

DOCUMENT



SCAD

The University for Creative Careers

DOCUMENT

a publication of

THE SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN®

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THE SAVANNAH COLLEGE
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IS THE UNIVERSITY
FOR CREATIVE CAREERS.

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DOCUMENT

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NEON SIGNS

Sarah Hunt

From the top of the two-story steps, I could see her legs on the ground thrashing—heels making divots in the dirt—the rest of her body blocked by the leaves of a low-hanging tree. My first thought was seizure. But as quickly as I thought it, I dismissed it. Mom wasn't epileptic. A couple more steps down and I could see her torso jerking, arms folded back toward her still leaf-obscured head. It took another step down and leaning over the railing for the backyard to come into full view. Even then, I had no conscious memory of what had brought me running out from the house. I assume it must have been something I heard—a scream, my dog barking—because I yelled at Samantha and Michael to be quiet before rushing from the living room, through the kitchen, to the backyard.

We had just gotten our first television and Sam and Michael were fighting over what to watch. Earlier that morning, Mom had brought the set home from work wrapped in white tablecloths. She was waiting tables in a restaurant in the Royal Orleans Hotel. Twenty good comment cards from guests had earned her a ticket for the employee raffle. Those with winning numbers got to bid on the hotel's post-remodeling throwaways: embroidered lobby chairs with fading, fleur-de-lis-covered seats; photographs of river boats trailing thick arms of coal-tinted smoke; and paintings of anorexic-looking hunting hounds surrounded by chipped, gilded frames. Mom opted for a television—perfectly good save a missing remote—with a top bid of \$50.

Not bothering to debate, Sam and Michael hurled their picks back and forth.

“Transformers!”

“Smurfs!”

“Optimus Prime!”

“Gargamel!”

Without a remote, they had to stand on either side of the set to fight for a twist at the dial. A few years older, Sam had the height to strong-arm Michael away most of the time, but he had the stubborn determination of a 7-year-old and kept trying little spins to get in close enough for a kidney punch. He had just landed one and was about to make a grab for the dial when the familiar feeling of fear and adrenaline made my legs electrify. I dropped the cereal bowls. I was picking up, splashing milk on the coffee table, and bolted to the backyard.

I was halfway down the steps before I realized what was going on.

A man I had never seen before was holding my dog back by the collar. Sheena was barking and fish-jumping like a strung bass, trying to get to Mom. Mom's boyfriend, Lee, was crouching over her with a knee planted on either side of her head. He had fistfuls of her hair and was bashing her skull into the ground. When she'd try to turn over or twist away, he'd lean back and kick a work boot into her side. I think they were yelling at each other—or maybe she was begging him to stop—but by that time, sound had clicked off for me. I could only hear my own cursing and was rushing the rest of the way down into the yard. That's when I saw Lee's son, thick and wide like him, at the bottom of stairs. I couldn't figure out why he wasn't stopping his dad but still assumed he was on our side. Maybe he was on his way to call the police. I only realized he wasn't there to help when he tried to block my way down. He wasn't coming up the stairs on his way into the house; he was trying to corral me back up the steps to keep me from coming any further down.

I'd had a crush on him for months. Unlike Lee, he didn't live with us but had come over a few times to see his dad. Clay was 19—four years older than me—and had an old Yamaha he'd rebuilt himself. Even better, he worked as a referee at Skate Country, where my girlfriends and I hung out on the weekends. We would watch him roller-skating backward in the middle of the rink, wishing we had the nerve to talk to him. I wanted to be close enough to see the tooth marks on the whistle he kept hanging from his lips like a cigarette. I could almost see it still dangling there when I punched him in the mouth to get by. Knowing he was at least twice my size, I threw all of my weight and momentum into that single right hook. When it made him stumble back, I wasn't prepared for the open air in front of me and almost fell headfirst down the rest of the stairs. After bouncing down a few steps on my knees, I was able to catch the railing. By the time I reached the bottom, I had regained my footing. All my focus was again on the backyard.

My first objective: Find a weapon. I needed something to knock Lee off Mom, and I doubted my 78 pounds and already throbbing fist would have any effect on him. And I still didn't know how involved or not involved the guy holding back my dog would get. Or even who he was. It looked like he was wearing a work shirt with Lee's construction company logo on it. It was hard to tell what he looked like because he was leaning over Sheena trying to keep her still. I knew there was a lead pipe near the bottom of the steps by the fence, so I ran for it. But he must have heard or seen me coming because he started pulling on Lee's shoulder and motioning for them to go. I made it to the pipe and was running toward them, but

the friend was yanking Lee up. They sprinted through the back gate before I could get to them. Finally free, Sheena tried to nuzzle Mom's neck and lick her swollen cheek. Mom just moaned and curled into the fetal position. Once on her side, she stayed there—arms over her face and hands cradling the back of her head.

Not caring that I didn't have shoes on or how stupid I looked waving a pipe over my head, I chased behind them for a block before turning around. Once back, I stopped to check on Mom. But she kept brushing my hands away.

"Sarah, I'm O.K. Stop."

"You're bleeding."

"I'm fine."

"The whole side of your face."

"It's just the back of my head."

"Stay here. I'm calling an ambulance."

When I got to the wall phone in the kitchen, I was relieved to see Clay was gone. Sam and Michael were still watching television in the living room. I dialed with my thumb because two of my fingers were jammed stiff, my knuckles busted.

"911. Is—"

"I need an ambulance. My mom needs an ambulance."

"O.K. Can you tell me exactly—"

"Her boyfriend beat her up. We need the police, too."

"Just tell me where you are, and we'll send someone out right away."

"1312 Sparkman Blvd."

"O.K., good. Just stay on the phone with me. I'm going to ask you some questions."

She had the concerned voice of a mother talking to a sick child, but I was still in too much of a rush to be comforted.

"But how long is the ambulance going to take?"

"It shouldn't be long. I've already dispatched two officers to the scene."

"Can you just tell them to hurry?" I pled, but instead of answering, she only asked more questions.

"Is her boyfriend still there?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Where is your mom right now, honey?"

"She's in the backyard."

"Can you see her from where you are?"

I realized she was right. I couldn't see Mom from where I was on the phone. I had no idea if Lee was coming back. Or already back.

“Sam, get the gun!” I yelled into the living room, not sure she could hear me over the Thundercats theme song.

“Now, listen, officers are already on the way.”

For the first time, I could hear fear and alarm in her voice.

“There’s no reason to let this escalate,” she continued, “I don’t want you—”

But I was already hanging up the phone.

Mom met Lee when she was bartending. He was one of the regulars who came in after work for happy hour. When she first started, he was only having a beer or two. But gradually, he started staying longer. Eventually everyone—including Mom—expected him to be there for her entire shift. If she was working during the day, I waited for her there after school. Lee would smile at me from his bar stool by the service well. This is where the other bartenders, their friends or the bar manager sat. When I’d come in, he’d move down so I could have the closest seat to Mom’s side. Sometimes I’d sit at the Table Pong video game. Without money to play, I’d pretend it was me moving the paddle back and forth across the screen, knocking back the comet-trailing blip, instead of the computer’s pre-play program. Once, when the vending machine guy came to empty quarters, Lee talked him into opening up the quarter collector and running through a handful for me so I could play for free.

A year later, he and Mom were looking for a larger place to move into together. Lee was tired of his commute from Metairie, and we were happy to leave our one-bedroom apartment. Mom said we wouldn’t even have to paint the new place. It had a room for Sam and me, another one for Michael, and a great backyard for Sheena. There was even an aboveground basement large enough to house the three huge neon signs Lee had gotten from an amusement park that was closing down. Outlines of cyclists bent over racing bikes, each one of the signs was at least six feet tall, seven feet wide, and mounted on a rust-colored metal box. It took him and three other guys two hours to get them unloaded and into the basement. When they lined up together, they looked like a neon version of a Tour de France poster. But they were never on, and we were told not to go near them. Lee had plans to sell them. At least twice a week, he’d dust the signs with a hand-sock and carefully check each filament’s connection. Once, he found a wet towel draped over one of the metal boxes. He called us all down to the basement, where he shoved the balled-up towel in our faces, demanding to know who had done it. When we wouldn’t tell him, he made us stand against the wall—backs straight, not moving—until Mom came home two hours later. Sometimes, after everyone went to sleep, I’d turn on the signs and

leave them on all night, hoping one of the tubes would burn out.

“What are you doing?” Sam asked from behind me. I was on a stool trying to reach the back shelf in Mom’s closet.

“I’m getting Lee’s gun.”

“Why?”

“If he comes back, I’m going to shoot him.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The cops are going to be here in a minute. Don’t let Sheena in the backyard.”

“Sarah, seriously. Stop loading the gun. You’re scaring me.”

“Just stay in the house.”

When I went back into the kitchen, Mom was at the sink washing blood out of her hair with a dishtowel. Her right eye had swollen shut—you could barely see her wet eyelashes pinched between the fat, stretched lid. She had a busted lip and swollen cheek.

“Are you O.K.?”

“Asshole stopped taking his antidepressants.”

“Oh.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“He ran off with his friend.”

“Yeah, I saw you go after them,” she said, finally turning around. She walked over to me, took the gun out of my hand, and put it in a cabinet above the refrigerator. “When the cops get here, I want you to stay inside with Sam and Michael. O.K.?”

When I didn’t say anything, she put her hand on my shoulder and made me look at her.

“I mean it, Sarah. Inside.”

