

Alphabet Soup: A Novel

By

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"There's a bit of magic in everything, and then some
loss to even things out."

-Lou Reed

I'd sleep on the sofa underneath the window so the sun could make its way through and soak over me. I worked nights at the NECCO candy factory making the *Clark Bar* and the *Sky Bar*, and I never slept an entire night or an entire day, just sun soaked naps here and there when I wasn't working, or when I wasn't up in front of the typewriter trying to become a writer. It was a bad time to be a writer. Everyone and their mother was a writer and it seemed that the urgency had left the art; that it had become just a hollow, championed act as sex had become to a couple entering their fifth decade of marriage. Nothing new was being created and if nothing new is being created then what's the point? And if there is no point, then it can't be interesting. That is my burden; I am bored with my fellow man. I bore easily, because the people around me feel so comfortable with being average, with being everyday, humdrum nobodies. I was a nobody, but I never imagined I'd stay that way. Plus, a man needs some time to be a nobody, it builds character. A man needs a period in his

life where if he died no one would notice. Fame and celebrity come with a terrifying responsibility, and knowing that wars would still be fought without you, and people would still act cruelly toward one another without you is a great relief, somehow makes you feel less responsible. It puts into perspective the insignificance of your life, how powerless you really are, and in an odd way it gives you purpose and some hope, because then you know that you must try to make something of yourself, hammering your way into history, tooth and nail, and in my case by way of an out of date art, and you can't rely on the love of others to do so. Too much love is the decomposition of these people, it is the very reason people can be so sinister. We like the blame non-love as being the reason for evil, but it is the exact opposite. Too much love is the problem. Everybody needs some time to be a nobody.

I read the most recent rejection letter under the light in the doorway of my apartment building. The ultraviolet light made the words hard to read. The note said: *You are not what we are looking for right now, but*

thank you for your submission. They never made it seem that it was the quality of work that was the problem, only that it wasn't the right time. In a world full of nothing but time, it was never the right time. I crumpled the letter up and threw it in the wastebasket near the stair set. I knew writers who kept every rejection letter as sort of a badge of honor, the way a veteran flashes his wound, proud of it in a way, and I could never understand that. If I were to keep all my rejection letters, firstly I would have mounds of them that reached the ceiling, and secondly I would just read them again and again, until I knew all the words by heart. I'd dwell on them and then I'd curtail my writings to appease the publishers and that is the quick, luscious death of a writer. I would have to just keep submitting things until it was the right time. When I got up to my room it was very cold because the seal on the window had broken and was leaking air into the room. I sat on the bed with my jacket and scarf on. I could only do that for about five minutes before I grew restless. I looked at my bookshelf and marveled at how wonderful it looked, some of the world's greatest books lived there, but when I opened one to read I only got a few sentences finished before my mind began to wonder. I closed the book and decided to pay

a visit to my favorite restaurant. The food wasn't particularly good, and it wasn't an exceptionally nice place, but it fit me just fine. There was a waitress named Wendy that I was fond of. Like the restaurant she wasn't particularly good looking or exceptionally nice, but she looked good to me. She had a very tight ass. She wore these black slacks that hugged her ass with an unrelenting grip, and I'd watch it as she walked away from me. Wendy was a woman you could grab a hold of and never run out of places to squeeze. She was your very own orange tree, and they dangled in the sunlight, beautiful and firm. The place was called *the Iowa*, and I had learned never to trust a place like that when you could see the cooks through the metal windows laughing and grunting like pigs, but there was never a better place to get a cup of coffee at an odd hour of night when sleeping was out of the question. Sometimes when I didn't feel like going home, the thought of it being too lonely; I'd go the Iowa after the NECCO factory and watch the sun come up over the hills through the thick, reinforced plastic windows, distorting it just enough to forget what city I was in.

I always requested to be seated in Wendy's section, and she'd come over and sit on my lap, while taking my

order and twirling her pitch black hair around her
dishwater bloated finger. That night it was just me and a
delirious old drunk in a red woolen cap with his ears
tucked into it, but I could see Wendy making her way over
to me. Wendy had class, she wasn't always classy, but she
had it, saved up for the moments where you needed it most.
She carried herself not like a waitress in a broken down
diner, but like a privileged woman working the Polo Lounge
in Beverly Hills. She reminded me of a flower caught in a
bed of weeds. I could of easily saw her as the arm piece on
some big shot horseplayer, and she'd be good to him, always
doing her makeup for him, encouraging him to bet big, but
she was dealt a bad hand, and she ended up in the Iowa
instead of the Polo Lounge. I sat at my usual table and
Wendy brought out my usual order. I was a creature of habit
if there ever was one. And as I ate I tried to write
something, but nothing came. The Iowa was my Dingo Bar, the
bar in France where Hemingway wrote parts of *The Sun Also
Rises*, but nothing ever came out of me until I was in front
of my old machine in my room overlooking the street, a
street that I bruised with footsteps, every day, back and
forth between there and the NECCO factory. The four walls
of my room felt better to me than it did to a boxer to feel

the crunch of a nose under the knockout punch. Some have told me that the four walls could be daunting, almost claustrophobic, but to me they were familiar friends. I depended on them.

The sun was almost entirely up when I left Wendy at the Iowa. I felt like I should go home and write something. I talked about it so damn much that if I didn't write every day I felt guilty. The way I talked it would have seemed that writing was no struggle at all, that it just came from me like water from a faucet, but the truth was I had to wrestle each line out, for I was searching for the golden sentence, the sentence that would launch a beautiful book, but night after night it never came. I was having an especially difficult time now, for I was very mixed up. For the last three and one half years I had been apart of an affair. It was an affair of the heart and I made myself into a dog because of it. The sexual affair had just been going on these past two weeks, and I found myself so mixed up that I could barely eat let alone write. In the past no matter what happened in my life, good or bad, I understood it. If it was miserable, I knew it was, and I could write about it, but now I found that I was too caught up to remove myself enough to live it again in words. While

everyone felt pain, the writer had the burden of having to latch onto it, embrace it and remember it, and then live it all over again, hanging on every word, using nothing but the alphabet to make the reader feel it too. In my case, I believe that you have multiple minds: your brain, your heart, your gut, and your balls, and to make it in a world as ugly as this one you must use them all. The problem is, most of the time they are in conflict with one another, and it leaves you a foolish mess with bunk to show for yourself, only what's left of your pride after you've given your heart to someone with nothing but hope that they don't throw it away.

When I got back to my place I undressed and got into bed. My eyes were closed, but the brain behind them was killing itself with thought, as though my skull was keeping it prisoner. I thought about June. I thought about the three and a half years I had spent chasing her. I looked at my timepiece and I could see that it was almost seven o'clock, so I imagined pure blackness and spoke to my brain, "It's time to stop for tonight." Now only flashes of

June's face edged their way into my head. I rolled on my back and looked up toward the ceiling and lit a cigarette. I thought about if she was sitting in bed thinking of me the way I was about her. June lived an hour and a half plane ride away from me, but sitting in bed alone made it feel like oceans were between us. When we were together it seemed as though there were tiny magnets in each of hearts that were trying to reach one another through our chests. When we were apart, instead of quieting down and forgetting they only fought harder to break through the rib cage and find each other, but for some reason June and I fought it, and we took how we felt and we stuffed it back into our hearts, but it didn't all quite fit, the way once you take something out of its package it never fits the same way again. My heart was like a bird that I had to pat on the head to keep from chirping. She made it dance. She was the reason I whistled as I walked down the boulevard, and she was the reason I stood up straight.

I never liked to put too much of myself in the hands of a woman. If you expose yourself fully, it is only asking to be hurt. I let little pieces of myself out at a time, and I kept certain things just for myself, for when a woman left me they couldn't take it all, something was still

mine, the things that no one can get at or take away from you, and that makes it easier. When I think of Van Gogh cutting his ear off for a prostitute he hardly knew I envy him in a way for having the moxie to give his all, or perhaps he knew that she would never be able to take his paintings away and in comparison an ear didn't matter. A woman had never asked for an ear, but I can't be sure I wouldn't have given it to her in my younger days. Now, I was an artist and women needed to have their place, but when it came to June I felt at ease, and it was nice to write about love, instead of about wanting it. I could write about June and how good she was. Good was something much harder to find than beautiful, or interesting, or even intelligent. Good was the struggle, because so many beautiful women were bad and not just beautiful woman, all women and men too. Sometimes June could remind me of how bad I was, but she emitted enough light for the both of us.

Before I met June I was alone. Being alone is also one of those things that are two-faced, because people like to blame loneliness for all sorts of misfortunes: madness,

suicide, what have you, but in all my time alone I never wanted to kill myself. I didn't even feel lonely; I liked it, it made me feel tough, like I didn't need anybody. Despite my trying, I knew I wasn't a very tough man. I had been in some bloody fights, some of which almost ended me in a dark and vicious way, but I never had the spine for it. And I didn't measure myself by how many fights I'd won, but by being alone in a cold room, or sitting alone at the bar; that made me feel mean, impervious. I hung around in the bars so much that I became known to the other patrons. There was Mickey who dealt cards out of a rotten deck he always carried with him in a brown, rain stained polyester overcoat. He knew every card game there was, and the others often joked about how in a past life he must have been a dealer in Las Vegas, but he was a cheat, and before I knew it he'd taken thirty-five dollars from me. Because he was such an old fox you couldn't stay mad at him, and he had endless stories about his New Orleans days, some of them true, others extravagant tales, but either way they always left you with the feeling of confetti behind your ears, and an image of Bourbon street that rivaled Heaven.

There was Bill who had eyes like Lee Marvin. I never saw him without a cloud of cigarette smoke twirling in

front of his face. He smoked this very special brand, Mangalore Ganeesh Beedies, some dirt cheap cigarette from India, and he would frequent Pakistani smoke shops to get them. When I offered him one of my Camels his face recoiled in absolute disgust, as if I was ingesting pure Ammonium nitrate by smoking them. He told me his Mangalore Ganeesh Beedies contained no chemicals, and it shocked him how hopped up American cigarettes could make people. "I watch them like zombies." He'd tell me. "People suck at the butts of cigarettes like slaves. Don't let them smoke for a day and watch what happens, they come apart like goddamn junkies."

There was Francis who had a reputation for being pig headed. The alleyway behind the bar had more of Francis's blood on it than it did asphalt, for every night he'd pick the biggest, meanest, hairiest guy in there and egg him on until they found their way out there. Francis never won his fights, but he'd smile a bloody, toothless smile as he stumbled back to the table. I'd ask him, "Why do you do this to yourself? What's the point?" and he'd tell me there was no point; it was a habit for him just like it was a habit for anyone else to chew their fingernails. He said it was healthier than smoking or drinking, which he also did,

but that was Francis; there was nothing you could do to stop him. He'd been fighting as long as he could remember. As a boy in the neighborhood if you didn't fight back, you just got beaten down, he'd tell me. The fights were never over anything, it was just a matter of the strong versus the weak, take it or give it. He even tried to brawl with me the first night I went into the bar... Walking into a bar for the first time is a particular thing, everybody's eyes are on you, as if they all were little flies with ninety-six eyes each, and nobody's nice. It seems as though they'd known each other since childhood and they built the bar together, brick by brick, and their initials were carved somewhere in the sidewalk out front, and now you, a stranger decided to barge in unannounced and uninvited to eavesdrop and steal. When Francis came over to me it would have been out in the alleyway or right there on the barstool, I didn't have a choice, but it was thanks to the barmaid, Tuesday, calling him off that my blood didn't end up apart of that road too.

Tuesday was a woman whose beauty was driven out of her by cigarette smoke, running mascara from salty tears, pills and booze. She was always at the bar as if when the new owner bought it, the old owner threw her in as an added

bonus, but the truth was she just didn't have any place else to go. And for such a lonely woman she was always able to make me feel better about June, the way you can give advice but never take any. Tuesday wasn't that much older than I was, but her hard life had given her a motherly capability, even though she was unable to have children of her own, and when I'd say, "Tues, I'm giving up on her." she'd say to me, "Luke, baby, did Don Juan give up?" and I'd say, "No, but it drove him mad searching for the perfect woman." and she'd just laugh and bring another round of beer out to Mickey, Bill, Francis, and me.

The fact that I was a writer was irrelevant to the boys at the bar. They mocked me and thought only homosexuals wrote poetry. It was irrelevant to my boss at the NECCO factory; it was irrelevant to everyone on the earth except June. She had this way of understanding everything I wrote, even if it was about her. In the time we hadn't been together I'd written many a poem about what I'd imagine her and I to be. Sometimes it wasn't very flattering and instead of getting up and slashing at my

face with her fingernails, like other women had done to me, she could see beneath the words and understand their true meanings. Women didn't always understand me, and I had the cigarette burns to prove it. I marveled at June, because while so many had just seen the greasy skin covered in hair, she saw something else, I don't know what it was, but it was something besides what I saw in the mirror every morning and I was thankful for that. A lot of women hung around me long enough to realize I wasn't the artist they envisioned when they saw me put on a poetry reading. Despite my extravagant stories, most of them true, I am a simple man who likes nothing more than a bowl of soup in the winter time. It is everyone else that always seems to get me into trouble, and the women in my life were like grains of salt, memorizing to look at and terrible to put in your mouth.

I once was sleeping with a woman the size of a pygmy, her little feet and hands repulsed me, but I was lonely and it felt good to have a body to lean up against, tiny as it was. She was damaged because of her height and I was damaged because of everything else. Her temper was about as short as her stature, and she always had something to say. Sue was a fitting name for her, but she went by Sue Anne as

a half-assed pseudonym for she was a writer, too. I knew it was a mistake. Artists should never sleep with someone who practices the same art as them, because even though she lied through perfect teeth, I knew she doubted my ability as a poet, and she hated how I kissed. My lips pressed up against hers, just two dried lips, punchy and abrasive. I'd suck on her neck like a mosquito, but she'd tell me, "Harder, harder. Suck harder." So I sucked and nibbled and I made her neck look like a bruised apricot. What really got to me about her was the way she talked. She fed into the act of a writer. Her favorite word was *contrived*; the most overused, flabby, hollow adjective in the English language, and she used it like a school teacher, with fire under her dress, but cobwebs between her thighs; that sexually stunted yearning that English teachers have in their voice when they use words like *contrived*.

I had had about enough of her when we sat in bed and tried to watch a film on the television. She was mad at me for a reason I still don't know, and she kept making noises, distracting me from the film. It was one of my favorites, *The Lost Weekend* with Ray Milland and Jane Wyman. After fifteen minutes I got up out of bed and grabbed her coat and bag, "Get up." I said to her. "What do

you mean?" she said. "I mean, get up. I'm taking you home."
"Why?" she asked. "Because I want to write and I can't have
you here." "But you've written with me here before." "Jesus
Christ, not tonight." I went out and started up the car.
She lived on the other side of town, twenty or twenty-five
minutes away going top speeds and I was in no mood to sit
next to her during the car ride. As soon as I dropped her
off, I telephoned June to come over and spend the night,
and by the time I got home she was already there, and I
never saw Sue again.

It was a few days before June was coming into town to
visit me when I drove up to a lookout that allowed you to
see the entire city. To see a whole city makes you feel
like a giant, and as you drive further and further back
into it the smaller and smaller you became, until you were
finally a monkey clashing cymbals again, helpless, wrapped
up in the fist of the metropolis. The lights from the city
made the stars almost completely invisible, but as far away
as I was you could make out the Milky Way galaxy and if you
squinted with the best kind of eyes there was Mars as a

small red blurb. June had lived out in that city all her life, before she moved away two years earlier, and I looked in the direction of where her house used to be and it was a lonely feeling knowing that the only person I wanted to be in that city wasn't, and it made it seem to be an empty, sad place, like a lumbering beast, and the millions of sparkling street lights were its yellow teeth, grinning at me.

June had taken many lovers since we were apart, which was natural seeing that she was a woman who needed a man... or perhaps even a woman, if the circumstance presented itself, and most of the time they were miscreants, junkies, and real bores. I never understood how a woman as alive as June could spend her days with such lame ducks. I think it was because she wanted to help them, a real humanitarian she was, always trying to fix the unfixable, always searching for a way to do some good, because for some reason or another she thought she was naturally bad. She'd go on and on about how terrible she really was inside and for me to just wait, because one day she was just going to do something so awful. In those moments I felt like June was five or six years old, and the more realistic she was trying to be the more romantic her words became. The truth

of the matter was June was so low on herself because out of all those men she tried to save; none of them were looking for a savior. She'd love them with her whole heart (most of it anyway, always leaving some room for me) and when it became too much for her she'd do as anyone would, she'd leave them, but she'd take with her the guilt of them broken and alone. There is no easy way to leave a person, but for all the love she gave to them, they didn't give any to her, just the illusion of love, just the pretty words that come with it, but never the whole thing, and that satisfied her need for a while. There is such a thing as bad love, and they gave it to her, and because of it June wasn't good alone. She was victim of too much love. It was all she'd ever known and now she looked for it in all the wrong places.

Women were no trouble for the boys at the bar. Mickey had been married three times and all three women left him at his poorest and lowest. "Women are good that way." he'd tell me with a cockeyed truthfulness, "They always wait to leave 'till you need them most." The truth for Mickey was

not the truth for everyone else. His advice came like kidney stones, bloody and jagged, but better out than in. The way he told it, it seemed as though when he married a girl he put his wild gambling days behind him, and became a quiet and sullen man, a man any woman would be lucky to love. But without him saying so, we all knew that he had driven the women away with his drinking, gambling, and cheating. You never knew if he was telling you the truth or if he was just dragging you along by your ear. "I got married because I thought it was the thing I was supposed to do. In those days you didn't have a choice. A bachelor was worse than a con. I had the disadvantage of being both." He said with a gravel-on-a-tin-roof laugh. Mickey liked to blame everything in his past on the times in which they happened. A lot of old timers relished in nostalgia, but Mickey loved living in these times. He loved being able to reach back into his bag of stories, a handful for each decade, and tell about the things he had to do without, and for each stage of his life there was a woman to go with it. He said he was responsible for more broken hearts than the First World War.

I had never seen Bill with a woman or for that matter even talk about a woman, except his mother, who he hated.

Bill was his own functioning organism. He didn't need the assistance of another person, man or woman. He only interacted with Mickey, Francis, and I because he thought we were interesting enough to survey. His posture was very straight and ridged, and his arm was always raised with the butt of his cigarette a few inches away from his thin, pale lips. He wore a three piece tweed suit that was tailored to his tall, lanky figure. To look at him you saw a man on the straight and narrow, but to know him was to know a truly incendiary man. It was as if that suit put a coat of normalcy over him, when he was anything but. The suit housed the madman inside, and to the outside it was a cool, calculating exterior. I'm not sure a woman was capable of loving a man like Bill. He had grown immune to love; he looked at it the same way he looked at the American cigarette smokers, like slaves. People in love walked around with a distorted view of the world, a much better view, and to him it was silly to look at life with your heart instead of your eyes. Bill had a very simple philosophy, he believed that everything had conditions, nothing was absolute, and nothing was ever yours to keep.

Francis had a different woman every night, but they were the undesirables, the bar-tramps, and when he couldn't

get those he'd find a prostitute. It was all the same to him. He once told me when he was very drunk and the wounds from his last beating still looked like split orange peels on his cheekbones that he had loved a woman named Phyllis, who was forty-three when he was nineteen, and he half-laughed when he told me of how it had become the town scandal. He had her named tattooed in faded black ink that had turned a shade of green on his right arm. They shared three months together during his pass through Albuquerque, New Mexico. He stopped there while making his way through the southern half of the United States; he explained it as a man getting to know his country. Francis had lost his virginity when he was twelve years old to his mother's girlfriend, but Phyllis was the first woman he loved, and he spent every day of that summer in bed with her, experiencing for the first time what it felt like to be truly fulfilled. When there is no one to love or lust over there is still a sense of hurt, a sense of emptiness that enters your heart and Francis felt that for many years until Phyllis came along and filled him with something else. He didn't feel overly wonderful, but the dull, constant pain was no longer there and he felt good.

Only proving once again Bill's theory, not long after the weather began to change Phyllis died from complications due to pneumonia while Francis sat at her bedside and watched. He stayed for her funeral and then caught a train eastward until he reached the Atlantic Ocean. After that he traveled all through Europe, spent some time in Paris. "Did you visit the Dingo bar?" I asked him. "No. Paris is putrid. There's dog shit everywhere you fucking step." To him traveling thousands of miles to sit in a bar where an eventual suicide case once sat was insane, especially when there was a bar every ten feet in any direction. He never mentioned Phyllis to me again, but after he had told me about her I pitied him in a way, because here I was, the most mixed up I had ever been, and over a woman too, but at least I had a sense of whatever happened I'd still be able to go on. Francis was permanently disfigured, and although he was the craziest man I ever knew, he still hurt like an ordinary man, and after all he had seen since, a part of him died back there in Albuquerque.

I was doing a poetry reading at a place called *Main Street Antiques* the night June came into town. Main Street Antiques was an oddity; a real jewel buried within the trash heaps. If you looked out of your window at the city on the right kind of night it would look like a ruined town after a firebombing, a toppled juggernaut bleeding to death, or perhaps a city one thousand years into the future when humans had finally grappled at and picked apart every last beautiful thing, but Main Street had somehow survived the bomb. Its collectibles were eerie in a way as if each toy had been plucked from the hands of a child, who had now been long dead. You couldn't help but think of morbid things like that when you went in there. The walls were decorated with decapitated dolls, cracked plates with pictures of Marilyn Monroe and James Dean on them, full sized plaster molds of Betty Boop, aftershave in glass bottles shaped like Revolutionary War pistols, and wristwatches and screwdrivers with naked ladies on them. It smelled the way your grandmother's dresser drawers smelled; a musky, damp odor you could taste on your tongue and it always seemed to be quiet, with a particular deadliness. I liked antique stores because everything had a story, each item had already lived a life without you and that was a

kind fact. You could not be judged in a place like that, you could just walk among the obscurity and feel totally relaxed, confident, even inspired.

Poetry readings had become such bores, just woman wailing about how shaving their vaginas made them feel oppressed and I'd sit in library theaters or on coffee house stoops becoming more and more certain that poetry was a dead art. I wanted to find a different venue. Some libraries were nice, but the crowds were small and morose. Bars always drew a strange and hard-boiled crowd, but I couldn't do one at my bar because of Mickey, Bill and Francis, who took pleasure in hassling me until reading against their shrieks and laughter was no use. Only when I had too much wine did the boys hear my work and even then it was clubbed down into submission and ridiculed as "fag shit." So, I approached Jon, the owner of Main Street, and convinced him to let me use the attic, where they sold used claw hammers, pickaxes, and shovels, for the reading. Jon was a homosexual ballerina from South Africa who had owned and operated his own dance school there, but then moved to the States to write music for a children's television show. He co-wrote two plays that were preformed on Broadway, and in his retirement from show business ended up purchasing

Main Street Antiques. He seemed fitting as the owner, for his estranged stares at the costumers completed the uneasy feeling that came with shopping there. He kept his sagging neck hidden behind black turtlenecks and his violet gums stained from ink tea underneath purple lips. He walked with the straightness of a uniformed soldier. His toes tapped the floor instead of pounced and he spoke slowly, methodically, taking into consideration each word. He was a man consumed by details, touching up the damaged items with a thin bristled paint brush. You could tell he missed his art, but it was simply a case of the body puckering out. To many he had been a great dancer, and now he was just an old man who peddled hand-me-downs in a downtown junkyard. His body could no longer do what it once could, and perhaps that is the greatest tragedy of all, because the body will break down long before the mind, and you have to live with that artistic paralysis; the ability to still create but not execute. It's enough to drive a man into the madhouse, enough to make Jon weep at the sight of a copper stature featuring two ballerinas, which he kept in a glass case in the front of the antique store window. Luckily for me, I could write until the day I died, hammering out the last few words before long, glorious sleep..

The reading went well and June's flight didn't come in for another few hours so I stopped off at the bar for some drinks first. My stomach was uneasy. I'm not sure if it was nerves or excitement about seeing June, but whatever it was it gave me acidity little flutters in the bottom of my throat as if someone was playing puppeteer with my esophagus. It was about six-thirty. Tuesday was behind the bar listening to the radio, and Mickey had roped a few newcomers into a game of cards. He walked over to the bar and ordered a drink. "Excuse me, Miss..." he said to Tuesday, who played along with a "What can I do for ya, Sir?" It was all apart of his plan. He looked at me and winked which meant he wanted to do our old routine. From where I was sitting, if the other players at the table were careless, which they usually were, I was able to see what cards Mickey dealt them. If I coughed it meant that they had high diamonds, if I cracked my knuckles it meant they were strong in clubs, if I adjusted my stool it meant hearts, if I lit a cigarette it meant spades, and if ordered a beer it meant royalty. Mickey would lose two or three hands to avoid suspicion, and just when the poor fools thought they had an old beggar beat, Mickey's luck would begin to change. By the time our friends left the bar they were

penniless. While the first man graciously left his fate in the hands of bum luck, the other got the feeling something wasn't right. "I'm going to make this easy for you old man." He said, "Give us our money back, and we'll forget that you cheated us." Mickey remained seated, his legs hidden beneath the table, holding out his arms. "I'm sorry, but I can't do that. I won this money fairly." "I don't know how you won the money, old man, but it certainly wasn't fairly." "There is nothing up my sleeve." Mickey joked, holding up his coat sleeve showing them his wrist. "I won't hesitate beating the ass of an old man." the man said. "Hey, now boys, why don't you think about this someplace else?" Tuesday said, very sweetly. "Stay out of this bitch!" the man fired back. I stood up from my stool. I hadn't noticed how tall he was, but now that I was standing I only reached his chest. The man's friend didn't say anything, just stood in anticipation waiting to see what was going to happen. Mickey finally made it to his feet, "Now sonny, I don't like being called a cheat. I've played cards with the best of them and you just got beat, plain and simple." The man reached over the table like a gorilla and grabbed Mickey's shirt in his fist. "I'm going to rip you apart like wet tissue paper!" he shouted. Mickey

coughed a yellow glob of saliva on the big man's hand. He reached back to fire the first punch. "Hey!" I shouted, "You shit, why don't you bring some of that over here." I stood up straight for the first time in weeks and I felt my back crack. He let go of Mickey's shirt. The truth of the matter was, Mickey deserved to get his ass handed to him, but the big man had insulted Tuesday and I thought I should do the manly thing and give the big bastard a run for his money. He'd probably tear me apart and Mickey too, maybe even kill him, and perhaps have his way with Tuesday, but I thought it was the principle of the thing that mattered. The big man started walking toward me. I felt smaller and smaller as he got closer and closer, and just as he wound up to plow me, the door opened, and there stood Bill and Francis. "What's going on here?" Francis asked rhetorically. "New boy didn't like losing to Mickey." Tuesday said. It then clicked in the big man's head. He had been cheated by one big organization and despite his size he was now outnumbered. He was now a killer whale in a sea of hammerhead sharks. Bill didn't say anything, just remained in the shadow cast by the open door, his cigarette smoke making its way into the room in swirls. "You were about to hit my dear friend, Luke. Do you know who he is?"

Francis asked the big man. "No." he replied, still holding onto my shirt. "He is the world's greatest undiscovered artist. He needs his pretty face if he's going to be famous." "They cheated me." The big man said. "The old man and the bar-tramp, they cheated me." "Why don't we talk about this out back, you and me?" Francis asked. The big man's friend now stuffed a few rumpled dollar bills into his hat and tried to make his way through the door, but he was blocked by Bill. The big man finally let go of my shirt. "Fine, you and me." He said to Francis. "Splendid!" Francis slapped and rubbed his hands together, making his way past the big man, out the back door and into the streetlight.

The big man fired two mean jabs into Francis's face, but this wasn't just a fight, this one had purpose, and Francis came ready to win or die trying. Francis channeled his anger into short bursts of laughter and crooked smiles. He looked demonic as he danced in and out of the lamplight, much faster than the big man. He punched back, his fists packed tighter than shotgun shells, and they came one after the other, but the big man stayed on his feet, swinging wild punches, all brute force and no technique. Francis came at him again. He reminded me of Joe Louis for a

moment, a real athlete, completely fearless, the alleyway his arena. The big man's nose began to bleed, and finally he went down on one knee. That was Francis's chance; he couldn't let him get back up. He kicked his face and stomped on his head, until finally the big man waved his arm in surrender. The tops of his ears were beat red from the cold and his nose looked like a battlefield, torn to pieces. Hardened blood lines ran through the big man's crew cut hair style. He was most likely an army boy, out on leave looking to win some money but he ended up getting the shit kicked out of him instead. The big man's friend rushed over to him and helped him to his feet. I was expecting Francis to say something snide, but he just looked at him and watched them walk away. In another life Francis could have been a great conqueror, a Napoleon Bonaparte, a man who commanded great armies, and ruled over vast landscapes. He would have gone mad with power and become a tyrant, but if he was in any other place in any other time he would have ended up in history books instead of a broken down alleyway behind a bar with nothing to show for his existence except for a few photographs hanging on the shithouse wall. There was real prestige with what he did to the big man. If I had to pick one hundred words to describe

Francis, *honorable* wouldn't be one of them, but he saved my ass and he called me "the World's Greatest Undiscovered Artist," somehow a bigger compliment than if Hemingway said it.

By this time it was ten to seven. June's plane landed at 8:15. I needed to stop by a mailbox before going to the airport. I only had ten minutes to find a mailbox because the last pick up was at seven and if I missed it now it wouldn't get sent out until after the weekend. Mickey, Bill, and Francis took their usual spots around the card table. "Hey, Tuesday, where's the closest mailbox?" "Around the corner, Sweetie." She said, before grabbing my arm. "And thanks for sticking up for me back there. You were about to be a real hero." "A martyr, maybe." "No, Luke, baby, you showed some real guts." "I have my moments." I said. She smiled and I walked out without saying anything else. The enveloped I was mailing contained a short story I had written and wanted to get into the hands of the publisher, Homer C. Miller. He was the only publisher that seemed interested in my work besides some mild curiosity.

His rejection letters came with words of encouragement, almost as if he was waiting for me to get better, knowing that I could be great, but wasn't yet. I opened the mouth of the mailbox and dropped the envelope in. There was a young black girl standing on the corner in the doorway of the automat who called out to me as I passed. "Hey there, white boy. Lookin' for some fun, big daddy?" "No." I said. "Oh, come on. I'll play with that little thing for you. I'll make you shoot your juice pistol! Come on, baby." I didn't answer this time. I just stuffed my hands into my pockets and walked down the avenue until I could no longer hear her.

The sun was completely down by the time I got to the airport. As I sat in the terminal I thought about the time I had spent with June and it occurred to me that in three and a half years I had hardly ever seen her during the day. She was a night person, it agreed with her. The darkness complimented her deep features, her defined jaw, and her long nose. It was a nose with some purpose; you knew it when it rubbed against yours. She had creamy eyes at the

top of her cheekbones that were the color of wilted sunflowers. She had a good body, lean, but with some heft, and I don't mean fat, she was good to rub up against in the winter time, and her hips were pathways to a wonderful ass that connected to long, beautiful legs. Her legs were like pristine paved roads, leading down to arched feet, and up to her snatch. She was tight and it took some working to enter her, but when looking at June's legs you could almost completely forget about the pussy. It really didn't matter in the moment that your eyes climbed the rugged ladder of her legs, up past the knee and onward to those thighs. You could get whole handfuls of her thighs, and her tits fit perfectly in my palm, giving them chicken skin, the nipple resting between the middle and ring finger, looking at you like a hidden, fleshy eye, or a cigarette that's been smoked down to its filter. She worked hard for a good body, eating right, running, but a lot of it was genetics and with a bit of luck she would sail into old age seamlessly, perhaps losing that firmness, but always keeping those cool sunflower eyes that made their way so perfectly to mine.

That was the real sickness when it came to June, she had this way of turning me into a complete, goddamn sentimental whenever I was around her, like my skin

detached itself from my bones and she could rearrange me anyway she pleased. I thought about this and the feeling of dread came over me. Any other woman would have been long gone if they pulled any of the shit June had pulled with me over the years, but it was as if she had put a spell on me, and I couldn't do a damned thing about it, just watch it all happen. Love must have been the reason I acted so foolishly, but I had loved before and when they got to be too much, they were gone like yesterday's newspaper. I was an artist, woman where things to pass the time, to keep me from going stir crazy, and sex was the reward for being able to make it through the rest of the time with them, the long days of shouting and yelling, coming home to find all your belongings in the yard, your wine gone. I thought about the women I'd loved, but I couldn't remember any of their faces, and then I thought, perhaps I never really loved them at all, and they never really loved me, because real love, when it's good, *had* to linger a bit. Now I couldn't even remember their faces. All the love I had for them was gone, and only the hurt remained. Women had run me through the grinders time and time again and I took it because I was lonely and horny, and just when I grew some brains and some balls, when I thought I learned the gamed

was rigged and my wits got keen and my heart grew hard, June came along to break me down again, leaving me wanting her, leaving me waiting, like an old toy who gets shelved at Christmas time. My brain knew better, it knew that June was going to be bad news, that I was beating a stinking, dead horse, but my heart strangled it until it was purple and quiet. I saw her coming toward me in a brown canvas jacket and cowboy boots and figured it was no use fighting. When the time came that it was over, I knew I would end up being the fool, but there are a lot worse things than looking foolish, like looking much too serious. The dread left and was replaced with that old feeling of contentment that comes with taking the woman you love into your arms and together you fit the same way you did the time before, and that feeling is what makes all the madness and pain almost worth it, even if it was only for a short while..

