

An Experiment in Autobiographical Fiction

A Humanities & Arts MQP by Marc Anthony Bouchard

The Choice of Autobiographical Fiction

When undertaking the project of composing a narrative, a writer is set against more difficulties than mere word choice, use of imagery, metaphor, flourish and correct placement of semi-colons. Writing is a process of refinement, and only one-half of the process of composing a narrative. A successful narrative requires characters, plot, subplots, drama, tension, climatic moments, resolution, conflict and dialogue, and all the best writing in the world could not save a poorly thought out and uninteresting story from disinterest or bad reviews.

When I compose a story I do not simply or magically capture ideas and characters out of the air around me, but rather create and conjure them up from the immense pools and depths of my experiences and imagination. It is perhaps impossible for any writer of fiction to not incorporate some aspect of their own life or some story which they have read into their own narratives, regardless of how it manifests itself within their work. Perhaps a writer will emulate the epic structure of *The Lord of the Rings* to frame a series of battles they had been in while touring Korea, or perhaps they will use the structure or concept of *The Catcher in the Rye* to tell their own tale of dysfunction or the lasting emotional scars of loss. Perhaps I should reflect upon the similarities of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, and how while both are amazingly similar, the former is a fiction, while the latter is an autobiography. Literature is full of this borrowing of ideas and styles, as every story needs inspiration, regardless of where it comes from. In fact, I would argue that writers draw much more heavily upon their own lives and experiences than they realize, and they do this for obvious reasons:

there is no wealth of knowledge, characters or experiences more vast and available to a writer than that which resides within their own mind. It is for this reason which I, when undertaking the project of constructing my own narrative, have chosen to draw upon my life as its main source of inspiration.

Autobiography has always been one of the most popular forms of narrative, as the story is already laid out before the writer (or behind) and all they need do is chronicle their own experiences. It is said that truth is often stranger and more interesting than fiction, as it is often more muddled, complex and shocking than many of the simple plots of revenge, world domination, murder and love which are found in books and on the television. The truth is not always black and white, but this is not what attracts us to stories of truth. It is a true story that attracts us to it more than fiction simply by virtue of its truth.

The genre of autobiography itself has evolved greatly from its original and most basic form: the diary or journal. Examples of the more rudimentary styles of autobiography could be observed in May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*. In her journal (as it is truly a journal both in structure and style) Sarton relates her thoughts and experiences in her annual retreat to Nelson, New Hampshire as powered by her obvious social phobias and extreme introversion. It is a journal of her thoughts and actions through and through during the little more than a year which is spans, never really aspiring to anything more or less than such. The journal begins and ends in solitude and features much self exploration as well as reflection upon topics such as feminism, women writers and Jungian theories, and serves (as I believe it to be) as a receptacle into which she pours her frustrations, allowing for a method of catharsis.

This tone of confession which is so often experienced in any autobiographical work, I believe, is the main purpose for the entire genre. Aside from simply chronicling one's own life, writing down the intimate details of our lives can serve as a way of releasing them, rather than stuffing them down inside us. There are many aspects of one's life which they would rather not share with others, or find difficult to talk about, and I believe that autobiography in the form of the journal or diary represents the most basic need of the autobiography for a person: emotional release.

From here the next step is to what I would call the classic or traditional autobiography, which I will define as a memoir of the author's life written from the perspective of the author, always in hindsight, and spanning a large number of years. An example of this more classic form of the autobiography is *Growing Up*, by Russel Baker, which is, more or less, the story of his life, following his mother before he was born, his birth and childhood up to adulthood, marriage and ultimately his mother's death. The story is, as the reader learns, prompted by his mother's terminal illness as he claims to finally become interested in the story of her own life, and thus begins to go into some of its details, eventually leading into those of his own life. The structure he uses is completely traditional for an autobiography, detailing the more memorable moments in his life involving his mother, school, college, the air force and his wife. The book spans a large period of time within its covers and fails to delve into extreme detail of any one period of time, as Baker attempts to remain truthful in his work and invent as little as possible - although the invention of dialogue for use in autobiographies is almost always a necessity. At the work's core it is an autobiography, in that its main purpose is to relate the more pertinent and memorable moments of his life with his reader. Another example

of this can be found in Ann Patchet's *Truth & Beauty*, which is as much an autobiography as it is a biography.

If I were to categorize all memoirs and autobiographies then odds are that most could be described as traditional, such as Baker's *Growing Up*. *Truth & Beauty* by Ann Patchet is very similar to Baker's autobiography, as it is the story of her friendship with Lucy Grealy. *Truth & Beauty* is an autobiography in the classic sense as it is told from Ann's perspective and details both her and Lucy's life from the beginnings of their friendship until Lucy's tragic death by drugs. She uses the first person perspective, traveling from one instance to the next using much more narration than dialogue. Yet, at its core it is a story about Lucy, following her up until her death and the reasons for it. There is perhaps an equal amount of focus upon both the author herself and her friend, but the reader is clearly made to see that it is a story about Lucy, which is why I claim it to be a biography as well as an autobiography. Still, despite its focus upon the author's friend rather than herself, it remains an autobiography, as it is a true story told by the author using the first person perspective. I cite this story here as an example despite its subtle differences with *Growing Up*, as it has the core aspects of an autobiography, yet inventively uses the narrator's own voice to tell a story about herself as well as her friend, which stands in contrast to the much more self-centeredness of Baker's memoir.

At this point there is nowhere to go but further away from these classic examples of autobiography. I believe that if I were to take one step away from these then I would end up at memoirs such as *Night* by Elie Weisel, which though retain many of the traditional elements of autobiography, are not concerned with the author's life as a whole, but rather one traumatic or important event or period of time. Weisel details the very

traumatic experience of being transported into Auschwitz and Bruna, the hells he and his father encounter there and the eventual death of his father. Told from the perspective of the author, the short novel serves as a way of sharing with the world the horrors he encountered at the hands of the Nazi's as well as a method of catharsis and letting go of them.

