

ABSTRACT

Life is Found under Rocks and Hard Places: A Collection of Short Stories

Jordan Vanderpool

Director: SJ Murray, Ph. D.

This collection of five short stories explores the depths of human character and the contradictions in contemporary society. My characters traverse the present political and sociological environment, and often find themselves lost, hurt, and wounded. Yet, the depths of depravity which they at times attain serves to expose the deeper level of morality and spirituality that is found when superficiality is peeled back. Following Augustine, the most basic assumption in my thesis is that all iniquity reaches for some good. While my deeply flawed characters often fail, grace nonetheless works upon them. Hope lives.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS

Dr. SJ Murray, Department of Great Texts and Religion

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM

Dr. Andrew Wisely, Interim Director

DATE: _____

LIFE IS FOUND UNDER ROCKS AND HARD PLACES:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Honors Program

By
Jordan Vanderpool

Waco, Texas

May 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Life is Found under Rocks and Hard Places.....	25
Chapter Three: Mene, Tekel, and Peres.....	51
Chapter Four: The Devout Thief.....	78
Chapter Five: The Little Ones.....	94
Chapter Six: Exit 54 B.....	107
Bibliography	111

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to profusely thank Dr. Murray for her selfless and tireless dedication to the completion of my thesis. When I reached out to Dr. Murray quite late, asking her to direct my thesis in the Spring of 2020, I had a long way to go. I have seen so much improvement within myself, both as a writer and as a person under her guidance. I will also remember the hours spent in the independent study reading Flannery O'Connor or watching Disney short films with immense gratitude.

Secondly, I would like to offer my thanks to Courtney Smith, without whom I would probably be graduating in August. I am incredibly grateful for the time that you spent reading my really-drafty-drafts before they went off to Dr. Murray.

Finally, I thank my peers. Specifically, I thank Catherine Marple, Collin Slowey, and Annie Donovan, who have all have spent much of their precious time reading and re-reading my stories and listening to my plot ideas and offering needed feedback. Without critics, it is near impossible to write anything worth reading. Thank you all.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

There exists two arms of fiction: the philosophy, or the meaning behind the writing, and then the writing itself. In this introduction, I will first lay out why I have written a creative thesis. Then, I will discuss the moral and philosophical outlooks expressed throughout my short story collection, followed by the technical and theoretical aspects of my thesis. Lastly, I will address what I have learned in the process of writing a creative thesis.

Where meaning and morality are concerned, I have focused on one central and overarching theme: All love (this side of paradise) is veiled. Alcoholic fathers, self-obsessed boyfriends, impenitent thieves—these all mirror love in some mysterious way. My collection of short stories aims to understand the veiling and mediation of love. In diverse ways, my stories echo Robert Browning's quip in *Bishop Blougram's Apology*: "Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things./The honest thief, the tender murderer,/The superstitious atheist" (Browning). On the technical side, I have followed Aristotle's advice as put forth in his *Poetics* loosely, particularly in chapters three, four, and five, by applying his theory of unity of time. Moreover, I have also followed Aristotle's advice in a more indirect way, by drawing on Dr. SJ Murray's teachings in her course and book, *The Basics of Story Design*.

Motivations

“The world will be saved by beauty,” the holy fool, Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin, is quoted saying in Dostoevsky's great novel, *The Idiot* (Dostoevsky 446). While I have no intention of arguing such a bold claim, I do hope to communicate the effect of this claim on the creative nature of my thesis. The desire to create something beautiful has fueled the motivation, actualization, and completion of my thesis. For this reason—to create beauty—I have written a collection of short stories.

Within every person's being exists the pull to contribute some *thing* to the world, some object or theory or idea which will in some way add to the world's goodness. Hopefully, this thing that we desire to contribute takes part in God's plan of salvation for the world. By doing our task—by *being* what we should be—we give glory to God. As Gerard Manley Hopkins writes (129):

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

Beauty has played an enormous role in my own undergraduate formation. When I discovered the beauty in Aristotle's anthropology and Plato's forms and Evelyn Waugh's prose, I was shocked into another world. Chesterton might call this world “fairyland” (61). No longer was my life's purpose to succeed in school, obtain a high-paying career, marry a nice wife, and go to church on Sundays. No. It was to take part in something greater than myself: to explore and enrich and enliven; to dive headlong, and splash, into this magical world of beauty.

At first, this took the form of reading all the fiction I could get my hands on. Later, I realized that I could create beauty for myself, not just soak it in. If the beauty of

fiction is so evident to me, so formational and impactful, why not write some for myself? Why not attempt to add some little aspect of beauty to this world? Why not take part in God's own creative nature and create something myself? Tolkien perhaps said it best in his poem, *Mythopoeia*:

In Paradise perchance the eye may stray
from gazing upon everlasting Day
to see the day-illumined, and renew
from mirrored truth the likeness of the True.
Then looking on the Blessed Land 'twill see
that all is as it is, and yet may free:
Salvation changes not, nor yet destroys,
garden not gardener, children not their toys.

God allows his children gifts to express aspects of himself, parts of his goodness, truth, and beauty. In writing a creative thesis I, following Tolkien, chose to attempt to reveal some mirrored part of beauty from Beauty Himself.

Thematic Content

The most basic assumption in all of my thesis work is, following Augustine's words in *Confessions* (30), that all iniquity reaches for some good: "Yet in the enjoyment of all such things we commit sin if through immoderate inclination to them—for though they are good, they are of the lowest order of good—things higher and better are forgotten, even You, O Lord our God, and Your Truth and Your Law." Every one of my protagonists, while deeply flawed, participates in this truth. This lesser good for which he aims eventually falls through and he is left with some realization of a higher good, albeit not an obvious realization. However, this is not an incidental quality of my characters. I argue that this is the most frequent way in which man perceives God's love—that

ultimate good for which man reaches—this side of paradise. My stories wrestle with this reality: the veiling of loves present on the earth.

Before diving into my stories, it is helpful to explicate the general theory of the veiling of love more clearly. Hopkins understood this concept well. He writes about God, who, for this Catholic and Jesuit priest, is Love Himself (160):

A blear and blinding ball
With blackness bound, and all
The thick stars round him roll
Flashing like flecks of coal,
Quartz-fret, or sparks of salt,
In grimy vasty vault.

In this same poem, he adds that God's "glory bare would blind." While, for this poet, the answer to the problem of God's greatness is The Blessed Virgin, the premise to his conclusion still rings true for the present argument. Hopkins took it for granted that love is veiled in this world. The Father's love is mediated through the Son, and the Son's through the Blessed Virgin. But, for modern man, love is veiled by his own sinful being. Man reaches toward some lesser good, it fails him; and then he reaches toward some other good, and that fails him, too. Then, someday maybe he'll reach toward that one Good which will not fail him.

All of the protagonists in my stories learn to love from the effects of their own sin and others' sins upon their lives. For example, in "Mene, Tekel, and Peres" and "Exit 54 B," the protagonists struggle with sexual sin. Their lust disappoints them and they have to learn to love something greater. In "Life is Found Under Rocks and Hard Places" and "The Devout Thief," the protagonists deal with their own selfish ambition. Other characters struggle with greed, violence, and anger. However, my stories do not end in sin. As Flannery O'Connor put it in one of her many letters to A., "my stories are about

the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it” (1067). Grace works on my characters by showing them what God is not—how not to love—and eventually there exists hope that they will find where he is.

Methodology

I owe much to writers who have guided and inspired me, and it is fitting that I acknowledge their influence especially as concerns my methodology for approaching the art of the short story. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, by Salman Rushdie, Haroun, the protagonist, fights to defend the “sea of stories,” that place from which all stories come (Rushdie 29).

Although I make no attempt to engage in a metafictional world, Rushdie makes a point highly pertinent to my thesis: stories come from other stories. The same is true for the present work. All the stories in my thesis have some literary basis or style upon which they are loosely based. After I have discussed those authors who have greatly influenced my work and the manner in which they have influenced it, I will then describe the practical and very general outline I followed in creating my stories.

The foremost influential author in all of my work is Flannery O’Connor. In chapters two, three, and five, her influence is particularly evident. From the word count to the seemingly depressing and nihilistic endings of the stories, to the inclusion of modern political issues from an a-political perspective, the parallels are patent. In my fifth chapter, I consciously imitate O’Connor’s use of the profuse layering of flashbacks (see “Parker’s Back”) to create extreme character depth in a short time period.

Another author of a completely different age and style has influenced the fourth chapter of my thesis: Gonzalo de Berceo, twelfth-century Spanish poet and writer of short miracle stories. “The Devout Thief,” my fourth chapter, is explicitly named after Berceo’s story, “*El ladrón devoto*.” I took the basic premise from Berceo: a thief who has some sort of close relationship with the Blessed Virgin who decides to steal something precious. However, I rendered the entire plot in a completely different, more modern, light.

Finally, my sixth chapter is structurally very different from the others, mostly insofar as it is only around 1,000 words (compared to the 4,000-7,400 words in my other chapters). That’s because I sought to challenge myself to emulate the pithy, short narratives that inspired me, from the Middle Ages to modern times. Stories by Virginia Woolf (“A Haunted House”), Saki (“The Open Window”), Marie de France (“*Laustic*”), and many from Berceo’s collection of *Milagros* all boast a similar word count, along with a substantial number of Hemingway’s stories. In my sixth chapter, I experimented with this same style and discovered, as Horace puts it in his *Ars Poetica*, that brevity can in fact be a powerful story tool. It sets our imagination loose and draws the reader in: “Be brief, what is quickly said the spirit grasps easily, faithfully retains” (Horace 335). I came to realize that brevity can in fact invite the reader to participate actively in the creative process, and to engage the text in a “writerly” rather than “readerly” way, as Roland Barthes puts it (4). Indeed, the reader is invited into Barthes’s “writerly text” and invited to do some of the work, rather than allowing the story to wash over us and focus on the consuming of it (4). In many ways, my sixth chapter taught me a deeper, and more grounded, appreciation for the tradition of writing and “great texts.”

In terms of more technical details, I have followed Dr. Murray's story beats from her class and book on story design as a general outline for my stories. Story beats are essentially moments and movements common to all good stories. A readily understandable example of one of these beats would be the climax, which occurs near the end of every story, and towards which all action has been leading up. However, Dr. Murray has laid out a much more detailed version of these beats, basing her outline on Shakespeare, *Star Wars*, blockbuster films, and many other books and stories that have proven successful. I was pleasantly surprised to find many of the beats baked into the short stories of Flannery O'Connor, from "The Geranium" to "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The weight of beats does not come solely from empirical evidence. Instead, Aristotle explicitly defines many of them in his *Poetics*. Like the bars and phrasings of a musical melody, story beats kept my stories alive and taught me what I need to do next in every story.

I also employed Aristotle's teachings on unity of time throughout my last three short stories. Aristotle writes in Book Five of the *Poetics*: "Tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit" (39-40). In the last three short stories of the present collection, I constrained the plots to one day in order to experiment with this technique. After writing "The Devout Thief," I liked the results so much that I remained with this strategy for chapters five and six. In fact, I clung to this teaching so closely that chapters four, five, and six each take place in less than one hour.

The Beats

In this section, I provide a general overview of story design beats and what they accomplish, and explain how I implement these writing techniques in each of my stories. Some beats are combined depending on the length and structure of my work. So, what are the beats cited by Dr. Murray? I explain them in my own words below:

- *Opening image*—The opening image introduces the basic themes and premises of the story in as concise and elegant a way as possible. It also allows the reader a hint of what the story will be about and starts to set up some of the conflict.
- *World as we know it/storm is brewing* —Every great story takes some time to show the reader what normal life is like for the protagonist *and* give a hint that this normal life is about to be flipped upside-down.
- *Inciting incident*—The event within which everything changes for the protagonist. Maybe he or she cannot yet perceive that everything has changed, but looking back later, they'll know that this was the incident that turned their life upside down. In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” by Flannery O’Connor, the grandmother sneakily hides her cat in the car, which later comes back to bite her when the cat causes the wreck that leads to her death and the death of her whole family (138).
- *Dilemma*—Now the protagonist faces a decision. It’s like standing at a crossroads and the protagonist is forced to ask the question: should I stay, or should I go? Will I embark on what may seem to be a haunting, and even life-threatening, quest?
- *Full commitment/ crossing of threshold*—The protagonist does something that demonstrates they have fully committed to the quest. There is no going back. Dr.

Murray describes this beat as follows: “Something happens and prompts the protagonist to make a proactive decision to move forward. Remember, the protagonist cannot simply be swept along into the action. An active decision must be made and clearly presented in the story. The protagonist must take ownership of this moment” (62).

- *Adventure sequence begins*—After the previous commitment to the quest at hand, the real adventure begins. The protagonist starts to live in the extraordinary world caused by their commitment to the quest. Back in the golden era of studio movies, this is where the “set pieces” were situated: the exciting new scenes that were important enough to warrant commissioning a new set, constructed by carpenters on the sound-stage dedicated to the project (Snyder 81). In novels and other creative writing, we want to create the impression that the protagonist is peeling back the onion of the new world and uncovering surprising and eye-opening experiences.
- *Character moment #1*—Here, the protagonist does something they wouldn’t have done earlier in the story based on what they’ve learned. It’s a character-revealing moment, because we witness the protagonist making a choice and committing some action they’d not have considered during the first act of the story.
- *Midpoint*—The tide of the story turns. If the story ends in victory for the protagonist, this is a major setback; if the protagonist ultimately fails, the midpoint is typically a victory. “Most importantly, the protagonist moves from passive to active. This decision changes the course of the story and is a direct cause of the brick wall— although the protagonist doesn’t know that yet” (Murray

64). Many story theories describe the midpoint as a significant turning point. As such, it sets the stage for the rest of the story. We're not in Kansas anymore, and the new world now presents a set of new challenges and setbacks!

- *All downhill*— “Everything goes from bad to worse. The second half of Act Two represents a series of ever-increasing setbacks for the protagonist” (Murray 64). Additionally, the action picks up pace: everything seems to turn faster and faster, and in a well-written story, these events should lead logically into the climax.
- *Character moment #2*— “The protagonist does something she wouldn't and couldn't have done in the first half of Act Two. This moment represents a step further along the character arc than the first character moment” (Murray 66). Character moment two highlights how the protagonist has changed from the beginning of the story. They are no longer the same person that they were; and there's no going back.
- *The brick wall*—Everything is lost for the protagonist. It is an all-time low. The only way for him to push through is to recommit to the quest. I like to think of the moment in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* when Harry dies (Rowling 704). How in the world is he going to get past this one? Somehow he does, though (I dare not get into the logistics of that here). He pushes through the indestructible brick wall and lives, to continue to fight for the good and defeat Lord Voldemort (Rowling 724).
- *Final face off*— “The protagonist now makes a bold move to confront the antagonist in the final face-off. Conflict is at an all-time high and culminates in the climax of the movie” (Murray 66). One of the most iconic examples of this

beat in the last few decades is when Luke Skywalker confronts the Emperor in *Return of the Jedi*. Everything is on the line. All of the conflict of the entire story has led up to this point. Here the reader or viewer witnesses who will ultimately win.

- *Resolution*—Now a new world exists because of the journey the protagonist has made. “We experience, first-hand, the results of the protagonist’s quest and inner transformation on the story world” (Murray 67). After the climactic trial in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, we see Alyosha unite the rebellious children who had previously hated him and his brother, as they cry, “Hurrah for Karamazov!” (776). Alyosha’s heroism has created a new world, wherein filial love abounds and hate has been driven out.

Of course, plot beats are only one half of the equation when it comes to great storytelling. Character is at the center of stories. Throughout my work, I’ve come to understand characters as dynamic creations in motion. They are not stagnant beings. How they respond to external events and internal challenges reveals what they are made of. Thus, storytelling possesses an innate anthropological view. Jonathan Gottschall, in his book, *The StoryTelling Animal: How Stories Make us Human*, calls storytelling “our evolutionary niche” (177). Humans care about humans. It’s part of our nature. That’s why character is so important. While the writer must carefully plan out the story so that it conveys the world and obstacles effectively, and even seamlessly, the reader doesn’t care so much about what happens to the character. What the reader wants to see is *who* that character is. As I’ve often been reminded during my training at Baylor with Dr. Murray,

if the story beats stick out and flash like a neon sign to an untrained reader, there's something wrong. Like the load-bearing walls of a well-constructed house, readers are supposed to forget about them, and get on with their business of living in the story world. And a truly masterful execution of structure will make even the trained writer's eye forget and lose themselves entirely in the story book world.

The beats provide opportunities for the character, as established when the story is set in motion, to reveal who they are and who they want to be. The beats are the obstacles the characters must face. Ultimately, the character inhabits the story. The characters do what they want to do. That's why creatives must wrestle with planning their characters and story, while also letting the characters become who they truly are. Working on the beats and writing character profiles eventually allows the character to come to life. And then, if the writer is fortunate enough, the real story takes place. The story and character take on lives of their own. As Faulkner put it (qtd. in Donald M. Murray), the writer's job now is to "trot along behind him [the character] with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does" (908).

*My Beats**

**Spoilers follow: by all means return and read these after you enjoy the stories themselves*

Beats for "Life Is Found Under Rocks and Hard Places:"

Eli and his sister Rose live on a rural farm with an alcoholic father where they are forced into working long and hard hours. Eli desires nothing more than to escape from home, go to college, and become a rich professor. For all his plotting, though, he has no

way out... until one day, he does. When Eli finds a fortune's worth of gold buried in his backyard, he is forced to reconcile his desire for a normal, educated city life and his family's well-being.