She looked good. She was the only person I knew that could get off a plane and look good. That was a nice thing about June, she was natural. She could wake in the evening after an all night drunk and look just as good as if she had spent the night at an art show romancing socialites. She could drink, too. Many a night she drank me under the table, which gave her a real hard-edged feel, but she

masked it with a sense of innocence. She was a polite, charming, dignified drunk, if there could be such a thing, and like Wendy at the Iowa she had just the right amount of class to stay respectable, but not a stitch more. She greeted me with a big, wet kiss on the cheek and I let her saliva stay on my face after she broke away. I opened the trunk of the car and put her bags inside of it. "I need to tell you something." She said to me as I turned the key into the ignition and the car roared back to life. "What?" I asked. "I'm seeing someone and it's very serious." She said. "I just thought I should tell you." I didn't respond. "I can see that it's going to be a very long visit." She said, with a little dread in her voice. Then she said, "You have to promise me that you won't kiss me on the lips." We looked at each other for a moment, her big eyes fixed on me waiting for me to make it easy on her, waiting for me to cower down like a dog, but then I said, "I can't make that promise." She just looked straight forward. For all intents and purposes, I was not a man of my word, only when it suited me did I tell the whole truth, and if I told her I wouldn't kiss her, she and I both knew they were meaningless words spoken only because she ask me to. The fact that she had another man was immaterial, for I knew

where her true heart laid, and these men had come in and out like a bluebird through an open window. I was the only constant, the only bird that was unflinching, and if I was nothing else, I was reliable.

To see June again was to be reminded of simpler times: when your mother's words cut like knives, and when your father looked at you with strange eyes because you told him you wanted to be an artist. It reminded you of climbing trees at your brother's baseball games, the night you listened to your first record, and the popping sound it made when you put the needle to the vinyl, the wooden hall passes they gave you in the grade school, how cold the holy water was at church when you dipped your fingers into it, the day you lost your faith, the hair color of the girl you first dreamt about marrying, the first time you read Shakespeare, the first time you got a hard-on, the picnics, the dancing, the shouting, the laughing, how soft the streets were in summer time and how hard they were in winter, firecrackers, bubble-gum cigarettes, Swiss Army knives, razorblades, and the women in the Red-light District. It reminded you of the junkie on the street that laid there dying in the sunlight, of the jazz musicians that played boisterous melodies to empty barrooms, of the

man who lost in Russian roulette, the first time the whiskey bottle touched your lips, the first time you played dice, and the first time you put the pen to the paper. It was all there, the regret and the pleasure, because no matter how else June made me feel, above all she made me feel alive, alive in that moment in time. I was still kicking, creating art, some good, some bad, sticking my privates in places perhaps I shouldn't have, but I was doing it, I was living it now, in rambunctious days and wild nights, I grabbed the mane of life and rode it as far as I could, keeping tiny cinders, knowing that one day I'd light a fire unable to be put out.

I decided to take the long way home after dropping off June. We hugged and kissed goodbye the way friends would, the way friends who hadn't slept together would, and it hurt a little while still feeling good. Going the long way home meant passing through the black neighborhoods on the west side of town. I was one of the few white boys that could make his way through the ghetto without getting jackknifed or mugged. I had gone to school with all the

black boys that now hung around there and when I was young I would eat dinner with my family and then head down to eat again on the west side with the black families who took me on as one of their own. They often called me the lightest colored Negro around because of my ear for music, and the beat I was able to keep as natural, if not more, as my own heart beat. It had been many years since I had been down on the west side, but I could see the front porch lights swaying from the commotion inside the houses as I drove past. I didn't want to spend the night alone, the thought of my apartment was a sad one, especially when June was in town, and her dreams were filled with the face of another, so I decided to stop off at an old friend Emmett's house. Emmett was a clarinet player at one of the black jazz bars in town and I'd check in on him every once in a while, see him play, share a drink or two. After each performance he'd go back to his house with some of the other musicians and play into all hours of night, using only the sunrise as their clock. The house was always filled with people, four hundred pound women who shook the floorboards with their steps, poets, painters, actors and actresses, and Emmett's old lady who everyone affectionately called Mama. As many people that could pile into the taxi could join the party.

If you could play an instrument there was a place for you in the band, just as long as you could keep up. It was pure jubilation, and when the night spiraled down, the men would find a woman to love and they'd either go home or take a spare room in Emmett's house. It was like a brothel, finding strangers on the couch, half naked women sleeping in the flower gardens, the carpets damp from saliva emptied from the spit traps of the musician's instruments. Emmett himself was at one time a pimp, until he met Mama, who he loved more than coyotes loved howling at the moon, as he put it. He was good with analogies like that, he loved her more than elephants loved peanuts, he loved her more than a dope fiend loved junk, and on and on.

I pulled my car around the corner and walked to the entrance on the sidewalk. There was Emmett out front blowing hard on the clarinet, making it talk dirty, and he about swallowed the reed when he saw me. "Luke! I haven't seen you in a dog's age." "Or a coon's age." I said. "Careful white boy, you better knock that coon shit off around here." He let out a big white smile, his teeth like pearls against his lips. He ran over and wrapped his arms around me. "This is my brother, Ellis." He said as he pointed to another black man playing a trombone. "And that

there is Huddie, master of the jazz guitar." The rest of the boys playing were just nobodies from the bar that came along to play, but it didn't matter anyway, because they didn't even see me. They were too busy shaking their heads back and forth to the music, one playing stand-up bass, one banging on a snare drum and high-hat, and one playing the trumpet. "Go on in and see the girls." Emmett said, as he ran up on the porch and jumped back into the song. I made my way through the front door and saw the fat ladies with their red feather boas around their necks, laying poker chips on their tits, on their coca skin, smoking cigars. It was strange to see a woman smoke a cigar, but it was sexy in a way, too. The whole place smelled of reefer and carnival food, for Mama was in the kitchen cooking enough for everyone to eat and still have leftovers. I didn't recognize anyone's face, but then I heard, "Luke, baby, is that you?" I turned to see Mama with her hands on her thundering hips. "It is." I said. "I thought that was you, get over here and give Mama a kiss." She grabbed the sides of my face and kissed both cheeks. "Come on in, we're open all night." She glanced toward the kitchen. I sat down at the small, wooden table that had daisies painted on it while Mama made me a plate and got me a beer. I rubbed my

fingers along the leg of the table and could feel little divots cut into it. I looked down and saw what I had forgotten I had done. The words, *Luke Hurt was here* were carved into the leg of the table. Next to that was what must have been a dozen other names, *Rufus was here, Marcus Smith was here, Hattie was here, Ernest was here, Sam was here, Jack was here, Lou was here, Tom was here*, but the one that intrigued me most was, *Mister Good-bye was here*. "Who was Mister Good-bye?" I asked Mama. "I couldn't tell you. We've wondered over that for years now. With all the people who come in and out of this place, we'd have no way of knowing." She brought me a stuffed green pepper and a Pabst Blue Ribbon, and then sat down at the table. A young black couple came laughing into the kitchen covered in confetti like it was New Years. "Still gets pretty wild here." I said. "Oh, you know Emmett, lying in bed next to me just ain't enough, he's got to have people around him all the time. Sometimes I wish the party would end, but that's just Emmett." There was a sadness behind her eyes as she told me about Emmett. "So what have you been doing to keep yourself busy, Luke?" "Just working and writing, like always." I said. "That's good. How about matters of the heart? Still chasing that little white girl up in the

mountains?" "Yeah." I said, ashamed. "I don't know if I should anymore, she's got another man." "Luke, baby, let me tell you something. Emmett had every woman there was, every color, creed, and disposition. Big ones, small ones, cute ones, ugly ones, every tramp he set his eyes on he had, and I've slashed and spit on his face many a time for it, but it was me that stole his heart in the end. A man's heart is split up into two parts. One part belongs to his art. Emmett loves music more than anything, I'd go as far to say he'd die without it, it is as important to him as air and that part of the heart I knew I can't have, it's just for him, but the other part belongs to me, and all the whores fade into the background like first morning fog. After all his antics it was me he came home to. Just wait, she'll come to her senses and realize that piece of your heart is meant for her." "But Mama," I said, "I'm tired of waiting, I'm tired of hurting." "You best get used to hurting, darling. Even if you get her, the hurting never stops; it is only broken up by moments of joy, and maybe some music if you listen carefully."

The band had stopped playing and Emmett stood in the door frame. He knew what we were talking about without having to hear the conversation. He put his arms around

Mama. "You care to stay the night with us, Luke?" He asked. "No. It's getting late, I just stopped by to say hello." "Well, don't be a stranger, Luke. You know you're family to us." "I know." I said. I walked out of the front door and found the other musicians rung out like washrags from all their playing, their ties loosened, their suspenders down by their knees, their old voices crackling in the dense winter air. It was past midnight now and I could see my breath as I exhaled. It always got coldest after midnight. My car took a moment to get started, but when it did I drove off, down the block, away from Emmett and Mama. I did not look forward to driving all the way home alone, because drives home can often be the loneliness times, but I could sleep better knowing that this terrible city had people in it like Emmett, Mama, and tonight, June.

At the typewriter I sat there hunched, my fingers resting on the W, E, I, and K, not sure what to write. I decided to go to bed. I got underneath the semen stained blanket and closed my eyes. I fell right to sleep. I had been up since the night before, and my eyelids were just

too heavy to stay open and think about the night or June. The next morning I woke up with that starched, bright feeling you often find when waking up in hotel rooms. My room had become a stranger to me; there was nothing of mine in it except the bookshelf. I looked over the bookshelf which was organized in my own neurotic, compulsive way. It was arranged chronologically, by size, and by what books I liked best. The author I respected most had small books, so they were kept on the bottom shelf, but they were in front of the other small books and in order of their publication date. The madness of it made me sick, but a person needed some sort of peccadillo, some sort of idiosyncrasy to keep them from going completely bat-shit crazy. The silliness of my bookshelf was my outlet, it kept me from shooting up the NECCO factory, or marching down the street with my prick out, mothers covering their children's eyes in horror, and it kept me on the other side of that very thin line of people calling me crazy and men in white suits coming to take me away. I believe the world's greatest madmen were all sufferers of not enough outlets. Everyone's a little crazy, and that keeps the balance. Imagine how grey and crippled this world would be if we all danced along the line society deemed sane. I'd be like one big tragedy play

with no intermission. It isn't the large tragedies in life that push people over the edge, it isn't coming home and finding your wife in bed with another man, it's coming home after a hard day and finding the milk gone, or dishes in the sink, or a book out of place..

It was a cool afternoon, but cloudless and the warm sun reached into the room and settled on the perfect temperature to lay shirtless and smoke cigarettes. I called in sick to work because I would be meeting up with June later that night, and I much rather see her than mix chocolate. I worried about staying at the NECCO factory, getting too comfortable, and forgetting about the writing game. That would be the smart thing to do, because it was goddamn stupid to want to be a writer. For people who claimed to be much more intelligent than most, it was them who picked the dumbest profession, but defiantly one of the most important, and although there were only a handful that wrote with some guts and some true talent, there needed to be writers, bad ones, good ones, they all really boiled down to the same thing in the end. Some of the most important documents in history had to be written, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and on and on. Hell, even the Bible, history's most famous work of

fiction was conceived with a pen and paper. Books used to have the power to change generations, to spit in the eye of corruption, or maybe even inspire some sort of rebellion, but now, looking out of that window at the street, it didn't seem to have any of that. It seemed to be tamed, and prepackaged, and all of the fire and life had been beaten out of it, manufactured for the big, dumb majority. I worried, because had I been too late? Was there enough left for me to have my time? Did people give a shit about what a nobody like me had to say? Did I care enough to tell them? All this made me think. Many a night I thought about quitting, but something made me hold on. I think it was just the pleasure I got from it all, the fact that I didn't care if New York publishers came on their thighs when they read my works, that to me nothing else came close. June once told me, "You write too much about writing. You're really disconnecting yourself from your audience, because they don't know what you know." And she was absolutely right, they didn't know what I knew, and she didn't either, and I thought, maybe it's because she doesn't understand how perfect it is, she doesn't understand the feeling it gives me, and maybe she never will, but that's fine, because it was something just for me. I wanted to give it

to her, but I couldn't, the same way I couldn't understand how sweet it must be to hear the pop of the catcher's mitt when a fast ball is sent down the pipe, or when a boxer connects hard with a big right hand, but I could appreciate it. I remember getting a rejection letter that hurt more than the others for some reason and telephoning June to ask her, "Do you think I can make it? Do you think I can be a successful writer?" and her saying, "Yes." After everyone you trust tells you that you can't do it, it was nice to hear the person you love tell you that you could. When everyone tells you that you're crazy, after a while it begins to seep in and you almost believe them, but it takes somebody like June to pull you out and remind that you were a diamond in a desert full of fake crystals.

The day was sliding into evening when I decided to put some music on and give the typewriter another shot. I approached it like a sleeping lion, the way a broken down boxer approaches the ring, except I hadn't experienced my glory days yet, so I approached it with a bit more

optimism. My writing desk was on the opposite wall of my sofa and the sun that came in through the window rested on my back and neck, warming and numbing them as I wrote. An idea came to me and I began to punch at the typer. It felt good to get my flow back, to feel the rhythm restored. I preferred the typewriter over longhand because it was much harder to build a relationship with a typewriter. Writing on paper was like gliding across a frozen pond in ice skates, but the typer was like walking through a swamp, the mud clinging to your boots, pulling you down and each step took all your strength to break away. It was a satisfying feeling when the hammer came down and slammed the letter into existence. It made you feel powerful. I wrote until dark and until I heard the payphone in the hallway ringing. I ran out there on its sixth or seventh ring and answered it. It was June telling me the plans for the evening. We hung up and I went back to the typewriter. I was almost finished with a story, perhaps the best one I had ever written. When the final punctuation was in place I put the story in a manila envelope and addressed it to my old friend, Homer C. Miller.

On my way to get June I dropped the envelope off at a mailbox. It was already past last pick-up, so it would sit

there till morning. We were going to be meeting up with some of June's other friends she had in town, so I brought with me a little tin flask with my initials, *L.H.* engraved on it. I knew I wouldn't be able to sit through the night clear headed. I hated being around other people when I was with June, because I couldn't touch her the way I wanted to, or give my half-ass attempts at being romantic, I had to sit and pretend to be just another friend. I didn't even like bringing June around my friends, Mickey, Bill, and Francis, if you could call them friends... Francis would try and fuck her, and the kind of woman June was, she'd let him flirt and she'd flirt back. It was a horror show watching June with other men, because she was oblivious to the fact they were trying to screw her, or maybe she knew, and despite all my wishing, she was a little bit of a whore. Bartenders would give her free drinks because of the way she looked and when I told her, "They want to sleep with you." She'd say, "No, no. They were just nice." I tried to explain that no one was just nice, especially bartenders, but she wouldn't listen. I don't think June knew how beautiful she really was, and maybe in hindsight I should have told her more, but she didn't have any of the pretension that other beautiful women had, and I don't

think it was because she was able to overcome it, or that she was humble, but that she simply didn't know.

I worried about her, maybe for her sake, maybe for mine, but I worried because I knew the way she could drink and what a push-over lush she was and it probably was a known fact to get her drunk and then accost her with all sorts of penises much larger than my own. My biggest fear was that she knew this as well, that when she wasn't with me she let men finger-fuck her under the table, and everyone in town had a piece of her, and I suppose the thing I feared most was because of it she wouldn't be special anymore. It's funny, when you're not in love with someone it doesn't matter how many men they've slept with, but get the heart involved and there is nothing worse than a whore. I've often tried to rationalize it, I've tried to recognize that I had been with many downtrodden women in my day and I was in no place to judge, that sex was an open act that everyone should enjoy whenever they could, that it was nothing more than the thing you do when you couldn't sleep, but when it came to June it made the puke turn in my stomach. Hypocrisy was also one of my virtues. I couldn't help being a little child about it. The thoughts of other men grabbing her fat ass, running their fingers along her

thighs were enough to put me in a sour mood. Even though it drove me mad thinking about it, and I broke many a windowpane because of it, I knew that whatever I was imagining was much worse in my mind than it was in real life, and when I got June alone, when she looked into my eyes, all the worry went away and it didn't matter what she had done, what mistakes she had made, because it was now me, a browbeaten old hack that got to hold her that night.

June was dreading seeing these friends. "Why don't we forget about them?" I suggested. "We can't do that, Luke." She said. "Well, let's make a quick stop first." "Where?" she asked. "You'll see." I said. She hated it when I wouldn't tell her where we were going, or if I wouldn't tell her what song I was going to put on the stereo. I was taking her to the overlook of the city. It was a place I had so many times wished she could have been, to look out on that brutal city of ours, but now the want for her to be in it was gone, and I could enjoy the fact that we both were out of it together, out of the constant decline. The city lights, instead of being rotten teeth, could be lemons that were yellow and ours to pluck. I started up the dark road, "Don't worry. I'm not going to rape you." I said. "You can't rape the willing." She said, jokingly. I thought

about pulling over and taking her then, real savage, two bodies rolling together like a great classical music piece, building and building until reaching climax, rhapsody. It wasn't a question of if she wanted me to, that was never the question, it was the sense of guilt she'd feel for cheating. To me it felt every time she climbed into bed with another man she was cheating, except on me, and on her heart. June and I were much more complicated than black and white, right and wrong. By giving in to what we wanted we would be doing right by us, but ultimately the wrong thing simply because of circumstance, as a bomb that ends a war but kills thousands of innocent people in the process. It made me think, perhaps there was no absolute right and no absolute wrong, that no matter what you did one of the other made it's way in, that nothing was every totally good or bad. That's a hard realization, because you want to believe something can finally be good, that you can fondle the good life and live in a big house at the end of a winding road, and smoke fat cigars, and hump the American dream until it cries, but that was wishful thinking, which was as good as no thinking at all.

I reached the top of the road. "You know that spot I was telling you about? This is it." I said. She looked out

at it with the same wonderment I felt the first time I looked out at it, thinking, could this be the same city? We didn't have to say anything for a moment. June was the kind of woman you could share silence with. I wanted to tell her about all the nights I went up there and looked out toward her house, feeling the most alone I had ever felt, that my heart bled for her like a flea-bitten, romantic dog, but I didn't. After a few minutes I said, "Well, you want to get going? We better go and meet your friends." "I don't know." She said, "I could stay up here all night." "We can stay up here as long as you want." I said. "I'm hungry. Let's go get some food and bring it back here." "Alright." I said. It was pretty late and all the restaurants were closed. "Know any good places?" She asked. "I know one." I said, thinking of The Iowa, but that was a part of my life I didn't want June to see. "Why don't we go to a grocery store and get something." June suggested. We went down to the closest twenty-four hour market and June bought a loaf of French bread and some salami to make a sandwich. When we got back to the lookout, she took two bites of it and said she was full, and that she felt so fat. I decided then that it was no use trying to talk sense into a woman about their appearance. June, as far as I was concerned, was the

sexiest woman alive, but if I were to tell her that it would come out tired and phony and she'd play it off as a run-of-the-mill compliment, that really didn't mean much, when I was indeed telling the absolute truth. In addition to being very sexy, June was funny. Not a lot of people could make me laugh, especially woman, as far back as I could remember I don't recall meeting one truly funny woman, except June. "You think we're much funnier than we actually are." She'd say to me. "What do you mean?" I'd ask. "Our jokes are only funny to us." "Why do they have to be funny to everyone else?" I retorted. When I asked her that she'd realize she was acting superficial and say, "You're right. You're right..." June didn't fit into a stereotype easily, but deep down I could see that she was insecure, and it wasn't so much about not fitting in, as it was about fitting in with the right people who were known to not to fit in with anyone. I didn't hold it against her, though. Most of the people on the earth searched for a place to belong, wanted to be apart of something, it was only me who did not care about anyone or anything. I never saw the logic in wanting to be something for the sake of someone else, because most of the time everyone else was so damned boring.

June and I put on some music and made ourselves comfortable in the car. Out on the outskirts of the city it was very cold and dark. I took out my flask and sipped at it to warm myself up. June took a drink and then I put it back in my jacket pocket. We laid sideways on the car seats and opened the roof so we could look at the stars. It takes living in a city of lights to make stars extraordinary, like they were the sky's crystals, or abandoned rubies from one million heists. How often people overlook amazing things like the stars every day of their lives, but here they were in front of us on a canvas. We picked out the constellations with our fingers, and we found the Little and Big Dipper. June and me didn't talk about her and I, and our screaming hearts. We just laid, and let it alone, let it exist without prodding or poking at it. There was no use ruining moments like that with words. People did too much talking. The music played on and June rolled over, giving me her back to rub. I rubbed it up and down until she fell asleep. I took the opportunity to enjoy the silence with her, by gazing at the lights and letting them blur like firecrackers. June and I had found ourselves in dozens of phony situations that seemed to be plucked from awful, trite romance novels, but they always served as

reminders of why I loved her. She could turn the world's most unphony man into Oscar fucking Wilde. I often worried that our story was too much like a piece of bad fiction, that we were either heading toward a picture perfect ending, or a tragically sad one. We laid there until five or six in the morning and the sun was coming up, looking like a half slice of grapefruit over the hills. We decided we better go. I started taking her home, but my place was on the way and she wanted to stay the rest of the night with me. We climbed in bed together and slept, and there was a certain feeling that came with sharing a bed with a woman, no fucking or fondling, just two people in bed, and how the sheets will stink of her long after she's gone, those are the things that make a man feel like he's been someplace.

In the morning we laid in bed and talked. "This place is rather plain." She said, "You don't have a lot of *shit*." "What do you mean?" I asked. "You know, you have your typewriter, your bookshelf, one picture of a man on your

wall." "That's e.e. cummings." I said. "Yeah, well, that's all you've got. There's nothing even on the floor." "I was thinking of moving the place around a bit, put the bed in the other corner and put the desk up against that wall." "Why don't you put the desk near the window so you could look out of it while you write?" Until she said it, I had never thought of that. "That's a good idea." I said. She got up and began to put herself together. I laid in bed and watched her. Anyone who's been in that position knows there aren't many things better than watching a woman dress from bed, their bare back, the sides of their breasts showing on either side as they pull their shirt down over their head, the room funky and warm from your bodies. It was good, that moment with June. I pretended we were together, that we had just made love, and that she had gotten up to get us a book of matches for our cigarettes, but then I was brought back to reality when I wanted to reach out and grab her but couldn't. I wanted to squeeze her tit, let it flow over my hand like warm beer, but that was all, no sex, just so I knew I could. We said our goodbyes until later that evening and June caught a taxi home. When she left, I tried to think of how fast the time had gone, that I was already alone again. It seemed like only a moment had passed since

we were up in my car together. Time was not a friend of mine; it was always fleeting when it was something I wanted to endure, and always hanging around when it was something I didn't.

The shower at the end of the hall was occupied, so I decided to take a walk. I needed to stretch my legs; I was feeling claustrophobic, like my shirt collar was closing in on me. I unbuttoned a few buttons and let my chest hair come out. That was a problem of mine, the hair. I had hair everywhere, and it only added to my apish appearance. I wasn't very tall, five foot nine, and I had a belly, and some pretty decent tits, and they were all covered in hair. My small hands looked like paws, grubby little fingers that looked more at home wrapped around the neck of a bottle than they did around the neck of a woman. I would get ingrown hairs all over my body and I'd have to pluck them out with cuticle scissors or toenail clippers and they'd bleed like hell, matting down the rest of the hair, turning my flesh burgundy like wine stains. It was a pain in the ass to shave, so most of the time I walked around like a makeshift Big Foot, half man, half animal. The only good part of my body were my legs, they were lean and strong, muscular. I once lifted a thousand pounds in my highschool

gym class with my legs, and I thought I was pretty tough shit. Since then, they stayed beneath my pants, and it took some doing to just lift my feet to walk. I walked like a hunchback, instead of striding along with big, wide steps; I limped and shuffled about like a man half-mad or a two legged dog hobbling down the street. On my walk I passed a clothing store and saw a mannequin in the window. I couldn't help but stop and stare at it for a moment. I couldn't help but think about how nice it would be to take it home with me to cuddle and molest, and all the wanting, all the yearning, all the pain, could wait outside in the rain, because when the dirty deeds were finished I could just put it back in the closet, and it couldn't say it had to go, or that it didn't love me, and I could sleep, sleep like an old bull on the hill.

There was a neighborhood bar a block or two up. I limped over to it. The dust that hung in the air was visible in the sunlight that reached in like arms through the windows of the bar. It was empty except one or two regulars. The bartender knew me. "Get out of here, Luke. I'm tired of seeing your face." "Come on, I just need a drink to take the edge off." "What edge?" he asked. "The edge of living, the edge that comes with waking up day

after day, that edge." "You're gonna need a lot more than one drink to get rid of that edge." He said. "Yeah, it looms like disaster." He smiled and poured me a drink. A bartender loved nothing more than a cynic. Being in a bar in the daytime made you feel like a full fledged alcoholic, a depraved scum bucket, because if you were seen stumbling out of a bar at two in the afternoon, the passersby would give you awful stares, and anyone staring at you made you feel low, but it was just one drink to ease the pain. I went outside to the payphone and dialed the NECCO factory. The receptionist Charlene answered. "Yeah, Charlene, it's Luke Hurt calling. I can't come in again tonight. Sick as a dog, I am." "Yeah, yeah, Luke, whatever you say." She responded. Charlene didn't like me very much, ever since I tried picking up on her some months back. She was a fine piece of ass, but too stuck up, and too manufactured. She wore too much rouge and thick red lipstick that made her lips stick together between words, and when she said no, it was almost a relief, because the moment I asked her out I regretted it. "You don't have to act so goddamn dramatic, Charlene. I'm really dying here." I coughed into the receiver. I heard the phone go dead. She knew I was lying through my rotten teeth, but I didn't care, I was free for

another night. I must have used all my sick days within the first month or two that I worked there. I couldn't stand working in front of that machine, the minutes clicking by like hours, a puddle of sweat left on the concrete floor after my shift, and I had no time to write. I had to find the hours to write by cutting them out of my sleep time, and then I worked the job all night struggling to keep my eyes open. Work never agreed with me, I suppose that's why I became an artist; it was the fast and easy way to be a bum and become glorified because of it. I often say, "*I have to be a writer!*," that it is the only thing I ever did that mattered, but the terrible truth was, I could swallow it, I could work lame jobs, and I could throw my typewriter out the window and walk away at any time. It's astounding how much a man can hide away within himself, what he can live with. There weren't many things I loved, only June and my art, but just because I loved them didn't mean I could have them. That was the unfair reality that haunted me like the Angel of Death holding my coat and hat, ready to take everything away from me in one devastating swoop. I thought about Kafka and the *Metamorphosis* and how I would have killed to have been a bug in this life.

There were mainly women in my building, none of which I had ever said two words to, besides "Hello" and "Good morning." Most of them were very fine women who kept to themselves and seemed nice enough, but there was one woman who used to live in the apartment next to me that was a whore, a streetwalker. I could hear her through the wall shouting and wailing like a hyena starving to death. There was no way she was legitimate, no way a woman made those kinds of noises, but she gave her men a bang for their buck. The only time we spoke was in passing on my way out of my room and she was standing in her doorway in a silk robe smoking a cigarette with pink lipstick around the filter. "I'll let you screw me in the ass for fifty bucks." She said. "No thank you." I said. She looked me over and wanted me all the way down the hall, but then forgot about me the second I turned the corner...

I was seeing a woman named Maureen at the time and I was on my way out to visit her. Maureen was more of an infatuation than she was a love. She was a few years older than I was and she seemed very mysterious to me, very sexy. Her hair was worn up in big curls that when she gardened

would get damp with sweat and spiral down and pin themselves against her pale skin. Maureen drove around in a Volkswagen Beetle, the color of diluted piss, and always went at least twenty miles over the speed limit. She had a real danger about her, with her wild eye shadow, greens and blues and pinks, and how she wore black dresses like an undertaker, that pushed her large breasts out, until they looked like two milky softballs stuffed into her blouse. I was still a virgin when we met and her experience and sexuality intimidated me. She knew this and used it as a way to wrap me up, become her dog, but for all her age and all her experience she was broke like I was. In her young days, she had a rich husband who took her all around the world and now she pawned the stories off on me, because I was dumb enough to listen. "Have you ever been to Coney Island?" she asked me. "No." I said. "Oh, well you've just have to go! Leroy took me all the time... Have you ever been to the Reeperbahn in Germany?" "No." I said. "Oh, you really need to find time to go. It's a sexual odyssey for the mind, a whole street of bars, sex clubs, and brothels. It's also known as *the Sinful Mile*, because it's where your inhibitions go to die; where all the sins of the world are funneled down and turned into the largest pleasure

repository..." She had seen many a great things, visited some bizarre places, and blown thousands of other men's money. Now I would come home to find her drunk on rot-gut wine, howling and cooing, lost in the way things used to be but weren't anymore...

Maureen wouldn't sleep with me; just let me kiss her and squeeze her and then leave for days at a time, leaving me by the phone waiting for her call. She'd have her fun with other men and then come home to me, but there was no deep talks like there were with June. Maureen didn't have the substance to even acknowledge my hurt. She ran over it like a comb through her hair, and when her eyes looked into mine I could see that they were dead. A true curse is only seeing what's on the surface, and when she finally left me for good I did not weep, for it was like saying goodbye to a stranger on a bus, because I had made up my mind to let go.

Yes, I had said my share of goodbyes, but I'd said just as many hellos, I guess. Maureen was a long, drawn out ordeal, but nothing like June. Tuesday at the bar once asked me, "Why June?" "What do you mean?" I asked. "I mean, there are plenty of women out there, why be so hung up on one of them?" And I couldn't answer her, because I didn't

know. I wasn't a man who believed in fate, I didn't believe June was put on this planet just for me, but I believed in luck, the roll of the dice. I had found June out of pure, stinking chance, and when you found your pearl you couldn't let anything stand in your way. If all that time had passed, and instead of waning, my love for her only deepened, then I thought it was something worth fighting for. It really wasn't about my want or even my need, it was that somewhere I knew that she felt the same as I did, and as long as she wanted me, I'd be there to love her until I could literally love her no longer. As put-on as that sounded, as I cringed at those sappy words, it's what I felt. Until I saw the last nail hammered into that coffin, I would follow her wherever she asked me to go, across the roaring plains and through the Irish Sea. There weren't many things in life I saw fit to make myself a punching bag over, but June was my one thing, the thing that I'd put my neck on the chopping block for and welcome the blade like it was my oldest and dearest friend. The lion inside of me was yawning, I was tired of biting my tongue until I tasted blood, I just wanted to rest my head in her arms and mumble *I love you*. All she needed to do was open up her chest and let her heart fall out, for I would be there to catch it.

I had a few hours before I was supposed to meet up with June, so I went down to the bar. It was still early and only Mickey was there playing solitaire, and Tuesday was behind the bar leaning up against the rack. There was a woman at the bar that I hadn't seen in there before. "Luke, you tired old Dago-Teapot, you haven't been in." Mickey said. "He's got the hair of a greasy Dago and the name of a dirty Brit." "Mickey, you old Irish drunkard, you're mother's cunt smells like a pig farm on the Emerald Isle." That made him laugh, and I made my way over to the bar. "Tuesday, who's the woman?" "Don't know, she hasn't said a thing besides her order. She looks a little down and out if you ask me, a little roughed up." The woman looked trampled, but she had a strong face, like she could take it, or that she had taken it before. The more people I met the more I discovered everybody had a sad story to tell. Happiness was rationed only to the ignorant, and the rest of us had to fight over it like a pack of wolves. Despite her sadness, the woman was magnetic, almost absurd. I was attracted to her in a strange way. I felt a bit guilty

because June was in town, and how I talked about her you'd think I never looked at another woman, but she had a sugar daddy up in the mountains that she was probably telephoning right then and twirling the phone cord in delight at the sound of his miserable voice. I had the right to take that woman and have sex with her on June's doorstep if I so desired. "Can I buy you a beer?" I asked the woman. "Sure." She said, the agony of her sad story coming through her voice. "Two beers, Tuesday." I said. "I haven't seen you around here before." I spewed the cheesy lines like I had invented them. "No, this is my first time." As she said it, she turned her face toward the light and I could see that she had a black eye. "What happened to your eye?" I asked. "Nothing." She said. I knew her man had roughed her up; probably beat the pulp out of her for not looking at him the right way, or some such macho horseshit. "What's your name?" I asked her. "Rose Marie." She said. "Luke." I shook her hand, which deflated in mine, feeling as though if I squeezed any harder it would break up and blow away. "Rose Marie, that's a very pretty name." I began singing, "*Oh, Rose Marie, I love you, I'm always dreaming of you. No matter what I do I can't forget you. Sometimes I wish that I never met you, and yet if I should lose you I'd mean my*

very life to me. Of all the queens that ever lived I choose you to rule me, my Rose Marie." She laughed a soft, quiet laugh before resting upon a grimace again. "I'm sorry I'm acting so rude." She said, "I just left my boyfriend of three years." "Oh, well not to worry." I said, "You're a very attractive woman, I'm sure you'll find someone soon." After I said that she got very uneasy, then thanked me for the beer and left. I couldn't understand why women got so touchy when a man called them attractive, for all she knew I was just saying something nice, but it didn't matter anyway, my thoughts were on June, and a woman like Rose Marie was now a ruined woman. You never wanted to get involved with an abused woman, their problems were just too great, and it was never wise to get under the covers with a woman who had it harder than you did.

