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BEASTS AND OTHER STORIES

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Amanda Walton. BEASTS AND OTHER STORIES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION. (Under the direction of Mary Carroll-Hackett) Department of English and Modern Languages, July 2006.

The purpose of this thesis is to create characters who reveal the theme of hope in dire circumstances in short story form. Hope for the characters I create is rare and precious. I'm drawn to characters who are considered unlovable because of their actions, but TO me, they are, in fact, lovable, more normal than we want to admit; this lovability emerges through each story's circumstances. I have found many authors as models of the themes I explore: Flannery O'Connor, Larry Brown, Harry Crews, and Charles Dickens. I am interested in these unlovable characters both in fiction and in real life. I want to know how each becomes the questionable person he OR she is in the narrative, why each commits the absurd acts that become the story's plot. How do they face life's hardest moments? Relationships, with parents or with a significant other, are also explored in my writing, but I usually assume the male perspective, exploring men's feelings of loss, desire for hope. The male character is usually a rough middle-class worker who strives for something better, but in most cases will not get it. I believe that males in our culture are overlooked when it comes to emotion and personal relationships, taught to shut down. Through my stories I work to give them history, individual qualities so that the reader understands the reasons behind their harshness.

Each story is based around scene, employing a lot of dialogue, the element of craft with which I am most comfortable. I create voices true to the middle-class; each character has a distinct voice, mainly from Northern Virginia, but occasionally, I draw voices from my father's home state, Pennsylvania. When I write harsh male characters, my father is the model, with his booming demanding voice. Fiction helps me understand him, helps me understand my world. I tend to write as a minimalist, only using details integral to the story. I strive to create backstory or revelation in one short line; this skill is also a gift from my father, a man of few words. My characters face change, but refuse to accept it. Life is hard and I believe in writing a truthful story, I must reveal what really happens. We are surrounded by loss, all of us; I seek that kind of loss in everyone's story, hoping that readers might feel stronger, less alone, for the glimpse I give them.

BEASTS AND OTHER STORIES

by

Amanda Walton

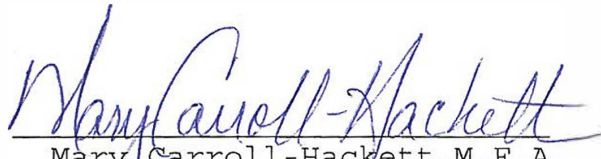
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Master of Arts in English

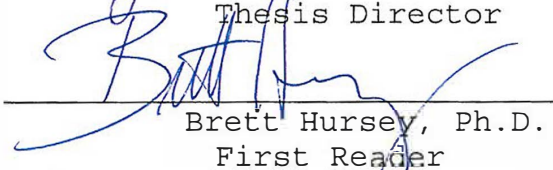
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BEASTS AND OTHER STORIES

BY

AMANDA WALTON

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July 2006

Dedication

For my mother and father - for their support,
understanding, and motivation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and show my appreciation to the members of my committee, Dr. Brett Hursey, and Dr. Craig Challenger, and the other members of the English Department faculty. They have pushed me harder than I could ever push myself and believed in me when I did not. I also want to thank my peers and friends whose harsh critiques made me want to do better every time. Most of all I want to express my sincere appreciation to my thesis director, Mary Carroll-Hackett. Not only is she my director, but she is also my professor, editor, counselor, mentor and friend. Without her, I would never have thought I could create this thesis. This is as much hers as it is mine.

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Beasts

"Well, well, well. Here's Mickey to tell us his reason for ditching us," Clint says with a smirk.

"Man, shut up and give me the bottle," I say, grabbing the Jack Daniels from Clint's sweaty palms. I take a gulp, grit my teeth and feel the burn pour down my stomach. I hear Spencer pissing behind a hay bale. I guess he's already drank a whole fifth himself. I take a drag off my cigarette and say, "I was just trying to see if Jane'd take a ride in my Chevy, but nooo, she's too fucking goody-goody for me. She actually said I was a loser and her parents wouldn't approve."

"She thinks she's better than you," Clint says.

"Fuck her then!" I take another swig of Jack.

I really didn't understand why Jane didn't want to go for a ride. I just bought a '55 Chevy pickup from my neighbor. Cool as shit - the black and brown paint shone for miles. But girls today don't appreciate old cars; they all buy SUV's - some kind of new female power, I guess.

"Aww, did you get your heart broken, Mickey?" Clint teases.

"Again, fuck you, Clint," I say, pointing my finger at him. "At least I got a chick to talk to me." I flick my cigarette into his lap.

Clint jumps up in my face. I know he wants to hit me. Instead, he just stares at me with wide eyes. It's hard to keep a straight face when Clint gets mad; cause he looks goofy when he's mad. He raises his hairy uni-brow so high, he looks almost spooked at something. I know I've hurt his feelings real good. He tries so hard to get a girl, but he is one ugly guy with a face that's a perfect candidate for the before picture of an acne cream commercial. But his ugliness is just one problem; Clint is also a complete jerk. If a girl says no to a date with him, he spits in her face and laughs.

Finally Clint blinks and says, "I have better things to do than to screw around with some uppity bitch!"

Spencer comes out from behind a trailer, zipping up his pants. "Guys! Stop fucking around. Ya'll draw attention to us!"

"Okay, okay," Clint says, backing off to sit on the bale. He's way too drunk to fight me anyways.

We'd come to the circus to get drunk and pick up chicks. But so far we'd only succeeded in the first. The

circus comes to Fauquier every year, to the fairgrounds. It's a big to-do, since nothing else happens here. Nothing but farmers and rich horse people live in this area. So it makes for the perfect time to cause trouble and try to get laid.

The Jack is almost finished and we have the whole night ahead of us. Digging into my pocket, I only pull out change. Shit. Almost nine and Clint's dad will be going to sleep soon. If we got any hopes of getting some more Jack, we better do it now. Clint's dad doesn't give a shit about buying us liquor, as long as we pay him a little extra to sweeten the deal.

"Clint, you got any money?" I ask.

"Nope. What - we almost out?" Clint peers at the bottle in my hand.

"You think your dad will spot us some cash?" I ask, swirling the liquid in the bottle.

"Don't think so. He hasn't worked in a couple of weeks," Clint said

"Damnit. This sucks."

Behind us a crowd of people rushed out of the tents, heading to their trucks. The tent master is yelling goodbyes at the open flaps that serve as exits. Organ

music still plays over the excitement from the audience. An overwhelming smell of dirt, popcorn and hay stings my nose. Carnies stand outside at their trailers scattered around the big tent, cigars in mouth, making inside jokes about the people leaving. Then I spy Nelson Funkhouser coming through the tent flap. I walk toward the line of people, leaving Clint and Spencer behind.

"Ha Ha, the funky Nel!" I say.

Nelson looks up with a jolt and whimpers, "Please don't."

I light another cigarette and, swinging my arm around his neck, drag him back to the hay bale where Clint and Spencer sit. I drop my arm, but quickly grab Nelson's neck with my hand and tighten my fingers, "Funky Nel, I need some money. Me and my guys need some more booze, but we don't got any money.

"T-that's not good," Nelson squeaks.

"Exactly. So what are you going to do about it?" I ask.

"Mickey, I don't have any. My mom says I lose money too fast and won't give me any." He starts to cry, just like he does in the school bathroom every time I'm about to hit him. I hate crying. I let go of his neck, grab his

arm and spin him around to face me. But he just stares at the dirt with tears running down his pale face.

"Funky Nel, You know I hate it when you cry!" I say with my best James Dean squint.

Nelson snuffles snot back into his throat. As he struggles to breathe, Spencer and Clint fall off the hay, laughing.

"Shit," I say and let go of his neck. I walk away leaving Nelson, but turn my head to see what he does. The dumbass just stands there. Okay.

With a smile, I step back to Nelson and grab the back of his neck again. I throw my fist into the side of Nelson's head, hitting his left ear. His big-rimmed glasses hit the ground, and Nelson clutches his face as he bends down to pick up his glasses.

"I want money the next time I see you, fucking bitch!" I say, looking down at him. I let him go and stroll towards Spencer and Clint. Looking back, I see Nelson grab his glasses and run off.

"Oh my God, Mickey!" Spencer screams through laughter. He leans against the bale, clutching his heart.

"Yeah, yeah, funny stuff. But we still ain't got no money for booze. And we almost done with this fifth!" Clint says.

"We'll figure out something. Let's go walk around." I pull Spencer to his feet, grab the bottle and down the last of the Jack. "Let's see what we can get into. We're at the circus, so let's have a little fun!" I spread my arms out wide to imitate the circus master from the show. I pull a comb out of my leather jacket and try to slick back the fallen strands of hair up to the top of my head.

"Hey Spence! You got any pomade?"

"Nope, don't carry it."

"Fuck." It's hard to believe none of us carry pomade since we try to look like Elvis as much as possible. Now that was the age of cool. I can imagine my father when he was seventeen, pulling up to the circus in his Chevy, blasting Elvis and the chicks fawning on him. My dad would have gotten laid.

I look the best because I look the most like Elvis. I have the God-given good looks, black hair, blue eyes and a hair-lip that gives me Elvis' lip snarl, even when I don't try. I'm the cool one out of the group and the guys know it. We don't like the term Rockabilly, but that's what

others call us. We idolize the style of the '50s and we're that smooth.

The white lights strung around the fairgrounds still blare across the light posts and tents. Few people roam around, except us and the carnies. The trailers are loud, full of carnies now off work, laughing and boasting of a job well done. I can hear ice cubes falling into glasses and slamming doors. Trash crinkles under our feet; I'd hate to be the one that has to clean this shit up. So, I add to it, throwing the Jack bottle against a trailer just to hear it shatter.

"Hey, you assholes! Stop right there!" A voice calls out from the darkness beside my targeted trailer.

We turn around. A large man emerges from the darkness, his huge muscles contrasting with the red spandex leotard he's wearing. I can't help but think I've seen him on WWF fighting Hulk Hogan or something. He stares at us for a second with charcoal eyes, then he spits through a Fu Manchu, dribbling tobacco juice down his chin.

"Tough guys, huh? I have a special opportunity for tough guys." As he says this, I hear a low growl come up behind him, but I can't see what made it. "My name is Trevor Barths, Fighter of Beasts." He stretches his arms

out in an imitation of a king addressing his people. "How would one of you badasses like to make some money?"

"Depends on how much...Trevor," I say, crossing my arms over my chest, causing my boys to laugh.

"Good question - one hundred bucks to start off with," Trevor says, winking.

"Hell yeah!" Clint yells, volunteering one of us.

"Step right up then - to my terror dome." Trevor smiles so wide, I can see he's missing his two front teeth. He turns and walks to the dark side of his trailer macho-like, swaying his muscular arms about his body.

The spot lights attached his trailer burst on revealing a cage with a grey tarp covering it. When Trevor walks away from the light switch, I hear more growls and snarls. Then, like a magician, Trevor tears off the tarp, whirling it to his side in one motion. Standing on its hind legs, a huge black bear growls toward the sky through his muzzle, pawing at the air with gloved fists.

I don't know what to say because I'm still not sure of what's happening. I hear a gasp behind me and turn to see Spencer pale like someone just kicked him in the balls. He squints his eyes and shakes his head. Next to him, Clint's head wobbles and his eyes hang half-opened with a dumb look

that says, *That's it. That's all you had to show us.* The bear growls again and I whirl around to face the cage.

"I'll give a hundred bucks to the man that gets in the cage with my bear, also ten bucks every time he pins him." Trevor folds his arms high across his chest.

Clint snorts. "What the fuck!" He is so drunk, he loses his balance and grabs Spencer's shoulder for support. But Spencer looks like he might fall too, only managing a nervous smile.

I look at Trevor and sort of remember this large man from the show, play-fighting with a bear, dodging him and cracking a whip. But I was too busy trying to get into Jane's pants to see what happened between the crowd's oohs and aahs.

Would Elvis have fought a bear? Shit, I know my dad would have; he's one tough-looking motherfucker. My dad left my mom before I was born, so I never met him. But once, when I was in Mom's jewelry box looking for something to pawn, I found this awesome black and white picture of him standing against a stone wall, one foot kicked back for balance. He wore a black leather jacket, unzipped, flashing a thin white shirt. His hands stuffed into the pockets of tight pants perfectly rolled at the hem to show

off black snake leather boots. He had the same snarl of a smile clutching a cigarette, I've seen on my own face in the mirror. But most important - his hair was perfectly slicked back in the cool Elvis style. The pomade in his hair shone so bright in the picture, like the shine off the chrome of my '55 Chevy. The epitome of cool, he didn't take shit from no one - I could tell. From the moment I saw that picture, I knew I'd make him proud.

"I'll do it," I blurt, looking back at Clint and Spencer with a half smile. Clint laughs drunkenly. Spencer, dazed, turns his eyes from the bear to me with panic in his eyes.

"Man, you drunk. You can't fight a fucking bear," Spencer whispers.