- *Opening image*—Normal life for Eli. A lunch break with his sister Rose on a hot, Summer day. The opening image here is set up to showcase the conflict between Eli and Pa in the next beat.
- *World as we know it/storm is brewing*—Pa slams down sandwiches on the table angrily, while Eli ignores him. Rose tries to kiss up to Pa.
- *Inciting incident*—Rose blabs to Pa that Eli has been talking about running off and going to school, if only he could get enough money. This scene creates the conflict for the whole story. Will Eli listen to his father's values, or will he pursue his own gain at the expense of his family?
- *Dilemma*—Eli sees something that looks like gold in the ground. This forces a reaction from Eli. What should he do: show it to his family or pursue his own ambitions? He quickly covers it back up. He will deal with this on his own.
- *Full commitment*— Eli says nothing to his sister or his father and goes back up to his room. This could have been his chance to help his whole family out, to make them all more wealthy, comfortable, and happy; but he rejects it.
- *Adventure sequence*—Time spent reflecting in his room.
- *Character moment #1*— Eli picks up a treasure box, wherein he had kept precious objects from his youth. It visibly perturbs him. This shows how much he really cares about his late mom and his dad and his sister. It's a moment of hesitation.
- *Midpoint*— Eli goes and digs out the gold at night. This is *his* money; he has now taken on a full and active role in his future at the expense of his family.

- *All downhill*—Eli lies to his father about his motivations for staying in bed. This represents a moment of deeper commitment. His father and Rose start to treat him nicely because they see how sick Eli is.
- *Brick wall*—Eli, in the process of running away from home to the city, gets picked up by two murderers and thieves, Jeremiah and Griffin. Things go from bad to worse. He has no idea what he’s going to do here. They are going to kill him.
- *Character moment #2*—He looks at the picture of his mom and dad again that he had left in his pocket. A world of light seems to flood into his head and he understands beauty from the hint of the rising sun. A beautiful life lies not in seeking one’s own prosperity, but in the prosperity of those whom one loves.
- *Final face off*—Eli, in a moment of utter courage and desperation, knocks out the driver and crashes the car. Jeremiah gets out of the car and comes over to finish Eli off, but they crash just outside of Eli’s house and Pa comes outside and shoots Jeremiah.
- *Resolution*—Eli wakes up in his room and is more satisfied with his home and his life after having escaped death because of his own actions.

Beats for “Mene, Tekel, and Peres:”

Stephen and his girlfriend Mari decide to take a vacation to Morocco for Summer break after their third year of college and third year together as a couple. After receiving various warnings from their parents and others about how dangerous their trip would be, they still go. Tension in the relationship is at an all-time high. And little does Mari know, but Stephen is planning to propose.

- *Opening image*—The busy streets of a crowded Moroccan city (presumably Marrakesh). Stephen is screaming in frustration and banging on the door of the taxi that pulls away just in the nick of time. The opening image here shows that the story is going to be chaotic and noisy and the characters are going to feel lost. They are outside of their comfort zones and in a completely different world from the American suburbs where they've been their whole lives.
- *World as we know it/storm is brewing / inciting incident*—The reader realizes that the taxi driver stole Stephen's phone. Now Stephen and Mari have no way of reaching their family back home or calling for help if they're ever in danger. But Stephen puts his foot down. They're going backpacking in the mountains like they had planned (he has to propose somewhere, after all).
- *Dilemma*—They found out that people had been killed by terrorists in the same mountain range in which they are going to backpack.
- *Full commitment/ crossing of threshold*—They decide to stay. Stephen convinces Mari that it's fine.
- *Character moment #1*—Stephen refuses to take off his cross necklace, even when Mari takes off her Miraculous Medal when prompted by the doctor in the van who says that they had better not go because of the danger.
- *Midpoint*—On the mountain trail, they pass “danger, do not enter signs.” Stephen acts like these are nothing, even though he knows that they are ominous, showing that they are probably on the same trail on which the tourists had been killed. He keeps pushing forward and reassuring Mari. His motivations become completely

active here: the next day, at the mountain peak, he is going to propose. It will all be worth it, he thinks.

- *All downhill*—Things start going better for Stephen. They have sex, though not explicitly, and Mari starts warming back up to him. But the plan starts to fail when afterwards they are both more alone than ever.
- *Character moment #2*—Stephen starts to let Mari in on his plan and tells her that tomorrow everything will be better. He makes a move to connect their separated psyches. This is the move towards unity which they need so badly.
- *The brick wall*—Stephen hears strange voices in the middle of the night outside of the tent far away. He has a suspicion that they might be Islamic terrorists. In a life-changing moment, Stephen realizes that his goal is not to possess Mari. It's to protect her. He musters up all of the confidence he has within his heart and runs outside of the tent to a tree far away and tries to pee to pass off as normal.
- *Final face off*— After exiting the tent to protect Mari, Stephen confronts the terrorists. They throw him around. Next, they find the cross necklace around his neck and in a moment of passion, they chop off his head.
- *Resolution*—Mari finds Stephen's body beheaded with the ring in his hand and with the cross necklace just by him. This is what love means.

Beats for "The Devout Thief:"

An expatriate of the United States finds himself stranded in Spain and starving, unable to obtain a job, food, or lodging. The only thing left for him is to steal, and the only place he will steal from is a wealthy Catholic church. Is theft from the Church

lawful if it is their duty to feed the poor? Does man possess a right to feed himself? “The Devout Thief” addresses these themes and more in a high-speed chase throughout the city of Madrid.

- *Opening image*—The story begins with the scent of rotting food distilling off of the protagonist’s jacket and into the church’s air around him. A flashback introduces how he received the jacket and reveals the reality that he is starving and homeless, which shows just how desperate the protagonist is.
- *World as we know it/ storm is brewing/ inciting incident*—The protagonist enters a confessional and the priest hears his confession. He confesses that he is about to steal something really valuable.
- *Dilemma*—He is staring ahead at a deliciously ornate tabernacle as a group of old ladies recite the rosary. His stomach grumbles and the ladies exit the chapel. He is starving and has to eat. He gets up and starts walking towards the sacristy, but on the way stops and prays in front of a Mary statue for her guidance in his life.
- *Full commitment/ crossing of threshold*—He goes into the sacristy and steals the precious vessels.
- *Adventure sequence begins* —The priest comes in just as he is walking out of the church and says that he was waiting for him. And as the thief turns away from the priest to leave, he trips over the kneeler of a St. Joseph statue and a precious vessel clatters to the ground. The thief sprints off, while the priest starts after him and pulls out his phone to call the *guardia civil*.
- *Character moment #1*—Runs into *Buen Retiro*, exhausted and still *so hungry*. Police sirens sound in the distance. He approaches a food vendor and tries to trade

one of the chalices for some food. They won't do it and look at him super strangely. He won't steal from them, only the church, whose job it is to feed the poor.

- *Midpoint and character moment #2*—He goes to the park exit. But he sees the same priest, talking to a Dominican nun. He just about slams into them but stops short. They try to detain him, but he runs through them, knocking the sister down. He sees signs of poverty in the priest and sister and this causes him to hesitate. Maybe the clergy aren't so bad. The priest has to help the sister up.
- *All downhill*—He goes into a restaurant and sits down (because he's so hungry), orders food, but everyone looks at him weird. They bring out the food; he devours it. He hears news of himself on the T.V. He gets up to leave, but has pangs of conscience because he hasn't paid. He leaves one of the items he stole.
- *The brick wall*—He comes out front of the restaurant and the police are there. Guns are pointed at him. He pretends to surrender and place the vessels down, but he escapes. A bullet grazes him in the leg.
- *Final face off*—There's nothing left for him to do at this point but run. He climbs into the highest tower of the royal palace, leaving footprints of blood, guards chasing him all the while. He finds himself exhausted and trapped in a tower. Guards are behind him, while the priest is below him on the ground. He tries to jump out of the window onto another building, but misses.
- *Resolution*—The body lands face down with arms outstretched, the precious chalice landing upright on his chest. The priest stands over him, hears his final confession, and anoints him. He dies.

Beats for “The Little Ones:”

“The Little Ones” pulls the reader into the mind of a young college student, Curt, driven nearly mad by grief and anger from traumatic events in his childhood. In the opening scene of the story, he sees an opportunity to confront these past events. Little does he know the full repercussions that his confrontation will have on him and those he loves.

- *Opening image*— On the chapel door hang two wooden signs. These signs set up the conflict of the story: this will be a story about religion. It will deal with the themes of the signs that hang on the door in the next beat.
- *World as we know it/ inciting incident*— Curt, wounded by gender confusion in his own family, reads the flyers on the chapel door advertising the talk today about gender fluidity in the Gospel of John.
- *Dilemma*— Should he bring his gun in?
- *Full commitment/ crossing of threshold*—He goes through the door and sneaks his gun past the security guard.
- *Adventure sequence begins and character moment #1*—Flashback with his sister Jordan’s first gender questioning. He receives a text from Frida, his girlfriend, which he ignores. He’s in this alone.
- *Midpoint*— After the speaker has been preaching about gender fluidity, etc... Curt becomes infuriated and stands up and yells that it’s false. Full active commitment to mission. He decides to fight this battle to protect the innocent

minds who could be corrupted and to get revenge for the death of his sister, which we see in the next flashback.

- *The brick wall*—The security guard asks him to leave.
- *Final face off*—The speaker says that the little ones who change their gender identity are heroes. Curt stands up, has a flashback wherein he relives the moment that he saw his sister's dead body after her suicide, and then he shoots.
- *Resolution*—He accidentally shoots Frida, his girlfriend and is left with this awful consequence.

Beats for "Exit 54 B:"

The unfortunate adventure of a man seeking out a night's pleasure. "Exit 54 B" addresses themes such as the vengeance, lawful pleasure seeking, pride, vanity, and sexual sin in the modern United States.

- *Opening image*—The young, muscular male protagonist has just pulled off at an exit, for what reason the reader is not yet certain. The exit symbolically represents a departure from everyday life. Something is different here.
- *World as we know it/storm is brewing / inciting incident*—The reader quickly realizes that he's married and looking for a prostitute. He's looking for a house, but there's nothing there except for an old, creepy hamburger shack. Something is off.
- *Dilemma*—Tries to call her and she doesn't pick up. He is forced to make the decision: Should he stay or should he go?

- *Full commitment/ crossing of threshold*—The revving of his car and his tattoo make him sufficiently calm to go forward to the hamburger shack. He’s going to find this girl. The tattoo of the tiger on his arm incites this decision.
- *Adventure sequence begins*—This is simply his drive over and the events that pass while he’s in the car.
- *Character moment #1*—He looks at himself in the mirror and gains more confidence. He is handsome! The confidence fills him so much that he thinks he might not even have to pay for Jenny, the prostitute.
- *Midpoint*— He gets up and walks to the door. No longer can he let the car take him (passively).
- *All downhill*—His heart starts to beat in his chest as he slowly makes his way into the hamburger shack. While this is an ominous sign for the reader, it is a sign of encouragement for the character. She is ever closer!
- *Character moment #2*— He looks at his tiger tattoo and it doesn’t seem so intimidating anymore. The poor man is scared for his life.
- *The brick wall*—The smell of something terrible nearly drives him out of the room. But he has to find her! He places the smell as the smell of a butcher’s shop in which he used to work. This is a victory for him. But he does not realize the consequences of this smell yet.
- *Final face off*—“Then his heart seemed to stop.” He turns around and faces Jenny who holds a revolver and a butcher’s knife pointed at him.
- *Resolution*—She says, “the thing about us loose women is that we come with a mighty high price.” He ends up suffering death and torture (not written).

Didactic Forces

The process of writing a creative thesis has taught me so much. Writing fiction isn't so much what it's made out to be: I, for one, used to imagine Faulkner sitting alone at his cluttered desk in near ecstasy as he poured out one-hundred words a minute without any planning, outlining, or revision. Turns out it doesn't work like that, at least not normally.

Time. Creating something beautiful takes so much time and devotion and practice. In order to write so many pages of fiction, I had to devote thirty minutes, then an hour, and then around two to three hours a day for what now amounts to about an entire year. It was not just sitting down and then the words came flowing out; it was a lot of staring at a screen, scrolling up and down on the page, and writing a sentence or two, over and over and over. Then, after three hours or so, words would be on the page. I was never quite sure how they got there or what they meant or how they would end up. But words were on the page. That was what mattered. However, this only happened because I developed the discipline of writing almost every single day. Anne Lamott speaks about this in her introduction to her book, *Bird by Bird*, and in the first chapter, saying that the writer needs to “put a little bit down on paper every day” (xii), because, “if you do your scales every day... you'll get better” (14). I understand the importance of regular, rigorous work now more than ever. It turns out that inspiration meets you on the page. And it meets you when you show up to play.

Moreover, beauty is carefully planned and plotted. Again, an image of Faulkner jumps into my head screaming at me that all you have to do is follow around your

characters and then you'll have a brilliant story. Maybe for a genius this is how it works, but not for me; and not for almost everyone else. My stories took so much planning upfront. If I didn't plan the whole story, from opening image to resolution, it probably ended in me having to scrap the whole thing from top to bottom. This happened too many times before I listened to Dr. Murray and decided to outline the whole plot. Then, I finally wrote a story. After the surprising success I had following my thesis director's guidelines, I decided to keep listening to her and finished my last four stories. And they were good. These stories work because I spent weeks and months brainstorming plots, words, and characters; and then I spent time outlining and planning before I started really writing. While this was frustrating, it taught me so much. I now know that anything well-done takes careful planning and a mountain of patience before one sees any results at all.

Finally and most importantly, I learned humility. What I didn't mention earlier about my frustrations in writing these stories is how many times I had to delete my work. There is no telling how many pages I had to scrap in order to come out with sixty-or-so pages of fiction, but probably I threw out more than the amount that remains. Anne Lamott calls these "shitty first drafts" (21). For me, though, it was closer to shitty fourth drafts. Faulkner and Chesterton and Dr. Murray and just about everyone who has ever given any advice whatsoever on creative writing (so, that means any and every creative writer out there) have all said, "kill your darlings," but I think Stephen King said it best: "kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart, kill your darlings" (222). However, one cannot understand this cute little maxim without actually doing it, without having to re-write an eighteen page short story upwards of five times with different plots, characters, settings, you name it. While

excruciating to the extreme, I learned to detach myself from my writing. I used to be so proud of every pretty sentence I could contrive. Now I look at a nice sentence as a tool in a machine. A beautiful tool, sure, but a tool nonetheless. I learned that every sentence or plot or character that I thought so clever and novel was *not* actually so great. I had to kill them off if they didn't work. Sometimes, it turns out that if you kill your darlings, they will be reborn: resurrected and glorious and so much better than you originally intended to make them.

Above all, I learned that the best I can do is to keep trying, to keep putting in the time, to keep editing, revising, and rewriting, and eventually—maybe—something would come out that works. Not because of me, but because of the process; and because somehow, for some reason, God willed for my stories to play some small part in his plan for the salvation of the world. I'm honored these stories chose me to tell them to you.

CHAPTER TWO

Life is Found under Rocks and Hard Places

Pa slammed down two plates with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the picnic table in front of Eli and his sister Rose. Today, like most days, the already-greying middle-aged man seemed to be expressing his profound and permanent discontentment with the world in the form of a dense, ugly frown. His blue jeans, which he wore every day, had two permanent marks in the front and back pockets: where he kept his chewing tobacco, and where he kept his wallet. Rose, his older child looked up at him and smiled, while Eli took out his book—*Great Expectations*—and stared deep into it with a look of intense concentration.

“What were y'all smakin' on about out there today?” Pa grunted, “I want to see harder focus until supper or there won't be nothing for either of y'all.”

“Eli was talking all about how—Ouch!” Rose yelled, “Eli, *why*?!”

Pa's huge shadow loomed over Eli and knuckles fell fast onto Eli's head as he tried to dodge the punishment. His father grabbed him by the collar so that his burnt neck grew white from the friction of the shirt against it.

“One more mistake from you today son, and I swear...”

Eli gulped and looked down.

“Pa,” Rose whined in a way *completely* unsuitable for her age, “Eli was talking about going to school again today...”

“He did what?” Pa said from between his teeth.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up! Rose for God’s sake won’t you keep your damn mouth shut.”

At these first words from his mangy son, Pa picked up his fist and slammed it so hard onto the table that Eli and Rose’s sad sandwiches flew up into the air. Eli’s flopped like a wounded animal and landed on the ground.

“Get out Eli. To the field, go!” Pa screamed and as he did so his eyes grew intense, fiery red like they got on Fridays when he was drunk.

With a brave lethargy Eli emerged from his chair, closed his book and sauntered off. Pa had his hand raised and was about to strike him from behind, but he stopped and let it down. Before running out after Eli, Rose grabbed her sandwich and shoved the rest into her mouth so that little spots of bread hung around her lips, forming extra freckles on her already-spotted face.

“Eli! Eli! I’m sorry, I didn’t know—”

“Shut up,” he spun around. “Can’t we just dig? In silence.”

The seventeenth row. Sixteen crates per row. Eighty-five golden potatoes on average per crate. One-thousand, three-hundred, and sixty potatoes per row. One row per hour for the two of them. Six-hundred and eighty potatoes an hour. That was his worth. His shovel shot down into the soil as if of its own accord and then began the afternoon of work: a world of darkness and light. Black soil and gold potatoes. Blue sky and yellow sun, always shining. His sister came next to him and started to gather the potatoes as he dug them up. She crouched low over the ground and moved her hands back and forth over the dirt in a rhythmic, ritualistic motion that made her look like one of those witches

the Spaniards burned during the Inquisition. Three hours passed in silence which was only interrupted by the shovel as it dug into the ground and ripped out the golden fruits of the earth, followed by hard knocks as the potatoes fell into the plastic crate. Eli made sure not to so much as look at Rose so that she would understand the harm she had caused him.

“Eli,” Rose ventured in a soft, innocent soprano, “I’m sorry.” Her twenty-year-old eyes were verdant green and shone with the first signs of tears like a Costa Rican jungle just before a rainstorm.

“Why—why in the *hell* did you have to say something? If I tell you one ounce of my life, you go and spread it to the whole world. No—not to the whole world... to *Pa*.” Drops of perspiration shone on Eli’s dark and thick, yet still handsome eyebrows. His curly hair remained dry and wisped outward into the blue of the sky like a small net cast into the heavens. His eyes were brown like the shell of a wild pecan. The only brown eyes in the whole family. He was a child of the *dirt*, Pa always said.