At this point I can either take a step forward or a step to the side in order to introduce the next stylistic leap of the autobiography, as it is not so much linear progression which I am concerned with nor which is occurring, but rather a departure from the traditional concept of it. This category shares much of the same elements which the previous one does, in that the authors have constructed a work which is autobiographical in nature, but reads like a narrative, and which must be categorized differently from the traditional autobiography for its heavy mix of actual and invented dialogue. Into this new category of autobiography, the autobiographical narrative I might refer to it as, I could add *Running with Scissors* and *Magical Thinking* by Augusten Burroughs and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers.

A simple comparison of any of the three to Russell Baker's memoir would quickly give rise to a variety of differences, the most notable being the highly confessional tone of each when compared to the somewhat reserved tone employed by Baker, and the very smooth and fictitious feel of each. Not only are Burroughs and Eggers laying before us a level of honesty seemingly unprecedented, but their novels all flow and read like a fiction narrative, so much so that it is difficult to distinguish any real stylistic differences between the traditional novel and any of these three pieces. It is also interesting to note that both writers set dysfunctions to be the focal point of their novels:

Augusten using his extremely warped upbringing and family and Eggers his parents' death and his own twisted romances with death and rebellion. These focal points provide a refreshing departure from the traditional autobiographical focus on the self and its experiences and add a greater degree of plot to the story as the protagonists are actually struggling against something - rather than following the now perhaps clichéd theme of finding one's own path in life - in addition to fleshing out the protagonists to a greater and more realistic degree.

These works are so personal and so honest that they at times seem outrageous and perhaps even make the reader question whether the story is true at all. Yet, it is this confession which gives them so much power. As ridiculous as some of the occurrences are in these three works, they are presented in a manner than makes them believable. There really is no lack of drama or tension in any of the three, which is why they can be so gripping, but I do not believe that the authors are being so honest simply in pursuit of a best seller. These three stories are so emotionally charged that the reader really cannot help but be pulled in and share in some of the protagonists' frustration. Not only does this have a profound effect upon the reader, but I believe that it has a very profound effect upon the writer as well. In much the same way talking about a traumatic ordeal with a friend allows a person a sense of relief, I believe writing down and detailing some of the more traumatic events of a person's life also serve as a way of "letting go," or cathartic vehicle.

There is, I believe, only one more step that I can take in this journey away from the traditional autobiography while still holding true to the genre, and that is by once and for all leaving behind the "I" and allowing the story to be told from a distance. There has

been little work in this new frontier of the autobiography, but if I am to discuss it at all, then it is inevitable that *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce should be taken as the prime example. This story follows the young life of Stephen Dedalus and his struggles with religion, sex and art. In true Joycean style, this semi-autobiographical novel is a beautiful mixture of fiction and non-fiction, blurring the lines between the novel and the autobiography and creating a hybrid that is both honest and fictitious at the same time. This new genre of autobiographical writing is perhaps more impressionistic than anything else, in how Stephan is neither a young James nor a completely fabricated character; he is both. Stephan is an impression of James, an example, a knockoff, which is why it is so important that he is named Stephan instead of James. Had he of been James then he would not be a “portrait of the artist,” but the artist himself as a young man, and while if I concern myself with semantics only then I might not see much of a difference, stylistically the differences are quite profound. By departing from that autobiographical “I” the author distances himself from both the story and the character. No longer is the story a series of *I thought’s, I did’s, I said’s and I was’*, but transforms into a real narrative with distance between the narrator and the protagonist, allowing for more objectivity, more ambiguity, more critical distance and more uncertainty without necessarily giving up that level of personalism which can be achieved with the “I.”

A story when told from the first person perspective is told from the protagonist, who does the reader the favor of interpreting the world and its characters for them, giving them a preconstructed interpretation from the point of view of the author. It is difficult to make one’s own decision when told that this or that person is loud, obnoxious, pretentious or quirky. The beauty of writing the autobiography from the third person is in

this: how the author may present events and characters in their true light, while still allowing the reader to come to their own conclusions. The fact of the matter is that people know themselves and their lives very well, but they do not always share the same opinions about themselves as others do, and this new genre of autobiography - what I like to call *autobiographical fiction* - allows the writer to paint their own pictures of themselves and their life without force feeding interpretations down the reader's throat, like viewing a Picasso by one's self, as opposed to with an art professor. Writers can now write about themselves, or portraits of themselves, and let the readers be the judges of their characters. Readers do not need to have their interpretations skewed or biased by the sometimes tyrannical "I."

Another prime example of this genre is *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in which the novel follows a typical day in Ivan's life, who has been incarcerated in a Russian work camp. The story follows Ivan from the third person perspective, presenting the hardships he and his fellow inmates face on a daily basis in a most objective manner, allowing Solzhenitsyn a degree of critical distance or defamiliarization from his own experiences, and allowing him to share with the world what a Russian work camp is like from the inside, without jeopardizing the work by using the first person perspective and simply telling the reader that it was horrible rather than showing it in an objective way.

This concept of critical distance is a very important aspect of autobiographical fiction, in how it allows the author to tell a story about themselves without investing their own feelings too much. Why an author might want to do this may not seem apparent at first, but from the writer's perspective, it allows them to tell a story that is usually

emotionally charged in a detached manner. By the simple act of changing the name of the protagonist from their own to something else, a writer can sometimes be more honest than they could if it were their own name. This simple invention of a protagonist that though intimately connected with the author is not the author, allows them to separate themselves from the story and concentrate on what is happening to and around the protagonist, rather than what is going on inside their head. It also has profound effects upon the reader's interpretation of the character, as the protagonist is no longer telling the story and handing the reader their own points of view. This allows the reader a greater degree of freedom of interpretation and allows them to make their own determination of the main character of the story and the situations they are in.