Mom went outside to meet the cop car and ambulance before anyone could come up to the house. I watched from the second-story front porch. I couldn’t hear exactly what was being said but could see Mom talking to the two policemen. One had a notebook out but wasn’t writing anything down. The other one was leaning against his cruiser, talking into his shoulder radio. After a few minutes, they turned her over to the paramedics, who sat her down on the curb to look at her head and face. They were putting a butterfly band-aid on her cheek when Lee and his friend walked up from around the block. I couldn’t believe he had come back but couldn’t wait to see him be arrested. But instead of bending him over the cruiser or handcuffing him, they just talked to him. At one point, Lee held up his forearm and

showed them a bite mark. They laughed. I thought I heard him say something about mouths being filthy and crazy bitches. It looked like the cops were agreeing.

Lee wasn't allowed in the house again without a police escort. They would supervise while he got his stuff. He showed up the next week with two cops and a folder full of receipts to prove what was his. While Mom sat in the living room with Sam and Michael, I followed him from room to room. I made him show me everything he was taking. Anything other than clothes I said wasn't his. If one of the cops started to lag behind or wasn't paying attention, I called him over.

"He's trying to take my mom's jewelry."

"I bought her that jewelry. I have receipts for it."

"Grandma gave her those earrings."

I learned early on to direct my attention to the younger of the two cops. If I stood close to him, put my hand on his arm, and pretended to be afraid of Lee, he took my side.

"Sir, just leave the stuff on the dresser. Anything else in this room?"

"Yeah, my gun is missing."

"I'm assuming it's a registered gun you're talking about now."

"Yeah, registered. And expensive. And it was in this closet."

"Officer, are people not on their medications supposed to have guns?" I asked innocently.

After that, I barely let him take anything at all. If he tried to claim something, I just stood in front of it and said it was mine. I kept his antique steamer trunk with leather handles buckling over each side, a pearl- and silver-inlaid globe that spun on a rolling brass stand, and his collection of model muscle cars. If he started to argue or move toward me, my cop would give him a look that told him to back down and move on. By the time we got to the basement, Lee was cursing under his breath. I walked right over to the neon signs and stood in front of them.

"Officer, look at these cool signs I've got."

Lee stood by the stairs, saying nothing.

"Wait 'til you see them plugged in," I continued.

"Pretty cool," he agreed when the basement lit up and the bike wheels started flashing on and off to give the illusion of forward motion.

"Yeah, I was thinking of selling them. They're worth a lot. But I think my friends and I are just going to smash them. You know, for fun."

"Seems like that'd be a waste to me."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. I'll just hold onto them. Only an asshole would smash up something for no reason. Right, Lee?" I asked.

But he only looked at me before turning around to go back upstairs.

“And don’t worry about your gun,” I called after him. “I’m going to be keeping an eye out for you.”



FATHER CHRISTMAS

Andrea Goto

*Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself,
I am large, I contain multitudes.*

–Walt Whitman, from “Song of Myself”

The mall Santas were always slouching, loosely bearded fakes. The one ushered in on a giant float at the close of New York City's Thanksgiving Day Parade could maybe pass for authentic, but I think that was just spectacle at work. The real North Pole, reindeer-chartered Santa didn't have time for pre-Christmas jaunts, that is, with one mid-December exception. For a few blessed hours, Santa appeared at the rented auditorium of the Cornwall Street Senior Activity Center to disperse one present to every deserving boy and girl whose parent worked at Georgia Pacific's paper mill. One present never felt like so much.

My sister and I, coordinating in red and green hand-sewn dresses, sat on either side of our festively groomed mother, and suffered through the pre-Santa programming. It was the same every year. "Joy to the World" played on a boom box hissing static like a deflating tire as the crowd anxiously found its way to the metal folding chairs. The stage sat before us, on which two flags—the American and the Washington State banners—hung from poles. Between them sat a Christmas tree decorated with paper chains drenched in sparkle dust made during the senior craft hour. To the left, a hand-drawn fireplace colored in with markers was taped to the wall, and in front of that sat a grand, wingback chair reserved for His Excellency. To the right, an endless number of wrapped presents were stacked and categorically arranged by age and gender.

The lights dimmed and the two-reel projector fluttered like a deck of cards as the bootlegged cartoon portion of the evening began. My foot began to twitch up and down after Chip and Dale took up residence in Pluto's Christmas tree, but once the films turned from Disney to denominational, I entirely spaced. I began to imagine the contents of the presents. Shoebox-sized packages lying on their side, you could bet were remote control cars. Rectangular four-by-thirteen-inch boxes standing upright contained Barbies. But if you fell into the coveted category receiving the eight-by-fifteen package with the slanted front, you got yourself a Cabbage Patch Kid. One year the party organizers made a dreadful miscalculation, purchasing a hairdryer for every girl ages nine to eleven deceptively packaged like a Lite-Brite. We forgave Santa, but our mothers started bringing just-in-case presents in the trunk of the car.

On cue, when the final credits mercifully began to roll, Santa's ribbon of

bells rang throughout the room like the chimes from St. Mark's Cathedral. Squeaky chairs sang off-key when the kids careened their nimble necks. At least two toddlers would begin to scream in pure horror as Santa emerged from the doorway bellowing, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" with one massive hand waving parade-style to the crowd. He was tall, looming, and perfectly gorgeous.

One by one, children went up to sit on Santa's lap. For most kids, this fireside chat was simply a formality. They came for the present and a red mesh stocking overstuffed with Palmer's Chocolates and Planters Peanuts. But I relished those moments with Santa. He smelled warm and musty and held me close with his hand on my leg, bracing me on his tall thigh as my mother snapped pictures. Somewhere from the depths of the white beard, a voice softly asked about my family, my pets, school; my response a nervous sputtering of half sentences, talking alternatively too quickly and too softly, averting my eyes so as not to linger on what little of his face actually revealed itself—his bulbous nose naturally red, his small green eyes burdened by fleshy lids. But my disappointing delivery didn't matter; he was a fortuneteller, already knowing my name, that I wanted the Snoopy Sno-Cone Machine more than anything else in the world, and even that I'd been mostly good that year. He defined omniscience.

When I turned thirteen, I was officially too old to attend the Christmas Party. Nonetheless, on that second Saturday evening in December I heard the familiar clang of Santa's bells but this time echoing from my parents' bedroom. Santa suddenly presented himself to me in the kitchen, bracing his tummy with one hand as he forced it to jiggle while Ho-Ho-ing it up. I blinked, hard.

"You really didn't know it was me?" he asked.

When I was growing up, Dad would take us on Sunday drives with a Playmate cooler of beer on the seat next to him, tossing the empty cans along Washington State's Scenic Loop Highway. On New Year's Eve, instead of buying fireworks, he fired his shotgun straight up into the sky. The neighbor tried to outdo him with his own pump-barrel, so the two men took turns firing until the police came. While Dad watched TV he let my sister and me pull his gray and thinning hair into pigtails and color his faded tattoo—an outline of a blooming rose with a banner across the stem bearing his ex-wife's name, "Donna." He neutered our cat with a rubber band.

My father, Santa Claus.

Born on my great-grandfather's farm in the Northwestern—most part of Washington State, Dad spent the first months of his life sleeping in a dresser drawer because he was too big for the cradle. When the dresser tipped over and

closed him inside, he was moved into bed with his parents until the second baby was born. Dad was the eldest of the three boys—Del, Dewey, and Dixon—all bearing a triplet-like resemblance to one another with lanky frames and goofy grins so wide that their eyes disappeared beneath droopy eyelids. With their wayward blond curls, rosy complexions, and farm-crusted hands, the boys looked like filthy versions of the cherubic children in Dutch paintings, smiling stupidly at the base of oversized windmills.

From Holland, my father's great-grandpa landed in a Dutch colony in Michigan, but in search of a better America, headed west, stopping just short of falling into the Pacific Ocean. There he homesteaded Lynden with a few other Dutch families who were simply too tired and too proud to return to Michigan when they saw things weren't all that different. Great-Grandpa Stremler built a farm in the flatlands near the Canadian border, and began the family's tradition of attending the Second Christian Reformed Church (a stone's throw from the First and Third), making Hoofd Kaas (head cheese) and Hollandsche Olie Bolen (fried cakes) for the old woman affectionately called "Grandma Down the Hill," and preparing the children for an uncertain future by withholding affection.

A Depression-era childhood taught my father that nothing is guaranteed. A scavenging raccoon may raid the coop, mercilessly tearing the heads off the hens' auburn-feathered necks and then slurping yolk from the remaining broken teacups. A desperate cow ripe for slaughter may resist capture, running through the fields like a madman on fire. When the sledgehammer finally hits the mark on the skull, the beast's muscles have already gone tough with adrenaline. At dinner the boys would chew and chew until their jaws ached, then casually cough the meat into their hands and press it into the pockets of their jeans, hoping my grandfather wouldn't notice; if he did they'd be forced to swallow the half-masticated lump, gagging it down through dripping tears and snot. If he didn't notice, my grandmother would discover the meat days later while raking the boys' dusty jeans across the soapy washboard and then serve it to them for supper in the fashion of stew.

When my father was nine, his parents left him to watch over his brothers while they went to church. The boys were engaged in mock-rodeo play, pressing their skinny thighs against the calves' ribs to stay upright, when the alarm sounded at the fire hall, screeching across the hay fields. Dad ran inside with his brothers chasing behind and turned on the radio. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

"What does it mean?" the youngest asked.

"Just what it sounds like. The Japanese are attacking us," Dad replied.

“Could we die?”

“I suppose we could.”

By the time my grandparents returned, Dad’s stomach had filled with warm sickness in spite of his steady voice instructing his brothers to pull the shades and remain under the table. They were all sent outside to play.

“But we could be killed!” protested Dewey.

“Nonsense,” said Grandma.