Where Eli was handsome always, Rose was handsome sometimes. Both of them knew this. Rose still crouched over the ground, but slightly higher so that she could look at Eli as she talked to him and maintain the image of working from the house or barn where Pa would be watching them. Eli’s response had stirred something in her that immediately dried up the tears which had been almost imminent; and her nose twitched up in a funny way, like she smelled something bad. She had the sort of face that was pretty when she was smiling, but very unattractive if she wasn’t. She almost never smiled. For a moment, Eli imagined what she would look like smiling in a sky blue dress with flowers on it. He decided she would look nice. And if only they could find that

gold... he would be a writer, or a professor, or something, and buy her a blue dress with sunflowers smattered all over in a brilliant feast of color and joy and—

“—Snap out of it, Pa’s watching,” Rose said, waving her hand at him.

Eli gripped his shovel tighter and forced it deep into the dirt, overturning the black soil to reveal the potatoes. This image of black and gold recalled to him what Uncle Bill had said that one night: whispered words in the cold smoke of a wet cigar which his uncle balanced in his mouth while rocking back and forth in long, slow motions.

“*Two* wedding rings with *rubies* in them,” Eli questioned, “nobody wants a ruby of all gems in their wedding ring. I mean... they look like blood... and... death. And, well, nobody wants to think about that on their wedding day.”

His uncle stared at him with a crooked smile and narrowed his eyes so that they were almost shut.

“These sisters did,” Uncle Bill grumbled in his melodious baritone, “they married a set of brothers in that abandoned house by the mine. You know which one I mean?”

Eli nodded and leaned forward.

“They demanded rubies from the brothers. The hardest gems to come by around here. Well, the brothers found them, after all, they owned the mine and could afford it...That was the last straw for the workers there. They banded together two nights after the wedding, when all the guests had finally left, broke into both of their houses, and shot them and their wives seven times each in the chest. After that they took the gold, including the wedding rings and buried them, as legend would have it, on this property right here.”

“But why,” Eli said, leaning forward, “why leave it here? Why not take it and move to...to Mexico or Italy and start another company...why *here*?”

His uncle looked at him and shook his head in a slow, circular motion.

“Because they did it out of spite.”

Eli gulped.

“But how come no one’s ever found it?”

“Your Pa’d kill the person that did—that money *belongs* to the dead, he says. Nobody messes with your Pa. Not even his brothers.”

Just then, a potato hit Eli square in the forehead.

Eli picked up the potato and chucked it back at his sister but missed and hit the crate next to her so that it made an empty thump. “Why in hell didja do that for?”

“I’m trying to save your butt and you know it.”

A minute passed. There was only the sound of the shovel munching softly into the ground, and then the hollow thump of the potatoes falling into the crate.

“You gotta give it up,” Rose ventured, “school, I mean. You gotta give it up.”

“You’re kiddin’,” Eli gripped his shovel harder and slammed it into the soil, “the one thing I’ve ever wanted in my life, and you, even *you* want to shut it down. Can’t you just let me have this *one* thing? *One thing*...” he trailed off. And, his eyebrows, having switched from their angry position (furrowed downward in the shape of an upside-down-triangle), to disappointed (an upward-facing, more relaxed, and somehow sad, pyramid),

he began again in a softer, more constrained voice that was almost gentle: “Ma would have been for it. She would have let me go to school.”

“*Ma*,” Rose mouthed slowly and with precision as she picked up a potato, dusted it off, and set it in the crate next to her, “you bring up *Ma*? You hardly even *knew* her, and you bring up *Ma*? Hell, Eli, you’re hopeless.” She stared at Eli who had started to dig furiously, overturning the soil with a reckless abandon, chopping up the potatoes and spoiling them in the process. “But maybe you’re right,” she continued, “maybe Ma would’ve been for you. Hell, she’d probably pray every day on her decaying knees while Pa sat on the porch drinking his brains out that you could go to school, that you would go to fucking Oxford for all I care. But you know what? She’d never *say* it. She’d never tell you and she’d never tell me...she’d never tell a damn soul. Ma knew respect. That’s what Ma would *be for*—respect.”

“Shut up!” Eli yelled, “Won’t you just shut up? Don’t you think I *know* I never knew Ma...” he trailed off in a short diminuendo.

Silence reigned supreme for a full five minutes, and finally Rose ventured to open her mouth.

“We should be done pretty soon.”

“Yep,” Eli responded without looking up.

“Surprised Pa never came to check on us again.”

“Yep.”

But Rose was right. The cherry sky signaled that day was nearing its end, so that meant Pa would be watching them from the window to see if they’d finish out the day right. Because of this, Eli started to dig with vigor. The shovel sent a jolt throughout his

lean, youthful arms and legs as he slammed it down. And then the relief would follow of gently laying the soft dirt and potatoes to the side. And then all over again. Dark, ebony soil and small golden tubers, over and over. Black and then gold and then black and gold.

Just as the sun dipped below the horizon, a faint gleam shot out from under Eli's shovel, and glancing around briefly, he dug away some of the dirt around it out of curiosity. The more that was exposed, the more it shone: rose gold and glimmering in the reflection of the remaining pink clouds hovering over the skyline.

Eli froze. And then without any further thought, he threw the dirt back that he had just removed from the hole and packed it down so that it would seem untouched.

"Rose," Eli called, "what do you say...what do you say we're done for today? I'm beat."

"Alright, come over here and help me finish gathering them up," Rose said as she glanced up at him. "Jesus, Eli. You didn't have to get so far ahead."

"I...I," he stuttered with an awkward look on his face, "I'll start on this end and throw them down towards you. That way we won't get in each other's way."

"Pa'd kill us if we threw them."

"There's a bunch of stickers in the ground over here," Eli muttered, blushing. "Just let me deal with them, and you keep going over there. Pa won't see."

"Whatever... but you're the one who's gettin' your ass beat if he finds bruised potatoes."

They finished gathering the vegetables, piled up the crates under the shed, and started the quarter-mile trek to their shed of a house where they had lived their whole lives. The house had four qualities: it was red, brick, dirty, and something was always

broken. By now, every time Eli looked at the house, it caused him an interior revulsion and he would have to think about something else, or he'd throw up.

Pa was sitting at the kitchen table staring down into a cup when Rose and Eli stomped in.

“What’s for dinner?” Eli asked.

“Sardines,” their dad grumbled through his dark beard, “there's a can of yellow wax beans in there from earlier.”

Eli opened his mouth to complain but stopped.

“How many crates y'all end up gettin'?” Pa asked.

“Twenty-seven,” Rose responded, her eyes shining with pride.

“Hmph.” Pa said as he looked up from his beer and peered at his kids.

Eli grabbed a can of refried beans, opened them up behind the counter, and almost sprinted up towards his room. Before Eli had been born, it was just an attic, but Pa and Ma cleared it out and made it big enough to fit a small child. If you live in the same room for eighteen years, though, you make do. Since he was in a rush to get into his room and think out what to do about what he had seen, Eli forgot about the pile of books he kept stacked against the opposite side of the door. So, when he flung open the door, the huge pile of twenty books came crashing down with a gigantic slam.

“Boy! What was that? I swear to Go—”

“Nothing Pa, it was nothing!” Eli yelled down the stairs and then sighed to himself, “damn it.”

He kneeled down to pick up the books, but in the corner, behind where the stack had been, a small blue box caught his eye. It was where he kept his “treasures” when he

was a kid: photos from when Ma was alive, glassy rocks he had collected around the farm, his first pocket knife, and that one little statue Rose had made him out of pipe cleaners for his birthday—two skinny white figures wrestling. He leaned over and pulled off the dusty top. Inside there were a bunch of photos. The first one was the house when it was first built. He threw this one to the side and looked at the next one: he and Rose playing on their old trampoline. She was laying on her back, holding him up with her arms and legs, caught in the middle of a contagious toddler laugh. Eli looked at this one for a moment and placed it on the table next to his bed. He glanced down at the next photo and gulped. It showed himself and Rose smiling in Pa's lap while he sat on their old Ford tractor. Ma stood to the side with her hand on the wheel. The next photo had him and Rose laying in the mud in their backyard after a long day of rain. He must have been five, and she, two years older. They were laying perpendicular to each other and Eli held his small hand smack in the middle of Rose's face, smashing her nose down into her upper lip. She was smiling. In the next, Pa sat with a huge chuckle half-way out of his mouth in his recliner in the living room. Eli stared at these last three photos laid across his lap for a long time.

First on this side of the bed with his feet above his head board, and then on the other side of the bed flat on his back, Eli spent the night tossing and turning, trying to find a comfortable position to read either Dickens or Jane Austen. After three hours he had read five pages in each book. As if searching for a savior from his ennui, he glanced

at his stack of books. One in particular caught his eye. It wore camouflage synthetic leather binding with gold letters on it, which seemed to make it important. Eli flipped over so that his feet faced where his head normally was and stretched out his hands as far as they could go to reach the book at the near bottom of the stack. He hesitated and then yanked it hard and fast. The other books fell into place.

“*The Holy Bible for Outdoorsman*,” the title read. There seemed to have been something he had heard from Ma about treasure in the Bible somewhere, so he opened it up and started flipping around. The first thing he opened up to was “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s.”

“O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth...” but at reading this, Eli quickly turned the page, and on the next one, it read, “Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle—”

Eli flipped to a different section, breathing hard. He decided not to read a full sentence anymore in *that* chapter unless he saw something relevant. He turned the pages, fifty or so at a time and glanced over them momentarily. After a few of these cycles, a phrase caught his eye.

“To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag...” and at this, his heart seemed to skip a beat, so he flipped over onto his back in order to see better. It followed, “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you...’ His master replied, ‘You wicked,

lazy servant,” and a few lines later it said, “So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags.”

Eli slammed the book shut.

He got up to put the Holy Bible back into the stack of other books and sat back down on the edge of his bed as if he were Moses himself after having just conversed with the burning bush, humbled and breathless. He held his face cupped into his hands and stared at the wall. The Yartvard University flag hung on the center of it like a crucifix at the center of a Catholic altar. After a few minutes of staring at it with a soft smile playing across his lips, he finally got up and placed a wet kiss directly on the wide base of the flag, as a lover would his beloved. But when he moved to lay back down on his bed, the photos on his desk caught his eyes and sent a strange, piercing pain through his heart—live images of Ma laughing and Rose throwing leaves into the air while Pa sang “Take me home, country road.” Homemade peach ice cream on a warm, misty summer night—salt in the first bite, followed by sweet, creamy, peachy goodness.

He drew in a sharp breath and crunched all the photos up into one hand, intending to throw them into the trash bin. But at the last second, he saved the one of them all on the tractor and imagined what it would be like if they all were still as happy as they seemed in the photo. Then he shook his head, shoved it in his pocket, and left the rest laying on his desk.

When the clock struck 1:00 am, Eli was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He had spent the last hour and a half pacing back and forth in his room as quietly as possible, trying to make up a plan for what to do if he really saw what he thought he did. So, when the time came, he was ready. He slipped out of bed and into the kitchen. A few minutes

passed as he stood just outside of his door because he thought he heard movement from Pa's room downstairs, but he heard nothing else and figured he had probably just imagined it. He stepped out into the backyard, leaving the door a hair open because it creaked whenever someone opened it from the outside and it was right next to Pa's room. Nancy, their golden shepherd, came running up to Eli right as he latched the gate to the backyard.

"Nance, shhh Nance. It's Eli...stay. Stay... oh alright you can come," he whispered and reopened the gate to let Nancy through. "Let's go."

Eli grabbed the shovel and dipped it down into the soil while alternating his weight on each side of the shovel so that he didn't have to jump up and down and wake the goose.

Crunch.

He threw off the dirt and before him bright golden chunks gleamed in the moon's dying light. With a ferocious sort of sheepishness, he dug around the golden nuggets as his body jittered. It seemed like the shovel itself was charged with electricity so that he could barely grip it. When a decent sized hole had formed, he tried to set the shovel down, but it slipped from his clammy hands a few feet above the ground and clattered down with a sharp ring. Nancy shifted her head and looked inquisitively at him but remained put.

“Damn!...good girl, Nance,” Eli whispered into her ear as he stroked her head with his shaking hand and glanced over towards where the goose slept under the chicken shed.

As if reaching for a tarantula in a deep, dark chasm, Eli scrunched up his nose and threw his hands into the hole. He pulled out a decayed canvas thing about the size of a small paper bag and jerked it around, letting the contents fall to the ground. Fifteen small, round chunks of gold, all misshapen and dirty, from the size of a dime to a half dollar coin seemed to glow a reddish hue in the moonlight. Two rings with giant vermilion gems sparkled next to the rest of the gold, signaling that this was the treasure. All along it had been right under their noses, after all. Just like Uncle Bill had said. With a gasp, he picked up the rings and slid them into his pocket in such a tender manner that one would have thought they might have been his own children. He fumbled around picking up the remaining pieces of gold—two pounds in all from what he could tell—and he tried to shove them in his pockets, but his pajama shorts wouldn’t hold up. He had to carry everything except the two rings, which he placed onto his fingers with great pleasure and a huge sense of pride—like he had just been proposed to by Fate Himself.

It was inconvenient as hell opening the gate to the backyard: he gingerly and slowly set the gold down on the brick post that surrounded the gate. But just then Nancy ran up to him and let out a short, ringing bark. She looked up at him with inquisitive, dark eyes. “Shut up,” he whispered through his teeth as he smacked her just above her eyebrows. She whimpered and sunk to the ground. Eli glanced back at the gold, and seeing it was still all there, unlatched the gate and crept through, leaving Nancy outside laying where she had been, obedient and tranquil. He picked up the gold, and when he

knew that all fifteen pieces were still there, continued to the back door and slipped through. Before tiptoeing up to his room, nudging the door shut behind him, and collapsing onto his bed, he grabbed a small paper bag from the pantry and threw all the gold in, including the rings.

The next day Eli woke up with all his clothes on and felt sick to the stomach. He knew he couldn't go out and work, so he lay in bed until Pa came in.

"Time to get up," he said, standing in his doorway with his hands shoved deep into his blue-jean pockets.

Eli lay silent for a few moments and then groaned and turned over like a mummy told to exit his grave for the first time.

"Eli. Wake up—work to do."

"I don't feel so good, my stomach is killing me," Eli groaned.

"Lazy piece of shit. If I figure out this is some sort of sham, you're going to be sore for weeks," he slammed the door on his way out. Everything seemed to have a reddish haze for Eli and the thought of Ma and Rose and Pa made him nauseous. He tried to read *Great Expectations*, but his head pounded like a blacksmith's insistent hammer. He gave up and drifted off into a restless sleep.

"Eli... Eli!"

"Huh, what?" Eli woke up and looked around confused.

Rose stood over his bed, worried.

“It’s lunch time, Pa told me to come and check on you... you look awful,” Rose said.

“Thanks,” Eli sighed.

“Pa said it’s your stomach. You eat anything weird... or weirder than normal?”

“Just what we had last night, but that’s weird enough,” he grinned, “but it’s not just my stomach now—my chest and my head feel hot and compressed: like some giant weight pressing down...and I just can’t get rid of it.” He paused, opened his eyes, and peered at Rose as if to search for any hint that maybe she knew what he was doing, that maybe she had seen what he had seen.

“My throat’s dry, too. Get me some water...please,” Eli said and rolled back over onto his stomach.

She brought some in and he gulped it down. He had the rest of the day to himself, but this time he could not sleep. Ever the thought of Rose alone with Pa and Nancy tormented him. Rose trudging through the fields all day and into the night without him to help. Pa would work longer hours and probably drink more... But he would drink more anyways.

That night Rose came in and brought him an orange. She only stayed for a minute and wore a worried expression. Right before leaving, she turned to Eli and whispered to him:

“What’s wrong?” she said, staring him straight in the eye.

“You know what’s wrong. I’m sick,” he stated, while his eyes drifted around the room as though they were trying to find something to grip onto just before a giant, slamming stop. “I’ll see you in the morning, ok?” He closed his eyes and made out as if

he were going to sleep whether she stayed or not. Rose hesitated and her green eyes seemed to pierce his soul as she stood there looking at him. But then she gripped his arm, released it, and walked out of the room, flicking off the light.

The night struck Eli as particularly black. Shriill yelps from coyotes rose up in the woods surrounding the road and seemed to dance around him and mock him as he took one step forward, and then another. Each step meant he was that much closer to the realization of his dreams. Images filled his head of himself writing at a table overlooking the Thames; a stained-glass window adorned the wall to his left and in front of him he could just make out a lone swan bathing in the icy waters below. Under his hand, the paper felt warm and fuzzy—as if his own child, impregnated by the rich fertility of his genius interpretation of *The Metamorphosis*.

A blistering howl emerged from the woods and destroyed this delightful scene. And again, Eli noticed the darkness of the night. Since the bus stop was six miles due north, he estimated he needed 2 hours to arrive there by 5:00 am, when the first bus left. When he passed the “Blamebury Baptist Church” sign that marked four miles from his house, night had hit its darkest pitch, meaning that dawn would arrive soon. His uncharacteristically slow and meandering gait had allowed him to possibly be late, and the only other bus left at 5:00 pm. As soon as Pa woke up at 5:00 am like he did every day and didn’t find Eli, he would hunt the world over searching for him. So he better be on that bus or some other place far away.

When he first heard the noise, he thought it was probably the sound of his heavy feet dragging against the asphalt, but then the headlights showed themselves and he knew it was a car coming up from behind him. Eli slowed down and moved off the road into the itchy spear-grass so that the car could pass. Two small, glowing eyes appeared in the blackness over the next hill and grew larger and larger every second, illuminating the grey and tan hues of the long-since paved asphalt. It came to a slow and drawn-out stop, as if it had seen him and started slowing down from miles away.

“Get in the car bitch.”

Eli moved his hat farther down over his eyes and ignored the voice.

“I said get in the car, bitch.”

“Fuck you!” Eli continued walking.