It is for these reasons that I chose to write a story about myself in such a fashion: in that of autobiographical fiction. In writing this piece, I was not concerned with a chronicle of my life's history from birth till when I started writing this. In fact, I believe that it might have made for a rather poor story. In my opinion, people live their lives much the same way they watch their favorite TV programs: episodic. However disheartening it might be, people live their lives concentrating on or awaiting events one at a time, whether it be parties, promotions, concerts, completion of projects, the end of a term or the end of the week. They live their lives out in anticipation. Taking this to heart, I chose to write about a single event. An event that was very significant in my life, and perhaps even my own coming of age: the rejection and opposition of my father.

This event actually occurred during the spring of my senior year of high-school, though for Anthony, who is my own Stephan Dedaelus, it occurs during the summer of his junior year of high-school. Anthony is, for all practical purposes, myself in what in

my opinion is how other people might view me; that is, instead of giving Anthony that “I” and allowing him to shape his own character, I set him against the backdrop of the characters he interacts with and the events which he finds himself involved in, so as to allow the reader to form their own opinions while I as the writer attempt to “tell it as it is.” In regards to this level of honesty which I am aiming for - an unjaded presentation of myself - I find it infinitely easier to be more objective when writing about Anthony, his thoughts, his habits, his quirks and his obsessions without that level of personal attachment which is forged when using the first person perspective. Anthony allows me to distance myself from the story and allow for it to be told in a way that is stylistically very different from what it would have been had it been told from the first person. Behind the cloak of narrator I can more easily throw off my biases and present a character who though being a model of myself, I am not afraid to put upon the cross to be scrutinized. This defamiliarization allows me to tell a story that for me is emotionally charged, without allowing myself to show my emotions in the writing, and thereby perhaps making it all the more powerful.

I believe a perfect example of the degree of critical distance that an author can create in a work is excellently presented in C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*. This memoir is an attempt at objectively viewing and analyzing the grief which a husband encounters following the loss of his wife. It is autobiographical in nature in how it is written by the author about the author, but it concerns itself solely with this one traumatic event and the author’s attempts to analyze his reaction to his loss. The short work observes Lewis’ own motives for mourning as well as probing at such question as the motives of god in relation to death. Rather than focusing on *his loss* and *his wife*, Lewis chooses to observe

loss and death and a person's reaction to it in a manner that is as objective as possible. The end product is an exploration of death, mourning and loss by one man who finds himself so far removed from his original reasons for emotional distress, that it becomes more a work of philosophical inquiry rather than a diary of mourning. This extreme detachment which Lewis creates is the exact reason why an author might chose autobiographical fiction to relate a story, as it separates them from their story to such a degree that they look upon it almost as if it were a work of complete fiction or the life of another person, which can in the end make it immensely easier to write.

This is not to say though, that I am (or other authors are) not still being honest. I believe that writers are given a certain amount of artistic freedom to bend and misshape the truth in order to better fit the sometimes unrealistic mould which they craft for their stories. Indeed, while truth may be stranger than fiction, it is more often than not much more boring, which is why I chose to have the story of Anthony and his father occur in one day. While it is true that both the reasons for his standing up to his father and his feelings toward his father are all factual, the brewing of those feelings of resentment took years to come to full boil. In this way I do not bend or distort the truth in any way whatsoever, I merely choose to focus upon this one day in Anthony's life which will define his relationship with his father for the rest of his life. The most important event which occurs on this one Saturday in May is his standing up to his father, which I believe symbolizes his rejection of the world as it is and the first instance in which he stands up for and puts himself in harms way to safeguard his own moral beliefs. Aristotle believed that humans are political beings, and that we actualize ourselves once we start to argue with each other about what we think is the best way to live life, in this respect, this is a

story about the self actualization and realization of a young man who up until this point has been for the most part a vessel for the insertion of the facts, beliefs and morals of others.

There are, of course, different aspects of Anthony's character which surface throughout the story, such as his obsession (though not in a superficial manner) with his appearance - which is a direct reaction to years of being tortured with acne - the duality between his longing for the female sex and his fear of it and the resulting reserve and distance which he places between himself and the world as a result from both his acne and his dysfunctional family as a way to protect his fragile sense of self.

This stylistic approach which I have adopted I believe better allows me to present Anthony in an objective manner (and so myself), and though it certainly is more difficult to convey his character using this method, I believe there is no better way to present it, as the way in which the reader experiences Anthony is as near as possible to the way they would if they were standing right next to him.

If You're Going to Kill a Deer, Shoot it
in the Heart

By Marc Anthony Bouchard

I can see her, but everything around us is hazy and ephemeral, as if the cul-de-sac is surrounded in a mist. Yet I can see through it; I can see the people in their houses going about their business, sleeping, going to the bathroom, eating, watching television, playing board games, having sex, and one person killing another. She's standing here in front of me; I can see her, but also myself opposite her. I'm standing on the side of the road, right where the street leads into the cul-de-sac, like a small stream feeding into a pond, or rather feeding off it, as we're on a hill. There's my car behind me, parked on the side of the road: a little red Honda that I had wanted so badly because it was a coupe with a removable top and a rear window that rolled down. We're talking right now, and I can't tell if I'm wearing clothes or not. It looks like I am, like I might be wearing a pair of khakis and my red sweater, or is it a pair of shorts and a tank top because she had just taught me how to play tennis, or am I naked? I can't tell, but she doesn't seem to take notice either way. I can see what she is wearing, though: white capris with white shoes and socks and an untucked deep blue collared shirt. She's very cute with her hair pulled back like that and those large brown eyes. They seem so innocent; they remind me of a kitten. She's smiling, and talking with me, but I can't hear the words. I look nervous. I'm fidgeting and looking down at her feet as I talk, occasionally glancing up to check if she is still there. I'm blushing, but she doesn't seem to be put off. Then I turn around and open my trunk, grab a piece of paper and something else, hiding the latter behind my back. I take a breath and begin reading from the paper, and now she starts to blush as I reveal what is in my other hand: a single pink rose. It lasts for about thirty seconds, and I finish, giving her the rose and letting my arms fall at my sides. Now she's, blushing. She smiles and says a few words, then she steps closer to me, leans in and kisses me.