And with that she shooed the boys outside, then sat next to the radio with my grandfather, squeezing his hand in hers and swallowing what felt like grief. Outside, Dad hid his brothers in the woodshed until they were called in for supper.

If my father believed in anything, it was only because he saw it with his own eyes. He knew about gravity because he fashioned parachutes from handkerchiefs, tying them to the cats and throwing them out of the barn’s loft. He knew about electricity because when he slid cow manure into his grandfather’s wooden shoe, he punishment was to piss on the fence. At Northwood School, a two-room schoolhouse with each row of desks indicating a separate grade, the teacher tried to tell Dad that God punishes the sinful, that math is important, and that spelling counts, but she couldn’t prove any of it. He left school at fourteen having learned only one thing: how to pile wood and shovel coal—the punishment for not believing.

Some people called Dad the orneriest son-of-a-bitch they’d ever met, but he wasn’t mean; he just never told people what they wanted to hear, unless of course, it was the truth. My father lied once in his whole life—he fudged his age to get out of Lynden and into the United States Navy.

The first time Dad went “over the hill,” as they call it in the Navy, he explained to the judge that love was to blame—he hitchhiked from San Diego back to Lynden to marry his sweetheart, “But here I am, back before the ship has left port.”

The second time he went over the hill, he again cited love not so much as an excuse as a reason.

The third time, he was court martialed and the weary judge, partial to honesty, sentenced him to the boat for thirty days. An easy sentence to serve given that Dad was already scheduled to be at sea.

After four years and three trips overseas, he was honorably discharged and walked off that Seaplane Tender and into the arms of his bride, who was by then visibly pregnant with his uncle’s child.

With his wife, Dad raised his daughter as his own, and had a second child—a

son—only believing it was his when he saw his own reflection in that baby's face. They later took in a foster son who exchanged one troubled home for another. Dad didn't stick around much after that. He rode his 1955 Indian with a gang of addicts who wore denim vests with "Patriots" embroidered across the back, stretching shoulder to shoulder; the front embellished with patches and pins from the places they'd been, like Yosemite, Carson City, and Sturgis, the Mecca of them all. Dad began to drink heavily but probably survived laying his bike down a few dozen times because of it. One summer he and a buddy rode out of town on a whim and a few lines of coke, ending up half-conscious on the salt flats in Utah. After a heavy rain, they stood naked in a remote Laundromat waiting for their only pair of underwear to dry. They brushed their teeth with their fingers and rinsed with Ripple wine, which they kept in a goat sack slung over their shoulders. When some outlaws at the National Motorcycle Race in Castle Rock pushed my father up against a station wagon and attempted to slit his throat, he finally headed home. As he rode up the gravel driveway, his wife of eighteen years met him on the front steps, requesting a divorce so she could marry their foster son.

Dad went on his way, moving ten minutes south of Lynden to Bellingham and renting a dinky house on the front of which he built a ramp so he could ride his Harley-Davidson Sportster through the door to be stored safely in the bedroom. In the winter he'd work on the bike and start it up, staining the walls with exhaust.

He met my mom at a cocktail lounge called The Alpine when a fight broke out. He shielded her from an airborne bottle of Coors Light. Unfit for the rotting panel walls and the stale beer fumes, she was a well-groomed ex-pageant queen and sorority girl eleven years his junior, who thought it strange that Dad rolled his own funny-smelling cigarettes. She told him she wanted to take a ride on his bike.

They married on Valentine's Day six months later. He sold his Harley to make the down payment on the only house they'd ever live in.

Mom's parents didn't approve of the relationship; even after my sister and I were born they refused to step foot in our house. Tired of seeing my mother fall into depression every holiday, Dad drove his bike onto their front yard and asked to speak to my grandfather.

"Sir, I know you think I'm not good, but I ain't playing games. I love your daughter and I'm gonna take good care of her and my girls."

And he did just that.

Things were still tense, but my grandparents suddenly started visiting for Christmas dinner. They even bought Dad a box of Whitman's chocolates every year. He didn't eat chocolate, but he'd thank them anyway and pour himself a

tumbler of Jack Daniels.

With virtually no education and without too much experience save peeling potatoes in the Navy's mess hall, Dad found it hard to find dependable work, but he had heard that Georgia Pacific's paper mill paid well. Guess every other man knew it too because while Dad had been riding his bike around the country, the other Lynden boys were filling every available labor position in town.

Leaning casually against the outside of the warehouse supervisor's trailer, he would wait for the door to open, at which point he'd ask, "Any work today, boss?"

"No, Del, we ain't hiring. And I sure as hell wouldn't hire a pain-in-the-ass like you even if I was."

"Well, maybe tomorrow then."

He'd open his sack lunch that my mother packed for him, unwrap the egg salad sandwich and sink his teeth into it, scattering egg bits down the front of his plaid flannel shirt. When the other Lynden boys passed by him as they headed back from their lunch break, they'd shake their heads. Dad would grin at them with a mouthful of egg.

But sometimes they would need an extra body for the jobs no one wanted, like folding flock—a muscle-pulling, hand-cramping task of moving one mattress-sized layer of would-be paper after another onto a pallet. And Dad would oblige.

After three months of intermittent labor, the supervisor waved my father into the trailer and walked him into the adjoining warehouse stacked floor-to-ceiling with oversized cardboard boxes filled with toilet paper. For the next thirty-eight years, Dad careened about the cold, cemented aisles of that cardboard maze in a tow motor, inhaling heavy exhaust as he loaded and unloaded semi trucks with toilet paper. In spite of his grade-school teacher's warning, he did it without math, without spelling, and without God.

With a casserole in hand, Mom would sometimes take my sister and me down to the warehouse at dinnertime. The break room was at the back of the supervisor's trailer, wallpapered in bitter coffee and cigarette smoke. A couple of men wearing industrial-strength coats quietly hunched over their bologna sandwiches in their respective corners, others flapped cards down in a game of solitaire, Marlboros dangling loosely at the corners of their mouths. Some worked at the warehouse, but others were truck drivers waiting for cargo. If the boss wasn't there the guys who knew us would give my sister and me rides on the tow motor or spin us around in the boss's high-back rolling chair. The ones who didn't suspiciously eyed the casserole and my mother in her look-at-me sundress and oversized plastic earrings.

It took me a few years to learn that most of these men didn't like my father, taking offense at the way he greeted them when they came into the office.

"You the fuck-head that parked that semi crooked at the gate? Are you retarded? Get your ass out there and straighten it out."

The guys who knew Dad simply replied, "Aw, go fuck yourself, Del!" And they'd all have a good laugh.

He had his share of problems over the years, getting written up for stealing toilet paper or for secretly removing the casings off the supervisor's door, sticking three rotting foot-long trout inside before sealing it back up. He was continually demoted and promoted, depending on the thickness of each new boss's skin.

Thirty years ago, someone from Georgia Pacific's administration asked my father to pose as Santa Claus for the annual Christmas party, and for some reason, he said yes. All they ever gave him in return was an assortment of dried fruit squished into a basket that was then sealed in cellophane and topped with a plaid bow.

Even though Dad retired from the mill nine years ago, he continued to play their Santa Claus. But much has changed since then. He started walking four miles a day and lost so much weight that he had to stuff the suit with a pillow. He suddenly stopped drinking after falling down the front steps of The Yacht Club, where he was attending a charity gala my mother had dragged him to, tearing holes in the knees of his rented tux and scraping his nose on the pavement. Mom hiked up her ball gown to step over him, got the car, and drove herself home. I don't know how Dad got home, but he never drank again, claiming that he "just didn't like the feeling anymore."

The Christmas party changed too. They scrapped the movie portion of the program and started herding kids directly to Santa, who was stationed in his chair before the doors even opened. He was still the center of attention, but only for a minute because a beanbag toss and a round of musical chairs distracts kids with the promise of more stuff—chintzy prizes like the ones found in the party section at the Dollar Store. But for an hour, boys still stood tugging at their starched shirtsleeves and girls still picked clingy pantyhose from their tiny butts in anticipation of their moment with Santa, a present, and a stocking, even if the stocking had been replaced by a brown paper sack containing a bruised apple, orange, and box of raisins. The parents who had first lifted their kids onto Santa's lap had become grandparents, and the kids had babies of their own.

In 2007, a few days before Christmas, Georgia Pacific closed down the Bellingham paper mill. The mill was never guaranteed to last forever; they had been laying off employees over the course of ten years, so it came as no surprise

when the announcement was made, but that was little consolation to the remaining two hundred workers who found themselves suddenly unemployed in at town that didn't have much use for the working class anymore. Because it was the right thing to do, Georgia Pacific financed one final Christmas party.

"Santa! Santa!" My eighteen-month-old daughter stood at my side waving wildly, trying to get Santa's attention from the kid on his lap onto her, still five deep in line. Santa was a pro and gave every kid his allotted twenty seconds. Plus, he forgot to turn up his hearing aid so he couldn't hear her anyhow. My heart hummed along with hers as I prayed that my overly sensitive child wouldn't suddenly panic and scream as she got closer like she did with that Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle at the Lynden Fair. Such an outburst would do my father irreparable harm in his final Santa hour, not to mention the uncomfortable horror of everyone else who waited to see his granddaughter's reaction to her first and last Georgia Pacific Christmas party.

When her turn finally arrived, she fell silent and I felt her small hand grab my pant leg, pulling it slightly backwards. Santa outstretched his arms to her, and she leaned further away as I countered her effort with a forward nudge.

"Ava! Have you been a good girl this year? Come sit on Santa's lap!" He patted his leg enthusiastically, desperately.