The weather was cold, raining off and on throughout the day and into the night. The roads were made slick by the rain and ice. The drive across town to get June was unnerving as at each stop I slid a few inches more than I wanted to. My windshield began to fog up, so I smeared a spot clean with my jacket sleeve, leaving it blurry and streaked. At the stoplights, I'd look at the people's break lights in front of me and they ran red and long, stretching

through the fog. Finally, I made it to June's. She was still getting ready and I waited downstairs in the foyer. We were going to meet the friends we had blown off the night before at a strip club downtown. Strip clubs were not nice places, they always looked like hell, the girls were always cheap and rundown, and it always smelled of ejaculate. The ripe odor hit you in the face the moment you opened the door, but it was a place to go. June came down the stairs looking too good for the kind of place we were heading, a goddess among cretins. When looking at June, especially when she was juxtaposed next to people we knew or in a crummy hole-in-the-wall bar, I sometimes wished she would have abandoned the bohemian life, and fallen in the line of the everyday nobodies, because in many respects it had much more to offer than the bohemian life. Yes, you were boring and average, but at least it was easier. She deserved more than the life she had chosen could ultimately give her, she deserved better than what I could give her. The life we were mixed up in sounded glamorous, but it was hard and painful. All the drugs, and booze, and men and woman, gave you a sense that you were truly underground, but you were really just in the mouth of another beast. Instead of corporations and suburban housewives, you were

tied up in the expectations of these wannabe-artist underachievers that waved their opinions around louder than they did their actual art, because what they created was shit and if they didn't shout as loud as they could, everyone would realize what genuine shit it actually was. Art is such a despicable word, because it comes with a criterion, it comes with an image of what it's supposed to be. It's cannibalistic, continually falling in on itself, like the Uroboros, a snake swallowing its own tail, because it encourages obscurity and originality, but then fails to live up to its name when all the meaning falls by the wayside. It is boiled down to how fickle humans are, consuming and extracting every last special thing until it is as mundane as coffeecake. I did my best to fight it, to refuse to pick a side, to remain a machine, a monster that picks flowers and writes poetry in his own small corner of the world. Each time I looked at June it seemed as though I was losing the grasp of her hand and she was slipping further and further into that make-believe world created for the artists and the wannabes.

We got to the strip club and met Roseanna and Harvey. "You're the second Rose I met today." I told Roseanna, whose attention span was too short to respond. Harvey wore

his hard life on his face, but he had a good heart. He was the kind of man that always lit his own cigarette, and people knew not to mess with him. We went inside and the music drowned out any chance of a conversation, thank Christ. I paid the two dollar cover fee, which left me with six dollars in my wallet. June, Roseanna, and Harvey sat around the table that the girls would come and dance on, a big gold, shimmering pole stuck out from the middle of it. I went to the bar where a topless woman was serving drinks. "Are these free?" I asked. She nodded "yes." I took two cups and drank one down fast, then carried the other to the table. There was already a dancer wrapping her legs around the pole by the time I got there. Roseanna was sitting on Harvey's lap, gyrating and laughing her head off, throwing down wrinkled one dollar bills. The dancer bent down and picked them up with her ass. The dancer's nipples were large and they clung to the breast like they were about to fall off, the areola stretched and transparent against the rest of the skin. I sat, sipping my drink, watching June out of the corner of my eye. The dancer got down on her knees and rubbed her tits in June's face, and then she turned to me. "Don't do anything special. I don't have any money to tip you." The purple lighting soaked over her. "I

can give you one for free." She said. I looked at June. "Alright." I said. She put my face between her breasts and it felt like going home after a long trip. Then she sat back on her heels and ass and inched her fig closer and closer to my face, until my ears were touching her thighs. Her skin was as soft as angel food cake. I could see June over the dancer's leg, with an uncomfortable look on her face, perhaps thinking she would like me to be between her legs rather than this stripper's, or maybe secretly hating me, because she knew that's what I was thinking, and now she couldn't help but think of it herself. I didn't know what to do, so I turned my head, put my ear to her plum and said, "I can hear the ocean!"

June had been acting strange, distant. When we parted ways with Roseanna and Harvey I asked June if she wanted to get some coffee. "I know a great twenty-four place." I said. "Sure." She said. On the walls were paintings of Louie Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, John Lee Hooker, and Miles Davis. We ordered two cups of coffee and took a seat across from each other. The conversation was bubbling at

the ends of our lips, but I would not be the first to say anything. I was always the talker when she and I got into it, wearing my stinking heart on my sleeve, her always the one with a faceless man in the background holding her tongue like a dog leash. And I was tired of trying to make my case, the more I told her the more it seemed that I was trying to convince her. It was no longer a heartfelt, spontaneous regurgitation, but a pitch, and I was the marketing representative for the world's largest bullshit firm, making my love for her sound as pure as first fallen snow, and if she bought in now she'd never regret it.

I once asked June what were the things she regretted most, and she said to me, "I don't have any regrets." And that came like a blow to the guts, because it was the first time I pitied her. "You don't have any?" I asked. "Nope." She said. My heart sank down in my chest and beat quietly. Perhaps she's not as alive as I once believed her to be, I thought. It wasn't that she hadn't done anything to regret, it was that she didn't know what they were yet, and one day they were going to topple down on her like a building and I worried that by the time it happened I wouldn't be there to pick her out of the rubble. June was unbalanced, too much love and not enough regret, and by saying that she didn't

have any, it hollowed her in a way. Regret is the thing that toughens your knuckles, it's what lets you know you're human, it makes your smiles mean something, because they had to overcome the tragedies you've endured, it makes your tears credible, because your hurt was bona fide, and she didn't have that, she didn't have any scars to show where she'd been. She was oblivious to the fact that regret was what the garden you plant your flowers in is made of, and failure fills the tub you soak in. It builds character, and strength, and it gives you the moxie to play with fire. It made you real.

Sitting in the coffee shop, staring at her then, I knew she had found some of her regrets and they humbled her a bit. I wore my regrets around my ankle like a ball and chain, because I had been stupid and careless, and I wished I would have opened up my heart more to June when she was mine. That's true regret, wishing you could go back, but knowing you can't, that terrible fact grinning at you in the mirror every morning, you left helpless with nothing to do but grin back. It was a grand carnival, but all the costumers were dead, and only the carousel music could be heard whining down until stopping all together. Yes, looking at June's face I wished I would have had the love

for her then like I did now, but I didn't. I let her go without a fight, like some pansy, instead of thrusting her against my lips and asking her not to leave, letting her know I wanted her to stay. I lived with the misery of letting her slip through my fingers, of not being able to walk up from behind her and put my arms around her waist, and her knowing it was me without having to look. When I tried to forget her, I'd say to myself, "*You only chase her because you want to even the score, you want to have what you almost had, just for the sake of having it, and that is no reason to love a person.*" And I had almost gotten comfortable with that excuse, but it wasn't the truth. I didn't love June because of how she made *me* feel, I loved her because when we were together we could be ourselves. I didn't have to be anything but Luke Hurt, writer, poet, candy maker, salesman, or bum, it didn't matter. I didn't have to shout and scream, but rather hang up my skin and be free. June was a different woman with me than she was to her friends, or even to her lovers. I could tell by the way her body melted into mine when we embraced..

We started talking about what we thought the word *reckless* meant. "I'm reckless." I said. "No, you're not." June said. "What are you talking about, goddamn it? I'm as

reckless as they come." "No. You know what you want. You have a driving force. You wake up every morning with a sense of purpose. You can't be reckless if you have that."

"What do you think reckless means?" I asked. "It's when you do something with complete obliviousness to what the consequences are." She sounded like a textbook handed out to troubled youths and kids in college that just had a taste of the wild side. That may have been what the dictionary said it was, but recklessness was something more besides some mindless romp. "I disagree." I said. "I believe true recklessness is when you know the consequence, you know the odds, and you do it anyway, with everyone telling you that you can't." "I think you're getting *rebellious* and *reckless* confused." She said. "No. I think you're getting *reckless* and *stupid* confused. Doing something without reason is *stupid*, not *reckless*. Everything has a reason." "Not everything." she said.

"Whether you know it or not, baby, consciously or subconsciously, people do things for a reason. It's much easier doing something out of stupidity than it is taking a chance on something that might fail. Reckless is when no one believes in you, the entire world is against you, but you go out and do it anyway, because you believe it's

right." "You just like the underdog." June said. "That's right." I said, "I identify with the underdog."

On the drive home we were quiet. The rain had quit, but now only little globs of ice were coming down. It was late and the house was dark. We began saying goodbye on the driveway as I moved closer and she put her arms around me. I kissed her neck and she moaned lightly. I continued to kiss her neck, nibbling, her skin sweet and sour. She put her hands in my pants pockets and pulled me closer, her fingers, long and glorious, finding their way to my loins. My prick swelled up and pushed out through my pants and against her crotch. Her body began to roll against mine, humping, shivering from the cold, my breath rising in steam, her breath getting louder and harder in my ear, asking me to penetrate her without words. I rubbed her sides up and down as I started to hump back, feeling her ass, groping at it, her tits pressed up against my chest, nipples erect, coming through her shirt, poking me like secret fingers. Now our bodies were rolling together, my prick as attentive as a guard dog, her breathing getting heavier and heavier while her knees buckled in ecstasy or guilty delight, my mind searching for the meaning, but soon forgetting about it. If it weren't for khaki and denim we'd

be fucking right there on the driveway, like two sexually depraved fiends. I stuck my face into her hair and breathed in. It was warm enough and lovely enough to die. My head went back and I began working her neck again, moving toward the chin and biting it gently, reaching out my tongue a half mile along her neck. It went on like that for thirty or forty minutes, just unleashing some of what's been pent up for so long, just a fraction of what I wanted to do to her, but then like a window shutting or a door closing, an attack of conscious came over her and she said the dreaded words, "I have to go."... "No you don't." I say. She nods and fights back tears. I'm not sure if they're tears of sadness, pleasure, or guilt, maybe all three. She looks into my eyes deep and long, and her face almost mutates into one I had never seen before. Our noses rub, and she looks at me again. I can't help but think how strange she looks, almost as if it was a different person looking at me. I pull her in close for one more squeeze and then she says again, "I have to go." She turns and enters the house. I get in my car; start up the engine, wishing it wouldn't make a sound, but it does, loud like an explosion, and then I began the long, lonely drive home along the black roads that can hypnotize you if you stare at them deep enough. It

was a very peculiar drive home, because I was no longer aroused, my heart hurt too badly, and when I finally reached the apartment, I crawled into bed, my mind severed into one thousand avenues of thought, the feeling of numbness all over me. I listen to the sounds of the sailor next door beating his wife and try to sleep.

18

When I woke up I was alone with the day. I wasn't sure if June was going to call. I had to fill the hours with something, so I figured I'd have a few drinks and see if I couldn't make sense of this whole mess at the typewriter, but when I sat down I froze again and couldn't pinch out a single word. I continued to drink and I made myself sick about it, because I was becoming one of those writers that valued booze over creation, and that was just as quick a road to death as curbing your stuff for publishers. You had to write more than you drank. So often you saw writers down at the bar or throwing parties, but you never saw any of their work, because they were always too drunk to actually write anything. Phony bastards. I saw them surrounding themselves with other people, being the life of the party,

affable and friendly. It disgusted me to watch them. I'd rather sit alone than be there in the midst of the crowd, rubbing shoulders with those dead people. There was no other way to describe them. They were laughing, and joking, and dancing, but they were all dead. I guess they were just trying to experience, just trying to gain some knowledge so they could write something meaningful, live a wild life so they could sit in a rocking chair fifty years from now and tell the crazy stories of their youth... what shit, I thought. The real fun was doing it now; the real fun was being able to write while you still had the world by the balls. Everyone was so quick to make mistakes, because they thought it matured them, but the truth was you couldn't plan on making mistakes, you just had to make them, otherwise they weren't mistakes at all, but just arbitrary attempts at living the hard life. My life had never been that particularly hard in comparison to the greats. I never had to eat my own flesh like Hamsun; there was always food about to eat. My father never beat me too bad, and girls let me finger them in the photography labs at school. After it all, I really didn't have that much to complain about. I found myself in hard times, but no harder than anybody else. My life had never been particularly exciting either,

never traveling the Paris pissing in the assholes of thirteen year old girls like Henry Miller, and I wasn't apart of the Lost Generation, a generation left wondering, feeling helpless, purposeless, their country forfeiting them in the process of war, writing with hate and conviction about the rotten hand life or God or the Devil or chance had dealt them. I wasn't sure what generation I belonged to. Everywhere I looked I saw apathy (as overused as that blasted word was it was the only one I could think of to describe it). Women were listless, so insane, men where greedy and ridiculous. All the good music and art had retreated to little corners of the world, and there I was in the middle of it all. When I was writing I never even considered that there was anyone else writing, that there were millions of other people in my exact same situation, some doing it much better, some doing it much worse. I forgot they even existed, for when I was writing it was me versus Hemingway, me versus my heroes, my gods. Each night I left the keyboard hot and beaten. Now, did I actually think I was better than Hemingway, or cummings, or Eliot or any of those guys? No, but that was the bar and I'd break my teeth off on it if that's what it took, and I'd smile a bloody smile until I was long gone and snot-nosed, piss-

ugly kids ripped the pages out of *my* books and spit on *my* grave and squared off against *me* every night.

I felt like a real sheep waiting around for the phone to ring. It rang twice and both times it was for someone else in the building. June usually called between the hours of six and eight. It was four-thirty. I decided to scrape together what little money I had and buy my own phone. This payphone stuff was for the birds. It was the first time I'd have my own number. That felt good. At the phone store, I picked the cheapest one I could find, which was a black rotary telephone with some of the numbers worn off. It was seven dollars, even with the worn down numbers. I got home, plugged it in, and dialed the telephone company to set up an account. I didn't have the money for the bill, but by the time I had to pay it June would be back up in the mountains and I wouldn't need the phone anymore. I wrote my number in blue ink on a slip of paper that could be seen through a little piece of plastic on the front of the phone. I could have saved the seven bucks and just telephoned June, but I was too much of a coward. At six-thirty the payphone rang. I answered it and it was June with a little hesitance in her voice. "Listen." I said. She breathed in, thinking I was going to say something about

the night before. "I got a phone. You can call me at this number now." I gave her the number. She exhaled in relief. The plans were still unsure for the night, but she wanted me to pick her up at nine o'clock. "Okay." I said and hung up. I went into my room and dialed the NECCO factory using my new phone. Charlene answered. "Yeah, Charlene, Luke again. I can't come in tonight. I should be all clear by tomorrow." "Don't bother, Luke. You've been let go." "What the hell do you mean?!" I yelled. "You used up all your sick days, and this was the last straw. You're fired." "Put that fat pig on the phone." "Mr. Ross is busy at the moment, but he told me to relay the message to you." "Well, fuck Mr. Ross and fuck you." I hung up. I don't know why I was so upset, I hated that job, but it was still depressing. Archibald Ross was the swine's name, I never liked him, but I hated him now. He gave me all the grunt work, like moping up the puke in the lady's toilet. He and I never got along, old Archie, a real piece of work, with a fat belly and brown suits. His suspenders screamed as they held onto his pants for dear life. He loved being a candy man, he treated it like we were making fine wine there, sticking his chubby fingers into the vat of melted

chocolate and tasting it, always getting some in his mustache. Good riddance, I thought.

A moment later my telephone rang. I knew it was June for she was the only person that had the number, besides the phone company. "Hello." I said. "Hey." She said and then paused. "Yes?" I asked. "I just wanted to talk. Is that okay?" "Yeah, sure." I said. June and I used to talk on the phone until late hours of the night, and I'd be out in the hallway whispering to her until she fell asleep. Even when she had another man, she'd call me to read my poems to her until I could hear her heavy breathing and her sleeping moans. I missed that. "I have a question for you." She said. "What is it?" I asked. There was another long pause and then she said, "Never mind, it was just me being a pervert." "Now you have to tell me." I said. "I was just wondering...if we had done what I *think* we were going to do last night...what would you have *done* to me?" It came like a kick in the balls. What game was she running here? First she was saying no, and then she was saying yes, Jesus Christ, it took all the strength I had not to hurl myself off the windowsill and plummet to the friendless street below. I wasn't sure if I was happy she was asking me this question or furious at the pure arrogance in which she

asked it. She knew she had me wrapped up and she loved it. June was a succubus, pure and simple. She came to steal my soul, I was convinced. She was either that, or completely insane, or the more common reason for women, she didn't know what she wanted. Women thrived on being indecisive; it was their ace in the hole. She wanted to have her cake and eat it too, but June didn't realize that the cake was my heart and she was cutting into it with a butcher's knife while I was awake and watching. I wanted to tell her to piss off, I wanted to hang up the phone and walk away forever, but the truth was I had the morals of a pig, the pride of a javelina, and the willpower of sex junkie. I would have done to her anything she wanted, no matter how perverted, vile, and wrong it was, I would have done it. I couldn't tell her that of course, I didn't want to give it to her that easy. I had to coax it out of her, make her ache. So I played it like a pro, when in reality I was just a rookie. I couldn't talk sex. I was too awkward. There was a disconnect between my brain and my mouth when it came to dirty talk. I was not a sexy man by nature, young girls didn't throw their moistened panties at my as I crossed the street, and I didn't have the kind of body that made up for it. I tried to make my voice drop an octave, and I put on a

fake, subdued voice to vibrate through the phone. "What would you want me to do?" I asked. "Well, I'd want you to eat my pussy." She said. She must have been on fire, for she spoke with the frankness of a whore. "First I'd undress you," I said, "then I'd suck your neck and suck your tits." "Hmhmhm" she mouthed into the receiver. "Then what?" Her voice became lingering and low. "And then I'd spread your legs." "Would you penetrate me?" "Oh, I'd penetrate you. I'd enter you, slow at first, then harder." My prick moved and the veins began filling up with blood. She said "I'm really wet right now..." then, "I'll see you at nine o'clock." and hung up...

I showed up twenty-five minutes late. She had on her brown canvas jacket and her cowboy boots. We were going to one of her friend's houses for a party. It was going to be disastrous, I could feel it. "Did you write anything today?" she asked. "No." I said. "I got fired from the factory today." "What are you going to do now?" "I don't know." "I think you should write for porno mags." She said. "Porno mags?" "Yeah, get yourself a fake name and write for

a pornography magazine. All the writers do it. They pay two and three hundred dollars per story and you're writing." "I don't think I'd be good at that." I said. "Most of your stuff is almost pornographic already." She said, and she was right. "The dirtier the better with those mags." "I'll think about it." I said. We both got quiet, for our earlier conversation was on our minds. "What are you thinking about?" She asked me. "Nothing." I said. "How about you?" "What do you think?" she replied. She put her chin down and looked at me with sex in her eyes. Her bare foot was up on the dash. I moved it on my lap and began rubbing her ankle, then up her pant leg, and I could feel the two-day old stubble, prickly and thick. We had to pick up one of June's girlfriends on the way, and we arrived before we could go any further. June put her leg down and I put my hand back on the wheel.

The friend we were picking up had been wanting to fuck me for three years, but I couldn't do it because of June. I couldn't fuck June's best friend. That was wrong, even for me. She had big tits and I'm sure a big pussy, but I never found out because I couldn't have done that to June. Her name was Silvia. "Jesus god, Silvia, I can't. I'm sorry." I'd tell her. She really didn't mind, because it wasn't

that she wanted *me* per say, just my meat. She didn't believe me when I told her I had a below average cock. "No. No. You're Italian." "That doesn't matter. My brother got all the cock, not me." "You're so full of it." "Listen, it gets hard, it fucks, and it makes babies. It does everything it's supposed to; it's just not that big." "Whatever, whatever." She'd say.

Silvia had two big, old dogs that ran over to June the minute she walked in and stuck their nose in her crotch. They must have smelled what I had done to her. Silvia was getting ready in the other room, putting on blush and fire-engine red lipstick. I stood in the doorway watching June. June sat on the step trying to forget, and Silvia and her two dogs were oblivious. It was going to be a long night for all of us.

When we entered the party everyone was standing around motioning slowly to themselves to the music that was drowned out by their dull conversations. I wished I could have been a thousand miles away at that moment. I wished the morning's sun was on my shoulders and I was looking at

something I had never seen before. I wished that I was homeless, that I didn't have a thing in this world to live for, that the soles of my shoes met with foreign pavement, that I didn't love June, that I didn't keep the typewriter shackled to my neck, that the only thing that mattered to me was finding a new landscape to wake to in the morning, roaming aimlessly until getting swallowed up by a little patch of sunlight and disappearing forever. I wished money was just papers with the faces of dead men on them, and I envied people like Francis, who bit their thumb at expectation, and could describe a beautiful meadow from memory. I once knew a millionaire who gave up everything he had to go and live in a dumpster. I said to him, "But you had it all, the dream: money, fancy clothes, good cigars, expensive whiskey." "Ahh, I had nothing." He told me. "Don't you miss the fat steaks?" "Not one bit." He said. I saw him there in tattered clothes, digging through other people's garbage, and I was jealous. I was jealous because he was happy, and I wasn't. That's really what it came down to in the end, I wasn't happy. I thought I didn't have anything: a job, a woman, a care, but then I saw that old millionaire sleeping sounder on curbstones than I did on a bed stuffed with goose feathers. I didn't know what would

make me happy. I knew June could make me happy, but I didn't want to say that, because then it felt as though she was the only thumbtack I hung myself on, and if one day she decided to toss me out, I would be a ruined man. I didn't want to admit to myself that I thought of her as my only true pathway to happiness. That was too much responsibility for one person to have. I lied to myself, I told myself that I could change, and that after the long day, if June didn't pan out, I could find another that understood me the way she could, but I didn't believe it. I felt like an old boxer that fought his last fight and was too old to learn how to do anything else, that I tried to hold onto my heart, but I let too much of it slip away and now June controlled its fate, and that made me feel even lower. I had a funny sort of pride, because I didn't mind the greasy hair and the gut, or getting up on stage and reading poems about my terrible sex life, but to let June have complete power over me, letting her have the ability to melt my heart, made me feel like the biggest chump of all. That old millionaire didn't have anything but his heart, but it was intact, it only beat for him, and he died in that dumpster a happier man than I feared I could ever be. I felt like I was put out to pasture, that I was in line for the

abattoir, and much too soon. I guess, people that have it don't want it, and people that don't have it want it; for some people it's diamonds and gold, and for others it's apple cores and spoiled milk, but for me it was to see things through, fighting for what I wanted, because it was right, and when something was right, nothing else mattered.

June and I were right. You couldn't argue that. We went together like dancers in the midst of a grand waltz. At the party, June jumped into the arms of her friend, Alec. He had the style of a good looking actor of the day, with feminine eyes, but chiseled features. Alec was a fag. I didn't have anything against him, of course; in fact, I was envious of him, for homosexuality seemed to be much easier. I'm sure they had their troubles in a relationship as anyone did. People, gay or straight, were innately selfish and cruel, and it was a struggle to coexist with any of them, but the thought of no women was a good thought for a moment. Then I saw a brunette sitting on the sofa, her breasts pouring out of her blouse like pitchers of beer and those thoughts were vanquished. What was it about the female form that made the pistons in my mind pump with dirty thoughts? What was it about when June breathed in and you could see just the outlines of her ribs through her

milky skin that gave me a hard-on? Goddamn, June made my blood boil. She was like four good looking body parts stacked on top of each other to make the ultimate woman. I thought about screwing the brunette with the big chest, but only for a moment. June's auburn hair captivated me again. Many men had weaknesses, mine was auburn hair. It was my kryptonite, for a woman with auburn hair could kill me. The dark reds mixed with browns made me pant like a thirsty dog, and June wore it that way because she knew I like it. "What something to drink, Luke?" Alec asked me. "Beer will be fine." I said. Alec got me a warm beer that had been sitting on the counter. It bubbled and fizzed as I opened it and half the bottle ran over my fingers. "How about I make you a drink?" Alec asked. "Alec's a bartender." June said. "Sure." I said. "What'll ya have?" he asked, much too funny for his own good. "Make me something tropical. Surprise me." I said. Silva didn't drink and was entertaining herself in the kitchen, talking to a boy who spewed cheesy pickup lines like a car salesman surviving on commission. "Why don't we go upstairs where it's more comfortable?" Alec suggested. So, we all went upstairs to where a couple of people sat crossed legged on the floor, smoking marijuana, taking pills, and there were syringes

lying on the table. These were full blown junkies here, worse than the kinds at Emmett and Mama's; these were real users, their black veins visible through their alabaster skins, their elbows wider than their forearms, sucking on the junk like some phallic candy bar. Alec smoked some hash and offered it to me. "No. I don't smoke; only cigars and cigarettes." I said as I lit up a hand rolled cigarette. "I use papers from France." "Oh, come on Luke." Alec said. "No. You go ahead though, just not my bag..." Marijuana was a brain-duller, a real testament to the undoubtedly stupid times we lived in, not that it was all that bad itself, but the people that used it redefined dull, and there was nothing worse than the artist who depended on it. Stoned writing, was flaccid, sloppy writing that rambled on and on, mostly about peace, when there wasn't an idea further away from realization. Yet again my hypocrisy came through, for while I thought about all this, I pickled my liver with another drink. June said, "I'll have some." and Alec passed her a joint. I hated it when June smoked reefer, because she became like a zombie, lethargic, and completely uninteresting. I sat on the sofa and sipped at my drink. It was good. Alec was a talented bartender. June sat staring with a sense of hurt in her

eyes at the junkies, a face of terror she couldn't hide as they injected themselves with the stuff. June had been consumed by the glamour of the drug culture for a while, but the expressionist had died within her, along with her serious drug-doing days, and it all ended, like most things did, with a hard and sad moment in her life when everything stopped being glamorous and the unrelenting reality set in like packed dirt in a fresh grave. She had once asked me why I didn't do drugs, how I could see everyone being so *happy* and not want to be apart of it, and I told her it was because what I saw wasn't happiness, but horror, mud and blood, guts and sadness and pain. All that happiness she saw was just an illusion. Those people weren't *really* happy, they were *made* happy by chemicals and the empty promise that they'd stay that way, and there is nothing more depressing than that. There is nothing more depressing than acting happy when you're not. Unless the feeling was real, I didn't want to have it. I'd rather be miserable and know it's real, because otherwise it's not living; it's just dying with a manufactured smile on your lips..

We sat around bullshitting for a while, the party downstairs steadily evaporating until it was just me, June, Alec, and Silvia who was passed out asleep on my shoulder.

I had about cleared Alec out of all his booze, but I wouldn't have known it, for he made his drinks so smooth and delicious. "How about this boyfriend of June's, huh Luke? What do you make of him? Do you think she should leave him, too?" Alec asked me. I just paused for a moment and let out laughter only June fully understood. "The guys an asshole," I said, "a real fucking bore. He's like watching cat piss dry." June kind of slumped down and wished she could have died from embarrassment. "I never heard the bastard say one stimulating thing." I continued. I was drunk, but not drunk enough to not be able to control what I was saying. I was trying to throw digs, and hurt June a little. I don't know why, the evil in me I suppose, or maybe I was secretly wishing by me saying it, she would realize it was true, and maybe when this visit was over and she was back up there with him she would be able to see it. From what I could tell, he was good to her, which was more than most of her other boyfriends could say, they treated her like absolute dog shit, at least he was kind to her, but so goddamn uninteresting. He had no fire, no balls, no *umph*. He was a fan of my poetry which I hated, and he even invited me to read at a charity benefit he was holding. I told him to go piss up a rope, because I could have used

the exposure, and I could of use the little money he had offered me to do it, but it was much too painful, and I couldn't be sure of how I would have handled it, perhaps taking a bite out of his face, or ripping a nasty chunk out of his hair, his boring fucking hair. Yeah, yeah, he was kind, but I could have been both, kind and full of verve... And in a strange way I felt bad for him; because he was sitting at home twiddling his thumbs while June and I were painting the whole damn town red with lust. I was not one to participate in an affair, and if I were a better man I wouldn't have humped June the way I did the night before, but I wasn't. I thought about the telephone call between June and I, and of how if he heard it what a terrible deflated balloon his heart would be. I took one final, long drag from my drink went to take a piss.

The rush I felt from standing up disoriented me and I stumbled into the toilet. I had to work to get my penis out of my pants, and when I did, I leaned over too far and my scarf got soaked in urine. I came out and decided not to sit back down. I rarely sat, but whenever I stood it would make people feel uncomfortable as if I was looming over them. "Are you okay?" June asked, pretty drunk at this point. "Fine, fine, baby." I said. "We were just talking

about how terrible the art market is today." Alec said, "It's all about money and not about the art." "Get used to it, boy. Everything there ever was has to do with money. "Not everything." He said. "Like what?" I asked. "...People." He let out meekly. I laughed. "I wish I was as naïve as you. I wish I didn't believe people were consumed by money and greed, that wives didn't kill their husbands for the insurance, that we are all not swimming in a big river of dirty money." "You're so cynical." He said. "That's the way people have made me. It's foolish to be anything else in a world like ours." "No, man, when life gets too rough you just have to say, 'fuck it,' that's my attitude." Spoken like a man who hadn't seen much, or who had, but hadn't lived long enough to feel the burn of their repercussions. *Fuck it*, I thought. What a miserable philosophy, it seemed like something the halfwit student, masturbating under the desk in the back of class with a *thud, thud, thud*, would write in the pages of his notebook, *fuck it*. "That's no way to be." I said, "I live for mixing things up, stirring the shit, asking questions and refusing their answers. You got to learn how to kick up the dust, that's what it's all about." It seemed like a tired old chant that I kept on repeating, preaching to others on how

to be *alive*. I didn't want to say it anymore. "Why don't we get going?" June interjected. "Oh, so soon, June?" Alec said. "Yeah, it's late and we're all pretty beat." June and Alec said their goodbyes and we shook hands. "You're an asshole," he said, "brutally honest." he said to me. "I wouldn't have it any other way." I replied, "You're a good fag, and a better bartender." He reached down and grabbed my crotch. I let his hand rest there for a moment. "Oh! Luke, stop it!" Silvia shrieked. "Until next time." Alec said, like a great female film star, putting his mouth to his hand and blowing us kisses with a *mu-wah* sound as if we were on some ancient railroad and he was bidding us farewell as the train pulled out of the station, him hanging from the window, waving us goodbye in the steam.

I dropped off Silvia and headed to my apartment. June and I got upstairs and undressed. She looked hesitant as I got into bed, thinking perhaps it wasn't the best idea. "I'm not going to try and fuck you." I said. "Don't say things like that." She said. We both got under the covers and I turned out the light. "I'm sorry." I whispered. "Sorry for what?" "Sorry for the things I said earlier. They were cruel." "Yes they were." She said. I wasn't sorry for saying them, but I was sorry that they hurt her. I

reached down between us and took her hand in mine. Our fingers interlocked, and she was cold. I wanted to say I was sorry for a lot of other things, but I could see her peering at me through the dark and I didn't say anything else. We rolled over and went to sleep.

21

I woke up at four a.m. The room was still a dark blue and June was up against me. I couldn't fall back to sleep, but my left arm was dead asleep from laying on it. My other hand was up on June's ass, and in her sleep she nestled and backed up into my crotch. It took everything I had to not slip it in, but I rubbed the head of my prick along her lower back. Finally, I finagled my arm from under my body and threw it over my head. As soon as I did this, it seemed as though one thousand needles made their way into my flesh, or thirty pounds of maggots in the mattresses had been sucking on me as I slept. I thought about getting up and shaking my arm until the blood returned, but my spot in bed was so warm and inviting, and June's body rested so kindly next to mine that I didn't want to leave. I stretched a bit and my foot reached into the cold corner of

the bed sheet. That was a small thing in life that I prized, the cold corner of the bed at four a.m. That made all the calamities of existence rest on their laurels for a moment, hang up their hat, and let me take a shot at joy.

I eventually fell back to sleep and when I woke June was gone. That was a bitter feeling, seeing the sunken in mattresses from where her body had been. It made you feel like a gas tank on empty. I went to the showers at the end of the hall, and it was late enough in the afternoon that no one else was in there. I couldn't shower if there were other people around, their disgusting bodies, their birthmarks, and their moles like flies on the walls of an outhouse. There were puddles of cold water in the uneven tile and I wore my stockings until the shower water made the floor hot. I needed a wash, I couldn't remember how many days it had been, and I stunk of a dozen punched out cigarette butts, and about a case of oily beer. My armpits reeked of B.O. and the stench from my balls climbed its way up until I could smell them without having to bend over. The water felt good. I turned the nozzle, making the water hotter. I don't know what it was about showers in the afternoon, but I couldn't make the water hot enough. At night I would leave it warm, sometimes even cold, but

something about the day made my body tolerant to extreme heat, and the entire bathhouse steamed up and it rippled at the windows in mad spirals. I left my hair damp and my armpits moist because it felt good to walk around outside still a little wet. It almost made you feel reborn when the wind blew and it was as if you were carrying bags of ice between your arms. It was a cold day, just a few days before Christmas, but the sun was out and made it surprisingly warm and I walked down the street feeling better than I had felt since June had arrived.

It was about two-thirty in the afternoon and I didn't have a place in the world to be. That was not a depressing fact, but a beautiful one. I often looked at people who passed me on the street, their heads down, going to work, going to school, going to meet their mistress, always going somewhere. What horrible lives they must lead, always moving toward a direction. I was a driven person, but only about my art. I had never been motivated to do anything else. In school I failed all my classes; I'd just sit in the back of the room and imagine having sex with the teacher. You really couldn't blame me, for the material was so uninteresting, *designed for the masses*, as they put it. Well, the masses were morons, and besides the teacher was

my kind of woman, intellectual and sarcastic. She had good, strong legs and a plump ass. Her dresses fell just above her ankle, but my imagination took care of the rest. She was dignified, the only dignified woman I had ever been attracted to, and she was the kind of woman you didn't want to imagine going to the bathroom, or having a cold. Those things just didn't happen to women like that. When she farted it came out with a *pssst*, and it smelled like a bouquet of stargazer lilies.

