern,” said Helen and turned to me. “Has Vern gotten his ticket yet this evening?”

“NOpe I haven’t,” Vern interjected.
“Your ticket is another simple one. Ready? Just repeat after me. I am a good man!”

The Sad Kitchen is a home for deliverance. Sadness is a steady disease, and it can be as cozy as the autumn, which is why it is so dangerous I think. Folks just get used to it.

It got to where we had passed out all 50 copies of Vern’s book over the course of two weeks.

We didn’t even have 50 customers before that point in time. Vern’s children’s book was becoming a great hit. Our regular customers were requesting multiple copies for other peoples’ children, I suppose. Word must get around in children’s circles: preschool and elementary school and all those other childhood enterprises. I don’t know—children are beyond my area of expertise. Sometimes I forget they still exist.

This book which I’m making right now is getting further and further from childhood, I fear.

By the third week of Vern’s book’s publication, so to speak, we were still getting requests from our regular customers.

And not only were we getting lots of requests from our regular customers, we were getting more and more new customers. We were up to approximately twenty regulars, twenty-five. And on any given night we might have had thirty-five customers throughout the whole of the night’s shift. It was getting to where I couldn’t keep folks straight, which, as a waiter, is my main task. I pride myself on knowing a name and a face and a tidbit about each of the customers of the Sad Kitchen.

A few of the new folks were:
- A gastroenterologist named Dominic Spencer (Sad news to come about him)
- A crew of lawncare professionals
- Three dental hygienists, all friends
- Herold, a high school basketball referee
- A self-proclaimed philosopher who claimed that the universe was shaped like a donut.
- A priest (one of Helen’s old friends)
- A city council member
- Two fellows who called themselves “Lowriders” which is a term I am not familiar with in reference to human beings, only automobiles

All this sudden growth prompted a lot more coffee, more cartons of eggs, and another batch of Vern’s book that folks could bring home to their children.

This time, when my wife went into the print shop, instead of falling asleep in the car outside, I played a game with myself where I attempted to guess how big of a batch she would order. My guess was 75 copies, but I promised myself that if she went nuts and ordered 100 I absolutely would not say, “How much is all this costing us?”

My wife is a special person and she has her fingers on the tenderest spots of folks’ souls: she ordered 250 copies of Vern’s children’s’ book about a tree growing up out of the floor of a little rabbit’s timeout. Where would all these books go? We had nowhere close to that many customers. I guess Helen had a “Print it and they will come” approach to old Vern’s book. The number dumbfounded me.
And Helen must have sensed this because she patted my thigh all the way home from the print shop that morning and that was all the communication we needed. Anything I attempted to say would have been inaccurate.

The reason Helen’s (and Jack’s) son was dead was that he was murdered during a robbery on the outskirts of his college campus. He was murdered by one of the guys in my ward. She liked to visit the man—“Crank” as he was known around the ward, although his real name was Cliff—because she was trying to convince Cliff that she had forgiven him. It was a difficult thing to do and required much persistence, Helen told me after I was released from prison and we struck up a romance and eventually got married, aged 54 (me) and 49 (her).

Forgiving Cliff was an ongoing process until about a year ago. It was always a source of much frustration for Helen because no matter how much headway she made one week, she could come back the next week to find Cliff in a very dark place (a place of crippling guilt), all of her previous week’s hard work unraveled.

The reason forgiving Cliff is no longer an ongoing process is that Cliff died about a year ago. The forgiving process is over and now it’s just a matter of praying for him, so says Helen.

But I only learned about this terrible, horrible, intimate, magnificent connection between Cliff and Helen once I was already out of prison and long-gone into the throes of love with Helen and she opened up to me. Back when she used to visit Cliff and the rest of the guys on his ward, the topic Helen and I would discuss was her son and she would speak
to me about him, very lovingly, as if he were still alive. The kid had been a shortstop in high school, and Helen would speak about him as if he were still playing shortstop in high school.

Shortstop is what we bonded over, Helen and me. I myself had been a shortstop. Thus, one embarrassing and very sad situation developed over the years: every week, when Helen would come visit the prison, I would give her a tip to relay to her son about how to make himself into a better shortstop. All that time, she never told me that her son was dead, and I just kept giving her those tips, week after week. “Tell that shortstop of yours to get his glove out in front of him when he goes to field a ground ball or else it’ll eat him up.” “Tell that shortstop of yours to kick some dirt around whenever there is a man on second base. Baserunners hate it! It gets in their head.”

I can only assume it made her cry on her drives home from visiting the prison when she got in the car and realized she had no shortstop at home to relay those tips to. I didn’t realize the situation, but that doesn’t make me feel like any less of a tactless old fool.

An arrest occurred. It wasn’t but two days after the printing of our 250-batch that a middle-aged fellow with a frog face came into the Sad Kitchen. We had only barely opened for the night. The coffee was still brewing, for heaven’s sake.

“How does this place work?” he said to me, looking rather froggy.

“Well—” I said.

“I might need you to hurry,” he said, in the slowest voice imaginable.
Then there was a silence. It was just him and me in the Sad Kitchen. No customers had arrived yet and my wife was in the back, cracking eggs. As I studied his face, I half-expected him to go *ribbit ribbit*. Instead, he used words: “Can you hide me?”

He looked almost bored.

“Hide you?” I was going to say, but I didn’t get the chance, because next I knew two officers had burst through the door and slammed the frog-man’s frog-face on our counter and were cuffing him and telling him his rights.

I am ashamed to admit that the thing I was thinking when the cops put the man’s face on our counter was: *Don’t get frog guts on my clean counter!* It happened so quickly, and this is the stupid sort of thought my brain has when it can’t keep up with a situation.

Two mornings later I saw the man’s froggy mug in the newspaper. Unbelievable: he was some sort of bigwig doctor. He was a gastroenterologist named Dominic Spencer from the university hospital and he had been caught taking advantage of sedated patients behind closed doors in the worst way imaginable. The hospital had caught him on camera and he tried to flee.

Evidently this Dominic Spencer fellow had heard about the Sad Kitchen and mistook us as some sort of asylum for men fleeing the law. The newspaper didn’t mention us in their article, but we wouldn’t avoid the spotlight for long. Dominic Spencer was about to fall from grace, and he was going to try to use the Sad Kitchen as a wet mattress to soften his blow.
Chapter 2

Vern had used crayons to paint the pictures for his children’s book. Vern was NOT a good artist. He used stick figures for the creatures, and for everything that wasn’t just a simple stick figure (such as the tree) he colored outside the lines—and there were no lines!

During the weeks when our batch of 250 books was being depleted, another new customer approached me very early one evening—around 8 p.m. This fellow was an artist, he said. Some of his work was in a gallery downtown, he said. The artist had a dark, soulful presence, and he used that presence to tell me, “I’ve got a proposition for you concerning the drawings in that book,” while I filled his coffee cup.

He didn’t come right out and state his proposition, but it was apparent where this was headed. “I’m not the decision maker of this operation,” I said, topping him off. “One moment please.”

I went and grabbed my wife.

They went to the end of the counter to talk. My wife’s face had been a little bothered when I told her the situation, so I tried to remain nearby their conversation. If something unpleasant needed to occur, I would take it upon myself to become the unpleasantness. My willingness to be unpleasant on my wife’s behalf is one of the most pleasant things about me, in my humble opinion.

“…I’m not going to touch any of the wording, just the art,” was the statement coming out of the artist’s mouth when I went to check on my wife.

My wife turned to me. Her mouth said, “This nice fellow is offering to revamp the pictures in Vern’s book. And he also says he knows some people who would be willing
to have it published afterward,” but, while her mouth was saying these things, I was trying to listen to her eyes. Her eyes said, I’m not so sure about this.

“Vern’s not in yet this evening,” I offered up. “Should we wait and see what he thinks about all this?”

This statement was the perfect ground for my wife to stand on. “That’s probably only fair to Vern,” said my wife patting my chest. Then turning to the artist, “And I will say, I think there’s something very honest about the way Vern did his pictures. I’m not sure they could be improved with all the talent in the world. Oh sure, you might make them very lovely, but we have the honest truth to consider. To redo those pictures might be like telling a fib in a prayer. Who are we fooling?”

“I understand completely,” said the artist fellow. “Listen, you talk to Vern this evening and think things over, and I’ll come back same time tomorrow, not because I want an answer but because I feel at home here.” And for a moment, I believed him. For a moment, I thought he truly felt the spirit of my wife and of the Sad Kitchen and wasn’t just looking for money or pride or whatever else.

When Vern arrived in the wee hours of that very night, my wife and I sat down with him at a booth and my wife sat on the same side of the booth as Vern so that it wouldn’t feel like an inquisition or a parole hearing for poor Vern. In truth, Vern was carrying himself a little tentatively and with very hunched shoulders these days, ever since the second batch of his book came into being. His children’s book had become something of a real-life child, and Vern was the stressed-out parent, hesitant to release his child to the world but aware that he needed to for the sake of the child AND for the sake of the world.
Folks made comments to Vern from one of two categories these days: category one, they praised and admired and congratulated his wild imagination, or, category two, they asked Vern, “Hey Vern, a tree didn’t really grow up through the floor of your prison cell, did one?” Both of these categories of comments left Vern totally and completely trapped inside himself.

Ever gentle, with her hand on Vern’s forearm, my wife explained the artist’s offer. When she told Vern the bit about having the book certifiably published, Vern looked at me with terrified, trembling eyes.

“What do you think I should do, Miss Helen?”

“Well, Vern, this is your book—your creation!—and I don’t think I should influence your decision one way or the other.”

“Did he seem like an alright fellow?”

My wife thought for a moment. “The impression he gave seemed very earnest, yes, and I think it’s only fair that we trust that impression.”

But all three of us seated in that booth knew very well that my wife wouldn’t speak badly about a fellow human being even if that fellow human being were holding a gun to her temple, threatening, “Hey lady, I want to hear you admit that I’m a piece of shit or else I’ll pull the trigger and prove it to you.” Vern looked at me for my read on the artist. “Bubba?” he said.

“Well Vern, at first I feared he was after money or whatever else, but like my wife said, he left a decent impression. You know how tough it can be to gauge a fellow’s intentions.”
Poor Vern was completely overwhelmed. “Let me get you some more coffee, Vern,” I said, standing to grab the carafe. “A nice, sad cup, how about?”

We discussed the situation with Vern for almost an hour that night. There were, I believe, two points of serious intrigue for Vern.

Point of intrigue number one: if the artist repainted all of Vern’s lousy but wholesome drawings, then some of the unwanted attention Vern was dealing with might be redirected to the artist.

Point of intrigue number two: if the book were certifiably published, it could possibly make a little bit of money, some of which would fall into Vern’s lap.

There was, however, one point of serious concern for poor Vern: “If that thing gets certifiably published,” said Vern, “then my name and my story will really be out there.”

“In a lot of ways it already is out there, Vern,” I said in the interest of practicality.

“I mean out there,” said Vern turning and jabbing a finger in the direction of the door of the Sad Kitchen, the alleyway outside, downtown, the world beyond.

The Sad Kitchen is a nurturing place. It’s false that only the youth need nurturing. Most of the tickets are fairly simple: Bring a plate of food to a homeless man and have a friendly talk with him. Say a rosary. Do some fasting. Go to mass at the St. Joseph Cathedral downtown (even if you aren’t Catholic). Go chat with the priest during Confession (even if you aren’t Catholic). Stick a special intention on our corkboard of intentions (Jack let us store this in a closet) and pray for all the intentions on the board. Give some alms if you can spare any.
Sometimes Helen will personalize them the way she did for Vern when he wanted

to do something for the children. Sometimes Mike’s (with Tourettes) ticket would be to

“Tell that girlfriend of yours that you love her,” or “Tell that girlfriend of yours that

you’re sorry.”

Vern entered the Sad Kitchen the next night in his finest attire he had his hair

slicked over and was wearing an old tie that must have been from the days of his trial. I

guess he thought his decision regarding his book’s destiny was important (which it was),

and he wanted to dress for the occasion.

“Damn, Vern!” yelled Mike as soon as Vern entered, which incited quite a stir of

hysteria among our patrons about Vern’s appearance. But Vern was in no mood for

enduring flattery.

He was very confident and serious when he asked me to get my wife. All I had to

do was poke my head through the bat-wing doors and say, “Hey, Helen, I don’t really

know how to say this, so I’ll just come right out and say it: Vern is here and he’s wearing

a tie.” My wife came right away, looking quite concerned.

“Miss Helen,” said Vern, with unshakable resolve, “I’m going to let that artist

fellow revamp the pictures in my book and get that thing certifiably published,” he told

my wife.

“Vern, Sweetheart—”

“And one other thing, Miss Helen,” said Vern. “If I happen to make a single

penny off that thing…”

“Yes, Vern?”
“I’m going to have it donated to the children of this charity.” Vern produced a greasy paper with the name of a charity on it from his jacket pocket and unfolded it and placed it on the counter and poked it with his finger.

In proud moments like this, my wife thinks about her son, the shortstop, and her son more than anything is the reason she cries.

There is love and goodness in this world, and that’s not nothing. Love and goodness are things that need to be reckoned with. They can’t just be skipped over when folks are going about their day, dealing with other folks in small or big ways. Because if we skip over love and goodness, what else is left?

My wife was proud of Vern, and I suspect her shortstop son was more alive in her heart than he had been in a long time.

Over the course of the next few months, the artist worked on the re-creation of the pictures in Vern’s book.

Many long nights they spent conversing over a cup of coffee in a corner booth, Vern and the artist. The artist wanted to thoroughly understand Vern’s vision. Let me give the artist his due credit for that.

Of course, folks were very warm and embracing toward the artist. Such is the Sad Kitchen way!

My wife never gave the artist any tickets other than, Keep working on those paintings!

Mike—crazy, loudmouthed Mike—had a nickname for the artist: Pa-sock-o.

“Hey, Pa-sock-o! How are them paintings coming?” Mike would shout.
We were all confused by the nickname until we put it together: Mike meant “Picasso,” but, Mike being the goofball that he is, got mixed up and called him “Pa-sock-o.” It would have been embarrassing if it weren’t so ridiculous.

In truth, these were a fine couple of months. It was autumn and we were cozy. The paintings were under development and Vern’s spirits were high and his stress levels were low now that the artist had gained his trust and he felt his book was in good hands and folks’ attention was shifted to the artist’s progress.

Otherwise, there is very little to report from this period of time. We were getting a lot of new customers and the 250-batch of Vern’s book was being further and further depleted. There were too many new faces for me to even pretend to recognize folks. I just had to be friendly about it.

Nowadays, my wife and I were going to mass more than ever. Typically, we went on Saturday nights on our way downtown to fulfill our Sunday obligation and it wasn’t uncommon for us to catch one or two weekday masses per week on the drive home from the Sad Kitchen in the morningtime. But nowadays my wife was insisting on going three, even four times during the week in addition to our Sunday obligation.

During the weekday masses, after a long night’s shift, I never failed to fall asleep in the pew. The priest was a young fellow who couldn’t stop touching the bridge of his eyeglasses up on the altar. The only way for me to get him to stop touching the bridge of his glasses was to fall asleep.
My wife insisted on waiting around in the gathering space after mass to talk to the nervous kid. As they talked, I would just linger ten feet distant and fall asleep standing up. “Morning, Bubba,” the young priest would always peek around my wife and wave to me.

“Morning, Father.”

“Sorry for keeping you awake this morning,” he’d say.

“Don’t worry, you didn’t.”

Or, “Hey Bubba,” the young priest would say, “what was my sermon about this morning?”

“Oh about 10 minutes too long, Father,” I’d say.

It was our little routine, and I suppose it was nice in its own small way. The sarcasm was a necessary part of any conversation in which I was expected to call a kid half my age “Father.” Anyway, he was just a good kid who couldn’t stop pushing on the bridge of his eyeglasses.

This period of time must have been quieter and slower than I initially realized since I find myself here discussing the nervous habits of a priest and his spectacles. But I suppose there is one very important thing to report: Dominic Spencer was quickly becoming the most hated man in the city. He even garnered some national hatred. His froggy mug tarnished the front page of The Dispatch, our city’s newspaper, every single morning. It got to where The Dispatch, with a horrible ominous tone, referred to him only as “The Doctor.” This nomenclature trickled down into folks’ conversations at the Sad Kitchen.
For better or for worse, we folks of the Sad Kitchen have a preoccupation with the news. In a few weeks, The Doctor’s trial would begin.

On Thanksgiving night, we had a feast. It was the grand unveiling of the artist’s rendering of the paintings for Vern’s book. The paintings were hung in frames and placed in sequence around the Sad Kitchen like an art gallery.

“No tickets tonight!” my wife kept bursting through the bat-wing doors and announcing, waving kitchen implements like wands. “Just enjoy the feast and the wonderful display and be grateful!”

What a cheerful night—one of the Sad Kitchen’s proudest moments. There was some thin sliced turkey and creamy gravy and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie, all of this paid for by Jack, the owner of Jack’s Diner. All the food was just a continuation of the Sad Kitchen itself, an attempt to grow softer and more tender to the human condition.

My wife always says that a sense of fullness can’t be properly understood without hunger, and that it is impossible to be grateful until you are properly dependent, and that hatred is nothing but a secret hunger for love.

Folks were very impressed with the artist’s pictures, especially since they had all read Vern’s story and thus were familiar with the narrative.

Vern, for his part, maintained the look of a proud father not wanting to steal the spotlight from his child: his story. “You doing okay, Vern?” I found an opportunity to ask.

“Bubba,” he said. “Do you know what the most challenging part of my life is these days?”
“What’s that Vern?” I said.

“Convincing myself that a human being like that wife of yours can exist without a catch. Is there a catch? Tell me there is a catch and I’ll be able to sleep at night.”

His statement caught me off guard the way most meaningful statements do. Because I knew exactly what he meant.

“Sometimes I look for it under her pillow,” I joked. “I check her medicine cabinet. I watch her pray from the other room to see if a halo appears.”

We had a good hearty laugh. “Or some wings,” joked Vern.

Later, around two in the morning, the artist hopped on the counter and thanked everyone in the house. There were probably 50 or so people that night, I would estimate, although it is difficult to apply facts and figures to memories that feel barely real.

The artist up on the counter thanked Vern and raised a cup of coffee, sad, as a sort of toast for Vern’s effort. The artist said what a profound pleasure it had been to get to know Vern and said that he never really understood what it meant to create a painting until he set out to create the paintings for Vern’s children’s book. “There is something about simplicity that is very, very complicated unless your heart is in the right place,” said the artist. Then, turning directly to Vern as the house grew silent and contemplative: “Vern, you are a good man.”

Soon afterward, the artist left the Sad Kitchen, presumably to go get the book published. But we wouldn’t see him or hear from him for months.

Chapter 3
This was the start of a long winter. The Christmas season can be difficult for folks of the Sad Kitchen. Helen always tries to romanticize the modesty of the nativity scene in the quiet nights of the Sad Kitchen. “Our job in this life is to try our best to create the nativity scene the way Mary and Joseph did: bring Jesus into the world in our own modest way in the quietest corners of the world!” But folks inevitably get their hopes up with visions of extravagance and grandeur.

Vern felt left in the dark concerning the destiny of his book—vulnerable and exposed. It was as if his child were in surgery while he was forced to sit in the waiting room: a stool at the counter of the Sad Kitchen. He waited and wondered and worried.

For months, his tickets had involved his book—making it and reading it and helping the artist grasp his vision—but now Vern was receiving tickets of old. Go give a plate of food to a lonely friend on a bench. Pray a rosary. Call your daughter even though she says she hates you and is ashamed. These tickets, I believe, felt like a terrible backslide for Vern. He used to be proud of those sorts of tickets but now I think he associated them with failure and with the fact that his book was “out there.”

Another arrest occurred. This was out in the alleyway just outside the doorway of the Sad Kitchen and just beyond the reach of the moonlight. The glinting light of the police car slammed and wailed soundlessly against the glass pane of the front door of the Sad Kitchen and inside all was silent. All had been silent beforehand, but now there was a
new, more purposeful silence. Folks sat hunched over their plates and their coffee mugs out of reverence. I can recall similar such reverent silences from nights in prison.

When my wife detected the shift in the silence, she came through the bat-wing doors and said, “What’s wrong?” And then she saw the blue-red glinting on the front door and joined the silence and stood and prayed.

The person being arrested was another one of our newer customers, a fellow who had joined us not long after the second batch of Vern’s book was printed. Kurt was his name. Sometimes his “Old Lady” (as he called her) came along, a pregnant woman named Janice. I wouldn’t normally use that terminology, “Old Lady,” because Helen has banned its usage. For example, Mike used to call his girlfriend “the Old Lady” but Helen disallowed it. “Are you married to this woman, Michael?” Helen asked him when he spoke of his Old Lady.

“No, Ma’am.”

“Well in here, she will be known as your girlfriend or your better half.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

But Kurt and Janice were new, and Helen hadn’t overheard Kurt use the term yet and I didn’t have the spine Helen had for correcting folks.

When Kurt first used the term “Old Lady,” to introduce his wife, I said, “Are you all married?”
Kurt said, “I just told you. She’s my Old Lady,” and then gave a big wink. It was a little humorous or at least ironic because Janice was a small and young-looking woman, and nothing about her screamed Old Lady.

“I’ll give you fair warning,” I said, “Miss Helen doesn’t exactly approve of that terminology. Old Lady.”

“Who is Miss Helen?” said Kurt.

“She’s the angel of this operation. My wife.”

“Well maybe I’ll start calling my Old Lady here’ Miss Janice’. How’s that?”

“Or Angel Janice!” said Janice looking shy and rubbing her womb—very precious.

But Kurt went right back to calling Janice his Old Lady and I never corrected him again because I’ve become soft in my old age and, besides, I very much liked Kurt and Janice right from the start. Individually they were special, but together they brought with them a third, even more special presence (Janice’s womb was part of this third presence, but not the whole of it).

Janice wasn’t there the night that Kurt got arrested which, at the time, the rest of us considered a silver lining. It wasn’t until later—weeks or months—that we found out the sad truth of the matter: Janice had been arrested at their apartment earlier in the night and now it was Kurt’s turn. Evidently, they were wanted by the law for a great deal of thievery that had taken place a few months prior in a city across the country. Now Kurt would go to a prison for men, Janice would go to a different prison for women, and I don’t know where that third presence I spoke of earlier would go. I fear the answer is very far from childhood.
And the artist didn’t come and didn’t come. For Vern, every time the door opened, it was the artist not coming through the door.

Vern was withdrawn into the place of his life that had once been occupied by his children’s book. It was a whining and weeping emptiness and he was perpetually trying to fill it with himself. He no longer greeted folks when they entered because, when they entered, they were not-the-artist. Vern wouldn’t even meet folks’ eyes. He looked at folks as if they were looking at him as a failure. Through folks’ eyes—especially Helen’s, I suppose—Vern saw himself as a failure. He went through the trouble of inhabiting other folks’ eyes for the sole purpose of seeing himself as a failure who had once written a children’s book but now was getting meek tickets of old.

The artist didn’t come and didn’t come, even after the Christmas season was through.

Helen was troubled because she didn’t know what to do about Vern. Mopey, mopey Vern. Meanwhile, Vern had stopped coming to the Sad Kitchen every night—he would come only three, maybe four nights per week these days.

It just so happened he was there the night the artist finally did return with a publishing contract for Vern to sign. But by the time the artist came back (publishing contract in hand), everything was all different. It was like the story of the prodigal son had been made victim of its own beauty right under the nose of my dear poor wife, for the artist expected to burst through the doors and have it be like Thanksgiving Part Two—a party.
And I think the rest of us folks would have liked for it to be that way too, but we had to defer to Vern and, for Vern, everything was all different. The joy of his children’s book was gone. His face was like the porcelain of an empty mug and there was nothing for me to do except pour it full of the saddest coffee.

Outside it was a new year and there was no way of faking our situation in the Sad Kitchen. Vern and the artist went to a corner booth and signed the papers, and then the two of them—Vern and the artist—got into a spat. As these things happen, it began as a verbal altercation:

“There, go make yourself famous,” said Vern tossing his pen at the artist’s face.

“Right, because mixing my reputation with a criminal is a quick route to glory,” said the artist.

“You need this place worse than any of us,” said Vern.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” said the artist.

“You think you’re above this place,” said Vern. “You think you’re our savior. But we don’t need you. We’ve got Miss Helen.”

“Miss Helen is the one who told us to work together in the first place you ungrateful piece of dog shit,” said the artist. “Every night my ticket was to sit in this booth and work with you. Do you think Miss Helen would have given me that ticket if she didn’t know what a supreme pain in the ass you are to work with?”

“Miss Helen was just doing you a favor, Jackass,” said Vern. “She knew you wouldn’t humble yourself so she was trying to do the work for you by letting you work...
with me, because I’m the salt of the earth. But you still ignored her grace and left us, you proud little prick.”

“If you’re the salt of the earth then no wonder this life is so damned flavorless,” muttered the artist under his breath, and then chuckled.

These sorts of disputes follow a strict format with which I am all too familiar; I had been waiting for a certain cue. In this case, the cue was the artist’s under-his-breath comment followed by a chuckle. The chuckle had given this spat the ignition it needed to express itself physically at any moment. I leapt over the counter and tried to hold back old angry moepy vulnerable Vern.

My attempt at peacekeeping worked, but for all the wrong reasons. It only worked because I tripped and fell and wrenched my back. Down for the count I was. And I was quivering—how useless and embarrassing.

Folks all took a knee around me while Helen came up and whispered in my ear and then shouted, “Someone call an ambulance!”

Something was knocked loose in my spine and I couldn’t stop trembling and convulsing. Never before had I so completely lacked possession of this thing which I have come to call myself. It felt like my brain was trying to instruct an imaginary limb to knit my spine back together. I could detect, unmistakably, a difference between my mind and my body and myself. “Are you in there, Bubba?” Helen whispered to me, and the question was too complicated to answer just then.

The ambulance came, but a cop did as well.
It was the middle of the night and here we were in a back alley and a man (me) was lying like the most pathetic docked fish on the floor of a questionable (albeit friendly) operation, and it would be an understatement to say that the cop was suspicious.

“What’s going on here?” I heard the cop say while I was being loaded onto a stretcher.

Helen was ushering folks out. She had decided to close the Sad Kitchen early so that she could accompany her pathetic groom to the hospital.

“What exactly is this place?” I heard the officer say.

“Everybody, everybody,” Helen announced. “I’m sorry but we are going to have to shut down for the night.”

Meanwhile, two men were loading me into an ambulance in the cold night and I was trying to figure out whether the coldness I was feeling was of mind, body, or spirit. One of the paramedics’ crotches was right in my face and I couldn’t do anything about it because my neck was malfunctional. Everything was all mixed up because of the wrench in my spine.

The evacuation process incited a lot of stress and chaos, and, as these things go, it launched Mike with Tourettes into quite an episode. “I punched her gut!” he was screaming. “I took my knee and put it in her face!” His screams filled the alleyway and garnered the attention of the policeman.

But the last thing I remember before the ambulance doors closed, even in the midst of Mike’s terrible filibuster, was Valli crying to Helen, and then screaming at Helen. Valli didn’t want to spend a night on the cold hard streets of downtown, and she was taking her frustration out on my wife.
Then the ambulance doors closed and everybody was gone.

I felt like a fool, and old. I had been injured in fights before, but always in dignified ways—having a tooth knocked out or an eye socket ruptured, things that didn’t force me to wonder about the difference between my mind, body, and soul.

I woke up in the hospital the next morning thinking about Mike. “What happened with Mike?” I said, still coming awake.

I turned to Helen. The white light of a bright morning in a hospital room after my long sleep was very conducive to Helen’s appearance as an angel, which she was. She had a sad face. “How do you feel, Bubba?”

“I think I can feel my body again,” I said. I hadn’t tried moving yet, but now I did, and it felt as if icicles were shattering inside my ribs. “As much as I would rather not,” I added, out of breath from the pain.

Helen took my hand.

“What happened with Mike?” I said.

“Well I don’t know how much you saw, but that officer wanted to arrest him.”

“Arrest him on what grounds!” I said, trying to be angry, but it hurt too much.

She squeezed my hand with both of hers and bowed her head and closed her eyes and vanished into prayer. I tried to go with her, but my eyes wouldn’t fall shut.