Slowly, painfully, Ava took a dozen half steps forward, using up all of her twenty seconds before being hoisted onto Santa's lap. I lingered back while my mother bounced around me schizophrenically snapping pictures, and I realized that I had been sweating and shaking with anticipation. But there was Ava, perched on my father's knee, leaning into his warm and musty scent and smiling into his barely-there eyes, undoubtedly sensing a familiarity that she couldn't yet understand. No one complained when Santa lingered with his only grandchild for an additional minute. I couldn't make out his face hidden amongst all the white, but I heard him sniff stiffly when he finally motioned to his helper-elf to bring a present. We made eye contact briefly as I lifted my daughter from his lap and his green eyes looked cloudy and red at the edges. I smiled and pretended not to see because that's how he would want it. Ava yelled, "Bye, Santa!" a little too loudly as I carried her away.

My father, Santa Claus.



ENGANCHADA:
A TANGO STORY

Ashley Easton

Tango, above all, is a seductive and dangerous thing. If you decide to approach it, do so obliquely, with great care and caution—as though edging past una vibora coiled upon itself in a narrow alleyway—and don't say after the fact that I didn't give you fair warning. This serves as my formal disclaimer.

I suspect you may have some concept of tango, formed from a mishmash of old cartoons—the dashing man with a rose between his teeth—or that horridly absurd show that pays “has-been” celebrities far too much to compete against one another with their professional dance partners (don't worry; I rather like it, too). But I am mildly chagrined by all this nonsense, as are all of us tangueras y tangueros. This is not tango. Not real tango.

However, this does function as a convenient if unattractive disguise, keeping the culture of tango well below the radar (at least in this country). It's a bit like going to the costume shop at 5 p.m. on Halloween and discovering that the only disguises left are of the cheap, nylon-and-lace, street-corner hooker variety—unsightly, offensive even—and while it's better than no disguise at all, you're frustrated because underneath you're something infinitely more sensual and attractive than a fake hussy. But a gaudy disguise will do in the circumstance of necessity: Tango, you know, is not for just any old Joe walking by out on the street.

And so it is with some hesitation that I attempt to reveal the intrigues of Argentine tango. I'm fairly tempted to just leave you in the dark and keep the secret. I don't want to spoil my secret world; on the contrary—I guard it jealously. But from my experience, I've come to know this: People initiated into el mundo de tango either become entirely addicted, or are never seen in the tango scene again—they simply vanish. For me, I had my first hit of tango and was gone—it went straight into my veins and I became an addict, totally hooked—enganchada.

As is the case with a number of things in life, it was my sister's fault that I wandered into the beguiling snare of tango. She was living with me for a few months after a semester of school in Europe, and while she did the virtual rounds on her laptop each morning in my living room, she would play this music. I feel I must digress and assure you that I actually like music very much. But this stuff was a bit odd. The sound quality was terrible—it sounded more like something you'd hear on your great-grandparents' phonograph than on a radio station or an iPod. Nor

was it all that pleasant—particularly if you were trying to focus on something else, say, typing up an e-mail or reading a news article. There would always be a sighing accordion thing (in reality it's called a bandoneon) a jabbing, staccato violin, a plinkety piano, and usually a man wailing and warbling in Spanish in a most tragicomic way. In other words, it was far too dramatic for my listening enjoyment.

The music seriously irked me, and naturally, my sister continued to play it (I suspect that she was secretly pleased she had discovered a way to annoy me with such ease). Eventually I made her take me along to one of these tango dances—a milonga. This was mostly a result of a curious fascination I tend to develop towards things that vaguely bother me (airline travel, Worcestershire sauce, and long movies without a point have been some of my previous fixations). These milongas can (and do) take place in practically any venue—chic little restaurants with barely enough space to move, huge ballroom dance studios, historic mansions, coffee shops, seldom-used banquet rooms above seedy bars, even gymnasiums. But I wasn't prepared to wander into a church to see this tango business. Granted, it was an existentialist church, which seems to have an established reputation for being exceedingly liberal and ... progressive. As I walked up the steep front steps and doubtfully regarded the hand-painted sign over the doors that read Sanctuary in curly gold script, I wondered what I could possibly discover in this strange little microcosm of Atlanta. I released a semi-reluctant sigh, smoothed down my skirt in a manner that said I meant business, and passed over the threshold.

As we stepped into the foyer, I could hear the music. Loud, loud music. Far louder than my sister would ever dare play it. I imagined what sort of scene would confront me beyond the double oak doors: I feared it would be a handful of near-deaf geriatric couples shuffling about like crabs with some legs missing. Odds are they'd smell about ready for the funeral parlor, and I'd have to hold my nose in a most delicate manner if they asked me to dance. I heaved one of the doors open, and nearly fell over: The place was packed with people—eighty would be a conservative estimate.

There were no pews in the church, just tables and chairs along the edge of the single large room. Couples were slowly progressing counter-clockwise in a most elegant and stately manner; others sat at tables, watching the dance floor and talking with one another. The ladies not dancing came over and sprinkled cheek kisses in the air on either side of my sister's face and she politely introduced me to her tango friends. Was this real?

The strangest thing was that not all these people were wrinkly old prunes. Not even most of them. There were middle-aged people, 30-somethings, college

students. I've even since seen a teenager here and there. Overall, it was a fairly attractive bunch—the gents were dapper—some even wore jackets! And the ladies were perfumed and well-groomed, with skirts that flipped or swished when they executed undulating serpentine moves, the preference being for decadently sumptuous fabrics and colors. Yes, some of the ladies were, in fact, wearing the fabled tango fishnet tights, and I must admit, to excellent effect. These ladies, along with the ones with the highest, skinniest, sexiest stilettos, appeared to be the ones who danced the most. This didn't bode well for me at all: I was sporting some one-inch kitten heel sandals. Cute, but not up to the task. So, not expecting to dance, and half not really wanting to anyhow, I sat back to watch (and to do the other thing writers continually revert to when they're feeling awkward—scribble notes).

A sweet, sad song began to play and couples rose and walked to the dance floor, while others somehow met on the floor, coming from opposite sides of the room. The floor was again full of dancers, moving gently to the sad music, and inexplicably never bumping into one another. The men were serious and focused as they danced. The women seemed to close their eyes in sheer rapture. I'd sooner lick the floor than dance with someone—eyes closed—while wearing golf tee heels and moving backwards, I thought. This was a strange, foreign world I had stumbled across. I wondered if it bore any semblance to the milongas in Buenos Aires, where the tango began. I decided to try to find out, and so the question that now occupied my mind was whether there were any Argentines about.

Argentines, you see, have a rather strange complex about their origins. Buenos Aires, in particular, is a city built by and comprised of emigrated Europeans. You could step off a plane in Buenos Aires, and without the foreknowledge as to which airport you've landed in, you could very well walk about the city and think that you were in Europe. The buildings, the people and their mannerisms are all quite remarkably continental. And so, if you are trying to spot an Argentine in a crowd, you'll be most successful if you pretend that you're actually looking for an Italian or perhaps a Spaniard. And this I did.

My gaze drifted to the front of the room where a charismatic-looking man was fiddling with a laptop while sipping on a glass of red wine, gesticulating and loudly singing along to the music—all at once. Aha! An Argentine. It seemed that this fellow was the DJ. I watched him closely as he studied the dancers and picked out the next set of songs to play. It struck me as lovely that a tango DJ would personally tailor his choice of music on-the-spot to best suit the crowd and momentum of the evening, but this is a fairly standard practice for milongas. I elbowed my sister, who was sitting next to me. "Who's he?"

“Oh! Horacio,” she said with a wink. She then proceeded to launch a barrage of coy gestures in his direction, missile style—crossing and uncrossing her legs, wagging her pointy-heeled tango shoes, trying her damndest to catch his eye. “Jeez, knock it off!” I whispered, mortified by her lack of subtlety.

“No, no, no, no. This is how you do it,” she said with obvious condescension. When he looked up, he caught us in our act of indiscretion and raised an eyebrow. “Mierda,” I muttered. He put down his wine glass and strolled over to us, as I considered the relative merits of ducking under the table.

After yet another introduction and cheek kisses, Horacio gave me a look that a man might give to a hooker in a hotel lobby after the rate had been negotiated. “Wanna go up to my room?” it said. I responded with a disgruntled look and may have let out a strangled utterance of confusion. I looked to my sister, who—ever helpful—laughed in my face.

“Do you want to dance?” Horacio clarified. “This is the way it is done in Argentina—the cabeceo—the eye contact is made, and the man asks for a dance with a gesture of his face—an eyebrow, you see? If the woman likes, she gives a nod. If no, she looks away. She can pretend, ah ... not to see.”

How charmingly clever! I thought. I nodded and, with Horacio, stepped out onto the floor. “You dance the tango before?” I shook my head vigorously. “Hay! Dios! Porque no!” I recoiled in shock. “No, no. I am only joking with you. Here.”

He wrapped an arm around me and offered his left hand for my right. I did my best to drape my spare arm around the back of his shoulders like the other women did. He moved my seemingly dead appendage further up with a forceful shrug of his shoulder. “Eso,” he said.

To say that this was a cozy embrace is not sufficient: We were chest to chest, cheek brushing against cheek, and my middle back was held between the crook of his elbow and his fingertips. Unbearably snug was more like it, though it quickly became one of the most natural, comfortable positions in my entire world.

“Give to me a little of your weight,” he demanded, and I leaned forward a bit so that there was a light pressure between us. *Not good*, my instinct for balance told me, *you’re going to fall on your face, stupid*.