The school I went to then was an art school and most of the faculty had been former students themselves and all of them were artists, the lowest kind of course, the art teacher a failed Picasso, the film teacher a failed Fellini, the English teacher a failed Dostoevsky, the theater teacher a failed Reinhardt, and on and on. They taught not because they loved it, but because it was their last ditch effort at calling themselves artists and I pitied them for it, but also respected them for not throwing in the towel completely. I majored in creative writing and that was the year I discovered what a complete waste school was for a writer. There wasn't one thing a creative writing class could teach you about being a writer, not one damn thing. The only reason I actually

attended class was the teacher and her mystery legs and snatch that I daydreamed about. She was a good writer, Ms. Pruett, but it never amounted to much, and as a result she found herself looking at ugly faces every day, people who really didn't care about the craft, just looking for an easy class. I believe she held them in as much contempt as I did, for we would often speak about it after class, how she was fed up with the students, how there was no getting through to some of them. She was a good ear to talk into, and when I felt quite alone, as I did a lot in those school days, I'd talk to her, and she'd read my poetry about masturbating and my female troubles that were now laughable compared to June and how she left my heart like a misshapen egg.

I got kicked out of that school after the first year due to grades and in the eyes of the private school system I was no longer an artist. But every great artist was kicked out of art school, weren't they? ...I feel that that's the moment I truly became a poet, when my fellow poets rejected me as one, and all the girls would cringe as I read allowed my poems of sorrow and disgust. "*You can't write poetry about your bowel moments!*" they would scream at me and run away. I read books about authors and all the

ass they got because of their writings and poetry, but it must have been after highschool, because girls looked at me as if I were the Elephant Man or as though I had gonorrhoea. The girls were no better at my new school, but I enrolled into a public highschool, which had sports teams and loose cheerleaders. Although I dreaded it each morning, it fit me better. Everyone knew they were about as important as roach shit, (with the exceptions of the big, buck, white boy quarter backs that all came from places like *Oklahoma*) as apposed to the art school, where everyone walked around like they had all painted the Mona Lisa. No one knew who I was or cared about poetry, and they all left me alone because I looked mean and nasty and had a full grown beard by tenth year. During the class period, I'd write poetry on a little pad of paper I took from the grocery store pharmacy that had the words *United Health & Services Co.* at the top of it. Sometimes I would doodle lewd drawings of the girls in my class, but I got most of my early work done during those school days on that little pad of paper, and even though I don't miss a single day, I miss the period of time and the misery I felt, because I felt a whole new misery as an adult, and this misery couldn't be discredited as being childish or inane, it was the misery that counts.

As I walked down the street I passed a bookstore, and what did I see in the window but a book by my old, dwarf lover, Sue Anne. You did it honey, you got published, I thought to myself. I entered the bookstore and it smelled good, like paper and glue and dust. I went over to the shelf near the window and picked up a copy of Sue's book. The title was *Men & Women*. I cringed a bit, because she didn't know bunk about men and woman. There was a little picture of her on the back, looking clean and wholesome, like the publishers had beaten the fight out of her, drained her fluids, embalmed her and propped her up for the cameras. I'm sure she kissed ass to get the deal, let them dice up her words, rework them, rewrite them, recreate them and she took it all like a mule, but they hadn't known her when it was three in the morning, stomping around like a pissed off circus midget, drunk off of half a beer, hollering and dancing, her tongue going from a sophisticated muscle to a lowdown, gritty hunk of flesh, spitting, and spewing words vulgar enough to make a sailor blush, like I had seen so many nights.

I bought a copy of her book and took it back to my apartment. It was a short novel, maybe fifty thousand words and a lot of it was fluff, you know, *the deer dipped his muscular neck down into the pond to drink. It created ripples and the sun that shown over the mountains came down in golden, stretching rays that lit all the flowers...* and so on. The first two or three pages were like that, and usually at that point I throw the book in the garbage, but since it was Sue's book I wanted to finish it. As I read I could see some of the characters were based on former lovers she had been with, and she used the exact words to describe them in the book as she used to describe them to me. I always liked that time in the relationship, when you've been with them long enough to tell each other about your past lovers, your past fucks, and it seems as though you'll never enter that group of people, that you are somehow different, that when it's over she won't speak of you the way she spoke about these other men... but that's when I got to chapter six and read: *Charlie was a writer as well, but I didn't have the heart to tell him he wasn't any good. He was passionate about his work and on the nights that he'd parade around the room, screaming and cursing, hating things for the sake of hating them, fish for*

swimming, the earth for spinning, writing with the flow of a small rowboat on a choppy sea, I lied to him. I told him he was the artist the world just wasn't ready for and one day he'd be bigger than his champions, Hemingway, Celine, Fitzgerald, and cummings. Charlie wasn't a good man. That's what was missing from his work, goodness. The passion was there, but it lacked that sentimental quality, which made it human. He was a terrible lover, humping, humping, humping and then rolling off to snort like a freshly fed pig as he slept. It wasn't love I felt for him, but more of a misguided lust and pity. One night he walked out on me, and I never heard from him again... I slammed the book shut and started digging through my bedside table. I was looking for my address book, which had Sue's old telephone number in it. I only prayed it still worked. I found the number and started spinning the dial on my telephone, my fingers too big for the holes. It rang twice and then I heard her tiny voice. "Hello?" "You fucking bitch!" I yelled. "Luke?!" she sounded surprised, "is that you?" "Oh, it's me, baby. I just read your book." "Oh..." she said, "Well, I didn't write anything that wasn't true." "YOU FUCKING BITCH!" I yelled again. "You walked out on me!" "Bullshit! I dropped you off, there's a difference!" "It doesn't

matter; you were too hung up on that bitch June, to be with anyone else." "Hey! When I'm with a woman, I'm with a woman." "Like you were with me when you left me at my house and I never heard from you again?" "You got a lot of balls, girly, calling me a bad man, a bad fuck, and most horribly a bad poet. You couldn't write yourself out of a brown paper bag!" "Oh, stop being such a baby. I'm sure you've written hundreds of poems about how much you hated me." "Yes, but none of them ever got published!" I heard her phone hit the cradle and it went dead.

I dialed June. She didn't answer for a long time. "What are the plans for tonight?" "There is a play at the *Art House A-Go-Go* that I wanted to see. Interested?" "Yeah, sure, when does it start?" "Eight o'clock." "I'll pick you up at seven-thirty." We hung up. Now that was a phone call, the brief exchange of information, none of that "Hello, how are you?" or "How's grandma's goiter?" stuff. I had no interest in seeing this play, but the things you'd do for the woman you loved. The *Art House A-Go-Go* was for the acts that didn't get picked up by Broadway, or off-Broadway

either for that matter, but it was an interesting place none the less; full of performance artists, comedians and wannabe Houdinis for the nights they held magic shows. I had gone there with June once before when we were still together and we saw an exhibition entitled *Zombie Jesus*. It was a painting of an undead Jesus Christ walking with his arms out just like the good old creatures you read about in science fiction magazines. To top it all off, there was a short, bald man next to a statuesque woman almost seven feet tall, dressed up like the television actress Vampira with straight black hair that came down to her pale, perfectly round breasts, and dressed in a long black gown that cut into a giant V all the way down her middle, giving out Holy (or in this case *Un-Holy*) Communion, with little rice patties and cheap red wine in a golden chalice. It was something to behold, the strangeness of it all. There were pictures on the walls of Satan and freakish looking creatures with large tongues and horns. It was just as ridiculous to me as being very religious, God fearing and all that. The idea of Hell and the three headed dog, and the fire and torment maybe even seemed more ridiculous to me than sitting on a cloud with all your relatives and favorite celebrities up in Heaven. But religion was the

equalizer, no one knew any better than anybody else, and I liked that. The Pope and a bum on the street knew the exact same about God, the Devil, Heaven and Hell, life and death, and that justified my disbelief. I wished that I was able to buy into it all, that I believed the terrible people of the world would experience some divine justice, but I didn't. At the end of the day, someone had made the whole thing up, just as the Greeks invented their Gods to explain what they couldn't, and as a fiction writer myself, I knew what an easy thing it was to convince people of anything, just say it enough times until they forget what their own opinions were and believed in yours. That's all it took, good salesmanship. I pitied and envied the people that believed in God at the same time. I pitied them because they were apart of the biggest, most unbelievable cabal ever orchestrated, but I envied them because at night when they slept, they felt like something was watching over them, and that didn't make you feel so alone. I understood why people had faith; it was easier, easier to believe everything had a reason, because it was just too hard to think that it didn't. I was a curious man, and curiosity and faith didn't mix well. I wanted answers to too many unanswerable questions, so I'd pledge allegiance to

nothing. I wouldn't claim to know what no one knew, and I'd make my own way, slinging my typewriter like a cross.

The Art House A-Go-Go played independent and foreign films as well, and the spring before I had gone to see Salvador Dali's film *Un Chien andalou*, with the famous scene of a young woman getting her eyeball sliced open with a straight razor, and the spring before that, they played Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*; I saw it twelve times. I tried to drag June to it, but she always fell asleep in the theater if she had to read subtitles. She loved the Art House though, because of all the peculiar people, and the sex of it all. There was a definite sex that lived there, the feeling of depravity, of pure perversion, it was like vaudeville, gorilla theatre, or Tin Pan Alley, a house full of artists, a whole generation of artists, exchanging work, singing melodramatic ballads and novelty songs; always looking for strange and new acts, the weirder the better: belly dancers, contortionists, fire swallowers, anything and everything, and to go there made you feel very bizarre, but at the same time very normal, because whatever it was you did when no one was looking seemed commonplace compared to some of the things I had seen at the Art House A-Go-Go.

We walked side by side along the avenue in front of the Art House and she asked me very sweetly and very innocently, "Will you hold my hand?" I felt like such a fool for she must of felt so lonely, my hands by my sides, hers wanting to hold mine, but were nervous, so I grabbed her hand and squeezed. We leaned up against the metal fence, which sunk back from our weight, and we kissed there for a while. When I yanked away, she pulled me back, her thin upper lip and her meaty bottom up against mine, lightly biting, sinking her teeth into my lower lip, just soft enough as not to draw blood. My guts quivered when I imagined it. That is one of the first memories I had of June, and it saddened me to think about it, because we both had come so far and changed so much since then, or perhaps she was the one that changed and I had stayed the same, and sitting there in my apartment after hanging up with her, I wasn't sure which one was worse...

I lit a cigarette and opened the window. I didn't mind the smoke up until the moment I finished my cigarette, and then I couldn't stand the reeking smell. I had once known a woman named Ruthie, who always smelled like a mound of one hundred wet cigarette stubs. She only had one eye and wore an eye patch to cover the fleshy socket, which looked like

a fish mouth when she blinked. She'd smoke four packs of cigarettes a day, her teeth brownish-yellow, but strong as cast-iron, and she'd do a trick where she'd inhale and then lift up her eye patch and blow the smoke through the hole. Now there was a woman who had some character, I thought. They didn't make woman like her anymore, she made all the others seem so plain, so banal. Ruthie was hard as nails, a war-wife, and a volunteer nurse for the Red Cross during the war effort. That's how she lost her eye, a soldier no more than seventeen or eighteen years old came in with his legs blown off, she leaned over the bed to restrain him and he gouged out her eye with his right thumb. "Popped out like a plum." She said, holding her thumb up like Jack Horner. I put my cigarette out on the window sill, and reread Sue Anne's passage about me. It made me angrier the second time. Some of it was true, I couldn't argue that. I wasn't good to Sue, because my heart and mind didn't belong to her. I had started seeing Sue about a month after June and I had split, and I was just using her because it made me feel good to have a woman around. Sue wanted to say *I love you* after about twelve minutes of knowing each other, even though she didn't love me and she knew I didn't love her, but we said it anyway because it was something she

needed. It didn't bother me so much that she called me a bad man, or that she thought my kisses were lousy, they were and I was, but it was that she called me a bad poet. That hurt me. I tried never to listen to anyone about my writing, but sometimes it would seep through and burn my pride a bit, especially now that it was in print. Even though I hated Sue for doing what she had done, it also stroked my ego, and replenished my arrogance, for I was now a character in the history of literary fiction, and when people read it they'd think to themselves, *what a terrible man. I wonder if he's real...* and I will be, alive on the same planet as them, perhaps even passing them on the street, the living, breathing monster they had only read about in books.

I figured I would stop by the bar like usual before I picked up June, blow off some steam, and see what the boys and Tuesday had to say about the book, but then I decided it would only make things worse. Mickey, Bill and Francis would only hound me and bust my ass, and I'd never hear the end of it, so I put the book on my bookshelf and starting getting ready for the play. I wanted to look good, really make it hard on June. I found my cleanest button down shirt and tucked it into my pants. It was maroon colored and made

me look thin. I took a pair of scissors down to the washroom and trimmed the beard. The chunks of hair fell like bullets into the sink. After a little water through my head hair, slicking it back behind my ears, and a couple drips from the cologne I felt all right. I had hardly eaten anything since June had been in town, my mind too in shambles to concentrate on anything else, even eating, so I didn't have to defecate, but I thought I better try so I didn't have to go during the play. Hunched over the toilet bowl, my ass a few inches in the air, the seat too disgusting to sit down on, I pushed trying to get it started, but nothing came. I pulled up my pants and went downstairs. My landlady sat behind her desk going through the mail. "Payment is due this Thursday, Luke." She said, without looking up to see that it was me. "I know. I know." I said. "I'm not taking it late this time, Luke. If you don't have it on Thursday you're out of here." "Say, any mail for me?" "No mail." "Goddamn it." I said under my breath. "Still waiting for those rejection letters?" she asked, mocking me. I didn't say anything back. After all the years I had been there, she had never warmed up to me, and every month she threatened to kick me out if I was late on payment, but never did. When I moved in I told her that

I was a writer, like it made me dignified, so she didn't think I was just another flunky. She was not impressed, "My oldest son is a writer." She said. "It's done nothing for him. You should consider getting a real profession." Sometimes wanting to be a writer seemed like a joke job, because it never made you money and you weren't famous until you were dead. People looked down on it; women liked dentists over artists, money over creation. It seemed that to be taken seriously you had to work a blue collar job and bring your lunch to work in a pale. But then you saw guys like Sherwood Anderson and Dylan Thomas, and of course Hemingway and they made the work seem real, important. They reminded you that you weren't just chasing a dream, they had done it... someone had made it.

I once heard a story about a man getting beaten to death with a hardback copy of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. As it went, the man was involved in an affair with a woman. Her husband came home while they were in bed together, so he grabbed the biggest book off the shelf and bludgeoned the man to death with it. It was always a joke among the

writers who had told me the story, because someone had finally found a use for old Leo's overrated epic. But now the story ran around in my head as I drove, because I was involved in an affair. Even though June and I hadn't had sex during her visit, we were still fooling around, our minds simmering in our skulls, our privates aching for each other, and no matter how you said it, it was cheating, probably much worse than if it was just sexual. It was the kind of cheat where everybody was losing, because June's boyfriend lost in the traditional sense, I was screwing him over plain and simple, but June and I also lost because it wasn't just a reckoning, a thumbing sexual frenzy, it was a long, painful drag through the mud, fighting the whole way, getting gravel in your teeth, because it was something that existed before her boyfriend, and knowing June, would go on long after him. We didn't let the whole beast out in one glorious, vile act of deception, we did it in short bursts, kissing, humping, fondling, but then she found some strength to walk away. We had been in scenarios like these ones before. It was a few years ago and she was with some flunky asshole, her heart wrapped up in his fingers, while I stood and watched through the windows, my heart getting smaller and smaller at the sight of it. We had gone out for

my birthday and then we went back to my apartment. She and I sat on the sofa, her head leaning against my shoulder.

"Read me some of your poems." She said. I grabbed a stack and read some of the love poems I had written for her. We held each other close and I took off her blouse. I put my hand on her left breast and we stared at each other. "I want to kiss you right now." I said stupidly, instead of just doing it. "I better go." She said. It seemed like those were her favorite words, because despite how much pain they caused, she said them all the time. In my mind I'd think, *soon, it will be soon that we'll be together. I need to hold on, just hold on a bit longer.* I said that to myself because as the number of men grew larger, June and I continued to fall into those situations. The more in love she said she was with these other men, the harder it was for her to fight me off. She was lying to herself about me, she wanted it, but thought she couldn't have it, or that she shouldn't have it. It wasn't fair, because I loved her more, but things weren't measured in love, and before you understood how unfair things were first hand, the saying "nothing's fair" seemed like a flip, bogus psalm without much meaning, but now it hit you like sledgehammers. Behind every man there would be me holding a bouquet of dead

flowers in the rain, waiting patiently for a train that might've never come.

25

It was only five-thirty. It seemed now that time was a slug on a branch, and I was suffocating with somberness. I needed something to drink, but I didn't want to go to my bar, too many faces I didn't feel like facing in there, Tuesday with her sweetness, Bill with his alien detachment, Mickey with the lingering stench of a fresh lie still on his teeth, and Francis with his downright madness. Trying to contain Francis, to just sit quietly and have a drink with him, was like trying to keep the deck of a ship dry during a windstorm. I knew of another bar on the black side of town, which had been a spot during Prohibition for mobsters and crooked politicians to drink and gamble. The mayor that preached against booze during the day spent his nights drinking his ass off, receiving payoffs and bribes, cupping his chubby palm around the asses of the whores. In those days, and in these days, and for all the days to come, the river of hypocrisy ran deeper and wider than the Mississippi. The bar was built below ground, down a narrow

set of stairs and into the basement. They had dug out the basement of the house next door as well to make it larger. Policemen on the outside saw only two, quiet houses in the ghetto, but on the inside, acts that could've very well unraveled the idea of law and order in America were taking place. There was no chance of getting busted either, for the mafia ran everything, and they had the mayor in their pocket, who turned around and had the police in his pocket, and it was one large stroke-fest, everybody jerking off somebody else, until you couldn't tell whose hands were whose. Now it was a regular bar, but still totally secret, mostly for the blacks that lived in the neighborhood. Emmett had taken me there once before and he told me the stories about the police and the mayor and the gangsters.

It was a little bit out of the way, but I would just have to cross over the bridge to get to June's place, and it seemed worth it to see some fresh faces, maybe they'd pull me out of this funk I was in. I was feeling especially low, I don't know why, but I was blue as a dog. I hadn't written in a few days and my thoughts were getting bottled up. That always was a slow death for me. I didn't believe in *writer's block*, it was a made up superstition, an excuse for untalented writers, but I did believe in the times when

you knew what you wanted to say, but didn't know how to say it. It was a slow, miserable torture to have all that in your head but no matter how it came out, it just didn't sound right. You were either oversimplifying it, or not simplifying it enough. In the young days of a writer you had to struggle with finding your own voice, your own style. You'd steal from the other writers and you'd try to mimic them, and it was always a shameful thing, but everyone did it. My first work seemed as though a much less talented Hemingway lived in my apartment and punched at the typer while standing up, and I sat on the bed watching. Finally you realized that it's a dark and dismal world trying to remain in their shadow and to be your own writer you not only had to step out of the shadow, but smash it completely. After that realization you really found the pleasure of writing, it became like ejaculating, like being in the throws with a woman and sniffing their neck, like putting the needle on the record and hearing that sweet music come off that magic material.

I pulled along the street, but I couldn't remember which house it was. It seemed like a long dead street, with cracked pavement, almost as if no one had walked along it in fifty years. I parked my car and got out. I could hear

the faint sound of music coming from somewhere. I followed it to a house where there was a sign hanging above the doorway that read, *It Ain't No Sin, Come On In!* I opened the front door and the music got louder. I could hear the horns blasting, the strange cosmic sounds thumping and pumping. There was an old Negro man sitting at a table near the door which led to the downstairs. "You lost?" He said to me. "No sir, I believe I'm in the right place. Do you know a musician named Emmett and his woman Mama?" "Why sure. Emmett's downstairs now. How do you know him?" "We're friends." He looked at me in disbelief. "Well, if he and you are friends, he wouldn't mind vouching for you. What's your name, boy?" "Luke Hurt." I said. The old man wore black pants, a pale yellow shirt with a black leather vest over it, and a black Fedora hat. He looked like all the Negro descriptions in all of Raymond Chandler's novels. He opened the door and a cloud of smoke fell out as if it had made fists and was pounding at the door to get out. A few minutes passed and Emmett emerged with the old man a few steps behind him. "Luke! You just keep popping up." Emmett said. "He's all right, Willie." Emmett said to the old man. "All right, Emmett." Willie put sat back down and put his head in his arms to sleep. As we walked down the very

narrow steps Emmett turned to me and said, "This might be something that interests you. Langston Hughes made time right here." "What?" I said. "You heard right. Langston Hughes, laureate of Harlem, made love on these steps."... Emmett told me to sit down and ordered me a drink. He went up and joined the band just as they were finishing. Everyone began clapping and cheering them on, shouting out requests. I could see Emmett whispering to the others and then they began playing my favorite jazz song *Viper Mad*. It was a song I had heard only a handful of times, but each time it stuck with me in a new and different way. Emmett winked at me and began singing, *Just viper mad, must have my fun, I'm never sad, it can be done, the people are talking, but I don't care, I'm twenty-one, far from done, I've just begun! Wrap your chops, grab this stick of tea, blow this gage and get high with me! Good tea is my weakness, I know its bad, it sends me gate, and I can't wait, I'm viper mad!* And then the band picked up, playing an overpowering wave of sound, truly crackling, making your eardrums thump, making the hairs stand up on the back of your neck and scream gospel hymns, and sweat drip down your face as you stomped to the beat. Listening to that song it made me feel happy, like I was young and mean and full of

piss and vinegar, ready to go the fifteenth round. I wanted to be like the man in the song, drink good tea and never be sad, to just have started breaking rules and mixing things up, showing no signs of slowing down or giving in. I wanted to be able to let this whole thing with June just roll off my shoulders, to be above it, to laugh in the face of my sorrows. I wanted more than anything to not care, because no matter what I did, it always seemed that I cared more than she did, that I would be the one left with a hole in their heart. I wished I could enjoy those moments without having June in the back of my mind. She was always there like a cancer, or a faucet drip in the middle of the night. My feelings on the matter changed more often than the weather, for when I was in bed with her I was certain she loved me, but then, sitting there in that bar, the woman dancing for me, my prick like a dried up fig, I wasn't sure if I was just something June would be able to shake off like a bad dream. If I didn't keep trying, would I just fade into the background? Was my hand only around her heart because I kept it there? If I left, would she remember me? I drank my drink and looked around at the walls, at the bartender, at the women, at the men, and I couldn't help but feel like a real part of American history, listening to

a music that was born in America, shouldering through the memories of the ones that had been there before me like a crowd, sitting where corrupt diplomats sat, underground in a black neighborhood, the only white man for miles, and despite my dreams of Paris, I felt as though it was a very sad, yet proud moment to be an American writer.

26

"You should play an instrument." Emmett said, patting his forehead with a towel one of the waitresses brought him. "Not me. I've preached too loud about the writing game to try anything else now." "You ever thought what you'll do if the writing thing didn't work out?" "Almost every moment I'm awake." I said. "If you could be anything else, what would it be?" "If I could be anything else, I'd be a jazz guitarist, like Django Reinhardt." "Ah, you'll never be as good as Django." Emmett said. "I wouldn't want to be as good, I'd want to be better." "Well, then I guess it's best you stick with the writing game." We both laughed a bit. Django was a gypsy guitar player from France that played so beautifully it made dogs weep. Just listening to him made me want to pack away the typewriter and pick up a guitar.

He manipulated the strings to his own liking, tweaked and bent them, made his fingers dance. He came from nothing, couldn't read or write, all he knew was that guitar and I admired that. Emmett looked at me with big eyes. Mama must have told him about my problems. We sat in silence for a moment, the band starting up again, the men on the other side of the room hollering at the roulette wheel. "I wish I could tell you what to do, Luke, but I just can't. Sometimes a man just has to go it alone." "I know." I said, "I didn't come here for your help." "I know you didn't, I just had to let you know." It was amazing how much two men with such different backgrounds and different lives could say without actually speaking that much at all. We spoke of June without mentioning her name, because it really wasn't about June, he couldn't have helped me with any woman. Emmett couldn't help me because he had found Mama out of pure luck, just the way I had found June, and neither of us knew what to do with a good thing once we got it. We exploited the goodness until we found fault, some sort of defense mechanism that only ended up crippling us worse. Emmett raised his arm up to call over the waitress. "Two more." He said. "After this I've got to go." I said. "I understand, Luke." The drinks came and we drank them down.

We stood, Emmett slapped his belly and we said our goodbyes.

27

I hadn't drunk enough to feel good, so I was just extremely tired. The Jack Daniels I shared with Emmett slipped its way into my system and I felt my eyes get heavy as I drove over the bridge to June's. My car pattered along like a beached whale on roller-skates, some dark women of the night stalking the streets, calling out to me, "*Twenty-fives bucks!*" I looked at my timepiece, seven-ten, but it twelve minutes slow, so it was seven-twenty-two. I pulled up in front of June's house and it seemed as through these past few nights were running together like soggy ink on a newspaper page, all of them started out the same, and all of them ended with a little bit of me left behind, broken and dejected. I knocked on the door and the dogs started going crazy, barking and squeaking and yelping, their nails scratching at the door. June didn't answer at first, so I knocked again. The dogs went even crazier and I could see their little heads through the windows, their breath fogging up the glass. Finally, June came to the door. "Just

come in!" she said. "I left the door unlocked because I was doing my hair." "I'm sorry." I said. "I tell you every time you come here, don't knock, just come in." "I've been knocking on doors ever since I started going places. It feels wrong to just walk in." She shrugged and sniffed the air. "You smell like an ashtray. Where have you been?" "A little club I know downtown, just over the bridge.. Say, you got anything to drink? I'm tired as hell." "Do you have to drink tonight? There are going to be a lot of important people there, people that could really help me, and I don't want you embarrassing me." "You want someone with some goddamn flavor? If I don't drink some more, I'm going to be asleep before the opening curtain." "Look in the cupboard." She said. I found some vodka and watered it down. "I better have some too." She took a shot and it made her shake. "You need to be polite tonight." "Have I ever not been?" I said, jokingly. "And no little jokes. Don't make fun of them." "Is it my fault they are such easy targets?" "You're not as smart as you think you are, Luke, not as funny either." "You're a whore." I said. June was worried about impressing some high class theater people, because she desperately wanted to be apart of them, so I had to be on my best behavior. She was truly a brilliant artist, creating things

that legitimately made me stop in my tracks and gaze, but she was victim of nobody paying any attention. The truth was, it really didn't matter how good you were, the only thing that mattered was getting the right people to see you, and her exposure was trumped by living in a crummy town hidden within the mountains that no great director or producer gave two shits about. These were the politics of the art she didn't understand, or perhaps she understood them, but didn't abide by them. June and I were ruffians, outsiders, and I thought that connected us in a strange and indefinable way. We would put the stereo on in the middle of the night, cranking up the dial all the way and we'd sit behind the bed and laugh as angry neighbors pounded their fists on the door. We didn't care. We were free. We were as free and two poor, probably insane people could be. She used to say she wanted to change the world, although she didn't know how yet, wanting to leave this place better than the way she found it, but over the years she had stopped talking that way. It's not that I actually believed she could change the world, but it was the desire that counted; it was the romantic thoughts that blinded you from what a sad and lonely heap it was that we all walked around on, and she was a good artist, which was more than most

could say. June had power to do something of importance. I knew she had the desire to be great, but sometimes I doubted her conviction, you had to know, because it made the failure much more glorified in the end, better than just losing steam along the way and giving up. You had to go out with some balls. It seemed as though she had a beautiful flower that was always in danger of getting crushed, that's how fragile it was, that at any moment it could vanish. If you lived any lower than what your legend could've been, you would be completely forgotten and that saddened me, because June deserved to be remembered.

When June and I got into the car I showed her Sue's book. She laughed as she read the passage describing me. "You're not *that* bad of a lover." She said. "Thank you." I said. "And I think your writings can be quite beautiful at times." That made me feel good, because what was a bad fuck in the scheme of things? We drove on until we got to the Art House. Inside the lobby we bought our tickets. "Did you write today?" she asked. "No." I said, "I've had too much on my mind." We looked at each other for she knew I was being coy, talking about her. "Did you look for a job today?" "No." I said... Being in the Art House again with June was strange. It made me depressed and nostalgic at the

same time, two feelings that often went hand in hand. I could tell she was feeling it to, but she had so many other memories with other people and other men in the Art House that I couldn't be sure if the memories she was thinking of were of me or someone else. June looked exceptionally good. I didn't know if it was because she really looked that good or if it was because I was so horny for her. Every time I was around her my blood simmered and bubbled inside the veins, and shot out of my brain like a legion of racehorses. I was so full of lust and semen all the time that the pheromones must have poured out of me and I'd get sudden erections around June that I had to hide by walking a bit slouched. In the theater I noticed her legs in tight denim jeans that ended in white high heels. It drove me mad sitting there, nothing in the world stopping me from getting up, stripping nude, and running around the theater, nothing stopping me from kissing June, nothing except this invisible wall of self doubt that pledged me. She looked so fine sitting there, three hundred miles from her man, but a seat away from me. I leaned over and whispered, "You're legs, baby, your goddamn legs are killing me." "Oh, you're just drunk." "No, I'm telling you. The booze wore off an hour ago, this is all me, baby, and I'm telling you your

legs are works of art." Before she could respond the lights went out and the play began. My eyes adjusted to the darkness and I could see the outline of June's legs, like arrowheads. They were the reason for Ulysses' Odyssey, and I would've traveled ten years to get between them again. It was no Homer, but it was something.

28

When the play ended we stood in the lobby surrounded by actors and actresses glad-handing each other, giving each other roses and crying over a mediocre performance in a low budget production, but this was Broadway for these people, this was the closest they'd ever get to glory. The play itself was so man-hating, every woman in there a misandrist, and they had the balls to call me a misogynist. Women have come up to me after poetry readings and said, "*You're despicable! You just hate women! How you use 'mankind,' it's HUMAN kind..*" and on and on. It wasn't that I hated women, I loved them. I thought women were the finest creatures to walk a miserable earth, but they had just treated me so damn bad. They were the bugs that rose to the top of the trashcan, and men where the worms at the

bottom. It wasn't my fault the bugs at the top had fat asses and nice tits. If anything, it was fair to call me misanthropic, because I didn't choose a gender to hate; as far as I was concerned everyone was guilty and deserved to be on death row... June was hardly paying attention to me, for when we got among crowds like these, I wasn't an artist enough; I didn't wear a scarf or a hat to signify my role as a fraud hack. You could always tell a theater actor by the way they carried themselves, they were obnoxious, ready to break out into scene at any moment, completely shameless people they were. Not only was a writer an outcast from every day people, but they were an outcast from other artists as well, and most people only knew poetry as, *Roses are red and violets are blue*, so when they saw me, the old shoes, the cum stained pants, the torn jacket, the unkempt hair and beard, they said, "*You write poetry?*" as if you had to look a certain way to think beautiful or dangerous thoughts. A friend of mine, straight-laced as an alter boy called me up on the telephone one afternoon. "I want to be a writer!" He told me. "No you don't." I said. "Yes, I do. It just hit me like a ton of bricks." "I thought you wanted to be a diplomat, a politician." "Nah, not for me." He said. "What about a lawyer?" "I thought you'd be happy for

me, Luke." "I am." "We can be two writing friends, like Verlaine and Rimbaud." "They were lovers." "Well, not exactly like them." "It's just that you've made your life a lot harder than it has to be. You went to a good school, you have a good job. I wouldn't be a writer if I didn't have to be one. It's a lot of pain, you make no money and you're not famous until after your dead. You don't choose writing, it chooses you." "Goddamn it, Luke. You're always blowing your own horn, but give someone else a try and all you can say is what a horror writing is. I think you just don't want the competition." "Listen; there are enough words to go around. Good luck and I'll see you in Hell." I hung up.

The director of the play, Margot Reynolds, was a tall, pale woman who had many problems. You could see her problems in the bags under her eyes. They kept her up nights, and they came through in her plays, strange, abstract scenes full of pain and hate and sadness. She moved as though her spine didn't bend, and the weather-beaten lines in her skin made it look like cracked marble, but she was sexy in a way. I could see myself marrying her, the intellectual coldness, the staying up late to do the New York Times crossword puzzle in bed, the kitchen always

smelling like black coffee and cigarettes, but she would be able to leave me alone when I needed to write, and I needed that. I couldn't have a woman who would knock on the door, or ask a silly question or vacuum the downstairs carpet when I was trying to write. She was a woman that didn't need me to survive, I was the bonus she came home to, but not the reason, and that was comforting. I put my hand around June's waist and it felt like slipping your hand into an old glove you haven't worn since last winter. I pretended June and I were at a party for the release of my seventh novel and she had just had secured an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, two rooms away from the Cezanne. The daydream ended abruptly, for that's when Margot saw June and made her way over to us, gliding so smoothly through the crowd that it seemed as though she wasn't walking at all, but floating. "June, darling." She said without any distinguishable sign of joy, or excitement, or dread in her voice. "It has been so long." "I know, Margot." June said. "I'm only in town for a little while and I had to come and see your new play." "Oh, thank you, dear. And who is this young man?" she asked about me. Goddamn she was classy; her age did not make her seem old, but aged. "This is a *friend* of mine." June said. The sound

of *friend* made my stomach turn. "Well, I'm having a get-together later this evening at my home. You and your *friend* are invited." "Oh, we'd love to come, wouldn't we Luke?" June looked at me with begging eyes, so I bit my cheek and said, "Absolutely!" I felt like such a dog, sticking out my lavish pink muscle ten and a half miles to lick the heel of this bitch's boot. She reached out her hand and gave the top of it to June to kiss. She kissed it. I winked at Margot and she gave me a terrible look as she turned and drifted back into the crowd, hovering a few inches above the ground, until you could no longer see her, and the tears of the young actors flowed more steadily than champagne on New Years.