“What’d you just say to my brother?” another voice said from the car. “Now you get your chubby ass in the car or I’ll blow your face to pieces.” The Mexican man in the passenger seat pulled out a small black pistol with a large clip and seemed to be foaming at the mouth.

“Ok,” Eli said as he shuffled over, “what are y’all in such a—”

“Damn!” the driver said, leaning over the other man, “Jeremiah, why does this boy keep talking? Might have to shut him up.”

“Calm down man, calm down,” Jeremiah said with a smirk on his face, “he’ll shut up soon enough.” He then began to cackle until it devolved into a hacking cough.

Eli opened the door and got into the car, sneaking in the bag by his feet.

“Hey, what ya put down there man?” Jeremiah said as soon as his cough faded.

He had a shaved head and a scar the shape of a banana across the back of his scalp.

“Did the little bitch bring us a present?” the other man said and turned around to face Eli. In the dark Eli had not been able to make it out, but now that he was so close it was shockingly clear: the man had black hair all over his face. It grew thickest where beards normally are, under the mouth and low on the cheeks, but where others’ beards stopped, his kept going. The forehead, nose, and all. This, however, was not the most noticeable aspect of the man staring at Eli with a haunting grin. His eyes and lips stood out like the full moon on a cloudless night. They were the only things not covered in hair. Each part, from the poisonous, green, snake-like eyes, to his fleshy, red lips, jumped out at the observer. It might have been better for the man if his eyes and lips were covered with hair. His appearance would have at least been pitiable.

“I said,” the rat-man swung his fist behind him and smacked Eli in the face, “Did you bring us something?”

Red dots swam across Eli’s vision as he pulled up his bag and gave it to Jeremiah.

“Holy shit, Griffin—look what we have here.”

“Vacation’s paid for this year. Make sure it’s real. And for the last time, *don’t* call me that name.”

Griffin’s terrible eyes seemed to hang in Eli’s vision, as they kept flickering back and forth between him and the road, so that he seemed like a lion hunting for his prey, but still keeping one eye on his cubs. So, Eli kept his eyes fixed directly out the window. There seemed to be no way out; doors locked, gun loaded. They were going to kill him. Images of Pa shouting at him flashed through his head. Him kicking Rose and her yelling back at him. He placed his hands in his pockets and tried to think of something good or holy but nothing would come. It was as if a huge blackness that he had seen stalking him

from far off his whole life was now sprinting towards him, devouring the distance between them and chomping it into small, meaningless bits. And there was nothing he could do to escape. Deep in his pocket, however, he felt something small and paper-like. So that they wouldn't notice, Eli opened his fist with the utmost delicacy, like he held his soul trapped in his shaking fingers.

A twitching, cold hand seemed to grasp at his throat.

It was the photo of his family on the tractor.

After getting a good look, he pressed it hard against his chest and then slipped it back into his pocket. The vermilion sun was already glaring on the horizon, sending scarlet sparks flying into the crisp, navy air.

A shiver escaped down Eli's spine. It was as if, for the first time, he had seen real beauty. Bleak and blinding, but real beauty.

Jeremiah laughed in the front seat and cocked the pistol.

"Where do we wanna put this kid down?"

"I know a good spot, 'bout five miles up ahead."

Eli sat staring straight into the sun with his eyes held wide-open, smiling like a dolt. But, with the dawn of the sun, a new thought occurred to him as well. He knew the drive had felt familiar, but now it was obvious. Never before had he felt so idiotic in his life. The whole time they were driving he didn't notice that they were driving towards *his house*. A surge of electric energy seemed to pulse through Eli.

As they passed the last remaining bend, Eli did the only thing he could think of.

He sat forward in his seat just a hair, waited until Griffin—who was driving—was staring at the road, pulled back and punched him as hard as he could in the right temple.

Crunch.

“What the *fuck!* You little piece of white trash mother f—” and as Jeremiah turned around he brought the gun with him. But there followed a loud bump and a sense of loss of gravity. The trees outside the window rotated onto their side, the gun went off, and everything went black.

Circles danced around his vision when Eli awoke. It was silent. But from moment to moment, he began to hear movement coming from in front of him and everything came back to him in one big, smashing blow.

“Kid, you better hope you’re dead as a mummy.”

Eli scrambled to get out of the car, but the seat belt buckle had been bent under a piece of metal in the crash. He shoved his arm under it in a hurry, but he felt a sharp twang. When he pulled out his hand, a steady stream of blood had already formed.

The front door of the car slammed to the ground with a dull thud.

A large black boot emerged from the door, searched for the ground, and then found its place. Eli shook his body in any way he could, but the seat belt would not come undone. He did the only thing he could think of and tore into the belt with his teeth. It was only a few millimeters thick and around 3 inches wide. Like a feral dog sinking into his prey, he ripped into it: it was as if the pure survival instinct of man had been revealed to be entirely dog, rabid and wild. Though the belt was giving way, it would not be enough. Warm liquid started to bubble in his mouth and then drip into his lap, and finally,

his canine fell into it as well—white and pure in the middle of a bloody red mess. Eli started to shake and moan as he continued tearing at the belt.

Jeremiah's heavy boots stopped outside of his door. A gentle knock sounded and Eli quit moving and whimpered. An awful screech followed of metal being grated and pushed against other metal, and then, the door fell off. Upside down outside the door stood Jeremiah. Fat and ugly and smiling.

“This your gold?” he said, holding up Eli's bag.

Looking him up and down, Eli remained silent. Then he gathered up as much spit and blood as he could and spat.

“You son of a...” his chuckle sounded like a thousand gears turning in a broken machine, “what is it you care about so much anyway? Life?”

Jeremiah sat for a moment and pondered his proposition.

“Naw, it's not your life. Your life ain't worth a dime...I know who you are. You're a white trash kid who hates his mommy and his daddy. Daddy probably drinks too much too. Grew up milking cows. Next job you'll be working is the cotton gin. No sir, no sir. It ain't your life.”

“Shut. Up.” Eli said slowly and exactly, like the way he said those words had some sort of effect on his own survival.

“Or is it your money. Hmm,” he questioned and started to play with the bag in his hand, twirling it up and down Eli's face, banging the heavy gold against his mouth, “big dreams, that's what it is.”

Silence enveloped them both as the blood continued to rush to Eli's head.

“Let’s get this over with,” he pulled out his small black pistol, cocked it and took aim.

“I hope you die in a black hole with no one’s there to see, you... you p-p-pig. You’re an animal, an animal,” but here, Eli’s voice choked and died. In place, tears ran down, and he sputtered, “Oh God oh God oh dear God no, help me, help...”

“Pitiful.” Jeremiah smirked, took aim again, and fired.

A thundering sound followed and Eli opened his eyes. Dazzling light entered for an instant—white and pure. And then a huge wet object slammed into the car and fell on top of Eli’s face and chest. A smelly, dark, skin-like substance coated with a thick, warm liquid lay on top of him.

Eli let forth a scream that would have made the sirens themselves run and flee in terror. He gestured wildly with his arms and tried to throw the body off, but when he managed to, he had already been soaked in blood and his face seemed to possess a layer of the gooey ooze all over it. His eyes stung, so he wiped his shaking hand over his face, trying to clear away most of the disgusting, hot blood.

Outside the car stood a silhouetted figure in place of Jeremiah.

“H-hello.”

“Get yourself out of there before I have to come and do it for you,” said a gruff and familiar voice.

“Pa... Pa?” The edges of Eli’s vision started to close in on him as more and more of his blood rushed to his head, “help, oh get me out of here, oh get me out—,” and with that last word, Eli passed out into utter blackness.

Jolting awake, he took in his surroundings: alone, in his bed. The soft orange light of the morning sun danced into his room through the waving curtains across his nightstand and over the two pictures he didn’t take with him. This time, Eli could hold back no tears. Full sobs without constraint seemed to burst forth from deep within, as if the very bottom of his soul had been clawing for an escape and had finally found it. For a full three minutes he was incapacitated and could do nothing but sit and let the tears pour forth. He lay there shaking long after, until the door inched open and Pa walked in. A hungry look filled his eyes while he gazed at his son, but this dissipated as soon as it had come.

“Now tell me what happened and why I was woken up to my son crashing a car into the only damn pecan tree in our whole property,” Pa said with the beginning tones of anger swelling in his voice. But Eli could see in his eyes that he didn’t mean it. The softness along the edges of his mouth gave him away. A squeaking in the floorboards alerted them both to the entry of Rose in the room: a warm glow seemed to exude from her as she moved over to Eli and kneeled by his bed.

She stared at him and grasped his hand in hers: “What *happened*? How did you end up in that car with *that* man?”

“I just wanted to go so much... I had to do it,” Eli felt his throat seizing up and trying to stop him again, “I’m sorry. I found it.”

“Found what?” Pa asked.

“The gold.”

“What *gold*?” Pa said as if he were trying to laugh but couldn’t quite convince himself that there was something funny.

“*The* gold. That Uncle Bill always talked about. I’m sorry. I thought I was dead in that car.”

“Ah damn,” Pa said, as he rested his face on his palms.

“You have it now, right?” Eli asked.

“I got you out of there as fast as I could... no I don’t have it,” Pa’s eyebrows twitched and he continued, “but I did go out there again to start cleaning up the mess. The driver was gone. Thought he was dead. Should’ve shot him when I had the chance.”

Eli shook his head and seemed to sink miles down into the bed; and maybe, if he could sink far enough, he would disappear. He pulled his hand out from under the sheets to pull the covers up over his head, but when he did so his hand came up with the same photo taken on the tractor. He dropped it as though it stung him and stared down at it.

Rose and Pa looked at it like they were drawn by some supernatural force. Not a sound escaped any of them for a full three minutes. Ma’s face glowed up from the photo and the sun filled the room.

Two long minutes later and day broke into the room like a steam-engine bursting through a brick wall. Pa rose and gripped Eli’s arm.

“I’ll see you tomorrow for work. Today, you get some rest,” he walked towards the door and placed his faded rawhide hat back on his head. But, taking it off again, he

muttered, “and, son,” his voice sort of faded out, but returned slowly first, and then finished like a blow horn in a quick crescendo: “It’s goOD TO HAVE YOU BACK.”

The door slammed shut and the stairs creaked with his weighty steps. Alone with her brother, Rose gazed out the window.

“There are few people in this world who can march into the sun and come back alive. You happened to have done just that. Not unscorched, but alive. I don’t know what occurred to you last night. But I do know damn well that it better not occur again. Next time the bad guy won’t be the one with the bullet in his head.”

A smile broke onto her lips and she threw her arms around Eli.

“Don’t ever do that again.” Tears glistened in her eyes.

“Ok.”

“Oh, and, by the way, I got you this. I’ve been hiding it for a while.”

She took out a *Test Prep* booklet.

“I figured if you did well enough, you could get a scholarship for a computer and you could take classes at night out here, at least for the beginning. I got it for you for you a while back but was waiting for the right time to give it to you.”

Eli smiled at her and took the booklet.

“Thanks.”

“Ok. I think it’s potatoes for dinner,” she grimaced, “again. See you down there.”

Eli lay back down while Rose made her way out. His room seemed to have grown bigger and more colorful. The rays of sunlight fell onto the prep book and danced across the glossy cover while luminous sparks of pink and blue light shimmered onto the walls. A sudden impulse to open the curtains and look out the window forced itself upon him.

So, throwing the curtains wide open, he shielded his eyes from the sun and looked out upon row after row of dark and rich, plowed dirt. The land stretched farther than he could see.

CHAPTER THREE

Mene, Tekel, and Peres

“Where’s my... Oh God...What the *hell?*” Stephen ran over to the taxi and slammed on the window where ragged curtains hung, but the driver stared straight ahead and forced the horn down. He floored the gas pedal as soon as most of the people cleared out from in front of him. The dusty street filled back in as soon as the car passed through as if nothing had ever happened.

“Please don’t tell me it’s your passport.” Mari gripped Stephen’s arm.

“My phone... it was in my pocket.”

“Let’s get the police,” she said, and then froze. Moving her sweaty palms towards her horrified, reddened face, she gasped, “Do they even *have* police here? I knew I should’ve brought my phone.”

“It’s ok,” Stephen stopped and looked at his girlfriend, “we thought this through: We knew up-front we wanted to escape—maybe this is just God’s way of doing it.”

“Sometimes God’s way sucks,” Mari responded, “our parents are going to lose their minds. I know they already found our notes. Just imagine Julie’s face when she finds it. I can see it right now. Exactly how it would happen. Her in my room, bent low over my desk reading the note, and she brushes her hair back from her face. Then she shoots up, screaming ‘Mark! Oh dear God, Mark! Look at this, God, help us!’ running downstairs like a damn maniac...maybe we should go back. I don’t know anymore... What if they call the police.”

Stephen took Mari's hand and moved her over into the dry shade from an arabesque arch overhead. "Mar—they'll have called my parents by now and have figured everything out. They just have to trust us. Three years of college, done, and we can do what we want. They have to get that through their heads. We aren't kids anymore. We have the authority. Theirs is gone." And, Stephen wanted to add, they were about to get engaged.

"You're right, you're right. I love you."

Stephen pulled her close and kissed her. The Moroccan ladies turned away and muttered to themselves.

Stephen, red in the face, said, "Let's get to our hostel... aw hell, we don't have the address. You remember the name?"

"Oh, was it Flowershade Youth Hostel?" Mari responded.

"That's it, that's it!" Stephen exclaimed, his fists clenched in an internal sense of triumph, "But, not a clue where that is."

The sandstone walls and ladies whispering in corners flashed past as Mari and Stephen wandered through the crowded, narrow streets. Scents of fried sardines seemed to cling to the dust particles in the air and fill their noses. Every so often, in larger openings between the covered streets, where the dry breeze could reach, a whiff of some other odor would pass them by. Something mysterious and not altogether good: a sour smell, hinting at near-by decay. Twenty minutes passed, but to no avail. No hostels and nobody willing to talk to them. The men were busy and tried to sell them hand woven

carpets; the women turned their heads away as if scandalized by Mari's mid-thigh length Patagonia shorts.

The streets turned silent and there sat a dark brown boy with a tattered jean jacket, about eleven years old, in a corner attempting to light a cigarette. He stared at them.

"Help? I help!" He shot up and showed his bare stomach under his unbuttoned jacket.

"*Salam*, yes! Can you help us find Flowershade Hostel?" Stephen said, annunciating every consonant forcefully and slowly so that the boy understood.

"Yes, yes. Flowershade, I know it. I know it." He smiled and walked off, almost at a jog.

"Stephen!" Mari whispered, "we can't trust him."

"Who else do we have? He's just a boy," Stephen shook off Mari's hand and followed, "Wait up! Hey, what's your name?"

"Ahmad!" he shouted back, "Come, almost there."

They ran to catch up, their backpacking bags heavy on their shoulders. After a few breathless minutes, Ahmad stopped and turned around. He pointed behind him.

"Flowershade. Here."

"Oh thank you so much Ahmad," Mari said and reached out to put her hand on him. But he shrank away like a wounded dog and then came back closer to Stephen. So close that Stephen could smell the salt on his skin and the long-dirtied clothes that hung about him.

"Flowershade, here." He said, this time a bit louder. He held his right hand out.

"He wants money," Mari whispered.

“Oh to hell with you,” Stephen wrinkled his nose, pulled out two American dollars, and slapped it in his hand, “We don’t have any Dirham yet, so you’ll have to deal with this.” Stephen grabbed Mari by the arm and opened the door to walk inside.

“Hey, Sir! Not nice, Americans, sir. Allah does not like bad Americans. I go and tell everyone that bad—”

Stephen slammed the door in his face.

“What the hell was that?” Mari said. Beads of sweat glowed on her brow.

“Shh. Nothing. It’s fine. That kinda stuff happens all the time here,” Stephen responded. He was left unmoving, his jawbone faded in and out on the sharp and angular wall of his face like it only had a few times before. An awkward silence followed while Mari stared at the bright pink register of the hostel. A pop song played on the radio.

As if to break the silence, a young girl with a tank top appeared from behind the register. She smiled at them: “How can I help y’all?”

“We have a reservation for two for tonight.” Mari responded.

“Name?”

“Stephen.”

“Stephen...,” she muttered as she clicked on the computer, “ah yes! Here you are. West Virginia—nice. I’m from Texas, if you can’t tell. Everyone here makes fun of my accent. It’s nice to see other Americans. What brings y’all here?”

“We’re heading out for the Atlas Mountains tomorrow for a backpacking trip. We’re students and have the summer off, so we wanted to go and see a little bit of the world, the eastern world,” Stephen said, almost winking, as he wrapped his free arm around Mari.

“Oh,” the girl winced a little and then forced a smile, “that’s...nice.”

“What is it?” Mari said and leaned forward a little, casting Stephen’s arm off her.

“You don’t know?” her green eyes peered at them, “I’m not supposed to tell people this kind of stuff.” She turned her open palms upward in a gesture that made it seem the most obvious thing in the world. “Jennifer, the manager here, always says the more I run my mouth, the less customers come and stay here. There’ve been a couple bad reviews.”

Stephen and Mari stood still, like Medusa herself were speaking. Their eyes narrowed in.

“Oh all right, I’ll tell you. But you can’t tell Jennifer.”

They nodded in hasty agreement.

“Well, three or four days ago, they found the bodies of three American girls in the Atlas range. Beheaded. They found the killers days later: Aises, five of them. They’re in jail now, so really, there’s nothing much to worry about. I’m sure it’s safe.”

“That’s awful,” Stephen grimaced, and looked at the ground. “Thank God they caught them.”

Mari fumbled for her phone in her pocket, but came up empty, and took a half step away from Stephen.

“Right. Here’s your key. Only have one of them, sorry, hope it’ll do. Room number nineteen: around the corner and to the left. Breakfast served from 6:30-8:00. Let me know if I can help with anything.” She snapped around and sped back into the room she had come from.

Stephen opened the door to their room and it smelled like overly ripe bananas. Pink and blue sheets and bright green curtains, like the backside of a dinosaur from a film made in the late nineties. Mari slammed down her bag, collapsed onto the bed, and threw her face into her hands.