“Okay, good,” Horacio said. “Now, I lead. You relax—no thinking—just follow.” What a gross oversimplification, I thought. But I soon saw that the man had a point. Dancing with him, I didn’t particularly need to know what I was doing. I didn’t need to know any step patterns, fancy moves. All the information I needed came from him and from the embrace. He was an exceptional dancer—the communication was as clear as if he were whispering helpfully into my ear: Step back,

and now here, now quick, quick, and slow. But, of course, he didn't need to actually do this; he's Argentine. Instead he sang along with lusty gusto to the music.

Sometime during the song, I stopped worrying about making a fool of myself and settled into a blissful daze of rapture. It was so exquisite, my eyes stopped working so hard, and my body, my kinesthetic sense took over the controls. When the song was over and we stepped away from one other, I felt as though I had awakened from a delicious dream, sleepy-eyed, and extremely happy. This tango was powerful stuff.

In the days following my first milonga, I contemplated what made it so remarkably satisfying. Was it because I was lonely, just craving the simplest, slightest human contact? Maybe so, but this could only partially explain my instant infatuation with tango. I think what captivates me most about the dance and its culture is that tango is a means to connect with other people, to communicate and enjoy one another in a comfortable social context. It's certainly not a meat-market scene like so many bars these days. Nor is it like the pithy, impersonal interactions on social networking Web sites—these are real people, together in a real place, doing something equally genuine and real. Many of the people from the church milonga—Milonga a Media Luz—are actually now mis amigos tangueros. It's very much like having a big, extremely eclectic, extended family.

The one thing we have in common is that we found our lives to be lacking something, and we first found that indefinable something while being held in the embrace of relative strangers, dancing to sorrowful, dramatic music from Argentina. I am now one of the many devotees, no—addicts—whose understanding of life has been deepened drastically through participating in the dance of tango.

Tango is a kind of consolation for the human condition—it is a small, delicate and temporary solace. To dance tango is to long for something I always knew, but never could have, and to pursue something that elusively refuses possession for any amount of time longer than a three-minute dance.

Later in my exploration of tango, I became more familiar with the music. There are still some songs I don't care for, but there are also lively waltzes, zippy milongas, and tangos that make my heart ache. And I found out the name of the particular song that initially inspired for me such distaste: *La Cumparsita*, or "The Little Circus" (an utterly asinine name for a song, I'm sure you can agree). What does fit so perfectly, though, why this song should be my least favorite of them all, is that *La Cumparsita* is traditionally the last song played at the milongas, and it signifies the end.

The end, that is, until next time.



A LETTER TO THE YMCA
REGARDING THE NEW POOL
REGULATIONS

Harrison Scott Key

Dear Mr. B _____,

Let me start by saying that my wife and I have deeply enjoyed our membership at the YMCA. Our city has so few summer activities for young children, and your pool has been a godsend. We float and frolic for hours at a time, celebrating the simple pleasures of family life. But something has changed this summer, turning those pleasures into hazards of unholy terror. I speak of your new pool regulations.

Please allow me to begin with the most egregious new policy, vis-à-vis the abolition of inflatable flotation devices. In May, my three-year-old daughter and I were enjoying a quiet day in the shallow end. We were playing “Robot Dolphin,” a game where I (in the role of the demonic Robot Dolphin) lunge at her violently through the water. The premise is simple: the mechanical beast has escaped from an animatronic show at a nearby marine park and is threatening the lives of children (it is a playful way to teach her how to survive a real life Robot Dolphin attack). During this particularly vigorous game, I was surprised to hear a lifeguard yelling at me from across the pool. Let’s call him Dragon Danny, owing to (what appeared to be) a large reptilian tattoo on his left leg.

“Hey!” Dragon Danny said, “You’ll have to remove that flotation device, man!”

I chafed immediately, as I find it very difficult to be corrected by lifeguards bearing tattoos of mythical creatures. I like the Robot Dolphin, but you don’t see me with a green tattoo of a mechanized sea mammal on my leg, do you?

“Son,” I said, “this thing is made of vulcanized rubber.” I lifted my daughter out of the water, innertube and all, to show him. “As you can see, it is a quality device.”

He did not react immediately. Perhaps Dragon Danny does not know about vulcanized rubber. Perhaps he is unschooled in the fusion of polymers and the major characters of Roman mythology. Finally, after his reptilian brain grappled with, and tossed aside, this complicated reference, he spoke.

“What if it busted and she drowned?” he said.

“Then,” I said, “we would have a funeral,” I said.

Irony had no quarter in his reptilian mind. He blinked a few more times and explained that my daughter would have to wear something that wasn’t inflatable.

“You mean like a tire iron or an engine block?” I said.

Again, no reaction. I knew it would be futile to reference Archimedes' buoyancy principle. Finally, I acquiesced and removed her innertube. I do not want to be a troublemaker, sir.

Now when we go to the pool, I tie a foam water noodle around my daughter's tiny body. It is the color of a Twinkie, and it usually explodes out of its loose knot, causing her to sink like a fleshy bag of rocks. Please don't misunderstand: I do not mind saving my daughter's life. She and her mother always seem very appreciative.

Your institution's policies are strange to me, sir. I understand that it's possible to purchase a tiny lifejacket or child's swimsuit with buoyant foam padding built into the sides of the garment, but I refuse to buy such things. Lifejackets are for boats, and when I dress my child in buoyant swimwear, her unusually large head causes her to float upside down. This is quite funny to watch, but makes breathing problematic.

I could stop there, but this is about far more than vulcanized rubber and a foam noodle. To wit:

In June, I witnessed Dragon Danny telling a group of children that they are no longer allowed to have underwater breath-holding contests, thus abolishing the last competitive pool activity available to our community's fat children. That same day, I saw him tell a father to stop playfully tossing his toddler in the air. "No more playing," he said. "Too dangerous." Dragon Danny mostly likes it when people just kind of lie there, on their backs, very still. Sometimes, when we get to the pool, I have mistakenly believed it was filled with dead people. But this makes sense, as the dead are easy to keep from drowning.

I understand that changes in the economy may have forced the leadership of the YMCA to reduce the number of lifeguard staff and perhaps the quality. This seemed to be the case, at least, on one Saturday in July, when the children's wading pool had no lifeguard for at least thirty minutes. Now that my daughter is no longer permitted to float, we spend much of our time in the wading pool, which is more fun because it is smaller, warmer, and filled with the urine of small children. Several times throughout the day, one of them stumbled and sank quietly to the bottom of the wading pool. My wife, who does not always like other people's children, nevertheless decided to rescue them. You might be wondering, "Where were these drowning children's parents?" Well, between you and me, I believe they were in the larger pool, trying to teach their older children how to go underwater without actually holding their breath, which turns out to require gills.

I could go on. And I will.

Earlier this summer, I opened the restroom door and your most rotund

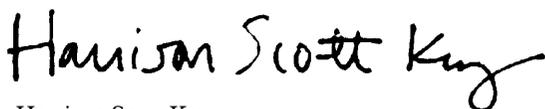
lifeguard – let’s call him El Gordo – was coming out at the same time. He lumbered past me without saying pardon or displaying even the semblance of human civility. I said, “Oh, excuse me!” as politely as possible, and he uttered not a word. In his hand, he had what looked like either the world’s largest burrito or a small baby wrapped in a flour tortilla. It was hard to tell, as I was reeling from the smell of the restroom, which fondly reminded me of a childhood visit to a cattle auction. Given El Gordo’s unusual girth, I am assuming he saves lives in the pool by displacing all of its water. I must admit, it is a progressive strategy.

One final incident. On my very last visit to the pool this summer, I noticed several lifeguards loitering near the pool office. One of them, a tan and twiggy young man wearing the conical straw hat of a Cambodian rice farmer, cursed very loudly. The exact word, if you would like to know for your official YMCA records, was shit. I sometimes say that word, too, and I’ve been known to enjoy saying it. But never in front of customers or children. And so, as a way to help this lifeguard fulfill the Christian mission of the YMCA, I politely asked him to watch what comes out of his piehole. This seemed the best thing to do, particularly in the absence of any apparent supervision or leadership from you and your crackerjack team. The next time he curses in front of my child, dear sir, I am going to wrap him in a tortilla and feed him to El Gordo. Same goes for Dragon Danny and the rest.

Robot Dolphin is on the loose. Look out.

That is all. Thank you for your kind attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Harrison Scott Key". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Harrison Scott Key

The End



POPS

J. Charlotte Jarrett

Outside, the Georgia air hangs with a damp weight. There is the light of a single street lamp in the parking lot and a red fluorescence bleeding from large letters that spell HOSPITAL. The L is going out. A moth hangs in space nearby, contemplating the fitful luminescence. Somewhere in the distance there is the sound of a child crying.

The two figures that exit the hospital are trim and handsome. Men. Brothers-in-law. They wear regular clothes; one, the taller, puts on a hat. They linger by the entrance as if waiting for someone and light cigarettes. The smaller man bends to tighten the laces of a work boot. They say nothing.

Finally, when the glowing butts of the cigarettes have been extinguished, the men turn to face each other. The taller one places a hand on the bent shoulder of the other.

“I’ll always be your brother, John,” he says.

The L flickers off and then back on, casting his face in an urgent hue, the red light inking the lenses of his glasses. John nods, swallows, and then they embrace, the sound of patted backs meeting damp air.

When they separate, the tall man goes to a 1973 Ford Country Squire. Instinctively, he moves to unlock the passenger door, then he stops, keys still in hand, and goes instead to his own side of the car. He lowers his body onto the seat. It is of blue leather to match the exterior, everything waxed and new. Several moments pass before he turns the key in the ignition.