I went over to the hors d'oeuvres table where they had a free bar. I ordered a whiskey and water and sipped at it. It was strong, burned my throat. No matter how much whiskey I drank, it still burned like a sonovabitch. I looked around the room and had lost June. The roar of the people's voices came in waves, with big bursts of laughter. This is what killed F. Scott Fitzgerald, I thought, finishing off the whiskey. Old F. Scott had died on my birthday, December 21st. His anniversary was the next day. I was another year older that night, one year closer to death, but the thought

didn't bother me. I welcomed old age. I couldn't stand being young; it was just a reminder of how much further I still had left to go. I drank two more and it felt like I had just poured a bottle of cologne down my throat. "This is strong stuff." I said to the bartender. "Liquid courage." He replied. "Makes you impervious to pain." I wished more than anything that that was true. "Take it easy." He said to me. "Yeah, you too." I said. I went into the restroom and ran the faucet. I splashed myself with cold water. I was having an attack of the heart, not a heart attack, but my heart was quivering with doubt. I thought about running out of there and leaving June. She would be able to find a way home without me, she was with countless people who knew her, and I would only end up embarrassing her by being a fool, getting too drunk and pulling my dick out in front of Margot, telling her to wrap her cold, dead hands around it and give it a tug, but then I calmed down and walked back into the lobby. June was still nowhere to be found and now the crowd was beginning to break apart. There were still little huddles of people here and there. I walked outside and had a cigarette. As I stood there I saw two birds land on the road, turn their heads around a few times and then fly away. I couldn't

recall ever seeing birds and night before. I probably had, but those were the kinds of things you noticed when your heart was heavy. As a boy there were power lines outside of my bedroom window and every day I would see the same two birds sitting side by side, perched on those wires. For some reason I hated seeing them. They wouldn't chirp or squawk, just sit together like two, real life lovebirds. One day I got my pellet gun and shot and killed one of the birds. It fell to the pavement like it had rocks in its guts, and it hit with a bloody thump. I felt good, I was proud of what a crack shot I had been, but it wasn't until the next day that I saw the other bird sitting on the power line, an empty spot next to it that I felt miserable. It looked so lonely sitting up there all by itself without its mate. I wished I could have taken it back, but I couldn't, it was too late, the bird was as dead as a wine-gnat. From that day on, I saw the bird sitting out there through the window, quiet and still and my heart ached for what I had done. Eventually the bird moved on, flew away somewhere to find another mate, flew into a deep patch of sunlight, but I never forgot what a terrible feeling it gave me to see that bird all alone.

The crowd had all cleared and I stood alone in the cold waiting for June to surface. What an awful night this turned out to be, I thought to myself. Finally I could see her walking from far away down the road. June's walk was unmistakable; she kind of lumbered side to side like a duck. "I was beginning to think you left me." "I'm sorry. Margot brought me backstage to talk with some of the actors." "It's fine." I said. "And thank you for going to this party with me; I know how you hate it." "It's no problem." I said. No matter how horrible this party was, it was just an excuse to spend some time with June. Over the years I had done all sorts of things I would have never of done if it weren't to see June. I once sat in the home of her boyfriends and I had to watch them kiss, but it wasn't even the kissing that bothered me, it was listening to them talk, the way only couples talked, with that extra bit of consideration you don't give to anybody else. That did me in the worst. I had to excuse myself because hot tears were gathering at my eyelids and turned cold on my coat sleeve. I had never cried in front of June. I had never cried in front of any woman. If I was around them, even if I had to, the tears just didn't come.. "So where are we heading?" I asked. She gave me directions to Margot's house. It was a

big house up in the hills, a house I had dreamed about owning, with a long driveway made of millions of grey pebbles and two fantastic white pillars at the entrance. Margot had money, I don't know from where, but she had it and she wasn't subtle about using it. The floors were so sparkling white when you walked in that you have to squint your eyes. You felt like you were in the company of class and ease, and the moment you left you fell back into the suffering city. You got a good look of the city, similar to me and June's lookout, only from the opposite side, and I found myself peering into the night toward my house, and I thought about my room, quiet and empty. It felt as if I hadn't been there in years. Margot had a butler who asked to take my coat. "No." I said. "But sir, wouldn't you be more comfortable with your jacket off?" "No." I said. That was another thing I did, I always left my jacket on. Like standing instead of sitting, it was something I did that made people feel uncomfortable. The truth was I was most comfortable wearing my coat and standing. "In that case, right this way." He led June and I into the sitting area, another completely white room with red chairs. There were already other people sitting in the chairs smoking cigarettes in long holders, laughing over one another. "Ms.

Reynolds will be out in a moment." the butler said. I took a seat next to June and slowly slipped into the background. June jumped into the conversation like a bloodhound. They were talking about the most important books of the last hundred years. "Ulysses by Joyce." One of the men said. "The Sun Also Rises!" another man said. It was funny seeing them fight over it all. The men stuck with manly books. The Sun Also Rises was about a man with a limp dick. No woman would ever understand a book like that as fully as a man would. "To the Lighthouse!" A woman shouted out. "Woolf was just a suicide case." Then all of them looked toward me. "What about you? What do you think?" I leaned forward and said bluntly, "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." There was a moment of silence, then, "Why? Because it says *Nigger*?" one of the women asked. I thought about ripping her face off, literally, getting up, going over to her and ripping the skin off her ugly fucking face. "No, not because it says *Nigger*. As Hemingway put it, it began contemporary American literature." "Bullocks!" A British guest said, "What's so great about *American Literature*? Most of the American greats left America to write their finest works." I was about to get into a very heated debate with this asshole, but then I looked at June and could see

that she was silently begging me to contain myself. "You're absolutely right." I said... Then like some woman from a Greek myth Margot came into the room. "Sorry to keep you all waiting, I was just getting a little more comfortable." She wore light slacks and a white blouse with a sort of veil that came down and wrapped around her. Her makeup was redone with a color that was more suitable to match her outfit; her perfume exploded into the room and reached all of our nostrils within moments of her entrance. Everyone stopped talking and waited for her to sit. She was easily twenty years older than anyone else in the room and we all had a reserved, quiet respect for her, even me, but I still hadn't figured out why. I think it was because she was living the life of a successful artist, and it reassured me that it could be done, but I didn't like the feeling her home gave me as much as I thought I would. It wasn't the kind of house you could get inspired in. In my small room I had no other choice than to imagine the better life, but in Margot's mansion there was no reason to dream. Everything you wanted could be gotten, everything you needed you already had.

The conversation started up again, but this time about what typewriters they used to write their plays. "I use a

Remington No. 5" one of them said. "My Martinelli is like a dream." One of the women said. "I have a Royal Portable, for when I want to work outside. There is a lovely little park near my home that I write in sometimes." "Luke is a writer, too." June said. All the eyes turned to me, and I could hear them shifting in their sockets, like squeaky doors that needed oiled. "I use a Corona No. 3" I said. Everyone jointly grunted in response and then went back to their conversation. Poor June was left out as well and she sat discouraged, but relieved, because at the end of the day, no matter how much she wanted to be, her and I were not like these people. The only reason I used a Corona No. 3 was because I found it cheap at a pawn shop. It wasn't about the brand name; it was about the machine and my ability to work with it. June didn't care about trivial things the way these people did. She was a very real person, very alive, because she had the capability, every so often, to let something beautiful out into the world and it always took a piece of her with it, so no matter what, even if she was forgotten, something of hers would live on. That was apart of being alive, allowing pieces of yourself to attach to others and watch it die if that's its destiny. While I sat and watched June, I noticed that Margot was

peering at me through the conversation. Her eyes made their way at me like darts in a bar. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Hurt?" Margot asked. "I would love one." She looked to her left at the Butler and instructed him to make me a drink. "What would you like, sir?" he asked. I figured I had been drinking whiskey all night with the exception of vodka at June's house, so I'd better stick with whiskey. "Any whiskey will be fine." "Malted barley or rye?" "Rye." I said. "June, darling, would you like something?" Margot asked on second thought. "Oh, no thank you." She said. The drink came and I steadily drank it down, a little bit at a time, to seem respectable. "What kind of writer are you, Luke?" Margot asked me. "A poet and prose writer." I said. "Oh, that's fabulous. Have you ever thought about writing for the theater?" "I've thought about it, Margot, but it never grabbed me the way poetry did." "But poetry is such a dead art; you would be more useful as a playwright, more money, too." "I don't do it for the money. If I wanted money, I would've become a dentist." "Why do you do it?" one of the other women asked in a slick, depressing way, talking down to me like I was scum. "Because it's like fucking." I said, "Every sentence is like a thrust and when you pound out that last period it like cumming." The woman

gaspd and gave me a look that was suitable for rapists and barnyard animals. "Haven't you ever felt that way about writing?" I asked her. "Not exactly." She said.

Margot walked June and I to the door. "Your *friend* is a very interesting man." Margot said to June, then looked at me. "You should come and visit me sometime, Luke" I hesitated, "I don't know." "You and June are just *friends* right?" and before I could answer, "Then what's the problem?" "I don't think I'm your type of man." I said. "On the contrary, you're just what I like, crass, blunt, and unapologetic, but you've got class, it seems that you've been around, that you've seen a few things." "More things than I want to remember." I said. And then June and I got in my car and started down the hill. "I can't believe you said that to that woman!" June yelled. "What? She was asking for it, that cunt." "You just can't behave that way around people like that!" "People like what? Rich people? Margot seem to like it." "Margot wants to make you a project, that's all." I sensed a bit of jealousy in her voice. "Oh, forget it." She said, "She didn't have any interest in introducing me to anyone anyway." June got quiet. I wanted a tender moment to happen; I thought I needed to say something to get on the subject of her and I.

"Remember that picnic we went on?" I asked. "Of course."

She said, and we laughed at the thought of it, at how sappy it was. I had brought wine, but forgot the opener, so I picked at the cork with my car keys, but it was no use. Being with your woman could make any moment seem like one that should only exist on the big screen. Sitting in a jail cell, or out on a picnic, it seemed like things only reserved for Hollywood stars and starlets, giving you the same warm feeling as the thought of an ancient baseball game did, all nostalgic like. June was still looking down. She never got that bent out of shape over a bad party with people like Margot, so I asked her what was the matter. "I was just thinking if what we did the other night was cheating." She said. "It was." I said. It sure as hell didn't feel like cheating, it felt like filling out a prophesy. It felt like getting out of the car after a long ride and smelling the ocean before you could see it, but when I told her we had committed the filthy act, it sort of cemented the idea in her mind and she became salty. I kept driving along the black road that I no doubt had to drive along again in the opposite direction, after June wrecked a little piece of me. Another few minutes passed and I was about to change the subject when she did it for me, "What

time is it?" she asked. I looked at my timepiece, "One-thirteen." "Well, happy birthday then." She said. "I didn't think you'd remember." She put her hand on mine; it was so warm and lovely. She took her hand off after a moment. "Leave it on." I said. She put it back on and left it there.

I got back to my apartment. I took out a small mirror and looked at myself. I looked like a mess, my jaw hanging low like a bulldog, the bags under my eyes purple and puffy. I needed sleep, but I knew that I wouldn't get it. "Happy birthday." I said to myself in the mirror. I got on the bed and lit a cigarette. It was good to be home. Margot's place was where you met Charon to take you across the river to Hell, where Death went to pace. It was a place where creation sat shotgun to need. Everyone at the mansion had butlers and men or women to pleasure them, they all had moist holes to fondle and penetrate. I sat in my tiny room with nothing but a streetlamp for a nightlight, my typewriter with no holes to fuck, no way to take care of me hand nor foot, the walls so close my thoughts clashed into each other like bumper-cars at the boardwalk, and I was alone again to try and expel greatness one line at a time, trying and put into focus this silly life.

I needed to find work. The little money I had socked away was running thin already. I swiped a newspaper from in front of my neighbor's door and hurried back inside. I hadn't even gotten past the obituaries when I heard a banging on my door. "What do you want?!" I shouted through the wall. "You've got my goddamn newspaper, I know it!" I opened the door to a toothless old man in a bathrobe, his face contorted. "I don't have your paper, old man, and I'm offended that you'd make such an accusation." "Bullshit. Mrs. Stillwater says she saw you take it!" "Oh, that old hag is as blind as a bat." The old man looked behind my shoulder. "Then what's that then?" he asked, seeing the newspaper on the table. It was too early in the morning to come up with another slick lie; I couldn't keep up the charade, so I conceded. "Hold on. I'll get it for you." "You're a real horse's ass, boy." He said as she turned and walked back to his room. That old man was a real salty dog, he had been a tugboat captain for most of his life and the salt of the ocean had been embedded into his skin from standing on the deck during windy days. He was miserable

living in a little apartment now, none of the excitement, none of the hardship. Some people got used to working hard for so long that they couldn't get comfortable taking it easy. Easy was never apart of their vocabulary. I liked the old man, even though he was meaner than a branded bull. Maybe that's why I liked him, because he didn't like me, he didn't play the game of pretending to be nice, and he didn't try to be mean, he just was. He was just a nasty man and he knew it. I could hear him all the way into my room when he sneezed, shouting "*Oh shit!*" as he did it, instead of *ha-choo!* And he had never said anything to me besides calling me a goddamn horse's ass. The rest of the apartment building hated him, hated him more than they did me, and I overheard them gossiping about him in the mailroom as I picked up my rejection letters. "*Oh! He's so nasty!*" one of the women would say. It wasn't that he was misunderstood, or made out to be a monster that really had a heart of gold; he was wicked down to his brittle bones.

Sitting there in the apartment it got rather lonely. I still didn't have any urge to write, so I thought I'd try masturbating. June had gotten me so worked up with the kissing, and humping, and sucking, and then she left me alone on my bed, between third a fourth gear, my prick in

high heels, ready to fuck, ready to dance the dirtiest dance there was, the smell of sex-funk pouring out of me by the barrel, our bodies sluggish with passion, drunk really, that when she stopped me from giving her my very worst my balls were the size of lemons. I started stroking myself, thinking vile, disgusting thoughts, but June's face kept working its way into my mind. I kept hearing the words, "I have to go." and I couldn't get it up. I tried and I tried, tugging on it with both hands, but nothing happened. I was defunct every-which-way, I couldn't type and I couldn't cum. She had taken from me the only two things I ever did well, and after ten more minutes of tugging, I finally gave up and pulled up my trousers. It was the first time I hadn't been able to get it up. Even when I was drinking I would be able to get a hard-on you could hang wet swimming trunks from, and now my prick cowered down like an ashamed dog that got caught peeing on the rug. My heart was too heavy and too mixed up to get aroused. I was hanging in limbo, purgatory, thinking I should be feeling frisky and devilish, but deep down not. I was feeling the only way a broken heart could make you feel, defunct...

I went down to the corner sundry store and bought a pack of beer. The morning sun drained all the energy right

out of me the moment it hit my face, the way only morning sun can. There was something different about the morning sun, it was heavier, it made you feel like you were swimming through molasses, or you had concrete blocks around your feet, and it was especially hot even through it was close to zero degrees. The sun reached its arms around you like silly putty and peeled off a piece of you the way it took off the images from the funny papers. There was a man dressed as Santa Claus on the corner waving a stupid bell asking people for money, ringing that damn bell like it was four o'clock in the afternoon and everybody's ears were ready for that kind of racket. It was my birthday, but no one gave a shit because of Christmas's big shadow casting over it. They were four days apart; my birthday and Christmas, and I came home from the hospital on Christmas morning. My whole life I got crummy presents for my birthday because it was so close to Christmas, and seeing that Santa, that fraud of a Santa, ringing that bell somehow reconfirmed my odium for this manufactured holiday and its season. I remembered being a child and loving Christmas, the magic actually felt tangible, that if you reached out into the air you could grab it, but the older you got, the more that feeling slipped away. I remember the

first year I slept like a baby on Christmas Eve; I knew the magical times were over. I used to stay up all night, unable to sleep out of excitement, looking at the window, waiting for the first, singular ray of sunshine to appear so I could run downstairs and open gifts. That was a radiant time in my life, and now, so often, Christmas marked a depressing time for when I felt the most alone. I wanted some of that magic back, but I knew that it was gone forever.

That feeling that Christmas gave you had a lot to do with where you lived. As a boy, I grew up in a house that was perfect for waking up on Christmas morning. There really isn't any way to explain how the house was, or the way it looked, or why it was good for waking up in, it just was. I remember the first Christmas I spent in an apartment. I didn't even bother buying a miniature tree or putting up lights. I didn't see the purpose of it all. I sat at the window on Christmas Eve and watched the snowflakes fall to earth and melt on the asphalt. The second Christmas I had befriended my then neighbor Nick. Nick had a daughter, Maxine, no more than six or seven years old. He and his wife had divorced and were dragging the kid back and forth between houses during the holidays.

The mother got Maxine on Thanksgiving, and Nick got her on Christmas. It was a real fucked up deal. Anyway, Maxine and I got along. I think it was because I was lonely and so was she. Kids could have a lot in common with adults if they're lonely, so when Nick decided to have a Christmas party in his apartment, he pawned Maxine off on me, because knew without having to ask me that I wouldn't be attending. I didn't have a television and Maxine sat on the floor and entertained herself, while I sat at the typewriter and smoked a cigarette. "Did your father buy you any presents?" I asked Maxine. "No." she said, "But I'm sure Santa will bring me something..." Man, I wanted to believe in Santa again, I wanted to be totally convinced that there was a man who built toys for the children of the world and delivered them all in one night by way of a sled pulled by reindeer. I wanted to be young again, three or four years old, I wanted to play hide-and-go-seek, and fly kites, and still feel danger when blowing off a firework, and fist fight without spending the night in jail, and play football until your nose bled, and scream "*Ollie, ollie, ox in free!*" as I finished the game... But at the same time I didn't want to start over again and be unconvinced all over again, and discovered Christmas was one big goddamn

conspiracy all over again. I couldn't wait to be old, even though it was much less painful to be young.. I didn't have the heart to tell Maxine that there was no Santa, that there had been, but now he was dead. "Do you read comic books?" I asked, handing her a stack off my desk. "No." she said. "Do you know who Batman is?" I asked. "Yes." she said, and then broke out into song, "*Jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin laid an egg!*" I laughed at her carol, because it was in the same vein as how I viewed Christmas, a cartoon version of itself, on the outside looking in at its pretentious cheer that lasted up the very last minute on Christmas day and not a second after. I went over to my cupboard and got two pots, two pans, and two wooden spoons. I gave her a pot and a pan and wooden spoon. I put the pot on my head and began banging the pan with the spoon. Maxine did the same. We began marching around the room, banging and shouting and shrieking. We were humming, and dancing and stomping, and we began to sing together: *Jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin laid an egg!*

I hadn't thought about Maxine in a long time, and watching that Santa there made me hope she still believed. The jury was still out on whether or not it's a good thing to have hope. Some have said hope can drive a man insane, and others have said it's the only thing that can keep them from going crazy. I'm not sure how I felt about hope, but I knew mine was dwindling when it came to June. She was like a lion on my back, making my heart beat out of exhaustion as I climbed the stairs of my apartment building. I was about to open my door when I looked behind me and saw the old man's room. I didn't want to drink these beers alone, so I knocked, and I could hear him rustling around inside the room, like a bull just let out of the gate. "What the hell do you want?" he shouted at me before he could get the door all the way open. "I felt bad about the paper this morning. I brought beer." I held up the bottles. "Jesus Christ boy, it's still morning." "You of all people, I never thought that'd matter." He looked me up and down with a rigidness like an army colonel looking over a new recruit in boot camp. "Come on in." he finally said as he opened the door a little wider and stood behind it. I think he sensed that I didn't give a damn about how mean he was; I was just a man looking for someone to drink with in the wee

hours of a harrowing Sunday morning, and he could respect that. You could tell it was Sunday by way the sky looked and how the air felt. His room was messy and dark; the only light came through the cracked blinds in yellow streaks. "Have a seat over there." He said, pointing to the bed. He sat down in a rocking chair, which creaked like his bones as he sat. He wore a white wife-beater t-shirt and under shorts. "Hand me one of those beers." He said. I handed him one and he snapped the cap off with an opener I didn't even see he had. I had been carrying the bottles around with me outside for the little while, but the bitter weather did well at keeping them cold. The bottles were sweating a bit, but they tasted good all the same. "You know, kid, I thought you were slow or something the first time I laid eyes on ya. Never saying nothing to nobody, jacking off all the time..." I drank my beer, not letting on that I was nervous to be there. "Yeah, I can hear ya breathing heavy through the walls. I never see ya bring any women back there with ya, except that one. What is she your woman?" "No." I said. "What is she then?" "Just some woman." I said. And as soon as I said it, I knew that it was true. When I stood back from it all, June was just a woman. She wasn't *my* woman, we really weren't anything that I could

put a name on, and I had never thought of it that way before. "Ah it doesn't matter." He said, "Women just weigh ya down. I was married to the sea for fifty years, had my share of women, but always left them on the dock, sailing back into the loving arms of my mistress." "How do you learn not to need anybody?" I asked him. "You don't learn it, ya just realize it one day, and often times most your life has gone by before ya do. I realized it early on. Every man has their one thing, their one love. Mine was my boat. That's all I needed." It made sense. The old man spoke much more than I expected him to, and as it turned out he was just a man looking for someone to share his stories with. I happened to be that someone on that day. He told me fifty stories about the time he spent on the ocean, he told me about each shanty that he got each of his tattoos in, the black panther on his left arm in Burma, the two blue birds on his chest in Baton Rouge, and the skull with a sword through the eye on his right arm in Ireland, but nothing he said stuck with me like the first thing he told me did, that you don't learn anything about love and loss, but realize it. We drank all the beers and smoked cigarettes until our tongues smelled like freshly paved roads, and after a funny story we wiped the tears out of

the corners of our eyes. "Why did ya take my newspaper?" he asked me. "I needed to find a job. I got fired from the NECCO factory." "A straight job was never for men like us." he said, "You're always gonna get fired, because you just weren't cut out for a straight job." I hadn't even told him I was a writer. It didn't seem necessary. "Get a boat, name it a pretty girl's name, and that is all the job or woman you will ever need."

31

I could hear my telephone ringing from inside the old man's room. I left him there, sitting in the dark. In a strange way he and I had become friends, and I didn't have to say goodbye to him, because he'd be there when I got back. I reached the telephone on its last ring. "Hello." "Hey..." June said, "I was worried you were already out." "No, not yet." I said. "Well, it's your birthday, where do you want to go?" she asked. June and I always went out for dinner on my birthday, it had sort of become a tradition. "I don't know. Where do you want to go?" I asked. "Luke, it's *your* birthday." "I know, I know, but you should pick." "I'm not going to pick the restaurant for *your* birthday!"

"All right, all right, I have to go find work. I'll telephone you later with the place." "Alright, but let me know, because I have to know how to dress." "Okay." I said and we hung up. The truth was, I didn't care where we went out to eat, it was all the same to me, but when I picked I did my best to be romantic. Over the years June and I had some very romantic dinners, a little Italian place that made you feel like your were tucked away in some café in Italy, a wine bar with a fireplace that stretched its flicking shadow over our table, and a quaint seafood place that specialized in clams and oysters, and for each of them I dropped a few hundred bucks. I was low on money so I had to get creative. It had to be the most romantic it had ever been, because although I didn't like thinking of it this way, I was basically trying to win June over. It made me feel like a terrible schemer, that every kindness I did for June wasn't genuine, that it was all part of a bigger plan to convince her to love me...

I didn't have a clue where I wanted to go, so I forgot about it and looked through the paper that the old man now let me have. There were a slew of jobs, but none of them were stimulating for a mind like mine, nothing would have kept me interested for longer than a few minutes. I tried

to think of my skills. Nothing came to me. On the inside I was the world's greatest undiscovered poet, but on the outside I was an uneducated laborer, that was a cold hard fact of life, no one cared about who you were on the inside or what your intentions were, whatever it said you were on paper is what you were to them, a name on an application sheet. My hands were as soft as a virgin's plum, hardly doing a real days work their entire lives. My mind, warped as it was, was my only somewhat redeeming feature, but there was nothing in the want-ads that called for it. Maybe a bookstore, I thought. I dialed up June. "What do you think of me working at a bookstore?" I asked. "I don't think you'd last five minutes." she said. "Why?" "Because you'd yell at a customer that picked up a book you thought was bullshit." What she said was true, but it was worth a shot. The place was called *Dead Poets*, and I had passed it one hundred times, but never went in. I liked the sound of it. I could see myself working there. When I walked in, there was an old woman and an old man behind the counter. The store was dead. Not one person was in it, only the two employees and the millions of words of dead men and woman that sat on the shelves like bats in a belfry. It was dusty and stuffy in there as well, and I found it hard to breath.

The two old folks were in a conversation and didn't acknowledge my presents for a whole five minutes. It wasn't that they didn't see me; it was that they didn't think I was important enough to interrupt their conversation over. Finally the old woman turned to me and asked, "May I help you?" in such a tone that it was clear that she didn't want to help me at all, but have me leave and never return. "Are you hiring?" I asked, "I'm looking for work." "No, we're not." She said without thinking. "No one comes in here and we just don't have the money to pay an employee." "We had a young boy working for us for free, but he went off to college." The old man said. "Mind if I take a look around?" I asked. "Be my guest." he said. I strolled around the store and looked at the books. It felt good to be in there as a customer, and I was relieved when they said they weren't hiring, because when you loved to go someplace as a normal human being, becoming an employee changed things, working there would only make you dread it, and soon I would hate walking into bookstores all around the world because it would remind me of work. And no matter whom they were, even if it was that old woman in *Dead Poets*, your boss played the role of your master, and you took the role as their slave. You'd be under old or fat or incompetent

people who hated their jobs worse than you did, smoking cheap cigars in their offices, looking down on you, simply because they had the power to crush you and that was that.

The second job I thought of was a book review writer for a newspaper. I could do that job; reading the terrible new books and sending them to the slaughterhouse, revealing their true travesties, perhaps I'd even make a name for myself as being the reviewer who pulled no punches, didn't kiss ass, and told it straight. I went down to one of the big newspapers in the city. It was the largest building on a street full of large buildings. I walked into the lobby that was sinisterly quiet and made of marble. A few years earlier the police had discovered a bomb in that place, some sort of target on a madman's list of buildings to strike, and I imagined it reduced to rubble as I made my way around, the beautiful marble in ash heaps. Way on the other side of the lobby was a reception desk. I walked, the soles of my shoes making loud *clacking* sounds as I stepped and they echoed off the humungous walls. When I finally got to the desk, a young woman with big rimmed glasses and thick lenses sat reading a magazine. "Excuse me." I said, "I want to apply for a position as a book reviewer for your newspaper." She looked up at me, and I could also see it in

her eyes that she hated me. I had that affect on people; they could take one look at me and hate me. "Do you have any experience?" she asked. "I've read most of the books at the public library." I said. "I mean *formal experience*. Have you had another job as a reviewer?" "No." I said. "Do you have a college degree in journalism?" "No." "Do you have a high school diploma?" "No." "Well, I'm sorry sir, but those are the requirements for a position at this paper. You need to at least have graduated high school to get an entry level job here." She went back to reading her magazine. I stood at the desk for another moment. She looked back up. "There's only janitorial positions open." She said. I didn't respond and she went back to reading her magazine. I walked outside discouraged and the noise from the real world came booming back into my ears. She had been so dismissive, as if I wasn't good enough to empty her ashtrays, and I thought about going back in there and giving her a piece of my mind, real nasty, calling her everything but a white-woman, but I didn't. What the hell did that thick rimmed bitch know about literature? I thought. She never read Stendhal, Flaubert, Balzac, Dostoyevsky! I was an educated man without the paperwork, and that little girl made me feel like a loser. It was the

first time my education played a part in my demise, and the words of my father came back into my mind harsh as church bells. "DON'T YOU HAVE ANY PRIDE!" he used to shout at me. "DON'T YOU HAVE ANY FUCKING *PRIDE?*!"... I had dropped out of high school during my senior year because there was no way in Heaven or Hell I could have graduated with the state my grades were in, and I really wasn't into the whole parading around in a gown and tossing your cap up into the air, celebrating with a hundred kids you've hated your whole life, saying you'll miss them and you'll keep in touch, when you had absolutely no intention of doing so. My report cards looked like mouths with the teeth broken out of them, and I used wait around the mailbox and intercept them before my mother and father even knew they had arrived. I'd walk over to the sewer, crumple them up and throw them in. The underground pipes of that city must've been crammed with hundreds of failing report slips, all with the name Luke Hurt printed on them.

My father was a mechanic and worked hard every day of his life. He'd come home covered to the elbow in grease, smelling of gasoline, in a stained jumpsuit, like a real old fashioned grease monkey. He hated the fact that I didn't have any work ethic, that I only had it for writing,

which he thought was a totally unrealistic dream, and did well at covering up his true feelings about it around me. I knew of his disbelief by overhearing him talking about what a lackluster boy I was to my mother. I used to say to him, "I want to get a job that allows me to do the least amount of work." and that would really get him hot. "WHERE IS YOUR PRIDE?!" "I have pride, just not in the same things as you do." "YOU HAVE TO GIVE ONE HUNDRED AND TEN PERCENT TO YOUR EMPLOYER! I DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE A GARBAGE MAN, YOU BE THE BEST DAMN GARBAGE MAN YOU CAN BE!" "It will just be for the paychecks until I become a writer." "WHAT IF YOU NEVER BECOME A WRITER? YOU'LL BE ON THE STREETS LIKE THOSE FUCKED UP HEROES OF YOURS! YOU WANT TO BE THEM!" "I don't want to be them. I want to be *among* them." "YOU DON'T HAVE ANY RESPECT, THAT'S YOUR PROBLEM!"... I never held it against the old man, even though it got to me sometimes and I'd scream back at him, trying to hold in hot tears, but sometimes failing and turning the whole affair into one dramatic screaming match. My father was a good man, he just didn't understand, just like June didn't understand, just like how everyone didn't understand, all my father knew was what he had been told. I couldn't expect him to understand what it took to be a writer, because he had never created anything

in his entire life, he had just learned a trade and made the best of it for his family. He could be very tender and loving at times, but his doubts in me hurt something fierce, more than I wanted them to. You could say to yourself one thousand times that you don't need anyone's support, but it never gets any easier when you truly don't have it. I regret that I wasn't able to make something of myself while he was still around. Now I look back and I remember when I was old enough to see my father as a man first, rather than a parent, a person with hopes and dreams and vices, and how so many of them had been crushed under the weight of his sacrifices. I didn't want to end up like that. When I got older, he and I would talk about women and when I saw one with a fat ass I'd say, "Hey dad, look at the can on that one." and he'd say, "Nah! You'd stick your dick in anything with a pulse!" and I used to admire talk like that, it seemed real to me, no pretense, something a man without a care in the world would say, but then I got a little wiser, and my father got a little older, a little closer to death, and I could see that saying things like that was his way of getting ready to give in, give up, throw in the awful, bloody towel. It depressed me to see him like that, thinking that he was a broken down machine,

and he sat there like a helpless giant, tired, hanging onto something no one else could see but him. It was right then that I made up my mind about what kind of man I would be. I would not give up my art, the only thing I knew how to do, I would not lose all my life before death, I would harness it in my fingernails and in my eyelashes, and even after women dragged me through the mud, I'd whistle at the ladies who stroll past my deathbed.

32

I drove to the bar. Francis and Bill weren't there, but they always showed up together. For two people that were so completely different, they enjoyed each other's company and you could often find Francis bringing women over to Bill's place, it being considerably nicer than Francis's. Bill didn't seem to mind, sitting in the corner and watching Francis fornicate, a trance like look in his face as he watched, smoking his little Indian cigarettes. I had only been up to Bill's once, which was on the fourth floor of the apartment building across the street from the bar. It remained completely undecorated, plain, dull, but fitting for Bill. At the bar it was good to see Tuesday

behind the counter. She was one of the few reliable things I had in my life. Everything was fleeting except for a few odd people in a few odd places. "How do you do, darlin'?" Tuesday asked me with that unrelenting optimism in her raspy southern voice. "Oh, looking for work." I said. "Not going so well?" "No." "I know of something you could do." she said. "What?" "Do you know your way around the city?" "Like the back of my hand." I said. "I got a girlfriend who owns her own flower shop. Her driver quit on her and now she's making all the deliveries herself. She's desperate for anyone. You interested?" "Yeah, sure. How hard can delivering flowers be?" "It's kind of romantic in a way." "You're right it is." I took a shot. "Another?" Tuesday asked, teetering the bottle above the glass. "Nah, I'll be driving soon." We shared a laugh. "Here's the address, honey. I'll call her and let her know you're coming." "Thanks, Tues." "Any time." She said. I looked her up and down as I got to my feet. "How come you and I never got together?" I asked. "Oh, Luke, you and I are at two different places in our lives." "Come on; let me see that snatch of yours." I reached over the bar and grabbed with two fingers at her fly. "Stop it, Luke!" she shrieked and then laughed. "I'd marry you, Tues." "Get out of here." She

flung the bar towel at me. I smiled, adjusted my pants, opened the door and fell back into it. The bar was a little reprieve, Tuesday was my own little desert island, and I meant what I said, I'd marry her, because we'd be happier than two pigs in shit together, but she wasn't the marrying kind. No one could lasso her, she was just too free, and even though it saddened me to know I could never be with Tuesday, it would hurt me worse to cage her; some people were just too free.