The last time I woke up in a hospital, I was handcuffed to the bed. I was twenty-seven years old, and it was the morning after my arrest. I’d been the getaway driver for a group of buddies in their attempt to burglarize a gas station. We were a clever bunch.
The reason I woke up in the hospital instead of in jail was that, about 30 feet into our getaway, I accidentally veered the vehicle into a gas pump at a very swift rate of speed.

I was the only one severely injured, although it could be said that both the getaway vehicle and the gas pump were casualties.

The reason my eyes wouldn’t fall shut now, even in the presence of Helen’s nurturing grace, was that I was calling to mind the pictures of the demolished gas pump from my court case all those years ago. The gas pump was totally wrecked. It looked like a creature suspended in the worst agony, I seem to recall.

But it was just a gas pump, right? Well, I don’t know. I’ve thought about it a lot and I have concluded that, in the grand scheme of my life, that gas pump might represent something far more complicated than your face-value gas pump. If I ever start to feel myself riding a moral high horse behind the counter at the Sad Kitchen, I remind myself that that gas pump could just as easily have been a man—a father of two young children or some such tragic situation. It was only dumb luck that that gas pump wasn’t a man, because there is something else I have neglected to mention about my role as a getaway driver in a gas station burglary: I was drunk.

Finally, my eyes were closed. Helen’s hands were warm on mine.

The machines that the folks at the hospital hooked me up to and inserted me into all beeped very stupidly, and it came as no surprise that they couldn’t figure out the meaning of the pain I was experiencing. It was a strange, contradictory situation: the more pain I
was in, the uglier and stupider the machines became which they stuck me inside of, and the more adamantly they claimed I was in perfect health. All day long, doctors and nurses were making inconclusive comments about things which I didn’t understand the meaning of, until eventually they told me I was being discharged, which was something that I was able to understand.

“Take ibuprofen as needed. Otherwise, just stay off your feet, but don’t lie down for too long either.”

“What am I supposed to do, hover?”

The doctor thought I was making a joke, the pompous jerk.

The pain was tricky because it seemed to have no focal point. I lay on the couch at our apartment trying to make sense of it. If you told me to point to it, I wouldn’t be able to. I would begin by indicating the region of my rib cage, but no, that wasn’t quite true. Sometimes it slipped up to my neck and sometimes it traveled, vaguely, down my leg. Sometimes it seemed to originate in my back, sometimes in my chest. Sometimes it seemed to originate from a place that was altogether outside of my body.

The pain itself seemed to be having an identity crisis, not just with its origin, but with the way in which it expressed itself. More than pain, it felt like a clash of forces: heat versus cold, pressure versus numbness.

It was a week before I was back at my duties at the Sad Kitchen, and two weeks before I was worth a darn. But even then I couldn’t stand for more than ten minutes before my leg
turned hot and numb, as if invisible wax were melting and then pouring down my leg. I kept having to sit down and catch my breath.

Meanwhile, the trial of Dominic Spencer, the gastroenterologist, “The Doctor,” was in full swing. The Dispatch loved to print pictures of him in his orange jumper with his hands chained and his froggy mug looking bored and hate-worthy, and I loved to look at those pictures because they were an easy object on which to project the wickedness of my pain.

But on the third or fourth day of the trial, Dominic Spencer’s lawyer, in an attempt to convince the media that his boy was a good man who merely suffered from an addiction, made a certain comment to a reporter from The Dispatch after the trial recessed for the day: “Consider this: Where was the first place he went when he felt the guilt of his actions? Darn it if he didn’t go to a soup kitchen! He went to a soup kitchen downtown to devote time to his community! A place of community service! Are these the actions of a monster? No! I urge you to see the full-picture here, ladies and gentlemen.”

The Dispatch article went on to mention that the soup kitchen was only an unverified, underground establishment known as…(here it came, folks, our name would be officially out there, to use Vern’s terminology)…the Sad Kitchen.

All of a sudden the name of the Sad Kitchen and the lies of Dominic Spencer were appearing in the same news article.
Now comes the period of time when the police made it a habit to drive slowly past the Sad Kitchen and through the alleyway several times per night. At least once per night an officer entered the Sad Kitchen to heft his trousers and touch his belt buckle. If you offered him a seat and some coffee, he’d turn up his bottom lip and turn around and leave. But his point was made: over the last few months we had had two arrests, one of which was the wretched and hated Dominic Spencer, and a third incident involving my wrenched back, and now we were officially on the police’s radar.

Plus, there was Vern’s trouble weighing us down. After he signed that contract, it was as if Vern were perpetually leaving the Sad Kitchen. It seemed every time I looked at the door, there was poor mopey Vern, leaving without ever having talked to anyone. Who knew a man could depart from an establishment more often than he could arrive in the first place?

Helen didn’t know what to do about it, and I knew she didn’t know what to do about it, and yet we never discussed it. There were important things that needed to be discussed and, as a replacement for those important things, I would make the most obvious and meaningless statement in the world, “We’re getting too old for this, Helen.” And in reply my wife would ask the most obvious, meaningless question, “How is your back, Bubba?”

In this small way we avoided everything we needed to discuss: Vern’s sadness, the recent arrests, the suspicious police, the fact that our customer base had increased and we were therefore creating quite a financial imposition on poor Jack, and of course the fact that we were getting old and my spine was wrenched.
My wife’s prayer was more fervent than ever these days. Her face disappeared into her prayer. We came home from the Sad Kitchen and right away I lay down on the couch to rest my sorry spine while Helen went straight into our bedroom and prayed, kneeling there against the bed.

I set out writing this account with the intention to be nothing but honest, so I’ll mention for honesty’s sake that my wife’s fervent prayer had begun to infuriate me a little bit during this dark period of time. The sound of her tiny prayerful whispers had begun to tiptoe and then to ballet and then to tap-dance about the edges of my pain.

“How’s your back, Bubba?” Can I get you anything?”

It went on and on like that in the wintertime so that my wife’s face was no longer a face, but just an image of herself kneeling in prayer as viewed from my reclined vantage on the couch. “I feel extra old today, Helen.”

“Why don’t I get you some ibuprofen for that back of yours?”

Until one day I had run out of ways to express how old we were becoming and how deeply I was in pain, and something terrible erupted from my stupid mouth. She was in there praying very fervently and I was feeling extra agitated. “You’re wasting your damn time!” I belted, as if my back pain were manifesting itself as the words of a daemon.

“Bubba?” said Helen.
“You heard me. Either your prayers aren’t working or you’re asking for all the wrong shit!”

She came over to me with her face missing—just a cloudy image of her kneeling in prayer in its place. Then she held my head against her as I wept.

After I regained my composure she rested my head on her lap and said, “Would you like me to tell you my thoughts about prayer, Bubba?” and I felt how lovely her voice really was. What an ointment! What a salve! It was the most soothing balm. I was an old fool.

“Please tell me,” I said and felt like a child.

She stroked my head and I felt like an old fool again.

“Alright,” she said, beginning to speak in a voice that turned me back into a child. “What kind of place do you think the Sad Kitchen would be if there were no tickets involved? If folks just came in for the food and the coffee and that’s all?”

I thought for a moment and then became rather exercised. “Why, that would defeat the whole purpose of our operation!” I said, scandalized by the crazy concept. “Oh sure, it’d still be a nice thing for hungry folks like Valli to get some food, but, for God’s sake—”

“It’s okay, Bubba,” Helen chuckled and stroked my head ever closer to her bosom. “Don’t get all worked up, now. Your muscles will tense and start squeezing your nerves and I’ll just have one big, bag of nervous on my hands. Now listen. I think prayer is a lot like the Sad Kitchen, okay? Sure, folks hang around for the nourishment and the camaraderie, but the real reason they come in the first place is they can’t sleep and they don’t know what to do with themselves, so they come seeking a ticket. When I’m in there
praying, I’m not asking God for anything except my daily ticket, and I trust that He will provide all the nourishment we need, tenfold!”

She stroked my head and our thoughts blurred together. This was the closest I had ever been to glimpsing the inner-workings of my wife. I could see right through her face, because her face was still missing and in its place was still the same cloudy image of her knelt in prayer, and pretty soon the cloud evaporated me up into itself.

Am I here to proclaim that all my pain suddenly disappeared and that I was suddenly bathed in relief or some such racket? Of course not, it was just a lovely moment. And over the ensuing months I did begin dabbling in prayer (“Hey God, whatever Helen says goes for me too,” “Hey Boss, I’m ready for my ticket now,” “Hey Friend, I have no clue how this works so I’ll just let you guide me and I’ll try not to screw it up,” “Hello Merciful One, I might not be sorry for all the bad things I’ve ever done, but I AM sorry that I’m not more sorrowful. Can you work with that?”) a little more often now that Helen opened my mind up to that crazy notion of not having to ask for anything in order to receive it tenfold. I’ve never been any too comfortable asking for things, but I’ve always been just fine taking orders. And over the next few months, I must admit, I did begin taking a few orders from On High and I did begin to understand my pains a little differently. It turns out that my pain was something that, in a sick sort of way, I cherished and even worshipped and, in so doing, I kept myself a prisoner to it. It turns out it is just as easy for me to worship my own pain as anything else. I wanted to keep the pain all for myself and to deal with it on my own terms, and I didn’t want to entrust it to The God Man.
I think it’s darn appropriate that that last sentence started with “I” and ended with “The God Man.”

So did that last one. So do all of these. The truth is, my life is a sentence that starts with “I” and ends with The God Man, and Helen is in the middle. My life is a sentence so simple that a child could understand it.

I was born in a Catholic cradle, but I had never sought God for myself. Instead I lay stupid and stubborn in my crib, for the first 60 years of my life, astounded and impressed by the stench of my own diaper, assuming that if God needed me He would come peer over the horizon of my crib making googly eyes at me and cooing, “Goo-goo gah-gah.” Then Helen came along. Through the course of our nuptials she has hefted me up out of my crib and sent me crawling into the world with God’s home address pinned to my chest like a bib splotched and splattered by my own yellow burps. Now, the more I search for Him, the more terrifyingly apparent it is that He has already found me.

Chapter 4

It was only a few days after my outburst on the couch that we arrived at the Sad Kitchen for an evening shift to find a hardbound copy of Vern’s book waiting for us near the stove alongside a note that said, “Channel 4 tomorrow night at eleven.” The note was signed by the artist.

Helen picked up the book. Timeout for Vernon. She opened the cover and it made a smooth greasy sound like the click of water lapping gently on a seashore. Clearly this
book had never been opened before and it reeked a fresh and self-conscious little odor. I stood over Helen’s shoulder and cupped my hands on her elbows as she held the book. She was a little bit mesmerized. The first page inside the front cover was all white except for a short passage: a dedication. “For Helen and all my friends at the Sad Kitchen who showed me where to find the Holy Spirit.”

I wasn’t sure if the dedication was Vern’s touch or the artist’s, but it must have been Vern’s. The artist must have discussed the dedication with Vern during one of their long meetings in the corner booth about Vern’s vision for his children’s book and now here it was: a real artifact of love.

Together we read the book and there was nothing to say. Helen’s hands were trembling the whole time she held the special thing, and that was all we needed in terms of communication. The artist had done a lovely job on the paintings, and I won’t even attempt to explain what I mean by “lovely.” What I mean by lovely can’t be explained here in a book that is so distant from childhood. The more I would attempt to explain it here, the further my explanation would deviate from the childlike simplicity of the truth.

After we finished reading the book, talking once again seemed like a useful, rational activity. Jackhammering the snowfall of our silence, I said, “What do you suppose is going to be on Channel 4 tomorrow night?”

“I don’t know, Bubba, but we had better figure out how to program that darn television.”
A television hung behind the counter at the Sad Kitchen, but we had never turned it on. It was blaring constantly during Jack’s Diner’s hours of operation, but we always shut it off at the beginning of our Sad Kitchen shift because it was contrary to our purposes at the Sad Kitchen. But now we had an obvious need for it.

That night we forewarned all our Sad Kitchen customers that Vern’s book had been certifiably published and bound with the artist’s pictures and that something mysterious involving the book was going to be on the news tomorrow night and we were going to have a viewing party of sorts, so they should try to be here by 11 p.m. Folks were sure intrigued: Was Vern going to be on tv? Would he be at the viewing party tomorrow night? Better yet, both?

We just hoped it wasn’t neither.

We didn’t see Vern that night, and thus we—Helen and me—were left in the dark. But our lack of answers only provoked the mystery concerning tomorrow night’s broadcast, because…

…Wow! Did folks sure show up. By 10 p.m. we had only been open for three hours and the house was packed: forty people, fifty. One man, a newer customer named Dwayne, brought six Tupperware containers full of cookies—144 cookies in total—which his wife had baked. Karen (the lawyer from the skyscraper) brought three enormous tubs of kettle corn, which I assume were left over from Christmas. Another man, a fellow I altogether did not recognize, attempted to have 10 cases of beer delivered in a van around 9 p.m., but before they could move the beer inside the establishment, Helen was outside in the
alleyway putting her foot down. The Sad Kitchen needed to behave itself following the recent arrests and my wrenched back incident, and I guess Helen didn’t think 240 cans of beer would be helpful to the situation. Cookies and kettle corn were where Helen drew her line for the viewing-party-festivities.

By 10:30, the Sad Kitchen was humming with plenty of sugar, coffee, and neon light. Folks had been pleading for us to turn the lights down to foster a movie-theatre-type atmosphere, and when Helen obliged, and the lights went down, a neon beer sign from behind the counter that we had never paid much heed was all of a sudden the main attraction. The Sad Kitchen was aglow with a lunar blue warmth and an almost guttural whooping sound from the very excited audience. One question remained, and if you listened close enough to the general din of excitement, you would figure it out pretty quickly. It went like this: “Psst…psssssst…Vern…Where’s old Vern?… pst… psssssssst…tsst….seen Vern?”

Indeed, old Vern had yet to arrive.

Concerning Vern, my concerns were twofold: One, I feared Vern would arrive and the house would erupt with such excitement as to cause structural damage to the Sad Kitchen or, two, I feared Vern would not arrive and we would have to celebrate without him. I don’t know which concern was more concerning at the time.
Regardless, around 10:45, almost as if he had a flair for the dramatic (which he didn’t), Vern entered the Sad Kitchen. In hindsight, I suppose this was the last time he would step foot on our friendly premises.

If his mood upon entry was mopey or somber or if he was spooked by the size of the crowd, he didn’t get a chance to express it, for, as I feared and expected, he was so suddenly assailed with adoration. Within seconds, cookies were being flung across the dining room and an entire tub of kettle corn was dumped over Vern’s head and then folks began to bang on the aluminum jug, which was over Vern’s head like a lampshade. It was a celebratory mobbing like after a walk-off home run in extra innings, but, little did folks realize, we were only in the sixth inning of this particular situation. All I could do was cringe, both because of the mess that was being made with the kettle corn and because I knew how sensitive Vern was about receiving attention, especially accolades.

But these folks needed and deserved something to celebrate. I think Helen realized that and therefore allowed it to continue.

I wanted to find Vern to talk to him, to gauge his emotional condition, but it was a difficult crowd to navigate and folks were requesting a great deal of coffee, and suddenly it was eleven p.m., and, under the blue light, a very electric silence had enforced itself about the establishment—it gave me the impression that if I made any sudden shifts, a strong voltage would surge through us all. Vern was given a seat front and center at the counter before the television.
This next part is difficult. This next part is where the story entirely unhinges itself from the child that it once was and begins to think and act by itself and for itself. I can do nothing but tell it the way it happened.

The eleven o’clock news featured an interview with two news anchors—a lady in a dress that showed a lot of leg and a gentleman with shiny hair—and the artist (looking pretty ritzy, himself), all three of whom were seated on a red couch. On a little coffee table before them was propped a copy of Vern’s book alongside three coffee mugs. Sure, it was a nice setting, but in the family room of my soul, it struck me as a little ridiculous.

After a few news tidbits and the lottery drawing and a weather update and a few commercials, the lady with a lot of leg said: “With us this evening we have a local artist who has gone behind the scenes to work on a children’s book with an ex-con. Now he comes forward to tell his story. Thank you for joining us, and blah blah blah blah blah…”

A wave of whooping and yucking passed through the Sad Kitchen.

On the tv, the interview began in a pleasant manner and the artist had a charming rapport with the anchors on the couch and folks were proud. But it was easy to discern a cynical purpose for this interview: the artist wanted to promote his new project and show folks what a sympathetic and open-minded fellow he was for dealing with such an untouchable guy as Vern.

But who can fault the artist for that? Because in truth he spoke very highly of Vern and of his experiences at the Sad Kitchen, how wholesome and loving and embracing and not-judgmental it is, and how it is a good way for troubled and guilt-ridden (except he kept throwing around the term “guilt neurosis” in order to sound fancy,
I guess) individuals to reestablish a connection with society. It was especially nice for him to plug our name in the aftermath of its having been splattered with mud in association with the wretched frog Dominic Spencer.

And when the news team asked him about Vern, the artist couldn’t have had kinder words to describe old Vern. “Sometimes simplicity is exceedingly more complex than the most complicated complexity,” the artist said about Vern, essentially juicing up his Thanksgiving toast. Meanwhile, here in the Sad Kitchen on the other side of the television, folks were coming up and squeezing Vern’s shoulders or touching his arm or patting his back. They were respectful and didn’t say anything. They knew it had been a trying time for him.

A cynical person would call the beginning part of the interview “simpering” or “self-serving,” but being cynical is a lazy-hearted decision and I hereby declare the artist and the news anchors to be good folks who were only doing their jobs. On both sides of the screen, folks really were touched.

But then the gentleman anchor asked, very casually, “In the scope of your project, why don’t you tell us a little bit about your co-author’s conviction, and maybe, if you would, can you also offer a statement or a sentiment for any of our viewers whose lives have been touched by this type of child abuse?”

The artist was caught off guard. “What?” he said. “Pardon?”

The female anchor, looking back and forth between the artist and the camera, said, “We understand that your co-author’s conviction involved several counts of sexual abuse of a minor, and—not to make this about his crime, because that’s not what this is
about—we were hoping you might offer a comment to victims of child abuse in light of this promising and truly hopeful work you’ve done with Mr. Richardson.”

“I…” said the artist, a stuttering mess.

“Were you—” said the male anchor.

“No,” said the artist. “I mean yes. I was unaware of the exact nature of Vern’s crime.” His words sounded like they belonged in a court room, not on a bright red couch with a coffee table. Apparently in all the artist’s and Vern’s discussions about Vern’s vision for the book, the reason for Vern’s imprisonment all those years ago never came to light.

The news anchors looked at each other. The silence on the television became the silence in the Sad Kitchen.

The artist said nothing, so the female anchor took it upon herself to attempt to save all three of their dignities with a very false chuckle and some very pointless words:

“It certainly wasn’t our intention to catch you off guard—”

“It never came up,” the artist cut her off. “I can honestly say it never came up between Vern and me. His crime or his sentence. Maybe it didn’t interest me, I don’t know. I would like to say it doesn’t matter, I would like to say this changes nothing, but I think you can tell from my voice that that’s not the case. I think you can hear in my voice that it changes everything.”

The lady news anchor was nodding her head very seriously and then when she realized another silence had befallen the scene and that she was expected to fill it, she looked genuinely fearful, terrified for a moment. “We will move on then…” she started to say.
“I don’t have a statement prepared at this time,” the artist cut her off again with disgust in his voice. “This isn’t something I’m prepared to speak about just now.”

“Then how about we change directions for the time being and ask you to speak a little about your influences?” said the female anchor. “What were some of your favorite children’s books growing up?”

The interview went on, but I’m sure it was only an attempt to save face.

As I turned from the television to check on Vern, the realization that he would already be gone took the wind right out of me. Indeed, Vern had left the Sad Kitchen. And the terrible suction of his departure was the aggregate of all the times he ever departed the Sad Kitchen. I should have gone after him that night, but I didn’t. There was no wind in me, and there was no atmosphere for me to move through. Oh sure, a few folks went after him, but it didn’t matter. He wasn’t coming back.

I should have gone after him anyway, just for the sake of going after him, just for the sake of failing to bring him home.

The next morning we cleaned up the Sad Kitchen and didn’t talk. Soon Jack’s Diner would be open but there were thousands of soggy puffs of kettle corn adhered to the ground and we needed to clean them up.

It was Jack, Helen, a few other folks, and I who hung around to clean the kettle corn. Karen hung around, I guess since it was her kettle corn.

My back hurt.
I kept having to stand up and wipe drips of tears from my nose. When I stood up, I could hear the hum of the neon sign behind the counter. It was a deep hum and it felt like Satan himself was humming in my ear and massaging my shoulders every time I stood up to ease the pain. So I bent back over and the hum vanished but the pain started back up and once again the tears started to drip from my nose.

Meanwhile somewhere in a skyscraper, an article was being drafted. We could see the top third of The Dispatch building from the alleyway just outside the Sad Kitchen. At that moment, as we were chiseling smushed kettle corn, a reporter from The Dispatch was drafting an article to be dispatched about Vernon Richardson, and about the fact that he had only spent one year in prison for raping a minor. It was going to be referred to as a developing story.

They were going to start looking into his early parole, and into the leniency of our justice system in general. That was all being written somewhere up in the sky while we were scraping kettle corn off the absolute floor of the earth: the floor of the Sad Kitchen. The article would be published in two days’ time.

What was Helen’s condition that morning? I can’t remember what we spoke about on the drive home after scraping the kettle corn. I can’t begin to imagine or to conjure anything useful from the dregs of my memory.

As usual, the more complicated the situation became, the more at-peace Helen seemed to grow, and the simpler our conversations became, so probably our discussion that morning was something very small.
“Should we stop somewhere and get you a hot breakfast, Bubba?” she probably said.

“How about some kettle corn?” I probably joked.

She probably laughed sweetly.

As our situation became trickier and trickier, I was beginning to understand the value of a children’s book. But no matter how hard I try, this book will never be a children’s book. We went home and I slept all day while Helen prayed. Here I am trying to tell this story from my sleep and Helen is busy in prayer.

The very next night was when the police started monitoring the Sad Kitchen around the clock, open-to-close, with an on-duty officer in-house at all times. Needless to say, folks were very nervous and skittish and, pouring coffee into folk’s mugs, I started to feel the need to talk with my eyes instead of my mouth, which is contradictory to everything the Sad Kitchen stood for. Talking with my eyes was something I learned in prison when times were tense.

Something awful occurred: As he typically does when there is tension in the air, Mike went on one of his Tourettes outbursts: “I punched her in the gut,” and so on and so forth.

Immediately the in-house police officer sat up so fast that his upward momentum launched his stool into the wall behind him. Our stools were secured to the ground, so this didn’t actually happen, but it’s how I remember the event. Because this next part did happen: he put Mike’s face flat on the countertop and handcuffed him. Mike was shoved
out of the Sad Kitchen, still having a fit. But his fit was a Tourettes-type fit where all he could say in protest was: “I put my knee to her gut! All of this in front of my little girl!”

In my memory now, as Mike is being dragged out of the Sad Kitchen, the door opens and I can hear cheering from the outside. Was this cheering real or is it the result of what, now, in hindsight, I know is coming?

*Slap!* said the newspaper when Jack dropped it on the counter before me at the beginning of the day’s seventh hour.

The Dispatch article had broken: “Awkward moment prompts ‘good, hard look in the mirror of our justice system.’” The couch interview from Channel 4 was, of course, the “Awkward moment.” The headline classified itself as a developing “story,” the gist of which was trying to shed some light on the balance between early parole and justice. It involved a lot of statistics on various things: the overcrowding of prisons, the percentage of sentences that are served in-full, the number of repeat offenders relative to the length of sentence relative to percentage of sentence served relative to the nature of the crime (violent or non-violent) relative to gender of the offender relative to race of the offender relative to race of the victim relative to eye color relative to favorite type of music relative to whether the offender likes spicy food relative to whether he prefers boxers or briefs relative to blah blah blah blah blah. Pardon that little bit of sarcasm. My point is, Vern’s situation was used strictly as a case study, a can-opener for a can of worms, where worms = statistical facts, figuratively speaking.
And speaking of “figuratively speaking,” when the headline said it was taking a “look in the mirror,” it actually meant it was going to “peer down its nose through the window of a skyscraper, judgmentally,” because the real kicker is that the article used all of those wormy statistics to arrive at a very simple conclusion: Justice for violent criminals was not being served in our state prisons and our parole criteria were flawed.

In the blurb, the Sad Kitchen was referred to, but only in name, not location, and it was called an underground “Soup Kitchen,” located in Jack’s Diner, which was obviously a little misleading. But I suppose we should have enjoyed the false identity while we had the chance, because it was about to get even falser.

On the drive home that morning, instead of saying things like, “Does Jack think it’s about time to shut down the Sad Kitchen?” or “Is Jack’s business going to suffer because of all this?” I said things like, “I think I made the coffee a little weak last night.”

“Oh yeah?” said Helen.

“I could see the bottom of the cup when I poured it.”

“How’s your back, Bubba?”

“I think it’s a little better. Just keep praying, lady.”

At home that morning I couldn’t sleep so I went out to the parking lot to change the oil in our automobile while my wife was inside in prayer. A sedan with a The Dispatch emblem drove up and a young woman in a tan coat and heels got out of the sedan and looked at our little complex.

“Oh, hello sir, do you know a woman by the name of Helen Sampson?”
“Who is asking?” I said, being sure to keep my focus on the dipstick I was holding so The Dispatch lady would know that she did not merit my full attention.

She introduced herself as Melinda from The Dispatch while I pretended to study the dipstick even closer.

After she was done, I stood from under the hood of our automobile and let it slam shut like rifle fire. *BANG!* The Melinda lady jumped. I said, “Nope. No Helen Sampsons here.”

“I’ll just go knock on the door,” she said, quickly gathering her dignity.

“Helen is my wife. She’s not home.”

“Bubba,” said Helen. She had come out on our front balcony in plain sight.

“Yeah.”

“What’s going on down there? I heard a bang.”

“This lady was looking for you. I was just explaining to her that you aren’t home.”

“Do you think she bought it?”

“Did you buy it?” I asked Melinda.

She smirked, very prim. Right away I could tell this was a woman I would have referred to as a “tough cookie” in the days before I met Helen and she told me to stop using that terminology.

“I don’t think she bought it,” I said.

“What was that awful bang I heard?” said Helen.

“She tried to shoot me,” I said.
“Well come on inside, Sweetheart, and we can work on your aim,” said Helen heading inside.

In our little kitchen it was my job to prepare the coffee while Melinda and Helen sat at our kitchen table and started talking. Before the coffee was even brewed, they had a secret rapport that I couldn’t keep up with. Their discussion seemed to be taking place on two different plains or levels, only one of which I could understand. The other one was extremely complex and took place well-above my head.

“Thank you for welcoming me into your home, Mrs. Sampson,” said Melinda.

“You’re welcome, deary. You can call me Helen.”

“I’m hoping to interview you for an editorial I plan to write about the Sad Kitchen.”

“Well that’s fine. I will answer as clearly as I can.”

Meanwhile, I set down their coffee and stood prepared to defend my wife’s honor, but I’m afraid I wound up watching them talk as if I were watching a tennis match, or ping pong.

“What is the Sad Kitchen?” said Melinda.

“It is a place for folks who can’t live with themselves. We try to love them when they can’t love themselves.”

“How do people hear about it?”

“Folks hear about it and they come.”
“In light of the recent arrests, do you ever worry that dangerous criminals will think of it as some sort of haven or sanctuary where they can repay their debt to society in lieu of going to prison? A sort of validation scheme that actually exacerbates crime?”

How would that word *exacerbate* go over in a children’s book?

“I don’t worry about that, no,” said Helen. Everything my wife said I imagined reading in tomorrow’s newspaper.

“Did you welcome The Doctor into the Sad Kitchen?”

“Dominic came to us on the night of his arrest, but I didn’t get to speak with him.”

“He had never come before that night?”

“Not to my knowledge. I never got the chance to meet Dominic.”

“Would you have welcomed Dr. Spencer into the Sad Kitchen if you had met him?”

“Of course. All are welcome. I would have loved to talk with Dominic.”

Melinda’s face seemed to twitch. “Mrs. Sampson, since you’ve sort of made sympathy and forgiveness your claim to fame, tell me, do you believe that Dominic Spencer should go to prison for his crimes?”

“I wish I could give a nice, sexy snippet for your story, but my job is to love. I apologize if that is bland.”

“It isn’t bland, but it seems a little easy and sentimental, Mrs. Sampson. It’s a cop-out and it completely ignores justice.”