"Shit if I can't." I say, rolling my shoulders.

I unzip my leather jacket slowly, waiting for Trevor "Fighter of Beasts" to laugh and say he's just joking. Slipping my left arm out, then my right, I stare at the man. He stares back with his jaw set behind his Fu Manchu. I always thought those mustaches looked cool - but now, on Trevor, it just looks evil.

I throw my jacket at Spencer. He doesn't even try to catch it. It hits him in the chest, and falls to the dirt. "Okay. Let's go."

Trevor smiles and pulls the pin from the lock, opening the gate. At the sound, the bear slumps down to four legs, turning his head to the left like a large curious puppy. As I get close to the cage, the smell of shit makes me cough. I'm afraid to breathe again. The bear's fur hangs clumpy, almost in dreads, nothing like the stuffed bears I had as a kid. He's large but he's muzzled and gloved. All I have to worry about is him sitting on me. So it's cool - I can do this, I tell myself. But my heart says something different. It beats in my ears, like it wants to jump out of my chest and take off running. My head whirls but I credit that to my deep buzz.

I step inside. The gate slams behind me along with Trevor's deep laugh and Clint's witch-like cackling.

"Oh Jesus," I hear Spencer say.

Not sure what to do, I stand there, rubbing my forearm looking at the bear in a fuzzy daze. My whole body feels hot - like I'm about to pass out. My head is heavy and, when I shut my eyes, I can feel myself falling back. I open my eyes when the bear growls again - low - probably

curious about why I'm in here with him. He paces the rear of the cage slowly, grunting and panting. Then, slowly the bear starts to move faster, back and forth, back and forth, his grunts becoming one big growl. Now my head is even more dizzy, and I can't take a full breath. Jesus, I'm going to get mauled. In mid-stride, the bear shuffles over to me. My feet are frozen to the cage bottom. Then, suddenly, he head-butts my hip, sending me to the ground. Sprawled out on the ground, all I can do is watch the bear circle the little cage, keeping an eye on me. Suddenly, the bear hobbles on top of me and I smell his dry, rank breath through throaty growls. Clint still hasn't stopped laughing; actually I think he is laughing more than before. The bear swats me in the face harder than I would ever have hit funky Nel. Then he swats my head again, like he's playing with a ball. Pissed, I kick the beast in the rear left leg, causing him to stumble back. He doesn't fall, just sits, right there on his ass. I jump up and run to the back corner of the cage. Still unsure, I frantically jump to the next corner. Feeling like Ali, I bounce up and down, my fists raised to my chest. The bear takes his time, looking me over like he's a prize fighter watching

his rival spar with the air. With a grunt the bear stands and roars.

"Jesus." I back up and look out at Trevor, for sympathy, just so he would open the gate.

He just smiles.

"Fuck you! Open the fucking gate!" I scream.

"Yeah, open the gate, man!" Spencer pleads. When Trevor doesn't budge, Spencer screams, "Open the fucking gate now!"

The bear prowls toward me and throws his paw against my stomach. His gloves are so worn, I feel his claws rip through the fabric. I fall down, clutching my gut, blood seeping through my white shirt. "Fuck. This is crazy!" I yell as the bear walks to the other end of the cage.

I look up from my crouch and see a little carnie next to Trevor waving his hands frantically in my direction. The little man screams, "This ain't for shits and giggles! Someone is going to end up dead!"

Trevor turns and glares at the carnie, "I'm just having some fun with tough guys." He looks back at me. "No one's died before."

The carnie turns and slumps away, shaking his head.

The bear roars and I jump, grabbing the cage bars to pull myself up, wishing I hadn't skipped gym class to smoke in the boy's room. Behind me, claws rip through my jeans, causing me to wail in pain. The swats keep coming, like I'm a goddamned punching bag. My ass stings so bad that I lose my strength and fall to the bottom of the cage. I curl up, like a coward, waiting to be pummeled to death.

"You baby - get up! Kick that bear's ass!" Clint yells.

I hold my knees tighter to my face and finally hear the cage door squeal open; hands come from somewhere and grab my legs, dragging my limp body to the exit. Still curled up, I hit the dirt. Spencer goes back and slams the cage door. Wheezing and coughing, I look up to see Spencer staring at me. Over his shoulder Clint smirks with half-open eyes. Behind them, I see Trevor walking away from us, shaking his head and laughing.

I stand up, feeling like an old grandpa, trying not to bother my scratches left by the bear. My face tingles, so I wipe it with my hand and pull back blood. Looking down, I see I'm scratched and clawed everywhere. My white shirt sticks red to my skin. My favorite worn jeans are blotched and smeared. They look awesome; now people will know I'm

tough. Twisting my body around to look at my ass, I see it's covered in blood; I look like a middle school chick whose mom forgot to tell the joys of being a woman.

Shit, I realize then - I just fought a fucking bear.

"WOOO," I scream, clutching the top of my head. "Did you guys fucking see that? I fought a fucking bear!"

"Yeeaahh, Mickey. Right on," Clint says, glancing at Spencer.

Spencer pats my back. "You're a bad-ass, Mickey."

"Shit yeah," I scream, punching my fist in the air.

"I fought a fucking bear." I smile, feeling a grin spread against my face.

Stepping up to the cage, I look in. The bear stares back at me. I can't believe I fought a bear. My dad should have seen that. He'd think I'm something - I know that.

Glancing around for Trevor, I lift the pin out of the lock and swing the door open.

"What the fuck are you doing," Spencer asks.

I punch Spencer in the shoulder lightly. "Don't be a pussy, Spence." I start walking across the dark grounds.

Clint laughs and follows me. "Yeah, Spence. Don't be a pussy."

Spencer groans and follows Clint. "Don't call me that."

In the darkness, their footsteps are dull on the dirt behind me as we leave the circus until next year.

Counting Mississippi

"Drake, go potty before you get in that tub!" Momma yells at me from her room.

"I don't need to go." I drop another GI Joe in the tub and watch him pop back up through the water to float on his back. Momma always tells me to go potty before bath time so I won't go in the tub. She says that if I keep peeing in the bath, my skin will turn yellow and everyone at school will know.

I step one foot into the tub and feel the warm water and the foamy bubbles from Elmo's Bubble Bath. Putting my other foot in, I jump up and down, making the foamies fly. Then I plop down into the bath, splashing water all over Momma's pink rug. I hate pink - too girly. My favorite color's green. Taking two of my Army men, I sit them on the jet ski I got last Christmas from Grandma, and speed them through the water. Then, I feel the tingle. I have to go pee and I'm not going to make it to the potty, but Momma will be mad if I don't try. So I'll just let a little out. It hurts too bad to stop so I have to finish. Done, I cup some water in my hands, and lift it from the foamies; the water is a light yellow.

Momma pokes her head in the doorway, putting her brown hair up into a bun. "Jesus, Drake, I swear, I have to do everything for you," she says after seeing me blowing the foamies off my pee water. "We're going to be so late."

She walks over, grabs my head, and dumps me backwards in the water, getting my hair wet. As she pulls me back up, I see her lips have disappeared. She pushes my head to the side real hard.

"Shit, Drake. You fucking pissed in the tub again. How many times do I--" She closes her eyes and sucks air in like when she blows up balloons, "One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi...."

Whenever Momma is mad at me, she closes her eyes and counts ten Mississippis. She gets mad a lot.

Breathing out, she opens her eyes again. "Well, we don't have time for another bath. Just get out." She stands and points towards my room.

Crawling out of the water and covering my bottom, I run past her through the doorway into my room as fast as I can. I hate when Momma sees me naked. Tonight she's making me wear a suit; I hate wearing suits too, reminds me of when I saw Grandpa lying in his fancy bed. Momma and Grandma cried a lot that day. I wonder how Grandpa could

sleep with all that crying, but he did - I guess getting ready for the trip Momma said he was going on. I don't wanna wear a suit.

I jump on my camouflaged bed and find another GI Joe. When I'm grown, I'm going to be a GI Joe. My dad was a GI Joe in the Army, but he's back now. I've seen him once. He had a lot of cool guns. He even let me touch them. They're nothing like my GI Joe's guns. They're a lot heavier and smoother. Seeing the enemy across the room, I point my GI Joe's gun at the blue man on my dresser, shooting him dead. I run over to the dresser and flick Cobra down.

"Drake!"

"Ah," I squeal, hiding by my dresser, so she can't see me naked.

"I told you we got to be at Lucy's engagement party at seven and it's ten til!" she says, grabbing my elbow and throwing me on my Army bed. She shoves my pants on, one leg at a time. "Now give me your arms!" I lift my arms straight above my head and she pulls my shirt down. Then she buttons my shirt, pins on my tie, and ties my shoes. Last, she licks her hands and smooshes my hair down.

Shoving me over to my mirror, she says, "Don't you look handsome? See - you look like such a nice boy. Act like one - for once."

At Miss Lucy's, there's nothing but grown-ups in fancy dresses; no one really pays attention to me. Momma makes me sit on the flower -covered couch and tells me not to move. This couch is hard, not like our brown one at home. Momma says sit still or she will take away my GI Joes. So I do, kicking the couch until Momma walks toward me with a Styrofoam cup. I stop my legs and put my hands on my knees, hoping she didn't see my shoes hitting the couch.

She bends down and says, "Here, have some chips and stop kicking. I mean it." She hands me the cup.

A woman in a red sparkly dress that looks like it came off of Barbie walks up and touches Momma's back. "Cary, how are you? I wanted to ask you, how is your husband? I heard he was back."

"Yes, he's back - but I don't see much of him anymore. We've decided to live apart for a while," Momma says. She looks over at me and, seeing that I heard, grabs the woman by her elbow and pulls her to the other side of the room. I know Daddy came back from the Army with another girl. It

doesn't bother me except that I don't get to see him much. When I do, he still plays with me and my GI Joes. I love Daddy; he doesn't yell at me or make me be around grown-ups all the time.

I start eating the nacho chips in the Styrofoam cup. I like Doritos and Momma doesn't buy them for me much. I eat, looking around the room. It's really red. The walls are red, the couch is red; even the painting on the wall next to me is red. That painting is cool. I've done stuff like that on my art swirl at my friend Jake's house. Momma is still talking to the woman in the red dress. Momma looks tired, even with her make-up face on. She says I make her tired, but I don't know how to quit doing it.

I reach to get another chip, but the cup is empty. I'm still hungry, but afraid to leave the couch, I lick the cup. The cup tastes like nachos, so I bite off a chunk and chew. Wow, Styrofoam isn't bad - tastes a little like those rice cookies Momma eats. Doritos rice cookies. I thought Styrofoam just made cups, but this tastes pretty good. I wonder why more people don't eat Styrofoam. Finishing off my Doritos cup, I slap the couch and run my fingers up and down to get all the orange off.

Then I spot a fish tank - wow. If I sneak over to it, Momma won't see. I just want to see the fish. I look around. Momma's still talking to the sparkly Barbie woman so I slide off the couch. I sneak between two men in suits - they probably feel as stupid as I do. If I hide behind them, Momma won't see me. I sneak over to the tank. Momma is near, but she has her back to me. One blue fish swims with a string of poop behind it. Haha, that's gross. The other fish just follow him. I bet they're making fun of his poop string. Looking at Momma, she still doesn't see me; I can hear her and sparkly Barbie talk about Daddy.

Momma says, "I just hate how he can do whatever he wants. He gets back from the Army with that bitch and doesn't even bother to ask about Drake - just says he doesn't want to be with me. It's not fair. I'm stuck with Drake all day long and I have to tote him along with me everywhere I go."

"Maybe you should call him and have set times for him to take Drake. Or, I can give you the number for my babysitter. She watches my daughter all the time and only charges five dollars an hour. She's young, but she's good," sparkly Barbie says, shoving bread into her mouth.

Momma shifts her feet back and forth, "It's just that...It's just I got pregnant right after we got married and it kind of ruined everything. I mean, I didn't even want children - he did. And now he ignores him. Drake's just a handful. He's six years old and he gets into so much. Jesus, I can't even get him to stop peeing in the bath tub."

"Cary, It can't be that bad--" sparkly Barbie says. "Why don't I help you pay for the babysitter?"

"I'm not asking for handouts," Momma says.

"Well, I just don't want you to have to go on welfare or anything. I mean, my God, how embarrassing would that be." The woman gets close to Momma and whispers, "You've already been through enough embarrassment."

Momma spins around, "Drake! Drake, where are you?"

She's mad again. I start to run to the couch, but Momma catches my arm.

"Drake," Momma says. Scared to look, I shrink my head to my chest. "Drake, throw your cup away, we're leaving."

"Already did," I say with a smile, knowing she hadn't seen me eat it.

"Cary, don't go, I'm sorry. I just don't want you to be embarrassed. Maybe I could take Drake for a few days. "

The woman with the sparkly dress follows Momma from across the room.