“We’re crazy. Being here, right now.”

“It’s fine. Look,” he said, “there hasn’t been a case like this in over twenty years, I looked up things like this weeks before we came. This is just a freak thing. These things happen, even in America—look at the Batman shooting and Sandy Hook. We’re just as safe here.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care! What are we doing? I don’t know if living like this is right. I don’t know where we’re going...or what we’re doing. —Alone in this room, in this bed. Sometimes I wonder if we are doing this all wrong. Maybe my parents are right. Maybe we should go home, and go to church, and...oh I don’t know what I’m saying.” She wrung her hands together and looked at Stephen with tears coming down her cheeks, smearing her mascara into little black streams.

“It’s ok. I love you,” he said and kissed her on the forehead.

“I love you too,” she whispered.

“Don’t you want this?” he asked, “Don’t you want us?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes were off in the distance.

“What you’re saying, it’s crazy.”

She turned away from him with an empty expression, like she was searching for some particular mysteriously hidden object, and pretended to fall asleep.

After a few minutes, Stephen stood up and went over to his bag. He unzipped the bottom space in his backpack and took out a few of his clothes like he was getting ready to shower. Nudged in the bottom right corner of his bag there was a little blue box which was still there, even after all of the travel. He snapped around to look at Mari again, and then took out the box, still hiding it between his legs, opened it, and smiled. He placed it back into its spot and nested his clothes around it.

Back outside the next day, the bright, jumping noise of the city erupted into their eardrums: cars honking at each other like wild jackals defending their territory. They hailed a taxi after a few minutes, a nicer one than last time that didn't charge extra for every bag. When they got out, the tour guide shoved them into the van and they raced off to the mountains. It was the sort of van that's set up so that everyone faces each other. With five seats on each side and all of the luggage crammed into the floor aisle just under their feet, it held ten people, barely. Stephen and Mari, smushed up against the driver's seat in the corner, sat across from a middle-aged couple. The man looked like a doctor the way he wore a smug smile on his face and pointed out little architectural facts as they drove by this mosque and that fortress from when the Spaniards had invaded Morocco during *La Edad de Oro*. His wife pretended to look interested and smiled in a vague sort of way that made it seem like she was smiling through her husband and not at him.

“Are you two backpacking for a few days as well, or are you just going for a daytrip?” Mari asked them.

The man chuckled a deep belly laugh that was only somewhat condescending, like he had just witnessed a toddler attempt to kick a soccer ball, but the child instead missed and fell down in the process, “Well that is very nice of you, young lady, but we aren’t so youthful anymore. I don’t know about how my knees would hold up. Just the day trip.”

“You two aren’t *backpacking*, are you?” the lady asked with an aghast look on her face that appeared hideous against the green hills flowing past outside of the window behind her. Her husband put his hand on her knee and glanced at her over his glasses.

Stephen chuckled, “Yeah, we are. I know, we heard about the attack the other week, but they’re caught. We’ll be fine—there should be plenty of people out on the trail. It’s a hugely popular route.”

“Well ok, son. It’s not my life on the line. But be careful. I would keep some sort of location device on you,” he said as he pulled out his Kindle from his bag and began to slap the screen with his middle finger.

Stephen smiled and made a little half sound with his throat that sounded vaguely like an agreement.

The man glanced back up at them and then plugged in his ear phones and mumbled about how books made him feel better when the roads got all winding.

A few moments of silence followed: the spoken tour had not started, but it would begin in just a few minutes. Verdant hills had begun to transform into lush brooks rushing off of small cliffs: villages with sunken roofs at the bottom, a saw mill dancing lazily in the stream like Susanna before the elders came. The wall to the left side of the road grew more and more impervious—black, stark, and terrible, like God. Unmoving, huge, and

indifferent. And then, a flash of brilliant green—peach-blossom cows dipping in the five-hundred year old aqueduct, a hundred mellow olive trees: patient, waiting for summer when their owners would come and free them from that burden of their own wombs, to be left agile and flowing once again. These scenes passed in a flash. And again, the proud granite wall of the mountain.

Mari gripped down on Stephen's shoulder.

"We should take off our necklaces," she said out of the corner of her mouth without any expression on her face.

"No," he whispered with a soft smile dancing in his eyes.

"If they find us with these on, they'll kill us. They'll know. The least we can do is hide it. It shows respect for life."

The doctor, head leaned back, cracked open his eyes towards them, coughed, and then closed his eyes again.

Stephen grabbed Mari's hand and whispered. "Mar, I'm not taking off my damn necklace I've had on probably since I popped out of the womb. If they search my naked body for Jesus around my neck, then damn it, they can kill me anyway."

Mari reached behind herself into her shirt, unclasped the silver latch that held the silver image of Mary—*Le Médaille Miraculeuse*, and placed the necklace in her lap. She looked at it for a brief moment, and Stephen noticed that her eyebrows furrowed together just like they did at the starting line for a triathlon. Then, as if taking off at the sound of the gun, she flung open her bag, gripped onto the medal, and shoved it three feet down in it—at the bottom of everything.

But as she did so, an awful retching sound came from across the van that seemed like the sound of a small volcano on the verge of eruption. The doctor came flying across the van, spewing chunky yellow liquid all the way. He stopped briefly to throw open the window. Next followed the sound of rushing liquid and gagging. Little splotches of mustard-colored chunks found themselves stuck to the window just above Stephen's head and the same acrid, rotting scent again filled their noses that they had first smelt in the city.

The car came to a stop and pulled over on the side of the road. The tour guide jumped out of the front seat and slid open the sliding door to the back. He stood open-mouthed and his hands seemed to float up behind his head, fingers laced in and out through his speckled grey hair. For a moment, he didn't move, but he soon recovered himself.

"Very normal! Happens all the time! Americans don't have windy roads like Moroccans," he said as the doctor stood up straight and took a few deep breaths.

"Wait," said the tour guide as he scampered back to the front seat and leaned in the door so that his feet hung out. He returned a few seconds later with a few paper napkins from McDonalds, a giant metal pitcher, and a small glass cup about the width of a shot glass but six inches high.

He handed the man the napkins and started to pour a brownish, steaming liquid into the cup. "Mint tea. Makes stomach aches better."

The doctor took the offered glass with a forced smile and sipped on it. There were two or three dark stains on his blue fishing shirt. He went back in the van and sat down with an embarrassed, apologetic look on his face. Then, as if nothing had ever happened,

he returned to the same spot and placed his hand in his wife's, laying his head back against the wall of the van.

"The tour will begin *now!*" the tour guide's head announced, popping into the car and slamming it shut right after.

The van pulled off and the green and black scenery again flashed before them. They continued. Up and up and up. And around—the zig-zagging, switchback pattern one knows from driving through Colorado or California or any other mountainous region. But it seemed like they were going down. Descending into a hitherto unknown world. The putrid scent of vomit still lingered in the air and mixed with the minty perfume from the tea, as if the car had tried to apply deodorant, but needed a full body shower.

"If you look to your right you will see the Berber villages and markets. Berber are ancient mountain people. They have been around since..." the tour guide began. But Stephen heard nothing. His heart pounded like a voracious hammer within his chest as he felt Mari's cold presence next to him. He couldn't bear looking at her.

"I'm not taking mine off," he said in her ear.

"Ok."

"...and on your left," the guide droned, "along the road you see a small brick passageway. That is an ancient irrigation technique. It has been here for hundreds of years—very ancient and old."

"Take it off," Mari whispered aggressively, "It's not like it matters. It's literally just a piece of metal."

"I'm not taking it off." Stephen could feel his face grow hot and his palms started to moisten. "You're being ridiculous. There are so many tourists here, confident in their

safety. We are going to be fine. They reprimanded the killers. They're gone. In prison. And we are fine. Can't you just drop it."

"And now it's time for snack stop!" the tour guide exclaimed with too much delight.

"I'm staying." Mari said.

"Come on, let's go," Stephen pleaded.

"I'm tired. I'm staying."

"Ok." Stephen hopped out of the car and sighed. He went over to the outdoor market, located the port-a-potty, and peed. When he got back out, he made sure he could still see the doctor. Then, he made for the food stands.

A Berber lady who smiled at him and then averted her gaze caught his eye. He walked over and gave her ten Dirham for a plate of warm, soft, circular bread with chocolate sauce on it.

"*Khobz*," she said, "thank you."

"*Shukran*," he took a bite, "delicious stuff!"

Unaccustomed to such behavior from foreign strangers, she let out a sheepish grin and then, as if astonished by her own reaction, turned around and tended to her makeshift oven where the *khobz* were baking.

Stephen brought back a bite of the bread thing for Mari. She was asleep, or at least pretending to be asleep, when he got back. He sat down next to her and ate the remaining piece of bread. He turned to his side and looked hard at Mari: that lush, curly

brown hair and those golden-brown eyes. Nothing would beat them, and it had seemed like nothing would ever come between them and himself. Lately, though, every little thing would set her off: a missed phone call, a sideways glance, forgetting to text her after getting home at 4:00am from a KXO party. Now, just because there was some tension doesn't mean it wasn't fun. They still had fun: at school, sneaking her into his dorm room long after his roommate had long fallen asleep with the Xbox controller in his hand and popcorn falling out of his mouth; on breaks at home, her parents' T.V. still playing upstairs and her little brother snoring from the adjacent room. But Mari just felt so bad sometimes. Occasionally, afterwards, he would feel it too, that ache in his stomach. And rarely, just before, he would feel his guts wince, as if anticipating some great fall.

The trip to Morocco had been a way for them to escape from it all. To restart with a ring, and God, how good she would look when she was finally his. His eyes moved over to her hands and imagined her left hand with the rose-gold ring and small, sharp diamond fit around her finger. He carefully laced one of his fingers into her hand and drifted off as well. The van lurched forward and the tour guide again began his narration, this time, starting with the ecosystem: the Desert Warbler and wild strawberry trees with their fluffy, pink fruits swaying in the breeze. But soon, these waking rumors of fairyland faded into dreams.

The doctor was shaking him when Stephen awoke.

“Hey, they’re saying if you’re back-packing, this is your stop.”

“Oh,” Stephen rubbed his eyes, “yeah, thanks,” he turned to his side and fixed Mari’s hair gently. “Mari, we’re here.”

She looked up at him. Her eyes were red and hard. In a slow and almost sarcastic motion, she yawned and lifted up her bag into her lap. Then, the door to the car slammed open.

“Time to go! Time to go!” The tour guide spoke with even more energy. “Pick up at base camp for Atlas peak at 9:00 am two days from now. You camp at basecamp the night before and we get you in the morning. Very good. You have map? Good! Very nice, OK. We see you in two days.”

He hopped back in the car like Tigger and his voice could be heard as the van drove off, “...but the tale goes that when they finally came down from the mountains, they had not a single thing with them, even the clothes on their...” The doctor's hand could be seen waving at them from the window.

Stephen and Mari stood by the trail head. It was silent except for the occasional tour bus whizzing by.

“That was a nice nap,” Stephen ventured.

“Mhm.” She stared straight at the ground as she spoke. Stephen took a deep breath and sighed, “Ready?”

“Mhm.”

“You first.”

The trail cut deep into the mountain. Here and there, vermillion rocks straddled the black soil like lone rangers in the wild west covered in blood after their last kill.

Lavender grew along the sides, its warm scent perforating the air, complementing the dry smell of the sage bush scattered around the area. But still there lingered that same odor of rot. If anything, it had grown since the city and taken on a life of its own. It wouldn't have been so noticeable if they didn't have to take in deep, long draws of the hot air caused by the steepness of the trail and the rising elevation.

Over the saddle they had been aiming towards for some time, they caught their first glimpse of the snow-capped mountains. In Africa. Jagged peaks miles in the distance, the black of the cliffs struck a sharp dichotomy against the purity of the snow; it seemed like God himself decided to paint a picture of his own paradoxical nature. There were a few trees scattered about on the hill, so they slowed down under them, where many other hikers had done so before them. Stephen sat down and Mari laid down next to him, resting her head in his lap.

"Just a few minutes here, and everything will be alright," Mari sighed, eyes fixed upon the mountains far off in the distance.

"I know."

Stephen became rigid and he sat up straight.

"What is it?" Mari glanced at him and took her head off his lap a fraction of an inch.

"Nothing, it's nothing." Stephen smiled.

He reached deep into his bag, dug around, grabbed something, and then hesitated. Mari yawned, lay back down in his lap and closed her eyes.

Sighing, Stephen dropped what he was holding, and pulled out the map instead.

"Look," he said pointing at the route they were on, "only three more miles to go."

“Let’s go,” Mari groaned.

Stephen’s watch had just beeped four o’clock when they passed another silent, grim hiker, wearing a face of utter precision. Most others who had come before him seemed exactly the same: expensive cameras hung about their necks and shiny windbreakers tossed over their European shoulders. Some would wave as an afterthought, and every now and then, from a garrulous youngster, a hasty “hello” or “*bonsoir*” would escape, followed by muffled laughter from a companion or two.

“People are acting strange,” Mari said, breaking the dead silence of the afternoon like a pebble hitting the surface of a glassy, alpine reservoir.

“You know, I thought so for a little too, but that’s how Europeans *are*, especially these Frenchies. Everyone knows the French are *douches*,” Stephen smirked as he fiddled with the scruff on his face.

Mari responded with silent perplexity. A moment later, they emerged from a brief pine tree covering, and to the right of the trail ahead of them there were a few strands of yellow tape.

“Look...” Mari said, “*fais attention...danger*” She stopped and peered down the path that was blocked off. Her face grew white and pale.

“Let’s keep going.” Stephen grabbed her arm and started down the trail. He looked away from her and tried to keep a steady tone, but the smell seemed to grow as

they went on, so much so that not even the dense piney woods they had just left could cover it.

The campground was empty. Not a soul in sight. Not even the markings of recent campers. A rickety sign hung on a wooden post that marked their site, campsite "T3." It was under a large cedar tree that grew alone on a green slope. A half a minute's walk, at the bottom of the hill, gurgled a crystal stream. In the faint light of the sun, Stephen could make out dark shapes of fish that darted here and there where the sun's remaining light caught in the water and broke forth throughout the stream: sharp and fleeting tongues of fire spreading word of the coming night. The fish came to the surface and took short but deep drinks from these last rays, as if preparing for the darkness to come.

Stephen bent down, filled up the pot, and walked back up to the campsite.

Steam launched upward from the freeze dried chicken and rice that Mari and Stephen huddled around in the glorious, crimson flame of the sunset.

"I wonder what our parents are thinking right now," Mari said, licking off the spoon.

"They're fine." Stephen hesitated for a moment. "I wasn't going to mention it, but I brought this." He reached into his pocket and showed her a Garmin device. "It's a GPS tracker. My dad's phone is connected to it. I didn't tell him, but if I press this button, he'll get a notification telling him where we are."

“Stephen,” Mari said as she drew away from him microscopically, “why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” he said as he reached out for her hand.

“You should have told me.” She got up, threw the bag of food away into the bear box, and slid into the tent.

After cleaning up camp, Stephen took one last look around and saw the gleaming, diamond moon, the stars, and the blurry shadows of the pines. He drew in a deep breath of the crisp mountain air and plunged into the tent.

Inside, it was warm and damp. Mari lay in her sleeping bag against the side of the tent facing away from the entrance, her face shoved against the wall.

“Hey,” Stephen whispered, “I’m going to read for a little.”

“Ok.”

“You know,” Stephen hesitated, “I wanted this to be perfect for you. So that you didn’t have to worry about anything. A paradise in the Moroccan mountains. That’s what I wanted. Just wait, tomorrow it’ll be better. I promise. Don’t you know I do it all for you? The plans, the things I did right, the things I didn’t do right. It was all for you. And it *is* all for you.”

Perceptibly, Mari’s breathing changed and she turned to face him. Her eyes no longer showed so clearly signs of disdain; they opened up and let in more, as if extending the first invitation after a long and painful separation. They started to regain some of their original warmth for which Stephen had first loved her.

“Keep saying things like that and this trip will turn out just how you thought it would,” she said with a small, mouse-like smile starting to play across the edges of her

lips, “But are we doing all this right? Were we right, from the beginning. Since that first day on the quad—you, the shy kid from chemistry shuffling over asking to sit down. The drive-inn Mary Poppins on that glimmering, snowy night. Then, I knew I loved you then.”

“But that love,” she continued, the smile fading from her lips, “It felt right, on and off, and then it felt wrong and then my stomach ached with the wrongness and then it longed to feel right. To just take one deep breath and not feel a quiver in my lungs, to hear for one second the silence of the earth without my own flickering heartbeat’s nervous tick. One spare moment... But this is the love we know.”

Her face glowed with warmth as she stopped talking. Brown eyes rich, dark honey, which, with every glance, one could almost taste the wild marigolds and pansies from which they had been made, shone in the near-darkness.

“What have we ever done wrong? Who or what has forbidden us a thing? Love, love, of all things is unforbidden.” Stephen sat up and put his arm around her waist.

“Hmmm,” she smiled at him the same plastic smile he knew so well—the same lying smile she had when she talked to her mom on the phone about her weekend plans.

He leaned down and kissed her once. And then again. She drew him close to her and kissed him with a deeper draw. And words blended into actions and actions into being and beings into one.

After the night had recalled them to its loneliness, Stephen and Mari lay both on their backs, facing the crown on the tent. They could just make out the somber shadows of clouds dancing across the nylon roof in the light of the moon.

Stephen turned over onto his stomach and lay still. Times like those, Stephen thought Mari might be right, his parents might be right, Fr. Richard might have been right.

At those times it seemed like life was filled with it. Around every corner and under every carelessly thrown T-shirt. Behind the stack of books left on his desk in his dorm; hidden within the first whispered word and that unspoken thought of nighttime's first dawn: sin. Sunk into the cracks of life, moments of unrealized thought and semi-consciousness. That forbidden word, that void. Sin.