“I really wish I could give you a sexy snippet. I sure do.”
Now Melinda studied my wife’s face with much diligence. She looked like she wanted to reach out and touch it. “Mrs. Sampson,” said Melinda, “what would you say in response to the claim that you are nothing more than a sociopathic, masochistic monomaniac, or some kind of—of—of recreant agent provocateur camouflaged by a grandmotherly facade?”

A small laugh from my Helen. “I would ask to borrow a thesaurus,” she said and then, for some reason, both faces turned toward me, as if I would produce a thesaurus. But I had forgotten that I wasn’t a just a fly on the wall. I must have looked quite stupid and unprepared, because they looked back to one another, and now came a sneaky little twist by Melinda, switching from one headline to another. “Last question for the time being, Mrs. Sampson. I promise this will be my final attempt to get you to say something you’ll regret. Ready? Do you think one year is enough prison time for raping a young girl?”

“It’s difficult for me to imagine spending even one night in prison away from my Bubba,” said my sweet Helen. “A year sounds just awful.”

Then the duality of their special rapport finally and completely exposed itself as Melinda took a deep breath and said, “I’m sorry for asking you these tough questions so rapid fire. It’s my job.”

What a shocking comment. I nearly sat down on the floor.

“That’s okay,” said Helen.

“When you read the editorial in tomorrow’s paper, my sympathy won’t come through. But it’s there. I promise.”

“I’ve been warned,” said Helen.
“The truth is,” said Melinda, “that I have heard about the Sad Kitchen. Oh sure, I’ve heard about it through the various professional channels that led me here, but I’ve also heard about it the way folks hear about it.”

“What did you think?” said Helen.

“I thought it sounded intriguing and I would like to come by sometime just to see how it works.”

“I hope you will.”

“Let me finish. I thought it sounded intriguing and I would like to come by sometime, but it won’t sound that way when you read the editorial I’m going to write.”

Now Melinda, the young woman I had mistaken for a tough-cookie, began to snuffle just a little. “I don’t know what to tell you. I’m sorry. It is unbelievably complicated. This life is just booby-trapped. You sound like such a good, kind lady, but if I’m being honest I’ve already written the editorial. And if I’m being perfectly honest, the editorial has already been signed-off on by my boss. He just needed me to come here to fill in a few quotes.”

“A few snippets,” said Helen, looking pleased with herself.

“Oh, what am I doing?” lamented poor Melinda. “Why am I saying these things? Ugh, this is so awful.”

I wanted to scream because I didn’t understand, and I was terrified. But I was too dumbfounded to rediscover the use of my tongue. It was the most complicated conversation I had ever witnessed. Soon Helen was ushering the young woman to the door. She had her hand on the young woman’s back and my tongue lay stupidly inside the hole in my face.
I tried to pick up their coffee mugs, but my hands were too shaky. Would you believe me if I said my wife has never seemed more powerful than she did that morning talking to the reporter in our kitchenette? *Powerful* is the only word to describe it, and the reason I was incapable of speech that morning, the reason my hands were so shaky, was out of sheer terror of this woman whom I love.

When she returned after having seen the young woman off, I had the urge to say, “Why do you refuse to defend yourself, you bat-shit, crazy-assed woman? Do you not realize how damn, flat-out cowardly that was?” but my tongue gave me the power to say, “Are you ever afraid of anything?” and she said, “Oh gosh, all the time, Bubba,” while she picked up the coffee mugs with the steadiest hands.

Chapter 5

The next morning Melinda’s editorial was published with the headline, “A Haven for Dangerous Criminals.”

There was a picture of Jack’s Diner (during the daytime) and then the mug shots of Dominic Spencer and Vern and Kurt and Janice and Mike.

“Do you want me to read it to you?” I said on the car ride home.

“That’s okay. I think I’d rather not know.”

The editorial called Helen a “compulsive and indiscriminate sympathizer, a monomaniac, and a provocateur who fails to think strategically and neglects to understand that a failure to account for human failings is, in and of itself, a deep moral failure.”
Another bit said: “To believe that blind kindness is a fundamentally sound response to any situation is, in and of itself, nothing less than the gravest form of unkindness, all the more dangerous for the fact that it is masked behind a charismatic smile.”

Another: “What is at stake here is the difference between evil and corruption. Evil is easy to understand, even by its agent. If you were to ask, for example, the Doctor [Dominic Spencer] himself, whether sodomizing anesthetized patients is evil, he would agree: yes, it is evil. But if you were to ask Mrs. Sampson, in a similar vein, whether harboring and comforting these degraded categories of criminals is evil, she would deny it as such. This is corruption. And the difference between evil and corruption is of ultimate significance here. If you, dear reader, don’t believe me, then consider the extreme. If you were to ask Hitler in 1940 whether his movement to exterminate entire races was ‘evil,’ he would have said, without the bat of a lash, no. Corruption is more dangerous than evil because it is willfully blind and blindly charismatic. Mrs. Sampson is a charismatic woman, but she is willfully blind, and her blindness is emblematic of—dare I say central to?—a greater problem of leniency in our society toward criminals, especially criminals of a violent inclination.

“I will leave you with this: if you still disagree with the power of corruption, consider the extreme nature of my words here. The fundamental power of corruption is founded in its ability to make anything that contradicts it seem extreme or over-reactionary or whiney or, more broadly, uncharismatic. I urge you, fellow citizens, to consider what is at stake here. We have a blind spot. We are corrupt. Rape and thievery and violence are tolerated in this society. Corruption has the power to normalize evil, and
evil has been normalized. Let us be awakened. Let us grind our teeth against the smiling face of corruption. Let us be the resistance.”

I didn’t know what to say, and sometimes I still don’t. The whole time I read the darn thing, I believed the emotion I was experiencing was pure anger. But then a tear dripped from my nose. It was more complicated than anger, I guess. The dot of my tear smeared the newsprint to gray. Helen patted my thigh and drove.

The protests began that night. When Helen and I arrived downtown, they had already set up a medium-sized spotlight under and around which there was a healthy smattering of about 50 people, 70. Also there were some police officers with crossed arms hanging around, and two news vans. The signs the protestors held ranged from things like, “You can’t hide anymore!” to “This city protects rapists!” to “Don’t legalize rape!” to “Castrate rapists!”

Helen and I sat in the car in the alley at a distance and watched for quite a while, silent. I didn’t dare say anything because, whatever I would have said, it would have been foul. But Helen must have known what was going on inside my head because she said, “It’s only some folks with strong feelings.”

“What should we do?”

“Our job is to love—”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean what should we do right now? I’m talking about practicalities here, Helen. Poor Jack is in there right now closing Jack’s Diner for the
evening. Soon he will have to leave and walk through that mess. Anything could happen.”

“I’ll go talk to Jack.”

“No,” I said. “Let me go. I don’t want those news vans seeing your face.”

“Do I look that bad, Bubba?” my wife said checking her face in the rearview mirror.

I had to give this comment some rigorous contemplation before it even registered in my brain: a joke. Helen had made a little joke.

I’m all for using humor to declaw a ferocious situation, but in God’s name, this moment was too awful even for the power of humor. An anger seized me and grew tighter and tighter until, at the very moment before a vein somewhere deep inside me was going to rupture, a tranquil realization came over me: this woman has lost her God-forsaken mind. Based on her performance last night during the interview in the kitchenette, and now this comedy act, it was the simplest conclusion. I was dealing with a veritable lunatic.

It had never dawned on me until this moment, but now it was totalizing: people do lose their minds in stressful situations as a sort of defense mechanism. It does happen, especially to folks our age. And now it was happening to my Helen.

I needed to rub my temples for a while. “Do me a favor, Helen” I said after a nice massage of my frontal lobe. “Can you please say one thing to prove to me that you haven’t gone totally looney? Any old thing will do, as long as it sounds like something a sane person would say. Even if you would just imitate a sane person for a moment, it would be helpful. I need this. I’m not being a jokester, right now. I just need to hear one
logical, rational thing come out of your face. Something that I can use to draw even a faint comparison between my wife and a relatively grounded individual.”

After she studied my eyes for a while her lips seemed to resign into a smile, as if it were her natural condition. “I’m angry too, Bubba,” she said and patted my thigh.

“The angry and afraid.”

My wife parked the car and together we made way toward the Sad Kitchen. Going past the protestors, we must have looked like folks trying to escape a cold gust of wind. We turned up our collars and hunched into ourselves and scurried along. Only once did I look the protestors in the face and now, as I try to remember what I saw, I cannot recall any particulars. Instead my memory produces a single snapshot of a solitary creature whose face is warped with torment, as if it were dealing with a painful and unruly bowel movement.

Then we stepped inside the womb that is the Sad Kitchen and all was quiet and very warm.

The moment Helen crosses the threshold in the evening, Jack’s Diner completes its nightly transition to the Sad Kitchen.

That night the Sad Kitchen was entirely empty but for one soul: at the counter, there sat Jack himself, hunched over a can of light beer.

“Well here we are,” said Jack.
“I’m so sorry, Jack,” said my wife.

“Would you all like a light beer?” said Jack.

“This is my fault,” said Helen.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll take a light beer.”

“Good!” said Jack and slapped the counter a little bit and Helen jumped in her shoes. Jack went around the counter and got a beer out of a grocery bag and cracked it and handed it over.

“Are you sure you won’t join us?” he said to Helen.

“Why don’t you have one?” I said, feeling suddenly good, like a young man.

“Well, maybe one,” said Helen.

Jack grabbed her a light beer and told her to have a seat at the counter. “You sit there and have yourself a light beer and quit that yammering about being sorry. It toxifies the atmosphere.”

I don’t know whether I’d ever seen Helen take a seat at the counter of the Sad Kitchen. It looked very unnatural. “Now,” said Jack, “tell me you’re not sorry before God packs his bag and starts limping off into eternity.”

I like Jack. Old Jack has always impressed me. I couldn’t help but feel that my display back in the car was partially to blame for Helen’s sudden self-doubt. Jack had a nice third-person perspective, and now he was using it to fix things. Helen took a cute, tentative nip of her beer. “Well I’m just sorry how things have turned out for you, Jack.”

“Nope, nope, nope!” said Jack. “I’m a part of this. You take another sip of that light beer and tell me how it really is.”

Helen took a good nip. “Fine then. I’m not sorry, darn you,” she said and grinned.
“Good!” said Jack. “Again!”

She took another good nip and then hiccupped. “I’m not sorry, darn you!”

“Again!” said both Jack and me now.

Helen raised her light beer, “I’m not sorry, boys!”

We sat at the counter, three in a row with Helen in the middle, having our light beers and waiting, although it wasn’t clear specifically what we were waiting for. It could have been said that we were just buying time while Jack gathered the courage to brave the protestors. It could also have been said that we were waiting for our first customer of the night to arrive, but because of the situation outside no customers were forthcoming.

In truth I think we were waiting for something more complicated than we could have put our collective finger on, and it went unspoken because it would have been too complicated to speak it. Because what happened as we “waited,” was that, by and by, Helen and Jack began to reminisce about their dead son, the shortstop, while I sat and learned fascinating information.

First, Jack compared his situation (being stuck in the Sad Kitchen and not wanting to face the hard reality waiting outside the door in the alleyway) with a little anecdote about their son from when he was just a toddler. “I remember one time I was showing him how to play with a toy truck in a sandbox somewhere or other, and all of a sudden the kid started trying to open the little, miniature door! ‘What are you doin, bud?’ I asked him real calm. ‘In!’ he said, ‘I want to get in!’ He wanted to get in the little truck! How do you explain to a human being that they can’t get inside of a toy truck that was no bigger than the palm of his hand? That kid must have cried for an hour!”
Jack’s story was some much-needed lightheartedness, but by far the most interesting tidbit of the conversation came a little later, from Helen.

“He came up with a theory one day,” said Helen after she and Jack had been reminiscing for a good while. “He was a real thinker, that boy—he was like you that way, Bubba,” she continued, leaving me shocked and flattered and convinced that it was my duty and obligation to write this ridiculous book. “And one of his best theories of all times was that folks have a God-given right to believe that anything and everything is a miracle. I still remember when he came home from school—he must have been in fourth or fifth grade, back when I was still his favorite person in the world—and he came home one day and told me that he had been getting some grief from his friends for his new theory. I asked him what the theory was, and he told it to me, plain as can be: ‘Everything is a miracle, Mamma.’ But if you could have seen the wonder in the eyes of this child that I had already come to believe was a miracle incarnate, you would see that there was no good reason to doubt him. All of reality seemed to wink at me and for a small moment he no longer bothered to hide what he truly was: a child of God. Oh, I sound so silly. Let me try to put it another way. It was as if a set of blinds were quickly pulled—a set of blinds that I didn’t even know were there in the first place!—and all of a sudden I could see beyond my son’s eyes and into a big, beautiful new place. It felt like a very beautiful place, Bubba,” she said, suddenly turning to me, although her eyes were still there and were very serious. They hadn’t been opened like blinds.

“Anywho,” she said, “that was the only time we ever spoke of it—his special little theory. For all I know, he had forgotten all about it by the time of his death, but it sure stuck with me. I think in his own special way he was preparing me for his death to come.
Of course, in those days, I was pretty lukewarm about things, but I just couldn’t forget that special little moment and I couldn’t shake that darn theory! It seems so simple now, but I was a single mother working at a dry cleaner and I guess I was always waiting for the universe to give me some type of a wink or a sad embrace or a friendly smile. After that, everyone and everything I saw, big or small, good or bad, no matter, I tried my damnedest to see it just that way: a miracle. Something to be thankful for. A wink or a sad embrace or a friendly smile from God. And to this day the only thing that ever prevents it is my own doggone cynicism. Now, that’s all I’ll say on the matter before I start sounding silly.”

I waited for either Jack or myself to say, “Silly just left the building and is skipping naked down Broad Street singing gospel hymns,” but, miraculously, neither of us did. Instead, we let Helen’s little anecdote stretch its achy limbs in the space of the Sad Kitchen, and it was very nice for a while, but, as these things go, I eventually felt the dull weight of my compulsive need to ask a question: the question that is really just a version of all questions that have ever been asked. All of a sudden I found my stupid, simple self face-to-face with eternity, hanging like a piece of twine between good and evil. How quickly that could happen! One moment I was listening to a little story, and the next thing I knew I was ready to challenge my wife and my God and even my very existence. Don’t ask it, don’t ask it, don’t ask it, I was telling myself, very urgent.

I was able to resist, but it didn’t matter. The special moment was dead.
The question, of course, was going to be: “Why would God let your son be brutally murdered at such a young age? How is that a miracle, you crazy, crazy, bat-brained woman?”

It must have been a few hours later—around 9 or 10 p.m.—that we heard a sudden yelping, moaning sound behind us. We all three turned. It hadn’t actually been a yelp, of course, but only the front door opening and delivering the sound of the protestors outside. Jack, Helen, and I had been reminiscing for so long that we had forgotten that the door existed. Then the door shut against the sound of the protestors and the womb of silence once again held us, but now we were four instead of three.

Standing just inside the door was Melinda, the young woman who had come to our apartment, sat in our kitchenette, sipped our coffee, and then published the awful editorial about my wife. When I saw her standing there, I said to myself, Right, this makes perfect sense, but I couldn’t decipher whether I was being sarcastic with myself or honest-to-God.

“I didn’t come for a meal and a ticket,” she said. “I just came to see how this place works.”

“Like any good reporter would,” said my wife, smiling at the young woman who looked lost. Little did any of us know, Melinda hadn’t just stepped over the threshold of our front door, but she had also stepped over a threshold of her life and into a vast unknown. It’s no wonder the poor girl looked lost and alone.

My wife went and greeted Melinda and brought her into the Sad Kitchen and introduced her to Jack. I watched Jack’s face perform some impressive acrobatics as he
came first to the realization that this was the woman who had written the libelous drivel of an editorial and, second, that he was going to have to be welcoming and kind to the young woman because Helen wouldn’t tolerate anything less.

Don’t worry, Jack, I was right there with you, pal. I was positively teeming with the most creative array of spiteful comments. But “Aren’t we glad to see you,” is what came out of my mouth.

“Bubba why don’t you go put on some coffee for Melinda here?” said Helen.

“None for me, thank you,” said Melinda.

“She doesn’t want any,” I said to Helen.

“Won’t you put on some coffee, Bubba? A nice big, fresh pot.”

“Who the heck for?” I tried to say politely.

“Me,” said Helen. “Do it for me.”

“You’re going to drink an entire pot of coffee on your own?” I said.

“Yes,” said Helen, quite snooty.

Helen has a way of making you feel like an ornery teenager if you argue with her.

I decided to shut up and make a pot of coffee before my dignity was gone in front of Melinda.

“Let me show you around,” said Helen to Melinda.

“As you can see we are not very busy this evening,” said Jack, a little sarcastic, and I’m afraid I scoffed along with him.

“Ignore them,” said Helen. “They get ornery when they are bored. Come on back and I’ll show you the kitchen.”
Melinda followed Helen through the bat-wing doors. Jack and I hung back and did not talk. This was normal for Jack and me. Whenever we were alone, we did not speak to one another. It was part of our manly rapport.

While the coffee was perking, I decided I would go check on Helen and Melinda. But when I approached the bat-wing door, a tender silence stayed me. Against this silence, as if to check for a heartbeat, I placed my ear.

“You terrify me, Miss Helen,” said Melinda.

“It must be my purple turtleneck,” said my wife.

“Please don’t be coy right now. Please don’t. I don’t understand what’s going on and I’m terrified by you and everything you stand for. Frankly, I don’t understand why I respect you at all. And I don’t understand why I’m here right now. Sure, you are kind and sweet in person, but when I think about the bigger picture, you strike me as insincere and self-righteous and evil and brainwashed and a little creepy, too. On paper, I should hate you.”

“You already did hate me on paper,” said my wife.

“You delude evil people into believing that they are good, but you trick perfectly good people into hating themselves. Why do I hate myself right now? Tell me, Miss Helen. Please, I need to understand. Please, just explain it to me so I can understand what I’m dealing with.”

“I’m not hiding anything. Everything you see is just how it is.”

“Don’t say that. That is infuriating and a cop-out and you know it! Now, explain it to me!”
“Well, let me see here,” said my wife, bumbling a little. “Why don’t you try this on? I’m afraid this is the only explanation there is.”

Unable to help myself, I peeked over the bat-wing doors and glimpsed my wife handing Melinda one of our aprons. Melinda was sitting on the stove range with her face in her hands in the shape of a person totally distraught. I tried to get a better view—to see whether Melinda would take the apron—but in my attempt, I stumbled into the bat-wing doors. Helen said, “Hi Bubba.”

“Uh,” I stammered. “The coffee is perking.”

“Thanks Bubba. We will be out in a few minutes.”

I turned and went back to my not-conversation with Jack. We had some important things to not talk about.

A few minutes later, Helen came through the bat-wing doors followed by Melinda. Melinda was wearing the apron Helen had given her. I tried to determine whether the situation called for a sly comment such as, “Ain’t exactly a ballgown, is it?” or “That sure goes nice with your manicure,” but decided to swallow my wit. Helen pulled a roller cart out of a closet and instructed me to place the 50-cupper coffee urn on the cart. A scheme was being set in motion: Helen placed a sleeve of paper cups on the roller cart and gave Melinda authority over all of it. Her task was to bring the cart outside to provide coffee for all the folks protesting in the alleyway.

While Melinda went outside, Helen smiled primly at Jack and me and then headed back into the kitchen. Jack’s and my options were few: we sat looking at our hands.
After a while Melinda came back inside and Helen made her a plate of eggs and hash browns and she sat at the end of the counter poking at it and moving it around.

“Did they enjoy the coffee?” called Jack down the counter in a cruel voice.

“Well anyway, they are drinking it,” said Melinda to her plate of food.

“Good,” said Helen.

“I told them that I was here doing some investigative work,” said Melinda. “I told them they have every right to be angry.”

“That’s okay,” said Helen. “In a lot of ways that’s all truthful. Now, just enjoy that plate of food.”

The next night the size of the protestors was cut in half. But the most passionate folks were still out there hollering away, and we didn’t have any Sad Kitchen customers. Melinda arrived around 10 p.m.

Jack had had enough. Upon the sight of Melinda for the second consecutive night, old Jack drummed his fingers on the counter, got up, and left the Sad Kitchen. He was ready to brave the protestors, I guess. “Bubba, Helen, I will see you tomorrow.”

I almost followed Jack out. In fact, half of me did follow him—the angry part. I was very pleasant with Melinda the rest of the night. Maybe my hostile feelings toward Melinda had all been part of a put-on to impress Jack. Who knows? “You just let me know if you need more coffee out there,” I said to Melinda with the voice of a peace offering.

“You just let me know if you ever need a proper lesson in how to change the oil in your automobile,” she said, completely rounding out her personality in a wonderful way.
Oh, I said to myself, smiling like an old fool I’m sure, this is the real Melinda. Now I get it.

My wife has always given off a slight rosy odor when she sleeps. Maybe it is a scent of secret perfume or maybe it is something womanly which I should not be speculating over in a place like this. When I lift the covers of our bed, the smell fills my nostrils and I start to consider new aspects of my life. One day during the time of the protests, my wife and I were lying in bed and the smell went quickly to my thoughts and I had no choice but to wake up my wife. “Helen…psst…hey lady.”

“Hi Bubba.”

“Helen, I just realized something. I’ve never really believed Vern’s story. The one about the tree growing up through his prison cell.”

“Well that’s okay,” she said, groggy and sleepy. “It’s only natural to be a little suspicious.”

“Do you believe his story, Helen?”

“What’s this about all of a sudden, Bubba?” She was coming awake and the rosy odor was gone.

“All of a sudden it’s got me a little guilty. It’s not so much that I’m suspicious, because like you said it’s only natural, but it’s the reason I’m suspicious that has me bothered. I’m only now realizing the reason.”

She rolled over and looked me in the eye so that I was nervous. “Well, what’s the reason?”
“I think the reason I’m so suspicious is that I have it in my mind that a miraculous thing like that wouldn’t happen to a person like Vern. If it were someone else—say an innocent man—I’d have no trouble believing it. But since it’s Vern…geesh, now that I say it aloud it sounds just awful.”

“Might be you should say a little prayer,” she said rubbing my shoulder. “Might be you just need to sort through some doubts, Bubba.”

So I attempted a little prayer, but I was soon asleep.

The next night the protestors were only a tenth as large as the first night. I guess the others had lives and schedules that were not conducive to nocturnal protesting, and thus they were starting to get worn down after three nights. Some Sad Kitchen customers were returning, and Jack seemed to be in a better mood about Melinda’s presence. Fireman John Rogers was there that night, and Valli, and a few of the newer and unnamed (unfortunately) folks who joined us later on with the 250-batch of Vern’s book.

In total there were fewer than ten protestors left outside, and Helen sent Melinda to invite them inside to eat with our smattering of customers. While Melinda was out in the alley delivering our peace offering, we waited inside, quite eager. I must admit that I was beginning to feel a little sentimental. An image of impending peace and warmth and coziness flooded me with a giddiness, and out gushed this statement: “That Melinda is a good kid,” I said to my wife.

“We’re lucky to have her, Bubba,” said my wife, quiet and composed. “We’re getting older and older.”
“I don’t know, I’m feeling renewed! My back doesn’t hurt anymore! This peace offering is going to work wonders! We’re going to get through this just fine. God is on our side.”

Helen gave a small laugh.

“Are you not feeling renewed, Helen?”

“I’m feeling okay,” said Helen, and before I could pick at her any further, Melinda reentered the Sad Kitchen with three protestors.

“Welcome,” said my wife. “Where are all the others?” she said.

One of the protestors spat a good-sized wad on the floor. “This is phony!” he said to my wife and Melinda.

“This is just a token peace offering to get us out of your goddamn hair! What a racket!” said another.

“You are essentially attacking us with your passive-aggressive moral superiority,” said a third. “It’s just degrading!” He looked around for something to punch but there was nothing very convenient.

Now Fireman John Rogers—the man who never speaks—stood from his booth and walked over to the protestors. “THIS IS A FRIENDLY PLACE!” he screamed right in the third protestor’s face, lodging everyone’s breath in their throats like a ping pong ball.

At this, Valli was so spooked she became hysterical. She began to scream unintelligible expletives at my wife and they were horrible. The sound she delivered was prehistoric, like a pterodactyl screaming as it gets hit by a bolt of primeval lightning. I had been heading over to restrain Fireman John Rogers who was scowling and bulking at
the protestors, but now I redirected my attention to Valli. I restrained her from behind, full nelson, and simultaneously attempted to cover her mouth out of fear that her voice itself would pierce my poor wife’s old and tired heart. I felt like an orderly in a psychiatric unit.

While I restrained Valli, I noticed my wife’s face. In my wife’s face I saw fear.

Jack and a few others went over to try to defuse Fireman John Rogers. Meanwhile, Melinda tried to wedge herself between John Rogers and the protestors. In my arms, Valli’s body seemed to be filled with lightning, and she screamed and screamed. The protestors went silent as the situation begged to be gawked at. Welcome, friends, to the epitome of the Sad Kitchen.

On the drive home that morning, my wife’s face was still fearful, as if it had been petrified by Valli’s prehistoric screaming. I sat there trying to figure out what to say. But my wife spoke first. Of all the things in the world that could have come out of her fearful face in a situation like that, the thing that came out of it was this: “I’ve been having the runs, Bubba.”

What was I supposed to do with that? “Might be you’ve got a little bug,” I said, feeling exhausted.

“I’ve been having them for a while now. Well, a long while, actually. And it’s a little bloody, too.”

“Oh,” I probably said.
“I scheduled a doctor’s appointment for next week,” I think she said, and her casual tone-of-voice irritated me.

“Oh,” I probably said again. I’ll bet my face was now just as fearful as my wife’s.

Chapter 6

The protesters did not come anymore. They did not send us a letter to inform us that their protest was thereby concluded.

*Our protest is hereby concluded. Carry on.*

Nothing like that.

Many times I had assumed the Sad Kitchen was dead and buried. This was once again what I assumed after the escapades of John Rogers and Valli in front of the protestors.

But it was springtime now, and as surely as spring follows winter, as surely as the drunk man stumbles home and falls face-first and cross-eyed into his cold mattresses, we sustained. Slowly the regulars returned, and more and more new folks simply staggered in. Karen the lawyer, one of our earliest customers, was back with us. “Do you believe this?” I said one night filling her cup, sad, while every seat in the joint was filled. “I thought we were dead and buried.”

“Maybe we are dead and buried, Bubba,” she said smirking a sneaky lawyer smirk. “Maybe this is what dead and buried looks like.”

“Is that what passes for decent lawyer humor these days?”

“All I know is I used to think Purgatory would be set in a courtroom where we are all just a bunch of defendants. But God willing, it will be more like this place.”
“Alright, take it easy, lady.”

“Think about it, Bubba. Which would you rather be subjected to? In a courtroom, the truth is a matter of consensus, but in here, it’s just the opposite. In here, consensus is a matter of truth.”

“I’m going to need another cup of coffee, a calculator, and a telescope before I can go any further with this sort of talk.”

Karen laughed, sweet and sympathetic of my simple mind. By the end of that month we would have at least 120 customers per night.

It is possible that this was always just a story about a polyp in my wife’s large intestine, even from the very beginning. When I was rambling on about Vern’s children’s book, I could have been discussing the little polyp’s youth and development into an angry, malignant tumor. When I was discussing the terrible 11 o’clock news disaster, I could have been talking about all the metastases to her liver and lungs. This book was always growing further and further from childhood, and I won’t rule out the possibility that it did so in order to make room for words like colonoscopy and malignant and metastasis.

Watching her walk into the doctor’s office from the waiting room I wondered if she looked skinnier. But I lacked a frame of reference, which is to say I was incapable of seeing her as a person, was only capable of seeing my entire life. This reminds me of a fellow, Judson, on my ward in prison who had a little daughter with cancer of the blood. He told me one time that good health is a window, but sickness is a mirror. At the time I hadn’t a clue what old Judson was talking about. But it has stuck with me all these years.
When she came out of the doctor’s office, my wife’s face was just a cloudy image of her kneeling in prayer and it caused me to stand up. “What did they tell you?” I said.

“They said to eat a toast-based diet and that I need to have a colonoscopy.”

“I can help with the toast-based diet,” I said automatically. “But not the other.”

When Helen laughed, her face came back, and it occurred to me that I had made a joke.