I should have known, though, should have expected it, and would have had I looked up and seen the dark purple clouds encroaching in upon us. Something just didn't feel right. She kisses me, but afterwards something has changed. Her face suddenly becomes consumed with fright, and she lets out a scream. Then, in a panic, she kicks and shoos at me and turns running towards her front door, dropping the rose onto the black pavement..

Now the setting has changed, and I'm in a square room with a blue carpet and white walls. There's a set of bunk beds off to the left in the corner and an entertainment center behind me with two bureaus to the right against the rear wall. There is a door in the corner at the right, closed, with a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles poster on it, and there I am, sitting on the floor with my pajamas still on. I'm talking into a microphone connected to my Sony "My First Boombox." It's red with blue speakers and colored buttons. There's also a tape in the tape deck and the record button is depressed. I must be only eight or nine years old with those freckles on my face and those two large front teeth. I can hear this time: "The time now is 8:53 and it's a lovely morning and we've got a special interview coming up,, but let's first go to traffic with Chris." I change my voice here, trying to make it deeper, projecting myself through the speakers. "Thanks, Anthony, well it looks like traffic is pretty clean on Bunker Hill this morning, though I've heard that there is an escaped pig from the Dross farm loose on it somewhere, so watch out. Back to you, Anthony. Thanks, Chris, now let's go to weather: looks like we should have a high of seventy today with a possible thunderstorm tonight, wouldn't that be fun, but right now there isn't a cloud in the sky. Alright, now let's get back to playing some music.." Then I put the microphone down and turn the radio on, turning through the

stations, looking for a song I like. I find one and stop there, letting the rest of the song play. When it ends I switch the stereo back to the microphone setting. "Alright, back to our program. We've got a real treat today. Today we're going to have an interview with Hulk Hogan about his upcoming match with Andre the Giant tonight." Now I begin to try to pretend I'm Hulk Hogan, tilting my chin down slightly and making my voice as deep as possible, but I can't hear myself talking anymore, because it is all drowned out by the slamming of a door.

It must have come through the walls, from downstairs. I can hear footsteps coming up the stairs through the wall. They are heavy, exaggerated. I'm starting to get nervous, can feel my heart start to beat faster and the heat come out to the surface of my skin, but that's me. The younger Anthony is oblivious, is too engrossed in his talk show and playing a ranting Hulk Hogan to take notice. Then, suddenly the door rips open in a fury and the heat rolls into the room as wisps of red air. The other me immediately stops what he is doing, frozen in fear as his face runs white. I can hear my heart, his little heart, pounding through his chest. He's scared, terrified of this man. I should have warned him, told him to hide or to be quiet, but I didn't, I couldn't. I need to do something, need to somehow comfort him and let him know that it's going to be okay. I run to him to try to protect him from this man, but as soon as I touch him I get sucked in, and now we are both seeing through the same eyes and inhabiting the same body. I'm a little boy again and am terrified of the storm of anger before me. He lets go of the doorknob and comes over to me, grabs me by the collar and pulls me up. The microphone drops out of my hand, and I cringe slightly. "It's nine in the fucking morning, what the hell are you doing? Me and your mother are trying to sleep!" he yells at me. I try to say

something, but I can't: the words get caught in my shirt and he grabs me with his other hand and whips me around, picks me up and slams me against the wall so that I'm suspended by my neck. I can feel my it straining against my underarms, then he slides his right hand over to my neck and holds me there. "You better shut up and be quiet. I don't want to hear you again. Nobody cares what you have to say so keep your fucking mouth shut," he spits at me with his finger in my face. Then he lets go of me and I'm fallin;, I've separated again from myself and can see the other me go over to the stereo and press the stop button. He takes the tape out of the tape deck and hides it in his bureau, and then sits down on his bed.

He's getting smaller as I continue to fall. Everything is black around me and the room is receding into the darkness as I continue to fall deeper into it. It swallows up everything, my anxiety, my fear, my confusion, numbing me. I'm suspended here within it, and I feel safe, far away from everything, even my own body. I can't feel myself, as if I'm just a consciousness floating in the dark. I relax and recede deep into myself, letting the void penetrate into me, or allow myself to spread out within it; I can't tell which one, but it doesn't matter. I'll just wait here forever. Then I hear something, feel something. A bang, a slam, and I feel the force of it rush up against me - more feet on stairs with those heavy steps. I'm being pulled back together and back up. I don't want to go back, I'm fighting, try to fall or swim back down, but I'm being pulled up like a fish, and I can feel the hook securely attached to my navel. There's the room again. I fight, scream. I don't want to go back. It's happening again, being replayed like some hell in Tartarus. I want to warn him, make him be quiet, or somehow stop that man from entering the room. I just want to stop it from happening again, want to forget, but it won't let me.

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Anthony awoke, opening his eyes to the same white patch of ceiling that he had for the past four years. He was not truly awake just yet; sleep still held him in a passive state, his mind thinking only on a subconscious level, sporadically jumping from image to image. A strange thing sleep is: how when lying in bed, thinking to yourself, pondering the day's events, or next day's, how sporadic thoughts can get, then suddenly lapsing into the depths of your inner consciousness. Dreams, a sort of consciousness of the subconscious, or into no dreams at all, a blackness, a void of darkness. Then the ascent back to the waking world. Dreams dissipate and the darkness of a dreamless sleep-scape melts away into the fleshy blanket of warm eyelids, pierced by the morning sun, the awakening heralding the destruction of that fragile dreamscape. Those who do not dream, though, are never deceived, are never plagued by nightmares of monsters, death, pain, fear or unpleasant memories; they are never stimulated by sensual dreams of erotic pleasures or lost within the obscure, perhaps to their relief.

Anthony could not remember that fragile dreamscape he had just inhabited which shattered across his waking mind, as if he did not want to. His only clue was that he knew he did not hide in the darkness while he slept. No, he had been busy, but somehow he could not recollect what had busied him. Perhaps that was a good thing, as he felt somewhat relieved to awaken this morning.