There are three children at home. The eldest is eight. She’ll have bad dreams all her life about this night. The youngest, only four, won’t remember it. He’ll grow up, marry a woman he loves, and start a restaurant. They’ll name their child after his father’s second wife.

When the tall man, my dad—can I call him that yet, before I’m born?—comes home, the kids will be asleep. His sister will be watching them. She’ll know before he says it that Cindy is dead. They’ll embrace, and he’ll send her home to her own family. To her living husband. And then my father will climb the stairs slowly, wake his children, and hold them when they hear.

It will be eight years before the beautiful woman moves in next door. By then, the children will be growing up. They will think seldom of that night, of the sudden dearth in their lives. They will be thinking of prom dates, of smoking

joints in the basement and sneaking beers, of making the swim team.

And then there will be a marriage. He, a widower; she, a divorcée. He will have watched his first wife, his high school sweetheart, die of pneumonia. She will have seen her first husband, her high school sweetheart, in bed with her best friend. And then my parents will meet, fall in love, marry, have my brother, have me.

* * *

Before the wedding, my father spoke to the pastor alone. He needed him to do something. On the day of the ceremony, instead of asking only my mother and dad, the pastor asked each of the four children—my father’s three and my mother’s one—if they accepted the marriage. Each said, reverently, “I do.”

* * *

“Let’s say this bridge collapses, kids,” he’d start. We were inevitably in the big Ford Country Squire, still running after all these years. Air Force One, we kids called it, because it was so huge. Dad thought it was best that we have more metal around us, should there be a crash. (“If that car were in an accident,” he would say, pointing to a convertible or sports car, “it’d crumple like a tin can.” The image sticks.)

“Let’s say this bridge collapses, kids,” he’d start. And then, in his baritone Southern lilt: “There are five things you have to do.”

I’m sure, the first time, we perked up. I’m sure we stopped our travel game of chess, the figures carefully tacked into their rightful squares with magnets, to turn our eager heads to him. Our hero. I’m sure, the first time, we swallowed hard, sensed the untamed water flanking sturdy road, and felt earnest fear.

But soon, we learned the speech. We knew the five things. We mouthed them along with him, hoping he wouldn’t see our sarcasm in the rearview mirror as he explained: “First, unbuckle your seatbelt—which you will have on. Then, go to the top of the car. There’ll be an air bubble. Take a big gulp and then, third, roll down the window. Don’t open the door—the water pressure will be too much. Roll down the window instead.” We stopped here, sometimes, to pantomime the circling motion our small wrists made to churn down the big Ford’s windows. “Go out through the window, find the surface, and then—fifth—swim. Swim toward shore until help arrives.”

Here we knew his bespectacled glance would meet ours in the mirror and

so we grew serious as he added, “And help will arrive.”

I remember Jeremy, two years my senior, asking, “How can you be sure, Daddy?”

Dad met the probing eyes, his own sobered, and said, “Because I’ll always be here.”

★ ★ ★

Every Saturday night, Mom and Dad went on a date. When we were younger it was a chance to play, to tell stories, for the older girls to sneak out with boy-friends, for the boys to skateboard down the long tiled hall.

One of those Saturday nights, for some reason, it was just Jeremy and me. We watched Nickelodeon, ate microwave dinners, and then he told me a secret.

“Daddy has a gun in the house.”

“Nuh-uh,” I said. I knew my daddy wasn’t one of the men they warned us about in school.

“C’mon,” he conspired, and led me to Mother and Dad’s bedroom. There, he lifted the mattress and revealed, laying placid, glinting with the potential for violence, a snubnosed revolver. It rested on the box spring. I stared at it until a shiver originated in my lower back and, climbing the rungs of my ribs, forced me to look away. I looked instead at the underbelly of the mattress Jeremy’s small hand held up. I saw in the mattress the impression of the gun—its stubbed handle, the chamber (loaded?), the short shaft—left there by the years of my father’s weight resting above it.

“But Daddy’s a good man—” I stalled.

“He is, that’s why he wants to protect us.” Jeremy’s gaze was also directed at the imprint of the revolver rather than the thing itself.

When I slept that night, I dreamed first of a masked robber, and then of my father chasing him from our home, brandishing the revolver like a sword.

★ ★ ★

He was born in West Virginia, the son of a coal miner. His father died when my own daddy was only fifteen. A heart attack the day Unity Carbide—his employer, the only employer of Charmco, West Virginia—closed. My father, also slated to mine coal, would go instead to the University of West Virginia on a full scholarship. He wanted to be an astronaut.

Sputnik went up on October 4, 1957. My father's sixteenth birthday. I picture him in the living room of Grandma Charlotte's home, crouched beside the radio, tears matting his eyelashes as they did the day my mother died, while the newscaster told the little West Virginia boy that someone beat him into the sky.

When he went to school, they told him he couldn't be an aerospace student. His eyes were too bad. He could never go to the moon. He took up, instead, civil engineering. "It was okay," he swore years later when I asked. "The guys there were more like me. They liked girls and football." He winked, and I knew then that he was making the best of it. I wouldn't know until I was an adult that he did that all his life.

But he loved learning. He read the almanac for fun, sitting in the living room, drinking Coke, quoting aloud to us occasionally. And when we came home from school he would inquire, hugging us in turn, "Did you ask good questions today?" He wanted us to understand. He wanted us to go to the moon.

* * *

We sat down as a family every night for dinner. He would be at the head of the table, broad-shouldered, six-foot-four. My mother would be at the end, the six of us lined up on both sides in between, an extra leaf put in when Uncle John was joining us. And each night, Dad would deliver the same prompt as we ate the meat and vegetables and warm bread Mother made.

Sometimes, still, when we gather for Christmas or on someone's birthday, one of us kids will suggest, grinning, that we play "What made you smile today?"

Back then, the answers were simple. A date to look forward to; a new book to read; the boys were playing sports. Uncle John got his truck fixed and Jeremy's friend had the full set of Star Wars action figures. I had spent the afternoon in the garden with Mother and knew all the words to the Mr. Rogers theme song.

I don't remember what made Mom and Dad smile. I only know that they did.

* * *

When I was in junior high I slept over at my best friend Janeen's house. I awoke in the middle of the night wanting a glass of water. When I came downstairs, Janeen's father stood in the kitchen. In the dark, I could see that he was wearing blue striped pajamas low on his waist. I tugged at my nightgown. It was pink.

He leaned against the counter, his long arms folded. After a moment, he reached for his beer. The muscle in his forearm flexed. It was covered with curling hairs. He took a step toward me.

“Can’t sleep?”

When he spoke, there was the odor of whiskey on his breath. I didn’t know what it was then; my own father never drank.

He watched me fetch my water. Watched me skirting the far side of the kitchen to keep my distance from him, as I would an untamed animal. His wife had died earlier that year in a car accident. Scalped by the sun visor, she bled to death on the remote back roads of Georgia.

When it happened, I felt only sorrow for my friend. How could she go on without a mother? How could anyone? I wished I could share mine with her, to help.

In the unlit kitchen, I thought I saw Janeen’s father touch the drawstring of his pajama pants as he smiled, his white teeth glinting in the dark like fangs.

Dad always slept on the side of the bed nearest the door. He said he could protect Mom better that way. It never occurred to me to wonder: from what?

When the phone rang that night, a rotary, white once but aged now to yellow, I imagine him snoring awake. I imagine him pushing his maroon sleeping mask up from his eyes, fishing in the dark for the phone, not bothering with his glasses first.

“Hello?” I don’t have to imagine his voice. I know its Southern lilt, cushioned still with sleep.

“Hi, Pops, it’s me—”

But by then, he would be shoving the receiver toward Mom, struggling into his jeans, on his way to get me.

“Pops” was our codeword. Dad established it even before I was born, telling us that, when something was wrong, we could always say that single syllable and he would be there.

It was true.

★ ★ ★

I planned to move to Savannah when I graduated from college. My mother dead, I was ready to be far away. I craved Savannah’s large squares, the bearded oaks, the promise of anonymity. I didn’t want to know anyone. I didn’t want to be known. I ached to escape into silence. To flee the noise of the city where she died.

Dad was to help me move. I didn’t resist his offer. I understood that this was, perhaps for the last time, something he could do for me.

He called me a few days before the move.

“Charlie,” he asked, “are you sitting down?”

I was.

“I have cancer.”

When I was silent for too long he spoke again. “Honey, do you understand?”

The acidity of hospital waiting rooms. The sandpaper eyes after sleepless nights. The copper flavor of fear making my tongue and throat thick. I understood.

The trip to my father’s house was filled with familiar highway and, toward the end, familiar dirt road. I’d driven this route before, to see him and my mother for holiday dinners. To pack up her things for the last time. To hug him on a Thursday night when neither of us wanted to be alone.

And I drove it now because he was sick.

On the way I crossed the bridge over Lake Suzanne. Mindlessly, I recited to myself: One, unbuckle your seatbelt. Two, take a gulp of air from the top of the car. Three, unroll the window. Four, find the surface. Five—what was five? Incredibly, I couldn’t remember. I remembered instead the imprint of the revolver beneath my father’s side of the bed.

At the house I found him sitting in his chair in front of the TV. It was off. His glasses lay on the table beside him so his green eyes were more obvious, more heartbreaking. His hair was all white now. I don’t remember what we said. I don’t remember if I asked good questions. I only remember that I was there with him.

I don’t remember if it was enough.

* * *

The morning we got the call I was asleep on Dad’s couch. My sister woke me. It was four a.m.

“Mom’s taken a turn for the worse,” she said.

That morning the handsome doctor told us that her oxygen intake had dropped; that, surely, if she survived, she would never be coherent again.