“They said I’ll need someone to drive me to the colonoscopy,” said my wife on the drive home patting my thigh. “You can help with that too.”

“Are we going to go on pretending that I’m going to be useful in a situation like this?” I asked.

“Let’s don’t call it a situation. Let’s don’t call it a this, how about.”

“What should we call it? You seem to have all the answers. You tell me what to call it.”

“Let’s don’t call it an it, either,” she said, almost pleased with herself.

“Well then what the hell!” I said. “What the hell!”

“It just is,” she said, very coy.

I wasn’t sure whether we were arguing or renewing our marital vows. “Are you being prim with me, woman?” I said out of genuine curiosity, I think.

“Oh Bubba.”

If I give the impression that I gave a damn about anything other than my wife’s bowels those days, it is a false one. Her bowels composed the most extraordinary nightmare.
They were somewhere wet and haunted and yet warm and womblike for me to reside.
The terrible shifting and churning became a terrible opera in my head.

The newest rebirth of the Sad Kitchen was just something to fiddle with as we waited to have the colonoscopy and then afterward, once we knew.

Sometimes these days I would be doing my duties at the Sad Kitchen and it would occur to me to pat my eyes to see if my fingertips would come away with tears.

“Is your eye okay?” said some customer, any old customer.

“Is there something wrong with my eye?” I said.

“Hey, take it easy, bub. I was only asking because you keep touching it.”

“How about you let me worry about my eye and I’ll let you worry about yours.”

“Isn’t that from the Bible?” said another customer down the counter.

“That would make great sense because I pulled it right out of my ass. Sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“Bubba, what’s going on, bud?”

“Oh hell,” I said. That was just the way of things nowadays.

Melinda was wonderful nowadays because she became a Sad Kitchen rover who helped my wife with the cooking and helped me with the serving and the camaraderie. She was a very dynamic lady. Whether she discerned that something was awry with my wife’s large intestine, I do not know.

“Don’t you ever get tired, girly?” I said, knowing full well she wouldn’t like that word, girly.
“Why would I get tired? I am young and vivacious. You’re the old bag of bones with a bum back.”

“I’m not the one with a day job though.” I used a cruel voice to say day job.

“Eh. I quit that.”

“Say you did?”

“Well kind of,” she said, continuing to rove about her duties in order to prove that I didn’t deserve her full attention. “One of those protestors took a picture of me helping out around here and brought it to my boss as blackmail. My boss was going to fire me anyway. Or at least demote me.”

Wow. I thought. Whatever Helen’s got, this gal has it too. “Oh,” was probably my response.

“Now put those old bones back to work,” said Melinda.

She was a good kid, growing younger every night.

One day in bed my wife had told me all about Melinda’s initial consternation with the Sad Kitchen. In short, Melinda didn’t appreciate how Vern had become the focus of a story of which he was not the true center.

“What does she think is the true center?” I asked my wife.

“Izzy and her son,” said my wife.

“Oh,” I must have said.

“And you know what? She’s exactly right, too.”

“Well it was never our intention to make this a story about Vern.” I said. “It was never our intention to make this a story at all! It just happened that way—”

“Doesn’t matter, Bubba. It just doesn’t matter.”
“Okay,” I said, feeling a little scolded. “Well, what do we do about it?”

“Well, Melinda has taken it upon herself to try to reach out to Izzy. But it’s delicate.”

The magnitude of my wife’s small whispers gripped a ripcord around my ribs and yanked. “Is there anything I should be doing?”

“Prayer,” said my wife, rolling over in bed. “God is a gathering force, Bubba. Between His love and His mercy, He gathers us.”

I tried a little prayer, but my wife was soon asleep, and I was left alone inside the trembling darkness of her bowels.

As we were getting more and more customers per night, Karen the lawyer arrived early one evening to discuss something with my wife and me. Jack had just left for the night and Melinda was yet to arrive, so it was only the three of us in the Sad Kitchen.

Karen was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. I’d never seen her in anything but her two-piece lawyer’s suit and high heels. She seemed nervous.

“I didn’t know you owned regular human clothes,” I said a little sarcastically to Karen. “You look like the doggone salt of the earth.”

“What is it, hun?” said Helen to Karen and slapped the back of my head a little.

Karen swallowed. “Helen, Bubba, I would like to hereby devote the entirety of my time, talent, and treasure to the Sad Kitchen.”

“Karen, you’re one of our longest-lasting customers,” said my wife. “You don’t need to do anything more—”
“This is important,” said Karen. “We are growing and growing. You two could use some help around here and God knows the kind of financial imposition we are on poor Jack. I’m a single woman in my forties and I’m swimming in my own savings. Let me do this. Just let me.”

“What’s your end game here, woman?” I blurted. “You’ve got a job. You’ve got a life. Don’t do this. Who knows how much longer we are for this world.”

“The Sad Kitchen will never die,” said Karen, a little too sheepish even to meet our eyes. “No offense, but it’s bigger than the two of you. It’s bigger than any of us, than all of us put together. Can’t you see that it is sustained by its own failings, which are us?”

Helen gave Karen a good hug and they were weepy together. “Miss Helen, you feel thin! Are you doing okay, baby girl?”

Worse than ever, I needed to go sit down in a corner by myself.

That night, as if Karen were prophetic, the Sad Kitchen had, for the first time ever, a line of folks reaching out the door and curling into the alleyway where only a few weeks earlier the protestors had been. Karen became our greeter and coordinator and hostess. She looked happy and just-right in her sweatshirt and jeans, and the clipboard she held gave her as much authority as her two-piece suit ever had. Melinda looked happy too in her duty as rover. The bat-wing doors seemed to automatically open for her when she gave them a good hard look of determination.

I lost count at approximately 200 new faces that night. I wondered what Vern would think about all this. An overwhelmed feeling poured over me: for a brief moment I suddenly cared about everything again. Then I remembered my wife’s bowels and I cared
about nothing. How liberating. I poured some coffee and stared, poured some coffee and stared.

The night before the day of the colonoscopy was upon us. Over the course of the night, Helen was supposed to drink a gallon of special liquid that would “clear her out.” At times these days it felt like my true duty in all of this was to enact just the right amount of stupidity so that we could go on pretending a little longer that my wife wasn’t losing her dignity in front of my very eyes. Saying “Clear you out” was a very effective form of stupidity.

As we were about to leave for the night, Helen wore her winter coat (even though it was springtime) and she held her big gallon of liquid to her chest like a little girl. She looked just like a little girl.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Bubba?”

“No reason. Say, can we just pretend that I said, ‘Why don’t you take the night off from the Sad Kitchen,’ without me actually having to say it since I know you won’t hear me anyhow?”

She laughed and casually destroyed me. “Sure, Sweetheart.”

That night at the Sad Kitchen, a new development: the line out the door and into the alleyway was longer than ever and Karen came inside with her clipboard reporting that folks were offering to take tickets without even receiving a meal and some coffee in exchange. “They just want a ticket,” she told me.

“That defeats the whole purpose!” I exclaimed, easily exercised these days.
“But if they’re offering, shouldn’t we let them? The tickets are the whole point.”

I just shook my head. “I don’t know. Go ask my wife.”

But Karen came back a few minutes later. “Um, Bubba. I can’t find Helen.

Melinda says she hasn’t seen her in over twenty minutes.”

Then I remembered that tonight was Helen’s night to be cleared out.

There is a little restroom back in the kitchen and I knocked with one knuckle and put my cheek against it. “Helen, it’s Bubba.”

“Hi, Bubba,” came the small reply.

“Are you okay in there?”

No reply and no reply and then I heard the lock give.

“Do you want me to enter?”

“Come in, Bubba.”

This story has already gotten far enough from childhood, so I’ll just tell you what I found when I entered. My wife was on the toilet hugging her jug of liquid and some of her mess was on the floor and on her pants and it was bloody, and my wife was on the other side of a veil of tears.

“This is where we’re at, Bubba,” she said, and then disappeared behind her veil.

“Okay,” I said. “Alright.”

“But it’s okay, Bubba,” said my wife, veiled. “It will be alright.”

“I will go get some aprons so we can wrap you up and get you out of here.”

“You don’t need to do that. No, it’s going to be alright. No, you don’t need to do that,” said my wife, strangely at peace behind her veil. I didn’t trust this peacefulness about her.
Melinda found me as I searched for some extra aprons. “Is everything okay with Helen, Bubba?”

“I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Well, I’m not asking you to explain it, you goon…” she said, still lighthearted.

“NO!” I screamed at her face. “EVERYTHING IS NOT ALRIGHT WITH HELEN!”

“Let me help. Bubba, just let me.”

She followed me back to the bathroom.

“Oh you don’t need to be dealing with this, Sweetie,” Helen said to Melinda as I held up some aprons for my wife to use as a gown.

“Miss Helen,” said Melinda, astonished.

“It’s okay,” said Helen. “I’m alright.”

Melinda must have been able to decipher that Helen was in a state of shock because now she looked me in the eye and spoke to me as if Helen were not even present:

“I will clean this up. You can take her out. Let me worry about this.”

“It’s okay, Sweetie,” said my wife to Melinda from a different planet.

“I know, Miss Helen. I know.”

She was all wrapped up in aprons and with one arm I was attempting to usher her through the Sad Kitchen as inconspicuously as possible while holding her jug of liquid with my other. It worked for a while, until we got to the crowded doorway and then outside where the line of folks was waiting to enter. “Is that Miss Helen?” came some mutters.
And, “Hi, Miss Helen!”

“That’s her, alright!”

“Miss Helen, pray for me!”

“Miss Helen, you rock my world!”

My wife kept attempting to pull away from me to talk with these folks, but I had to usher her along. “We’ll be right back, damnit!” I lied over my shoulder.

“We’ll be right back!” my wife repeated, very eager to please.

We didn’t sleep that night because my wife was mostly in the bathroom and I was mostly staring at the darkness of our bedroom and by the morning my wife’s strange state of shock had worn off and she grew very quiet.

The moment seemed to require me to act like a husband, which is a concept that has always puzzled me. But I thought I’d figured it out when, as I drank a cup of coffee at our little table in the kitchenette and looked at her, I said, “Listen, Helen, you don’t need to be embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed about what, Bubba?”

“Well…you know…about the scene in the bathroom last evening.”

“Why would I be embarrassed? That was just me opening up to you. I was just showing you my insides.”

She intended this as a stroke of grotesque humor, but I didn’t let myself laugh. Instead, I studied her eyes. In her eyes, I discerned a challenge. From somewhere deep within, she had really meant what she said—she saw no reason to be embarrassed, and why had I even brought it up?
A horrifying realization unsteadied me in my chair. I was looking into the face of a fellow human being who had become completely shed of pride. For a quick moment it left me with an urge to pick something up—anything at all—my coffee mug—and hold it dear to me.

Helen and I minded our own business for the next several hours while I thought about my life. In that period of time I came to a conclusion as to why a person could hate this woman, my wife. Her existence was terribly inconvenient.

Over the course of the rest of the morning, I remained quiet. But in the car on the way to the colonoscopy, I said to Helen, “You’re awful quiet.”

“I’m all emptied out,” she said, and it took me my usual interval to realize she had made another joke, and that I had a decision to make about what kind of a man I was going to be for the duration of all this.

“Well I’m full of enough shit for the both of us,” I said.

We were quiet later that day, too, back at home after the colonoscopy, but it was a different version of quiet because by then we had a pretty good idea of the situation. “Are we supposed to speak in a situation like this?” I asked.

“I think I’m just too tired.”

“Well then go to sleep.”

“I’m scared for you, Bubba.”

“Don’t—”

“Bubba, I’m going to die.”

“C’mon, now, woman.”
“Tell me it’s okay if I die.”

“It’s okay if you die.”

“Thank you. You’re a nice man, you know that? I’m proud of you, Bubba.”

Instead of crying, which was one very serious option, I decided I would go sit on the couch and pray. But it didn’t work very well, so instead of praying (and instead of crying) a resolution occurred in my brain to write this ridiculous story. What exactly compelled me, I do not know.

Melinda swung by our apartment that evening on her way down to the Sad Kitchen. She softly knocked and I stepped outside and shut the door and we softly talked.

“Hello, Bubba. Is she okay?”

“She’s asleep,” I said, unsure whether this was true. “I don’t think we will make it to the Sad Kitchen tonight. You’ll have to make the tickets up yourself and forge her signature. I hereby give you permission. But no funny business, girly.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes. Talk to me like a fellow who isn’t just a total sad sack.”

“Are you capable of cooking your own dinner without causing a toxic explosion?”

“Thank you. What else do you have?”

“Well I guess you could always make yourself a cup of that mud that you call ‘coffee’.”

“What, you don’t like my coffee?”

“I’m sorry, Bubba. I like your coffee just fine.”

“Hey!”
“Your coffee is mud!”

“That’s better. Now you get out of here. Listen, I’ve decided to write a story.”

“Send my condolences to literature,” said Melinda. “What is it going to be about?”

“Just this. Just my wife. Just how she’s an angel. Folks need to know that people like her actually do exist, as inconvenient as that may be.”

Melinda made a soft face.

“What’s that face?” I said.

“Nothing. If I don’t have anything snarky to say, well then I just won’t say anything at all.”

“You get out of here. Just try not to burn that place down this evening.”

That night, as I was settling into bed next to my emptied-out wife, she shifted and then murmured. “Hello, Bubba.”

“Shhh,” I whispered, “Go back to sleep. Melinda stopped by. Go back to sleep.”

“What did she say?”

“The Sad Kitchen is in good hands for the night. Go back to sleep.”

“She’s a good kid.”

“Go back to sleep,” I whispered. “You need your rest. Listen, since I can’t get any decent prayer going, I’ve decided to write a story as a replacement for prayer. I shouldn’t be talking. You should be sleeping. Go to sleep. I’m sorry. But listen, this story will be a lot like prayer, but a little different, though. It’s going to be about the Sad Kitchen. But
it’s also going to be about you. You’re my wife and you’re going to be the center of this story.”

My wife was quiet for a long time, and I assumed she was asleep. *I’ll just have to tell her in the morning*, I thought. *I’ll just have to get her permission in the morning.* But the rosy scent that usually accompanies her sleep was not there and soon she murmured, “Okay, but you had better leave out this next part. I would hate to get your story all bloody and messy. Yes, Bubba, you had better leave out this next part.”

Next Part

So that’s why I must be very careful here. Strictly speaking, I do not have permission to include this next part. It is unlikely that my wife would haunt me from the grave (being the sweetheart that she is) but she could resort to some cruel practical jokes.

Suffice it to say that this part of the story has been dipped in my wife’s blood and smeared with plenty of her guts, and I’d like to wash my hands of it.

Sometimes these days my wife would be in the bedroom and I would be at the kitchen table writing this ridiculous story and she’d say, “Bubba!...Hey, Bubba!”—very urgent.

I would scurry in there to find her reclined in bed yet obviously restless and in a tizzy. “What is it?”

“Don’t stop going to mass, okay Bubba?” she would say.
Or, “If you ever find yourself missing me just go ahead and say some prayers to Our Lady, okay Bubba?”

Or, “That Melinda is a good kid, okay Bubba?”

“For God’s sake, I know she is. Is that what you called me in here for?”

“Bubba, I’m going to die.”

“No you’re not. You’re alright.”

“This wouldn’t bother me one bit if I knew it weren’t going to be such a hassle for you. You’ll be okay when I’m gone, right, Bubba?”

“You’re not going anywhere, woman. Quit it.”

“How’s your story coming.”

“It’s getting further and further from childhood.”

“Well, don’t put this part in there.”

“I won’t.”

She missed the Sad Kitchen. But we were no longer nocturnal critters, and it was not easy to visit a venue that is only open in the nighttime. Sure, Helen wanted to visit, but she was torn because she did NOT want to trouble folks, especially Jack.

“Bubba, don’t tell Jack.”

“Don’t you think Melinda has already told him?”

“Melinda is a good kid.”

“I know she is, damn it.”
“I’m looking forward to seeing my little boy. That’s one good thing about all this—I’ll get to see him very soon now. Any day now. I’ll bet he’s as big as you are, Bubba.”

This was how our conversations went—very scatterbrained. It got so that the things she said next had very little relation to what she had said before. “How’s your story coming, Bubba?”

“Vern is in some hot water in my story. The 11 o’clock news is about to come on.”

“How is old Vern doing?”

“In my story, you mean?”

“No!” she was suddenly excited.

“We haven’t seen old Vern in months. You know that, you crazy old woman.”

“Vern is a good man, Bubba.”

With the mention of Vern’s name, a fear which had been, until that day, quite unformulated for many months, finally hardened in my hard, hard head. Vern was dead, I feared, and his cause of death was suicide, I feared.

I went and sat in front of this story and thought about my life. I knew in my soul that the Sad Kitchen was a friendly place. Was that enough to change the fact that Vern was probably a dead man? I was suddenly assailed by visions of the unifying grace of the Sad Kitchen and I had no choice but to say: *Melinda is going to go find Izzy and doggone it I’m going to take it upon myself to go find Vern and bring him home! It’s all going to work out! It just has to! The end of my wife’s story is at stake here!*
It was nothing but a moment of weakness. I had a sick wife in the other room. It was sentimental and stupid of me, and I think I realized it even while it was happening, but I let my irrationality fuel me:

“Hey lady,” I peeked my head into the bedroom and said to my wife, whose eyes were closed but who wasn’t asleep because I couldn’t smell roses. “I am going to step out for a little bit. Is there anything I should bring home with me?”

“One hot fudge sundae.”

“Listen, Helen, whatever happened to the little girl, Izzy? Melinda was going to try to track her down very delicately.”

“Izzy?”

“Yes, Izzy. Vern’s…You know. Izzy. Are you just completely bat-brained? Sorry I don’t mean that. Izzy! Remember, Melinda was going to track her down very delicately?”

“Melinda is a good kid.”

“Listen, I’ll be back later this evening with one hot fudge sundae.”

“Bubba, I’m going to die soon.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. You’re alright, you crazy woman. You just need a good hot fudge sundae.”

“Mmmmmmmmm,” she said and cozied into a rosy-scented slumber.

I drove downtown. It was daytime. In the hollow parking garage, I shut the door on my automobile, and then it echoed several times overhead like the doors of phantom automobiles.
Here I was, downtown in the daytime. I walked the streets for a while. It was spring, but the day was raw and very gray. The sky was the same color as the concrete all around me. My hands scurried into my jacket pockets like scared little ground animals. The wind was sharp and mean.

I apologize for bringing about this cold and stinging wind, but you must try to feel it on your cheeks while you still can—because in a moment, things will turn quite odd and you will miss being able to decipher where your face stops and everything else begins.

Here we are, folks. Right through here. Some bells clanked against the glass pane of the door and all of a sudden I was inside.

I am being coy, I apologize: the place I entered was the artist’s gallery. It was musty and cluttered and the lights were off. Everything was suspended in a state of either repair or disrepair—plenty of stuff covered with blankets and a scattering of cardboard boxes.

The silence of the choking air was such that I was compelled to clear my throat. When I did that, there came a rustling sound like a rat eating a dirty magazine.

Then there came some footfalls on a staircase which I could not locate—it was either underneath me or overhead or inside of me or back in the parking garage. The footfalls were wooden-sounding, and they were hammering me into a petrified state, closing my ribs tighter about my lungs. Breathing was a waste of effort anyway, so musty was this place.

The footfalls were getting closer and closer and were sounding more and more like the return of the echo of my car door back in the parking garage. Then they were
done, and I was suddenly face-to-face with the side of a face. Let me try to explain. A human figure was standing with its hands in its pant-pockets and its feet and chest and shoulders and neck square to all these same things of mine, which were also square, but this human figure was wearing a mask that caused its face to appear to be peering directly to the left. There was only one slot for an eye. The other eye must have been covered.

Stated simply, it was the mask of a face in profile, if that makes any sense. But if it does make sense, then I’m not explaining it correctly, because really it didn’t make any sense at all.

The face in profile was not the face of a human or a horse or a rooster, but it was not NOT any of those things either.

“Hey, Bubba,” came a sound in the voice of the artist.

It took me a long time to answer because, first, I had to remind myself what sound was, and then what words were, and then what Bubba was. “Hello,” I said like an idiot.

“You can’t tell, but I’m smiling right now,” said the artist. “I’m delighted to see you.”

“I’m smiling too,” I said automatically, even though I wasn’t smiling, which he could plainly see since I wasn’t wearing a mask. This sunk me more deeply into my idiocy. I had to clear my throat again. “That’s a mighty nice mask you’ve got.”

“I wear this mask when I meditate.”

“That’s very nice. Say, why is all your stuff covered with blankets?”

“I’m in a transitory state, you see. I’ve begun a regimen that requires me to wear this mask for twelve hours per day.”

“I guess I caught you at the right time then,” I said meaninglessly.
“Or the wrong time,” said the artist, and then laughed. His laughter, which seemed to come from out of nowhere (I’m speaking in respect to both time and space, now), unraveled me at my joints and left me floating. I was all disoriented. I was on the other side of the strangest mask I’d ever seen and the cold wind outside the door would have been like the warmest cup of the saddest coffee at that moment. At home my wife would be asleep and giving off her rosy wafts.

I cleared my throat once again. “Listen, I just came by to ask whether you’ve heard from old Vern. I haven’t seen him since the night of…I haven’t seen him for a damn long time and I worry about him. He hasn’t been at the Sad Kitchen. But you and he have that book together and, well, I thought maybe the business side of that arrangement might have brought the two of you into contact from time to time. Listen, have you heard from old Vern? I worry about the poor guy.”

“Come here, Bubba,” said the artist. “I would like to show you something. I haven’t shown it to anybody else, but I would like to show it to you. You are my man.”

“What is it?” I said, but the artist was already leading me somewhere. I followed. Down a wooden staircase we went, and then through a hallway into a cellar.

“You are in the bowels of the city right now,” said the artist. “Welcome.”

There was a torch burning on either side of the hallway—no light other. You are here, I told myself and touched my face just to verify that it was still there.

“Right this way. Sorry if this is a little creepy. It’s perfectly safe, I assure you. I’ve had it fumigated and I’ve verified the integrity of the walling.”

“I was just hoping to ask you about old Vern…”
“Right in here, see?” said the artist.

We turned a corner in the cellar and came to a small room that was barred off. It looked just exactly like a prison cell.

“What is it?” I said.

“It’s a prison cell.”

“Oh.”

“It’s a product of my own devising. What do you think?”

“I like what you’ve done with the place.”

“Thank you, Bubba. I knew you would understand. I’ve been wanting to show it to someone, but I thought nobody would care. Then you came strolling in here today and I said to myself, ‘This is a sign. If there is one person who will care, it’s old Bubba.’ Seeing as how you had such a good rapport with old Vern.”

“Had?” I said, trying to maintain my composure in this strange place. “Listen, do you know anything of Vern’s whereabouts?”

“This is where I spend my time nowadays. Do you know why? I like to visualize a tree growing up through the prison cell of my own life.”

“Like Vern’s did.”

“I have contemplated it at great length, and I’ve determined that Vern is the truest artist I’ve ever met. Before I met Vern, I believed that art was a way of presenting myself to the world. A form of self-expression. But with Vern’s help I’ve come to a realization: it is the opposite. True art lets the world be expressed through the artist, let’s the world pass through the artist until the artist is nothing but expression itself. Yes, Vern understood what it means to take part in creation—like a tree. Do I believe that a tree
actually grew up through the floor of Vern’s prison cell the way he always claimed one did? No! I have decided that it is an elaborate metaphor on Vern’s part for something that seems simple but is actually impossibly complicated, and I am going to figure it out. I’ll never try my hand at art again until I’ve learned what Vern already understood, until I’ve meditated for many hours—hundreds perhaps!—upon my own prison cell, upon my own tree. Do you see? What do you think, Bubba?”

“I think it’s interesting.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I don’t have to understand to think it’s interesting.”

“You think it’s stupid.”

“Listen, have you seen Vern?”

“FORGET VERN!”

It echoed like the parking garage, but downward. “My wife is sick. Helen is home in bed.”

“You better be going.”

“I think I better be on my way.”

“I agree. Go. GO!”

As I scurried down the hallway, I heard the bars clank shut on the prison cell.

Chapter 7
Let me pretend she was dead when I got home. Pretend I was holding the ice cream sundae that I had promised her in one hand and putting the back of my other hand on her cheek, and it was a tragic but peaceful moment filled with the smell of roses.

That’s not how it was, of course. I was so stupefied by the artist’s strangeness that day that I didn’t even remember the sundae, and my wife lived another four weeks, the middle two of which were horrible. The middle two weeks were the period she would have especially wanted me to skip here. By the end of the third week, Melinda had convinced me to call hospice, and they induced peace in our home. “She’s sleeping,” the hospice folks were obsessed with saying whenever I poked my head in.

“No, she’s not,” I always replied because I couldn’t smell roses. But they never asked me to explain what I meant by that.

My last words to Helen were, “You’ll be alright.” She died in bed in the summertime with the window open. I was in the other room.

After the burial, Vern was there. The burial ceremony ended with Helen dead in the ground next to her son, the shortstop, and I looked up and, sure enough—it was Vern. He was standing next to Jack in the road that went through the cemetery. When we saw each other, we didn’t know whether to shake hands or hug. We decided to shake hands.

“Do you want to get some coffee some evening?” said Vern

“I’m not nocturnal anymore,” I told him. “Let’s do some morning how about?”

We planned to have some breakfast a few days later.
Melinda kept coming over to check on me in the days after my wife’s death. She was wonderful. She had begun to call me “big dog,” which I got a kick out of. “Hey big dog.” “Doing okay, big dog?” “If you ever want to come back to the Sad Kitchen, we’ve got a place for you, big dog.”

“That nocturnal business isn’t for me any longer. I like the sunshine. It does me some good.”

“Okay but I need one thing from you. Can you make the tickets?”

“You want me to make the tickets?”

“You can make them up during the daytime and I’ll come pick them up from you.”

“Maybe in a few weeks,” I told her. “I want to finish this damn story about my wife.”

“What’s happening right now?”

“You’re pestering me.”

“I mean in the story, you goon.”

“You’re pestering me in the story, too! Get out of here girly! I’m just fine.”

Vern and I met for breakfast on a Wednesday morning as we had arranged on the grounds of the cemetery. Vern looked uncomfortable and shy when he got in the booth and I thought for certain I would have to say the first words, but all of a sudden he said, “So old Bubba is no longer a nocturnal critter.”

It was a wonderful icebreaker.
“I had forgotten that the sun existed there for a few years. Where have you been, Vern?”

“Oh, around.”

“I was afraid you might have killed yourself, bud.”

“Thought about it. Oh man did I think about it. I was going to hang myself from a tree. I thought it would be poetical, at least.”

We had some coffee and I had hot cakes and bacon and Vern had eggs and bacon.

I spent a lot of time debating whether to end my wife’s story right here while Vern and I are eating breakfast together in the morningtime. But I’ve decided to include one more note.

The main thing I want folks to understand is that I would have told this story just the same without this next part ever having happened. It is an important story without this next part, because my wife is a good person, and people like her actually do exist: that’s the main thing I want folks to be able to believe in. This next part isn’t important—nobody needs to believe it if he doesn’t want to. For all anyone knows, I made this next part up. After breakfast, Vern pulled a sheet of paper out of the breast pocket of his shirt and unfolded it and slid it across the table at me. It was a letter with the most awful handwriting.

Dear Mr. Vern,

I reelly like Timeout For Vernon. Expecley the dove. He was so nice to the bunne. I am in 2nd grade now. My name is Boone. My mom says hi. She helpd me write this but only
some words. Her name is Izzy and she says she forgives you. We pray for you every nite so you are lovd. Sorry if nobody loves you. We love you.

Love

Boone

END

Song of Neon

The Delivery Man
The delivery man drives a USPS mail delivery truck with its decals scraped off. He is a lanky fellow with wonky knees and he seems to prefer to pass between parked cars, to lurk near trees and shrubbery, to move along the sides of houses and dumpsters and other such structures. He halts every few steps to peer about, to check his surroundings. Each morning, he delivers a jar filled with a bluish liquid to the front stoop of every house. Each morning, Avery fetches it, brings it inside.

Give It Here

The deliveries began a month ago, late summer. As mysterious as the liquid was, the jars in which it came robbed some of its elegance, for they were nothing but reused grocery store pickle jars, olive jars, jams, jellies, anything of the sort.

When Avery would bring the potion inside (that’s what Avery called the jar of liquid, the *potion*), Saul, her husband, eating his oatmeal at the kitchen counter, would stand and, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, say, “Give it here.”