The flower shop was called *Summer Blossoms* and was run by a young white girl who didn't look old enough to buy a drink. Inexperience plagued her eyes and she looked at me like I was sent straight from Heaven to help her. "Oh, thank goodness you've come." she said as I opened the door. "Tuesday told me what you looked like." "Hello, Luke Hurt." I reached out my hand. She put her hand in mine like a feather and I squeezed it too hard. "All I need you to do is fill out this application, just for the paperwork, but you've already got the job." "Sure." I said. A single strand of hair fell down over her left eye, she tried blowing it back up with her mouth, but it only floated back down and dangled, adding to her dishevelment. She was cute, but I would have felt like a pedophile screwing her. I

wasn't even sure if she had hair on her cunt yet, but she was running her own business, making a go for herself. She arranged the flower bouquets all by herself, beautiful creations, unique and exquisite in their design. I checked all the right boxes and filled out the correct information, but when it asked, *Do you have a high school diploma?* I check 'yes.' She came back from the backroom with a clipboard and the keys to the delivery truck I would be driving. "It's a very easy job. The deliverers are written down on this sheet and the directions are shown on this map." "Easy enough." I said. "Here are the keys." She handed them over to me and I was officially as flower delivery man. I liked the title, because like Tuesday had said, it was very romantic, and I knew June would see how sweet of a thing it was to do. Sometimes I worried my nastiness is what kept June and I apart, and perhaps now that I did something as gentle as bringing flowers to lovers and to old women on their birthdays, maybe she would see that I wasn't all terrible, and perhaps I had some light of my own.

It seemed that the only radio station that came in clearly in the truck was the classical music station, and I drove around the narrow streets with daffodils, lilies,

orchids, and roses, listening to Bach, Mozart, Bee, Mahler, and Strauss. My first stop was to deliver an arrangement to a funeral home. The little white girl, Margery, who owned Summer Blossoms, told me that there was an entrance in the back of the building for flowers deliveries only and to go back there to drop off the arrangement. Driving was tricky, for you couldn't go too fast, because it would be hard to stop without knocking over the flowers, which were only suspended and held in place by makeshift milk crates. After a long and confusing drive, getting lost for more than a half an hour, on the outskirts of town where everything became smaller and further apart, I was relieved to see the door with the sign that read "Flower Delivery" on it. I parked and matched the name on the clipboard to the name on the card which was pinned on the front of bouquet. It was quite a beautiful bouquet; it was a shame whoever it was for wasn't alive to enjoy it. The bouquet was large and I had to open the door with my back, being careful not to let the flower peddles touch anything, for if a peddle simply brushed against something it would start to die. Inside were other bouquets for other dead people. I looked at some of their names, and it was odd to think that they were alive at one point, living and breathing, eating and

shiting, loving and hating, fucking and sleeping. I placed the flowers on the table, but as I did two men in suits came by rolling a dead body on a gurney. I jumped when I saw it and I had to fight back a scream, for it was as quiet as a church mouse in there, all the mothers, daughters and wives weeping and blabbering into their handkerchiefs. The dead body was gone before I had a chance to really see it, gone into the back room to be pumped full of preserving fluids, and to have its hair greased for the funeral. It gave me the shakes to see it there. I walked outside, leaned up against the building and lit a cigarette. It wasn't the first time I had seen a dead body, but it never settled right with me. My older brother was a doctor and during his training in medical school he invited me to go into the cadaver lab with him. I thought it was goddamn crazy at first, but my curiosity forced me to go. He brought me into a freezing room with twelve, white body bags with red, bloody finger prints all over them. There was a particular odor in the room, but not of rotting flesh like I imagined it would be, but more of a dull, pinching smell that stung at your nostrils, like one million rubber gloves where hanging from the ceiling. My brother walked me over to one of the bags and unzipped it. Inside was what

used to be an old woman. She was completely skinned, her face sawed in half from a hacksaw, her eyes removed, the body split down the middle, everything dried out and smaller than it had once been, the heart like a shriveled beat, the lung, a purple sponge, and her tits hanging down on either side of her. The only hard things to look at were her arms, because besides having been skinned, they were completely intact. They were the only things left to remind you that she was human, and her fingernails were still painted red, as though she had been getting ready for church the Sunday morning of her death. That was the only distinguishable feature of a human being; otherwise it was just a carcass, deader than fly shit. "Do you want to touch her?" My brother asked. "Her?" I said. "Yeah, Helen." he said. He had her Helen, maybe to remind him that he indeed was working on a human being, one that had a family that loved her. I held her heart, and couldn't help but think of my own, and what agony it was in, and how hers, at least, was in peace. While mine pained me with each beat, hers sat so kindly in my palm completely still, painless. The heart died like anything else, and it was important to remember that in the end some flunky kid could be holding my heart

in a lab one day, saying it looked peaceful, and not noticing any of its love scars...

It was when my brother pulled out a plastic tub from underneath the table full of brains that I felt the puke roll over in my stomach, like a Bingo ball machine. He reached into the tub as though it was plucking apples and pulled out Helen's brain. It was much smaller than I imagined it would be, and the color was a shade of beige instead of bright pink with tiny purple veins running through it. "Hold it." My brother said. I reached out my hand and took Helen's brain. It was heavy, and the consistency of an orange, soft yet firm, like if you squeezed too hard your fingers would go right through it. I felt powerful holding her brain, for I was holding the organ that a woman used for ninety years to think, love, hate, wish and dream. My brother took the brain in his hand, put it back in the tub, looked at me and said, "Well, want to get something to eat?"

I only had one more flower delivery before I had to return to the store and pick up the next list of orders. I got back into the truck, cranked up the classical music and listened to that symphony beat out the notes, like a southern mother beating the dust out of a throw rug, they

hollered and it made me feel dignified, as if I wasn't delivering flowers to people I had never met, but taking a bouquet to June. June wasn't the kind of woman to except flowers well. They were too generic, and June didn't like generic things, chocolates, jewelry etc. She liked things with meaning, it didn't matter how much it cost, only that it came from the heart. In the past my gifts to her had been collections of my poetry, or a book I wanted her to read. There were descriptions of women in books that were far better than what I could have done to describe June in my own words. She was very hard to put a beat on, and most of my poetry served as attempts to capture at least a piece of her. I once tried to give June a stereotypical gift, a collection of lotions that smelled like pears, but when I gave them to her she only looked at me with strange eyes. "What are these?" She asked. "Lotions." I said, "I thought you might like them for your skin." "...Oh, thank you." she said, still a little confused. "I thought you might like a gift a little more traditional." I said, trying to explain. She started to laugh, because a generic gift from me only seemed awkward. We both began to laugh, and I felt foolish. "I figured you were tired of getting my stacks of my poetry." "I love your poetry." she said, "It's a perfect

gift..." Even if that wasn't true, it was nice to hear. That was another sign of a good woman, June's inability to be consumed by trivial things, not caring about what the price tag read, or getting candies in a heart shaped box with bow on it, and judging your manhood and love upon it. It was a sign of being genuine. No matter how June and I ended she had been good to me, I had to say that. She put up with my madman antics because hers were the ears I whispered my mindless ambitions into, and she'd say, "Yes, daddy, oh yes." when I crashed around my small room cursing the world, thinking that everyone and everything was against me. She put up with my lies and bullshit because she knew she was the thumb tack I hung myself upon. June had come to save my life. She was as reliable as an old car, because once you sat behind the wheel of the perfect car, you couldn't imagine yourself driving anything else ever again. Most of all she was reliable because she could hate me when I needed to be hated, she could slash and claw at my face. She was able to pull me out of my dank life and show me some music and some love, and so many men had become casualty to not being able to find a good woman. I had found one, she was beautiful and she was bright, but most of all she was good.

The delivery was on the other side of town and I had no idea how to get there. I got on the highway and headed west. It was mid afternoon now and the hundreds of cars looked like giant mythical beasts all running wild on the road, their tail lights reflecting in bright diamond shaped bursts from the sunlight. Only little slices of sun came through the grey clouds that now filled the sky. It looked as though it was going to snow. It was cold enough, and my fingers seemed to be made of pure bone, they were so hard and freezing. The cars moved like snails, a few inches and then stall, a few inches and then stall, everyone congested and crammed, confined to their cars, and for the first time I understood how easy it was for people to lose their minds on the road, stripping naked and smashing a car windshield with a tire iron. The stress got to be too much. There was nothing I hated worse than not knowing where I was going, and the madmen on the road, swerving, cutting in front of me, started to give me an anxiety attack. I tried to be as careful as I could, looking into the rearview mirror every time I tapped the brake, the loose flowers swaying, about to tip over. Oh, Jesus Christ, I thought to myself, a bead of sweat on my brow. This job had become more stressful than I every thought it could. Here I was *delivering*

flowers, and my heart was running like a racehorse in the last stretch of a big race. I looked at the map again, but couldn't find the right street before the cars in front of me started to move again. Some of the traffic broke up and I accelerated to forty-five miles an hour. I could feel myself breathing better, but then a car from the right lane came cutting across the highway. I had to swerve to avoid hitting him and when I looked up, the cars in front of me were all at a dead stop. I slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel sharp into a ditch on the side of the road. The tires skidded to a stop, the entire truck chugging like a train uphill, the flowers propelling themselves out of the milk crates and smashing on the floor, the glass vases shattering into unfixable pieces. "MOTHER FUCKER!" I shouted, my cigarette bent and broken on the steering wheel. I hadn't hit anyone, and I seemed to be in one piece, but then I felt a warm running liquid on my face. I looked down and my hands were covered in blood. My nose was bleeding. I took a piece of paper from my clipboard and jammed it up my nostril. Droplets still found their way out and landed on my lips. The taste of my blood was strong, full of iron and it almost seemed for a moment that I wasn't bleeding at all, but leaking some sort of metallic

fluid. I found my way back onto the road and got off the highway on the next exit. I was now in the heart of the city, and I was so pissed off that I couldn't see straight, my stomach in knots from frustration and nerves. I could not tolerate driving anymore, so I pulled to the side of the road and turned off the music, which had been playing the whole time. I no longer felt dignified. I was a bloody mess, the plasma dripping out of me like cough syrup, thick and dark. I sat in the truck for a moment letting my hands stop shaking. I was never a driving enthusiast in the first place, seeing that so many times a car ride ended in your body mangled in a mound of twisted metal, and I never had seemed to have any place to go in a hurry, anyhow. My legs quivered as I stepped, and I couldn't get my lighter to spark a flame as my fingers twitched too violently, but it was good to be back on solid ground...

I knew of a bar on the same street. I no longer cared about the delivery. I would be quitting the moment I walked back into Summer Blossoms, so I stumbled into the bar looking like a mugged tramp. "Jesus God, what happened to you?" the bar tender asked. "I was in a car accident." I said. "There's a hospital two blocks up." "I don't need a hospital. Where's your crapper?" "In the back." I went to

the bathroom and pulled the paper from my nose. A clump of blood hit the white, porcelain sink. I turned the faucet and let the water get cold. It felt like getting woken up from a bad dream as I splashed the water on my face. I stuffed new toilet tissue into my nose, dried off my face and went back out to the bar. "I feel human again." I said. The bartender nodded as I took a seat. He was a fat man and he stood wiping down glasses with a dirty dish towel. "What can I get for you?" he asked. "Shot and a beer." I said. I thought about getting something to eat, just for the sake of eating something, but I still wasn't hungry, and if I muscled anything down it would have only come back up nastier than it went in. I sat at the bar and drank and tried to retrace the steps of my life and figure out how the hell I had ended up there. Those were the kinds of things you thought about after a day like that, when you sat with your nose busted, how in all the roads there were to choose from, I had picked the one I did. It seemed like just a long road, and I couldn't be sure of where I had veered off, but I had somewhere, that was for sure...

I drank there until seven in the evening. I had almost totally forgotten about the last flower bouquet that was for sure wilted by then, I forgot that it was my birthday

and I forgot about June. The bleeding had finally stopped and the stump of paper in my nose was dried in burgundy blood. I threw it on the street as it began to rain. The sun was slipping away fast and the moon looked transparent in the dark blue sky. I got back in that miserable truck and drove back to Summer Blossoms.

The flowers frowned in my hand as I carried them into the store. "Where the hell have you been?!" Margery yelled at me, "The funeral home called and said you dropped off the wrong arrangement!" I looked at the flowers in my hand and read the card, it said, *In Loving Memory of Martin Baker*. "What the hell are those?" Margery shouted looking at the flowers. "I never made the last delivery." "You never made any delivery, and where the hell have you been all afternoon?" "Drinking." I said. She looked at me in disbelief that I would so outwardly admit to it. "Don't bother firing me, because I quit." I placed the flowers on the counter and turned to leave. Margery yelled after me, "You're not getting paid for today!" I didn't mind about the paycheck, I'd find another job, one that I actually knew what I was doing. I got into my car and thought, *goodbye Margery! Goodbye flower business, you were good while you lasted!* I had never quit a job after only one day

before, but I did not feel low about it. No one wanted to see my face giving them flowers anyway. A flower delivery man should be a pretty-boy, not a disinterested slob with holes in his shoes. They needed someone happily in love (if that wasn't an oxymoron). I once was sleeping with a woman who got on my case about having holes in my shoes. "You always have holes in your shoes and in your pants! Don't your balls fall out?" "Sometimes, but it's nice, they need air." I'd say. "Ooooh! You're so disgusting." "Then why do you stick around?" I'd ask, and she'd think about it for a while. "Because your easy, Luke." she'd say. I'd sit in her apartment in a chair facing the window while she laid in bed naked and talked. She could talk until sunrise, jabbering, never letting up, never getting too tired or slowing down and I'd go through two bottles of her wine listening to her, "You're good; you just make it so easy for a woman, you don't fuss or shout or cry. Do you ever cry? You just sit there watching the cars go by, listening to your music on your old radio, you hardly speak, you don't care about anybody, you aren't humane, you don't help or hurt anyone, you just are, and occasionally you'll write a decent poem, why don't you write better poems? You don't do anything else all day, but think them up, you should

write better poems. You don't have a job, you can't fill out the application right, you're the poster child for fucked up adults, but you sure are grand at times, Luke, never asking me to stick around after sex, I can come and go as I please... People use you, you know? Why do you let people use you? Women like you, but not enough to love you, it's because they pity you, because you write love poems about how lonely you are, and you drink and smoke and eat all day. You could stand to lose weight. You don't have any pets, nothing to keep you company, but you're easy because once I'm gone I won't have to worry about you. That's the wonderful thing about you, no one has to worry about you once they leave you, because you'll be fine, you'll be the same as ever. You're a dream for a careless woman, you're not that great in bed, but you don't think you are. You are the rapture, Luke boy. Why don't you answer or say anything at all?" and I'd look at her and say, "Because what does it matter in life?"

I had absolutely no money. I reached down in my pocket and felt a piece of string. I thought about calling June

and canceling the whole birthday dinner, for I didn't much feel like celebrating after the day I had. But then I thought about coming up with some cute, low-budget idea, maybe take her to Mama's for chicken and waffles or red beans and rice. Mama would cook us up something special, but I didn't want to burden her, plus it wasn't very romantic with a bunch of people around. The only thing I could do was go see my brother. In the old days when I was first on my own I'd go to him and ask for rent money. The first five or ten times it was no problem, but after the twentieth time the well began running dry, and I could hear his wife whisper-reprimanding him through the wall, "*You have to tell that loser brother of yours not to come back here! This is the fourth time in two months that he's come to us for money!*" She made it sound like I was an extortionist, hitting up my blood for a few extra nickels, squeezing him for his last penny so I could go down and bet it all on horses. The truth was, my brother was a successful surgeon, and his paychecks looked like ships with money blowing out of their stacks. He was wealthy, although it was ultimately an un-wealthy time for everybody, and I felt pretty rotten asking for his money, but it was for rent, not booze or dope or women, and he

knew that. My brother was one of my best supporters about becoming a writer, although he didn't understand either, he just trusted that *I* understood and that was enough. He and I were very different people, for example he didn't need music or art to survive the way I did, he just loved medicine the way a mathematician loved numbers, and I loved words. He craved operating the way a war-mad soldier craves the pink mist, the freckles of blood from a direct headshot. The way he was, he would have done well as a medic on the battlefields of the Civil War, bullets flying all around him, and if he had been born in Rome a few thousand years ago, he would have taken the glory in the Coliseum, decapitating his enemies with precision blows. If I were in those times, I would have been a philosopher and forced to eat hemlock for corrupting the youth, but somehow my brother and I always got along. We were both intense in our own ways, but he was focused like no one I had ever seen, and I admired that. He was a good man, giving me his money out of charity instead of pity, and it only made it harder to stand on the sidewalk in front of his cottage-like home, with a wooden entrance and two burning candles on either side of the doorframe. I hadn't been to his doorstep in five years, ever since his wife and I got into

it pretty good and I called her a money grubbing cunt. She hadn't worked a single day in her terrible little life, and I always assumed she was taking my brother for the ride, flashing him her gash and then filling up her change purse with his money, his heart and a little bit of his soul... I knocked on the door. His daughter Vivian answered. I hadn't seen her since she was a baby. "Who are you?" she asked. "I'm your uncle, Luke, Vivian... Does your father ever talk about me?" "No." she said. "...Is he at home?" "Yeah." she looked at me blankly. "Could you get him for me?" "...Yeah." she closed the door, but I could hear through the open window, "There's a man at the door that says he's my Uncle Luke." "What is he doing here?!" I heard my brother's wife say. Her angst for me hadn't settled over time. "I don't know." he said. A moment later the door opened again and there was my brother, looking old. What five years could do to you, I thought. "Luke." He said. "Hank." I said, "It's been a while." "Yes it has." "*What does he want, Henry!?*" a voice came from behind. "I don't know yet." he said, "What is it you want, Luke?" I looked down at my feet. "Well, I hate to do this to you, especially after not seeing you for so long...but I need some money." and then all of a sudden it was as if lightning hit the house, "I KNEW IT! I KNEW HE

WAS HERE FOR MONEY!" she came running and slammed into Hank's back. "YOU'RE NO GOOD, LUKE! YOU NEVER HAVE BEEN!" I bit my tongue and didn't respond. Hank's eyes looked heavy, but I couldn't distinguish whether or not they were heavy because of me or because of his insane wife. "What do you need it for, Luke?" my brother finally said. "Rent." I said, "I got fired from the NECCO factory." "Well, are you even looking for work?" he asked. I half laughed and said, "You have no idea." "HE'S PROBABLY SITTING AT HOME PLAYING THE WRITER! THAT'S HIS IDEA OF WORK!" "How much do you need?" Hank's wife looked at him with a stare that could burn holes through a suit of armor. "YOU'RE NOT ACTUALLY THINKING OF GIVING HIM THE MONEY, ARE YOU?" "Deloris! He's my brother and he needs it much more than we do." then he looked at me. "This is the last time, Luke. Now, how much do you need?" "Seventy-five." I said. He reached into his wallet, gave me the money, stepped backward into his house, started to close the door and said, "You should give up on your writing and get a real job, one that pays so you could settle down, start a family. Goodbye Luke." and then the door closed completely.

The honorable thing to do was to call up June and cancel the whole dinner, and use the money Hank gave me for the rent that was due, but I couldn't do that. Really, the honorable thing would be to go back to Hank's door and return the money, but I wasn't about to do that, either, so I found the closest payphone and dialed June. "What do you say to fat steaks, mashed potatoes, and all the red wine you can stomach?" "Oh, where are we going, Luke?" she said with some excitement. "The Golden Steer! So put on something nice and I'll pick you up in an hour." "The Golden Steer? Can you afford that?" "Don't worry about the money; I put away a little stash for this very occasion." "What should I wear?" "Wear that dress I like so well." "The black one?" "Yeah, and I'll pick you up in an hour." I hung up. It was kind of getting to me that I was lying all the time, about stashing away money and all that. My guilt played tricks on me, and I wasn't two blocks from Hank's house when a part of me worried he had overheard my conversation with June, although I knew it was impossible. I began thinking of all the worst case scenarios, like Hank and Deloris waltzing into the Golden Steer and seeing June and I stuffing our faces on their dime, Deloris screaming

at the top of her lungs, condemning me to Hell for being such a flea-bitten, money grubbing dog, and then June hating me for lying to her about the money. June was very noble that way. If she found out that I had taken the money from my brother to pay for the dinner she would have never spoken to me again, although June herself could be a charlatan about lying. She couldn't tolerate being lied to, but she would lie through her pretty lips whenever she found herself in a hard spot. You couldn't hold it against her, because I did the very same thing, probably more often, but it hurt worse lying to June, because I didn't want to do it, but sometimes lying was just as essential as telling the truth.

It took me fifteen minutes to get back to my apartment, and it was 8:24 when I arrived. I ran upstairs, changed clothes, splashed some water on my face, cleared my nose of dried blood flakes, and ran my hand through my hair, the grease making my fingers slick. I put on my corduroy jacket, my gut pushing out, empty, but full of gas. I looked at my timepiece and it was 8:31, and I exhaled with some relief. You could say a lot of things about me, but you couldn't say I wasn't punctual. I took a swig from my flask, which I left in my jacket pocket from

the night at the overlook with June, and it was warm and harsh. The burn lasted long after I swallowed and worked its way up into my nostrils. I took one more sip and it was like a goddamn bee sting in my throat. I knew I had to stop drinking. There wasn't one good use for it. Maybe I had just run my course with the stuff. I had been drinking long enough then, that I just couldn't hack it anymore. Sure, it felt as if I were flying, doing a backstroke on a cloud for a few hours, but it was a long fall down the next morning, my wax wings melting like Icarus in the sun. I rolled down the window and dumped the poison as I drove. It was a symbolic gesture as if there was no going back from it; I had given it up for good..

I approached June's door and was about to knock when I remembered what an ass-chewing she gave me for knocking the last time, so I opened the door and walked in and there was June naked in the kitchen. "GODDAMN IT, LUKE! HAVEN'T YOU EVER HEARD OF KNOCKING!" she shouted as she tried to cover her tits with one hand and her pussy with the other. I took it all in the way a tourist took in the Grand Canyon. "You told me not to knock!" "Oh, Luke, you planned this!" "How could I have planned it?" "Oh! Stop looking!" I began to laugh as she ran past me and up the stairs to get something

to cover herself. I laughed until tears came to my eyes. It took me a few minutes to quiet down, for just when I thought I was done, another roll of laughter came out of nowhere. Tears from laughter made my face wet, but my throat was dry as hell. I hollered up to her, "Got anything to drink in this godforsaken place!?" "There's an open bottle of wine." She yelled back. I went over to it and eyed it. I had just given up drinking fifteen minutes earlier and already the blue devil was whispering in my ear. I picked up the bottle, then put it down, went to the faucet and stuck my mouth under it. The lukewarm water tasted like steel in my mouth and I spit it out. Goddamn it, I thought as I uncorked the wine bottle and took a long drag, holding the neck, a nice pinot noir. I felt ashamed brutalizing a good wine like that, for I always thought of myself as somewhat of an aficionado on the subject, perhaps even a professional appreciator, that I didn't sink down to the level of other wine-rats who drank it out of boxes they kept in their refrigerators. As much of a slob as I was, I always regarded myself with some dignity, with some class, maybe it was misplaced self-praise for what I thought was a sophisticated intellect, or that I was a blue-collar candy maker who had read the Harvard classics, and even though I

slouched on the outside, I carried myself on the inside with a beaming arrogance, because it took arrogance to be great in this world... although greatness was losing its validity with each year that passed.

June came down the staircase looking like something out of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Blvd.*, so beautiful that I could hardly take it. It felt like the wind had been knocked out of me, and every other woman in the world seemed to shrivel and die next to her. My heart was overflowing, beating an irregular beat, for it couldn't comprehend her beauty. "I'm ready." she said. I didn't speak for a moment, searching my mind for something to say, to let her know how beautiful she was, but nothing came, so I said, "It's about time." That was my way, and she knew it. I could only express myself on paper, where it was safe; I wasn't made for the speaking world. Once when June and I were together she asked me if I loved her and instead of howling, 'yes, yes, yes!' like I should have done, the only thing that came to mind was, "Well, I'm still here aren't I?" She knew what it meant, and she'd nestle into me, her head fitting perfectly into my chest cavity like we were made to love each another, but I still regretted not telling her. That's what had my mind shredded to ribbons,

how could people so perfect for one another fight it so hard? And it made me question what the meaning of *perfect* was, how when you boiled it down, it was just a made-up word like *happy* or *love*, they were big words with big armor, but no insides, no guts. I always thought in life a certain thing had a certain way, a certain path it followed, but the older I got, and the more disillusioned I became, I found that nothing was certain, and everything could be broken. It made you question on a lonely Wednesday night if horses were born to run or to be made into glue..

It was only when I was in front of the typer that sappy love letters were written for June and the bravado melted off me like sheets of ice. On the nights that I had too much to drink, the typer would look up at me and say, "You're never going to get her telling all your sorrows to me." And I'd say, "Don't tell me about my love life, you goddamn machine!" "You know you think you're pretty tough shit," it'd say, "always walking around like some gift to the world, writing about June, but not having the balls to say any of it to her face." "I don't know *how* to say it, that's all, and I don't think I'm hot shit." "Listen, fat ass, you've hardly been writing at all, the thing you claim to love so much!" and it hisses at me, "Yeah, yeah, you

think you're something special because you put words on a page. Any bum could do that." "Yeah, but not with my grace!" I'd say. "Bullshit, your grace! Till you get something in *The New Yorker* like you're always howling about, you're just a flunky zero." "And what about June?" "June's never coming back; you're too much of a bum. She needs a better man than you; she needs someone who can challenge her." "I can challenge her! I'm more interesting than any of those jack-offs she's been with after me. I'm an artist!" "You're an artist like I'm a Remington Super-Riter!" "Hey, I could not write all and then you'd be fucked, with nothing to do but collect dust." "We'll see," it says, "We'll see how long it takes." "How long what takes?" I ask. "For you to come back, you'd lose your mind without me." it says. I get quiet, and it flips through the obituaries, because we both know it's right. There's nothing like the very thing that makes you feel so special knocking you off your high horse...

June and I got to the restaurant. The Golden Steer was an upper-class steakhouse with an infamous calf painted gold in the front of the building. On the inside it was decorated like a lodge, with hides of slain yaks, the heads of buffalos, and the wide-eyed deer, their necks erect and

their ears up. June and I looked completely out of place, for we were among fat men with thin silver mustaches, their wives wearing pearl necklaces on their necks, each of them used to eating plentifully, their wallets fat and happy, ordering three-hundred dollar bottles of wine and sending them back for nonsense reasons. Being out of place was part of the fun for me and June; we enjoyed watching people and insulting them to ourselves, laughing at their ridiculousness. June was the only woman I could talk trash with, because she noticed all the small things about people like I did, and when I saw something funny, I'd just look at her and she'd know right away what I was talking about. That was a much harder thing to find in a woman than beauty, the ability to talk decent trash. She also was a meat-eater and that was important. I didn't enjoy hunting or killing animals for sport, or anything like that, but I still wanted a good steak every now and again. I had been with a vegetarian once before and she ripped me a new asshole every time we went out to eat, telling me of the terrible conditions the animals were under, how they hung them upside down and slit their throats and on and on. It was all very terrible to hear and I pitied the poor animals, but I had been eating meat my entire life and I

was a creature of habit if there ever was one. June was an animal lover, but ate with more moxie than I did. The first time I ate in front of June, we had ordered a sandwich to share. I wanted my own sandwich, but I didn't want to seem like a glutton, so we shared, and I ate slowly, neatly, taking a bite, putting it down, taking another bite, wiping my mouth with a napkin, and while I was doing all that, June was polishing off her half, and right then I knew June was a woman I could love. Sometimes love hid in things as simple as that, and as we sat at our table in the Golden Steer years later I still felt that love for her, as strong and dysfunctional as a love could be. The maitre d' showed us to our table. We sat, and June learned her head down as to whisper something to me. She said, "We lead very strange lives, you and I..."

I still wasn't hungry although my mind was telling me if I didn't eat something soon I would die. The waitress was a very attractive young girl with curly black hair that came to our table wearing nothing but smiles on her face. "May I get you something to drink, maybe a cocktail?" I looked at June and tipped my head so she could order first, because I was a gentleman. She thought about the cocktail, but I could see in her face that she was really thinking

about whether it was a bad idea or not to start drinking, for we'd soon be back at my apartment, fondling and licking and she might do something she didn't want to do, or she did, but couldn't, well could, but thought she couldn't. "What do you think, Luke?" she asked. "If you want one, get one." I said. "I'll just have a water." she finally said to the waitress. "And for you sir?" "I'll have a glass of cabernet sauvignon." I said, ordering it hard and fast, like a bullet leaving a gun. "Right away sir." our bubbly waitress replied. For a man who watched his family drink most of their wine out of a jug, it felt good to order wine in a lovely restaurant to a beautiful woman. As our waitress walked away June called her back and ordered the cocktail and I knew even if it was for a moment, she was relaxed and happy to be with me on my birthday. When she walked away again June leaned forward and said, "How beautiful is our waitress? She makes me nervous." "Well, maybe we can talk her into going back to the apartment with us and have a threesome." I said half jokingly. June rolled her eyes, "What do you want to eat?" she asked. "I know it's a sin to be in a place like this and not be hungry, but I'm really not." I said. "Why don't we share a steak and get an order of potatoes and an order of asparagus?"

"That'd be fine." I said. When the waitress returned with our drinks I could see June getting nervous again and start to blush. She was actually sexually attracted to our waitress. I briefly imagined all three of us intertwined naked in bed, but the thought was ripped from me as soon as I got the pain in my stomach from imaging June and the waitress going at it all by themselves, and I couldn't help but feel a bit jealous. Despite as horny as June made me, I hardly imagined us having filthy sex, it was rather gentle and sensual, true lovemaking instead of just fucking, and the intense peering into each other's eyes as we did it, our minds making love as our bodies did. Women had that power, though, the power to crush a man with a few carefully selected words, or a mere sexual gesture that was directed towards someone else. They used their cunts like weapons; the simple fact that they had them could drive a man to the madhouse. Women knew of this power, and flexed it whenever they needed to or whenever they felt like being cruel, because there was no worse pain than the sense of doubt you had in your woman... There was an awkward moment when June couldn't put together her words to order and I was lost in a painful sexual fantasy, and the waitress stood over the table asking, "Do you need another minute?"

"No, we're ready." I said. "We would like to share one filet mignon, rare, an order of mashed potatoes and an order of asparagus." "That will be all for you?" she asked. I gave one final look at June and she nodded. "That's it." I said. "Alright, I'll put that right in for you." She smiled a wide smile at us and disappeared back into the kitchen.

June and I didn't talk about our affair, only rehashed the past and laughed over the memories of our previous birthday dinners, mocked the people around us, and saw a man in a fur scarf. June drank down her cocktail and I could see the tension in her shoulders dissipate. All the while, as I was talking with June, I looked at the people around us. They had gotten something out of life that I hadn't, and as I viewed surviving each night as a victory, all their happiness would evaporate if we switched places. My life was their rock bottom, but it didn't seem that way to me, I just got ahead when I could, struggling to keep my mouth above water. I was lower class and they were upper class, but we were all surviving. The people of this city choked down beef jerky and cheap beer, others swallowed lamb chops and champagne, but we were all in it together, and as disconnected as I felt from them, I couldn't escape

the fact that were just different extremities of the same stinking body...

The food came and we ate. It was the best steak I ever had, falling apart on the fork and turning into butter in my mouth. June loved it too. "This is may be the second best steak I've ever had." She said, "A friend of mine's brother is a chef for the Rockefeller family and he once cooked us a meal that was to die for." We continued to eat and I looked at her. Her face was very beautiful, her eyes looking at me, chewing on her asparagus stock. "Did I tell you about Cathy?" "No." I said. "Cathy's boyfriend is married to another woman." "Did Cathy leave him?" "No. She says she loves him." "Then it's her own damn fault if she gets hurt." "Well, he says he loves her too." "Of course he did." "I know, but it's not my place to say anything. It's her life." There was a moment of silence and I thought about what June had told me about Cathy and it made me disturbed. I wasn't sure if I was upset for Cathy's sake or that this was the kind of example of love that June had been around her entire life, that it was okay to settle, that men could do all these awful things, but to take them back anyway, because they said a meaningless phrase, *I love you*. "That bothers me." I said. "Really?" June said,

shocked. "Usually you don't care at all about people." "I'm not sure what bothers me more, the fact that he's giving her the run around or that she's too stupid to see it."

"You can't help who you love." June said. What a disgusting, cop-out thing to say, I thought, *you can't help who you love*. What a phony, bullshit reply. The truth was you couldn't help who you loved, but it didn't absolve you from being a moron because of it, and in an odd way I sensed that June said that to me because she was in love with this bastard in the mountains, and didn't specifically know why, and when the time came she could look at me and say it again, "You can't help who you love" perhaps thinking it would hurt me less, for I *couldn't* argue with the mysterious workings of the heart. What a pile of horseshit. My heart was the size of Texas and all it wanted to do with give its love to June, but she ran it through the fucking meat grinders, and to rationalize it she'd say, "You can't help who you love. *You can't help who you love!*"

I went to take a piss and when I came back our waitress was waiting for me with dessert, a candle burning in it. While I was in the toilet June had told her it was my birthday. It was a classy place, so there was no singing or chanting or anything like that, but the dessert was free

so I didn't mind. "Happy birthday, sir." Our waitress said, and when she said it I felt very old, older than anyone else in there, and it wasn't a good feeling. I felt as though I could keel over and die at any moment. "Thank you." I said. I blew out the candle and June and I dug into the bread pudding. The waitress refilled my glass of wine and I sipped it playfully, letting it rest on the back of my teeth, flicking it with my tongue and then feeling it hit my pallet. "Can I have some of that?" June asked. I gave her my glass and she drank the rest of it in a gulp. She was pretty drunk now, between the cocktail and the rest of my wine. The bill came, I paid it and June and I walked out of the restaurant. I rubbed the pig's snout as I walked past. All of Hank's money was gone, and I hadn't even got used to the weight of it in my trouser pocket yet. A cold wind blew and June shivered close to me. I picked my teeth clean with a toothpick. It reminded me of one of my favorite stories Francis had told me. When Francis was in his twenties he worked at a bowling alley in Memphis, and he had a habit of picking his gums with toothpicks. He did it so often that the nerves in his gums died and he had to get all of his perfectly white teeth pulled. That night when he went back to the bowling alley there was a woman

who was known as the neighborhood whore, a southern bell with a fat ass she squeezed into tight blue jeans, and red hair that she kept in a bow, laughing and eating caramels at the snack counter, and she called out to him in her sweet southern voice, that coy drawl only southern girls had, "*Francis! Francis! You poor boy, you got all your pearly white teeth pulled and now you can't have any caramels!*" and so Francis walked over to her, took a handful of caramels and put them in his mouth. He began to chew with just the fleshy, stitched holes where his teeth use to be. The stitches broke and blood began to pour from his mouth, Francis just grinning at the whore, chewing, chewing, chewing.. I threw my toothpick on the ground and lit a cigarette instead. "Can I have a drag?" June asked. "You don't smoke." I said. "I do when I drink." she said. I gave her the cigarette and she wrapped her lips around it. I must say it was the only time June looked ugly to me, puffing away like a real hip cat, the smoke from the cigarette clouding up her breath. She handed the cigarette back to me and I finished it off before getting into the car. A thin layer of ice covered the windshield and it took a moment for the wipers to break it up. The heat came cold at first, and then turned hot after a few minutes. "Why

don't we go back to my place?" June suggested. "Fine, if that's what you want." "Well, we're so much closer to it now, and I don't want you to have to drive me all the way back tonight." "You could always spend the night." I said. "My house is closer." she replied. So, I made my way to her house, away from the Golden Steer, and over the bridge.