Before falling asleep, Stephen unzipped his bag and took out the small blue box that held the ring and brought it into his bag with him. Tomorrow would be the day. God help it, tomorrow would be the day. He turned over again to face the star-spattered ceiling above and stared off into its void. Mari's breathing had slowed and become dull and rhythmic and he was alone. As the bleak night became one with blackness in his own vision, the image of the moon directly above the cross-beam of the carbon poles of the tent branded itself in his mind, forming a ghastly oval lantern illuminating the hidden recesses of his soul.

Mari reached into the bottom of her bag after Stephen drifted off, as if searching for meaning at the bottom of her being, and pulled out something small and silver, slipping it into her sleeping bag with her.

Voices.

Stephen raised himself with his elbows and sat frozen for what seemed like an hour, eyes and ears straining so hard that he felt his eardrums would burst. Every noise and every shadow flitting across the tent grew into something huge and monstrous. The moon was still at around a thirty-degree angle; almost pitch-black before dawn. Mari lay beside him snoring quietly and gracefully just as he had left her.

The voices grew louder. They were still far off, but growing closer. Five of them, at least. A disagreement. Arabic.

Stephen's nerves tightened and his neck muscles went rigid. He sat up and slipped out of his sleeping bag.

And the voices grew closer and more defined. One was louder and gruffer than the rest, a dark, haunting baritone, like the song of a pirate's ghost.

He looked back at Mari and noticed for the first time how innocent she was. The turquoise sleeping bag wrapped around her body recalled to him some holy loveliness. A warm light seemed to pierce his heart and he knew that he had to protect her. No matter the cost.

Without bothering to add any clothes to his outfit of a tee shirt and boxers, Stephen felt his cold hands moving to unzip the tent flap. Out in the distance, a half a

football field away through the foggy trees, he saw three—or four—lights flickering here and there.

And there was the laughter. One laugh stood out from all the rest. It was a horrid laugh. Not the drunken laugh that, on hearing, brings a sense of pleasure, no matter how deranged the one laughing might be. No, this was a stolid and sober laugh—a sharpened obsidian knife, poised to cut with precision and efficacy. A shiver went down Stephen's spine and he knew what he had to do. He opened the door and slipped on his sandals. Like a prisoner finally forced on the march to his long-awaited death, he started off in the direction they were going. The group would meet up after he had already been peeing for a few seconds, if he could make it there first, without being heard.

To Stephen it felt like he was floating over the ground like a ghost. The sharp cracks of twigs and acorns snapped under his feet, but nothing registered to him. Everything had grown numb and all he noticed was the approaching noise and the ever increasing smell of decay. The lights had become so close that he didn't dare take a step further. He zipped his fly down and tried to start, but he just stood there up against the tree, his toes freezing in the icy-white frost clinging onto the grass underfoot.

And the voices grew ever closer and louder, like the nearing of a shockwave from an explosion in the distance.

He didn't dare to look toward them. But he gave one last glance towards Mari. Nothing could be seen that way. The tent looked like the crown of a distant hill under a lone tree.

Like a broken machine within him that was on the verge of extinction, his heart pumped faster and faster.

And then the light was upon him.

And then gone.

And then on him again.

Fixed.

Dead silence and then an eruption of noise.

They were around him. The barking sound of voices, everywhere. Surrounded.

A jolt, and his world flipped. Something small fell out of his pocket and the ground felt soft under him. His chain jingled around his neck.

A huge, mutt-like face appeared, laughing, and he felt an electric heat about his neck. The man held up the chain and the cross dangled at the bottom, dancing back and forth to a dirge-like tune. After a snarling cheer from the group, the man threw it to the ground and kicked it to Stephen. It landed a few feet away down a gentle slope and nestled among a mossy outcropping from a nearby oak.

The leader man grinned at Stephen with an expression that made him seem more like the Egyptian god of death, with the face of a hyena and the body of a man, than a human. With meticulous fervor, he unsheathed a sleek, machete-like knife and ran his finger down both sides of the blade. A drop of blood hung on his finger and, steaming, fell to the ground.

Stephen shuffled, but another man behind him kicked him back down. He tried to move away again, but, this time two other men came and held his arms down. Like the

Pope on the balcony of St. Peter's, the hyena-man now stood above him, ruling, tall, and proud. The other two men forced Stephen to his knees and held out his arms.

“Please. Please God don't do this. Please for the love of God.”

The knife was raised to its height.

Stephen was nearly screaming now and his face started to fold in upon itself, melting into a mess of misery, “Don't. For, for Allah.”

“For Allah.”

The sun shone through the green tent cloth and cast a moldy hew over Mari as she woke up and rolled over to face Stephen's side of the tent. The frigid air made it hard to unzip her sleeping bag, but after a few seconds she managed. In the midst of her normal primary activity of any morning—a relaxed, drawn-out yawn, like the world would never end—her stomach grumbled out loud. She reached into her pocket to check her phone for what time it was, and for the third time that trip, her hand came up empty.

Then, she got out of the tent and, my God, how beautiful the sun was from up close. The rays shone through the already-dissipating mist so that they formed a rosy tinge. This contrasted with the green trees that stood out here and there, their leaves playing in the wind. Mari sat down by the fire pit they had never bothered to light, took out a breakfast bar, and waited.

But the same odor that she had sensed in the city filled her nose more and more with every gust of wind that pushed the mist out from in front of her, back into the forest from where it had emerged. While her auburn hair glowed and danced and twirled in the unveiled sunlight, she tried to stomach the last bite of her bar, but the smell had gotten worse. By now, it could hardly be called a smell. It was a fetor, crawling inside of her nose and spewing shrapnel of filthy, rotted eggs and fish, green with the slime of mold, and of some other terrible thing she couldn't quite place. She moved her shirt up to cover up her nose and then it dawned on her: it was when they had found Larry under the front porch bloated with flies all around him. Dead for two days and they hadn't even known. Her throat jerked upward and the bar felt like acid in her stomach.

As if jolted awake by an electric shock, she gripped the last chunk of bar so hard that chunks of granola mushed through her fingers and fell to the ground.

Stephen.

It had been at least twenty minutes since she had woken up and even *he* didn't take that long.

She stood up and hurried off down the hill. Her arms felt like long sausages flapping against her side as she stomped down, over the stream and onto the small meadow that fed into the woods.

But the stench grew stronger. She picked up her pace and, again, felt her throat flex and gag. She trampled onward into the trees. A soft path through the shin-high grass was becoming more distinct every step, as if something were guiding her.

And the smell grew embodied. It was now a being walking beside her and within her, dictating her every move. She could almost see a yellow cloud hovering around her,

feeding into her nose and then exiting her mouth with every breath. Like an infuriated, teeming hoard of bees, it stung at her eyes and exposed skin. If it could have spoken, it would have whispered of decomposition and blight.

Mari's feet had now grown heavy. The smell drove her back, but her will drove her onward like a supernatural force pressing her further. With every step she felt the weight of her soul. The weight of death and the weight of life. And she knew the weight of life more than the weight of death.

A looming trunk appeared in front of Mari and she knew that, there, she had to sit down, or she would pass out from the sheer wretchedness of the air.

She tried to put her arm out against the tree in a gesture of total dependence but missed and collapsed onto the ground. She lay face down in the leaves and dirt and gripped a few in her hand, bright mountain-pine needles. Beautiful yellow and green. Pressed against her nose, she caught the smell of Earth and life and piney-decay.

She rolled onto her back and sat up without opening her eyes.

When she knew she was ready, she opened them.

"No." She held her hands over her mouth. "God. No, no, no, no."

Detached from his body lay Stephen's head. The eyes were wide open and staring at the cross necklace one inch from the tip of his nose. In the palm of his right hand, the Garmin GPS machine flashed a dim, green light every few seconds. A small, blue velvet box lay almost hidden under the roots of a tree like the precious relic of a saint.

Mari bent down and picked up the necklace, and then box. Her shaking hands moved to open the box but she couldn't fit her nail in the small gap of the opening

between the top and the bottom. Again, she tried, and this time succeeded. She drew a sharp breath. Taking out the ring as if it belonged to God himself, she slipped it onto her finger and then collapsed on the ground next to Stephen's body. She gripped down on the cross in her hand and shouted, "No! Jesus Christ! Why?"

A violent scream let loose from her mouth as she slammed her fist into the ground over and over again until she was panting with exasperation. Prostrate, she lay there for an aching, agonizing minute and then raised her bruised fist so that she could see it. Red blood ran down the golden slopes of the ring and over the diamond at the peak. "Yes," she stared into the diamond and whispered, almost inaudibly, "yes." Inside the palm of her hand, the cross medallion had pierced it in two locations, where the sidebar went horizontally. Bright drops of blood had formed and now ran down into the lines on her hand forming a wound, the shape of a bloody "M."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Devout Thief

Two years ago today, his parents, driving to work in their old Mazda, were smashed against the hood of an eighteen-wheeler carrying ten-thousand pounds of vegetables, leaving him in Madrid on an exchange trip with no money, no family, one rosary left in his name, and without a way to return back to the U.S. Odors distilled off his body and into the air around him at *Iglesia San Juan de la Cruz*: half eaten tortillas from someone's dinner on Tuesday night mixed with another's Sangria and putrefied into a lotion-like substance that covered his forearms on the inside of his frayed jacket. A tourist had given it to him a few weeks ago.

"Sir, *señor*," the man said, stooping over him, "are you cold? Cold—*frío*? You *frío*?"

From the ground, he replied with an empty, lazy stare but didn't move an inch from his fetal shape, tucked into the corner of the church's iron fence like a hypothermic chick in the nest of a monstrous, mechanical matriarch of a bird.

"Wait," the man sighed as he pulled out his phone and started typing into it. An awkward pause followed and then he pronounced, "Ti-teyenees *frío*?" The man's look was so questioning and sincere that a response was almost forced out of his mouth.

"Yes," he grunted, "I *am* cold."

"Oh," he responded with an embarrassed grimace that made his bushy eyebrows look like angry caterpillars swimming across his forehead, "you speak English. Here,

take this.” He handed him his corduroy jacket and started to walk off. But he stopped and turned around.

“What’s your name?”

“Jesus.”

The man hesitated, glanced at him, and then mumbled, “nice to meet you.” He stumbled off down the sidewalk as if he had no idea where to go.

That was weeks ago and his name wasn’t Jesus.

His long, brown hair curled down the sides of his neck, resembling something between a greasy fisherman’s net and a wet poodle’s mane as he stood in line. When the person in front of him exited the confessional, he stepped into the small, wooden structure, closed the door, and stared into the patterned screen where hints of light pierced through.

“En el nombre del Padre y del Hijo y del Espíritu Sancto,¹” the priest began.

“Bendígame padre porque he pecado mucho,” he said in response, *“han pasado... ya no sé cuántos años desde mi última confesión.²”*

“You speak English if you want.”

“Ok.”

¹ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

² Bless me Father for I have sinned... I don’t know how many years it has been since my last confession.

Under his knees, the kneeler felt hard and odd and reminded him of when his father used to make him take off his school pants and kneel on raw rice on the tiled floor of their apartment after a bad report would come back from Mrs. Turner.

“Son,” the infuriated face of his dad screamed at him from behind, “pull them down. Now! The shame... Lord, the shame!”

“Please,” he heard his mother’s voice plead, “please, Tom. It wasn’t his fault this time. Listen—”

“Woman,” his father grew dangerously quiet like a bomb just before it explodes, when the fuse has shimmered into the shell and has only milliseconds to strike the fuel. “Stay out of it.”

“No. This time I won’t. I can’t take this.” A smacking sound followed and a sharp gasp fled out of his mother’s mouth, but he didn’t dare to look back and see the damage. It would show eventually. Slipping his pants down his legs with shaking hands, he kneeled down onto the rice grains and braced himself for the stinging belt.

“Hijo, ¿qué quieres confesar?”^{3]}

“I,” he stuttered, “I’ve hated my father. I think other people are idiotic scum. One time I slapped a lady in the face because she looked at me like I’m a piece of vermin—”

“A-a piece of what?”

“Vermin.”

“¿Cómo⁴?”

³ Son, what do you want to confess?

⁴ What?

“A rat. *Como si fuera ratón*⁵.”

“*Claro*⁶.”

“And, there's one more thing... I'm going to steal something very valuable.”

“I cannot ab—I cannot ab...” the priest coughed, “*no te puedo absolver de...de* sins of the future. *No debes...* you should not steal.”

“Ok. Absolve me of my other sins, then.”

“Ok. Your penance is to pray two *Paternosters* and one *Avemaría*. Make your...” he paused, “act of...of *contrición*.”

“I believe in God and I'm sorry to Him for my sins.”

There was a rustling of paper from across the screen and the priest said with precision, like he was reading from a script, “I absolve you in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

“Amen.”

“*Ve en paz*⁷.”

Outside of the confessional, the light in the church came from the high, stained windows, in the form of blue and green rays flashing down and soaking the wooden pews in icy tones. A group of old ladies sat in the front three rows of the chapel and failingly attempted to say the Rosary in unison. After minutes of gaping in awe at how inept they were at such a simple task, he managed to mumble his penance. His brown eyes seemed to glaze over as he stared at the gothic tabernacle in the center of the church just ten rows

⁵ Like I was a rat

⁶ Got it.

⁷ Go in peace

in front of him. It was a magnificent tabernacle. Twelfth-century miniature golden towers of the church climbed up the sides of the square structure. Small statues of gargoyles and dragon-like monsters stood guard over the structure and images of saints adorned the oak paneling just around the door. In the very center, an image of a lamb with a flag in his mouth was carved out of ivory.

A rumble from his stomach threw him back into reality. Having eaten nothing except two *barras de pan*⁸ over the past three days, an immense hunger had taken over him. But he had grown accustomed to the hunger. Two years of never being sure where your next meal would come from, anyone would grow used to it. That first week after spending all of his money on drinks for girls over Spring break in Mykonos, the hunger had not been so bad. The shock from his parents' deaths had covered up any serious gastrointestinal pain. When he walked down the stairs from his apartment for the last time, he went and sold his copy of "*Literatura Española desde El Cid hasta hoy*⁹," his copy of *Don Quijote*, his iPhone, and all of his extra clothes. The hundred and thirteen euros only lasted him another two months of food. When that ran out, the hunger got *bad*.

At times it was a small grumble that allowed him to continue his other tasks, like applying for jobs or talking to the U.S. embassy. At others, it seemed like a thousand minuscule bears were tearing at the lining of his stomach, clawing for any way out, as if, when they left him they would turn into spiders and eat him, the very person who had given them birth. When he felt like this, he could do nothing but curl up into a small ball in the corner of a park and hope to God that no one would see him. Right now, he was

⁸ Baguettes

⁹ Spanish Literature from the Day of The Cid until Today

somewhere in between these extremes. The pain was enough to keep him from falling asleep. He was glad for that at least.

But it wasn't enough to keep him fully engaged with his surroundings. Looking around, he noticed the last old lady exit the chapel to the side of the sanctuary. The enormous brass door, inlaid with pomegranates and apples, clanged into place behind her. A minute later, the bells chimed twelve o'clock and he rose from his seat; and, as if in a trance, he seemed to glide over to the white statue of "*Nuestra Senora de Fátima*"¹⁰ and knelt down before it.

"Please," he murmured in a voice just above a whisper, "please, please please help me. I'll die if not." He kneeled there for a few more moments as if awaiting a response, then got up.

The door to the sacristy at *San Juan de la Cruz* was never locked, except at night. Sacristies in old, European Catholic churches held hundreds of precious gold and silver things that were never used and wouldn't be that much of a loss to the church. So, heading towards the side of the church to the left of the sanctuary, he opened the oak door and walked into the dimly lit room. Inside, the cabinets that probably held the vessels were just to the right. As if he had done this sort of thing millions of times before, he reached into the cabinet and grabbed the two nicest chalices—they were a set. The first, an emerald chalice: the type of which has not been made for centuries upon centuries, nor would ever be made again. Emeralds were inlaid—decreasingly large ring over ring in

¹⁰ Our Lady of Fatima

eccentric layers as they moved up the chalice from the base so that the whole cup formed a verdant-golden vortex around the central image of a cross. The other cup was silver instead of gold. Spiraling vines ripe with grapes wound around it and reached into the mouth of the chalice like they were begging for just a taste of the blood of God. He shoved them in the grocery bag and started towards the door of the church.

“*Buenas*,” a voice rang out just before he got to the main entrance, “*te estaba esperando*¹¹...”

“What,” the thief sputtered out, “*no gracias padre... es que ya tengo que irme*¹²,” but he didn’t notice the kneeler for the St. Joseph statue just before him, and as those words left his mouth, he felt his legs being thrown up from behind him and his face came slamming into the uneven granite of the floor; and in the middle of the fall, the silver chalice crashed onto the ground with an enormous clang.

Silence enveloped the cathedral and seemed to fill the empty space, mixing with the stiff smell of stale incense and candle smoke for just one spare moment.

That’s when the noise erupted.

“¡*Oye!*” the priest shouted, “¡*qué es esto*¹³!”

The thief shuffled over the ground as fast as he could, swooped up the chalice back into his bag, and slammed into the brass door as it budged open with slow reluctance against his flimsy skeleton. Out of the door, he took off down the road to the left. Images swan past him of staring faces, hot coffee steaming upwards from their hands

¹¹ Good afternoon... I was looking for you

¹² No thanks, Father, I gotta go

¹³ Hey! What’s this?

like flares signaling his presence; brick buildings darted past him and the road seemed like a gushing stream beneath his feet.

“Stop,” a voice came from a few feet behind him, accompanied by the slam of sprinting footsteps, “¡ladrón¹⁴!”