Anthony was an undreamer, and always had been with few exceptions (this being one of them), but when his subconscious was not contained within that neat little black box he dreamed of horrible things. Nightmares. Terrifying, awful and distressing things, and the nightmares that he had were of such a hideous nature that he locked them away in the very recesses of his mind as he made the ascent back to consciousness, so as to not remember them when he awoke; he awoke only with the stale sensations that he had felt while dreaming, and remembered that he had, in fact, been kept very busy while resting. Nightmares, though, were not more favorable to him over the void; actually, he had become much accustomed to it. The void was a place in which even he, the undreamer, could not find himself - a place void of thoughts, colors, noises, matter, light and space. A place of absolute nothingness: no substance, no direction, no time and no life. Death. A word of such weight, of such impending thought. A word that can instill fear by its very mentioning. Yes, Anthony had thought about death before, and no doubt would in the future again. Death was something to him so very real, so very concrete, that it was almost tangible. He felt that he had visited death countless times in his sleep. He felt that every night he did not dream was like being cast into that oblivion, yet only for a short while. The thought of death almost comforted him when compared to the restful peace eternal in the void of his undreams. Anthony could embrace death with open arms if it bore resemblance to his mind's working at night. There he was at peace, not menaced by the terrible nightmares and memories bound up in his unconscious, nor assaulted by the world and its opinions. He was free from harassment. He was quite at peace in that darkness, that isolation, and yet it felt somehow familiar and lamentable. Then again, death, a state of nonexistence, a sleep from which not to awaken, a perpetual

imprisonment within that empty void was not the same as that of Anthony's sleep. There's the rub: In that undiscovered country there was no consciousness, no recognition. There was nothing, and the thought of not having that consciousness, that self awareness, a soul, frightened him. If only the dreams did not come as nightmares, then perhaps the dreamscape would seem less hostile towards him; perhaps he would then prefer that over his protective oblivion, which shielded him from the dreams.

Wiping the morning film from his eyes and lips, Anthony had finally finished his ascent back into the real world. He turned his head to check the time displayed in the cable box on his TV stand across the room: 9:00 AM. *Perfect*, he thought to himself, *not too early, nor too late, just perfect*. As he lay in bed, shaking off the usual morning drowsiness, he contemplated how he wanted to spend the first half of his weekend. The day was his in its entirety: his parents were leaving at ten to visit some friends at a cookout which was to last all day and into the night. Plus, they were taking his younger sister with them, which meant that the house was his for the entire length of the day. He did not have to work today, although he told his parents that he was working from noon till eight tonight, and did in fact have to work that very shift the next day. Yes, the day belonged to him, and he intended to abuse that ownership for all it was worth.

The only real difficulty he faced was deciding what to do. There were always so many things to do: books to read, games to play, places to go, friends to hang out with, movies to watch and so forth. With so many activities planned, the only thing that truly was a shame was how there were only twenty-four hours in a single day. Yes, had there been at least thirty-six then there would always be plenty of time for everything to get done, and plenty of time for all those activities Anthony had planned. Then perhaps he, as

well as everyone else in the world, could go to bed every night satisfied with the course of the day's events, knowing that they were able to accomplish all that they had dared dream of doing. Yes, a world of thirty-six hour days would be very satisfying for people like Anthony: people who aspired to doing great things with their lives, but who would most likely never live to see those dreams materialize due to their own lack of longevity. For how could he ever hope to obtain that degree in biology, make scientific breakthroughs, help fight cancer and aids, read all those books, spend time with his children and watch them grow up, be a soccer dad, a city league baseball coach, high school football coach, travel Europe, see Africa, visit Australia, run for political office and practice philanthropy within one short lifetime. How could he ever actually do anything he longed for without sacrificing the rest? Life was all too short to Anthony. Far too short. Seventy-five years for the average life span was hardly enough time to accomplish anything, save realizing this sad truth and having to accept the fact that you would never be able to do all that you desire, only dream. Such a wonderful thing dreams are: they give hope and faith in things that may never come to pass, but because most human beings would go insane or lapse into a brooding depression without their hopes and dreams, we are all able to ignore our real surroundings from time to time, and be comforted by a world where anything is possible, and perhaps be distracted from how terrible the world may really be.

It was a sad fact, however, that Anthony did not live in the wondrous thirty-six hour world. No, he did in fact only have a sparse twenty-four to live each day to its fullest, and the minutes were continuing to run from the clock as he remained in bed thinking. So, after a hearty stretch, he finally decided that it was time to get up. Outside,

the weather was exactly what you would expect of a typical day in May, as Anthony could tell this from the bright sunlight pouring in the basement windows. He did not even need to turn on the lights this morning because it was so bright out, and this somehow put him in a good mood right off.

* * * * *

Anthony's room was located in the basement of the house. It was larger than the average bedroom, with light blue walls and a glossy white ceiling. Anthony's bed was at the rear right end of the room next to his closet on the left, squeezed into an area which it fit so perfectly that it seemed to have been designed with such intent. His desk was up against the right wall between his two small rectangular windows which started at the base of the ceiling. His bookcase sat against the wall opposite it, and at the remaining end were his dresser, TV, and door from left to right, respectively. The rest of his room was just open space, which he now walked across towards his dresser to fetch some clothes.

Anthony himself was a young man of seventeen who stood about 5'5", weighed 140 pounds, and had a slightly muscular build, unruly brown hair and blue eyes. He also had the very unfortunate skin disease known as acne, which was a major blow to his self confidence and had been since it started to appear when he was about fourteen. None of that mattered when he was by himself, though, when there was no one there to judge him. Physically, the only thing Anthony figured he had going for himself was his physique. He

was proud of his slightly visible six-pack and apparent pectorals, which is why whenever he woke up in the morning he could not resist the urge to flex into his TV and see the one aspect of himself which he figured was worth looking at. Not that the rest of him was scrawny: his arms, although thin, were muscular, giving him definition; his legs were quite large for his size, and his very apparent calf muscles were a testament to years of biking and playing football; his shoulders were also widespread and square. Looking down at his abs he tightened his stomach and pinched the skin between his index finger and thumb. He could pinch it and feel his skin sliding against itself and over his abdominal muscles, and this was unacceptable. It needed to be firm and taught, like the skin on the back of his calf muscles which left no room for fat to hide underneath. He could see the fat, feel it, and it bothered him. Now he would have to fast for a few days and add more sit-ups and abdominal exercises to his already robust routine: bench press, dumbbell bench-press, butterfly curls (both using free weights and a machine), regular curls, preacher curls, curls on the cable machine, lat pull-downs, pull-ups, low rows, military press, inclined bench press, more butterfly curls on the cable machine and forty minutes on the elliptical machine immediately followed by running a mile and a half in under twelve minutes - without passing out.