Momma pulls her ugly brown coat on and says, "I don't need your pity. And, maybe some of us can't afford babysitters, so he is a burden. And maybe some of us have to live off welfare because their good-for-nothing ass of a husband decided to bang some cunt from the Army. Thanks for making me feel worse." Momma says this so loud everyone in the room stops and stares. She pulls me in front of her and shoves me toward the door. She keeps stepping on my heels.

Getting into our car, I see Momma's crying. Her make-up runs down her face. She puts the key in the ignition and turns it. The car bounces, making a loud noise, and then finally starts. This happens a lot in our car. It's fun - like I'm on a ride about to take off, like at the fair.

"Momma," I ask as she backs out the bumpy driveway. "What's a burden?"

"Don't you worry about that," she says, staring out the back window.

When we start down the road, I look out the window. Momma just hit a lightning bug. It's stuck on the

windshield. I watch until his light goes out. Then I ask, "Momma, what's a cunt?"

She sighs, driving fast, "Your Daddy's girlfriend, honey. She took your Daddy away and now it's just you and me. All day long." She doesn't look at me. "For the rest of my life." She frowns and drives and cries some more.

At home, Momma goes into her room and closes the door. My mouth still tastes like Doritos. Since nachos make a good cup, I wonder what else would. I run to the pantry and find a half-open pack of Styrofoam cups. Throwing them on the kitchen table, I go back to the pantry and find peanut butter, jelly, popcorn cheese, and cinnamon. I pile it all in my arms and carefully shuffle to the kitchen table and unload my stuff onto the table. I take the first cup and pour popcorn cheese in, some cinnamon in the second, then spread peanut butter and jelly into the last two, smearing them with my fingers. Peanut butter and jelly are better cold so I put them in the fridge to save for lunch tomorrow. That's a good idea. Tomorrow, I'll surprise Momma with lunch. I run back to the table to grab the other two cups. In each of my hands I swirl them around, coating all the white. I bite the cinnamon cup.

It tastes almost as good as the nacho cup. I hear Momma open her door, so I grab my two snacks and run to the living room. I slide them under the couch pillows. She'll be mad if I eat before bedtime.

"Drake! Come in here and put all this stuff back where you found it," Momma yells from the kitchen.

She walks into the room, she stares at me. "Why is all this out? You know it's too late to eat!"

"I know," I tease. "I was just making lunch for tomorrow."

"Well, clean it up and go to bed." She grabs a glass beside the sink, fills it with water and walks back to her room.

I run back to the living room. It smells like cinnamon mixed with cheese. I grab my snacks from behind the pillows and tiptoe past Momma's door to my room. I close my door and leap onto my bed. Cheese dust poofs out of the cup. I chew slowly, so the crunch isn't loud enough for Momma to hear. I finish off my cinnamon and popcorn cheese cups. I'm so smart. I'm going to get rich off my snacks. And when I'm rich, I'll buy Momma a sparkly dress - just like Barbie.

Momma didn't get me up this morning. I walk out of my bedroom and into the living room and turn on the TV. All I see are judge shows. I missed my morning cartoons. Momma doesn't have cable - she says we can't afford it. Daddy does though. That one time I stayed with Daddy, I watched cartoons I never saw before.

"Drake, lunch is ready," Momma calls from the kitchen. I forgot to tell her about my lunch. I'll save it for a snack then.

I bite into my bologna sandwich - a lot softer than my Styrofoam. I wonder if bologna will work with my cups. I'll find out soon.

Momma isn't eating. She doesn't eat when she's sad. Maybe she'd eat one of my snacks.

She opens the fridge, stops, and turns to look at me. "Drake? Why is there peanut butter and jelly in these cups?"

I say with my mouth full, "I made those for lunch."

"Made what for lunch? Peanut butter and jelly?" she asks.

"Yeah, in Styrofoam cups." I lick the rest of the mayo off my plate. "I thought of it yesterday at the party."

"I'm not even going to ask," Momma sighs, closes the fridge door and walks back to her room.

I go back into my room and play with my GI Joe s. My men kill King Cobra , so I start over until they kill him again. I look at the clock . It's almost dinner time. My stomach rumbles. I have to go to the bathroom -- bad. I slide off my bed and run down the hall, unbuttoning my jeans. I really have to go. In the bathroom, I pull my pants down and plop on the toilet. I wait, but nothing comes. I push, and my stomach hurts more. I see myself in the mirror on the wall across from where I sit . My face turns red. My neck is big, like my Army men. But nothing comes. I hold my breath and push. My stomach rumbles some more when I let my breath go. It hurts so bad, like I ate knives.

"Momma!" I whine. "Please help."

She comes to the door, "Drake, how many times do I have to tell you to close the door when you use the bathroom?"

"Momma, my tummy hurts and I can't go to the bathroom."

Momma stares at me with her mad face. Then her face changes. "Drake, did you eat those Styrofoam cups? You did, didn't you? Jesus, Drake, no wonder you're clogged. Well, you're just going to have to deal with it - that's what you get for being so stupid."

She walks away. I hear her bedroom door shut and quietly through the wall, I hear her count Mississippis. I bet she'll make me stay in my room without dinner. God, my stomach hurts so bad. Maybe the cups weren't such a good idea.

I hear Momma open her door again; she passes the bathroom and goes into my room. Minutes later, she's back at the bathroom door, dressed in her jean jumper, holding a suitcase. "C'mon, get off the toilet; we're going to your father's."

"But I haven't--"

"Now, Drake." Momma walks down the hall.

I get off the toilet, pull up my pants and hold my stomach. It burns all over. I walk slowly behind her to the car, careful not to jiggle my tummy.

In the car, Momma still has her mad face. "Momma, I'm sorry I made you mad."

"I just don't know what to do with you, Drake.
Whatever - I can't do it anymore. You need to stay at your
father's. He can take some responsibility for you and deal
with your fucking stupid antics. " She stares at the road
and, under her breath she says , "One Mississippi, t wo
Mississippi, three Mississippi..."

"I'm sorry, Momma," I say again. She doesn't say
anything. I turn and look out the window, rubbing my
tummy, hoping Daddy has GI Joes at his house.

Green Felt Box

Levi came through my apartment door with a small box in red wrapping paper. I thought it was unusual how cold the box was as I ripped through the wrapping paper and opened the lid, only to reveal eight chocolate-covered strawberries oozing with red slime.

"What the fuck, Levi!" I yelled throwing the box, scattering the shit-like clumps onto the floor. "You are such an asshole!"

Laughing and lightly kicking the box with his foot, he said, "I thought you'd love it."

Feeling my face burn, I stared at the strawberries.

"Oh, come on, it's funny," he said, slinking over to me and pushing his face to mine.

When he got close enough, lips near touching, I lurched at his face and bit down on his thin, pale bottom lip.

Levi squealed like a rat, trying to pull free. Through clenched teeth, I said, "You know I hate strawberries." Then I let go.

Levi brought his hand up to his mouth covering it like a child. "You stupid bitch. God, Addie, it was a fucking joke."

"Get the fuck out," I said, jabbing my pointer finger towards the door.

"Whatever you want - but I'm not coming back." Levi stood with one hand on the knob, looking at me over his shoulder, waiting for me to change my mind. But I didn't, so he opened the door and slammed it shut behind him.

I walked to the window and watched him get in his car. He peeled out of my driveway onto Route 11. What an ass. I know I overreacted, but I guess I was looking for romance, not a laugh, on our anniversary.

I hate strawberries. I've hated them since I was seven - the way they feel, all prickly, needley, making your gums bleed. Only the devil's food would look so sweet and taste so good, but cut you all the way down. Oh, and the horrible sound your teeth make when biting into one - like ripping through human flesh. Then, when you're finished eating, the taste lingers like cigarette smoke.

In a way I felt cheated - like strawberries and me never had a chance.

I was seven years old and visiting my Aunt Tandy with my mother. Aunt Tandy's tiny house reeked of hamburgers. Where we sat in the kitchen, I heard the sizzle of the beef and watched the steam rise from the pans. At the counter, Aunt Tandy beat slabs of reddish brown blobs of meat with a spiked hammer. I wanted to get out of the kitchen; the mixture of hamburger and blood was too much for me to handle.

"Where's Uncle Lem? -- Mom, where's Uncle Lem? -- Mom?" I said.

"Shh, Addie!" Mom said with that *shut the fuck up or you're be sorry* look. Turning back to Aunt Tandy, she continued to talk. "...so, Tandy, how's your knee been doing?"

"Ah, it's shot to hell. I can't get out of bed any more without rolling like a dying cow - a damned fool I must look like. Getting' old, it's tough, Janice. Fucking tough, like this damn beef. You would think after slaughtering the damned thing, Lem would at least tenderize it for me. You know I got arthritis." She said, never missing a beat pounding the hamburger. Red juice ran down the counter onto the floor. Mom had already stopped

me from drawing in the blood with my fingers by making me sit at the kitchen table behind her.

"Mom..." I whined, pulling at her elbow.

"That's too bad, Tandy. What does the doctor have to say about it?" Mom asked.

"Shit, I don't need no god-damned doctor - I don't trust those-money grubbing bastards." Aunt Tandy wiped the blood off her hands onto her dress.

"Not all of 'em are that bad--"

Determined to know where Uncle Lem was, I yelled, tugging at her sleeve, "Mom!"

"Shut up, girl!" Aunt Tandy said, slamming her mallet down onto the burner. It made a hard final *ting* as it hit the metal. She threw her face towards my mother, beady eyes behind car-framed glasses. "Control your child, Janice! Fuck, what kind of mother are you? Children need to know how to behave," she growled, picking the mallet up and shaking it, small beads of red juice flying at us the whole time.

Aunt Tandy wasn't a very nice person. She was always yelling at me for something - even something small like petting the dog too long.

Mom turned her head towards me and sighed, "Now Addie."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Addie, Uncle Lem is outside picking strawberries," Tandy said, glaring at me. "Go out and help him and get the fuck out of my damned hair!"

I got up and ran toward the door. I slid on the splattered red juice, caught myself and went out the kitchen door. As I reached the edge of the porch, Mom stepped out of the kitchen door and grabbed me by my shoulders.

"Addie, now mind yourself around Uncle Lem. You know he doesn't like your talking. Just be quiet and pick them strawberries," she said.

"I'll be okay. I like Uncle Lem and he likes me," I said, bouncing down the steps.

Uncle Lem and Aunt Tandy were really my father's aunt and uncle. They were as old as the hills they lived on and they didn't like kids much. That was what Mom had tried to warn me about. But, I believed everyone loved me because I was cute and talkative. My mother felt it was her duty to visit Aunt Tandy once a week because she was old - besides we lived right down the road. Only, Mom got a lecture about something every time. If it wasn't the way she

raised me, it was her food, or not taking care of Dad as well as Aunt Tandy did when he lived with them at sixteen. By then he was fifty-five - but they never let anything go.

I skipped down the curvy garden path that went to the little red tool shed where Uncle Lem spent all his time, probably to get away from Tandy's screaming. Uncle Lem was a cattle farmer, but he also had a huge garden full of vegetables I didn't like but was always made to eat whenever I spent time at their house. When I looked around the shed and saw the strawberry vines, my mouth filled with saliva. Uncle Lem stood at the end of the third row, head bent, picking the red berries. His torn-up fedora hat was supposed to keep the sun out of his face. But, if you looked at him, it didn't look like the hat had helped much. His face had been cracked and red for as long as I could remember.

"Hi, Uncle Lem!" I screamed, waving my chunky arm. "Aunt Tandy said I could come help you pick strawberries!"

"Quiet, girl!" he scolded. "If Tandy told you to come then fine, but I don't want to hear your lip."

He tossed me a felt green box for the strawberries. Even with my arms stretched out wide waiting for the box, I missed and it fell to my feet. Uncle Lem smirked and the

little laugh he let out made me think I'd made him happy.

I picked up the box with a huge laugh and rubbed my fingers up and down, playing with the fabric along the insides. It was soft and changed the shade of green with the up and down of my finger.

"Get to picking!" he barked, the smile gone.

I reached up and plucked off a strawberry. The berry felt prickly and firm against my fingers. I rolled the strawberry in my hand and then stopped it between my index finger and thumb. I wanted to squeeze the fruit to see if I could bust it. I looked up at Uncle Lem first to make sure he wasn't looking, but I saw him staring at me from the corner of his eye.

"Sorry," I said, dropping the strawberry into the felt box.

I continued to pick some more, listening to the plop of each strawberry bouncing against one another. But my fingers began to hurt from the prickles and the red juice made them sting more. I thought that the pain should be rewarded by one taste of a strawberry.

I turned away from Uncle Lem to sneak a quick strawberry into my mouth. Just as I bit down, I heard two clicks behind me, like the sound of a fingernail tapping

twice on a metal counter top. I turned around slowly and raised my eyes to the barrels of Uncle Lem's shotgun. Shocked, I dropped the felt box to the ground, spilling all that I had picked.

"We don't eat the strawberries," Uncle Lem said in his smoky voice, "we pick the strawberries. You hear me?" He squinted down at me over the top of his gun.

I just looked at him. He stared back.