We went up into her room and sat down on the bed. "Would you like your birthday present now?" she asked. "You didn't have to get me anything." I said. She rolled her eyes because it was such a trivial, mundane thing for me to say. "Sure." I said. She pulled out a nicely wrapped gift. I could feel through the wrapping that it was a book. First I undid the bow, and then the paper. It was a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. "I hear the main character is as cranky as you are." she said with a devilish smile. I put the book down and kissed her fingers. "Thank you." I said. I was now leaning over the bed and she was laying long ways in front of me, as if she was waiting for me to paint a portrait of her, her body inconceivable in the lamplight. I began rubbing up and down on her thighs over the dress. Her legs were freshly shaven; I hardly felt any hair, except for a few uneven patches. Then after a few times of running my hand over her dress, I slipped my hand, chewed fingers

underneath it, rubbing her bare thigh, and almost reaching her ass. She wasn't wearing any panties and her flesh seemed completely unadulterated, soft as buttermilk, like running your fingers over a piece of velvet. She moaned lightly. "I think you should have sex with me for my birthday." I said. She began to laugh, "And why's that?" "Because we both want it, and it would be nice." "What about my boyfriend?" "What about him?" "I'm dedicated to him." "It's just me and you in this room, no one else for one thousand miles." "I've never seen you like this before." she said, "Like what?" I asked. "I don't know, almost *pleading* with me, but it's cute. I like it." she began to run her fingers through my hair, taking the pieces and wrapping them behind my ear. "I'm so tired." she said, "That wine did me in." Her eyes began to get heavy. I got closer to her and put my head in her arms, and we slept like that, feeling more at home than I ever felt in my own bed, her smell like summertime, two people sleeping together...

I woke in the middle of the night. June was still sleeping. I picked her up and put her under the covers. I went to the bathroom and ran the faucet. I sat on the toilet and pushed, but nothing came out. I wiped once, just

in case, washed my hands and walked back into the hall. There was a spare bedroom at the end of the corridor with a window. I went in and sat down in front of it. The bloodshot moon came out from behind a cloud and it looked close enough to grab. I could have sworn I saw dew on the surface, like a meadow or a moor. I looked out of that window and noticed how peaceful everything looked, how quiet everything was. There were no people walking the streets, everyone had a bed and they all were in them, somewhere. And it began to snow...big, fat snowflakes drifting softly to earth. Across the way was a poster of Rocky Marciano in one of the windows. I was sad about June, but sitting there watching the snow was enough. There were no rotten kids shooting dice in the alleyways, no drug addicted mothers, no lowlife fathers, no dogs with rabies, no cats with ticks, no junkies, no hustlers, and no hookers...

I left before June woke. No one was on the road as I went twenty-five miles below the speed limit, almost too depressed to move. That stagnant feeling the morning gave

me was rising right along with the sun. I got home and slept for a few more hours. When I awoke my back was stiff as hell and I had trouble getting out of bed. It felt like an ice pick was in my back, lightening bolts of pain shot down my right leg with each step. I found a place for *The Catcher in the Rye* on my bookshelf by taking down Sue Ann's book and throwing it in the garbage can. I limped down to the toilet, trying to keep all my weight off my right foot. I looked into the mirror, and did not look well. I knew I wouldn't be able to find a job the way I looked, so I took scissors and cut my beard as closely as I could. Then I took a straight razor and shaved it off, the skin sensitive to the blade. When I was through, I looked like a different man completely, a face still sad and broken, but cleaner and more respectable. I managed to shave without cutting myself too bad, just a few slices and cuts, and the blood clotted after holding my finger to them. My skin was smoother than I remember it being before I grew the beard, and I looked younger as well. I had always looked fifteen years older than I actually was, and now it was more like five years. I got ten years back just like that, and that could reinvigorate a man. I got into the shower and rinsed off all the small hairs that had gotten caught in my chest

and arm hair, because if you let them go they would itch like cockroaches crawling over you, or red ants taking a bite out of your ass. I let the hot water hit my back, maybe ease the pain, but it was no use. I washed my balls, and it felt good. I tried stroking my penis, but it still went limp in my hand. Shakespeare never had this problem, I thought. I'm sure Shakespeare could get a hard-on that lasted for days, and he got whatever woman he wanted, and he never drank alone...

The great job hunt continued as I sat in a small café and drank a coffee, looking through the free newspaper. There was a position at a dry-cleaner, no experience required. I ripped it out of the paper and stuffed it in my pocket. I seemed like good, honest work. I would be providing a service, something people needed. Unlike flowers, everybody needed clothes, and that fact made it seem less useless than I knew it to be. The world was full of poetic dry-cleaners, I thought. As I walked out of the café, a delivery man with a clipboard came out of the building next door. I pitied him, for I knew exactly what he was feeling, I knew it from being a delivery man for just one day, the dread he must have felt looking at the next address on the list. It really didn't matter how many

books you read or films you saw, you really didn't understand something until you did it. I felt for that poor bastard. My car was out of gas and I didn't have any money to fill it up so I walked to the dry-cleaner, which was eight blocks away, just over a mile. My leg pain still hadn't given up. I was breathing heavy by the time I got there and I had to bend over and spit. My goddamn fat stomach, I thought, I needed to get into shape, not for looks, not for women, but for health. I just had to live long enough to write a classic book, just long enough to get my name in lights...

The dry-cleaner was boiling hot from the machines, and it felt good for a moment, making it feel like my face was defrosting, but soon it became unbearable and I couldn't breath. The boss came out from inside his office dressed like it was mid summer, a white wife-beater with yellow armpit stains. "I'm here for a job." I said. "Why do you want to be a dry-cleaner?" he asked me. "I don't." I said, knowing that he knew no one *wanted* to be a dry-cleaner, you either had to be, or you were born into it, and we both knew I *had* to be. "It isn't a very hard job, just a precise one. We return the clothes on the same day their brought in, can you handle that?" "Yes." "Alright."

Then he brought me into the back room where some of the other employees were working, all of them looking miserable, disgruntled, and harboring a deep hatred for me. The boss then showed me what I'd be doing. "You're going to switch the loads. When one load is finished you put the clothes through the ringer and then you hang them outside on the line." I nodded and looked at the ringer. The ringer was a machine that had two rolls hooked up to a crank that you sent the clothes through and it sucked all the water out. "A few hundred times a day and the ringer will start building muscles on you." "That's what I need." I said. "Alright, you'll start on Monday." "Good. Thank you." I didn't call him sir, because I didn't want to seem like a kiss ass. If you give them an inch they took a mile and you'd be their lapdog from that day forward. You had to be respectful, but reserved, let them knowing you had a dick and balls that worked. The boss seemed like a decent guy, though, he was taller than the Empire State Building, and his long arms swung down by his knees. The hot air in the dry-cleaner had sucked the life out of him and he looked like an apple core, completely dehydrated. Besides a dry-cleaner, he was also a laundromat, which meant he got people's undergarments besides their gowns and tuxedos, so

I knew it wouldn't be a very sanitary job. I was a bit of a germ freak, and I didn't like the idea of dealing with panties with pussy juice in them or stinking, reeking stockings, but a man in my position couldn't afford to be picky, it was a paycheck.

Starting on Monday meant that I had to spend the weekend with no money. Christmas was around the corner and I still hadn't figured out what to get June. I didn't want to give her more of my poetry, because I don't care how genuine you were, it was a tiresome gift. Even if T.S. Eliot were giving them to me, I would get tired of it, so I had to come up with some cash. Perhaps it wouldn't be an expensive gift, but I set out to get something meaningful. I remembered what June said about writing dirty stories and how a lot of writers had done it to make some quick money. I didn't know of anyone who could except the stories and pay me that fast, but I thought it was worth a try. I called up a buddy of mine, the one that got pissed when I told him he shouldn't become a writer, just to see if he knew of anything. He was always a man who had a hand in everything. He knew a guy in every pawn shop in the western hemisphere, and he was a bit of a scoundrel, hanging around the Art House A-Go-Go satisfying the many perversions to

his name. "Hey Jerry, this is Luke Hurt calling." "Luke, I didn't expect to hear from you." "Yeah, about that, I'm sorry for the way I left things, but I need your help."

"What is it?" he asked. I didn't know how to approach it at first, so I decided to be blunt. "Well, you know how some guys write for porno mags to make some extra bread?" "Sure, I do it myself." he said. "Really?" "Shit yeah, it's great money. Hundred bucks a story, and it can be about anything, the dirtier the better." "How long does it take to pay you?" "It used to be a week or two when I first started, but now the guy knows my work and he pays me when I bring in a new story." "Listen, I need you to call this guy, tell him about me, and see if he'll pay me for a story." "I don't know; it doesn't work like that. You've got to submit your work to him, just like any legitimate publisher." "I know, but I'm in dire need of some cash right now. I'll have a story for him today. Talk to him; promise him that I'll have a story for him today if he can pay me. Put in a word for me. Talk me up, lie if you have to. If you do, you can come over any time and we'll talk writing." "Alright, Luke, I'll call him." "Fine...fine...You're a good man Jerry. You can call me back at this number." I gave him my telephone number and we hung up.

The pain in my leg hadn't gone away, and the closer I got to my apartment the more it seemed to hurt, like the way you could hold taking a shit all the way until the moment you set foot in the toilet and then it felt as though it was coming hot and fast. I climbed the stairs and made it to my room. I sat down at the typewriter and put my fingers over the keys. It was the first time I had done it in days and it felt good. I was about to type something, but then I sat back in my chair and thought. It didn't matter how good you were; only that it was filthy. I wrote at the top of the page, *Paris, You Whore*. And then the delicious flow came back to me all at once and I began to dance on the keys, the stars aligning with the planets, each sentence as if they were waiting up in writing heaven for me to pluck down and punch into life. I was writing dirty, filthy things, but I wasn't feeling sexy in the least. It was a mechanical act, as eating or driving, the only joy I felt was from the act itself, like playing an out of tune piano, spanking the keys, making them plead for mercy... The story was about a married man, Waldo, who traveled to Paris before cementing himself at home to take care of his ill wife. While in Paris he meets another American man, Ernest, in a hostel. Ernest has an apartment

in Paris, but is staying at the hostel for the night because his girlfriend threw him out. The story aspect soon fades away and segways into Ernest's lavish life of orgies and French prostitutes, and his perversion of urinating into his condoms, which he only uses because most of the whores in Paris either have syphilis or Chlamydia. Waldo, who had never been apart of anything sexual like that before, returns to America to his sullen and prude wife, Margie, with the seed of perversion planted in his mind. Margie wants to get pregnant, but Waldo doesn't think he's ready to be a father with the meager earnings he makes as an antique salesman, so he uses condoms when he and Margie have intercourse. One night, when the thought gets to be too much for old Waldo, he takes one of the condoms, puts it on and urinates into it. To his surprise the urine starts squirting out of tiny holes in the condom, which had been put there by Margie in order to get herself pregnant. The story ends with Waldo leaving Margie out of shame, for he confesses to urinating into the condom, and staying with Ernest, who had moved back to America to peruse a career of pornography featuring young girls making love to Shetland ponies... I thought the story was quite a riot, and I howled with laughter at the ridiculousness of it, but also how

clever it was. I could be very clever at times. Just as I finished the telephone rang. "Hello." "Yeah, Luke, it's Jerry." "Jerry, tell me good news, I've got a story here, it's filthy all right, it's terrible." "He said you're in luck, he desperately needs one more story for his next issue of *Max's Bizarre Book of Sexual Fantasies*. If you can have it to him by his deadline, four o'clock, he said he'll give you two-hundred big ones." "I got it right here in my hands, buddy. Just tell me the address." Jerry gave me the address, I thanked him and I was off down the road, limping, letting the pages flap in the wind so the ink could dry.

Max looked like a pornography peddler, the kind of man that would have snapshots of twelve year old girls in an old shoebox from Sears Roebuck and Co. underneath his bed. While so many men were clean cut, their hair short, no facial hair, skinny ties and slacks that came to their ankles, Max had long, greasy hair and a long beard, wore rings on his fingers, and wore sunglasses like the rock and

roll stars of the time, even though there was no sun to be seen in the dungeon of his office. I thought I stuck out like a sore thumb in a crowd of run of the mill nobody students, or straight laced lawn jockeys, people who looked like their mother's dressed them or they had jobs that would bore any person with a soul to tears, but Max lived on a planet all his own. He was as ugly as a pile of vomit in a trashcan, but he got all the pretty girls with bodies like Marilyn Monroe, because he was their master. All the porno guys were ugly as hell, but they got all the women because of their position of power. All of them were oily, fat pigs with little pricks, but women would fall over one another to fuck them, because they might put them in a picture, and it was quite a life lesson just watching him sit, knowing these facts as well as I did. "Are you Luke?" he asked, croaking it out of his throat like a toad. "I am." "Jerry told me about you. He said he'd put his reputation on the line for you." "Well, Jerry's got a big mouth." I said. "Do you have the story?" "Right off the goddamn press." I slipped him the story. "*Paris, You Whore.*" He read aloud, "Say, you're not one of those artistic types are you? I have to read three pages of bullshit before getting to the good stuff?" "Not at all,

baby. It gets juicy right off the bat." He lifted up the story again and read a few lines. "You're a wise man." he said. "Why's that?" I asked. "You waited until the last minute. Jerry must have told you I needed it by four. I don't have enough time to read it, so I'll just have to pay you, right?" "Jerry said you needed it at four and you'd give me two-hundred bucks if I got it to you by then." I pulled out my timepiece. "It's three-fifty now." He gave me a long and dreadful look before going into a drawer and getting out four fifty dollar bills.

I was a rich man again, and it was from writing, which made it feel better than receiving a paycheck, even if it was for smut. When you are in the pit writing was writing and you couldn't be picky. I had made money from some sort of art and that was like extracting juice from a pinecone. It was a publication and no one could take that away from me, and writing dirty stories also provided a security of your work, because your writings wouldn't end up anywhere else besides the magazine in which you submitted, maybe under a different name, but that didn't matter because you had gotten paid, and no one could trace them back to you. The problem with submitting poetry was you really never knew where it would end up. Sometimes you'd never hear back

from a publisher and then all of a sudden your work pops up under a different name and only a stanza is used in some lowbrow magazine that had a readership of six. Poetry is raped worse than any other art form; it is left naked and dead..

37

I decided to go down to Main Street Antiques and visit my old buddy Jon to find a good gift for June. I limped over to my car; the pain in my leg was so terrible I understood how someone could kill themselves because of it. I had once known a man that suffered from leg pain, the same as mine, sharp, burning pains, all the way down your ass cheek and into the bottom of your foot, fierce when you stepped, throbbing when you sat. The pain followed you no matter what you did, sat, stood, or laid flat. He saw every doctor in town, but none of them could help. For five years the pain slowly picked at him, eroding his psyche, until one night he put a gun in his mouth. He was feeling bad otherwise, lost his job, lost his wife, and with his leg the way it was, life had just gotten to be too much for him to bear. I saw him the night of his death at the bar. He

seemed to be his normal, disgruntled self. He went home, drank some more, and did it. Over the years of hanging around in a bar, you lost a lot of people, some to suicide, some to drinking themselves to death, some of them wandered off and you never heard from them again, but one way or another, a lot of people came and went. There were a lot of ghosts in the barroom, and each time someone would leave us we'd sing a song to their memory. In all my years, nothing had ever made me feel more at home than singing a bar song, to be locked in arms with your fellow drunks, howling away like madman, off key, out of tune, but bellowing the words out like some primal mating call, *Goodnight Irene!* *Oh, goodnight Irene, Irene goodnight! I love Irene, God knows I do, I love her till the sea runs dry, but if Irene ever loves another, I'll take morphine and die!* ...There wasn't anything better or sweeter than that. Tuesday, Mickey, Francis, and even Bill, singing, and with all of us together you couldn't tell how bad we actually sounded. The pure volume of voices drowned out any imperfections, and the floorboards hopped with commotion as we stomped our feet to the melody... Those were the things I loved: bar songs, gospel hymns, prohibition police raids, twelve string guitar solos, speakeasies, saloons, riots, murder

ballads, bedtime stories, harpsichord concertos, chain gang melodies, field hollers, opium dens, pool halls, cigar clubs, braggadocios, halfwits, philistines, madrigals, troubadours, boozehounds, prizefighters, beer gardens, jail houses, movie houses, dog houses, dirt naps, bull fights, cockfights, undertakers, whiskey with beer chasers, shaggy dog stories, tall tales, chess games, and screaming matches...

Jon was glad to see me, and his deep South African accent bellowed as he asked me why I was limping. "I don't know. I woke up this morning and it felt like there was a butcher's knife in my back." "You should go see a chiropractor." he said, "I go to one twice a week." Everyone became a doctor as soon as they saw you gesture a certain way, they all knew exactly what you needed, and they all had a theory on how you hurt yourself. "It's because you slouch." he said, "You have to walk with straight posture. I know these things. I was a dancer for many years, and you always have to keep a straight back." "You're right." I said, "I'm a slouching son of bitch." "Well, what brings you here? Want to hold another reading?" "No, no, I'm looking for a Christmas present for a woman." "Your girlfriend?" "...Yeah, my girlfriend." I said. It was

just easier to tell him June was my girlfriend than explain the whole mess to him, something Jon wouldn't of understood. If I told him some of the things that I had gone through over her visit, he would tell me to waltz right up to her and kiss her on the mouth. In his mind that would have solved everything. I wished things actually happened the way Jon thought they should, and it made me wonder how he had gone so long in his life without realizing they didn't, and then I thought maybe they had for him, and things truly were what you made them to be, and maybe it was June that was making my life such a torment, maybe my heart didn't have to be so heavy all the time, if I found a girl that didn't fight it so hard. A man who had seen as much as Jon surly had encountered some hard times, and yet he spoke as if his heart had never been broken, and that he wasn't missing a piece of him at the hands of someone else... "What kind of things does she like?" He asked. "I'd like to get her something artistic." I said, not knowing a better way to describe her. "Is she an artist?" "Oh, yes." I said, "A much better one than me." "Art isn't a profession; it's a way of life." Jon said, and it was one of the truest things I'd ever heard someone say. "Let me take you to the art gallery. They are all reprints,

but they might be just what you're looking for." Jon led me into a back room that looked as if no one had been in it for decades, dust as much apart of the paintings as the paint. I didn't notice her at first, but there was someone else in the room with us, a very tall, lovely woman looking through the paintings, flicking them towards her with her hand. From afar she seemed to be the uptight, intellectual, sexually cold, Central Park West, studio apartment, educated, wealthy from birth type, with a stick permanently placed up her snatch, and an upturned nose. I immediately wanted to sleep with her. The way she flicked through the paintings aroused me. As I pretended to look through the paintings, I watched her through the corner of my eye, she moved the way a porcelain stature would have moved, slow, fluid motions, delicate and sensual. I then decided to abandon my thoughts of taking her into the restroom and giving it to her brutal, because I really no longer cared enough about sex to pursue it. As far as I was concerned I had let loose enough jism, enough to show where I had been. If June said she would only take me if there was no fucking involved, I would be able to do it in a heartbeat. Luckily, she'd never say that, and I'd be able to enjoy her love both tender and sexy, but it was the hypothetical that I

was concerning myself with. Those were the kind of insane things you thought of when you were in love, how you could deny yourself the basic human need to release your jism, but I would've given it my damndest.

A painting that struck me was called *Coney Island* by Paul Cadmus, depicting beach bums and freaks having their way on the shoulder of the ocean, the rollercoaster in the background, a photographer capturing it all, and I knew that in a weird way the painting captured the essence of June and I. We always felt to be the outsiders, but that we were apart of a much larger, grand story, a story neither of us had control over. "I want this one, Jon." "Oh, yes." he said, "That is very much your style. It was first painted in 1934, and only appeared in an art gallery for a short while. No one's seen the original since." I held it up and stretched out my arms as far as they could go to get the whole picture. It wasn't very big, maybe a tad larger than a regular picture, the kind you could hang on your mantle. I knew that June would understand it, and for the first time in a long time I felt excited about Christmas. I had always heard my ex-lover, Maureen go on and on about Coney Island and how her husband had taken her there, but now those memories of that time were gone, and new ones

were born with June in mind. I continued to look through the paintings while Jon took *Coney Island* to the counter and wrapped it in thick brown paper. A few paintings back, I saw one to which I already knew the story. It was a reprint of my all time favorite painting, *The Death of Chatterton*. Chatterton was a poet, who had committed suicide as a result of too many rejection letters, and his young, lifeless body was depicted in Henry Wallis's eighteenth century painting. Such wonderful oils were used, and it looked pristine, ageless. It was so beautiful it almost brought tears to my eyes. I had to own it, an impulse that only surfaced when I had money to blow. It was considerably bigger than the original painting, which hung in the Tate gallery in London, but I knew of a perfect place it could fit. I had only seen a picture of it once in a magazine, but I thumb-tacked it to my wall as a reminder of what happened to poets during a depression. Now I would hang that painting on my wall over my typewriter, and it could remind me of what was only a handful of pills, or a loaded revolver away.

Me with money was a dangerous thing. In the afternoon I had two-hundred big ones, and then in the evening I had already spent fifty of it. It wouldn't be long before I was

busted again. It was as though I had holes in my pockets. I didn't manage my money well, never had, and my father always used to tell me, "*You spend your money like a Nigger on payday!*" I'd have a good go of it for a while, though; I'd buy June drinks and take the taxi instead of drive. I'd tip five on a seven dollar bill, and valet park instead of parking in the lot and walking half a mile to the entrance. I'd buy top of the line cigars instead of the coffin nail cigarettes, and I'd drink good whiskey by the boatload, and dress in the finest of swimwear. I'd go to the record store and buy printings of Mahler's Fourth, Beethoven's Ninth, and then I'd get the bargain vinyls or some old ragtime blues quartet and fling them out of the moving cabs, laughing and kicking... God, it was good while it lasted.

Monday morning had arrived and it was time for work to begin at the dry-cleaner. I was suffering from a hangover that I had contracted from going to a jazz club called *The Aruba* with June the night before. The Aruba was a pool hall and dance club that had a live jazz band until eleven o'clock, and then they played the greats like Benny

Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Louie Armstrong, Chick Webb, and Glenn Miller until the wee hours of morning, and people could do all the dances, the Foxtrot, the Jitterbug, the Mambo, the West Coast Swing, the Cha Cha, the Bosa Nova, and the Stroll, the men taking the women and throwing them around like rag dolls. I wasn't much of a dancer, but I'd take June there and we'd sit with some of her friends and get free drinks. June flexed her power of sweet persuasion over the bartenders to get my drinks and make the evening bearable. I sat slumped in my chair most of the night, listening to her friends drone on and on about utterly pointless things. No body had one goddamn interesting thing to say, but I was happy to be around June and I put on the bravest face I could. June had no illusions that I liked any of her friends, only that I put up with them for her sake. We would often exchange looks expressing every emotion needed to understand the way each other was feeling, and I had to control my laughter most of the time. She was the only woman I knew who could make me laugh by just looking at me, with her playful, sunflower eyes..

When I had gone up to the mountains to visit June she held a party at her apartment, which she shared with two other young girls at the time, and I was just a strange man

sleeping in June's bed, stumbling out in the morning, my pants unzipped, my gut paler than a full moon. The party was full of artists, all with some sort of credit to their name, a painting in the town gallery, a poem in the local arts bulletin, and so on. I sat in the corner of the room and watched them. I thought perhaps if I sat there long enough and still enough, people would forget I was there, and I could disappear to someplace else. I thought about playing the part of the crazy poet and getting up on the coffee table and taking my cock out and waving it around in all the ladies faces, but it wasn't my bag. People would have cheered me on, and thrown peanuts at me as I humped a young girl; they'd all hail me as an eccentric genius. Things were fucking backwards. That kind of behavior used to be provocative, but now it was the era of the Beats, and the only people who showed up to parties like that were drug addicted, jobless bums, who used art as the net to their morose trapeze act, complaining about how the government was corrupt. The government was corrupt, that much of it was true, but none of us could do anything about it. I had discovered long ago that anyone's rebellion was taken in the government's stride. They waited for the attacks, and when they came, the government just

steamrolled right along; a protest wasn't a protest if the government was waiting for it. The only purpose a protest held was to remind you that it was *them* that were crazy, not you, and that there were others that had woken up from the chaotic, patriotic wet dream as well. I stood in the middle of the riots, torn between my beliefs and my powers. I was a man without a country, smacked down by the mainstream, but dejected by my comrades, the awful Beat Generation. I was better off living in Brazil in a bungalow, writing about water bugs and transgender hookers, rather than in the war between pen and paper and bullets and bombs... Everyone at the party had brought their own reefer, and some people sat down in circles like good little Indians, sitting around smoking a peace pipe. I couldn't stand them. What a generation to be apart of, I thought. The wild many, but the brilliant few; I just wasn't sure what side of the line I was on. Was my writing deranged? Was it controversial? But most importantly, was it controversial without taking short cuts? I wanted to stir the shit; I didn't want to be a yuppie living in the suburbs writing about my neighbors tomato plants, I wanted to be good in my own way. I was scared, though, because people had written about the hard life already, I guess it

was my job to do it better, maybe a little truer than it had done before. Some writers were afraid to use the word love in their writings, because they thought it made them seem soft, but I was not afraid to use it, because I enjoyed the word's duality. When you heard it, you thought of pink hearts and your girlfriend's strawberry blonde hair, but most of the time when you felt it, it was such a hard lover, and it left your thighs raw. It was also the only word that retained all the ingredients of a good story: humor, tragedy, pain and joy. It was beautiful and ugly all at once; beautiful, that's another word I wasn't afraid to use. Perhaps the other writers would think I was going soft...let them, I thought.

In one of the tender moments I shared with June, she laid in bed, while I sat on the floor and she was playing with my hair. It was the morning after the party, and I asked her if I was affable enough, if I had come off as too much of a jerk, and she said, "No, but sometimes I wish other people could see what I see in you." "What do you mean?" I asked. "I mean, you are so kind to me and so funny, and nobody else gets to see that." "That's because I save it for you." I said. Hearing her say that made me very happy and very sad at the same time, for she was the only

one who knew me for how I really was, and that could be a rather lonely thing to think about. It was that same afternoon that I began driving back home, back into my decrepit city, when I saw the saddest, yet most beautiful site I had ever seen. On the side of the road was a little patch of wilted sunflowers in the snow. All their necks were slumped downward in the same direction away from the sun. It was truly awe-inspiring, so much so that I had to pull over, and cross an icy freeway to look at them more closely. I had never felt more depressed and inspired in all my life. I wished I could have stayed there forever. I knew that I would never be able to write about them, and capture it exactly the way it was. It was something just for me, something only me to take in and marvel at, keep sacred. I looked at it for a few more moments, before turning and driving away.

The dry-cleaner was stuffy and I had to unbutton my shirt five minutes into it. Because of a chemical they used to clean the clothes, it always smelled like a skunk had just sprayed its jism on every inch of the place. "What's that awful smell?" I asked one of the boys. "Oh, that's Perc you're smelling." "What's that?" "Perchloroethylene, a solvent we use on the clothes. It will get you high as a

motherfucker." "Is it dangerous?" "Sure is. Try not to inhale it. Work here long enough and you'll develop a drinking problem." "Why a drinking problem?" "Well, the Perc gets you feeling so goddamn loopy all day that when you start to come down, you want to feel it some more. You don't want to go sniffing Perc, so you start drinking." It came apparent to me that wherever you worked, a slew of new problems found you there. Some men had claimed Perc had caused them cancer, paralysis, and blindness from working around it for so many years. I worked the ringer for a few hours, and by the time we went on break, my arms throbbed from twisting that crank. I had sweat stains down my front and down my back, and it felt as though I was working in a sweat shop in some far out, foreign country, making sneakers and stitching footballs for a penny an hour. I enjoyed the cold air and a cigarette, but then it was back into the boiler room. Like the boss said, it wasn't a hard job, just precise. We ticketed each article of clothing with a little colored ticket, a different color for each day of the week. Then we had to separate the whites, blacks, and colored clothes from each other so the colors wouldn't run. I'd put each load of clothes in, one at a time, and then run them through the ringer to dry them. We

had a man who ticketed the clothes, Jack, a rather disturbed fellow, for he'd take the dirty panties from the costumer's clothes and jack-off into them, sometimes putting them on his head and laughing hysterically about it, running around the place. "Do you want to sniff them, Luke?" He'd asked me, holding a pair a few inches away from my face. "A cunt was in them just a little while ago. I think I can still smell it." "No, goddamn it, you animal!" I'd say. There were others on the steam press, Augustus and Xavier Salt, two Filipino brothers, who got the heat worse than anyone, standing over those presses, the steam rising up right to their faces, sucking their skin dry like mummies. The boss sat in his office all day, stretching his long arms by throwing playing cards into an upside down hat, and then when all the clothes were separated, washed, dried, and pressed, he'd load them up in his truck and make the deliveries. While he was out, the boys and I would take cigarette breaks, all dog tired from the days work, a little high from the smell of the Perc. They all talked about their fight stories, how they got their scars, and so on, all the macho shit that really bored me, but they were good guys, completely suspended from any functioning societal group of any kind. Augustus and Xavier were

straight from the Philippines, and they didn't know the first thing about America, only that it was their new way of life. Jack was originally a tailor, which is how he ended up working at the dry-cleaner. He'd tailor the suits of costumers, always sewing, sewing, sewing, making the jackets fit like gloves, but never having the right sized clothes for himself. There was never any peace when old Jack was around, because he was always thinking about something, and you were always trying to figure out what it was. Jack was lost in his own world, staring off into space and then bursting out a random question like, "What do you think the barometric pressure is for today?" and I'd say, "I don't know, Jack, Jesus God." Maybe the Perchloroethylene had got to him, and melted his brain a bit, but no matter, we all got along, and we all sat, our minds floating on the fumes, the kings of dirty clothes, me with my x-rated stories, a fat wad of money in my pocket, feeling good against my thigh, Jack with his sewing machine, and the Salt brothers with the American dream..

Jack brought a chess set to the cleaner and on our breaks he'd challenge me to a game. I had been a chess player all my life, often playing my brother as a child, and I had gotten pretty good, but Hank was the master. He'd

make his first five moves and then walk away to go do other things, and I'd be sitting there, scratching my head. As I got older, and Hank moved away to college, I would bring my set to school and hustle the other kids during the lunch period. Once I got known around the schoolyard, I'd go down to the park where the old men sat on stone benches and played. I was the youngest and slickest kid there, playing with metal pieces, while the old-timers played with marble, and pieces carved out of limestone. They didn't take me seriously, until I took twenty or thirty dollars from them a day, playing three or four of them at a time. "What are you going to do with the money, sonny?" They'd want to know. "I'm going to put it in a college fund for my little sister." I'd say, so they didn't feel so sore about losing. Really, I blew the money on books and records, like I was still doing as an adult... Jack was a decent player, capable of always being three moves ahead of himself. Sometimes one game would last all day long, and into the next day, played just during lunch and on our two cigarette breaks. As I worked the ringer, I'd think about my next move. I'd strategize, and so would he, rummaging through ladies panties. I liked chess because you could equate it to any situation in life. Everything could be viewed as a

strategic battle of wits, each move crucial to victory, and in the end it was all still just a game. I admired that about chess, and you couldn't say that about any other game, it was dignified, intellectual, and enduring. All it really took was patience, enough time for your opponent to show their weakness. I guess it appealed to my meticulous nature, even though I could be impulsive at times. When it came to important things, patience was my best virtue. I had been waiting for June for three years, and we had gotten ourselves into a situation that was very much like a chess game, for just when I thought I had her king cornered, a goddamn knight would come out of nowhere and block me. I was a lowly pawn, but I had guts and you had to admire that.

Sometimes people would bring their clothes in with piss and shit in them, and I'd say, "*Don't these people have any shame? Why would they turn in dirty, shitty clothes?*" "They need someone to clean them." Jack would say. "Hell, throw them away! I'd be too embarrassed to bring in a pair of pants with shit in them." "People don't care if we see their shit, they don't see us as anyone they have to ashamed around, we're their dry-cleaner. Same as going to the doctor; women show their tits to the doctor

all the time, no questions asked, but then it's like asking to borrow money to see them in the bedroom. Your profession dictates what kind of undergarments you see. If you have a good job, you only see the sexy panties women wear, because they know that besides a dick, you've got a fat wallet. We at the dry-cleaner, we only see the panties full of period blood." They were words spoken from a man who had been made salty by life, who had gotten the raw end of the deal every time, who had ordered steaks and only tasted fatty gristle, but he was right. Most women didn't see the man for the man, they just saw their shell, how much bacon they brought home, how big their pecker was, how hard and how long they fucked them. That was the measure of the man, how thick his prick was, not how many rounds he could go..