The potion was a flat blue color in repose, but when shaken or disturbed even slightly, it took on a phosphorescent energy, a strange turquoise vitality. Every morning, Saul poured the jar’s contents down the drain in viscous glugs while Avery stood back and watched. For the next several minutes, it could be heard gurgling and burping through the plumbing under the sink. Saul sat at the kitchen table pretending to ignore the terrible corrosive struggle while Avery watched, fear swirling in her eyes. At last, it would sigh, a smooth, lurid exhale, and be gone.

Job at Hospital
At the hospital where Avery was a nurse, Millard General, the smell of the chemical disinfectant used to mix with all the infected bodies to create a reek like engineered pollen.

Millard General was the only hospital in Millard and it was a small hospital whose different wings and wards were nothing more than unglamorous hallways, whitely alight. The hallways were always cluttered with bulky, manila-colored, wheelable machines beeping slowly and dumbly. They sprawled, whining and moaning, like a chorus of orcs straining to explain the concept of loneliness to anyone who would listen; but Avery believed they had bigger plans than they let on and she tried not to make them angry.

Saul

Her husband was a woodworker with an emphasis on craft owlhouses. He worked out of a shop in the basement of their home. He was a stooped, rangy man who had perpetual bedhead even after showering and even when Avery used her blow-dryer on him and then muddled his hair and combed it out for him. But he wore flannel shirts that were specked with sawdust and he rolled his sleeves up to reveal powerful wrists. He had great wrists, fine strong woodworking wrists. He was wiry, yes, but he conducted himself with a single-minded industriousness, which, Avery felt, resembled the ambition of someone with a job in finance or law or the medical field or even a firefighter or a CPA or a priest or a realtor or an engineer, or anything sensible, really; it didn’t matter, the ambition was the important part and it was the same regardless of where it came from, and Saul was no layabout. His spine was too stooped for a person his age and his hands were rough and
dry and his fingertips were split and eroded and left thin white streaks when they passed over skin, but he looked good and right and nimble when he handled a piece of wood. Avery kept a website that showcased and cyber-auctioned all her husband’s work and she had also set up social media pages to promote his little operation. He made wine racks and nativity mangers—mangers only, not the “action figures,” as he called them—and checkerboards and ornaments and picture frames. The owlhouses, though, were his specialty.

Avery had set up the website four years ago—this was during the first year of their marriage while they were still feeling each other out as co-habitants—because she was proud of her husband’s work and because they needed the extra source of income on top of her salary, but there was also a third, more logistical consideration. The website was a way to keep the clutter out of their home. Saul, Avery was realizing, seemed content to let his finished pieces just sit around. Whether or not a piece was sold or wound up being scratched at and teethed upon by a nest of baby mice in the corner of his own basement didn’t seem to bother Saul.

Dissociated

When autumn commenced in Millard that year, the lawns went utterly unraked. A terrific reek of rotten leaves filled the air and riled the dogs, whose barks came tired and distant and melancholy, as if heard from underwater. Everything felt like the silence after a snowfall, but there had been no snowfall; there was no wind and yet a bumblebee flag flapped and smacked in the dead garden of the neighbor across the street. Avery tried to say something about this curious circumstance to her husband but it was tricky to figure
out where to begin. “It has something to do with that delivery man,” she said. “It has to. It just has to.”

“What has something to do with him?”

“Listen…can’t you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

“Everything just feels so…what’s the word…I don’t know…dissociated?”

“You’re alright, Avery.”

“I’m not talking about myself, Saul!”

He’d grunt and head down to his workshop, call back to her, “Things’ll settle down.”

But things are too settled down, she thought. That’s the problem!

In a moment here, she knew, a winsome whistle would drift up the stairwell and tickle her ear drums—for Saul often whistled while he worked. Avery went into her bedroom and closed the door, though. She didn’t want to hear any whistling right now.

*If you can’t let yourself whistle while you work, then it’s a surefire sign you’re in the wrong career.* This was Saul’s heartfelt conviction.

Avery had given it a try a couple of times a few years back. She knew she enjoyed being a nurse but nonetheless felt the need to prove it to herself, for herself. So she whistled.

It went poorly. She got herself snapped at by a surgeon who was suspending a scalpel over the abdomen of an anesthetized hernia patient and then the next week she was forced to issue an apology to a different patient for whom Avery was the attending nurse. The man had just been informed that he would need a new kidney and he took
Avery’s whistling as she catheterized him as flagrant disrespect for the gravity of his unfortunate circumstance.

Rod Germaine

On a Saturday in mid-October, about a month and a half after the deliveries began, Avery went with her husband to the little hardware store where he got his raw materials. Rod Germain, Saul’s uncle, was the owner. But Rod Germain wasn’t there; the store was dark, completely deserted, and nobody manned the registers.

Saul, in denial that anything was awry, rifled through his uncle’s store while Avery stood up front in the window light, holding her purse, waiting. She could hear him shuffling through the dusky aisles, digging around, the intermittent thonk! of a block of wood on the cement floor, his muffled cursing when he must have banged his shin.

“Saul? Hun?” Her voice was small in the big empty place.

“I’m all right, damnit!”

After a while he emerged, his cart loaded with several sheets of cedarboard, some dowel rods, sand paper, boxes of nails.

“Are you just going to leave the money there on the counter?” asked Avery.

“Rod must have taken a day for himself. I’ll pay him next time.”

“But what if he’s not here next time, either?”

“Why the hell wouldn’t he be? This is Rod Germain were talking about.”

“I know that. But what if he’s just…I don’t know…gone?”

She knew Saul wasn’t a man given to speculation. “Eh,” he grunted.
She tried a silent treatment but it didn’t work. Looking over at him from the passenger seat on the drive home, she could see that he didn’t care. Or worse yet, he hadn’t even noticed that she’d gone silent. Out the window, she watched the grim landscape smear into a gray watercolor, muttered, “My husband is in denial.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he said. Then, “Alright, fine. We’ll drop by his house right now and check in on him, damnit!”

Rod Germain’s wife, Saul’s aunt, Shirley Germaine was three years dead of a molar infection that had gone to her heart, and now Rod Germain lived alone in the next neighborhood over from Avery and Saul. Partly because she enjoyed Rod Germain, but mostly because she mistrusted her husband’s state of belligerent denial, Avery went to the front door of Rod Germain’s home with Saul.

As with every lawn in town, Rod Germain’s lawn was terribly shaggy and strewn with leaves. But this fact was extra suspicious, Avery thought, because Rod Germain, Avery was well aware, was not a man known to let things become unkempt. Rod Germain had a flat top buzz cut, like so many grisly, villainous men from television; but Rod Germain was no tv villain. He was a war veteran who, as long as Avery had known him, had kept an orderly hardware store, clean teeth, and a regimented personal schedule. And even after his wife’s death—a tragedy so random and seemingly insignificant as to make a lesser person lose all hope and meaning—Rod Germain hadn’t taken to drinking and womanizing and using the world as his platform for self-pity. Avery admired how Rod Germain maintained his industrious demeanor even though the dealings of his life were greatly reduced after the death of his wife, understandably so.
She could remember the time, a few weeks after Rod Germain’s wife died, she called Rod Germain to invite him for dinner with Saul and herself. Rod Germain answered the phone with a robust voice, saying, “Hello, Avery, you’re talking to a man on his way to the grocery store.”

This caused Avery to chuckle and, because he was polite, Rod Germain laughed along with her. But Avery was certain he didn’t understand why he was laughing.

“I’m sorry, Rod,” she said, “I only chuckle because you’re an inspiration. You see, I dread going to the grocery because all I can ever think about when I’m at the grocery is hauling the bags inside afterward. I despise hauling the bags inside after a trip to the grocery.”

“Well, Avery,” said Rod Germain, “I used to despise hauling the bags inside after a trip to the grocery, but that was before I performed a simple calculation. I use cloth grocery bags that weigh just over eight grams per bag, you see, and I’ve determined that a single bag can carry up to four gallons of milk, each of which weighs just under ten pounds, carton included. That means my cloth grocery bags can sustain a load close to 2,000 times their own weight. It sounds like something from an infomercial, but it’s true—I have the figures documented if you want to look them over. And now every time I haul the bags inside after a trip to the grocery, I’m very aware that I’m involved in an act of unbelievable leverage. Truly, it’s an honor to haul the bags inside after a trip to the grocery.”

She chuckled again and said, “But I have just one question, Rod. Why do you need so many gallons of milk!”
And without missing a beat, Rod Germain said, “I drink them for the protein, Avery, so that I can continue to carry four gallons at a time. Otherwise, what’s the point of having such well-reinforced cloth bags!”

The ambition of Rod Germain, even though it had caused Avery to giggle over the phone that day, was something she profoundly respected, and when she became frustrated from time to time by Saul’s undying devotion to his owlhouses she liked to think that Saul was merely driven by a similar ambition as his Uncle Rod Germain, and that he just didn’t express it with quite as much charm.

But now, after their trip the hardware store, when Saul knocked on Rod Germain’s door, an excruciating silence ensued. Avery was nervous for a reason that she didn’t think she wanted to understand.

Slowly, after a few minutes, Rod Germain opened the door. His hair lay just as shaggy as his lawn, and his beard was strewn with incidental bits of a crusty, indeterminable matter, and something was different about his eyes. From deep down in his face, his eyes churned like a couple of crystal balls. But Saul seemed undaunted by his uncle’s appearance, for he got right down to business. “Hey, Rod, listen, I was just over at—”

Rod Germain stepped outside, grinning, unknowing. “Dear children,” he crooned, so gentle his voice. “Hello. How are you?”

“Doing well, Rod, doing well. Say, listen—”

Rod Germain’s face drifted directly in front of Avery’s face and he lifted his hand to her cheek. Avery stood petrified, frozen in this moment of strange liaison, for peering into Rod Germain’s eyes there on his front stoop that afternoon was like peering into the
mist raised by a waterfall. Suddenly she herself, her entire body, felt swathed in the tender kiss of the mist, and she was able to see, was able to experience from the inside out, the way a waterfall could capture and reflect prisms. “Absolutely fascinating,” said Rod Germain, and his voice startled Avery out of her reverie, “that the eyes are the human body’s only reflective surfaces. Don’t you agree?”

By the time Saul could begin to formulate a response, Rod Germain had already begun to wander off, wading through the shin high sea of leaves in his front yard. He began to stroke the bark of his barren street tree, and he also seemed to be softly singing to it, so loving, so gentle was his voice on the soft air.

“Say, Rod,” said Saul placing a few bills on a table just inside the front door, “I’ll just leave the money here, how about it?”

Then Saul took his wife’s hand and pulled her across the walkway to the car. In the passenger seat, Avery leaned forward and saw that Rod Germain was now rubbing his cheek against the bark of his street tree.

Avery rolled down the window, leaned forward to call, “Goodbye, Rod!” but her husband was already driving off, rolling up the window as he went.

Drunk!

In complete silence, they drove home; only when the car was parked and the garage door shut did Avery speak. “And I suppose you found that all perfectly normal. Your uncle’s behavior.”

“Clearly he was drunk, Avery. He misses his wife. I would be the same way if something like that ever happened to me.”
“Did you see his eyes?”

“Drunk!” insisted Saul.

What Are You Doing?

That very evening, over a dinner of jerky sticks and crasins, Avery was cutting up her food, her elbow high, her gaze intense, when she thought she heard Saul say—or anyway she heard the words said and Saul was the only other person around—“What are you doing?”

Her reply was simple, declarative, very much in control. “I’m cutting up my food into tiny little bites.”

She continued with the task for a few moments before dropping her silverware and looking at her husband and saying, “Wait, what just happened?”

Saul ripped a jerky stick with his premolars. Chewing, he said, “You seemed to pose a question to yourself and then you answered it.”

“Wait,” Avery said. “So that was me who asked the question in the first place? The one about, ‘What are you doing?’”

“Yelp,” said Saul, his chomps smacking wetly on the jerky stick.

Was that mirth she detected in his eyes? Avery was terrified, horrified—she stood up and sat back down. “Do you realize what this means! I was talking to myself, Saul!”

Smirking, now, undeniably, “I agree,” Saul said, “You absolutely were.”

Avery’s terror mixed with fury. She surged so deeply within herself that she could suddenly see her situation from outer space: a woman and a man adrift in a kitchen in a
house in a wasteland. “HOW DOES THIS NOT CONCERN YOU!” she bellowed into her spouse’s face.

By the time Avery was able to master herself, resituate herself as a human being seated at a kitchen table, Saul had already excused himself, glared reproachfully down at her, and descended the steps to his workshop.

Church Goes Out of Business
Then, the next morning, Sunday, a new development: Avery went to church, but the service was cancelled. Or, rather, nobody showed up, not even Father Bill. She knelt in prayer for half an hour amid the floating dust illuminated by the auroral half-light that beamed from the stained-glass windows. She tried to ignore the little squeaks of mice all around her. Then, from somewhere unseen, back in the vestibule maybe, a crow cawed—a horrible squawk, a report from the darkness. Avery hurried home.

Resolution
She resolved that she needed to talk to the delivery man. He had the town under some sort of trance, Avery was sure of it—him and his potion and his creepy truck which was almost definitely stolen from the US government. So instead of sitting with her husband in the kitchen while he ate his breakfast, she began taking her morning coffee to the dining room where she could watch for his arrival through a front window.

Gray mornings aggregated around the wretched shudder of the street trees, a theatrical silence through the window pane. The delivery man pulled up in his truck, got out, disappeared from sight, reappeared slipping along the side of her home. He never
knocked, never rang, simply placed the jar on the stoop and scuttled off. Moments later he would materialize at the front stoop of their neighbor across the street. It was essential, Avery felt, to be sly about this, to catch the man off guard, to match his ghoulish nature: “Who are you?” She cracked the door and hissed as soon as she glimpsed him flitting through her garden. She was alarmed by the vicious tone of her own whisper—she didn’t want Saul to know she had undertaken this crude investigation.

Anyway, her attempt was for naught; she got no response. The man was gone before she’d even opened her mouth. But there sat the jar, smirking primly, an affront to her very existence. She brought it inside, into the kitchen, handed it to her husband, watched him pour it down the drain.

“What is that stuff?” was her question the next day, and although she didn’t catch the delivery man, the jar was wobbling on the stoop, still finding its center.

These questions weren’t premeditated; they were Avery’s impassioned reactions to the man’s daily assaults on her peace of mind. And she was learning, seemingly from the urgency of her own voice, just how grave the situation was. When she saw the man’s truck ease alongside the curb in front of her home and park there, she filled with anger. She couldn’t believe his gall, which seemed to embolden with each passing day even though he did the exact same thing. She hated him.

“Where is everyone?” she shrilled through the slit of the front door the day following. But she could only glimpse the heel of his boot as he disappeared around the corner of her home. He was just too quick.

Septic Shock
Avery had used to work three twelve-hour shifts per week at Millard General, the hospital in town. The hospital, though, just like the church and like Rod Germain’s hardware store, had become utterly vacated, divested of its patients and medical personnel alike.

All the patients, even those who were wildly contagious or perilously unstable, were discharged under the orders of doctors who were seldom coming into work, and who would soon stop showing up altogether. They began calling in their diagnoses, their treatment regimens, and if Avery questioned their merit or demurred even slightly, they asked to speak to the patients personally. Avery would have to hand over the phone and stand listening to the patient’s half of some of the most annoying conversations she’d ever heard. She watched a man with red eyes and with folds of pasty skin, indistinguishable from the sheets of his hospital bed, and with a blood pressure of 75 over 45, no doubt on the verge of septic shock, begin to cry tears of an unnamable emotion, something that wasn’t quite joy but definitely wasn’t sadness either, into the telephone because he was being sent home. “Thank you, doctor,” he blithered over and over until he was positively whimpering. “Yes, okay, thank you, doctor, thank you doctor, okay, yes, okay, thank you, doctor.”

After the phone call the man strained his feeble self to shove up in bed and hand the phone back to Avery, who stood spook-eyed and confused. She wouldn’t accept the receiver. “What did he say?”

“I’m going home, nurse.” His voice was so weak.

“But he must have offered some sort of diagnosis!”
The feeble fellow either winced or smiled and then either chuckled ruefully or wept nostalgically, it was impossible to distinguish. “He did, young lady, he did,” the man said, and his voice was so weak and raspy that Avery had to lean to hear. “He said I will surly die but that I have nothing to worry about. He said we humans fear death the same way dogs fear fireworks or the electric air of a thunderstorm. He told me to go home and drink some of the blue liquid so that I might begin to understand what he means.”

Avery understood that confusion and disorientation was a surefire symptom of the onset of septic shock, but then she realized that she could no longer be sure what confusion and disorientation even meant as a concept, because where was the baseline? What, she wondered, would a state of non-confusion even look like anymore?

And soon all the patients were discharged and the doctors stopped calling and prospective patients stopped arriving and Avery began spending shifts running wind sprints across the cracked gray plain of the empty parking lot. She’d stand catching her breath, thinking about her life, watching leaves scuttle and bound in a gentle autumn waft that wasn’t so much chilly as merely ticklish in her crannies. Then she’d go inside and sit listening to the dial tone at the front desk—it comforted her because of its ability to obliterate the silence—until she could no longer conceptualize the tone as a sound, but a vibration that occurred not in her ears or brain, but in the very essence of her mind, and it would continue long after she hung up the phone and went home to her husband.

Semantics
Her mind humming, Avery tried to discuss the situation with Saul, but he didn’t seem to grasp the extent of what she was saying. Their discussions became misunderstandings over semantics. He thought she should continue to go to work, but she didn’t see the point.

“There are no patients, Saul.”

“That new hospital was supposed to open over in Bolander. People are probably taking their business over there because it’s so new. Things’ll normalize. Always do.”

“I’m not saying there are fewer patients, I’m saying there are no patients.”

“Why don’t you just provide extra good care to the patients that you do have.”

“When I say there are no patients, I mean there are absolutely no patients. Zero!”

“If your floor is so slow, why don’t you see if you can help out in the cardiac wing? You always say how clogged up they get down there. Isn’t that what you always say? You always say that, I’m sure of it.”

She made an intense effort to maintain her composure. This particular argument, as with many of Avery and Saul’s, ricocheted up and down the staircase that led from the main level of their home down to the basement, where Saul’s workshop was located. These days, the staircase was cluttered with owlhouses—Saul had quite an inventory backlog.

“Listen,” Saul continued, putting his protective goggles up on his head, re-rolling the sleeves of his flannel, “this probably isn’t the time to start taking your job lightly. Not now, not with the internet so choppy. Hard for me to make my sales with a choppy internet connection.”
“The internet isn’t choppy, Saul, its dead! It’s shut off! It’s…it’s…it’s…You can’t be this oblivious! You’re in the most flagrant state of denial!”

She shut the basement door.

“We’re being persistent,” came her husband’s muddled voice. “This is how you weather a storm.” Soon he was whistling.

Squatters

She continued to go to the hospital for her regularly scheduled shifts. With no festering bodies to cancel it out, the disinfectant reeked worse than ever. It melted Avery’s sinuses into a bitter syrup that leaked down her throat and she was left with the decision of whether to spit it out or swallow it and wait for her stomach to turn to acid. Soon she began to hang out in the kitchen of the Labor and Delivery wing with a janitor named Shyla Meeks and a man who called himself Shucks who, as best Avery could determine, was either a homeless solitary or was involved in some vague way, possibly romantically, with Shyla Meeks. Sometimes the two of them seemed like a married couple, sometimes brother and sister, sometimes complete strangers. Shyla Meeks, as part of her custodial duty, possessed an enormous key ring and was able to unlock the vending machine so that the three could snack on chips and pretzels and candies and cellophane wrapped cakes.

Mostly, they didn’t talk, just sat, lounged, snacked. Even though there were no more patients, there were still various machines occupied in a beeping dissymphony out in the hallway. The beeping machines were complicit in all of this; they knew who Avery was and were mocking her—she was sure of it.
The conversations Avery did have with Shyla Meeks and the man called Shucks were fraught with glitches and blips. The deserted state of the hospital was never discussed, nor was the potion. Shyla Meeks and Shucks never brought it up and Avery, therefore, was hesitant to do so—she was paralyzed by a terrifying notion that everything, this whole deplorable circumstance, might have been a projection of her mind, and that if she mentioned any of her concerns, she would be revealing herself as a lunatic, a completely disassociated person involved in a dimension, the reality of which was suspect. But as long as she stayed quiet, accepted things as they were, she could maintain her guise as a stable human being dealing with a difficult situation. Out in the hallway, the machines slowly beeped.

One day, the man called Shucks, staring dumbly at his feet, said that things were changing. His tone of voice was foreboding and Avery, hoping Shucks might have been referencing something along the lines of the unreality she was experiencing, asked him to explain what he meant. “Didn’t you hear the moon last night?” said Shucks.

“Don’t listen to him, babygirl” said Shyla Meets, “he’s a crazy old man.”

“Where is everyone!” said Avery suddenly, unable to help herself, comforted by Shyla Meeks’ calm demeanor. But it immediately occurred to her that this was the exact question she had tried to ask the delivery man earlier that morning—or was that yesterday morning?—and that this sort of impulsive, repetitive outburst could be considered a kind of a schizoid tendency.
Shyla Meeks chuckled. “You’re okay, babygirl,” she said, evidently able to read Avery’s mind.

Avery’s throat thickened at the generous sentiment and suddenly she wanted to open up about everything, wanted to slit her soul and let her emotions pour forth, but she didn’t know where to begin and when she opened her mouth, this is what came out: “My husband,” she said, “is in denial.” A tear slipped from the corner of her eye. She was seated on the floor, leaned up against a trashcan. Resting her head back against the trashcan, she looked at the ceiling, swallowed elaborately to disguise the fact that she was fending off tears. “He doesn’t understand that everything isn’t always just perfectly peachy. He makes owlhouses,” she continued, “and it has become an obsession, I’m afraid.”

Shucks cackled malignly and Shyla Meeks shot him a scowl. “Go ahead, babygirl,” said Shyla Meeks.

“And the thing is,” said Avery, “he doesn’t know the first thing about owls, He doesn’t even like owls, I don’t think. And yet it’s his job. It’s his profession, his career, his…his…his vocation. And he’s so passionate about it, but—”

“Got a question for you,” Shucks interjected. “You’ve worked here long enough,” he said, and Avery ignored the fact that she had no clue how Shucks might know how long she had worked there. “Do you think these docs actually care about their patients?”

Avery began banging her head against the trashcan a little bit.

“Quit it, Shucks!” snapped Shyla Meeks.

“It’s okay,” said Avery, “he’s right. We both know he’s right.”
“I know he is, babygirl, but we don’t need that sort of talk right now. There’s nothing wrong with living in a state of denial. You can do a lot of good living in a state of denial. It’s a relatively stable state and it allows for a long, healthy, productive life, babygirl.”

Shucks stood from the corner where he was lounged and Avery and Shyla Meeks observed intently as the man fashioned a bong out of a hospital issue oxygen mask and a plastic water bottle and began using it to smoke a citrusy hash. Soon the air in the little kitchen turned fragrant, and Avery savored the reprieve from the stink of the disinfectant. For some reason, the act of smoking the hash lent Shucks a platform from which he was expected, it seemed, to make an announcement, for he had the full attention and anticipation of both Avery and Shyla Meeks. Shucks used his platform to say, “All this misplaced passion is catching up with us.” He coughed and burped a little. “Want my advice, little lady?”

“Okay,” said Avery, her eyes very serious.

“Dump him. Quit him. Kick him to the curb. Drop him like a bad habit. Use a grave voice and say to him, ‘Saul, we need to talk.’ In a sinister tone tell him, ‘I just need some time to get my priorities in order.’ Tell him you can still be friends with him, but then stare at the ground for an extended period of time. Tell him—”

“Shucks!” hollered Shyla Meeks. “We don’t need this right now! We can’t use this sort of talk!”

Absurd
The idea of leaving Saul was absurd. That was the word for it, *absurd*, Avery told herself. It wasn’t a good idea and it wasn’t a bad idea and it wasn’t a stupid idea and it certainly wasn’t a pleasant thought. It was positively absurd, and to consider it wasn’t even really to “consider” it, she told herself—at least not in the standard sense of the word *consider*—but was more so an impulsive overindulgence of a fantasy, and not so much a “fantasy” in the standard sense of the word, she told herself—because truly she would never fantasize about leaving her husband and anyway, if she did leave him, wherever would she go?—but more accurately a fantasy with a sort of dystopian twist where the Fantasy Land of her overindulgent imagination is plagued by lonely times where she would be forced to sit all day listening to an angry wind howl through the rafters of an empty home and watch the rain drops streak down a windowpane as pieces of incidental trash fluttered in a pile of dead leaves.

No, she didn’t want to leave him, or even legitimately consider the possibility. But she did, for one reason or another, back off her insistence that the hospital was so utterly and absolutely deserted. Now, when she came home from her shifts and Saul came upstairs to ask how her day had been and to see if she had any stories of death and gore—he did this sometimes—she told him that, since her floor was so slow, she had been moved to the Labor and Delivery hall where she had been assigned to the postpartum care of prematurely born triplets. “They look like little cocktail weenies!” she told her husband. “They can’t even open their eyes!”

Saul tried to hide a sheepish little smile that Avery found endearing now that she was misleading the poor fellow. “What type are they?” Saul asked.

“Two girls and a boy.”
This wasn’t a “lie” in the standard sense of the word, Avery told herself, because her husband hadn’t even believed her in the first place when she explained how deserted the hospital truly was. Really, she was just enabling his state of denial. And a state of denial is a relatively stable state and it allows for a long, healthy, productive life, just like Shyla Meeks had said.

Two Hours
Avery met Saul seven years earlier at an opera in Chicago over the holiday season and discovered that they lived only two hours apart back in Ohio. Saul was there with his mother and Avery was there alone. During the intermission, out in the lobby, Saul’s mother, sister of Rod Germain, indicated Avery by pointing at her. Avery noticed this and took the gesture to mean she was supposed to go over and talk to the woman. But Saul’s mother had only been pointing as part of an explanation to her son about how odd it was for a girl that age (Avery was so young then, still in nursing school, living at her childhood home) to be at an opera alone.

When Avery came over and said, “Yes, hello,” Saul’s mother said, “I was just telling my son how peculiar it is to see a girl of your age at a place like this all on her own.”

“Oh,” said Avery and chuckled politely. “I grew up doing all sorts of things on my own. On overcast days, I used to swing at playsets on my own because I enjoyed the awful moan the rusty swings made on an overcast day. And I used to go to skating rinks on my own during January. In the autumn, I made bonfires by myself and roasted marshmallows back in the woods. I would have gone to the swimming pool on my own
during the summer, but I had too many classmates that went to the swimming pool during the summer. My mother used to say I was rude to do so many things on my own. She said that I was selfish. But really I was just making sure I existed. You have to be alone to make sure you really exist, you know?” She chuckled nervously, for Saul’s mother was a large, daunting woman whose outfit reminded Avery of a peacock. On her forehead was either a wart or a daub of sweat mixed with cakey makeup.

After a very severe silence, during which Avery felt she was suddenly under evaluation, Saul’s mother said, “Your mother was right.”

But then, very gently, Saul, wearing an oversized suit, probably his father’s or grandfather’s, Avery assumed, stepped forward and touched his mother’s arm; Saul’s mother pursed her lips and flung her head back and away. Avery smiled at Saul then because she could see the courage it had taken for him to stand up to his mother that way. Some young men, Avery was aware, were spineless, helpless amoebas next to their mothers.

The earnest young Avery introduced herself to the young man, partly in spite of the mother, but also because she was fascinated by the shy and gawky fellow who already possessed the stooped body of a geezer, probably, Avery assumed, from years of indentured servitude in his mother’s matriarchy.

After the opera but before Avery eventually moved to Saul’s hometown, Millard, Ohio, immediately (she came for the funeral and never left) following the death of his mother, they didn’t see each other for over a year. They spoke every day over the phone, and Saul would talk to Avery about what a fascinating distance two hours was. He would absolutely dwell on this idea of a two-hour distance. The best way he could explain it was
to say he had the option of either getting a full night’s sleep or, instead, of driving to Avery’s father’s house in Cincinnati, Ohio (where Avery lived at the time while she was in nursing school) and parking his car in the cul-de-sac and simply watching the house for half an hour in the middle of the night, comforted by the fact that Avery must have been peacefully asleep in her childhood bedroom, and then driving home and still getting a few hours of sleep before daylight. “Do you do that Saul! Is this something you’ve done before!”