"Okay," I said. Slowly I opened my mouth to let the smushed-up remains of the strawberry drop straight from my mouth to the ground. I didn't move. I just stood and watched him continue picking.

Finally, I picked up the green box and the strawberries that had fallen out, walked over to Uncle Lem and laid them at his feet. He didn't even look at me. I turned slowly and walked towards the porch, letting my short brown hair fall across my face, to hide the shame I felt. I climbed the steps and slipped through the door, back into the smell of hamburgers and blood.

No one paid attention as I took the seat behind my mother at the kitchen table and started tracing my finger along the red flower pattern of the table cloth.

Finally Aunt Tandy turned, looked at me and laughed, "Well, I guess Lem is the only one that can shut that girl up!" She and Mom laughed together.

I looked at my finger tracing the flower cloth, waiting for them to stop laughing.

"Uncle Lem pulled a gun on me," I said.

"I *told* you to mind your talking," Mom scolded.

"Well, you probably deserved it, you little brat," Aunt Tandy said. "So shut the fuck up and let me and your mother talk in peace."

I sat there and traced and traced the flowers, the tablecloth cold and slick - feeling my green insides growing red and prickly - raw with the hate of strawberries.

Translucent

Trees rolled by Cheryl's window and she tried to be quiet so she wouldn't say something stupid to Sammy. She caught glimpses of herself in the window every time a headlight passed, showing her skin's pinkish hue. Her makeup was long past its prime, black mascara rubbed under her eyes and blue eye-shadow balled in the creases of her eyelids.

Sammy switched the CD in his player to Judas Priest. Cheryl left the CD in his car, the last time she was in it, hoping Sammy would play it for her when she rode with him.

"Aw, my favorite," Cheryl moaned, too tired to say any more.

Sammy looked over at her and smiled out of the corner of his mouth, "I know."

Cheryl smiled back and started tapping her fingers to her thigh. They had been at Ricky's Bar and Grill 'til it closed. Sammy had a lot to drink, but not as much as Cheryl, so she figured it would be safer for him to drive.

"Oh, fuck!" Sammy yelled.

She turned her head and saw his Marlboro Red burning in his lap. He slapped his crotch repeatedly, sending the car swerving all over the road.

"Sammy!" she screamed. "Watch the fucking road!"

He jerked the car to the right and pulled onto the side of the road, almost into the ditch. He stopped so quickly their heads slammed back into the headrests.

"You all right?" Sammy asked, stomping at the floor, trying to smash the cherry.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Did you get the fucking cigarette out?" she asked with a little laugh, still shaken from the near crash.

Sammy looked at Cheryl and grinned. "Yeah, I'm such a dumbass."

Sammy's smile made Cheryl ease up - she couldn't ever really be mad at him, so she just smiled back at him.

They had met at the 24-hour diner, Frost, two years ago. Cheryl had just been dumped by the lead singer of a local band. Sammy walked into the diner decked out in a Western style shirt with horseshoes on it, hair slicked back with pomade and tattoos covering his scrawny arms. He carried a guitar - Cheryl's one weakness; she always went

for guys in a band. She felt invisible all through high school, guys never really talked to her. So, after graduating, she started getting tattoos and piercings to snatch up band members. They made her feel noticeable.

Sammy sat at the table across from hers, and every now and again, they would meet eyes. Finally he spoke.

"Hey, I like your piercings. They look awesome."

Cheryl had two lips piercings in her bottom lip.

"Thanks, I got them a few months ago. Hurt like shit."

She ran her hands through her hair. She did that when she was nervous. "Um... I like your tattoos."

Sammy jumped up and slid into the seat next to Cheryl. He lifted his sleeve and showed her his tattoos of pin-up girls in tiny outfits. "This was the first one I got. I was seventeen."

"That's so cool." Cheryl really didn't like them because they were derogatory towards women, but he was cute and she thought he might ask her out.

Cheryl went to the diner every night after that to sit and talk to him. They were both twenty-two and had similar interests in music - metal. He wanted to be a rock star and was in a new rockabilly band, playing lead guitar. Cheryl told him she didn't know what she wanted to do. She

really wanted to be a Hollywood make-up artist. But she didn't tell him because she thought he would make fun of her or think she was lame.

After hanging out awhile, she got attached to him. Sammy said he didn't want a girlfriend because he was always touring with his band, doing fairs and small clubs. Cheryl ignored that. They never made it official because Sammy didn't want to, but they were together from then on. They never really went on dates - just to the diner to hang out with friends. He called when he wanted to fuck or go drinking, and Cheryl went. All she had was her job at the salon, washing hair, and Sammy looked like he was straight out of the rocker magazines. She would do anything for him, because, asshole or not, she loved the way other girls turned to stare when they walked into a room. All the girls who hung out at the diner wanted Sammy, and for now, he was Cheryl's.

Cheryl had never known her father. He left before she was born. Her mom told her it was a one-night stand after a Tom Petty concert. Cheryl imagined he was Steven Tyler and wished for years he would come back and get her to take her out on glamorous tours. Her mom married another man, Tucker, when Cheryl was four. Tucker was an accountant and

wore suits to work everyday. He didn't have any hair and talked through his nose. Cheryl couldn't believe that her mom let her father get away, just to marry a boring man like Tucker. So, when Cheryl saw Sammy, she knew he was the complete opposite of Tucker. That attracted her even more.

Next to the car, bullfrogs burped from the pond. Through her open window, she peered to look at Old Mill Pond, imagining the frogs from the Budweiser commercials. Cheryl couldn't see much of anything this late at night - just trees silhouetting the pond. Every now and again, a breeze blew, swaying the trees back and forth.

Sammy put his hand on her knee - his sign for *wanna fuck*? She turned her head and he kissed her. She smelled the sweet staleness of cigarettes that engulfed his brillo goatee from seven years of smoking.

She ran her hand through his short brown hair and pulled at it. He bit her lip and she groaned through a smothered smile. The duct tape holding Sammy's seats together scratched her skin, so she lifted her arm higher and rested it on his shoulder, pulling away from the rough cushion. He always said he loved this car, a beat-up Chevy

Cavalier, and Cheryl wondered why he didn't take better care of it. Every time she got in it, a new cigarette hole was in the upholstery or another crack in the dashboard.

Old Mill Road was empty -- usually was at two in the morning. Sammy pulled away from Cheryl and turned off the engine, but left the music on. He slid between the seats to the back. She followed, while he shimmied his pants around his ankles. On top of him, she pulled off Sammy's Elvis Costello glasses and looked into his gray eyes, caressing his stubbled face. She wanted to tell him she loved him, that she'd miss him when he left for his tour. But, instead, she peeled off her Guns N' Roses tee shirt and pressed closer against him.

Sammy was already sweating. Cheryl never thought she could enjoy the odor of B.O. but with Sammy, it didn't smell so bad - like his stale goatee smell, it was just another part of him. Every time he left to go on the road with his band, Cheryl wrapped his work shirt around her pillow, imagining him next to her.

Cheryl lifted her body up and unbuttoned her jeans, then leaned and contorted her legs behind her, wiggling out of the stiff denim. She'd never figured out how to undress sexy in the backseat of Sammy's car. Relieved that she

wore her lace thong and not her torn grannies, she threw her left leg around Sammy, snapped off her bra and propped her arms against the tiny headrest.

Sammy grabbed himself and found her after a few stumbling attempts. It always hurt, like at the end of her period trying to shove another rod of cotton up inside. She took a deep breath and he pushed harder. It never got better. It wasn't that Sammy was big or anything; she just didn't think her vagina was meant to be jabbed, especially not in the backseat of a car. But the car was the only place they had. He lived with his parents when he was home and Cheryl lived with her mom and Tucker.

Finally, he was inside of her. It still hurt. With every thrust, it felt like his dick was jabbing her uterus, pushing it toward her stomach.

"God, Sammy, I don't know how long I can do this," she said, clenching the headrest with her fingernails.

He didn't say anything, but pushed harder and faster, trying to finish sooner. Cheryl just wanted him to stop but she didn't want to piss him off. Whenever they had sex, Cheryl always felt this pain. Sammy yelled at Cheryl in the past for making him stop in the middle of sex - she

thought she was tearing - so she just kept her eyes closed and prayed for it to be over soon.

As she slid up and down, sweat dripped off her chin. The windows steamed and a few beads of water ran down. She ignored the bullfrogs in the background and Rob Halford's faint voice belting out "Turbo Lover"; the only sound she heard was Sammy's heavy breathing. He never made much noise even when they talked. So, she didn't expect much. Sammy was only quiet with Cheryl. At band practice he was the one always telling dirty jokes or singing Van Halen songs with David Lee Roth's jump kicks to get a laugh. Sammy usually was the life of any party; Cheryl wished he would joke and play with her like he did with other people, but she figured if Sammy didn't want to be with her, he would have dumped her a long time ago.

Cheryl could tell he was about to come; his legs were quivering and jumpy. She pulled her face from Sammy's neck and looked at him. His mouth opened wide, his lips trembled a tiny bit, and then closed shut. His eyes focused and he looked at her for a second.

"All right, we better get home." Sammy said and he squirmed his body, letting her know to get off of him.

She swung her legs over and plopped down next to him. Pulling her hair back in clenched fists, Cheryl sighed and laid her head against the back of the seat. Sammy always finished fast, which was fine for Cheryl. Even if she could orgasm, he would always be first.

Cheryl's stomach began to cramp already. She would feel it for the next couple of days. The burn between her legs hadn't let up, and she swore that she'd never fuck again; it just wasn't worth it.

"Sammy?" Cheryl whispered.

"Huh."

"I'm gonna really miss you. I hate saying goodbye almost every fucking weekend." She rolled her head toward him.

Headlights flared behind them and they ducked their heads down, resting them on their knees. The car slowed a little when it went by Sammy's car, and then sped up after it passed. Cheryl peeked her head up to see if more headlights were in sight. Nothing - so they straightened up.

"Yeah, well, gotta do what you gotta do, right? I'll be back in a few days." Sammy pulled on his black jeans and zipped them.

"This fucking sucks. I'll miss you." She was always missing him.

"Yeah, well, you'll live," Sammy replied.

Cheryl wanted him to say he would miss her too - that he hated to go. But Sammy didn't say any of that. He had to be a fucking tough guy and hold his feelings in - if he even had any for her. She knew that when he was on the road and had groupies all over him, he cheated on her. Like he said, he didn't want a girlfriend, no matter how much Cheryl wanted him. He was hard. Cheryl just hoped she could change all that and become "the one." She grabbed her jeans and yanked them on. They felt looser than when she had them on the first time.

Sammy got out of the car, stretched his arms in a big Vee, then opened the driver's side door and sat down in the front seat. He started the engine and said, "C'mon, I'm tired."

"Yeah," Cheryl said, snapping her bra back on. She squeezed between the seats and edged her ass down, swinging her legs over. She reached back and grabbed her shirt, scrunched it up over her head and rolled it down for cover. She frowned as she held the hem of the shirt; it was all

stretched out, distorting Axl Rose's pretty face, making him look more like Meatloaf.

During the ride home, they didn't talk - only Judas Priest blaring through the speakers. Old Mill Road was deserted. The moon shone down at the countryside, hitting the aluminum roofs of the barns and reflecting back at Cheryl.

Sammy turned into Cheryl's driveway and stopped fast, the tires spitting gravel.

"Okay, well, see ya later," Sammy said.

"Oh... okay. Call me tomorrow before you leave?" she asked.

"No problem," he said. But Cheryl knew she would be the one who called.

She leaned forward to kiss him and got a dry peck. "I'm tired, Cheryl," he sighed. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Yeah, sure. Bye." She bit her lip and got out, quietly shutting the door. He revved his car and backed out of the driveway.

Cheryl watched him drive away. Maybe it was useless for her to continue this relationship. It was going

nowhere. But the thought of not having him to call, or seeing him sitting next to another pretty girl made Cheryl's heart jump. She couldn't give him up.

"*Fuck!*" she screamed, letting it echo off the other houses. She knew Sammy didn't love her; she was just an easy lay to him. Their whole relationship was based on beer and back seat sex.

She stood in the driveway looking at the stone walk that led up to her house. The streetlight next to the house shone the way. It had just rained; the rich asphalt smell rose from the driveway. Cheryl sat down on the stone wall that followed the walkway and lit a cigarette. She wasn't ready to go inside to face sleep - to force her eyelids closed.

At her feet, the rain flushed a pink, slender worm onto the walk. The light passed through the worm's skin, skin so thin Cheryl thought it resembled a plastic bag, almost see-through. It wriggled; the desperate long and short strides of his convulsions led him nowhere. Cheryl felt sorry for the worm's attempt to squirm away because she knew it had no place to go. Its home had been washed out. She smoked silently watching it twist in panic.

Finally breaking her worm-induced trance, she shook her head and threw her cigarette into the grass. She rose and walked toward the house. She opened the front door and instead of going into her bedroom she fell onto the couch. She turned the TV on and rubbed her cramped stomach.