Once he had satisfied himself by marveling at the reflection in the TV, Anthony opened the door, went up the stairs and into the bathroom directly across the hallway. He tossed his clothes in the corner and compulsively approached the mirror to examine himself in it. This had been a longstanding part of his daily ritual ever since his acne had started, not that he enjoyed looking at zits first thing in the morning; in fact, it was the one part of his life that he loathed the most. Still, this was just one more chance to

attempt to keep the problem under control, and it gave him an idea of how others would perceive him.

There was no consensus on what caused acne; it was a combination of factors: hormones, diet, bacteria, genetics. Most acne creams and washes such as Clearasil and Neutrogena contained salicylic acid as the active ingredient, and all that did was cause the cells on the surface of your skin to lyse, to explode, and to die. Any bacteria that came into contact with it would be killed, *Propionibacterium acnes*, in particular, which is a bacterium that naturally inhabits the skin and lives off its secretions. They also clear off dead skin from the surface, which could clog pores and cause the build up of sebum, the yellow puss.

These inspections had a critical influence on his esteem for the day: if he had a bad breakout overnight, then he would avoid contact with other people for the entire day, the thought of them seeing him like that was degrading and embarrassing, whereas if he woke up to a fairly clean complexion then he could face the rest of humanity with what confidence he had left, at least until he had unsettling findings at a later check up. He imagined that every person he interacted with looked over him as a plastic surgeon would a patient, bringing every imperfection to light, scrutinizing every nose that was a bit too large, chin that was a bit too shallow, face a bit too long and every scar and every dimple. *Your eyes are too close together and make you look as if you have inferior intelligence, and your jaw line gets lost between your neck and cheeks and makes you look cowardly and uninteresting.* He felt that he couldn't avoid anyone, everyone finding every single zit and pimple on his face and then drawing conclusions about him from it, as if each one was a testament to some bad deed, impure though, character tick or shallowness that

could be read like a scratch test for allergies. He imagined everyone drawing conclusions from the way he looked, and deciding that he wasn't worth the time to socialize with and that what he said or thought wasn't worth consideration.

Today though, was a fairly good day for him: no visible zits or pimples, just a normal, slightly scarred complexion stared back at him, and he found this very pleasing. "Not so bad today," he muttered to himself as he turned away from the mirror smiling, then stripped off his boxers and turned the shower on.

Then there were also the hormones and the diet, neither of which anyone knew for certain how and why they might influence acne, but it was suspected. *Just so you know, your acne could be caused by your hormone levels, which you might or might not have any control over, such as insulin and glycogen, which respond to the levels of glucose in your blood; the testosterone your testes secrete might worsen your acne.*

Anthony loved the shower. It was probably one of the activities he enjoyed the most. Nothing compared with a long, soothing hot shower, where the warm water just beats against your skin until it goes numb, and the rising steam takes all your problems with it. Anthony was always at complete ease under the warm water, always so relaxed, he could just fall asleep, just stay there forever in his steamy, soothing haven. The shower was not just a place to get lost in relaxation for him though; it was also a place to think. The shower was where the day was planned out in detail, great questions were pondered and creativity was at its peak. The hot water and steam melted his brain into a state where thoughts were free flowing and plentiful and the minutes flowed by with the running water as he lost all concept of time.

Suddenly, Anthony was startled back to reality with a loud knocking at the bathroom door. “Hey!” shouted a voice playfully through the wooden door, “water boy, what are you drowning in there?”

“No,” Anthony whispered as he stared at the water running down his front. Almost every day his stepfather did this: anytime Anthony spent more than fifteen minutes in the shower, which happened almost every day. He knew that his stepfather was just trying to hint that he wanted him out of the shower, but Anthony would stay in longer regardless. The soothing hot water stole from him the ability to gauge time. For Anthony, taking a shower was just too inviting, too relaxing to rush.

“Hellllloooooo,” his stepfather said once again through the door in a child’s voice. Instead of answering, this time Anthony simply turned the water off immediately. “Breakfast is ready, if you don’t hurry up, it will get cold,” he said before walking away.

As Anthony drew back the shower curtain he grunted something that resembled “alright,” before reaching for his towel. Still steamy from the hot water, the bathroom mirror was completely fogged over. Instinctively he turned around and cracked the window which was, oddly enough, on the shower wall. The cool spring air rushed in and gave him a slight shiver as it passed over his still dripping body. Not pleased with the draft, Anthony dried and dressed himself

The remaining steam rushed out as he opened the bathroom door into the hallway and the sweet smell of his mother’s homemade waffles drew him into the kitchen where he took a seat at the breakfast bar next to the oven. *Just so you know, your acne might be the side effect of your diet, resulting from the glycemic index of the food you eat, which means sugar and carbohydrate content, because diets with high glycemic indexes can*

cause sharp rises in blood-sugar levels, which can cause fluctuations in hormone levels, which again might or might not cause acne.

“Good morning,” a middle aged woman with red-haired said to him cheerfully.

“Morning, Mom,” Anthony returned. *You might be predisposed to it because your parents had it because it’s genetic, or because you live in a culture that consumes mass amounts of carbohydrates and refined sugars and processed foods and has a high glycemic index in its diet because other countries in the world don’t eat the same things you do and don’t have acne problems nearly as dramatic.*

“I made waffles this morning, apple cinnamon, how many would you like?” his mother asked him.