“What should we do?” my father asked. It was the first time I ever heard him ask for directions.

“Take her off the life support.” Then, more quietly: “Let her go.”

When we were alone Dad asked us each, all six, if we agreed.

My siblings, one by one, in their own quiet tremors, agreed with the doctor. “I do.” It was time to let her go. Dad asked me, the youngest, last, and I found I couldn’t speak. I knew only that this was all wrong, that no one should ever

ask me this question. That I couldn't kill my mother.

I sobbed into my father's shoulder and whispered, "Pops," again and again.

★ ★ ★

Why does an engineer think of bridges collapsing? Why does a coal miner's son tell his children to ask good questions, why does he care that they understand? Why does a gentle, sweet man sleep each night above the imprint of a steel-cold revolver?

I never knew the tall man outside of the hospital before I was born, telling his dead wife's brother that he would always be there. Meaning it. I never knew that man—couldn't, a decade and a half before my birth—but I know the one he became. I know the one who wanted us, only, to smile each day. To tell each other about it over dinner while we laughed and ate a meal our mother made. The one who gave us five simple steps for surviving the unknown. The one who told us to swim.

Pops.



THE LOOP

Saria M. Canady

“You’re so out of the loop,” my best friend told me over the phone one night. This, after she’d dutifully informed me that Jennifer, also known as Miss Popularity in high school, had just married for the second time and was pregnant with her fourth child — “and the wedding was beautiful!” And Roger, our high school’s dreamy quarterback, had just completed a three-year jail stint for battery. The hunk Steve from biology just “came out” and lives with his new boyfriend in Jersey. Linda and her husband just bought a really big house in the Hamptons — “And did you know he’s about 20 years older than her?” Mike had just started his own law firm — “didn’t know he had it in him.” Oh, and “you know that guy from our chorus class that you had a crush on? He sooo married that girl you didn’t like, or who didn’t like you. Whichever.”

As my friend rattled on, I gave her the occasional interjections of “Get out!” or “Really?” or “You don’t say,” even though I was not at all interested. I just didn’t see how such information about people from our past could add any depth to my life. Why would anyone want to keep up with such things? And how, I asked my friend, does one find the time?

In high school, we all scribbled our home phone numbers in the back of one another’s yearbooks next to the acronym K.I.T., for “keep in touch.” Many of us really intended to. Then, most of us went off to college, made new friends. After college came life and the “real world.” The high school era — including most of the people — became a distant memory, falling victim to the passing thought, I wonder whatever happened to...?

My best friend, though, seemed to K.I.T. with everyone from the decade past. Well, it turns out that she hadn’t exactly kept up with them over all that time, but had reunited with them just last year. They’d all met by chance in the same place. And now they meet there every so often, share pictures and stories of their children, their homes, their vacations, their crazy nights out on the town. She’d even met some new friends.

“You really should join us sometime,” my friend chirped.

But with my crazy work schedule’s squeeze on my social life, I was not convinced I’d have the time to reconnect. I just let her keep me in the loop of all things unimportant.

Finally, though, I decided to go check out to this cool place for myself.

Here is what I found: I saw crazy, shirtless fraternity guys caught up in keg games, girls half-dressed or in compromising positions, lovers kissing, everyone showing off new outfits, hairdos, eyeglasses or cars. There were people selling everything from shoes to sex and broadcasting their thoughts on all things, from how pitifully the Clippers played to how much they hated “George Dubya.” I heard all types of music: gospel, pop, alternative, rap, and something with lyrics that would make Satan blush. People publicly shared personal information, with no worries about it falling into hands of ill intent. For example, Cindy—age 16, single, roller-skating enthusiast, and Justin Timberlake’s biggest fan—wanted all stalkers to know that she’d be meeting her friends at the mall at 2:00 on Friday. She gave her phone number and address, too. I also came across a 25-year-old “future trophy wife,” showing off her modest engagement ring and calling herself a “psychological transsexual,” whatever that meant. She added that she “put the sex in Essex.”

As I wandered about the foreign territory, I ran into a few current and some old friends from high school and college, and I found myself suddenly immersed in the loop. Wow, Shelly’s put on a few pounds. Goodness, Marcus is still as wild as he was in high school. Beth still looks the same. Melissa always did want to open a child care center. Lord, I thought Sharon had fallen off the face of the planet. There was so much going on. Before I knew it, I’d been in the loop for more than two hours, this “place for friends,” that promised to connect and reconnect people.

It was, of course, the social-networking site MySpace. I had heard of such sites, but wrote them off as time-wasters for people with nothing better to do: people in their teens and early twenties, nosey people, people craving attention, people in search of love, people who like to embarrass themselves on the world’s stage.

I was not one of those people.

Months went by after my visit to that place. I had almost forgotten about it until I got a phone call from one of my old college roommates, whom I had not seen or talked to in close to a year. She told me about a cruise she had just taken with this really great guy, who “might just be the one.” Her insipid descriptions of her boyfriend, the sky, the water, and even the food left much to be desired in terms of visualization, but I figured it all must have been quite breathtaking, since in her excitement, she kept stopping mid-sentence to catch her breath.

“Hey,” I said finally, “why don’t you e-mail me the pictures from your trip?” She paused and swallowed, and I could hear the question-mark look on her face.

“Why don’t you just get on MySpace or Facebook?” she asked. “I posted all the pictures up there already.”

E-mail was now archaic. I really was officially out of the loop.

After our conversation, I ventured back to that strange place — apparently foreign only to me — to check out the pictures from her cruise. I found her smiling and holding onto her boyfriend, sun in their eyes, the ocean as their backdrop. Click. YOU MUST BE LOGGED INTO SEE THIS PAGE, warned my screen. Oh, what the heck, I thought. I guess I can create an account. What could it hurt?

I typed in a few things about myself. Created a password. Uploaded a picture that displayed my signature wide grin. Creating my online profile took about 30 minutes. I sent out a few friend requests, as they’re called in the social-networking world, just to let some friends know I was there so that we could be online buddies, too. Then I signed off and told this brave new world I’d visit another day.

In the span of 24 hours, I had a host of online friends, including people I had all but forgotten about — all at my fingertips. My best friend, my former roommate, and several other friends and associates had left short comments on my page like, “It’s about time you got here!” or “Finally, you made it to the dark side!” or “Hi! I corrupted you! So glad to see you here in Stalkerville! LOL.”

I also was bombarded with messages from men all over the world who suddenly wanted to get to know me, and perverts “turned on” by my smiling profile picture.

Perverts aside, both MySpace and Facebook began to prove rather useful. I couldn’t believe how easy it was to connect and keep up with everyone — not to mention the convenience. No time for a 10-minute phone conversation? Just drop friends a quick line on one of the sites. Want to get the girls together for a night out? An all-inclusive online message beats four or five separate phone calls on a busy day. And at any moment of the day, I could sign onto either of the sites and instantly be updated on every friend’s thoughts, locations, and life happenings — even if I didn’t care. Lisa has the new Mariah Carey album on repeat. Alison is so upset with her husband right now! Kendall is eating ice cream and watching “Desperate Housewives.” Jessica is relaxing by the pool. Brandon is wondering why this Hooters waitress is pregnant. The cyber version of reality TV.

MySpace, Facebook, and other social-networking sites have certainly changed the dynamics of friendships — for the worse, some would argue, and I can see their point. This new ability to stay connected has, in a way, disconnected us. I can’t remember the last time I picked up the phone to chat with certain old friends or colleagues or even some family members, but I do speak with them regularly online. I used to get calls from buddies and loved ones who just wanted to hear

my voice or make sure I was still alive. Those calls are now very rare. I, too, once made such checkups, but I suppose my subconscious deems them unnecessary. Everyone's online updates answer my questions before I have to ask.

But I miss the physical contact with the people in my life. I once found myself exchanging Facebook messages with a friend for more than 45 minutes. It wasn't until later that I realized the problem with that: he and I lived five minutes apart. We could have just as easily met to talk over lunch. Pre-cybersocializing, I would have been more inclined to go knock on his door than to pick up the phone, even.

It seems my relationships have become abbreviated. My best friends are now my BFFs, and instead of hearing and seeing each other laugh, we read LOL or imagine them really ROFL. I suppose that's a price we pay for a little modern convenience. So, maybe I haven't actually talked to my friends in weeks, but I can tell you exactly how they're all doing.

I'm never out of the loop.



NIGHTLY BASE LIFE

J. Austin Floyd

Lagostas. Twenty-four of them moving in slow motion, the pink and purple rubber bands holding their claws together bright in contrast to the muddy browns and reds of their shells. The cold stuns them, according to Lobster Ron, whom I'll be calling to tell how many we need for tomorrow. I can't imagine it being much colder in the walk-in cooler than the New England waters where he gets his stock, so I'm not sure I believe the part about them being stunned. Funny thing about that guy: when I first started this stint as a part-time manager, I asked one of the full-time managers when I should call Ron to place the order. All I got was a blank stare. It's always Lobster Ron.

"Salsicha, you come on! No good to stay in too long." Claudio smiles, his front teeth jagged from last week's attempt to catch a bus pan with his mouth. The walk-in went out two days ago, so large bags of dry ice are scattered, smoldering among the vats of black beans and raw hamburger meat, making the whole place look like the set of a B horror flick. Without the hum of the fans it's even more unsettling. The entire Whiskey's staff is on a buddy system when going in the walk-in. I think the exact managerial reasoning was "We don't need to get sued because some dumbass suffocated in the cooler."