Cheryl woke up the next morning, still on the couch, to the sound of the lawn mower outside. Her mom Tammy, had decided to mow the lawn early to get back at the neighbors for leaving their dogs out to bark all night. That was her mom's standard retaliation. Cheryl got up and walked outside, stopping just at the edge of where the stone walk and wall met. Tammy saw her standing there and rode over. She turned the mower off and asked, "Have fun last night?"

"I guess so," Cheryl said. "Why are you mowing so early?"

"You know, damned dogs. Couldn't sleep for hours."

Cheryl rolled her eyes. "Why don't you just tell them to put the dogs in at night?"

"Because, I don't want to cause a problem." Tammy wiped away a sweaty strand of hair.

"God," Cheryl said. Her mom always was passive aggressive.

"You don't look so good. Why don't you stay on inside?" Tammy said squinting into Cheryl's face.

Cheryl stared distantly away toward the neighbor's yard.

"Ya know, I heard you come in last night," Tammy said.

Cheryl looked at the ground. "Oh, yeah."

"Yeah, you shouldn't scream that word so loud around here. It's not something I want the preacher down the road to hear."

"Sorry," Cheryl said. She turned and walked farther down the walk, away from Tammy, toward the driveway.

Then she saw her worm still on the stone walk. Dried up to a grayish brown, he looked like a burnt onion peel, almost transparent, barely inches from where she'd seen him the night before. All that struggling for nothing.

"That's sad," she said.

"What's that?" Tammy yelled.

"Oh, nothing." Cheryl said, turning to face her.

Tammy frowned, started the mower and slowly rode away.

Cheryl sat down on the wall; Sammy was gone and off to fuck someone else. But he'd be back, back to pick her up in his car - and she'd go. She looked at the worm,

thinking her desperate struggle to keep Sammy would lead her nowhere too. In the end, she'd dry up also. She leaned her head back in the morning light and let the sun do its job.

Walls

Trent pushed a knocked-down stone with his foot, rolling it to the nearby pile of old stones, all covered with dry cement and chipped up from the chisel. He hoped to keep the stones intact so he could still use the ones his father had years before. Trent was rebuilding his father's stone wall in the dining room. Looking at the wall, Trent saw the last stone still holding strong to the foundation, not ready to come down. Trent reached out and felt its cold and grainy roughness. Then he wrapped both of his hands around the stone to pull it free. It wouldn't let go. Trent felt almost ashamed to chisel it away. But he pulled the chisel and hammer from the back pocket of his Dickies and pounded at the cement behind the stone, finally cracking it away from the foundation.

From upstairs, Trent heard a gurgling cough. His father's cough got louder and more forceful, a pounding noise through the floor boards. Sometimes Clyde, his father, coughed so hard the cheap bed moved a little across the floor. Trent looked up at the ceiling, trying to guess if this was the last cough - the last hack. He almost wished it was. No man should go through so much pain.

Clyde had been coughing up blood for weeks but wouldn't let Trent take him to the hospital - the old man didn't believe in doctors. The coughing didn't stop and Trent, clutching the stone, rubbed his calloused finger over its ridges and finally tossed it into the rejected stone pile.

He walked through the living room and climbed the creaking wooden stairs. When Trent was young, the stairs had been so loud that he could hear Clyde coming home at night, heard every long, tired step he took. Clyde and Trent's mom used to tuck the young Trent in at night. After she died, Clyde came home way past bedtime. Trent, by then, old enough to tuck himself in, remembered a few years ago hearing his father's feet on the stairs. He sat up in bed and waited for the knob to turn, like it used to many years ago. Hoping Clyde would at least check in on him. The stomp of the boots paused at his door. He whispered, "Dad?" and listened for a few seconds until he heard the boots continue on down the hall to the end bedroom. From then on, Trent stopped waiting. He just listened to the stairs creak and knew his father was home.

Just outside Clyde's room, Trent heard the coughing stop; he opened the door and saw his father lying in bed. Clyde had always been a skinny man, but strong. Years ago

he had lifted the couch by himself whenever Mom needed to vacuum the living room. Trent walked over to the side of the bed and pulled up Mom's rocking chair, waiting for Clyde to open his eyes. He studied his dad. Clyde's face showed creases from long days in the sun and scars from rubbing stone dust deeper into the pores on a hot day. The old man had never worn gloves. Clyde unclenched his eyes and peered at Trent.

"What?" Clyde rasped.

"Just making sure everything's all right."

"I'm fine."

"Why don't you let me call a doctor?" Trent asked.

"I don't need no goddamned doctor. Just let me die in peace," Clyde grumbled.

"Dad, please - a doctor could at least make it easier." Trent looked at Clyde's hand lying at his side on the bed. Rough from the stone, deep ruts cut across the meat of his palms. When Trent was a kid, Clyde regularly needed stitches or Super Glue to close them. But as stubborn as Clyde was, he let them heal as ruts. Those hands cradled rocks like babies, even when they cut like razors. Trent reached out to grab one of those calloused hands.

Clyde snatched his hand up fast to his chest and glared at Trent. "Son, I don't need to be babied. Just leave me alone." He turned his head away and forced his eyes closed.

Trent got up and walked out the door, shutting it quietly behind him.

Even though Clyde refused to see a doctor, Trent had called his cousin Barbara. A doctor at Fauquier hospital, she'd come last month to check him out. She'd listened to the rasp deep in Clyde's chest and studied the rust colored phlegm that Clyde had been coughing up. Trent knew from her years of experience that she was right when she said Clyde had lung cancer. She told Trent that he'd probably had it for years. The way Clyde looked now, she'd said he didn't have too much longer - a few months at most. Trent broke the news to Clyde. Silent at first, Clyde had, after a few days, called Trent into the room. He'd told Trent in one sentence he wanted to die, not fight it. Trent just nodded.

Clyde told Trent to call the funeral home before he died so that everything would be set. Clyde wanted to be buried out in the yard - his one wish. Here, at his home. Trent guessed it was because he spent so much time out

there that he would want to be in the middle of it all.

Over the years, when they got home from a job site at the end of the day, Clyde always went straight out to the yard, back to building walkways, walls, patios, benches, posts, and whatever else that could be made out of stone. One day, Trent believed, the whole lawn would end up being stone.

Trent dialed the number for Moser's Funeral Home.

He hung up the phone with the undertaker, he just had to go over there and sign some papers, then, everything would be set to go. Trent went back to the wall that separated the dining room and the den. The wall was eight feet wide but only six feet tall - all the rooms had low ceilings because the house was built in the early 1800s. But it suited Trent and his family. The wall was bare, nothing but old brownish cement plastered up. Trent grabbed his hammer and swung, breaking up the cement. It cracked, causing dust to fly up into Trent's face.

Trent had gone to work for Clyde when he was thirteen, wanting money to go to the movies and buy baseball cards. The old man may have been a hard father, but he was an even harder boss.

"Goddamnit, Trent. Stir that shit faster - we don't got all goddamned day," Clyde had yelled when Trent couldn't mix the cement in the trough fast enough. He didn't have the muscle for it yet. Trent had kept his back to his father and continued to stir with tears rolling down his cheeks. Trent soon realized that the faster he stirred the cement, the less Clyde talked to him. It wasn't easy but Trent stayed on with him. Now, at thirty-three, he couldn't think of anything else he wanted to do but be a stonemason. Trent had a few dates in the past, but he was so busy with work, girls got in the way. Then his father got sick, and he didn't have time for anything. He spent his evenings making sure Clyde was comfortable.

Clyde told Trent that he had built the wall when he and Mom moved in this old house forty-five years ago. Clyde had knocked down the wooden wall that used to stand between the den and dining room, and put up a stone one. Trent still remembered the look of pride in his father's eyes when he walked past that wall. His best work. When Trent's mom was alive, she sang that song, *Like a Rock* by Bob Seger, to Clyde. It made him smile; sometimes they

danced in the dining room. Trent never forgot the loving looks his parents exchanged as they shuffled to the tune from Mom's lips. The song was right. Sixty years as a stonemason had made Clyde strong and hard to get to.

But, those had been the good days when Clyde had come home from work and eaten dinner with Trent and Mom. Now Trent looked at the dining room table shoved into the corner, remembering the stories and jokes.

"Ah, Zachary told me he's getting some Mexicans," Clyde said, shoveling all he could fit on a fork into his mouth.

Mom slapped his hand. "Clyde! They're Hispanics, not Mexicans. Watch what you say around Trent."

"Trent! He knows I don't mean no harm, don't ya?" He poked Trent in the arm with his fork, smiling and winking. The good times hadn't lasted.

Mom died in a car crash when Trent was eight. She'd been burned so badly that Clyde had to cremate her. Her ashes rested in an urn on top of the TV. The days at the dinner table were over after that. Clyde withdrew from everyone.

Trent shook his head and put the hammer down, tired of fighting with the cement. He walked into the living room and turned the TV on.

Trent woke the next morning on the old checkered couch with a damp pillow stuck to his cheek. He drooled a lot in his sleep and always woke up with his face sticky. He sat up, rubbed his wet skin and hair, then turned the TV off and walked upstairs to check on Clyde.

"Dad?" he whispered.

Clyde, still in bed, did not move. Trent walked to him and leaned over. A metallic smell rose from his father's lips. Clyde's eyes twitched; his chest bobbled a little - not a lot, but enough for Trent to know he was still alive. Trent straightened up and sat down in Mom's rocking chair. The woven wood groaned under his weight and Clyde's eyes opened quickly as he turned his head toward Trent.

"Sorry. Forgot how noisy this chair is," Trent said.

"Damn, like to give me a heart attack," Clyde said, easing his head back into the pillow.

"How you feeling today?" Trent turned on the TV in the corner, wanting to catch the weather. Winter was coming,

and he hated to work outside in the cold. But with clients waiting, he had to continue Clyde's jobs.

"Like shit...nothing I can't handle." A trace of a smile started at Clyde's mouth. "Did you call the funeral home?"

"Yeah, it's all set. They'll bring you here for a wake and then I'll bury you under the pear tree," Trent said. "That's it, right?" Trent still felt awkward talking about his father's death to Clyde himself. He didn't really want to think about it. He still had so much to say.

"Yeah, that's it." Clyde said. "Trent?"

Trent sat up in the chair, causing the wood to shift and moan again, "Yes, Dad?"

Clyde reached to the night stand. "Here." He handed Trent a medium-sized, grey stone in the shape of a heart that Clyde had chiseled for Mom years ago for her birthday. He smiled and laid his head back down on his pillow and closed his eyes.

Trent looked down at the stone in his palm. A stone. He gave him a stone. Trent curled his fingers around the stone, held it so hard his knuckles turned white. A fucking stone.

Trent got up and slammed the door. Walking past his bedroom, he threw the stone in his trash can, the paper in the can softened its fall.

He stormed down the steps, grabbed his flannel coat and walked out the front door onto the porch. He lit a cigarette as he sat on the porch swing, lacing up his steel-toed boots. He picked at the dry cement that turned his black boots grey. A tear fell on the boot, and Trent watched it expand into the leather, shining that one spot. Trent wiped the other tears away, then got up and walked down the long stone porch. Tiny cracks had opened in the cement that he'd need to soon fix too - it seemed that Clyde's work was disintegrating along with him. Throwing his cigarette out onto the grass, Trent opened his truck door and hopped in. He threw the truck in reverse. The wheels spun, spitting out gravel, then caught, and he backed out of the driveway.

After a long day of work, Trent opened the front door. Without taking off his boots, he slouched down on the couch. He didn't want to move but then heard the coughing. Sighing, he headed up to check on Clyde.

He opened the door and found Clyde hunched over on the side of the bed, hacking toward the floor. Trent walked

over and saw the lumps of blood mixed with strings of spit falling from his father's mouth.

"Dad? You all right?" Trent said, crouching down. "Dad?" He pushed up at Clyde's shoulders, causing him to roll back onto the bed. One of the old man's hands hung limply over the side of the bed, the other draped itself over his stomach. Clyde struggled to breathe, but kept his eyes on his son. Trent straightened up and stared at his father - Trent's breath quickening.

After a few minutes, Trent bent down to Clyde's face, his father's eyes following. "Dad?"

Clyde didn't say anything, but his lips forced a little smile. The clock ticked beside the bed. Trent watched, but Clyde didn't make any more movements.

Trent reached down and grabbed the hanging arm, feeling the old man's wrist. He couldn't feel a pulse. He held Clyde's hand in his own, closing his eyes. The sandpaper palm still felt warm. Trent let go of his hand and reached to the night stand, calling an ambulance, following procedure.

The next afternoon, workers from Moser's Funeral Home brought the body and set it up in the living room in front of the TV. Trent signed all the documents and watched them

leave from the window. It was four in the afternoon and Trent needed to start digging the grave soon. There would be no wake, because Trent had no clue whom to call. Clyde didn't have any friends these past few years. Trent went to the coffin and opened the lid. Clyde's creased face looked relaxed and peaceful, in a way Trent hadn't seen in a long time. Trent felt tears build, but blinked them away. He carefully closed the lid. The silence of the once loud room ticked around him. He had Moser's set the coffin in front of the TV, Clyde's favorite spot; he'd sit for hours watching reruns of *Colombo* and *Murder She Wrote*. Finally, Trent turned and flipped the TV on, not caring what was playing, just wanting some noise.