“Four,” he answered. *Try to avoid eating lots of greasy foods. Try to avoid eating lots of sugary foods. Chocolate doesn’t cause acne though, but the sugar in it might aggravate it.*

In her usual cheerful morning mood – which was a stark contrast to the always tired and irritable state she would be found in the evenings – Anthony’s mother plopped four apple cinnamon waffles onto a plate and handed it to her son.

“So you’re working today?” she asked

“Yup,” Anthony answered before shoving a piece of waffle into his mouth.

“What time?”

“Twelve to eight,” he answered.

“Then I guess we’ll see you after you get home, meaning that you are going to be on your own for dinner. Will and I are going over Joe and Jill’s house, and we’re bringing you’re sister too. You remember Joe and Jill? Jill used to go to Murphy’s with

me.” Murphy’s, which was located downtown within Gold’s Gym, was a martial arts studio where Anthony’s mother had taught kickboxing classes, and where Anthony had frequented multiple times a week when he was younger.

“Yes, I remember Joe and Jill.”

“Well, Jill’s pregnant again. Today we’re throwing a surprise baby shower for her.”

“That’s nice of you,” Anthony said after taking a sip of milk. *Try drinking lots of water to keep your body hydrated and to remove unnecessary junk in your blood stream that might worsen it. Clean out your pipes because it might be influenced by circulating levels of compounds in your blood, so flushing the system once a day might help improve your visage.*

Anthony finished what remained of his breakfast in silence. He discussed internally with himself what he should do immediately after his parents left. He was currently reading *Wuthering Heights* for his English class, and needed to keep up. He also wanted to spend some time with his buddy, Chris, later on, but glancing at the clock, Anthony realized that the odds of him being awake at this hour were extremely unlikely.

Breakfast was soon brought to a halt with the descent of Anthony’s stepfather from upstairs as Anthony was midway through his last apple cinnamon waffle.

“You’ve been rushing me all morning, and now that I’m ready you’re not!?” he said rounding the stairs while concentrating on tying his tie.

Anthony’s stepfather, Wilfred, stood about 5’10” and had a thick 240 pound frame, short brown hair and mustache, a beer belly that hung out over his waist line two or so inches and a eight inch metal rod in his back from the when his father broke it when

he was thirteen by a beating that must have been most savage. He had been forced to wear a back brace for two years following, and also wasn't allowed to play football for the school team. He didn't like to talk about it. His father was an alcoholic.

In nearly every aspect, he was a grunt. His entire life was spent performing manual labor after he was honorably discharged from the military post Vietnam. He worked the kind of jobs that required a good solid work ethic, but relatively little intelligence to handle them. Not to say that he was stupid, or that Anthony thought so. He did have a lot of common sense and know-how when it came to many everyday activities and was abundant in what one could consider "man skills," but he had not been forced to think since he graduated from high school in the sixties. Anthony had a lot of respect for his step-father, unlike his real father, but he did find him ignorant of many things.

"Oh shut up," his mother said, "All I have to do is throw my shoes on and that's it."

"With the way you've been rushing me all morning I would have thought that you'd be ready and waiting outside in the car," he retorted.

"Well then how about you get *your* shoes on and go outside and wait in the car while I call Jill and tell her that we're on our way."

"Why? *She*'s not even ready yet!" he said pointing a thick, stubby finger upstairs.

"Don't worry about her, just go outside and wait in the car," his mother commanded as she pushed him towards the door.

"Yeah, okay boss," he answered back, not bothering to turn around as he shut the door behind him.

At this point Anthony was finished his breakfast, and hopped off the stool to wash off his cup and plate while his mother took a step over to the bottom of the stairs and yelled to his thirteen year old sister to hurry up. *Just another typical morning*, he thought to himself as he placed his cup and plate into the dishwasher, and then proceeded into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Anthony always took good care of his teeth. When he was twelve he was told by his dentist that he would need braces if he wanted his teeth to be at all straight. He remembered vividly the pain he went through during that three year period he wore them. He recalled the pain and the rewards of wearing them every time he looked at his teeth in a mirror, which were now fully recovered. Cavities, cysts, gum disease, root canals, *dentures*: the mere thought of such things made him cringe. Anthony would never stop babying his prized masticators. To him, not brushing one's teeth twice per day was a crime, if not just plain disgusting.

After flossing and washing his mouth with mint flavored Scope he wandered back into the dining room in search of a black glasses case and *Wuthering Heights*.

"Mom, I don't have any clothes to wear!" his sister suddenly shouted out from the top of the stairs.

"What do you mean you don't have any clothes to wear?" his mother shouted back, wrinkling her brow.

"You didn't do the laundry, so I don't have any clean cloths!"

"*You* have more clothes than I do, Jessica! Now get dressed and come downstairs! Dad's waiting in the car for us!" his mother yelled as she put a spring jacked on.

Anthony's sister, Jessica, was his full sister by blood. She was not Wilfred's child, even though she called him "Daddy"; Anthony figured that she only did so as a way of forgetting their real father, Anthony (yes, their father's name was Anthony as well, and although Anthony was named after his father, he was blessed with a different middle name), and also consoling herself at the same time because of the kind of man their father was, whether she was aware of it or not.

Their father was indeed a tough subject. Anthony and his sister had lived with him until he was in fourth grade and his sister in readiness, until his mother finally divorced their father. As far back as he could remember Anthony was always nervous around his father. Although he didn't know the reason at the time, he knew now that it was most likely due to his pulling such antics as showing up to his little league baseball games drunk and laughing at how "horrible" his son was or throwing a metal pen at him one morning when he was about six or seven sitting at the breakfast bar in their old house on Bunker Hill because he was singing while eating Cinnamon Toast Crunch. He had no memory of the former happening, but heard an account that his grandmother had to force his father to leave, the latter though, he remembered in detail how the pen came at him and hit him on the left side of his nose, tip first, and how it then dropped into his bowl of cereal as he started to cry.