Then he heard the sound of dialing on a smartphone, a brief pause, and the panting priest gasped behind him in between huge breaths, “*Hola, sí. Ladrón. Calle San Francisco de Sales. Soy cura de la Iglesia católica San Juan de la Cruz. Está enfrente de mí, pero ya escapa, joven...*¹⁵”

The noise of streets and the distance between them overcame any other words that could have been heard. The thief rounded a corner, and saw the familiar gates, towards which he had been running without knowing it: *Buen Retiro*. Wafting scents from the pink hazelnut blossoms filled his lungs even as he ran through the gates, but in the very same moment, a stabbing pain in his abdomen forced him to a stop and involuntarily he cried out. Bent over, it seemed as if he were being robbed of his breath. When he finally looked up, what appeared to be a world of onlookers was staring at him and muttering amongst themselves; so, he inched himself up from his crouched position and started towards the food vendors along the lake to put at least something into his stomach. Or he'd collapse.

“*Ho—hola,*” he stumbled up to the nearest vendor's small table covered in crispy chips, a jug of hot chocolate, and *churros calientes*, “*dos churros,*” he gasped, slamming his bag with a clank on to the table.

¹⁴ Thief!

¹⁵ Hi, Yes. Thief. Street San Francisco de Sales. I am the priest at San Juan de la Cruz Catholic Church. He's just in front of me, but he's escaping.

The old man stared at him through his dusty glasses and scratched his head. He moved to get the churros out of the warmer, but he did this as if he had been asked by his mother to clean his room, like he would stop and turn on the T.V. the second she turned her back.

“*Siete euros*¹⁶,” the man said, moving his hands to give the thief the churros.

“*Te doy esto*,” he responded, and pulled out the silver chalice, “¿*vale*¹⁷?”

“No,” the old man stuttered back, “—*siete euros*.”

“*Por favor*,” he pleaded, “*Euros no tengo*¹⁸.”

“*Siete euros*.”

A wave of anger pulsed through his veins and he slammed his fist down on the table and ran off into the recesses of the park where he could find the wild strawberry plants that grew under the bushes where the garden keepers didn't mow. After two minutes he had located seven whole and gorgeous, small red strawberries under a moist bush in a shady corner of the park. He sat down and enjoyed the plump, sweet fruits. A wave of energy, incremental but not insignificant, flooded through his body. But he had to leave. It seemed like everyone in the park had seen him, and soon enough, the park would be secured and searched square to square. The exit on the other side was equidistant to the entrance where had come in, so he headed that way and before long was just before the iron and brass-plated gate, but, swinging around the corner and onto the street, he slid to a jolting stop. Immediately before him, the same priest stood in his full-length black robes, caught in the middle of what seemed to be an intense

¹⁶ Seven Euros

¹⁷ I'll give you this... does that work?

¹⁸ Please. I don't have any money.

conversation with a small nun in all white, with the exception of a navy blue bonnet-like cloth that draped over her head. The thief tried to turn around and head back into the park. But it was too late.

“¡*Ve!*” the priest said to the nun, directing her to cut off the thief from both sides, “¡*allí—es él!*”¹⁹!”

“Oy!” the nun screamed as the thief smashed her into the ground while attempting to edge between her figure and the gate.

“*Hermana María Rosa,*” the priest quickly knelt over her with his eyebrows deeply furrowed, “¿*estás bien?*”²⁰?”

“*Sí, sí,*” she let out, “*nada. No fue nada!*”²¹.”

The thief had stopped for a moment when he heard the nun fall onto the ground. He stood, gazing at her with a puzzled look on his face, as if to take in every detail of her that he had failed to notice before: the dirtiness of her white robes, the stained and faded edges of her head-piece, her skinny arms and sunken eyes. Like she had somehow sensed his gaze, she flashed her grey eyes towards him. They seemed to bore into his own, as if she had released hundreds of tiny drones that darted into him, and were at that moment speeding their way down into the center of his soul, ripping and breaking whatever tendons, vessels, or arteries that stood in their way. The instant he saw those smoky-grey eyes, he tore away down the street, all the while whispering to the heavens over and over, “Hail Mary—*gasp*—full of grace—*gasp*—the Lord—*gulp*—is with thee...”

As if in response, looming, grey thunderclouds filled the skies overhead.

¹⁹ Go! It's him!

²⁰ Sister, are you ok?

²¹ It was nothing.

He had tried to find somewhere safe to hide. The abandoned cinema in *La Princesa* would have been best; there was a vent that was easy to remove and slip in through. But he couldn't wait. A magnetic force seemed to be drawing him to every restaurant that he saw, and after what was probably minutes, but felt to him like hours, he could no longer resist.

The entrance to the restaurant was nothing spectacular. Inside, it had the familiar glow of a touristy restaurant attempting to seem bourgeois, antique, and exquisite, but, instead, was nothing of the sort.

“¿*Qué te pongo?*”²² a soft voice invaded his momentary rest.

He jumped a fraction of an inch and responded, “*la pasta por favor*”²³.

“*No la tenemos*”²⁴, the waitress frowned.

“Ok,” he blurted out, “*entonces, el pollo asado*”²⁵.

“*Vale.*”

Luckily it didn't take too long for the chicken to come out. But during the time that he waited, each second seemed an eternity. The weight of the emptiness in his stomach drew him deeper and deeper into his cushioned seat until he could have been

²² What can I get you?

²³ The pasta, please.

²⁴ We don't have any.

²⁵ The grilled chicken, then.

stuck there forever. Faces passed by staring at him for an instant, and then went back to the food on their tables.

“*Y tu comida, señor*²⁶,” the waitress placed his steaming plate of chicken and rice down onto the table from the edge of her fingers and then inched away at first, but almost ran back into the kitchen when she thought he couldn't see her anymore. The first bite of chicken entered his mouth and he thought that he could have entered paradise. First communion had not been as good. Not even close; the dry wafer-like substance had been disappointing. This chicken, on the other hand, was heavenly on all accounts, rich, creamy, golden, and pure: adorned with all the right spices of cumin, garlic, and parsley, like the infant Jesus with his gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Only one small thing dampened his enjoyment of the meal, turning the chicken into something chunky and dry in his mouth. Everyone had left the restaurant without his noticing. The sole remaining noise was the obnoxious drone of the television in the corner behind the bar. Without much consideration, he tuned in:

“*Criminal, joven, americano corriendo por las calles con artefactos sacros de La Iglesia San Juan de La Cruz...repito en inglés*²⁷: a young American man has stolen precious items from Saint John of the Cross church, was last seen in a corduroy jacket, around two meters tall with brown hair... *si se ve, llame inmediatamente a la guardia civil*²⁸.”

His back went rigid and his fingers felt stiff around the small metal fork in his hand, and pushing his chair out from behind him, he began to rise from his seat. The

²⁶ Your food, sir.

²⁷ Young, American criminal running through the streets with precious items from San Juan de la Cruz Church... I repeat in English

²⁸ If you see him, immediately call the police.

thought that he had not yet paid, however, drew him back like a twitch on a string as he moved to open the door; and, in place of money, he set down the silver chalice. With the chalice next to the plate of leftover chicken bones and half-eaten rice, the table appeared to be some sort of pagan altar to the gods of good fortune. Before he walked out of the door, he glanced back at it for one second. Then he tore out of the room.

“Stop,” one of the seven civil guards yelled at him as soon as he opened the door, “you are under arrest.”

“Ok,” he said without a moment's hesitation, and started to lay down the bag containing the other chalice, but, noticing the immediate relaxation from the guards, he jumped up and ducked like a football player between the smallest two guards. His shin skidded by the fire-hydrant without touching it, and he spun around the corner. Just when he thought he was safe on the next street over, he heard “Stop, thief!” and two large *bangs*. His body hardened beneath him and grew into a robotic machine, stretching forth this leg and then that leg with an ease and dexterity which he had not felt since his eight-hundred-meter days in high school. Like any good runner, he refused to look back. A fleeting glance showed him the only place he could go. The road led in one direction. The high cross spire called him from far off. Sounds from steps and sirens of the civil guard swam through the crowd and fell around him like the wispy smoke of a dying campfire; and he could not be bothered by it. Foot fell after foot on the medieval slate roads and it seemed nothing could have slowed him.

Only one small exception existed: a wet squishing sensation had started to grow in his shoe, as if he had unknowingly stepped into a shallow swamp, that, with every step, grew wetter and wetter; glancing down, a small, dark hole—about the size of a quarter—showed in his calf. From it streamed a constant trickle of blood that dripped onto the ground and into his shoe, which, by now had become red as an apple at harvest. The leg seemed disconnected from his mind in every way. Not a single perception of pain had travelled into the framework of his nervous system. It could have been another’s body, like the leg of a close friend or lover which he saw every day, but without much interest or worry at its well-being.

He blasted through the entrance into the royal palace, past the line of hundreds of eager tourists and through the main doors. In the process of his entrance, however, the alarms in the palace began blaring, offended by his disrespect and irreverence in entering such a sacred place without showing due reverence.

Nothing was left to do but to keep running. The last time he had visited the palace had been in another life: a sophomore college student from the U.S., churro chocolate stains smeared on his face and a smug look of literary knowledge hanging across his face as he had glazed through the Velasquez paintings and baroque architecture. But that had been when he could afford to eat, when he could afford a place to sleep. When he didn’t wake up to the face of an officer screaming in his face to not sleep on that bench. When he didn’t have to pretend to be warm. The stairs leading up behind the “*no pasar*²⁹” sign seemed to materialize in front of him and he found himself bounding up the foot-worn granite steps. Behind him, anxious voices echoed through the spiraling staircase.

²⁹ Do not enter

“¡*Detente*³⁰!”

“¡*Aquí, por aquí*³¹!”

With every call, he pushed his legs faster and faster, and still, it felt he had no control. Only, this time his legs were slowing of their own accord, like wind-up toy cars that had exhausted all of the springs’ potential energy. Faded and used. The harder he pushed, the faster his body slowed. And the voices grew closer and closer, until they seemed razor-sharp beaks, diving at him, feeding on his mistakes and sins. Right before he would have collapsed onto the cold rock, a door appeared in front of him, and in a desperate movement, he flopped his hand onto the knob and turned.

It gave way.

In three small steps, the whole of the Plaza Royal of the palace lay out far below him and down at the bottom he could make out the figure of man in a black robe squinting up at him from under his hand which shielded his eyes from the sun.

“Son! Stop!”

At first, he didn’t realize why he was telling him to stop, but, looking down at his feet, he saw that he was standing on the edge of the thick granite railing. His right arm dangled off the ledge, testing the airy waters of its own accord. Across a small distance, maybe three meters horizontally, and two meters down, there stood another ledge like the one he perched on.

“Stop! *Hay perdón*³²!”

³⁰ Stop!

³¹ Here, through here!

³² There’s forgiveness

A crazed look seemed to fester in his eyes and spread throughout his cheeks and nose, causing them to twitch and jerk incessantly. In place of the priest, he saw his father's grey and furious face shouting up at him. He seemed to scream not about *perdón*, but about blinding, searing, deathly shame. He tore his eyes away from the man below, and, with the chalice in one hand, and the other grasping for the ledge in front of him, he jumped.

A voice behind him shouted, "No!" and he felt a tug on his clothing that jerked him backwards just a fraction of an inch; but that one small tug was enough to cause a morbid change. The wet ledge was just far enough so that only his free hand grasped it, and in one fleeting instant, his legs kicked beneath him, searching for anything, a ledge, a stick, a small crack. Instead they found nothing, and with a horrific, hollow scream, his body fell and crashed into the first small ledge under him, bent like a ragdoll, rolled over twice, and suffered a final fall onto the rice-covered ground under the priest. His leg bent under him in a shape similar to a boomerang, and somehow, the golden chalice ended resting on top of his already-bruising chest, untouched and glowing a verdant green in the frigid air of the urban evening. The priest bent down on one knee and placed his ear next to the kid's whispering mouth. After a moment, he made a gesture with his hands and smeared a thin, yellow oil across his lifeless forehead.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Little Ones

Two signs hung on the wooden chapel door.

“Firearm free building
Guns & other weapons
Not allowed”

The other was a small, colorful flyer and it read:

“True Love: Gender Fluidity and Homosexuality in The Gospel of John”

He hesitated. An image of his sister, Jordan, flashed into his head— “Mom,” the small eight year old child frowned as she walked out of her room, “am I a guy or a girl?”

“You’re neither,” her mom smiled back at her, “you get to decide.”

“But everyone else in school knows if they’re a guy or a girl,” she pouted, “and I don’t.”

“That’s because you know better, honey,” she walked over to kiss Jordan on the forehead.

“No!” Jordan shouted up at her mom and stormed back into her room, her peppered blond hair flying up behind her, “I’m a girl! I know I am!” The door slammed shut and Curt found himself through the first doors of the chapel building.

Stationed outside the inner door to the large University chapel, an old security guard stood and flashed a gap-toothed grin at him as he walked past. His grey eyes seemed to stick themselves onto his own pockets as he began his way down the aisle. His heart started to thump in his chest. *Babump. Babump.* He stuffed both hands in his jacket pockets and gripped hard onto the cold metal barrel, forcing a smile just in time to pass off as normal. But the guard's eyes seemed to glue themselves onto his back like a sniper's laser, patiently awaiting the time for the kill. The chapel was almost filled to capacity, so he headed for one of the open seats up front in a nervous trance. His gait resembled something close to the ticking of a huge mechanical clock jerking on the brink of extinction. A buzz went off in his pocket when he was halfway down. The text that blinked onto his screen read:

From: Frida

“Hey”

And then another a few seconds later flashed

“Can I sit with you?”

He ignored the texts and shoved the phone into his pants with a morbid frown that displayed a hint of both derangement and, in a paradoxical sense, calculation, as if every decision in his life had been leading up to this day, like he had foreseen that it would require an iron will, distilled, refined, and purified until it shone like a precious Somolian diamond. Three open folding chairs in the third row from the front seemed to call his name, as the middle one would be the only chair where he could be alone. Or at the least, he would not have to listen to some arrogant engineer-aspirant breathe down his neck; in that chair he would await the future with composure and disdain—to judge this lady by

the standards of God Almighty. From so nearby, he could overhear tiny patterings of feet and voices coming from the sides of the vast stage like filthy rodents in the hollow walls of a dirty restaurant, and just as he felt the beginning of the presentation inevitable, a hand shot down onto his shoulder.

“I found you,” Frida whispered into his ear and stepped over him, one knee at a time so that the creamy inside of her limbs brushed over his knees and a light perfume of warm ocean nights flurried around him.

And for a moment he was in that first steaming week of freshman year when they had met. The palm branches jerked in the wind as he meandered his way back from calculus class like a child lost in a world of unencumbered freedom. He followed the trees’ path of shade where they thrust their hulking shadows onto the ground and left a brief reprieve from the afternoon’s heat. Drops of sweat pricked his back and the smell of baking pavement filled his lungs, reminding him of childhood track meets and sweet summer evenings before the divorce. But the excitement of moving away from home and starting a grand new life on his own had by now passed and given way to the same restlessness that was always tailed by depression. The ringing tones of the dining halls at 7:00 pm had morphed into a dull, obnoxious roar. Professors’ voices, once charming and marvelous, had become frivolous and dull.

“Hey,” the cute red-headed girl who normally sat behind him in Calculus stuck out her hand, “Frida. Frida De La Cruz.”

“Curt,” he blurted out, startled from his reflection.

“Oh,” she muttered, moving her hair behind her freckled ears, “Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you. I’m a little forward sometimes, I guess.” Her face blushed a deeper

crimson than the color of her hair, making her seem like a deliciously ripe strawberry on a wet summer evening.

“What...” he peered at her and slowed down to match her pace. He let out a fresh, clean and ringing laugh, “No. My *name* is Curt. Nice to meet you.”

Then, there had been the enchanting weeks after that. Nights at the bridge, throwing tortillas at the post sticking up from the river below, black and sparkling with the pale-yellow hue of strung city lights. Spanish lessons over chardonnay, “*te quiero*” murmured so softly that maybe it hadn’t even been said. Whispered words and hidden fears, left bare and naked, the weight of the divorce and his sister and his mom, dissipated like the morning dew. And there was the first kiss—the long walk by the same river after a night of dancing and mixed drinks at the theater. The warm, spicy scent of baked cinnamon mulled and mixed with a sweet vanilla-almond cream. Warm lips pressed against his, lush and soft and ripe. If he drew in deeply enough, he could still catch a hint of that sacred odor.

He felt a yanking in his guts and last Monday evening bore itself into his head like a fast, pounding electric drill. He didn’t often go out for walks, but he had needed a break from studying for his Biology midterm, and the path between the parking garage and the president's house had always seemed like it would be pleasant at night, with its sparkling lights floating high across the trees over the sidewalk. At the end of the path, he heard a familiar sonorous female voice. Startled, he hid around one of the bushes to surprise her, like any good boyfriend would. Something told him that he shouldn’t jump out at her, a dark, shadowy feeling that groped his intestines. Then, she stood in front of him: tall, pale, and lovely. Next to her strutted another. And before his own eyes (God, how he

would never forget) he saw her—his girlfriend—purse her lips and press fervently onto the soccer player next to her. His breath drew away from him and he fell back from his crouching position into the grass next to the building with a crunch.

“¿*Qué fue eso?*” Frida asked, pulling away.

“What was what?” the tall girl with long, muscular legs shook her head and giggled, “come on, you're so paranoid.”

“Let's just get out of here.”

“Hey,” Frida shook his arm, “you look off.”

He blinked a few times and turned away from her.

“It's starting,” He responded, seemingly to no one in particular, avoiding her gaze as best he could.

“Hello and welcome everyone!” the tall blond lady proclaimed, prancing onto the stage with a large, waving gesture indicating that, indeed, everyone was welcome. She waited for the expected applause, and began again, “My name is Dr. Ivana Piper, head pastoress of The New Gospel Christian Community. Before diving into the present day's topic, let's first invoke the Divine Being for his guidance and spiritual assistance.”

Lifting her head to the blank roof of the auditorium with her palms upturned, she intoned: “O Mother Mystery, fill our lungs and breathe your nature into us. Make us not long for differences, but for unity. Love, make us know love; for ‘God is love,’ as your spirit most solemnly proclaimed through the Sacred Book. Make us yourself. Let us know, O *Mystery...*” With that, she crouched down here so that her wispy hair fanned out like a funeral veil in front of her face and continued in a low voice, “what it is to be truly

human. To exist outside of all corruptions imposed by society; not by you, O Divine, not by you. Grant us to know who we are in your sight so that we can live liberated. Drive out fear with your perfect love, for where there is love, we know that there is fear no longer. This we ask.”