Trent walked into the dining room and stared at the wall, hating himself for not trying harder with Clyde. Tears rolled down his face. He sobbed and finally threw a fist at the cement wall.

"I'm such an asshole," he gasped and turned to the coffin. "You were such an asshole." Trent slid down to the floor, propping his elbows on his knees and pushing his hands against his forehead, trying to calm down. The tears stopped. He spotted his mallet and reached for it. He propped it under him as he got up from the floor.

"Fuck!" He swung the mallet at the wall and the tears came again. The cement cracked. Trent swung harder and faster, grunting against the swings. The harder he swung, the deeper the cracks grew. Dust swirled around, never settling from the constant motion. He beat the wall so hard his hands bled. He beat more, until he saw the steel square grid embedded in the cement. But instead of stopping, he hit harder, the metal grid peeling with each blow. Finally, he could clearly see the whole of the grid. When Clyde trained Trent, he always told him of it's importance; the thick metal held the foundation for the cement to be poured into place. The spiraled steel was the stronghold of the whole piece.

Trent threw the mallet down with a thud, reached into the wall and yanked at the metal, feeling the gritty cement drive into his cuts. He yanked with such force that the cement gave way, letting the grid come loose. Trent stumbled back with it, falling onto the floor, grid on top of him. His breath came quickly, moving the weight of metal up and down on his chest. With all his strength, he threw it from his body and stood up. He walked to an upside down bucket and sat down, waiting for his breath and heart to slow.

Trent looked through the bay window to see darkness surrounding the house. He still had to dig the grave. Trent rubbed his face, stone dust scraping his skin. He stood and went back to the coffin, lifting the lid and looking in. *Like a rock*, Trent thought. Suddenly he knew what he had to do. He reached in and put his arms under the middle of Clyde's back and legs. The body gave a little, but not much. It was still stiff, but Trent had handled bags of cement heavier than Clyde was now. He carried the body into the dining room, over to the wall and lowered the left side of his body, letting Clyde's feet touch the powdery ground. He let go of the old man's legs, swung his arms against Clyde's torso and pushed the body standing, back into the opening left by the removed grid. Trent unhinged his father's arms. They popped as he straightened them, the bones snapping by the stretch. Trent grabbed the grid with one arm and dragged it over to the wall. Positioning it in front of Clyde's body, under his chin so he wouldn't fall out, Trent ran outside to the shed to mix more cement. He'd always hated to stir the stuff; sometimes it got so thick that it wouldn't budge at all. But now he mixed as if he'd found new strength. *Stir that shit faster, Trent*. He finished and pushed the wheelbarrow through the front door, to the dining room;

globbs of cement dropped along the stone walkways and carpets. Mom would have been pissed.

With the grid still propped against Clyde, Trent spread Clyde's feet apart. It reminded him of a poster his art teacher in high school hung over her desk. Da Vinci, he thought. A naked man in a form of a circle, arms and legs stretched to his limit, holding up something invisible. He snatched his shovel and sloshed cement at his father's feet. Then, he grabbed a stone from the new pile and placed it at Clyde's foot. He grabbed another one and shoved it in next to the newly placed stone. Stone work was like a puzzle; each piece had to fit against the next without squeezing cement through the crack. If a stone was too big, it had to be chiseled until it fit. Trent worked steadily - stone, hammer, chisel.

After Clyde's legs were covered, Trent ran out and dragged the hose in to make sure the cement wouldn't dry. He shoveled cement up to Clyde's chest and fit more stone in place. Trent worked until the sun appeared over the forest behind the house. He worked around Clyde's face, saving that for last, building the stone up to the ceiling.

Trent stepped back; Clyde's face was framed with stones - brown, gray, black and red. He saw a look of pride behind those closed eyes and imagined them looking at

him this one last time. Trent picked up his shovel and heaped up more cement. With a deep breath, he ran the shovel along the edge of the fitted stones and shook cement into the hole. He picked up his trowel and smoothed the thick cement, careful not to smash Clyde's face. Slowly, he picked up another stone and placed it in the hole. The stone caught, not wanting to fit, so with one hand Trent held it in position and grabbed his mallet from the floor at his feet. Gently he tapped the stone into place, covering Clyde's face.

Trent stepped back again, looking at his father's wall. Trent had had to rebuild it, but the foundation would always belong to Clyde. Trent went upstairs and retrieved the stone-heart from the trash. Back downstairs, standing at the new wall, he held it, rubbing its grain between his fingers, silent as stone, saying a prayer.

What the Shadow Knows

"Hurry up, Russ! We ain't got all day," I yell as my younger brother runs to catch up.

"Jim, we gonna go to the lake today?" asks Russ as he juggles his text books on his side.

"What do you think? Course we gonna go to the lake. We need money, don't we?" I roll my eyes at him.

"You think the lake will be iced over? It hasn't snowed much today," Russ says.

"Who cares? If we fall in, we fall in. Them people just want to see us fall in, but we've showed them before and took their two bucks," I say with a grin.

We get to the lake; it was always a good place to make money on a snowy day. Those stupid rich kids come to see me and Russ skate across the lake when it's iced over. They pay us two whole dollars to see if we'll make it across and back. But if it's not iced over all the way, and we fall in, we lose the two dollars. And they laugh, oh boy do they laugh. They like to see us poor kids do anything for a dollar. But it don't bother me none - I usually never fall in. Me, I'm a great skater. But Russ, he's dumb as a hell. He don't know how to avoid the mushy spots.

"Jim, it's cold out here. I have a hole in my shoe and snow's getting in it."

"Stop complaining. You gonna take those shoes off to put your skates on anyways," I snap.

It's a cold day in Kimmerton, but not unusual. Pennsylvania gets some mighty cold winters. The air feels like it's gonna bite my nose off at the stem. Russ is getting on my nerves something bad; he's always complaining. I got holes in my shoes too. But I know how he feels. The snow gets in and gets your sock all wet. Then it freezes to your foot. When you get home, you gotta pry your sock off like peeling wallpaper. We got another year to make these shoes last though - Dad's job at the furniture shop cut back his hours after Christmas. It's either wear these shoes or start wearing our sister's. We get teased enough as it is, so we don't need any more material for the kids at school.

I finish lacing up my skates and check over the crowd that starts to gather. "Come on Russ, they waiting on us."

"Youse guys ready? We gonna empty your wallets!" Russ hollers at the rich boys who are yelling over at us to hurry up.

I step on the ice and it's mushy ice - real mushy. But there are a few patches of thick ice in between. I'll

just stick to those spots. I step out onto the ice and skate, just brushing against the mushy places, flinging ice flakes up into the faces of the crowd. I only stop to grab the money from the rich kids, my favorite part. Just then I hear a crack and splash behind me. I turn just in time to hear Russ scream.

"Jim! Jim! Hurry! Help!"

I skate over and pull the doofus out of the water. He can be so embarrassing sometimes. The lake isn't even that deep. I'll have to teach him how to swim again - he just can't get the hang of it. I pull him over to the side where the ice is sturdy. "You know we just lost six bucks with your falling in!" I growl at him.

"I'm sorry, Jim - it was the mushy snow. You know I'm no good on the mushy snow!" Russ wipes his eyes on his coat where the cloth's already starting to collect frost.

"It's all right. I made twelve bucks. I'll buy you a peanut cluster. Let's get on home and dry off."

As we get near the house, it's dark already and I see the brand new '45 white Oldsmobile parked out front of the house. We live in a two-story house on the edge of town. It's needed paint for as long as I can remember. When Ma and Pop fight, Russ and me make out a game to see who can

collect the most paint chips. But we always get in trouble cause Pop can see the flaking around the hedges. Then he threatens to make us paint the whole house. But he's too cheap to buy the paint.

"Man, Pop's home. Damn. He's gonna have our asses for sure if he sees us," I say to Russ who is still soaking wet.

"Shit, Jim, I didn't mean to fall in. I don't want you to get into trouble. I don't want to get hit tonight. My ass is still sore from last night," Russ says, crying a little more at the sight of Pop's car in the driveway.

I hate Pop. He's always ticked about something. Russ and me are the two youngest out of seven - two older sisters and five boys. Russ being only ten months younger than me, I have to look after him just like Lenny looked after me. But Lenny went off to war in Germany, so now I gotta look out for myself and Russ. We get along all right; Pop's usually asleep in front of the radio before we get home.

As we start up the steps, the front door opens, and out comes Pop.

"What the hell happened to you, Russ? If you keep ruining your school clothes, you gonna have to wear your sister's! You wanna be a sissy boy? Do you, sissy?" Pop

yells. He only yells. I've heard him with his friends and still he yells. I don't think he knows how to just talk.

"Oh leave him alone - it's just water. It'll dry off," I say.

"You sassing me, boy? I think that calls for a whopping along with sissy Russ for ruining his clothes," Pop says as he pulls off his belt. Russ cries harder.

Russ and me start backing down the steps slowly; just then, right behind us we hear a snort followed by a low growl. Russ and me turn around to see Duke standing behind us, a good eight yards away, his growl sounding more like a bear than a dog as he staggers towards us, dragging the red and white doghouse he's tied to. You'd think Pop would tie him to something larger, like a tree, so he'd stay put. Every day I see Duke dragging that doghouse back and forth from the kitchen window, chasing a squirrel or bird.

Duke stops and him and Pop have a staring contest. Me and Russ sidestep back onto the walk and watch. Duke hates Pop and Pop hates Duke. All of a sudden Duke breaks into stride and jumps onto Pop; snarling and cursing is all we hear.

"You piece of shit dog! Get him off of me! You dumb asses don't just stand there, get him off of me!" Pop screams.

We don't move. Pop finally grabs Duke around the neck and peels the dog off of him.

"Youse two, don't move! I'm gonna kick your asses. Maybe kill your damn dog too," Pop grunts. He is panting pretty hard - Duke sure does a number on him every time.

He's still holding Duke by the neck, and starts to drag the dog and the doghouse around to the back of the house. The whole time Duke is trying to stretch his neck and his jaws are snapping away, just wanting a piece of Pop's arm.

Me and Russ run to the opposite side of the house and peer around the side to watch Pop hammer the doghouse back in its rut until he thinks it's good enough so Duke won't take off again. Pop just isn't that smart.

"I'm gonna put a bullet between your eyes one of these days, you dumb mutt," Pop says as he walks away. All the while Duke goes nuts, shaking the chain and leaping into the air, looking frozen in mid-leap from the restraint of the chain. He snarls and growls so much that foam drips from the corners of his mouth.

When Pop is out of sight, me and Russ run to Duke and, when he sees us, he instantly calms down. We slide on our knees in the snow next to him, patting him.

"Good boy, Duke," I say, rustling his fur with my hand.

"I love you, Duke," Russ says as he buries his face into Duke's neck. Duke licks our hair and hands with a permanent smile.

Just then Pop appears around the corner of the house, "You pieces of shit! Youse guys can stay out here all night and freeze your asses off for all I care!" But you gotta come in sometime." Pop chuckles as he climbs the steps and slams the door behind him. Pop's actually scared to death of Duke. He knows he can't get near us with the dog around. If Pop didn't grab his neck so that he couldn't bite him, Duke would have killed him. One day, though, Duke'll get him.

"We gonna stay out here all night, Jim?" Russ says, nestling up to Duke.

"I am. If we go in, we gonna get it for sure after this," I say.

"Yeah, I guess so. But I'm cold," Russ whines, with his face still buried into Duke's broad neck.

"Get in the doghouse - we've done it before. C'mon."

All three of us - me, Russ and Duke get in the doghouse and curl up to each other like a nest full of cold birds puffing out for warmth.

Duke is the best dog in the world. Ever since Lenny left for the war, me and Russ have no one to look after us but Duke. He protects us. I'm not too sure what kind of dog he is. He sure ain't like Miss Carrie's dog next door, a tiny terrier that has the shrillest bark you've ever heard. Duke has a broad, massive head. It's so strong, I could kick him in the skull without him flinching, not that I would ever try. He is light brown with one white strip starting at his nose all the way to his neck. Not a real pretty dog, but I love to see him coming.

"Jim?"

"What, Russ?" I say, yawning.

"Goodnight, Jim."

"Goodnight, Russ," I say with a sigh. I look over at Russ and he's curled up in between Duke's legs, right against his gut. He must be freezing - still sopping wet - so I cover him up with Duke's old blanket that smells like a musty basement and is covered in fleas. But at least it's warm. Russ looks so helpless - he has blond hair while mine is jet black. He's so baby-looking, weak even. We don't look like we'd be brothers, except for the trademark family mouth. Our mouths are so tiny that even a tiny lollypop will fill it all up. Russ and me are both eleven and in the same classes at school, him being only

ten months younger than me. Mom and Pop waited on sending me to school until Russ could go. Even though he looks soft, Russ really is tough, though. He don't take shit from the other kids. Of course he's scared of Pop just like all us. There's just not too much going on upstairs. He just don't get school. I get it; I just choose not to do it. Not like us poor kids are actually going to make anything of ourselves, especially with a cheap son of a bitch like our old man.