My parents were divorced when I was a young man; it didn't break me up at all, I didn't cry myself to sleep every night or anything like that, they were miserable and it was better for the both of them, but I remember my mother telling me when she was on the hunt for a new man, "*As people get older, they love for different reasons. At my age it's about security.*" I had never heard anything more depressing in my entire life. It's about *security*? In so many words, it was about how much money he made and how

much he could pay for so she didn't have to work, that's what it boiled down to in its scummy, awful truth. It broke my heart to see my mother chewed up and spit out, rang through the ringer when it came to love, and despite the many, many times her and I got into arguments because we disagreed, or I challenged her because she just needed to be challenged, I never opposed her more than when she told me that. I hoped with all the romanticism in my young heart that she was wrong, that she had been made bitter and her views had been warped, because if what she said was true, I held out no hope of finding someone who could love me. I thought about that for a long time, and I realized that love really wasn't anything you could define with a simple string of words. It changed with each person. I believed love was when you cared more for the other person than you did for yourself, but to some people there were conditions to love, factors in the fine print that lessened the beauty of it and amplified the pain.

It was Christmas. The streets outside my window were busy with people doing their last minute shopping, buying

presents for distant cousins of whom they never saw, and procrastinating to the very last moments, because they didn't want to get the presents in the first place. When the magic cleared out of the holiday like cigarette smoke in a barroom, it turned out to be a very cynical day. More people committed suicide on Christmas than any other day, and as I stood shirtless, smoking a cigarette, looking down upon the passing people, I began to subtract my age from the average age of death of the American man, and figuring out, roughly, how many Christmases I had left. I only had about forty, most likely thirty, with my weight the way it was, and thirty when talking about how much longer you had to live was a very small number. The air was crisp and clear and good for breathing. June's present was leaning against the wall, while my *Death of Chatterton* reprint hung above my typewriter. Now when I brought a woman over they could endure a little fucking class. It was nice having something on the wall, besides photographs torn out of magazines; it gave the room a little character. I believed decorating a room could say a lot about a person, and Bill's apartment was so drab and empty, and it made you cold to just be in it. Now my room had some warmth... I was feeling a bit lonely on Christmas morning, so I decided to

visit the old man next door. I had sort of a sore spot for old men; I couldn't stand the sight of them alone. It was like an Achilles' heel, it got to me every goddamn time. I knocked on the door, and heard him grumbling to himself, more blue than usual. "Oh, Luke, it's you." "I thought you'd like to tie one on with me on this fine Christmas morning." He smiled a wide smile and showed me in. We sat around and drank warm beer in silence. "I have three boys, you know." He finally said. "Where are they?" I asked. "I don't know." he said, "None of them have spoken to me in fifteen years." "Why?" "I was caught up in my damn mess to be a good father to them, out on the ocean for most of their lives. I tried to make it up to them when they were grown, but it was already too late. I blew it." He took a long drag from his beer. He made a face as he swallowed, but it wasn't the beer that was bitter, it was the old familiar taste of regret that lingered in my mouth as well. "They don't even send me Christmas cards." he said, half laughing to cover a weak spot in his voice. Watching him there tore me to pieces, but there was nothing I could tell him that he hadn't already figured out for himself. The air in his cramped room was thin and dead, deader than Christmas cards...

I dialed June and asked when she wanted to meet. She told me she was with her family and that she wouldn't be available until later. I had an entire Christmas day to get through, and it seemed like an eternity. It was barely noon when I visited the bar. Everybody was there and Tuesday was wearing a Santa hat. It wasn't quite snowing, but sleet covered the shoulders of my jacket and the bottom of my shoes. "Wouldn't it be lovely if it snowed on Christmas?" Tuesday asked me. "I'm tired of the snow." I said. "No, no, snow is what makes it *Christmas!*" she said, the rest of the boys almost completely oblivious of the holiday, none of them with anyone to share it with, no one to buy gifts for, no way of knowing it was Christmas other than by what it said on the calendar. I sat around the table and Tuesday brought us a round. Everyone was being unusually quiet; perhaps it was because we all had been struck with the sense of sadness that came with Christmas, the deep feeling of unexplainable depression that lingered in the aftermath of such a cheerful day. Francis was tame, Bill was indifferent, and Mickey flicked his cards. "You ever get tired of cards, Mick?" I asked. "No. They are the only things that ever made sense to me." He said. "I have little stories worked out in my head and everything, you see. The

King and Queen are married, but the King cheats with the ace. The Jack is a rebellious soul who hates his mother and father. The ten thinks her shit doesn't stink, and the nine also thinks he's tough shit, but he's always been envious of ten. Eight goes his own way, while seven is a pretty boy always giving six a hard time. Six is always in the shadow of seven, trying to be him, admiring his long, straight back, the six trying to suck in his gut, and hold himself up like the seven, but never being able to. Four and five are married, while two and three are thick as thieves, leaving the one alone, strong and glorious. The one is the maverick; he doesn't need a goddamn soul." "What about the Joker?" Bill asked. "The Joker?" Mickey thought for a moment, "...I haven't come up with one for the Joker." he said. Mickey had come up with his own little world with those cards, and Bill's question about the Joker had thrown a crimp it, for Mickey's face was one of a confused old man with Alzheimer's, disgruntled and disoriented. I suppose he created that world because the real one had been so harsh to him, and for the first time he became more to me than just an old crook. I felt for him, and the rotten hand he had been dealt. Maybe he was just trying to deal himself a better one with each turn of the cards. I was feeling more

for people, maybe something had happened to me, maybe June had softened me up like whale blubber, maybe my corners were being rounded, maybe my edge was gone. Love could do that for a man, complete sacrifice to love could crush a man, break his spirit, tie his guts in a bow, really do some awful things to a man, let alone a writer. A good writer needed to be alone, to harden you, to understand your own mind before taking on someone else's, but it was a hard thing to wake up alone in bed every night, when the typewriter had betrayed you and you couldn't stand anything of what you'd written, and when no one was around to appreciate your half-ass art, and you were just a man...

Francis excused himself to go to the pisser and Bill called me over to the jukebox. "Do you think old Mickey has finally lost it? Going on and on about those damn cards? Two cards are married? What kind of madness is that?" Bill asked. "A different kind of madness than yours and mine." I said, "Some people wear ladies panties on their head and fuck cantaloupes, others blow up post offices, and some create elaborate stories about playing cards. Who are we to judge? I do some pretty mad things myself, don't you?" "... Pretty mad things..." he said after an eerie pause. I turned from Bill and the jukebox and announced to the whole bar

that I had to be on my way. Bill fed the juke a quarter and *Christmas Night in Harlem* began to play as I walked out onto the sidewalk and the first snowflakes fell. So many children would be happy, but for me it meant that I had to scrape ice off my windshield; one man's misfortune is another man's snowball fight, I thought. June's painting was leaned up in the backseat of my car. I didn't know where I would go for the next few hours while she spent time with her family, I couldn't go back to my apartment; it was too lonely in there, so I decided to go back to the lookout. Time always seemed to go quickly when I was there. Even though it was quiet, I had so much to look at and take in, so much to think about. The snow was pretty heavy up there and white covered the hard, cold ground, like a blanket. The loneliness I felt sitting at the lookout was different than it was before, now that I had been there with June, it made it all the more grim. The city itself was shrouded in fog and it looked like a ghostly hand making its way between the buildings. June was out there somewhere, smiling and giggling, tearing the paper off presents, and beyond that was her lover, still unaware of the affair June and I had so hastily found ourselves in. From up at the outlook it wasn't Christmas at all, but a

cloudy day. I clicked on the radio and heard, "Another one thousand soldiers dead!" I clicked it off. There was already enough death around; I didn't want to have it pouring through my car speakers. No matter where you went, you couldn't escape it. There really wasn't any peace to be had. I was all alone on the outskirts of the city, and I still couldn't escape it; death in the morning, death in the afternoon, death in the evening, and death at night. I was a peaceful man living in an unmerciful time. I tried to think back at the generations before mine and figure out which was the best time to live in, but I couldn't come up with one. Each decade from the birth of America had been divided by war and death. Even the arts, things you believed to be the opposite of death, were consumed by it. I was a quiet man, but in my business only the dead were quiet. I'd rather stay in my dark room and never come out, letting the world know I was still alive by the release of a new book every few years. I was a man who thrived on the madness that came with solitude, the talking to ones self, but I had to get up and shout and make a fool of myself, get on stage and read my awful poems. I was a man who wanted his peace, but they wouldn't allow it. The hummingbirds peck at my windows, and the mice sleep in my

shoes, and cats and dogs fight and fuck on my porch, and the tigers stretch out on the sofa and the crows hang in the curtains. There is no peace. I look out my window and see a man shot, a woman raped, a country at war, and think, how could there be peace in here, when there's none out there?

June's foyer glowed from the lights on her Christmas tree, an ominous red. She was clad in a green sweater, red scarf and cowboy boots. I took her in my arms and we embraced. "What do you think about going to see a film?" she said. "Sure," I said, "I always say I don't get to the cinema as often as I would like. What's playing?" "The newspaper is on the hall table. Look inside for us while I finish getting ready." I walked into the hall and retrieved the paper. Nothing was playing that I had any interest in, and then I saw it, "*Never has the screen thrust so deeply into the guts of war!*" It was a film titled *Paths of Glory* with Kirk Douglas. "I found it!" I shouted up to June. "What is it?" she shouted back. "Paths of Glory!" "What's it about?" "It's a war film." "Oh, god, Luke, do I have to suffer through another *boring* film of yours? Isn't there a nice musical playing?" "No, there's not. Trust me, June, you'll love it!" "Trust me, huh? Famous last words." "It's

settled then." June wasn't enthusiastic about the film, but I knew her sensibility, and I knew she would end up loving it. Before we left I said, "I have a surprise for you." "What is it?" she asked. I went out to the car and got the painting of *Coney Island*. "This is for you." I said, and handed her the painting. She looked at it for a moment without saying anything. "I've always wanted to go there, but it wouldn't be the same if I went without you." I said. "Oh, you're terrible. Do you know that?" "Why am I terrible?" "Because you make it so hard on me, saying sweet things like that." "I know I do." She looked at me with a smile, her raised cheeks holding back tears. "I wish everything was simpler." she said. "I know." I said, "Me too."

We drove down into the city and pulled in front of the theater. I had been there once before to see the Marx Brothers in *Duck Soup*, and just the memory of that visit so many years ago brought back a sentimental feeling. The marquee looked glorious, so wonderful. I had always dreamed of working in film, but you had to eat too much shit to do it. Of course, if you show me a man who hasn't eaten his helping of shit, I'll show you a bum, but even still, there seemed to be an extraordinary amount of shit to eat when it

came to Hollywood. I even went to a workshop on how to get into the film industry, not knowing that it was the equivalent to going to a creative writing class to learn how to write. I sat in a room full of other rookies, all bright eyed and bushy tailed, my ears open, optimistic, and a man no one ever heard of before came out with a cigarette in his hand, looking the way a Hollywood big shot should, graying hair that was greased and combed, distinguished with thick rimmed, black sunglasses. "Who wants to work in sound?" he asked. Three people raised their hands. "You'll always have work." He said, "Every production needs a sound guy. Who wants to be a set designer?" Five people raised their hand. "You'll work too. Who wants to be a director?" Almost everyone raised their hand, including me. "You've got it hard, but once you make it, you have the most lucrative position. And who wants to be a writer?" I was the only one to raise their hand. He looked right at me, pointed his finger and said, "You'll starve..." It was then that I knew workshops were phony bullshit. Although what he told me was true, the writer always made peanuts; it was the kind of thing I'd gotten my whole life proclaiming my aspirations about writing. As the producer, you'll get the women and the money, as the director, you'll get the money

and the awards, as the actor you'll get the money, the women, and the awards, and as the writer you are left a poor carcass for the vultures to circle around and pick clean but for your balls. I got up and left, and found the closest bar. And now it was a bittersweet feeling walking into the theater, because I would always love film, I'd hold it in a special place, but there was no better feeling than being in complete control of your words. Without much exaggeration the poetry I typed would remain untouched, perhaps it would be perverted by small fingers, but not as terribly as a film. It came down to how much shit you were willing to eat, that's all. Everyone wanted to get their grimy hands on your work, and when you refused to let the jackals at it, they'd cast you out, blacklist you, and you might as well kiss Hollywood goodbye.

The film began and I nestled close to June. It wasn't long before we realized we were witnessing a masterpiece. In the end of the film, there is a scene of a young German girl, scared and crying, brought up in front of a room of brawly, rowdy French soldiers, heckling her and whistling at her, and she is made to sing a song. As she begins to sing, entirely in German, the soldiers begin to quiet down, all of them touched by the sweetness of her voice. It

becomes clear that no matter what the lines on a map, human beings were human beings, and plunging a bayonet into the belly of a rival soldier was still killing a man... The French soldiers begin to hum to the music, and then they begin to cry. June began to cry as well, the tears streaming down her face, and my heart felt like it had drifted off to sea, downing in tears that hid inside, but never came to the surface. Everyone left the theater with a heavy heart and a better sense of the horrors of war. Most of us, who had never fought in anything close to a war, seemed to be humbled. I thought about the young men that had fought and died, and how many of them weren't born soldiers, but school teachers, and musicians and poets. The best poet in the world could have been killed on a foreign beach, four thousand miles away from his typewriter, screaming his masterpiece to the dead boy next to him...

In the lobby of the theater there was a Christmas light show. June and I found a spot along the railing and I put my arms around her waist, hugging her from behind. I nestled my chin into the space between her neck and

shoulder, and it smelled like passion fruit. We watched the light show together, terrible as it was, laughing and giggling, all the red and green lights shooting around us, fake snowflakes made from paper getting blown out onto the crowd, Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* playing overhead... June and I loved the corniness of it all, watching the other people jumping up and down, actually awestruck for the makeshift light show, getting transported to another, better time in their lives. Christmas was almost over and so was my time with June. In just a few short days, she'd be back on an airplane to the mountains and to her boyfriend, who'd she hug and kiss, my face always in the back of her mind, the painting I gave her hanging in *their* apartment. The thought of it made me nauseous, but I swallowed hard and put it out of my mind.

June and I returned to her house and sat down on the bed, both of us drained from the film. We were in sentimental moods, as if everything had slowed down and the volume of things had been turned to silent. I sat behind her while she sat up, leaning against me. I put my arms around her waist and put my face up against her lower back, and was comfortable enough to expire. The clock read eleven-fifty-nine. "Merry Christmas, June." I said. "...Merry

Christmas, Luke."... I began rubbing up and down along her back and neck. I could hear her exhale heavily as my fingernails delicately brushed up against her. They were hard and chewed, but they moved like feathers that night. I reached underneath her shirt and rubbed her bare skin. Then I moved to her hips, reaching her rib cage, hitting each rib as I passed like a tin cup on the bars of a jail cell, and then the sides of her breasts. I felt my prick move, but only a twitch. She leaned back harder into me and I moved my hands lower, working her waist and running my thumb around the brim of her pants. I'd wait a minute or so, and then I'd go a little deeper. June started to smile. "What are you smiling at?" I asked. "I'm smiling at how close you're getting." She said, meaning her plum. I pushed my hand in a little deeper. I could feel her cunt hairs tickling my fingers as I found her entrance and slipped a finger in. It was moist and open. June's head went back as I worked her cunt. I began kissing her neck, going lower until my face was in her tits. I sucked and kissed them, and then I tried to make it to her mouth, but her head was so far back that I couldn't reach. My free hand made it to her lips and she put my finger in her mouth. All the blood in my body rushed to my prick, the head like a German army

helmet, shiny and red, June's tongue flicking my finger like tiny waves, and then all at once her head moved forward and my finger was sent deep into her throat. I couldn't take it any longer; I pulled my finger out of her snatch and unzipped my pants. I undid her pants as well, ripped them off and threw them over my right shoulder. I stuck it in, and began working hard, giving her my all, but then I slowed down, going out and then in, and our lips finally met. I kissed her with one thousand left-for-dead kisses behind my lips, like it would be the last kiss I'd ever have. We were making love and the ground shook beneath us. For a moment, there was no one else on earth besides June and I, and there was no folly in our act, just pure goodness. It was probably the only good thing I had ever done in my life, and it lasted for a long time, our bodies linked, and for a moment I was not fat and I was not ugly, and June did not have that sadness behind her eyes anymore, we were just at ease, doing what we had put on earth to do, love each other powerfully.

I finished and rolled off. Reality sunk back in and the bliss soon ended when I heard June crying. I knew why she was crying, and I didn't say anything at first, just sat up in bed and began to get dressed. She got dressed as

well. I walked around to the other side of the bed and she stood up. We looked at each other for a long while, until I finally said, "Please tell me what you're thinking." She looked down and cleared her throat. "George and I are getting married this July." she said. "Well, you'll have to call it off." I said. "I can't do that." she said. "Why not?" "Because I'm happy with George." I stopped for a moment, and looked at the bed we had just made love in. "Aren't you happier with me?" I asked. "That's not a good question." she said. "Hell it isn't! It's *the* question..." "Well, I can't answer it." "Listen to me, I love you. I've never loved anything, but I love you, goddamn it. If we would have been together all this time, it would be us getting married." "I know." she said. "We're right for each other. I didn't want to believe in such a romantic notion, and I've tried to hide it for years now, but I just can't anymore. I want to be with you. I want to buy a miserable little house in a miserable little town and live there until I can no longer hold a piss." It was my best shot at being sentimental. It felt as though I had let out from its cage the mad bird in my heart, and lifted thousand pound weights off my pitiful beating muscle, but the relief was soon dampened by the feeling of aching and hurt. "We have

this image of what our life would be like together, but I'm not sure if it's real; I have a good thing right now with George, and I'm not willing to risk that to find out. I'm leaving early tomorrow to meet him New York." "Don't you love me?" I asked. She looked up at with floating eyes and said, "No." and it seemed as if a nuclear bomb went off over the city, destroying everything for miles, starting with my heart. "I did. I did for a long time." she continued. "When did that go away?" "When I had to stop thinking about it, and then I met and fell in love with George." And that was enough for me, that's all I had to hear. I knew that the long chase had finally ended in flames. There was a pause, the tension so thick it was hard to breathe. The pain I felt was floating around so heavy that I had to bat it away with my hands, like a wave of mosquitoes. June started to cry, but there was no noise, just fat tears gathering and then falling. She and I were still holding each other close, because I didn't want to let go. "Does that hurt you?" she asked. "Yes." I said, and it did hurt, it hurt worse than I'd ever let on to June. She began rubbing her hands up and down my chest, my shoulders and my gut. "I'm sorry," she said, "it's just that I feel as though this is the last time I'm going to

feel your body this way." That struck me like a knife, because I knew it was true. I would never feel her touch that way again... The only reason I chased June for so long was because I thought she loved me, and I would have chased her until the end of days, just as long as I still believed she did, and to find out that I was wrong, filled me with anguish. I did not regret loving June. My love for her was genuine, I had loved her better and longer than anyone, and I could be proud of that. She made me believe in the sappy, sentimental junk I so fiercely rejected, she made me believe that there was a special person in the world designed for you that just *fit* a little better than anyone else ever could...

While looking at her, I thought I still saw some love lingering in her eyes, but then the more I looked, the more it faded away, like a door closing or a candle being blown out. I was not mad, just defeated, washed up and beaten down. I wished I hated her, but I didn't, I couldn't. Hating her would have made things easier, it would have given me a definite way to feel, and I could relish in that feeling until going numb all together... At long last, the fighting was over, and I had to admit to myself that that part of it felt good, even though I had lost the fight. I

wanted to cry, but I still couldn't find the tears. A part of me didn't want to believe her; I didn't want to believe her mouth saying 'no,' when her body told me 'yes.' For a moment, I thought she was feeding me a long line of bullshit, because if she really didn't love me, and she was so in love with this George fellow, then it wouldn't have been such a difficult two weeks, every time we were near each other, our hearts and loins grappling to intertwine, our eyes doing that dance of love, but I couldn't argue with the cold, dead words she had spoken to me. Lies or truth, she had said them and I had to let go. I had to tip my hat in the yellow lamplight. We embraced once more; I kissed her cheek and whispered, "Goodbye." Then I turned and walked out.

It was the next night, and June was leaving for New York. I thought about her running into his arms, kissing and embracing him, going back to the hotel and fucking, and I felt like vomiting. I laid in bed all day until the sun set. It was about an hour before her flight took off when my telephone rang. I considered not answering it, but then

I did. "Hello." I said. "Luke. It's June. I'm leaving in an hour, and I was wondering if you wanted to see me before I left." "I do," I said, "but I can't. Something's come up." "Oh...well, I won't be gone too long. I'll be back in four months." "To plan the wedding?" I asked. "Don't do that, Luke." "I'm sorry." "Well, I have to go, my taxi is here." "Have fun in New York." I said it so bitter that the phone cord trembled, she didn't say anything, and I hung up. It was the exact opposite of what I wanted to say to her, I wanted to plead with her to think again, to find that cinder of love she had for me in her heart, because I knew it could be a fire again. I wanted to propose to her, to ask her to marry me instead, but I thought being rude was what I should do, to let her move on, to let her hate me, because if she hated me, it would be easier for her to forget me. I wanted her to know I was hurt, but I don't know for what purpose. Nothing I did could undo what had been done the night before, but I was feeling sorry for myself, and I thought that maybe if I put some melancholy in my voice she'd realize what a wet paper bag she had made me, and come showing up at my apartment door like in a crummy old romance film. I even watched the door for a few hours, less than half expecting a knock, but it never came.

I knew that I would go crazy if I stayed in that apartment, so I threw on some clothes and went out. Going to the bar would only remind me of June; same with Mama's house, so I set out to find a place I had never been before, a place where June's face wouldn't haunt me...

I found a pool hall called Cue D's and went inside. The bar tender asked if I wanted a drink and I ordered a beer. I set up a rack and broke, but no balls went in. I felt like a worthless sack of shit, the wave of depression getting to be too much and I was drowning in it. I saw a woman from across the room and went over to her. She had a rat face, but big tits and I imagined being between them, thinking maybe they would be able to take the depression away. It was foolish thinking, for when I had her on my dick in the passengers seat of my car, her tits hanging out of her blouse, looking out at me with a blind man's stare, I only felt more empty inside. I came and pushed her off. "Thanks, daddy." she said and went back into the pool hall.

Sleeping with that stranger was a mistake and I felt like a boot heel about it, trying to cover up pain with

meaningless sex. She was an Eastern European girl and I was worried she had given me something, for my balls itched and burned. I went down to the washroom and filled one of the sinks with cold water. I then climbed up on the sink with one leg in the air and the other on the ground, and dipped my loins in the water. It felt good to let them soak... The burning eventually stopped and I was convinced that it was all in my head. I was a bit of a hypochondriac, but I think it was really to try and keep June off my mind. I still couldn't write, each time I sat in front of the typewriter, the words came tough, pushing them out like hemorrhoids. Work at the dry-cleaner was saving my life, giving me something to fill the hours with. Women would come in and drop off their most intimate articles of clothing, full of mystery liquids, giving them to me without a second thought that I was a man with a penis. Jack was right; they looked at us like a different species, incapable of getting horny or falling in love...

A woman came in with a sly, Russian accent, beat and desperate, bringing her husband's clothes to be washed. She had a mole on her upper lip that danced as she spoke and a playfulness to her that made me unsure when she was being serious or sarcastic. Her almond shaped bellybutton could

be seen right below her small, cotton shirt that hugged her breasts and pushed them to the brim on her blouse. She was considerably older than I was, but her true beauty had died out long ago, from any number of traumatic experiences in her life. It looked as though if she was allowed to sleep as long as she wanted, she might never wake up. "You look lonely. Are you lonely?" she asked me. "Yes." I said. "I'm lonely too. Why don't you come by my place tonight?" "What about your husband?" I asked. "He works nights." I looked at the shirt's collars; her husband had a dirty neck and wrists. "I'm greasy, too." I told her. "Yes, yes, but he doesn't know how to pleasure a woman." she says. "I don't know much better." "But there's something about you," she says, "something powerful." I never got tired of hearing that. "What time does your husband leave for work?" "Around eleven-thirty." "I'll be over at midnight.."

That night, I knocked on the door and she answered in a nightie, some her cunt hairs coming through, a big thick bush that came to a point near her bellybutton. "You're natural." I said. "Do you not like?" she asked. "No, no, a guy like me can't complain. We fucked, me on top of her, grunting and spewing, half man half pig, like the end of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. I couldn't give her my all, because

June had taken it from me, I was now like an empty can of glazed cherries, just a little of bit of that red goo left at the bottom. We laid in bed, her rubbing my fingers.

"What are these black marks on your hands?" she wants to know, "Grease from those wire hangers at the dry-cleaner. It sticks to my fingers and no matter how hard I scrub it won't come off. I guess it's the mark of the dry-cleaner." I remarked jokingly. "Let me try." she says as she puts my fingers in her mouth and sucks on them. "You've got such strong hands." she says... After a while she went over to a table and opened a bottle of pills. "Want some?" "No thanks, got any beer?" "Only my husbands and he'll know some is missing." "I'll go get us some beer." I crawl out of bed and start to put my clothes on. "Get me some cigarettes while you're out, will you?" she asks. "Sure, what kind?" "Kents."

When I returned she was almost asleep from the pills, and the slurring of her words mixed with her Russian accent made it almost impossible to understand her. I shook her shoulder and showed her the beer. "Did you remember my cigarettes?" I threw them on the bed. "You should knock off the pills." I tell her. "They're the only way I can sleep." She put a cigarette in her mouth, clinching just the ends

of her lips to the filter. "My husband detests smoking and he knows I only do it after sex. He'll know someone was here tonight." "Is your husband a big man?" I ask. "Are you afraid?" she taunted me. "I'm not afraid of anything, goddamn it. Hell, I'll carve your name into my arm." She laughed and rubbed my belly. "In your dry-cleaner, how much is wool to clean?" "Fifty cents." "What about silk?" "Fifty cents." "How can you afford to be so cheap?" "We're the best in town, baby." "You do not seem like a dry-cleaner." she tells me. I think about telling her about the writing and the poetry, but I don't have enough strength. "A lot of people don't become what they want to be..."

The thoughts of June pummeled through my mind like a train without a conductor. My heart was smashed like an out of season strawberry and there was no one I could tell my sorrows too, not even my old faithful typewriter. I missed June, but I pretended to myself that I didn't. Old loves sank faster than Captainless ships on the pacific. To keep my mind off of it, I remembered there was an open mic poetry reading at a café downtown. I gathered some of my

poems, stuffed them into my pocket and headed down there. I sat down at one of the tables and awaited my turn. The other poets were awful, all repeating the same shit, screaming about their repressed cunts, *"I'm a woman! I'm a woman!"* and then men, *"The government is corrupt! The government is corrupt!"* Then a young girl from over at the bar said, *"Hey! It's Luke Hurt, the poet who can write about anything!"* I had made a little name for myself around the independent poetry scene with my outlandish readings, drinking an entire pack of beer on stage, or dressing up as a priest and reading my filthiest poems. The woman at the bar was a young tramp that went to all the open mic nights. *"He'll write about love and then he'll write about worms! I don't know how he does it!"* "You know me." I said. *"Why don't you write about this pea?"* she held up a pea, mocking me. "I can't." I said. *"Why not? I thought you were the poet that could write about anything!"* "I can write about fucking you." *"Oh, you awful man!"* she said. I hated her more than usual; she was such a filthy bitch that even if she flashed her gash at me I wouldn't have done it. I got up on the stage, took the poems from my pocket, and began to read. The words didn't come out as clear as usual, my throat was filling with snot, and my eyes were fighting

back some sort of tears, bitter as cider. I worked my way through one final poem and then said, "I'm through." The crowd broke out in a small wave of applause, full of pity and chagrin. I burst out of the door and ran to my car, started her up, and got out of there...

My money was just about out and I figured I'd spend my last dime on a drink with the boys and old Tuesday. I began walking toward the bar when I heard a loud noise, glass shattering a moment after, and the dust explode off the wall from the apartment building next door. I looked up to my left and saw that the window that had shattered belonged to Bill. I ran over, went into the building and began climbing the stairs. I heard two more loud noises. They sounded more like gunshots now. I got to the fourth floor and went to Bill's door. It was unlocked and I went in. There was Francis holding a pistol and the naked, dead bodies of Bill and a young black boy. The blood looked like vines stretching out of Bill and the boy. "What have you done, Francis!?" "Bill was a fag, Luke! He was a fag! ...I came here to get him to go down to the bar, and I walked in on him with this little Nigger!" "So you shot him!?" "I pulled my gun and it just went off, broke the window, and then I did them both." "Jesus God, what are you crazy,

Francis? What are you nuts? Why did you kill them? Oh, Jesus!" ...It wasn't the first time I had seen a dead body, but I had to cover my mouth to stop from puking. Poor Bill, I thought, hung around with a man like Francis in these horrible times and he ended up dead. "Oh, Jesus, Francis, Jesus Christ..."

Francis stood unflinching in the aftermath of the room, and he felt regret at killing his only friend for a reason even he didn't quite understand. No one from the other apartment buildings ran to see what the noises were, they all knew, and it was if Francis and I were alone on the moon. The newspapers would not report on the death of a fag and a black boy, and I'm not sure what made me sicker, the stench of the bodies, or the fact that tomorrow it would all be forgotten, except for the blood stains that soaked into the wood floors... Tuesday at the bar across the way heard the gun shots and called the police. Within minutes they were there with an ambulance. They took the bodies of Bill and the young black boy away, covered up in white sheets, like the bodies I had seen in the cadaver lab with my brother, and they put Francis in the squad car. They drove off, turned the corner and I never saw any of them again.

The police questioned me and I told them the story of how I was walking to the bar when I heard the first gun shot. Tuesday was crying, being held by Mickey, and it was the first time they were something more than barmaid and costumer... It was dark when the police cut me loose, and I walked back to my apartment building with my head down, using only the streetlights as guides. The death of Bill was something I didn't know how to react to. If I hadn't of been there when it happened, he would have become just another ghost at the bar, and we would of sung a song for him, but the way that it went down, seeing his body and that little black boy's, lying there so still and so dead, there would be no singing...

When I came in through the front room my landlady called out to me, "Mail for you, Luke." "Another rejection letter?" I asked. "Don't know. It's from a *Homer C. Miller.*" I went over and took the envelope. I looked at his name in brilliant black ink. His handwriting was very recognizable, with big loops on the Ls. I carried it to my room, undressed and sat down in front of the window,

looking out at my ruthless city. I didn't want to open the letter at first, but I had to, my fingers ripping open the envelope with almost absolutely no help from my brain. It read:

Dear Mr. Hurt,

I am pleased to say that we will be excepting the submission of your short story, 'Mr. Goodbye Was Here.'

I have been watching your work for some time and it brings me great joy to finally be able to publish something of yours in our magazine. I knew you had something to offer, all you needed was more time.

You and your work remind me of a bulldog I once had. When he turned fifteen, everyone expected him to die, but each day it kept living, kept surviving, and in the end it lived to be nineteen years old. It's a story of guts and sheer conviction. Your writing has both. You are a dog, sir, and I suppose that strong dogs live to see nineteen.

Yours truly,

Homer C. Miller

I put down the letter. I had done it, I had gotten published. I looked down at my typewriter, and rubbed it,

thanking it for being such a good and loyal friend. I thought about my life, and what a sad state of affairs it was in, I thought about Bill once more before never thinking about him again, I thought about June, and how I wanted to die without her, but I just kept living, and lastly, I thought about writing. I could finally put my money where my mouth was, and out of a night of ugliness, a bit of light shown through. I had beaten the odds, I had rolled the dice in a dirty alleyway and won, I had gone fifteen rounds with the champ, I had crawled through one million miles of sewage, and come out clean on the other end. I burned the nights down with laughter. I could finally reach for the sun. I had slept on the softest of Egyptian bed sheets, I had seen fiery sunsets, and rose gardens, and listened to be-a-u-ti-ful music, enough to pacify and given king on any given day. I had loved a woman until you could twist me like a worn out washrag, I had made a foolish dog of myself, but I did not care, not one bit. My one small victory was everything and nothing, it was beautiful and sad, it was a way of staying sane, it was beating a snarling dog, it was the smoke stacks, the stray cats, the bums on the street, the rich in the Hollywood hills. It was the postman, the uncontrollable heat waves

and snow storms, the suicides and marriages, it was your mother-in-law, that painting by Picasso, that movement by that symphony on the radio, the sleepless nights and the empty stairwells, and it was the feeling of sickness in the pit of your stomach, because the woman you loved was married to a man who could only love her a fraction of what you could..

Sitting there, alone in my room, I was feeling good for the first time since June had come to town, but I wished more than anything that I could have shared that moment of success and pleasure with her. June had been a victim of too much love, and I had been a victim of not enough. I wanted to cry, but I didn't. I wished I was in any of one thousand places, besides that lonesome room. I wished I was in the Dingo Bar in France. I wished I was in New Orleans, confetti on the brim of my hat. I wished I was in Coney Island. I wished I was at the Reeperbahn in Germany, walking along that sinful mile. I wished I was back at that patch of wilted sunflowers in the mountains. Maybe that would have brought me some peace. There was a coin on the desk and I rubbed it with my finger, feeling the edges. The moon was out and no one was in the street. I could hear a police siren and the sound of a far off

barking dog. I looked at my bedroom wall and noticed in the plaster a shape that resembled a pig's face smiling at me. I stared at it for a long time, with nothing to do but smile back.

The End.