All he did was laugh, a sly but precious little snigger, and she didn’t press him to explain further because the idea itself, a mere suggestion, seemed to lend itself nicely to Saul’s strange aura. She liked waking up in the morning and looking out her window into the lonely cul-de-sac and wondering—not knowing for certain, but still able to indulge the idea—if Saul had been there just hours ago. In this way she started to understand what he meant when he talked about what a fascinating distance two hours was.

Not Good

One night during the weeks when Avery was still misleading her husband about the state of her job at the hospital, Saul woke wrenching in pain. Avery assumed it was indigestion or a shin cramp and rolled over, but no. He scuttled to the bathroom to vomit, but it was already dripping through the fingers of the hand he used to cover his mouth, splatting on the linoleum. After he finished retching, he returned to the bedroom wiping his mouth with the back of his forearm, grunting to cover the hitch in his step. Avery, sitting on the edge of the bed in the dark, whispered, “Jump.”

“No.”
“Jump.”

“Why?”

“Jump!”

He tried and keeled; Avery flipped on the bedroom light and there lay her husband with vomit rolling out of his mouth in languid, bloody convulsions. His face was so candlewax pale that it was actually green. Soon he was unconscious on the floor.

She knew that the hospital was not operational, and that the situation was not good. But her training told her to stay calm. She had long since learned to hone the adrenaline of emergency situations to find an inner peace and now, incited by a professional serenity, she fell into a state of steadying tranquility wherein she became so self-aware, so excruciatingly herself, that there was no longer any self to be aware of and she was suddenly inside-out of herself and no longer contained physically or chronologically but rather able to move freely between the space-time jelly that makes up these ectoplasmic dimensions. Avery performed her husband’s surgery herself right there on her bedroom floor.

Surgery

She wore a kitchen apron, Saul’s woodworking goggles. She used a steak knife to make the incision, a vacuum to slurp out the infected organ and the puddle of poisonous pus, and Saul’s wood stapler to seal everything shut. Afterward, she hefted him up onto the bed and even though a little vomit leaked out, pendulous from his bottom lip, his color already looked considerably better because under his eyes was melancholy blue instead
of malevolent green. She fashioned a saline intravenous drip out of a sandwich baggie, a clothes hanger, and a meat infuser.

By the time Avery was once again aware of herself as a person as opposed to a mere essence kindred with and indistinguishable from the air in her bedroom, she was sitting up in her bed next to Saul, holding his little appendix in her cupped hands. It was still faintly throbbing and the site where it had ruptured was gaping silently like the mouth of a docked fish.

The next morning, when Avery opened her eyes, she was staring straight at the little organ, but now it was dead and gray on her night stand. A yellow liquid had seeped from it and dried, crusted over. She experienced a moment of panic, a metallic pang down her spine, because in her weary state she was unable to disassociate the organ from her husband. She thought he must be just as dead as the organ. But she jolted out of her slumber and rolled over and dug her thumb into his neck and his pulse murmured back at her. His hair lay flat and matted against his face and he was as peaceful as child in a deep sleep. She kissed the region where his cheekbone met his eye socket and stood admiring her patient’s stable state. It had secretly felt good to use her training, to feel like a nurse again for the first time in weeks, even if it had taken an eruption inside her dear husband’s gut.

A little invigorated, Avery went downstairs, where the house was hers alone. Sipping at a mug of coffee, she peeked through the window blinds. Her eyes narrowed.

Shoomp!
Shoomp! The jar of potion split open on the front stoop in a low, flat concussion—it no more shattered than a pumpkin would shatter—but when it hit the stoop, Avery could feel the ground shudder under her feet from a distance of three yards. There she stood on her front walkway, panting slowly, a white-knuckled grip on an old wooden softball bat from the garage.

When the jar burst, a steam rose from the spill like it would from dry ice, only more vigorous, and it seemed to whisper, seethe, purr as it went up into the white sky.

What she’d done was she’d hidden behind an evergreen shrub in her front garden with the intention of jumping out at the opportune moment to trap the delivery man on the front stoop between her house and herself, holding the softball bat in a manner that would suggest she was crazy and desperate and would stop at nothing to get the answers she desired.

And it worked; she’d had him where she’d wanted him. They stood facing one another from such a close proximity as she could have taken one step forward and struck her blow. She’d looked into his eyes, droopier and more soulful than she would have imagined, like two frowning moons, and set so deeply in his long face, much older than she would have expected, behind the limp hang of his hair. Under his white moustache which began well up in his gaping nostrils he turned up his thin lip as an expression began to form on his face, and it was a long time coming for Avery could see it develop as if in slow motion, and she assumed it would be a shudder of fear, but his eyes, already so droopy, softened even further and revealed not a glint of fear but a rueful smirk.

That was when he dropped the jar and became swathed in the rushing steam.

As the steam diminished into the white sky, Avery heard a squeal from behind and flung around to see the truck peeling away from the curb and cutting down the road.

Not because she thought she could catch him, but because she was enraged and desirous of a release, some sort of emotional purging, she was compelled to chase after the truck while holding the softball bat aloft like a maniac, screaming nonsense. But a dear patient lay upstairs in her bedroom and Avery knew he needed a somber caretaker.

She went to check on him, applied an expired disinfectant ointment to his wound, which had gone raw and purple and bulbous around the staples. His mouth moved like he was trying to form tortured words, but nothing came out except lip smacking sounds, the sticking and unsticking of gluey drool.

Back downstairs on the front stoop, the potion was fully disintegrated. When she stepped outside to pick up the shards of the broken jar, Avery accidentally touched her hand to the place where the spill had been. The concrete there was warm to the touch and caused Avery to inhale sharply. A flood of enraged yearning quickened her breathing and the more she tried to disassociate it with the delivery man the more fervently it rushed through her until she was panting almost sexually. It took a long time for her to realize that she had the autonomy to move her hand from the place on the concrete.

That day she glued two plastic eyes on her husband’s appendix and then poked a purple pipe cleaner into its rear end and coiled it around her finger. With a marker, she added some whiskers and all of a sudden the little organ was a mouse, which she placed on her husband’s night stand. In case he woke up, inevitably groggy and in bad humor, he would have to concede to the cute charm of the thing.
Collecting Her Thoughts

That night, with supplies from Saul’s workshop, Avery hammered a nail into the paneling on one side of the front stoop and fastened a length of twine around it. Then she screwed an eye bolt into the other panel and fed the twine threw. Then she made some notes to try to organize her thoughts. She titled the paper, “Let’s Get This Straight.”

- Either everything is real or nothing is real, but it can’t be both. I don’t know which is scarier. The first is probably scarier.
- Either I am confused in and of myself or I was created in such a way as to feel confusion, but it can’t be both. I don’t know which I would prefer.
- Rod Germain is a good man but something is wrong with him.
- I think I love my husband but I have nothing to compare it to so I don’t know for certain
- If everything I do makes me feel crazier, then maybe the thing to do is to just accept everything as it comes. But this feels somehow contradictory to my first point.
- For instance, I can write something extremely irksome like this:
  - When I get scared, I will always have scientific facts to fall back on.
  - Statement one is a philosophical statement.

The Most Important Thing in The World

The next morning, she woke with her forehead on her notepad at the kitchen table. Upstairs, she treated her husband’s wound, checked his temperature with her cheek,
kissed his forehead and then, in order to blend in with the morning’s half-light, she dressed in a gray sweatsuit. The notes she’d jotted down the night before came gradually back to her mind, but in her sleepy state they seemed petty and frivolous and a little ostentatious, too, and she wondered if she might be making a big production out of nothing. Thus it was with a somewhat sluggish and perfunctory air that she hid behind a bush around the corner of the house holding the end of the length of twine, which was to serve as a trip wire. The critical moment in her scheme would come just as the delivery man was about to step down from the stoop after having already placed the jar. The reflection cast by her neighbor’s first floor windows would tell her when to yank. He’d trip into the front yard, she’d pounce, tie his ankles.

When the breaks squealed to alert Avery of the delivery man’s arrival, she became giddy. Suddenly, this was the most important thing in the world again. In the reflection from her neighbor’s window, she watched as he passed through her mulch bed and then she glanced him up again in a second window, watched him edge along the side of her home. Even though it was a chilly morning, he was wearing shorts; he had skinny, old man’s bird legs and he deployed them with a coltish intensity for the simple purpose of walking. Avery’s elation came not without a tinge of guilt as a strange consideration struck her that she was spying on a creature too majestic to be taken advantage of this way. Everything was working out too perfectly; it just seemed unfair.

Watching in the window, she saw him place the jar, she yanked, he overcorrected, tried to stay himself, slipped, veered right, slammed into the trunk of an ash tree in the front lawn. Instead of leaping to action, Avery stood there completely petrified, hand covering her gaping mouth; she forgot to go tie his ankles together. The delivery man got
up and darted toward his truck, all dignity gone from his movement. Only then did Avery pursue. She cut a sharp angle, leapt, tackled him, and they slammed together into the truck’s metal flank. Avery was knocked out.

Avery’s Dream
Avery was unconscious of the world and she found herself sitting with her husband in a field near a waterfall, the spray of which they could only hear, not see. Blossoms chased endlessly across their line of sight, describing the undulant plane of a field. She must have been supine, for she was eye level with this floral sea, gently rolling in a breeze. She reached for the wound of her husband’s surgery but found only the plump hang of fleshy strawberries, tried to kiss him but his lips unfurled and bloomed and a stream of mites crawled out. She tried to touch herself, but the petal of her hand came away with a thin yellow dust.

“I am here”
Crates and crates of empty jars were stacked in the corner of the truck’s trunk, and leaned against this stack, was a woozy Avery coming slowly awake. The truck roved and swerved. She slid and righted. Her ankles were chained together, but the significance of this fact was lost on Avery in her delirium. When she was mostly conscious, she resolved not to be obvious—not to scream, not to panic, not to make useless demands. “I am here,” she said to herself in an almost bored voice and touched her face to make sure it was indeed still there. “I am here,” she repeated, pressing her fingers into her cheeks.
Leaning against the crates in the back of the delivery truck, she simply submitted herself to the rotation of the earth.

Sand
Saul’s head felt filled with sand that shifted, it seemed, when he pushed himself up in bed. He wiped his face, fingered the grits of sand that had escaped into the crevasses of his eyes. When the blood rushed to his head, the sand spilled out, began to pour through his body. This was his body, the hourglass of his existence.

When he poked the little mouse-organ on his nightstand it turned into a pile of sand. “Avery…Avery…Hey, Avery…”

But Avery wasn’t home.

When he rose from bed too quickly he felt a whorl of visceral pain. He had to sit down a minute on the edge of the bed where he tried to remember but couldn’t.

He touched his wound but wouldn’t look at it. He grunted like a much bigger person than he really was when he walked to fetch his robe.

Industrious Saul
In his bathrobe in his workshop over the next three days, Saul crafted 47 owlhouses. The stairwell became so clogged with his precariously stacked artwork that it only made sense to limit his trips upstairs, lest he set off an owlhouse avalanche.

Saul was aware of the fact that he had a profession that, when he told people about his work, it made them want to ask loaded follow-up questions like, “So tell me: do you let the owls take out a mortgage or do they have to pay it all upfront?” or make snide
comments such as, “Sounds like you’ve really got your head in the clouds there, buddy boy,” and then slap him patronizingly on the back.

Used to bother him. Not so much anymore. Learned to block it all out, for the most part. World’s problem, not his. *I’m a woodworker. Make owlhouses for a meager profit.* He learned how to say it almost like a dare. *How does that make you feel?* his tone seemed to imply.

Still, every now and again he’d catch himself muttering things like *mortgage* or *head in the clouds* while he worked. And muttering led to working too quickly and making preventable errors and a general loss of creative prowess. The best cure for muttering? Whistling.

He whistled while he worked, and his work was making owlhouses. *How does that make you feel?*

Annoying

On the third day, he became hungry, and made his way to the kitchen and sawed the top off a can of peaches. As he was dropping them in his mouth and letting them slide down his throat, he happened to notice Avery’s note and read the “Let’s Get This Straight,” and then quit reading. On the morning of the fourth day he was swinging his hammer and felt something tug, swung again, felt something pull, swung again, felt something rip, swung again, felt something burst in a sheer wet heat. His leg was slick and his robe was annoyingly caked to his thigh. It infuriated him how caked his robe was to his thigh and when he began smacking it out of frustration, it sounded like a child slapping at the water in its bath. “Avery,” he said. “Avery…Avery, *damnit!*”
He breathed a few times. Then, very carefully so as not to disturb any of his owlhouses, he tiptoed upstairs and drove himself to the hospital.

He parked his car in the middle of the tarmac-immensity of the parking lot. The parking lot and the sky were the exact same hue of gray: wet ashes and rotten newspaper. In his bathrobe, he shuffled through the hospital’s empty halls calling for his wife, “Avery…Avery…Hey, Avery…”

Bloody

The drone of the florescent lights seemed to grow louder and more contemptuous each time his calls went unanswered. The florescence flickered and glitched like lightening, but it was impossible to know whether the fault was with the lights or with his own vision. The annoying hum of the lights was his wife. The sheen of heat on his thigh and the awful squishing sound in his right shoe were his wife, too. The wall, though, was sturdy and strong and was practically like his third leg because he could use it to lean against as his eye lids became heavy and his legs became shaky. This was a wall he could trust. *It’s a damn fine wall*, Saul told himself, either aloud or in his head, he wasn’t sure.

Soon an elderly gray-skinned man with a beard came out of a room and found Saul leaned wretchedly against the wall.

The man said, “Hey buddy, who are you?”

In his hazy state, Saul wasn’t entirely sure this man existed, but he went ahead anyway. “Where is Avery?” he demanded. “She’s supposed to be a nurse here.”

“I know Avery. Who are you?”

“Avery is my wife. I’m Saul.”
The man laughed. “Saul, as in the owlhouse maker, Saul?”

Saul bared himself and then stood up straight, not sure whether to exude pride or confusion or anger. “That one, yeah.”

“Well let me tell you, Saul-the-owlhouse-maker, you’re bleeding all over the damn place.”

“I’m looking for my damn wife is what I’m doing. Try one more time to tell me otherwise and see what happens.”

The man chuckled, hung his head, swung it, looked back at Saul. “I guess she finally done it then. Well, good for her.”

“Done what?”

“Buddy, you’ve been dropped. Dumped. Divorced—”

“I need her to fix my damn wound.”

“I’ve not seen her. She’s not around.”

“I need somebody to fix my damn—” Saul was saying but he didn’t get to finish the sentence before his hand, so slick with blood, slipped off the wall, causing him to whack against it and then collapse to the floor.

Bolander Wellness Authority

Then he was in the passenger seat of his own car and in the passenger seat of his own body, in and out of consciousness. The things he experienced were the sight of a silver-plated skyscraper with more floors than there are organs in the human body, a service road which felt like a carousel, and a clean-cut valet who greeted him with a hardy smile and didn’t make a fuss about all his blood flow.
He experienced the hissing vacuum sound when a set of doors opened automatically and then he was suddenly horizontal, evidently being conveyed into the building, and his horizontal orientation gave him a wonderful perspective of the mammoth edifice’s awesome size swirling into the terrible sky before a warm tailwind, some sort of a nurturing-suctioning mechanism, seemed to rise from underneath him and channel him into a huge empty room at the far side of which, one hundred yards distant, it seemed, a grinning boy with nefariously shellacked hair was sitting behind a huge desk under silver-plated letters which read Bolander Wellness Authority. Then there was the smooth breath of another automatic door somewhere and all of a sudden a woman’s bosom and a man’s crotch appeared at either of Saul’s ears. From the side of the crotch, Saul’s hair was being stroked while, from the side of the bosom, his arm was being tapped, fashioned with a rubber tourniquet, cotton swabbed, and then injected with something.

Now came a dreamless sleep.

Post-op
The room in which he woke radiated a remorseless white light amidst which the head of a seemingly disembodied woman hung at his bedside. Without speaking, the woman lifted Saul’s gown and held up a mirror so that her patient could see his repaired wound without having to strain to raise his head. It looked clean and neat and its color was good. When he realized he was expected to say something, Saul’s response was the same as when a barber holds up a mirror to show his neckline after a haircut. “Alright, that’s fine.”
Evidently the nurse was satisfied because she nodded and left the room. Saul thought he was alone, then, until a calm voice from the corner said, “Hello babydoll. Aren’t you going to ask if you’re okay?”

He craned his neck to see. There sat an unfamiliar woman, legs crossed, holding a folded newspaper, smirking at him. She was backlit by a window which, from Saul’s reclined vantage, peered out over nothing at all, just a phantom white sky. “Am I okay?”

“What do you mean, are you okay?” said the stranger.

“I don’t know. You made me feel like I should ask.”

She laughed—a hint mockingly, a hint conspiratorially, Saul thought.

“Hey, lady, who are you? Where am I? What is this?”

The lady’s laugh gave way to a pleasant chuckle and she said, “Seeing as how I’ve had your blood all over me today, I suppose we should become officially acquainted. I’m Shyla Meeks, Avery’s friend. You see, I used to be the custodian at Millard General. And you, mister, are in the care of the brand spankin’ new facilities of Bolander Wellness Authority. I drove you out here when you fainted all over the place back in the halls of Millard General. Forty-five-minute drive, you writhing around the whole way, mewing like a kitten in a nightmare…”

Saul digested everything for a minute and then said, “Well I’m Saul, Avery’s—”

“I know who you are.”

And then they were silent for a time and Saul looked away and was thinking about that image, a kitten in a nightmare, which he found a little embarrassing, when the lady said, “Are you in pain, babydoll?”

“Feel fine. Feel good. Nothing wrong with—”
“What, you aren’t going to thank me? I saved your life today, Saul.”

“I’m fine. I was just fine. Would have been just fine.”

She studied him, and Saul was surprised to find his breath bated. “Answer me honestly,” said Shyla Meeks, “who do you think you are? I’m not being tart I just want to know.”

“I’m Saul.”

“But, are you sure? Because, how do you know?” She stood and took the nurse’s mirror from the bedside to show the scar. “You’ve been altered, see. Look at the scar, Saul. Look at it, babydoll, it’s okay, just look at it.”

Saul looked but didn’t know what to say.

“Your body, Saul,” said Shyla Meeks, “is your life. It’s the proof of your reality, alright babydoll? You say you’re Saul, but what choice were you given concerning whether or not you should come to exist in this state, enclosed in a human body called Saul on planet earth, subjectable to medical emergencies like an acute ruptured appendix? But the first time you stopped crying as an oblivious, little infant, you accepted it. Accepted it? You signed on the dotted line! ‘Okay, you said. This is me, Saul.’ You took ownership of it and you began to believe it was your right to be Saul. Saul. Saul. Saul!

“But you come in here bleeding all over the place and they fix you up nice and neat and, what, you don’t even think to ask whether you’re okay?

“Saul you say. What is, ‘Saul’? How can you be sure it isn’t just a concept? Just a poor pathetic concept that stands for nothing at all excepting, what? Excepting owlhouses? Saul.”
Underneath Saul’s gown Shyla Meeks began slowly to stroke his wound with two fingers, and Saul began to tremble. In a soothing voice that Saul mistrusted, Shyla Meeks began to sing to him, “Shh, babydoll, it’s okay, it’s alright, you’re okay, now, now, there, there, shh, babydoll, you’re okay—” No warning, she pressed her fingers firmly into his wound and Saul brimmed with a tender excruciation, breathless and woozy, a euphoric agony. More deeply, and with her thumb now, she pressed into him and his synapses spazzed out and his nerve endings began bursting like tiny galaxies in his joints all through his body and he whimpered to the rhythm of his own blurring vision until he was unconscious, but not dreamless.

Saul’s Dream
He was a flower in a field stretching his spine in the sun and it ached joyously as he felt himself becoming more vigorous and pubescent. He must lean in just such a way to accommodate the weight of his hanging berries. He was potent, and the sunlight shined for him alone. The only nuisance to his existence was a gentle breeze which was firm enough that he must lean into it but not nearly so firm that he could release himself of his own weight and let the breeze hold him upright. Indeed, the breeze was the only nuisance—the breeze plus the flower next to him which wasn’t as robust as he, because it couldn’t seem to hold itself erect against the breeze, or was choosing not to, and instead it was leaning into him, tickling him, brushing his berries with its fuzzy petals. He snarled at the pathetic thing and then lazed in the dozy sunlight.

But when he woke he was in the darkness. It was the middle of the night and Saul was holding himself. The custodian lady was gone but she’d left his car keys on his
bedside. He took the keys and exchanged his hospital gown for his crusty bathrobe and tried to escape from Bolander Wellness Authority, but couldn’t—rather, he didn’t have to. Down in the lobby, a familiar receptionist with shellacked hair and a grinning face called him “sir” and told him congratulations on his escape and to take care. Saul stopped cold and said, “What, you aren’t going to try to stop me?”

“We at the Bolander Wellness Authority encourage our patients to sneak out in the middle of the night. Our logic is that if Death comes like a thief in the night then we would really much prefer that our patients not be here when He comes for them.”

“I’m not going to die.”

Still grinning, “Not here you won’t, sir.”

A Single Man

Fortunately, since it was still nighttime, he didn’t have to look at all his dried blood in the passenger side of the car. But it released the rancid stench of oxidized iron baking belly-up in a stagnant pond, which cased Saul to experience a confusing mix of shame and fulsome curiosity. He couldn’t help himself, kept sniff, sniff, sniffing as he drove.

At home, Saul was hungry but the pantry was low, just dusty boxes and cans. He ate oatmeal and drank a pot of coffee and soon his gut turned to bubbling mud and swamp water and his face went blank. The day was dawning, and Saul caught himself peering out the kitchen window at a sky that looked like a bludgeoned grapefruit, thinking about the fact that now that his wife had abandoned him and the house was his alone, he was free to lose himself in his own contemplations this way. When Avery was around, Saul didn’t like to be caught staring out a window, looking at the sky. And why is
that, he wondered, that the idea of being caught deep in thought by his own spouse was so embarrassing?

She would have felt obligated to patronize him and say, “Whatcha thinkin’ about, hun?” and he would have been obligated to say, “Nothing,” and then where would that have left them? Nowhere, because its these little niceties that muddle everything up, that estrange people. He was thinking about this now as he stood peering through the kitchen window and he recalled an embarrassing time when his wife did catch him at a vulnerable moment like this one: he had been staring out this same window thinking about how if he were a salesman and he came to his own door dressed in his charcoal suit to sell something, to sell anything, to sell his owlhouses, to sell his very self, he would almost definitely tell himself to please go away. And then when his wife caught him and said, “Whatcha thinkin’ about, hun?” it occurred to him that Avery would almost definitely tell him to go away, too, and in reply to his wife that day he said, “Nothing,” and sunk more deeply into his ennui.

He blinked, shook his head to wrench himself from his contemplations, said to himself, You better get to work. I better get to work. You better get to work. But first he needed to do something. He went into his bed and tried to knead the flesh of his wound in just such a way as to reproduce the sensation the custodian lady had generated for him, but he was incapable. It hurt and he tried to push through the pain but it only hurt worse and then it hurt worse yet. It was a blunt pain, and very centralized, whereas Shyla Meeks had applied her fingers in a certain way that had seemed to thrust him to the edge of something, a precipice over which the thrill of not falling was greater than the rush of soaring off ever would have been. Harder and harder he kneaded his gut flesh until he
was screaming and then he dropped his arms to his side, panting. “This is me,” he said. “I am Saul.”

You better get to work. I better get to work. You better get to work. But something from within was preventing him from crossing the threshold of the clogged staircase to head down to his workshop. What it was, he was not sure. But he found himself seeking procrastinations. He decided to pay his uncle Rod Germaine a visit. His uncle had lost a wife to death and now Saul had lost one to desertion and this was something that could be discussed the way Saul was pretty sure men discussed things.

For the fresh air, he decided he’d walk to his uncle’s house. To do so, he had to wade through the sea of unraked leaves, making gliding motions like a novice ice-skater. He kept his eyes trained downward and let his mind wander to the shusheling rhythm of his steps.

Rod Germaine

Rod Germaine’s front door was a few inches ajar and when Saul called through the crack there came no response. Cautiously and suspiciously, he entered, expecting, possibly, to be met by a burgled and plundered scene.

But no, something even more curious: resting there on the hallway table was the same fold of bills which Saul himself had left weeks earlier as compensation for his woodworking supplies. And there were empty glass jars perched like cats about every surface and sill. They were the same eclectic mix of reused jars—sauerkraut, peppers, salsa, pasta sauce, Korean kimchi, peanut butter—as Avery used to bring inside for him.
to pour down the sink. He realized he hadn’t checked his front stoop since Avery had left, which probably meant jars were aggregating. “Rod?...Hey Rod?...Avery?”

Moseying through the place with a cautious and respectful air, he entered the den with the bear skin carpet and a mounted deer head. On the mantle under the deer head were Rod Germaine’s and Thaddeus Germaine’s (Saul’s grandfather) honorable discharge papers, a rifle in a glass case, and an oil painting of Rod Germaine’s late wife, a moose-faced woman who looked every bit as spooky as the dead deer just above.

“Rod?...Hey Rod?...Avery?”

There was a big brown chair on one side of which a record player was perched next to a case of records and on the other side of which was a small photo album opened to a picture of Rod Germaine’s late wife lounged in a pile of leaves and smiling at the camera. Next to the open photo album was a jar—it appeared to be an old pickle jar—half filled with the blue liquid. Saul picked it up and swirled it around and it came to life with a turquoise effervescence. Carefully, he sniffed it. He expected a vinegary stench but it smelled, he thought, like a bonfire—the way the air probably smelled in the picture of Shirly Germaine in the leaves. Even though he was obviously alone, it was necessary, Saul felt, to try to appear casual as he placed the rim of the glass jar on his lips and began to tilt it toward his gullet. Something made him stop short.

“Rod?...Hey Rod?...Avery?”

But his voice was so shaky it made him even more nervous. His Adam’s apple felt like it was trying to choke him.

As he brought the jar toward his lips once more, he thought he heard a small rustle like someone crumpling up the wrapper of a chocolate bar or like a varmint sifting
through a dumpster, out in the front hallway. Disgusted at his cowardice, he put down the jar and went to see about the noise. Just inside the front door stood his Uncle Rod Germaine, evidently having just returned from somewhere, and he was completely bleary-eyed and unshaven and disheveled, and he was also buck naked. The idea that he might startle his uncle didn’t even occur to Saul; the man was clearly sunken into a similar state of oblivion as he’d been last time Saul came over, but perhaps worse yet. He’d grown scrawny and frumpy, seemed to be missing some bottom teeth, and his mouth was inverted, turned up so that his jowls hung limp. His eyes were positively kaleidoscopic with unknowing.

“Hello, Rod. I was just…” but he could see it made not a bit of difference what he said, for the man was not listening. “Well, anyway, I just stopped by to tell you that Avery appears to have—”

“Henceforth shall the weevils swoon!” announced Rod Germaine, and his jowls shook mightily, “and the katydids be silenced; the birds of the air shall light, and the fish of the sea shall rise, for gone are the days of ill-content; the dawn of resignation is upon us. Bask now, dear friends, for this, I say, is the present!”

“My wife left me, Uncle Rod. Avery is gone.”

“Smitten with our ill-content and floppy hearts and shaky bowels, we have scaled these eminences, plumbed these depths. But it is the sorry man, I tell you, who comes to a flower on the side of the road and assumes that it is there for him and him not for it.”

“Okay, then.”

“Gird not your loins! That’s what I say!”
The idea of trying to scooch around Rod Germaine to leave just then was somewhat unappealing because of the man’s nakedness. Stepping forward, Saul was muttering, muttering, muttering, “Pardon me, Rod, I’ve got to get going. I’ve got to get to work.”

And he went on muttering and muttering as he slipped past the man, and he hurried down the front walk and shoved his hands in his pockets and strode down the middle of the street, wading through the sea of leaves, hearing the diminishing yammering of his uncle which was gradually replaced by his own muttering, You better get to work. I better get to work. You better get to work.

The Visitants
Back in his own neighborhood, nearing home, Saul came across two children, a boy and a girl, very young looking. They wore black suits, both of them, with their collars open and their ties lose and with the legs rolled up to just below their knees and no shoes and they wore top hats, both of them, and the boy’s arm was slung across the shoulder of the girl while his other arm he held a guitar case. They swooped and frolicked as they passed through the sea of leaves, and they leaned against each other, laughing heartily about something so distant to Saul that when he tried to fathom what it might be, it scared him, how unfathomable it was.