I look at my watch. Damn, it's eight. Time for *The Shadow* - my favorite radio show. I listen to him every Thursday night. "The Shadow knows!" I say out loud in my best radio voice. Duke lifts his head and turns to the side, looking at me like I had suddenly turned into a stranger. I pat him on the head and he licks my wrist before laying his head on top of Russ's leg. I lay my head down on Duke's back and fall asleep.

The next morning me and Russ wake up and head into the house. Pop's already left, so we go in to find some breakfast. I pour the orange juice and make Russ go upstairs to change. All I know how to make is toast so that'll have to do.

"C'mon Russ! We gonna be late." I say, shoving toast in my mouth. School starts in ten minutes, and we have two miles to go.

Russ comes running in with dirty dungarees on - but at least they're dry. "Okay, I'm ready."

We run all the way to school.

After school, we walk straight home. "Better not go to the lake today. Pop will be ticked if we show up late for dinner. And, knowing you, you'd fall in again," I say to Russ.

We round the corner and see our house; Russ breaks off and runs towards the back.

"Duke! Duke, I got something for you!" Russ waves the bone he found lying outside of the butcher shop we passed this morning. He's been carrying it around for six hours, stinking up our classroom. Smelt like rotten meat all day, and the teacher was mad, but he couldn't wait to give it to Duke as a present for standing up to Pop.

As I round the back of the house, I see Russ on his knees, crying next to Duke's doghouse. I see the doghouse, but no Duke. Then I see his chain up and over the picket fence that separates our house with the neighbors. I run over and jump on top of the fence, finding Duke hanging

there on the other side. He doesn't move. I jump down on the other side and push Duke back over to where Russ is. Duke falls with a thud. When I finally climb back down into our backyard, Russ looks up at me, his eyes all puffy and red with snot running over his lips.

"D-D-D-uke is d-d-dead... right, Jim?" Russ stutters.

"Yeah, he's dead, Russ."

Russ throws himself onto Duke, crying and grabbing chunks of his fur.

Duke must have started after something and dragged that damned doghouse across the yard - then jumped over the fence and hung himself. I always knew that chain was never long enough.

I pick up Duke and lay him in my red flyer wagon and wheel him over to the graveyard just down the road next to the Baptist church where Gramps and Gram are buried. I decide to bury him right next to Gramps because he always brought Duke bones. I know he'll take care of Duke in heaven. Gramps took care of us when he was alive - never would let Pop beat on us.

That night, Pop came home late; me and Russ, already in bed. I'm so glad he didn't see Duke - he would have had a ball. I'd have killed him if he had laughed or even

grinned. I lay awake thinking while Russ lay next to me breathing in my face. Now it's my turn. Lenny is gone, and now Duke. I gotta protect me and Russ from Pop. If I don't, Russ won't make it. I won't make it. I may be eleven years old but I got at least seven more years in this house. I gotta stand up. Be a man.

Rednecks for Dessert

"Mom, I'm hungry. When do we get to eat?" I squirmed off the couch Mom was sitting on.

Mom pointed her finger at me, "Johnny, if you don't settle down, I'm gonna set you down on that floor and you won't be able to move at all."

I was so excited to be at Grandma and Grandpop's house. I'd only seen them once before when I visited with Dad last year. They hide candy all over the place in jars around the house. Everywhere I turned, even in the bathroom, was another candy jar. But Mom wouldn't let me have any because we were about to have dessert. That wasn't fair - I was hungry; I'd had to sit still for five hours in the car ride up here. Mom had been in a bad mood since we left for Grandma and Grandpop's house. She hadn't said a word in the car. And now she still wasn't talking to nobody.

Once we saw the sign welcoming us to Pennsylvania, she said, "Well, here we go." That was all she said.

Dad just looked at her and said he was sorry. We had to come up for Grandma's birthday and we missed her dinner because of traffic. I wasn't sorry. I was watching everything. Cars zoomed around us so fast on the freeway,

I felt like we were in a race. Some guy even yelled at Dad, shaking his fist and screaming the f-word at him. I'm not allowed to use that word. Mom says that that word will send me to hell, and I don't want to go to hell, so I say "fudge" instead.

On the floor, I picked at the fuzz on the old orange couch. Uncle Jerry walked into the living room, "Hey, youse guys want cheesecake? The real kind - not that Betty Crocker shit Marsha makes. Right, Marsha?" He slapped Mom on the thigh as he walked by.

He must have hit her hard, cause she rubbed her thigh and stared at him with her mean face.

"Come on, Ma, cut that cake - we're starving," Uncle Jerry said, trailing off into the kitchen.

Mom only came this time because it was Grandma's birthday - but she said this was her last time in Pennsylvania. Every time she talks about Dad's family, she just shakes her head and says, "Them damn Yankees."

I wouldn't mind being a Yankee. They talk neat. I'd like to talk like them. But Mom doesn't like it. She says I should be proud to be a Southerner because I'm raised right.

I got up from my squat on the floor and ran over to Mom. "Hey Mom! Don't Uncle Jerry talk funny? I think it's funny, but cool funny."

"Yeah, real funny," Mom said, pulling her coat shut.

"Would you listen to that!" Uncle Brent took Uncle Jerry's seat next to Mom on the couch. "Johnny, let's hear that little redneck accent again." He laughed.

"My neck ain't red, see?" I turned my head to show him.

"Did youse guys hear that? Johnny's neck ain't red," he said, grinning at me. I made everyone laugh, so I laughed too, thinking something special of myself. But Mom wasn't laughing - she was in one of her moods. Dad sat over in the corner in a rocking chair. He smiled too, shaking his head. My uncles liked me, and I liked that.

I batted at Mom's legs. "Uncle Jerry said that they have a skate park behind the school. Why doesn't Warrenton have one? And... and... the kids here just walk to school. They don't have to ride the bus for half an hour. Isn't that neato?"

"So, Marsha, how old is Johnny now?" Uncle Brent asked.

"I'm seven - in the first grade," I said before Mom opened her mouth.

"Johnny, you wait until you are asked," Mom said, grabbing my hands. "Do not interrupt."

"Any good deals down at Wal-Mart lately, Marsha?" Uncle Brent asked.

Mom just stared at him and I thought that was just as rude, so I butted in, "Mom works at Wal-Mart and I get toys for cheaper than anyone else."

"Oh, that's just great - everyone needs a job, right, Marsha?" Uncle Brent kept grinning, showing off his gap tooth.

"It suits me just fine, Brent," Mom said.

"Me too," I added.

Uncle Brent turned away, saw Dad in the corner and walked over to him, pulling up a chair.

Mom turned me around hard, and slapped me on the butt - not hard - just so I knew that I was bad. "I told you not to interrupt. Now set on the ground and be still."

I crawled to the corner of the room by Dad and Uncle Brent and sat on the floor, not daring to look at Mom. I wished Mom hadn't even come. I picked at the green fluff from the green carpet. It looked funny against the yellow walls - like a fun house. The furniture was real old. The couch Mom sat on had orange flowers on it and the chairs around the room were dark brown. Nothing matched. I

wondered if all Pennsylvania houses looked like this. Back home, my friends all had the same checkered couch we had, with the matching checkered curtains from Wal-Mart. I wished I knew where people from Pennsylvania shopped to get their things.

Uncle Brent whispered to Dad, smiling his gap tooth smile. He looked just like that guy who played Peter Pan in *Hook*, except with curlier hair. Dad looked a lot like him, but fatter and with a mustache.

"Gary, why are you still down in the South?" Uncle Brent asked. "I thought when you were sixteen, it was just to get away from Ma and Pop - but you go and marry a Southerner. Stuck now, huh? I mean, for God's sakes, Gary, she works at Wal-Mart. You can't be happy."

Dad stopped rocking his chair and leaned into Uncle Brent, "Well, Brent, I've never been happier anywhere else. So I guess I consider myself a Southerner too."

What's wrong with working at Wal-Mart? I mean, whatever we needed was there and Mom brought stuff home all the time. Uncle Brent just didn't like Mom. Maybe she had spanked him too.

Uncle Brent looked over at Mom, who sat there still playing with the buttons of her blue coat and not looking

at anybody. Then he looked back at Dad. "Whatever you say, Gary."

Uncle Jerry came in. "Cheesecake, who wants a slice?"

He held four plates. I raised my hand but, looking at Mom, I knew I should wait until everyone else was served. Uncle Brent walked up to Uncle Jerry and took a plate. Then he sat back down. Mom and Dad said "No thanks." That left me. Uncle Jerry handed me a plate. I held it carefully. "Thank you."

I took a bite and felt the creaminess slide down my throat. The cheesecake was really good - like eating pudding with a fork. Then I realized I could hear my uncles eating. I looked around - they didn't close their mouths when they ate. If I'd done that, I'd got yelled at. Their lips smacked and I could see the white of the cheesecake moving around in circles in their mouths. Pretty gross. Mom and Dad stared at each other, doing their eye talk like they do when they're mad. In the car ride up here, Mom and Dad argued about how rude his brothers were. Mom said she couldn't stand to be in the same room with them when they ate because it was like being with wild dogs. She wasn't joking. I heard Mom say that Dad's uncles never liked her cause she was from Virginia and something about losing the war. She said they called

her names. Dad said he knew but this might be the last time he saw his Ma, and then they wouldn't have to deal with them anymore. I'm glad I don't have any brothers.

Grandma appeared, sat in her dark brown chair and turned the TV on flipping it to the news. Her hair was white and she was wearing a sweat suit. Mom had made me wear a tie and my church shoes. I wish I could have worn my dinosaur sweat suit and been comfortable like Grandma. Grandma didn't talk much, but I knew it was bad to turn the TV on with company around. Maybe these things weren't as bad as Mom always said. I mean, everyone here was doing things that she told me were rude. But I kept my mouth closed and chewed quietly. I didn't want another spanking.

Uncle Jerry stood by the window, next to Uncle Brent. Uncle Jerry was the oldest one - I could tell by his grey hair. He talked out the side of his mouth like the puppet guy I saw at the library over the summer. Uncle Brent was a lot shorter and always smiling. He looked over at me and I heard him whisper to Uncle Jerry. "Watch this." Then he yelled, "Hey, Johnny! Why don't you go get pop? We all need pop." He jabbed Uncle Brent in the arm with his elbow.

"Sure." I jumped up and ran into the tiny kitchen. The kitchen didn't even have a table - just a counter and a

stove. But you can't eat off of 'em, so I wondered where they all ate dinner. Pop wasn't in there so I opened the basement door and hopped down the steps. The smell of wood and gasoline was so strong, it was hard to breathe. The basement was Grandpop's workshop - he fixed things down here. But the basement wasn't that big. My room at home was much bigger. Broken TVs and radios filled the shelves all around the walls. Wood was stacked in two of the corners, piled so high, it looked like it'd be fun to climb.

I found Grandpop sitting on a wooden bench like he was riding a horse, rubbing a piece of wood - a box - with a cloth. He loved to build boxes.

"Grandpop! Uncle Jerry wants you upstairs," I said slowly cause Grandpop didn't hear well.

"Those goddamn sonuvabitches," he groaned. "What do those goddamn kids want?"

"No, it ain't kids; it's Uncle Brent and Uncle Jerry who want you," I said.

Grandpop stopped rubbing the piece of wood and looked at me, "Boy, it's like talking to these stacks of wood, talking to you. Guess I can't expect much from a Southern boy, huh?"

I stared at him; Dad told me Grandpop's mean. He was mean to Dad as a boy and that's why Dad left home. He was almost scary mean. Mom told me Dad got a lot of whippings when he was a kid - and sometimes he didn't even do anything to deserve them.

He laughed at me, mumbling something, and slowly got up from the bench, grabbed his right leg and pulled it over the bench. Grandpop had old bones. As he headed for the stairs, I sprinted up them fast, skipping steps, ahead of Grandpop. I waited for him at the top until he was on the last step, then I walked into the living room, with him following. I flopped down to eat some more cake.

"What youse sonuvabitches want? You know how hard it is for me to get up and down those steps," Grandpop said.

Everyone burst out laughing, except Mom. Even Grandma smiled a little. I looked around, confused.

"Damn, Gary, the South is ruining your boy," Uncle Jerry said.

Dad frowned down at his feet. Grandpop picked up his pipe and lit it, smoke puffing all around the laughing heads.

"Goddamn schmucks," he grunted and turned back to the basement to finish his project.

Embarrassed, I couldn't swallow the cake in my mouth because of the lump in my throat. The cake felt like paste. Finally I forced it down and felt it go into my turning stomach. I got up, knowing my face was red, cause I could feel it burn. I went over to Mom and climbed into her lap.