"I know, Claud-jo." Claud-jo is the only way I can approximate the Brazilian pronunciation of Claudio. "Obrigado, thank you." I glance at the lobsters, wondering if one could survive in the Charles River if I liberated it from its fate as lobster dinner or lunchtime lobster roll (fries and slaw; sorry, no substitutions). I reassure myself that as long as a) I'm not having conversations with the lobsters, or b) not calling myself the Crustacean Crusader, I'm probably okay, if not perfectly normal. Right?

"Salsicha! Come on! Fast, fast, or maybe you choke, and then I'm sad because you die and give me no more free Red Bulls!" He loves his Red Bull. The cooks have dubbed me "Salsicha," which is the Portuguese name for Scooby-Doo's pal Shaggy. But it doesn't mean shaggy. Because we are long and thin, we are called "sausage." I'm vegetarian.

The head cook once said to me, "Hey, Buddy, I think maybe you gay." When I asked why, he replied, "Because you no eat meat. Real men not wimpy like you."

My response using his faulty logic: "I think maybe you gay."

“Why you think that?”

“Because you drive a scooter.”

“Fuck you, Buddy.”

I then asked him for a ride home. He turned me down.

My radio crackles. “Hey, boss?” Dan, the doorguy. A self-proclaimed Masshole, not a word ending in R in his vernacular. He has a youthful grin that flashes usually at the crudest jokes. “Can you come watch the front?” I tell Claudio boa noite (good night) and obrigado (thank you), and ask him to repeat the message to the rest of the cooks.

“Sure, Dan.” I make my way upstairs, out of the dank basement, and into the bar. Whiskey’s is the kind of place where the owners probably spent tens of thousands of dollars to make it look like a Texas shithole, right on Boylston Street in the Back Bay area of the city. It’s complete with rusty license plates, strings of little lights with translucent red chili peppers on them, and a giant wooden pig’s ass that has been the target of numerous attempted thefts. The scent of stale beer and wings lingers just behind the mixture of cologne, perfume and disinfectant. I’m here because they hired me on the spot after I’d spent a week filling out job applications. It was supposed to be some quick money, a pit stop. But after a few months, they offered me the management gig, and I took it. I keep pretending that I don’t feel the bar’s gravity tugging at my aspirations for a career that doesn’t revolve around barbecued meat and overpriced booze.

Two of the bartenders, Alecia and Kristen, wave and smile at me from behind the bar, where they’re dancing to The Jacksons’ “Blame it on the Boogie” in their Red Sox shirts and daisy dukes, the required uniform. The rule for proper dukes length seems to be that something along the lines of two inches shorter than what would adequately cover the wearer’s ass is almost short enough. When I make it to the door, Dan breathes a sigh of relief. He tosses me the customer counter and flashlight, and then bolts. Watching the door discourages me. Dan the Masshole is qualified to man the door because of his towering size, knowledge of all fifty states’ ID safety features, and intimidating demeanor. I’m in no way aggressive and have to consult the book for most out-of-state IDs. But I have keys to the DJ booth and combinations to the safes.

I wait a minute and radio Dan. “You all right, man?”

“Yeah, you know, sometimes you gotta go.” I keep it up with the small talk. He gives one-word answers and then finally pleads for me to stop talking to him or he’ll never be able to go because it’s like I’m right in the bathroom with him.

The hours between 11 p.m., when the kitchen closes, and 1:45 a.m., when

the bar closes, always drag by. Sometimes I can kill time by calling my girlfriend, but she's almost always exhausted from grad school, the reason we moved to Boston in the first place. So, I turn to other distractions. Much too quickly, I found the limit of lousy music videos' entertainment value. Even lower is the limit on how many times I can listen to a group of drunks screaming the lyrics to "Pour Some Sugar on Me." Luckily, I have to go back in the kitchen for server cashouts, where the music will be muffled enough to ignore. Dan returns just in time for me to miss the second round of taking the bottle and shaking it up.

Cashout time may as well be known as time-to-bitch-about-your-night time.

How was your night? Shitty.

Any problems with the kitchen ticket times? Yeah, apps took forever.

Decent tables tonight? You made the seating chart and I had the worst section.

Are you a dick to your customers, too, or just me? Being a dick to my tables could get me fired.

Management (the real management) decided to make everyone take an SCDT (Specialty Coffee Drink Test. They love their acronyms) despite the fact that our coffee tastes terrible regardless of how much booze you add. Christine, a short waitress with cheap blonde highlights, reads over her list while waiting for her ride home.

"Doesn't Keoke Coffee sound like it should be an Indian drink?"

Jamie, another server, retorts, "It's a little more P.C. to say Native American."

"It does kinda sound like a tribal name." One of the new cocktail waitresses; I haven't tried to memorize her name yet. If I wait a week, she'll probably quit or be fired.

Christine, seemingly thrilled to be chiming in with a fun fact, announces, "Yeah, like, the Cherry-oh-keys!" She's completely serious.

The radio, my savior, pops and hisses again. "Got a problem outside the bah!" It's a weeknight; what trouble could there be? I shove the envelopes of cash in the drop box. Outside, I find Laura, the resident squatter whose perch is a utility meter box a few feet from our front door. She's screaming at a guy I just call Hustler, a big, middle-aged man who's always in a button-up shirt a size too big and carrying a gym bag. God knows what's in it. Gotta hand it to him for being the best backwards walker I've ever seen. He negotiates curbs, pedestrians and storm drains while maintaining a very uncomfortable level of eye contact during his spiel about donating money to whatever cause he thinks you might sympathize with. I much prefer One Arm Pushup Man, who will do fifty one-arm pushups in less than a minute for the highest bidder, and Down

Payment Guy, who always needs help with a “down payment on a chicken sandwich.” I’ve given him enough to pay off several chicken mortgages. I’ve never seen him with a sandwich.

Laura seems young, late teens or early twenties, but it’s hard to tell a vagrant’s age. Her hair falls in thin brown clumps that she tucks behind her ears as she feigns nervousness asking for change, but only if the potential charity is a stranger. If it’s someone she knows, like one of our servers or bartenders, she flashes a smile and asks, “How was your night? D’ya get any extra change? I know you guys hate those dollar coins.”

She’s not so friendly now.

“What the fuck is your bitch ass problem? This is our corner!” Laura, despite being half Hustler’s size, is in his face. With one hand she’s wildly gesturing between the milk crate she sits on and the gangly guy who’s her boyfriend, and she’s waving her other hand in Hustler’s face. Our sister restaurant hired Gangly for a week, but fired him for being lazy.

“Oh, okay, your corner? Your corner? How ‘bout this?” Hustler kicks her crate out into the street. “Put your corner over there and get yo’ skank ass run over by a cab!” I stifle a laugh. Gangly perks up, starts yelling, and it’s immediately a cacophony punctuated by mother–, son of a– and piece of–. Dan and I stand back. He’s smiling, I’m bored; if it didn’t start inside, it’s not our responsibility unless it gets out of hand. Right on cue, Hustler slings his bag to the ground and pulls back his fist. Then Dan’s on him, Gangly’s on Dan, and I’m about to try and pull Gangly off, but Laura catches my eye.

“Don’t you fuck with my boyfriend!” She’s holding an empty Arizona Iced Tea bottle by its neck. Green tea blend, her favorite. She swings it in a wide arc and smashes the bottom end on a parking meter, little bits of glass showering into the storm drain like change. She jabs the jagged end toward us with a growl. A white Crown Vic swerves around the crate in the road, but it’s not a cop. Just a cab.

Freeze frame for a moment. I’m 23, helping run a meat market bar, facing off with a hobo over a claim on who gets to work the corner. I took karate for five years, earned a black belt. I must have missed the class where Master Brown taught how to disarm psychotic panhandlers wielding broken bottles. Maybe if I ask nicely Laura will trade the bottle for some big red punching pads.

“Laura!” Nothing tough about my voice.

“Get outta my way! No one gets away with that shit!”

“Drop the bottle.”

“No! I’m gonna cut that bitch! I’m gonna stick him!”

“And if you do, you’re gonna go to jail. Put it down. You don’t really want to do that.” I raise my hands in front of me, palms open toward her. The soft, pink skin would slice so easily, bleed so much, but so would my face. I think about the time I tried to catch a falling pint glass, instead slamming my hand down into broken pieces. When I lifted it and extended my fingers, a wound spread wide like eyelids showing white bone and tendons first, then gushing blood. I wince at the thought but keep my palms up, vulnerable and naked.

“YesIfuckingdo!”

“Okay, fair enough. You do, I get that. But I really don’t want you to. I don’t want to deal with the Boston police right now. You like me, right? Don’t ruin my night.” She takes another half step toward me, but her resolve wavers and the bottle drops an inch or two. Feet shuffle behind me, but my eyes are pinned on Laura.

“Get the fuck outta he-yah.” Dan. Feet shuffle again, Gangly stumbles by me and past Laura, then turns around with his nostrils flaring. A pungent mix of sweat and cigarette smoke wafts quickly behind him. Laura tosses the remnants of the bottle in a green trash barrel like it’s just a piece of crumpled paper. They cross the street, pick up her crate and head for the Prudential Center building.

I relax a little and turn to Dan. Hustler throws his backpack over his shoulder, then bellows, “I know where you sleep! I know both of you sleep!” I’d never considered that in the homeless world you probably know where everyone sleeps. It strikes Dan and me as funny, and we laugh, both trying to not sound relieved.

“Fuck you guys, too. I know where you work.”

“Yeah, well, we know where you work, too, asshole,” Dan shoots back.

And I laugh a little more, turn and walk inside then head downstairs to the walk-in to grab a bottle of water, this time all by myself. I watch the lobsters and wonder if their night was as shitty as mine. At least I didn’t get stabbed. There’s always that.