When they were close enough to make eye contact with Saul, they unleaned themselves from one another and stood straight up, walking erect and proper and with faces that were very solemn—except Saul thought he could sense latent conspiratorial
smirks, probably at his expense. He shoved his hands more deeply into his pocket and pretended to look at his feet in the sea of leaves while side-eyeing the curious children.

After they passed him, Saul peeked over his shoulder and made unfortunate eye contact with the girl who was also peeking over her shoulder at Saul. Then he distinctly heard them giggling, at his expense he was absolutely certain now, and in him rose a mortification like in first grade when Sister P. said, “Okay, Saul, if Connie has seventeen cupcakes and her brother eats six of them, how many cupcakes does Connie have left?” and Saul said, “Well, Sister P., I think I’m going to need to know more about this Connie gal a’fore I can give you a proper answer,” and then the whole class started sniggering; or like when Avery used to try to tickle him in bed on Saturday mornings just to try to make him lose his composure; or like when he used to go to the nurses’ Christmas party with Avery and she would introduce him to the other men and they would ask him about his profession and he would tell them about his woodwork with the owlhouses and they would ask follow up questions in a snide, mocking tone or backhand tap each other’s chests and say things like, “Saul’s work is for the birds,” and then they would guffaw.

Now Saul trudged ahead while the chemical reaction that turns embarrassment into rage occurred in his brain and the product dripped through his body. Stopping cold, spinning: “Hey, you two!” he shouted. “What the hell’s so funny!”

At a distance of fifty yards, they spun to face him, but said nothing.

“You hear me! I want to know what the hell’s so funny!” Saul shouted in order to sound fierce but also because fifty yards was much too far to use a conversational tone. His voice went up into the naked trees, swirled into the empty white sky. The pair didn’t
say anything. Saul stood breathing slowly. The bonfire smell was still thick in his
nostrils.

“Who the hell are you!” Saul demanded.

They looked at each other. “We are The Visitants!” hollered the boy and the girl
doffed her top hat.

“Who are you visiting!” Saul shouted back.

They looked at each other and snickered. “You!” the girl replied.

“Me? Who the hell…But you don’t even…What!”

“We’re here to visit you!”

“But my home is the direction you just came from! And you just walked right past
me without saying anything! You don’t even know who I am! How could you be here to
visit me!”

“You’re Saul, aren’t you!”

Saul peered across the sea of leaves and chomped and ground his jaw. “How do
you know that!” he hollered. “Who are you! If you’re here to see me, why didn’t you talk
to me!”

“We’re talking to you now, silly!” called the girl. “We knocked on your door but
nobody answered! And then when we came upon you in the street you had a very no
nonsense look on your face!” added the boy. “It was a little frightening, to be honest!”
called the girl.

“I want to know what this is all about! Why have you come to visit me! I don’t
even know who you are! Arghhhhh!”
“We’re sorry if we’ve frustrated you!” shouted the boy. “It was never our intention!” added the girl.

“You were laughing at me!”

“That’s because you’re walking down the street wearing a bathrobe with a crusty substance all over it!” called the boy. “And it seems you have a hitch in your giddy-up!” added the girl. “In addition to being frightening, it’s also very humorous!” called the boy.

Saul had to think about this for a moment. “I had a little operation is all!” he shouted. “And it hurts to wear pants!”

“Oh dear!” shouted the girl. “Are you okay!”

“Nothing too serious!” Saul assured them. “I just have a little…well, like you said, a little hitch in my giddy-up! I’ll be fine, though! I’m just fine!”

“Phew!” called the boy. “We’re relieved to hear this!” shouted the girl.

“Say!” bellowed Saul. “My house is back this way! If you really want to pay me a visit, why don’t you come on!”


“Fine!” called Saul. “Good! That’s fine! I’ve got a lot of work to do but, but we have time for a short visit! Maybe I can show you my workshop if that’s something you might be interested in!”

The suspicion was mostly gone from his eyes as he watched them near, high stepping and laughing through the sea of leaves.

Shackled
With a common bike lock and fairly long chain, Avery was shackled to a support beam in a musty den with knotty pine wall-paneling and a red carpet and a dusty, cob-webbed window to look at. She was in a two-room cottage in a wooded area that she didn’t recognize and she was pretty certain that her head was concussed from when she knocked it on the truck. Her tether was long enough that she had free rein of a couch and a little half-bathroom with a sink that spewed rust-water and with a toilet that, when it was flushed, squealed like a mouse who has accidentally scampered into a fire. Because of a principle she couldn’t quite name but which she was pretty certain was important, she declined the couch, chose to sleep on the cold, dusty floor.

Avery had decided she wasn’t going to speak to him, but it didn’t matter because he didn’t speak to her anyway. But he did feed her really well. Tilapia and spinach the first night, turkey tetrazzini the second, apple glazed pork the third, eggs and toast with chutney smear every morning. They ate dinner together in his den; he sat in his recliner, Avery on the floor. The first thing to come out of her mouth, if she were going to speak to her captor, would have been a request for some pain medicine to ease her aching skull. Her temples felt like they were connected by a rod secured on each side with a nut and bolt. She closed her eyes and touched her nose with one finger to make sure her coordination was okay.

Those first three nights he forgot to bring the salt and pepper shakers from the kitchen and, all three nights, he sat down in his recliner and had to stand up again to go fetch them. Every time he stood up, his joints creaked and popped. The sound made Avery shut one eye and grind her teeth. She wondered if he went through this salt and pepper sit-stand routine every single night, even when she wasn’t there. By the third night
she wished she could remind him before he sat to go grab the shakers, but she held fast to her resolution not to speak.

It was that very evening, though, while they were eating the apple glazed pork with roasted broccoli and mashed potatoes, that Avery accidentally said, very quietly and speaking more to her plate than to him, “This is really good.”

He looked at her, spook-eyed, then looked back at his food. A few minutes later, he said, “I have to go out to Bolander to do my grocery shopping because all the food in this town is spoiled.”

“I would imagine so,” Avery said.

After he did the dishes, he could be heard ascending a wretched and creaking staircase until he was shuffling like a critter in the roof over Avery’s head. She imagined the space to be an A-frame loft or attic with a cot, but it must have had a bathroom too, because she could hear his stream of pee slapping at the pot water and whenever he flushed the toilet it sounded like all the walls in the cottage flooded.

He was gone from sunup to sundown, presumably making his deliveries. Avery pretended to be asleep when he left in the mornings and she also pretended to believe that he didn’t know she was pretending. He was fussy in the mornings, opening and shutting doors and drawers and flushing and brushing and the wretched wooden squawk of the staircase and then he’d begin banging dish wear and snapping things and zipping things and ripping things and now here came the pop of the toaster and the whistle of the tea kettle and then it was terribly silent for a moment before came the nearby porcelain clank of the plate of eggs and toast and a mug of tea—Avery’s breakfast—which he placed on the end table of the couch on which Avery chose not to sleep and then he shuffled
through his front closet and eased into his coat and finally was out the door. All of this became the soundtrack to Avery’s morning. It ricocheted around inside her wracking skull fell down the staircase of her stiff neck.

As soon as he was gone, she’d move up on the couch to eat her breakfast because nobody likes cold eggs. Then came the muted cough, cough, chug, chug from the engine of his truck firing up outside. Avery chewed and stared, chewed and stared.

Fire Viper

On the morning of the fourth day, along with Avery’s egg breakfast, the delivery man placed a notebook on the little end table. While she was alone, Avery thumbed through it.

On the front cover, where a schoolchild would write World History or Geometry, was written the phrase, Fire Viper. It caused Avery’s eyes to grow fierce and she chewed on her bottom lip. This was just a casual perusal, she tried to tell herself as she opened the notebook, no different from skimming through a magazine in a waiting room. But even braced as she was by this perfunctory attitude, Avery was troubled by what she found inside.

Rendered from all different angles, there was a series of unfathomable sketches all smeared with graphite pencil dust depicting a horrible, sprawling creature with many tentacles and no eyes. Each new page featured a new perspective on the terrible thing and with each new sketch, the creature became more realized, and its body parts were labeled—Swivel Thruster, Cranial Condenser, Fire Chugger—and arrows were drawn to all of its creepy orifices, all of which were explicitly rendered. And the worst part was
that, in almost all of the sketches, there were children edged into the corner of the page and the creature was zapping their heads with its electrode tentacles.

It was the sort of reading material that any person already feeling insecure about her sanity would quickly toss aside before sitting and thinking very seriously about her life, which is exactly what Avery did. The most concerning part about the notebook, Avery decided, was that the delivery man had left it right there on the end table with her breakfast for her to see. He had wanted her to see it and to know that her kidnapper was capable of imagining such horror. There she was, alone, chained-up in a shack, and now she had to sit there with the knowledge that this horrible creature existed; if only as a concept in a notebook, it existed. Avery knew that, where fear is concerned, anything imagined is already real.

That night he fed her Bombay Chicken and while they ate she asked, in a shaky voice that utterly failed to sound casual, how his day had been. But she had terrified eyes and when he didn’t answer she said, “My husband is sick. Please. I need to go see if he’s okay.”

When he still didn’t answer, just kept poking his food with his fork, she said:

“Look, I’m sorry for tripping you. And for the whole softball bat thing.”

At least he looked at her, now. His eyebrows were clenched and furry and looked like something was about to crawl out of them.

“I was just feeling desperate and—”

“Your husband must be okay,” he cut her off. “His car was gone today.”

“It was?”

“You are the last two on my route, you know. You and your husband.”
“The last two for what?”

“To drink.”


He rose from the recliner and took his own plate as well as Avery’s to the kitchen.

“Hey, I wasn’t done with that. Hey, come back here. Hey! HEY!” He was in the kitchen cleaning the dishes and Avery wrenched at her chain and kicked the pole to which she was bound. “HEYYYYYYYY! LISTEN, GUY. I’LL TELL YOU WHY MY HUSBAND’S CAR WAS GONE. IT’S BECAUSE HE’S OUT SEARCHING FOR ME AND ONCE HE FINDS ME HE’S GOING TO KILL YOU! HEY, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME? KILL YOUUUU! AHHHHHHHHHHH!”

When she fell to the floor, panting and tugging at the roots of her hair, her head throbbing, she tried to imagine her husband arriving to save her, and would he come by night or day? Would he burst through the door or arrive in stealth? But her anticipation made it seem all the more unlikely. She felt a similar anxious, hopeless feeling to that when something seems too good to be true.

The next morning, the delivery man placed Avery’s eggs and toast on the end table like usual, but Avery took the plate and calmly flung it like a frisbee against the wall. The delivery man picked up the mess like any old chore. Through his stretched and yellowed V-neck undershirt, his old man’s spine protruded, all horny and knotty and creaturelike, and Avery missed her husband.

“Who am I?”
That day, on the near perimeter of an afternoon doze, Avery felt a memory come into her mind as quiet and unbidden as a breeze. One time, she recalled, under the imperious autonomy of her first month as a nurse at Millard General, Avery poked her nervous smile into the room of one of her assigned patients. But it was the wrong room, and thus she found herself face-to-face with a different patient than she expected. Where she had expected to see one of her assigned patients, an old man with whom she’d had a nice rapport—a man who, every time Avery let slip the faintest of sniffles, enjoyed jesting with her, saying, “You ain’t one of these kids goes in the bathroom and snorts things, are ye?”—she found an old woman whom she did not recognize. This woman squinted at Avery for a moment before perking up in her bed and saying, “Oh! It’s you!”

Later, after the episode, Avery would ask another nurse and discover that the woman, even though she was presently hospitalized for a urinary tract infection, also suffered from severe dementia, which doubtless meant that her false recognition of Avery was founded in her own tortured unreality.

The whole concept spooked Avery, for she had never consented to existing in any alternative realms, especially one so demented and strange; and, that day when the woman had said, “Oh! It’s you!” Avery stuttered in reply and said, “Wait,” and then she stuttered again and said, “What?” and then at last she gasped. “Who am I?”

It must have been Avery’s stuttering that launched the woman into such a helpless fit of laughter that a few other nurses came to make sure everything was alright. And now, these five years hence, shackled to a pole, Avery could all of a sudden remember the woman’s gray teeth, her laughing yellow eyes, and she could remember the way she, Avery, felt afterward upon discovering that the woman suffered from dementia: in her ice
hot panic, Avery could not think of a single piece of evidence to prove that her own sense of reality was any more legitimate than the woman’s had been.

Into the Forrest

That evening after dinner—meatloaf and green beans and mashed potatoes—the delivery man put on a three-piece gray-pinstripe suit with a gold pocket-watch chain and combed his crooked thicket of hair. He unfastened Avery’s bicycle lock and grabbed a satchel and began leading Avery out of the den and out the back door of the cottage using the chain like a leash. “I’m not even going to ask what’s going on here,” she said.

He led her through the sea of leaves along a bike path with a split rail fence and along a stream plastered with leaves and then over a bridge and then into a darker wood and, even though she said she wasn’t going to, Avery nevertheless started asking a few questions, understandably so, and as they got deeper and deeper into the forest she began hollering her husband’s name in closer and closer intervals, whining softly to herself in between, for the silence of her husband’s non-reply was swollen with all the hopeless and helpless anticipation of the silence following gunfire. The only other sounds were the chain on Avery’s ankles, which clanked as she walked, and the rustle of their footsteps through the sea of leaves.

The night air in the forest was a gloomy purple gelatin amid which the trees were paralyzed like fossils in aspects of twisted agony. Avery tried to make a run for it, but with her ankles bound could only manage to scoot, and was soon tripped by her anklet or a tree root or maybe it was both—it happened so quickly. She tried to crawl but the forest
floor was knotty with roots. The delivery man showed his quickness when he scurried to recover the chain.

While prostrate on the forest floor, it occurred to Avery that if anything terrible was going to happen to her—if she were going to be fed to the creature in the notebook—it could just as easily have happened back in the den or at any other point in her life, really. It wasn’t that she was vulnerable now, she realized, it was that she was vulnerable always. This strange, fleeting taste of an epiphany momentarily thrust her the rest of the way through the domain of her feelings of vulnerability and launched her into her own personal empire of complete acceptance and invincibility, two qualities that she had used to believe were distinct from one another, but which, down on the forest floor with her ankles chained, she decided were the exact same thing. The pain in her head eased. Maybe it had been angst all along—a stress headache.

They came to a circular clearing in the forest. There was an enormous fire pit in the middle of the clearing which Avery vaguely tried to make sense of while she was simultaneously trying to focus on the fact that the delivery man had produced the bike lock from his satchel and was chaining her to a scrawny tree along the perimeter of the clearing. Also in the clearing was a water well and a small cement slab that looked like it could have been the foundation for another little cottage like the one she’d just come from, only this one had since crumbled. The stones around the fire pit might have been the ruins of the cottage, Avery supposed.

For the next hour, the delivery man roamed about collecting kindling and scooping up armloads of dry leaves and hefting them into the fire pit until the brush pile
was as tall as he was. From his satchel he took a bottle of lighter fluid and squirted down the pit and then ignited it all with a single match. The fire pit said, “Phoomp!”

Not until the cement platform was lit up by the blaze of the bonfire did it occur to Avery that the platform might approximately resemble an alter and that she herself, chained there to a tree, might approximately resemble an offering. She had been sitting down, but when she made this realization she stood up; this was the extent of her recourse, though. To lose her composure could cause the return of her headache, she felt. The blaze was warm on her face.

The delivery man sat hunched on a log near the fire with his head hung between his legs and he was running his hands through his hair.

After a while, from all different directions, human figures began to emerge from the surrounding forest and into the clearing. When Avery saw the first person emerge—this was obviously a lady—she tried calling to her. But the lady moved with the deliberate insentience of a sleepwalker and her bare breasts were glowing in the firelight. The delivery man stood to watch the figure approach and they embraced silently. Then the woman took a seat on one of the stones and sat watching the fire.

Nude figures of all shapes and ages continued to emerge from the forest one-by-one, not in pairs or groups; if this were a party they were coming stag. One-by-one they waited to greet the delivery man before taking a seat around the fire pit. They didn’t seem to speak to one another, just sat there. A solemn mood prevailed.

For over an hour, figures continued to arrive until it was standing-room-only in the clearing. The figures stood five rows deep and Avery lost sight of the delivery man and could only see the top of the bonfire. Nobody acknowledged her, and she didn’t dare
call out. There must have been five hundred people here, men and women and even children, yet all were silent—Avery could hear the crackle and sputter and spit of the bonfire, the crowd was that quiet. Quiet, sure, but it had begun to perceptibly sway—collectively in that they were all swaying back and forth, but individually in that each figure swayed to its own rhythm. Something was bound to happen soon, Avery figured, some sort of a commencement or an announcement and then…what?

A Field and A Morning and A Memory

What happened was two distinguishable figures, a young-looking male and a young-looking female, took the platform. The reason they were distinguishable was that they weren’t naked, rather they were wearing very nice black suits, and they had wires sticking out of their heads.

Avery began cold sweating in the demon-breath of the bonfire, for the drawings from the notebook had hardly moved to the back of her mind and now they surged back up, front and center, and started roaring. These children were about to have their brains electrocuted on the alter, Avery was dead, cold, certain of this fact, and she braced herself, gritted her teeth. Because of the bulking crowd, she couldn’t see the origin of the wires sticking out of the children’s temples, but she didn’t need to, for when she heard the awful gargling, hocking, throttling sound, she knew the creature was lurking back there and her only remaining question became whether the children’s heads would explode outright or whether they would simply jolt, seize, and then collapse to the alter….
…But one of the many powers of fear is that it makes people too suspicious, and when the boy knelt and pulled his instrument out of a black case and the girl began to sing and all of a sudden the sound took the shape of music, Avery found it almost incidental, as if the source of the song might have been inside her own skull—the washing and purifying sound of relief pouring through her. The boy played an acoustic guitar and the girl sang a sad song about a field and a morning and a memory.

The crowd swayed and swayed and they seemed to be finding a synchrony to their movement, a common rhythm.

The first song ended on an anguished note that left the boy slumped over his guitar and left the girl holding her fists tight to her breast. But as soon as it was over they both smiled and in earnest voices that very well complimented the solemn mood the boy said, “Good evening, everyone,” and the girl said, “We are The Visitants,” and the boy said, “We hope you enjoy the show.”

Rod Germaine

After several consecutive sad songs, they took a set break and the crowd began to mosey about and embrace each other and even chatter a little bit. Avery studied the scene, tried to decide if she should try to talk to anyone. Now that the din of conversation was afloat, Avery thought she could manage it without becoming the center of attention. One her tippy toes, she scanned the crowd for the delivery man to see whether he was watching her. The figure that caught her eye, though, was Rod Germaine, only ten feet distant, unmistakable in the firelight.
He was speaking to a few children and, even though it was hard to take him seriously because of his nakedness, he seemed to be in the midst of a potentially intelligent lecture as his face was very stern and he was using confident hand gestures as he spoke to the children. “Rod!” hissed Avery. “Hey, Rod! Rod Germaine!”

Rod Germaine looked up with a face that did not match Avery’s excitement. He stepped toward her. “It’s me!” she whispered, thinking her face must have been shadowed. “It’s Avery! Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt, but—”

Skipping any sort of nicety, he seemed to pick up right where he left off with the children. Gesturing at the bonfire, “The interesting thing about a fire,” he said, “is that it is a microcosm of the concept of time, you see. Look, do you see it? It is the present burning the future into the past. This,”—he opened his arms to include everything in the universe—“is time.”

“Rod,” said Avery, “what the heck’s going on here. What is this?”

“This, dear child, is the present.” He grinned, clearly relishing the moment, basking. “No,” he said, “hold on, now this is the present. Wait, no, now this is the present.” And he walked off, grinning stupidly, repeating it to himself. “Now this is the present. Now this is the present…”

More Familiar Faces

The children continued playing their songs for several hours that night. The music was sad and soft and slow but more than anything it was indescribable, especially by words, because it wasn’t words, it was music, and that’s the whole point. The girl who sang
looked very young but she had a full voice that seemed to understand all the pain in the world, and it only grew more anguished as the concert went on.

Through the course of the night, during the various intermissions, three more familiar faces in addition to Rod Germaine wandered near to where Avery was tethered, and she was able to get their attention.

The first was Father Bill, the priest from the church Avery had used to attend, whose enormous, furry back glistened with sweat and dew. He did not recognize Avery, and he was badly out of breath. She must have asked him a question beginning with the word “why” because he spoke to her firmly, claiming, “Why! What is why? For many, sadly, it is their only connection to themselves. Why? But it is merely sound, you see: *(h)wī*. Or perhaps it is merely a prediction, or a history—or history’s prediction.

“Interesting little tidbit: My family’s origins in this country can be traced back to a little colony established on the bluff of a glacial lake shaped like the letter Y. It was a Quaker colony founded on the principle of total sexual abstinence. And yet, all these generations later, here I stand. I am the final product of a family of bastards and descendants of bastards and now my family’s name will die with me. And so I ask you, young lady, what use have I for this word, *why*?” He smiled and panted like an overheated bear. Then he was gone.

The next familiar face was that of a dialysis nurse from the hospital who had once put a patient in cardiac arrest and sent him to Avery’s floor to be dealt with. A fuzzy birthmark, the existence of which Avery would never have imagined having only ever seen her in scrubs, sprawled like a constellation across the woman’s left thigh and raced like escaping stars into her crotch and up through the pouch of her belly. She did not
recognize Avery, but she spoke to her, claiming, “I feel like a marionette who has had her strings clipped and now I’m adrift, buoyed by the air. And to think—all my life I mistrusted this sensation every time it blew its ticklish breath in my ear. It’s almost laughable!” The woman shrieked and then set off whooping and squawking in a breathless fit of hilarity.

The third was a skateboarder kid who used to carve and slurve down Avery’s street with his dog on a retractable leash. Faster and faster he flew each time Avery saw him and she was certain it was his sole intention to scare the snot out of her. She worried about the kid, yes, but the poor dog could hardly keep up. It looked bound for a nose dive and tumble—a broken neck. Now, in the ochre fireglow, Avery could see the scrawny concavity of the kid’s bare chest and the crusty acne that flourished there. In a similar manner as the priest and the nurse, the kid spoke to Avery unknowingly, saying, “So here’s the thing about tats: if you get a tat you’re not just a person who, like, has a tat. You’re a person who, like, needs a tat in order to, like, try to be a person who just has a tat. But you can never just have a tat. See what I mean?”

As Avery was thinking about the kid’s claim, the kid said, “Yo dis stuff is da motherfricking bomb!” and then he, too, was gone.

Sleepy

When the sky began to dawn, the trees lost their wicked silhouettes and were revealed to be the peaceful giants that they are. The bonfire waned—less flame, more smoke. Imperceptible until it was obvious, the crowd waned, too. Avery tried to keep an eye out for the delivery man, but she was exhausted. After the children sang their final song, the
delivery man leapt on stage to give them each a hug. Then he popped the electrodes off their temples and mussed their hair and they gave a sheepish grin.

Without any sort of final announcement, the show was over and the crowd dispersed, one-by-one, just as they’d arrived, as introspective as people leaving mass. Under dawn’s sheepish glow, Avery was half asleep and she couldn’t collect the energy to care about anything. Her face felt like it was slipping off her skull, so she rested it in her hands.

The Real Fire Viper

Morning was fully bloomed when Avery jarred awake with the two musical children standing over her. “We’re supposed to take you back to the cottage,” said the girl. “But we have to keep you chained up,” said the boy. “Sorry,” said the girl, and she genuinely looked it.

Avery peered about. The clearing was empty of people and the bonfire was dead. Across the way, the delivery man was hunched over the water well doing something—Avery couldn’t quite tell what—and he had pulled his truck adjacent to the well and its trunk was open. Empty crates were unstacked and strewn about the area.

Avery stood and squinted through the glisten of dewy leaves on the floor of an autumn morn. There, sprawled across the lawn between the firepit and the well, was a thing resembling the creature from the delivery man’s creepy notebook. But the sight of it sprawling in the bonfire pit that morning made Avery want to spit, if only she had the energy. It was no creature; it more closely resembled the lawn of a garage sale that has gotten out of hand. The facets Avery could readily make out were a rusted-out
lawnmower flipped on its side with an industrial-size coffeemaker secured by frayed bungies to the blades of its underbelly which was then secured by a pulley system to two slowly turning hubcaps, the rhythm of which appeared to be gently churning the contents of...what was that?...some sort of a vat or a cistern with a hose sticking out of it which led to the water well, and with an ancient computer perched on top of it, out of which the electrode tentacles originated.

In her state of dreamy demur, Avery looked at the delivery man. He was kneeling over the water well filling jars. He was bottling the well water. But it wasn’t well water. Water wasn’t what came back when he dipped the jars. It was the potion.

The potion was in the well and he was bottling it and putting it in the crates in the trunk of his truck.

“Hey, are you ready?” said the boy and Avery looked at him blankly. He was holding the end of the chain. “She looks confused,” said the girl. “She looks overwhelmed,” said the boy. “Maybe she’s hungry,” said the girl. “Maybe she’s cold,” said the boy. “Maybe she’s just sleepy,” said the girl. “Well so am I,” said the boy tugging at the chain. “Just give her a dang sec,” said the girl.

“Who are you guys?” said Avery.

“We are The Visitants,” said the girl.

“Okay,” said Avery. She was too tired.

The Musical Children

They led her along the path back toward the cottage, the boy holding Avery’s chain in one hand and his guitar case in the other, the girl holding the bike lock like the handle of
an invisible briefcase. Should she try to run? They were just kids and they looked at their feet as they walked, seemed to emanate the same sad essence as the music they’d played all night. Most likely she could take either of them in a one-on-one fight, even limited as she was by her anklet, but there were two of them. Plus they could holler for the delivery man whose charge, apparently, they were under.

“So you all know that guy, I take it,” said Avery.

“That guy,” said the boy, “is our grandpa.”

The musical children began to hum as they shuffled through the sea of leaves and Avery, bumbling along behind, tried to decide on what her next question should be. Why did she keep finding herself brimming with simple questions, the answers to which seemed veiled in thin air, encrypted by the wink of a malevolent eye that she could feel watching her at all times?

An eye like a bonfire viewed from the night sky? Everything that shines or burns or glows is just an eye in a pair of eyes, she realized, and the other eye is winking at her. The moon, the sun, the ever-twinkling stars: all just winking eyes.

Maybe the thing to do was to start making assertions, stating claims, hocking her ideas like mathematical facts into the universe and waiting to see if the universe would spit anything back at her.

“He’s making a potion in a well back in a forest, which makes him, what…he’s some kind of a sorcerer,” said Avery.

The boy giggled, the girl giggled.

“Well,” said the girl, “More like a chemist,” said the boy, “Yes, a philanthropic chemist,” said the girl, “A very…avante-garde…philanthropic chemist,” said the boy.
“He’s using our town as his lab rats.”

“Everyone is happy,” said the boy.

“Everyone is ruined,” said Avery.

“Everyone is content,” said the girl.

“It’s poison,” said Avery.

“It’s heat,” said the boy.

“And music,” said the girl.

“Heat and music,” said the boy.

“It’s a drug,” said Avery.

“What it is,” said the girl, “is distilled music.”

Inside the cottage, in the den, the girl and boy loosened their ties and unbuttoned their collars and the girl apologized that they had to lock Avery to the pole again.

They gave Avery a granola bar and some orange juice and, while she munched the granola bar, she said in a flat voice, “He is afraid of me because I’m not under his spell. He’s going to keep me locked up until I agree to drink it.”

“He likes you,” said the boy, fastening the lock. “He wants you on his team,” said the girl. “Our team,” said the boy. “Yes, our team,” said the girl, “because he likes something about your skeptical spirit. He thinks you have promise. He thinks you’re especially tuned-in. He’s looking to expand and he wants your help.”

It took everything she had not to spit. “My spirit?” she said. “Tuned-in?” she said. “Pshhh.”

“He’s not some kind of compulsive or frivolous or selfish man,” said the girl.