“Amen,” the audience muttered in a collected, confused fashion.

“We love each other. That’s what matters,” his mother’s eyes shone with a pleading intensity.

“Don’t you get it?” he looked at his mom and then back at Dina, “don’t you realize that you’re confusing the hell out of her? She’s nine years old and you’re destroying her. One day she wears a bra and the next boxers. And now you two... ”

“Dina,” his mom rubbed her girlfriend on her tan back, “maybe you can give us a minute,” and she whispered into her ear, “he’ll warm up, I promise.”

“If you need anything you just let me know,” Dina meandered over to the door in silence. Before closing it behind her, she glanced at Curt and tried to smile but failed. Instead it seemed like she had just stomached a dozen bad oysters and was trying with all her might not to spew them across the floor.

The door slid to a close.

“Look. You and dad can get a divorce. I don’t give a shit what you and dad do. But don’t bring her into it. She’s in that closet upstairs balling her eyes out because she saw her own goddam *mother* kissing another woman. Do you know what this is doing to her?”

“It’s what’s best,” his mother responded as small, hot tears started to well to the surface of her eyes like the incipient signs of some great flood. An instant later, they hardened and glazed over with a shiny, robotic sheen. “She’s waking up to reality. It’s a purifying process.” She sat down on the wooden stool by the cabinet and moved her right hand back and forth over her left hand’s empty ring finger. “Oh, I’ll go talk to her.”

“Loosen up,” Frida nudged Curt and pointed to his ghastly white fists. They were clenched so tight on top of the wooden armrest that he seemed more like a prisoner on death row readying himself to face that last great nothingness than a student sitting in Chapel. His neck muscles stood out, rigid and lean and tendon-like.

“Now, how, you might ask, may we end an invocation without that infamous word ‘amen.’ This is, I reiterate, this is the right question to ask. To answer, however,” Dr. Piper said, lowering her voice, “we must close our eyes and envision the answer. Call to mind what images, words, and forms most correspond to the word ‘amen.’ Syllable by syllable, break it down.” Here she paused for a moment and, smiling, looked out over the people below her, like Moses gazing out over the defeated Amalekites with pleasure and pride, “Men, of course. A-MEN. How can we end every prayer with the syllable ‘men’ if God is neither woman nor man, for surely, God is Spirit, as John the evangelist most marvelously stated. Spirits have no sex nor gender. Nor may we address them with a sexed phrase. Jesus could do it because he alone understood that in its fullest sense.”

“*What?*” Curt shouted and started to rise from his seat.

“How can you tell a ten year old that gender isn’t a thing? We came to you because we thought you could help.” The therapist’s voluptuous lips curved back at them

from the couch across the room in a way that made it seem like he appreciated Curt's comment more than anything he had ever heard in his entire life.

"Maybe you should leave while I talk to Jordan alone for a few minutes." The smile seemed glued onto his fat face as he stared over at the two of them.

"Ok," Curt grimaced. When he had emerged into the white hallway, he muttered to himself and slammed his fist down onto his thigh, "One chance. This son of a bitch gets one chance."

Three minutes later the door flew open and Jordan ran out with her open backpack spilling books out behind her.

"Get me out of here! Please, get me out of here!"

"What are you doing?" Frida whispered in a forceful voice while she yanked him back down into his seat. "You'll get us kicked out."

The lady on the stage had noticed, but, in an effort to seem unaffected, continued and paced towards the other side of the stage with speed and anxiety, like a restless, wild lion locked in a cage, who, spurred on by the ruthless laughs and pointing fingers of the onlookers, has turned defensive and angry. "But this is precisely our topic today. How, if God is spirit—as he is—how, can we possibly emphasize such corporality to spirituality as is present in the American Church? No, if God is spirit, we must strive to be spirit. We must live as without bodies, and if without bodies, then without gender. We, of course, cannot deny that sex exists, but it only exists to us. Not to the Divine." A long, hollow pause followed here.

"Love. One may only love in full, without fear, as spirit. Strive towards that spirit. Cast out the fears of conforming. Live your identity just as Jesus lived his identity as

queer in such an oppressing time. Oh,” she looked about inquisitively, “did some of you not realize this? Think about it, ponder it deeply in your hearts as Mary, that great matriarch, did,” and, sighing, she raised her eyebrows, “Twelve men camping together every night along the moonlit seas of ancient Mesopotamia and Jerusalem. The prophecy of God as bridegroom starting in Exodus 4:25, climaxing in the Song of Songs. Jesus *was* the bridegroom to these men quite literally, just as the prophet Isiah foretold, ‘your builder shall marry you.’ Yet he had everything to fear for this expression, and was unjustly condemned for this crime of self-expression. And—”

“Go tell Jordan’s it’s dinner time,” Dina said with characteristic tactlessness as she sat the coconut curry down on the table.

“You go tell her,” Curt said without looking up from his book, “I don’t want to bother her. She’s seemed almost happy lately.”

“Curt,” his mom yelled from her room, “please do what she says.”

“Fine,” he muttered, glaring at Dina’s back as he walked up the stairs. A funny tumbling in his stomach struck him as he turned the knob but he continued anyway, and, on the ground right by the door two tan shapes tumbled and snaked in silence interrupted by the occasional gasping moan. His limbs froze and every groan seemed to magnify and explode into his ears, casting him into a world of chaos and unbridled noise.

“Jordan,” escaped from his mouth like a small spit of steam from a kettle, and then, again louder; the kettle erupting, steam screaming out, “Jordan!”

The movement on the ground stopped and two small blond heads poked up from among blankets with perspiration flowing down their faces. All the blood rushed from his

face, and grabbing the two empty bottles of wine tossed on the ground, he rushed downstairs, bumping into the wall and leaving the door wide open.

“Mom...” he whispered, “Mom!”

“Bullshit,” Curt screamed, gripping the gun harder in his pocket, his hand twitching to pull it out, but he instead shouted again, “that’s bullshit!”

“Oh...” Dr. Piper froze, and then, a moment later, stuttered, “maybe afterwards we can engage in a friendly and didactic conversation about this—”

“Sir,” the same gap-toothed guard yanked Curt by the arm, “come with me.”

“No, please, I’m sorry,” Curt said through his teeth as a strange calm entered him, “I’ll shut up. Please,” he pleaded again, “I have to hear this.”

“No can do. You gotta go.”

“Please. I’ll fail this class if I get kicked out,” Curt shrugged with an intelligent sense gleaming from his eyes.

“Ok,” the old security worker scratched his flaky head and muttered, “well I suppose if you really keep your trap shut it won’t do no harm. But I’ll be right here behind ya the whole time.”

“Yes, of course,” Curt whispered and sat back down like an obedient child who, on the outside seems resolved to amend his ways, but located deep-down in the recesses of his mind still lurks, unabated, the same unresolved anger, morphing into something disturbed and concentrated, funneling into a thin and powerful stream of unfulfilled desire. The weight of the eyes from every person in the audience pressed down like the lid of a pressure cooker as he sat staring at the lady on stage, at her vivid audacity, her unforgivable blasphemy against the students in the room. What her words could do to

someone. And—God no!—what her words were doing to Frida as he sat and did nothing...

“Well,” a sniffing sound from the stage arose and found its way into Curt’s ears like a homing missile, “even under oppression we must continue,” she stopped, wiping away a tear from her icy-blue eyes, “we must continue to fight the fight for liberty and for justice. So, without more ado, we must address the issue of sexuality further in the Gospel of John.”

“Are you ok?” Frida reached for his hand, letting some of her hair fall in a scarlet wave across his shoulder. Her chocolate eyes reflected his own pain like a crystalline mirror.

“Who are you,” Curt jerked her hand off of his, “I know what the hell I’m doing. Leave off.” His vision honed in on the speaker, who had become, to him, some sort of witch-like monster, flying across the stage in a new-age Satanic ritual that seared itself into his mind. And to him, it seemed that her words and being had become his entire, fiery world. With every new phrase she uttered, miniature explosions went off in his heart, threatening to burst through his ribs and into his lap in front of him, bloodied and steaming, left to throb out its last few precious beats, and then cease.

“... and that’s exactly why you, like me, should feel the freedom and courage to embrace your identity where it *is*. Not where society wants it to be, not where your parents want it to be. But where it *is*. Live your identity. Male, female—what are these? Nothing. They shall fade just as this whole world shall too. And we will live free. Like ghosts we will walk this planet and reign as spirits. We see every day stories about small

children embracing their true identities as transsexual and bisexual and queer. These little ones are the brave. These little ones are the heroes.”

Jordan’s ghastly white, expressionless face stared straight up into the blank ceiling above her bloated form. Her blond hair splayed out around her on the side where she had kept it long, like half of a corrupted halo, while the other side of her head was shaved and had streaks of red running through it. Grey arms lay limp at her sides, while the last drops of blood hung from the long slits in her wrist and congealed into a carmine pudding. The blood from the pool surrounding her had soaked into and ombreed the white tank top that draped over her shoulder as if to protect and adorn what hidden piece of dignity that remained. Splots of the liquid lay across the floor and plastered along the walls, while a huge maroon smear coated itself along the outside of the tub. Two empty bottles of red wine were placed neatly in the corner of the tub like solemn witnesses to the crime scene.

He gagged, grabbed one of the bottles, and stumbled out of the bathroom door. Everything came spewing out of his mouth from the depths of his being.

“Mom” he screamed, “Mom, get over here.” He choked in his vomit. “You piece of shit! I told you.”

The words seemed to stop halfway out of his mouth and he stood, sputtering and shaking. Then, he reared back and chucked the wine bottle at his mom with a ringing yell. She ducked just in time and the bottle slammed into the wall behind her with a terrible, shattering boom.

The noise shook his eyes open, and he saw the pistol in his hands and noticed that he stood straight up, all in a fraction of a second. Fury seemed to boil in his heart and

pump through his arteries with an incredible force. The witch on stage was taunting his dead sister. Taunting her! As he pulled the trigger and the gun kicked back in his hand, he felt a violent force crashing into his side that tilted the gun two inches to the left. The awful explosion of the wine bottle crashing into the wall above his mom released from his mind and burst out into the world, mixing and melting into the shot from the gun, forming one vast echoing blast. Then the room enveloped a profound silence. Everything seemed frozen. Like the moment before a foaming tsunami crashes into a city, laying waste to all in its path—a haunting, sucking, vacuum of silence. The speaker still held her arm straight up, but an expression of intense terror was filling her features in slow motion, as if death had finally called her name, and her soul was not ready to leave her body behind.

And noise erupted.

Over the screaming uproar, a faint yet piercing whimper rose from the ground.

“Frida...” Curt bent down and shook her arm. “Frida,” he said louder this time over the growing noise from the crowd. Then he shouted, “Sister!” and turned her over so that her chest faced upward. Her hair splayed out around her in a crimson circle, and on the left side of her chest, a dark red hole had formed, from which a thick maroon substance leaked out in a steady stream, causing the top half of her white shirt to become one and the same color as her hair. His hand grasped at the air next to her to pick up the wine bottle and throw it at someone, at anyone, but nothing was there. Sinking down to his knees, he stared with empty, dark eyes into the face of his beloved and the heart of his oblation.

CHAPTER SIX

Exit 54 B

Jenny had told him to take exit 54 B. He could have sworn to God Almighty that she had. But there was nothing here except for an old, rinky-dink hamburger joint straight out of a horror movie. Small and shabby and dank, the kind of place that'd have a murderer living in the basement.

He picked up his flip-phone to dial the number as he sat at the stop sign across from the empty parking lot. Six one five, six one seven, three five eight six. He pressed the numbers with the finger on his left hand, the one with a silver wedding band around it.

“Call cannot be completed as dialed. Please, try again.”

“Aw, God damn it to hell,” he shouted, slamming the pre-arranged thirty dollars on the steering wheel of his rusty Pontiac. “This bitch better be flawless,” he thought, “or I’ll give her what she deserves.”

Still at the stop sign, he stared off into space and frowned. To calm himself, he placed one foot on the brake pedal and the other on the gas.

VRooomm. VRRROoom.

Vroom, vrooom vroom.

A blackened grin crept across his face and, at the same time, a heaping concoction of testosterone and adrenaline seemed to course through his veins. The world took on a hot, scarlet hue. He glanced down at the tattoo on his working arms. Joey, the tiger, held

his mouth wide open in a ferocious roar. Its two long teeth jutted out three inches and sunk into his huge biceps, while red blood sputtered out in small, stagnant squirts.

Tattoos had always seemed ugly to him, but there was something about a tiger that made him shiver in his lungs and made the hairs on his arms stand up. Tigers always got what they wanted.

With that thought, he zoomed over into the parking lot and skidded to a stop right in front of the door. She oughta know that he was there, he thought. Just to be sure he tapped on the gas, so that his tire sat propped up on the wheelstop. He cut off the engine and reached through the window to open the door. The piece of shit had been broken since he got it. *Yank, CRkkk*. And it opened. He placed one foot down on the grass-splattered asphalt but thought better of it. Better to try her one more time on the phone.

He plugged in the numbers and pressed “call.”

“Call cannot be completed as dialed. Please, try again.”

“Hmph,” he huffed. Before getting out, he checked himself in the mirror: those green eyes still shone, didn’t they. Gleaming like a steamy jungle plant under the rich canopy of his dark hair. Maybe she wouldn’t even make him pay. Past the mirror was the grey door to the shop. It was wooden and plain and hung open a fraction of an inch like it was waiting for him.

He got up and his heart took off at a clip in one and the same moment. Heat soaked in through his shoes from the pavement and permeated his body, flowing from his soles to his loins, to the tips of his meaty fingers. His left hand came into contact with the knob and the icy metal reinvigorated him, feeding and mixing with the heat, balancing it

out and purifying it. But his heart started to thump like a jackhammer in his chest. Every fraction of a second it seemed to grow louder and faster.

Bang bang bang.

The door rattled and opened a hair as he knocked.

“Hello,” he called in an excited, gruff voice, “Jenny. You there?”

Bang bang bang. Bang bang.

The last knock jarred the door nearly half-way open and he figured he had better step on in and see what in the hell was a matter.

He passed through and it seemed like a dense, warm fog enveloped him. Inside, the joint seemed cloudy and dim and possessed a strange moldy scent that he couldn't quite place.

“Jenny,” he questioned in a lower, sensual tone, “Jenny, girl, you in here?”

A funny feeling made its way into his head. He glanced down at his arm as if for reassurance, but in the feeble light of the room, the tiger didn't seem so awesome and terrible anymore. It seemed like a little drawing of a cat. A shiver escaped down his spine, and like a defibrillator, it shocked his heartbeat into overdrive. The moldy smell turned sour and pungent, soaking in from the floorboards below in smoky, white puffs. It seemed to fill up the empty room and drive him out with an unbelievable force. If only he could place what that smell was! It was thick and juicy and made him want to gag until he choked out every last chunk of last night's ribs. It was like spoiled milk or rotten steak or filthy, mold-covered hamburger meat. Or it was like... an old butcher's shop... That was it! It smelled like Anderson's Butcher shop after it had closed down and he went

back a month later to pick up his last check. The blue and grey and red carcasses still hung in his mind like great big monuments to a past life.

Then his heart seemed to stop. He froze and strained his ears until it felt like they had frozen and fallen off onto the cold, dust-covered floor.

A faint, faint breathing could be heard behind him.

Hmff hehh... hmfff hehh... hmff hehhh

He dropped the shirt covering his nose. And placing one foot behind the other, he spun around.

A small, young lady in a flowing Victorian wedding dress stood in the space behind the door. She held a long butcher's knife in one hand and a revolver in the other. Both seemed to glow an unnatural bright in the dusky air. One side of her face smiled and winked at him, while the other displayed a hardened, desperate look. The tall brunette bun on her head wisped out in every direction and seemed to grab the smoky haze surrounding her and pull it around her head like a white halo.

"The thing about us loose women is that we come with a mighty high price," her icy soprano sliced through the thick air of the hamburger joint off exit 54 B.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Translated by S. H. Butcher, Project Gutenberg, 2008.
- Augustine, et al. *Confessions*. Translated by E. J. Sheed, Hackett, 2007.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller, Blackwell, 2002.
- Browning, Robert. "Bishop Blougram's Apology." 1855. Poemhunter, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/bishop-blougram-s-apology/>. Accessed 23 March 2021
- Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy*. Ignatius, 1995.
- Dostoevsky, F. M., and David McDuff. *The Idiot*. Penguin, 2004.
- Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley, and Catherine Phillips. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: the Major Works*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Horace, *Ars Poetica*. Translated by A. S. Kline, 2005.
- King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Scribner, 2010.
- "Basics of Story Design." *Basics of Story Design*, <https://www.basicsofstorydesign.com>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2021.
- Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Instructions on Writing and Life*. Pantheon Books, 1994.
- Lucas, George, director. *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*. Twentieth Century Fox, 1983.
- Murray, SJ. *Basics of Story Design: 20 Steps to an Insanely Great Screenplay*. AnderEd, 2017.
- Murray, Donald M. "The Explorers of Inner Space." *The English Journal*, vol. 58, no. 6, 1969, pp. 908–911. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/811666. Accessed 8 Apr. 2021.
- O'Connor, Flannery and Sally Fitzgerald. *Collected Works: Flannery O'Connor*, Literary Classics of the United States, 1988.

Rowling, Joanne K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007.

Rushdie, Salman, and Paul Birkbeck. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Penguin Books, 1993. <https://connect.issaquah.wednet.edu/>,
file:///Users/Jordan/Desktop/Colloquium/Haroun_PDF.pdf

Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat! : The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2005.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "Mythopoeia." 1988. Akademia Gornicz—Hutnicza,
<http://home.agh.edu.pl/~evermind/jrrtolkien/mythopoeia.htm>. Accessed 23 March 2021