"What's so funny?" I asked her.

Uncle Jerry shouted, "Johnny, go get us pop. He did that last year too. Those schools down there aren't too good, huh?" They all laughed again and I looked away, pushing my head close to Mom's ear.

Dad stood up, "Johnny, they just want a soda. I'll go get it." He went out of the room.

Not looking at them, I mumbled into Mom's ear, "Then why didn't they just ask for a soda?"

Mom patted me. "I know, honey, that wasn't nice."

I turned my head towards the kitchen and saw Dad standing next to the back door, looking out into the dark. He looked embarrassed too. Turning back, I laid my head into Mom's curls and played with the buttons of her coat. If I let them see my tears, they'd just laugh harder.

"I want to go home," I whispered to Mom.

Mom slid her hand soft up and down my back and said, "Me too, honey."

Found Things

Tick hollers at me from the blue WeExchange dumpster. "Sweet cheeks, come here. Today is our lucky day - they just dumped a whole lotta trash."

Throwing my cigarette out the window, I yell back, "But, if I turn the truck off, it may not start again."

"Well then, leave it running," Tick growls. "You don't gotta turn it off. Just get over here."

When I open the door, it creaks so loud that the girls at the Mad Hatter hair salon, out on a smoke break, turn to see what made that god-awful noise. They see it's me and Tick and turn their noses up, like we're the ones who stink and not the trash. They hate to see me and Tick's green Ford pickup around the shopping center, and I'm not blind to the looks they give us when we climb into the thrift store's dumpster. But, hey, we don't got much and we find good stuff in there.

Tightening my ponytail back up to the side of my head, I grab the cold metal of the dumpster and pull myself up on tip-toes to see what's got Tick all excited.

"Look!" he says, holding up a black combat boot. "This is real nice. If I can find the match, they'll come in handy when the jobs pick up again. Man o' man, I bet

these cost sixty bucks up in the Wal-Mart. And they're just throwing them away. Can you believe it?" Tick, smiling wide and proud, hands me the boot.

I smile back, rubbing the toe. "Wow, they're steel-toed too. Sure feel strong enough."

"Shoo, they'd keep my feet safe, even if a truck run over 'em." He sticks his hands into his unbuttoned shirt and rubs his chest hair real fast. He does that when he's thinking. This man's got plenty of ideas. He once found an old TV in this dumpster and brought it home. When it didn't work, he took the insides out and put a fish tank in it (which he also found in the dumpster). We set it up in the bedroom with some goldfish. "Wilma," he said, "this here's art. I'm just a starving artist that paints fences on the side." Tick may not be too smart, but he sure is crafty and funny.

He turns and dives back into the dumpster, looking for the other boot, throwing newspaper wrappings and ripped garbage bags out of the way.

"Baby, the girls be mad if you make a mess," I warn him.

"I know that, Wilma, stop nagging. I gotta find my match," he says. "Why aren't you in here with me? You

love this dumpster - even more than the Dollar General one."

"I don't know; I'm not feeling so well, I guess." I drop back flat on my feet. I rest my head on my arms against the edge of the dumpster. I got another one of my headaches coming; I feel it behind my eyeballs. When Tick starts his job again in the spring, I'll be able to see the doctor.

Tick pops his head close to mine and pulls me in for a breathless kiss. He shaved this morning. He shaves just for me, because I don't like the feel of stubble against my face, it itches too much.

I hear the hair salon girls laughing and pretending to puke. "I can't believe they are making out right in the dumpster," one of them says.

Smacking his lips when he jerks away, he says, "I love you, sweet cheeks."

"I love you too." I stare into his brown eyes, ignoring the giggles. He bends down and starts to hunt for his other shoe.

The pretty girl from the WeExchange thrift store opens the back door, rolling the garbage bin out. At the dumpster, she flips the bin up in the air. It lands on the edge of the dumpster, and she shakes it, dumping more

garbage out, mainly tissues. All of it falls right onto Tick. She drops the bin and peers into the dumpster, smiling that she hit her target. God, they really hate us being here. One of the girls got a knife pulled on her when she told one dumpster diver to stop making a mess. I guess they think we'll do the same. Tick can be pretty intimidating when he don't brush his hair down. But when I come alone, while Tick is at work, they don't pay me any mind. Just tell me to move out of their way.

The pretty girl turns with a smirk and walks back into the store without a "hello" or "sorry." Leaning over, I spot a used maxi-pad stuck to Tick's blue shirt. On tip-toes, I reach in and pluck it off and throw it aside as fast as I can. Who wants to touch another girl's used pad? She could have warned Tick. But that's the thrift store girls. It don't bother me none, anymore.

Tick's real good to me. We've been together for two years, living together for most of it. We live over on Hytide Street, not a big place, but enough for me and Tick. He bought the house a while back from his boss so we don't have to worry about rent or a mortgage. He paid it off within the first year of having the place. I work for old Miss Haverty, cleaning her house twice a week. She's real

nice and pays me two hundred and fifty dollars - and that pays the bills.

We'll have enough money saved up to get married soon. Hell, hopefully we'll have enough money saved up from our flea market booth to buy that engagement ring I saw at the pawn shop. It's not a real diamond, but it looks just like the ring my momma had when I was a little girl - one that she got from her momma. But they want sixty bucks for that ring and Tick's fence painting job don't pay too well, 'specially in the winter when it snows and painting can't be done. Tick hopes that he'll find me a diamond ring in the thrift store dumpster. Every day he says that maybe this will be the day he finds it. It means a lot to him to find me that ring, but I'm just as happy to be with him without it. Sure would be nice to get married, but if we can't afford it, the hell with it - I love Tick and he loves me. That's all that matters.

Some of the stuff we find in the dumpster, we sell at the Culpeper Flea Market. We got a table up there and sell glass wares and the jewelry I find and fix up. I saved up for weeks to get me a glue gun, beads, and paints. I can turn an old cracked plate into brand new, adding beads and puffy paint for more effect.

The flea market money is for the wedding. Got about four hundred dollars saved. Another hundred and we can get a nice Justice of the Peace to marry us, and we can spend the rest of that money on a honeymoon to Luray Caverns where they got those underground crystals. I hear it's real pretty.

"Baby, I'm really not feeling good. Can we go home?" I whine, still laying my head on my arms. The ache has moved to my forehead now.

Tick stands up. "Found it!" He shoves the other boot into my hand. "Um...yeah, sure thing, sweet cheeks, I'll take you on back." Tick stumbles over the trash, grips the edge of the dumpster, swings his legs over the side and jumps to the ground, crunching glass into the pavement. "You must not be feeling good to not get in that dumpster with me. I hope you don't got something bad."

"Nah, it's just my head. Got one of my headaches that's all." I walk to the passenger seat and climb in. Tick gets in and slides me to his side, resting his free arm up on the back of the seat. I keep my eyes closed for the drive home, thankful we only live four minutes away, so I can lie down and sleep my headache away.

We pull up and I open the door and start to fall out onto the sidewalk, but Tick is there to catch me. Holding

me up under the armpits, he guides me to the door of our little three-room house. He lays me down on the couch, covers me with a blanket and kisses me on the forehead. "I'm gonna go back and do the rounds. I'll be back in a couple of hours. Maybe I'll find you that diamond ring." He winks at me as he shuts the front door.

I hear his Ford fire up and leave. We do our dumpster rounds every day religiously. First, the WeExchange Thrift Store, then on to the Dollar General dumpster where we get open bottles of aspirins and busted bottles of shampoo, and, lastly, Food Lion for dented cans and old bread. Sometimes we go through the other thrift store dumpsters, but the WeExchange is my favorite. A person can find everything in there - the green couch I'm lying on was outside the WeExchange back door one morning before they opened. Now we aren't supposed to take things that are left outside from the donators, but this couch was real nice - only a few pulls in the fabric - so Tick drove up close and I helped heft it on his truck bed. The dining room table with the three chairs Tick had to duct tape the legs back on because they wouldn't stay in the grooves - was actually in the dumpster. Once he fixed it, we had a nice dining set. We got a stereo too - with one working speaker. So when we listen to Conway Twitty, we don't hear

much of the bass, but at least I got something to play my music on. That thrift store don't take beat-up stuff cause they're real picky. But, hell, a place to sit and eat is a place to sit and eat - no matter the scratches and dings.

My whole art collection was found in the WeExchange dumpster - the nine angel pictures I hung in the kitchen and little angel figurines along the ledge over the fireplace; I just love angels. Tick found a painting of a growling black panther that I hung over the couch so it's the first thing he sees when he opens the front door.

That dumpster is special. Not just cause of the stuff, but cause that's where I found Tick.

I used to work as a stocker at the Dollar General and I had gone out back for a smoke break. When I lit up, a man popped up from inside the WeExchange dumpster, right next to the Dollar General's back door. Alice, my boss, warned me that people got in the dumpster and I was supposed to tell them to shoo. The fella stepped out of the dumpster in a blue shirt unbuttoned down to his belt buckle, showing off the Jim Beam logo. He puffed out his chest, and rubbed his hands inside his shirt, fluffing his dark, curly chest hair. His jeans were so tight, I blushed looking at the bulge. He was a good looking man - sexy as

all hell, far as I was concerned. I just couldn't tell him to leave.

Glancing back in the dumpster, he ran his hands through his long hair down his back, even though it was shorter up top, pulling it out of his shirt collar. He tilted his head to the side to look at me and said, "You sure are pretty, sweet cheeks."

I giggled, trying to hide my smile behind the hand, holding my cigarette. I hated my smile with its crooked teeth. Momma never could afford braces, so I hid my smile every chance I could.

"Aw, come on, don't be shy. I already seen you're a pretty girl - let me see you smile," he said, grinning at me all big and wide.

Giggling more, I let my hand fall and smiled.

"Well, don't that beat all - just like a movie star. I bet your Daddy just beats the boys off," he said.

"I ain't got no Daddy. He up and left me and my Momma when I was five," I said, embarrassed that I blurted out too much.

"Well, that's a shame. I'm sorry about that. Now, how old are you?" he said, walking towards me.

"Twenty-one," I said.

"Old enough for me to buy you a drink, huh? Would you like to go out with me for a drink? I'm sorry - didn't get your name." He edged over.

"My name is Wilma. Yeah, I'll go with you. I get off at three," I answered.

"Well, I'm Tick and I'll just be here in the back roaming around til you get off."

When I got off work, I called Momma and said I had a date and walked out the back door. Tick was waiting for me in his truck. We had a beer at the Four Clover restaurant. He told me he was thirty-five, from Alabama, and left because his daddy wanted him to go into the Army but he hadn't wanted to. So, he moved to Virginia and settled down in Culpeper, painting fences in the summer to pay the bills. I told him about my daddy leaving when I was five because he was trying to find his fortune. He went to California to work on the phone lines, figuring California had movie stars and they'd pay better than people in Culpeper - so he left. Momma was raising me by herself, but now she was dying 'cause of her heart problems.

Tick acted like he was interested and smiled at me a lot, and I liked that he called me *sweet cheeks*. To tell the truth, Tick was the first man ever interested in me, and I fell in love that night. I started doing the rounds

with him, skipping work and crawling in the dumpsters. When Alice saw me in the Dollar General dumpster, that was it. She fired me on the spot. Now, when the girls I used to work with see me in the dumpster, they laugh and turn their backs. At first it bothered me but, after awhile, I knew I got what I wanted - and I'm happy about that.

Tick walks in the door around eight. "Sweet cheeks, look what I found!" he says, as he kneels down by the couch. I open my eyes and he holds up a painting of a doe drinking water in the forest. "Bet we could get twenty bucks for this here painting. Almost too good to sell."

My headache is gone and I look at the picture; it's so beautiful and peaceful. That doe doesn't have any worries and I'm sure she got a buck that loves her and protects her. They don't got to worry about paying for a wedding and are happy with each other. That's how life should be.

I watch him pull the painting close to his face, studying it. His eyes move across every inch, just like he does me when we make love.

"That's a real nice painting. It'd look good in the bedroom," I say.

"Sure will. I guess it's too good to sell then, huh?"

I get up from the couch, take the painting and walk into the bedroom with him following.

I take down the picture of the lady in a garden and put the doe painting up. The doe is so peaceful and happy drinking from the stream. No one is there to bother her - she's just living her life.

Turning, I see Tick peeling his blue shirt off, before he stretches across our mattress on the floor.

"You feeling any better?" he asks.

"Much better," I say as I watch him pull the black comforter over himself. I smell trash and sweat and frown a little, knowing that smell will seep into the mattress.

"Well, you come over here and rest up and get that head of yours better. And if you don't feel like going out tomorrow, then just stay home. I'll do the rounds." Tick yawns as he settles on his side and closes his eyes, mumbling, "And maybe I'll find that diamond tomorrow."

I look back at the painting, at the doe.

"Don't you think..." I turn back to ask Tick, "doesn't that doe look happy?" But he's already fast asleep.