“We understand your hesitation,” said the boy. “Our dad was a compulsive, frivolous,
and selfish man—all three of these—so we know a thing or two about the type,” said the girl. “Yes, our dad was the type of man who lived vicariously through sporting teams with whom he had no real affiliation,” said the boy. “Yes, and when the thrill of win-or-lose wasn’t enough anymore he was the type of man who would take matters into his own hands,” said the girl. “That’s right, he would find ways to raise the stakes so he could feel more…involved,” said the boy. “We’re talking about a serious gambler,” said the girl. “The type of man who loses a family’s entire savings and then goes to a rehab facility out west where he has ‘connections’.”

“I’m sorry,” said Avery, and sat down on the cottage floor and her eyes grew distant. “My dad was the type of man who, when he was sober, would put my hamster in the food processor. Then, once he’d get some beer in him, he became the type of man that would kiss my forehead and go out and buy me a new hamster and then come home and shadowbox in the garage or mow the lawn in his underwear or crack jokes with the mailman or pick fights with the garbage man.”

The children looked at each other. “We’re sorry to hear this,” said the boy. “But then you must clearly have the good sense of discernment to see that our grandfather is not this type,” said the girl. “Yes, and admit it, you would have tried harder to escape if you didn’t already know this,” said the boy. “And he’s a really great cook, isn’t he?” said the girl.

But Avery was still hung up on something and her eyes were far away. “What type of woman was your mother?”

“The dead type,” said the boy. “Oh, real delicate,” said the girl. “What? It’s true!” said the boy. “Okay but you don’t have to be so blunt about it,” said the girl. “She’s
pushing up a few daisies is all. She just passed away a little bit. She’s in a slightly better—” “Oh, hush your dang mouth,” said the boy. “Why don’t you hush your own dang mouth before—”

“Is it addictive?” Avery cut in.

“What?”

“The potion. Are there side effects? Is it addictive? Are all those people dependent now? Are they a bunch of drunkies or druggies or—”

“No no no no no no no,” said the boy. “You’re thinking about it all wrong,” said the girl. “You’re still being too suspicious about everything,” said the boy. “You need to stop that,” said the girl. “You’re thinking too much like a nurse,” said the boy. “If there were any side effects it wouldn’t matter anyway because they wouldn’t care because there would no longer be any reason to care,” said the girl. “And they’re not addicted, they’re just… disrealized,” said the boy. “Yes, they’ve disrealized the overall meaning of their lives, which makes it so they no longer feel fear or pain,” said the girl, “because fear only occurs when you think your life might not be how you want it to be and pain only happens when you know your life isn’t the way you want it to be.” “Essentially, they have discovered the tendency for progress to disguise itself as regression and vice versa,” said the boy. “Nostalgia has begun to affect them prematurely because the good old days are today instead of yesterday,” said the girl. “They’ve stopped trying in vain to compare their dreams with their realities because they have no reason to because they already feel fulfilled,” said the boy. “They’ve come to understand that if the earth were any closer to the sun then they would be too warm to be alive and that if the earth were any further from the sun then they would be too cold,” said the girl. “And that’s enough to make
them happy,” said the boy. “Completely content,” said the girl, “because their needs are eliminated from the top down. Or, more properly, what they used to \textit{perceive} as their needs.” “It’s like the exact opposite of an addiction, can’t you see that?” said the boy. “Haven’t you ever heard a song and been filled with the goosebumpy delight that anything is possible yet nothing really matters?” said the girl. “That everything is sad but at the same time everything is really just fine?” said the boy. “That all your problems were just lines in the sand and the music is the flow of a gentle tide that washes them away?” said the girl. “Now multiply that feeling times a billion!” erupted the boy. “Well,” said the girl, “he’s being slightly dramatic. According to grandpa’s calculations the rush from drinking music is between 17 and 22 times stronger and lasts between 450 and 500 times longer than the rush from listening to it. But even so!”

Avery twisted the palms of her hands into her eyes until she was seeing improbable light shows and then waited for her vision to return.

“She still thinks we’re kooky,” said the boy.

“Why doesn’t \textit{he} drink it then,” said Avery. “Why don’t \textit{you} drink it? If you believe in its powers so much…”

“We would be completely unproductive,” said the boy. “Yeah,” said the girl, “if grandpa were to drink, then who would take care of the distillation process? Who would host the bonfires? Who would make the deliveries?” “And if we were to drink,” said the boy, “then who would create the music to be distilled?”

“It wouldn’t be your problem!” said Avery. “You’d all be drunk or disrealized or whatever the heck—”

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“But,” said the boy. “Well,” said the girl. “Uh,” said the boy. Nervously, they looked at each other. “It’s a sacrifice, for sure,” said the boy. “Yeah, we’re not going to sit here and act like we aren’t envious of everyone who gets to drink, but we know we’re doing something important,” said the girl. “It sustains us,” said the boy.

Anticipation brewed in the four interchangeable eyes of the musical children while they explained their and their grandfather’s goal of expansion beyond Millard into a wide-spread, halcyon state of existence, as they called it. If the expansion process was handled properly, they said, then just imagine! “It has calories, you know!” the girl exclaimed. “It’s a viable form of sustenance with free and all-natural ingredients. It could replace the need to eat! Are you processing all this?”

But it had to be gone about in the right way, they said, because, in the wrong hands, the distillation formula could be used as a means to gain political or commercial or religious influence. That was why their grandfather was being so painstaking with his recruiting process and deliberate about expansion. But he liked Avery and he wanted her on the team. He likes a person who is skeptical at first because if you are skeptical it means you are a thinker, was his philosophy, the children explained. He just has some social idiosyncrasies and some trust issues is the reason he keeps her locked up and doesn’t really talk to her and has his charming grandchildren do the talking for him. “But just imagine!” they insisted. “There will be no more crime! No more advertising! There will be no more need for the law, and the law will never be broken! No more pain! No more pollution! No more politics!...”

…The children went on and on making grander and grander claims, and down on the cottage floor, Avery felt herself shrinking smaller and smaller, hardening into a
cannonball with no fuse, and she felt as though she could roll into a corner and stay there for years and years, accumulating dust. Next she knew, the little girl was tapping her shoulder. “What’s wrong, Avery?” she said in a loving voice.

It took all she had not to weep in front of the children. “I miss my life. I miss my husband. I miss my job. I miss…I miss…I miss…” she hid her face in her arms. “He’s taken all of it!” she screamed and blithered.

The musical children went into the kitchen and they must have been convening and scheming, for Avery could hear the sharp edges of their little whispers.

_Pss…Tss…Tss…Pssssss._

They returned with conspiratorial faces. “Okay, we think we might be able to fix this” said the boy. “How about this,” said the girl. “What if we promise to go in secret to your husband, without our grandpa’s knowledge, and explain the situation?” said the boy. “It’s Saul, right? On Checkerberry Lane?” said the girl. “We’ll just explain the situation to him,” said the boy. “We will explain that you are safe and that you have been selected for a very important role in a very important mission,” said the girl.

“And…And…And…Well, is there anything else within reason that you would like us to tell him?” said the boy.

Avery’s face lifted out of her arms to reveal her veiny eyes. “Tell him,” she said slowly, “that you are brainwashed little creeps and tell him not to listen to anything you say.” Her eyes narrowed. “And most of all, tell him not to drink that stuff. Ever.”

It was the little girl that knelt and placed her hand gently on the side of Avery’s head and peered into her face in a way that made Avery feel exposed, as if there were a little planetarium behind her own eyes that she herself didn’t have access to, but this little
girl could see it. “We know you don’t mean that, Avery,” she said. “You’re just sleepy.” Then she winked.

Saul Is Put on the Spot

“Drat!” said the girl. “Crud!” said the boy.

Saul was showing them how to make an owlhouse.

After he invited them into his home and told him a little about his craft, the children became insatiable—they needed to see him in action. Quickly, he whipped together one of his go-to models, a double-decker affair that looked way more complicated than it really was—perfect for an audience. He whistled as he worked and added plenty of flair, twirling the hammer on the palm of his hand and firing nails with rocket-like precision out of his teeth, and the children were not stingy with their applause. They started calling him “Mr. Saul,” and they said, “Ohh!” and “Ah-ha!” and “Woah!”

Afterward, he set up twin workstations on either end of his workbench so that he could coach the children through their own creations. It wasn’t going too well, though. They didn’t even know how to swing a hammer—gripped it way too close to the head, beginners mistake. You’re choking the thing, and you’ve got no power. Here, see, grab it like you’re shaking hands with it. Now swing it from the elbow, not the wrist. This is oak wood were dealing with here, okay kiddies, and you’re going to have to swing from the elbow. Saul explained all this, set them free again.

“Dag!” said the boy. “Ouch!” yelped the girl.

Pinched finger, not good. She cried until her face was a rosy sheen of spittle and tears. They all went upstairs and the girl sat on the kitchen counter while Saul fetched
Avery’s stash of band-aids and medical tape from the bathroom. By the time he returned, she was just sniveling, wiping her face, her hairline damp with sweat. There was no blood or anything so the thing to do was just splint the affected finger with the adjacent finger to make it look like he knew what he was doing. While he was doing this, in a babyish voice, while her finger was being tended to, the girl said, “I’m sorry I ruined the owlhouse, Mr. Saul.”

“Eh,” he grunted, “You’re alright, little lady.”

“Do you live here all alone, Mr. Saul?”

“That I do.”

“Are you married, Mr. Saul?”

“Used to.”

“But then what happened?”

“Well, my wife left me a few days ago. Or…let me see here…a few weeks ago, I guess. A month maybe. Heck, I don’t know. It was recent, okay?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Saul.”

“Eh.”

“Won’t you tell me about her? Please please!”

“Well…let me see…heck, I don’t know…how do you describe a person?…you’re sure putting me on the spot here.”

“Sorrrrrrry, Mr. Saullllll.”

“Eh. It’s just that you asked me too quickly is all.”

“I didn’t mean tooooo.”
“Let me see here. We’re talking about a woman who hums when she eats chocolate. Not much else to say, really.”

“That’s okay, Mr. Saul.”

“Let me see what else. She used to giggle every time she’d put on her robe or wrap herself in a soft blanket.”

“You don’t have to keep telling me stuff if it’s too difficult for you, Mr. Saul.”

“She was a surprisingly good burper. Biting into a popsicle have her the heebee geebees. She had slow-moving bowels. She sang in the shower, okay, damnit?”

“I’m sorry, she sounds real nice, Mr. Saul.”

He snipped the tape on his splint-job. “Eh. Well. Yeah. Suppose so. How’s that finger?”

“It’s feeling much better. Thank you, Mr. Saul.”

He found a frostbitten bag of crystalized parsnips in the back of the freezer and wrapped it in a rag and gave it to girl to put on her finger. “Hey where’s the other one?” he said. “The kid. The boy. Where’d he go?”

Just then the boy emerged from the front hall clasping five to seven jars of the blue liquid to his chest. “Hey, Mr. Saul, what is this stuff! It was out on your front stoop! Just sitting there!”

“Here gimmmy that, gimmmy that. Bring those over here.”

“What is it! What is it! It looks so pretty!” the girl chimed in. “Dare ya to take a drink, Mr. Saul!” called the boy. “Dare ya! Dare ya!” echoed the girl.
The boy hefted the armload of jars onto the countertop and Saul began pouring their contents down the drain one jar at a time, and he said, “Listen, I gotta be getting back to work. You all ought to be getting on your way here soon.”

“Hey, don’t pour it out!” urged the boy. “It might be important!” shrieked the girl. “Wait!” “Hey” “Stop!” “Quit it!” “Noooooo…”

Pink Flame

One by one in a rapid succession, impelled by the tinny anthem of the children’s’ protest, Saul dumped each of the jars, five to seven of them, down the drain of his kitchen sink. The plumbing under the sink began to shudder and rattle and the drain itself began to hiss and seethe and a steam or smoke—one or the other—began to spew up out of the sink. The children only became more adamant in their protest, but there was a cure for this. Saul flicked the switch to start the disposal, which devoured all unwanted noise. Amid the horrible grinding, a pink flame rose up out of the drain of his home—his childhood home, his mother’s home—so he turned on the faucet, but the flame only flared and swelled so he turned the faucet higher and higher yet. Water gushing, disposal grinding, plumbing shuddering wildly, the children screaming things, the pink flame swelled and swelled and then went woosh!, and Saul was inside of it, and there was no more sound.

The children scurried, but Saul remained. He had been the closest and now the pink flame consumed him, and now and now and now. It was not hot, it was not cold; temperature had nothing to do with it. It swarmed and spirled and he watched it slowly—he was right there in the midst of it. Everything was nothing else and Saul didn’t want to get away from it—he wanted to be intensely present, and present as himself, as Saul. He
was unbelievably present, and he could understand, here, now, in the midst of the flame, that it was possible to become so present in a moment, to so thoroughly inhabit it, that the moment simply cannot sustain itself. He was vanishing, yes, but he had realized this from a long distance away, seconds ago—time was distance to him, always had been; his life occurred from there to here, nothing in between but distance, and this was his childhood home. This is Saul, this is me, and I can get right in the midst of it. This is Saul, this is me, I am there-to-here. Not hot not cold, temperature had nothing to do with it, for it was the sound of the flame, or the lack of a sound, really, which is different from silence—he could see that now—that consumed him. Silence is no sound from the outside, but this lack-of-sound was something a deaf person would be able to feel because it emanated from the inward-out, from Saul outward.

He had the urge to hold up his hands and look at them, but no, he decided against it. This is me, this is Saul, forget this body. His body began to feel extraneous, utterly superfluous, which in truth it was and always had been; and now, as the very quintessence of his entity was become vague and not-at-all-finite, he concentrated on what was happening around him, and if he concentrated just right he could imagine that there was no difference between his body and the pink flame that consumed it. Then there really was no difference, and then there was no more body, and then there was no more flame. Meanwhile, outside on the front yard the dew on the sea of leaves glinted like a billion dancing diamonds, jaunty for another sunup.

Avery Gets Yelled At
Avery stirred awake that evening when the delivery man returned from his route. While the delivery man rattled around in the kitchen, the morning’s episode with the children drifted into Avery’s foggy head. Sitting cross-legged on the cottage floor, she thought it was a little embarrassing—the way she verged on losing her composure, had almost wept in front of those snobby little kids. Rubbing her kinked neck, wiping her face, she thought about how nothing ever seemed as important when she woke up as it did before she fell asleep.

Yet here she was, still chained to this pole, and she wanted to go home. That was important.

She sensed the delivery man’s weariness this evening if by no other indication than their quick and easy meal, grilled cheese and tomato soup. He must have been awake…what?…at least 24 hours straight by Avery’s calculation.

She ate her meal on the couch with her knees together, her plate balanced there, and spoke to him gently without expecting a response. “You must be tired,” she said. Her voice was soft and spaced apart. “Your grandchildren are very nice,” she said. Not expecting a response was freeing. “How did their mother die, if you don’t mind my asking?” Even her questions were gentle and passive, a mere curiosity. “Was their mother your daughter or are you their paternal grandfather?” Mindlessly, she stirred her soup. “Did your daughter pass away?” The delivery man’s gaze was fixed on his soup. “How did she die?” said Avery.

She tried to make her voice a croon, a lullaby. “If you want me on your team, you’re going to have to learn to trust me, you know? But that’s okay, isn’t it? I can be trusted and we can take it slowly, okay? Does that sound alright? Because I can’t do you
any good chained to this pole, can I? I would be much more helpful to the team if I could only just return to my husband and lead a normal home life.” At the onset of this speech, Avery had thought she was making a ploy, but the more she spoke, and then with the mention of her husband and of her home, she was beginning to convince herself that it sounded almost alright, becoming involved with this strange fellow’s crude scheme. She set her plate aside and with more fervor now she spoke, “I can be trusted, I promise. I’m ready to be a team player. Is there anything I can do to help you believe me, to help you trust me? Tell me and I’ll do it. I promise, okay? Does that sound alright?”

“Jars” said the delivery man.

“What?”

“I’m running low on the jars. I need you to go to all the grocery stores in town and collect all the jars you can and clean them out. Or you can go from house to house collecting the old ones if they’ll let you. I’m running low on jars. I need jars.”

Avery swallowed. “But then I can go see my husba—”

When the delivery man sprung from his recliner his soup spilled and when he used the sole of his boot to kick-shove the couch on which Avery sat, Avery’s spine jarred straight erect and her soup spilled over. “Forget about your husband!” honked the delivery man like a goose in a nasally voice that sounded like it had been stored somewhere dank and cold and haunted since puberty.

A Hooting

That night, instead of sleeping, Avery lay listening to a hooting owl just outside the cabin. She thought it sounded like tender lovemaking and it was lovely for its contrast to
the sound of the delivery man’s voice when he scolded her. The hooting told her not to worry, that soon it would be morningtime, and then it was morningtime and when she heard the delivery man shift in the attic, the owl went silent. The delivery man went through his morning routine and placed Avery’s breakfast on the end table and left the cabin and that was the last time Avery ever saw the delivery man.

Shackled and Alone

By midnight of her first night alone, her terror mixed with the whiney pit of her hunger to create a scratching, chirping sound in her ears, like squirrels gnawing on nuts.

By the second evening she had already considered the possibility of breaking the most recent breakfast plate and using its shards if she became too desperate.

By the third day she was laving rust-water from the faucet of the half-bath to her lips with the palm of her hand, but all of a sudden, outside the cabin, the owl was hooting and she was asleep with her head on the toilet and it was actually nighttime. She had to think about that.

As she thought about it, she tried to find her reflection in the toilet, but she couldn’t seem to center herself over the pot. She was lightheaded from no food and too much rust-water and everything was swirling. Then she flushed the toilet and for a moment all was still—her world was steady and at peace as she watched the funnel go down. Then the water refilled and set her vision awhirl. She rested her head back down on the toilet.

By the fourth day she forgot which day she was on.
That same night she caught herself—it was a phenomenon like waking up but she was almost positive she hadn’t been asleep—in a state of complete panic in a state of complete blackness, no dimensions to it, just sheer and unrelenting black, and started biting her hand, positively gnawing on it, in order to reestablish that she was a thing that could feel pain. With her teeth dug into her own flesh, Avery wondered halfheartedly if she was long gone into the throes of insanity. She went to the bathroom to drink some rust-water.

Owl

Then there was light, a shy morning brightness, and there was a little white owl perched on the hearth. He was there from her dream the last time she had been asleep but it hadn’t been the first time she met him because she remembered remembering him from either a previous dream or a fuzzy state of reality, years distant.

“Who are you? I can’t see you very well,” Avery told the owl.

“That’s because your hair is hanging in your face.”

“No it’s not.”

“Trust me.”

Avery rolled her head around bonelessly and her hair fell away. “Who are you?”

“I’m your old husband, Saul.”

“Why are you an owl?”

“This is just how things turned out.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” he said, tired and defeated-sounding.
“Are you an owl because I’ve gone completely insane in this cabin with no food and nobody to talk to?”

“Maybe.” The owl bared its wings and hopped off the hearth and waddled over to Avery. Nestling into her, the owl said, “Would you please stroke me, Avery?”

“I think I’m hungry,” said Avery, using a finger to stroke the owl from his forehead to his tail.

“Don’t try to eat me,” said the owl, making a squinty smile with the delight of Avery’s touch.

After a certain measure of time, the owl said, “I have something to tell you.”

“Okay,” said Avery, bored-sounding.

“I’m afraid that this is all my fault.”

“What do you mean, husband?”

“Just that, well, I got caught in a flame of that potion stuff and it forced me into a very strange ecstatic state. Hey, don’t stop stroking me, please.”

“Ecstatic how?”

“Just how you see it. I’m here alone in a cabin with my wife. Just a very peaceful situation. Ecstasy.”

“This is ecstasy for you?”

“It’s sort of like a birdhouse. But now I’m a little concerned you’re caught in the birdhouse of my life.”

“I got stuck here as the result of some unfortunate things which didn’t have much to do with you.”
“Well anyway, that’s nice of you to say. Even if it’s not true. I would help set you free from those shackles, but I can’t because—”

“Because you’re not real?” said Avery, with a little bit of enthusiasm, relatively speaking.

“No. I was going to say, ‘Because I’m an owl.’ So I don’t have dexterous fingers or much strength. Hey, don’t stop stroking me.”

“Could you bring me some food?”

“That brings me to my next point,” said the owl, very squinty. “Maybe you should just go ahead and drink the potion.”

“Why? No thank you.”

“It might be your only way to freedom.”

“Freedom?” said Avery. “Pssssst!” she tried to say but her mouth was too dry and her lips made a flatulence sound.

“What?” said the owl.

“All my life I keep thinking that there’s some magical mindset or…or…or rule-of-thumb that, if I can just find it, it will make everything better. But I don’t think such a mindset exists.”

“Don’t stop stroking me, please.”

“Am I just dreaming, husband?” said Avery dreamily.

“No, the world is dreaming of you. This is a phenomenon called the Dream of the World. Listen, I think you should just go ahead and drink that potion.”

“The Dream of the World?” said Avery. “Sometimes I think…” But
she lost her train of thought, and the effort of getting it back caused her to be aware of the fact that she now lay in a bed in a white room with a window looking into a sky of smeared wet ashes. At her bedside, underneath the window, sat the musical children, composed in their solemnity, looking at their shoes. The girl looked slowly upward to meet Avery’s eyes and then the boy quickly followed and when they began speaking their voices came from faraway, on the other side of the window. With her fingers Avery touched the mattress on which she lay and then touched her own stomach. They felt exactly the same, which is to say, they didn’t feel like they had anything to do with the fingers that touched them—just a numb detachment.

Avery the Nurse

A nurse entered wearing a gauze face mask and began flicking an IV tube over Avery’s head.

When Avery looked back at the musical children, they were on the other side of the window, standing outside in the sky, peering sadly in at her as though they had something important to say. Their little hands were pressed against the window pane and their suits were wrinkled and soggy about their shoulders, their hair stringy and flat on their heads. The nurse leaned across Avery to adjust her pillow and Avery was able to read the stitched lettering rising like the arc of a sun out of the breast pocket of the woman’s scrubs. It read: Bolander Wellness Authority. The nurse smiled down at Avery through her mask, for Avery could see the woman’s eyes scrunch at the creases. When the nurse pulled her mask down over her nose and off her mouth, Avery’s arms and legs filled with blood. The nurse was Avery. She was her own nurse.
“Are those your children?” said Avery the nurse.

“No,” said Avery the patient.

“Who are they?”

“I knew their grandfather.”

“Who am I?” said Avery the nurse.

Avery the patient let her face soften into what she was sure was a soulful expression and said, “You’re alright.”

“Do you miss your husband?” said Avery the nurse.

“Yes,” said Avery the patient.

“Are you going to die, do you think?” said Avery the nurse.

“Yes,” said Avery the patient, “Yes, I think I probably will,” and she turned her head away and soon she fell asleep.

Nocturnal

By midmorning the owl had fallen asleep, plump and poised on the cottage floor, but Avery continued to stroke him and to speak to him. His little skull and his minute, fine-boned skeletal structure felt fragile under the soft fur of his feathers. She knew she shouldn’t be offended at his having fallen asleep, for he was a nocturnal creature and outside the day was blooming and its beams of light burst through the dusty windows.

Soft and sorrowful were her words to the sleeping bird. She told the owl that she was worried about the musical children and about their grandfather, too. Worried about them how? she asked herself. Worried about what they might do to the world but also worried about what the world might do to them. How come those two fears don’t cancel
each other out? she asked herself; but it was a question she couldn’t answer and the strain of it thrust her back into the hospital bed.

Rod Germaine
The sky through the window swirled darkly and deeply blue and the musical children were gone and Avery the nurse sat at the bedside. “I don’t want you to die,” said Avery the nurse.

“I have to,” said Avery the patient. “I’m going to.”

“But how come?” said Avery the nurse.

“Because I have been many days without food and have been drinking filthy water and part of being alive is you need to eat food and drink clean water.”

Just then, her husband’s uncle, Rod Germaine, entered the room dressed like a retiree: loafers, casual jeans, a collared shirt, a brown-leather jacket. The cold, rotten-leaf smell of the outdoors entered the room with him. His hair was combed, and except for a missing incisor, there was nothing about him to suggest that he’d just recently been stupefied in a state of drug-induced oblivion. Avery the nurse whispered to Avery the patient that she would be right back, and she went off to greet him. Then they were discussing something, Rod Germaine’s face composed seriously around his slightly moving lips, his hands clutching Avery the nurse’s arms. Though she couldn’t hear what Rod Germaine was saying, Avery the patient felt there was no reason to suspect that his message was utter nonsense.

Strangely, though, he never even glanced at her, supine there in the hospital bed. He remained focused on the nurse to whom he spoke. And now as the patient lay
watching her husband’s uncle speaking to another her, another Avery, she thought to herself for the first time, *If that is me then who am I?*

After Rod Germaine turned to leave the room, Avery the nurse returned at once to the patient’s bedside. “They still haven’t found him,” said Avery the nurse. “Saul. They don’t know where he is. I’m so sorry.”

“That’s not for you to worry about,” said Avery the patient. Her throat quivered but she gathered herself. “You let me worry about that, alright?”

Detective Tries to Restore Harmony

By evening, someone had come to speak with her. When Avery the nurse reported to her that a young man wearing a pea coat and holding a briefcase and identifying himself as Detective was sitting in the waiting room requesting a conversation with her, Avery realized she had been expecting him all along and that she had been dreading his arrival.

“I don’t want to speak to him.”

“He said you’d say that and he said to give you this note.”

The note was written in Avery’s own hand. At the top it said, “Let’s Get This Straight.” Of course, it was the note she’d written for herself the night before the morning she was captured, but *so what?* she told herself, *so what!*

She flipped the paper over and drafted a brief note in reply to Detective and handed it to Avery the nurse to deliver. Her note read:

*So what!*
With Avery the nurse as their messenger, the man in the pea coat and Avery the patient exchanged notes on the back of the original “Let’s Get This Straight” document until the early evening. The transcript of their communique continued:

*Ma’am, I have come to you in my capacity as a Deputy Sargent of the Bolander Authority for Public Harmony. I would kindly appreciate the opportunity to speak with you concerning your recent abduction (fancy word for kidnapping). We have your captor in custody and are seeking prosecution (fancy word for we’re going to bring down the hammer on him). The lab is performing an investigational analysis (fancy word for test) on the substance which he cultivated (fancy word for cooked up) and distributed to the people of Millard but is yet to determine its specific illicit (fancy word for not nice) property. In the meantime, your abduction is the only substantial (just pretend this word isn’t here) charge against him. Your testimony (your side of the story) would be immensely helpful in bringing him to justice and restoring harmony.

He didn’t abduct me. I was abducted by the Dream of the World. I cannot help with your investigation.

Ma’am, I have reason to believe you may be experiencing symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome. This is a syndrome (fancy word for medical condition) where a hostage (in this case, you, ma’am) experiences an emotional attachment to his or her captor (the man who kidnapped you). I would kindly appreciate the opportunity to speak with you in order
that I might perform the needed psychological evaluation to ensure your wellbeing and to restore harmony.

I know what Stockholm Syndrome is you condescending jerk! And you’re right, I do have it. But so do you. So does everyone. We were all born with it (except for maybe my husband). Quit calling me ma’am.

We have reason to believe your kidnapper might be responsible for the disappearance of your husband.

Don’t you realize that if you have to restore harmony then there was never any harmony to begin with!

Why are you protecting this man?

Darkness as A Mirror

Outside the window an oily, indigo darkness had begun to churn, and it only intensified the harsh florescence of the room and the bed sheets and Avery’s thoughts. She wanted to be there for the owl when he woke for the night, but the question in Detective’s most recent note was microwaving the thoughts in her skull.

Avery the nurse sat at the bedside, her knees together, chomping a fingernail, waiting to deliver Avery the patient’s next note.
Avery the patient released the weight of her own head and studied the nervous young woman about whom she knew everything but understood nothing, for whom she wanted peace-of-mind but to whom she could think to offer only warnings and precautions. She rolled her head away from the young woman relishing the sight of the darkness outside, but if light is a window, darkness is a mirror. Cast unto herself against the pane was the reflection of the little room, but in the bed lay no patient whatsoever. There sat the young woman in her wrinkled floral scrubs next to the bed, her hands now balled up in her lap, her head bowed as if in prayer, and she was alone in the yellow glow of the room, for the bed was empty. This was how Avery saw herself tonight and this was how Avery would know herself, remember herself, now in these final moments as her world grew narrow as that of a sleeping child who dreams only of a bedside lamp. Avery the patient closed her eyes and tried to go to sleep. Come morning, Detective would be gone and the reflection in the window would be dissolved and the bed would be neatly made, awaiting another patient.