The man was an alcoholic. Anthony now knew that this was the reason he never much enjoyed being around his father: He was perpetually afraid of being yelled at, for anything at all. Anthony's father had always been on a short fuse, but when he drank, he would find things to yell and scream at you for. Not only that, the man was verbally, and even physically abusive as well, even when sober. More so verbally than physically, but

sometimes, when he was red in the face, the smell of beer heavily on his breath, his eyes slightly glazed over, he would say things that stung so bad deep down that they left scars wider and deeper than any that could be inflicted physically. Those were the scars that never healed and always reminded you of him, so you could never ever let go of the pain he induced, never leave it behind.

Anthony did not know how to feel towards his father. Somewhere inside him there was a half-hearted affection towards him, an affection that still lingered in spite of everything his father had done. This affection Anthony felt, the love for his father that occupied the half of his heart that his anger had not yet taken hold of, was the only reason he continued to visit him on a weekly basis. Once a week, usually Wednesdays after school, he would visit him in his two room house (if you could call it a house) with his fold out bed, his TV, his upright shower, vegetable garden in the back, guns hidden above the sink, bows in the shed, practice foam deer target in front of the shed and his red, rusted and somehow still running 1989 Chevy truck with no heat in the driveway in the middle of the city only five miles from where Anthony was now. It was a tool shed trying to pass for a house with new wood floors installed, new wood paneling, a new kitchen table, new stove, new sink, small porch addition, concrete patio with a table and tent in the back yard and a trellis with rose plants on either side of the walkway from the porch. It was a tool shed trying to pass for a house, and it was maintained by a man to whom a similar metaphor could be applied. He was a vast container of flesh into which too little humanity was deposited, with the excess of space taken over by something jagged and animal. What Anthony did not know, was that although he felt this way towards his father, the love was nothing more than the almost shattered bond between parent and

child, that connection that no matter what existed and drove him to continue contact with him, hoping that one day he might repent and formally apologize for his despicable behavior, holding on to some belief that he was not entirely a horrible person. That, a bit of guilt, and pity were the only positive feelings he had left towards him. Yet even those three combined would not be able to suppress the anger he could generate.

“There they are,” Anthony muttered to himself as soon as he spotted his glasses case and book. He usually left them in the middle of the counter, but this time his mother must have moved them into their present location: on the same counter but up against the far wall along with all the usual junk mail set there to rot. Anthony walked over and collected his things as a car horn beeped in the driveway.

Almost immediately, Anthony’s sister came running down the stairs to put on her shoes and jacket.

“It’s about time you’re ready,” his mother said, “He’s starting to get impatient.”

“I can tell,” she returned sarcastically. Anthony could see a slight look of disgust across her face as she threw on her shoes and jacket and slammed the door behind her, not bothering even to acknowledge Anthony’s presence, which might have bothered him had he not done the same. There was an unspoken understanding that had been reached between the two after years of fighting with each other - many physical encounters - of mutual indifference.

“I really hope this is just a phase,” his mother said sighing as she turned to look at her son.

Anthony’s sister, Jessica, was, in every definition of the phrase, a problem child. She fought constantly with her mother and step-father, sometimes over nothing at all, but

mostly over such things as not being allowed to go visit a friend or having a friend visit, not being allowed to go on the internet or the computer, having a curfew, there being no kinds of cereal she liked in the cupboards, and simply not having life conform to her own wants and wishes. She was diagnosed with ADHD when she was about seven, and had been taking various medications in attempts to stabilize her moods, as she was also bipolar, which was either a side effect or another novel symptom. Anthony could remember the time when he was in seventh grade and his sister was in third, when his mother was at work and he and his sister were home alone after school; they had gotten into a fight over something, and it quickly became physical, as usual. Jessica had lunged at him while they were in the kitchen arguing, and Anthony, neither taking particular pleasure in being beaten on by his sister nor directly beating her, opened the refrigerator door on her, which she slammed into. (Of all the senseless fights they had gotten into when they were younger this was the one he remembered most clearly, and to be quite honest, he could not help but chuckle at the remembrance of his opening that door and her slamming into it and falling down onto the kitchen floor on her butt.) It did not end there though, as she quickly grabbed a large cutting knife from the knife rack and chased him around the house until Anthony, his heart pounding as he was convinced that she actually would stab him if she caught him, ran circuits around the first floor and then ran out the kitchen door, which his sister promptly locked. Furious, Anthony began to walk around the apartment complex with no particular destination in mind, and on a stroke of luck caught Will as he drove by on his way over. Things were different back then: Anthony wasn't able to ignore his sister, and the reverse was the same for her. It had

taken a few years for them to eventually ignore each other completely, and it would later take even longer for them to actually care about each other again.

There were many other times as well, such as the so called “whip it” saga in which her and her friend had been inhaling the cleaning agent in order to get high, the time when she punched Will right in the nose and then ran out the front door because no one would let her go over her friend Kaitlen’s house, and the final episode in which she and her mother had gotten into an actual fight and Will had been forced to call the police, again, while Anthony’s mother had his sister in a full nelson. This particular day Anthony had come home from work just as Jessica had wrenched herself from her mother’s grasp and ran out the front door. When he found out what had happened he ran outside and stopped her, so that she would be there when the police arrived. Anthony had run down the street and grabbed her by the arm, spinning her around.

“Where are you going?” he asked her.

“What the fuck do you care?” she screamed at him, hysterical and half crying. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a large light brown sweater that was too big for her and hung down to her thighs and over her hands. She also smelled terrible, as if she hadn’t showered in three days and had worn the same clothes the whole time, and her breath made him gag.

Anthony made this observation in a second as he looked her over and then back into her eyes, which were starting to water. Her voice was quivering and shaky. “Are you scared?” he asked her with a straight face.

“Shut up,” she said with a sob, tore her arm loose and continued walking down the road.

“Hey, HEY! What are you doing to her!?” A man yelled at Anthony from the house across the street. He was standing in front of his motorcycle wearing a leather jacket with dark sunglasses resting on his bald head.

“SHUT UP AND LEAVE HIM THE FUCK ALONE!” yelled a voice behind him as loud as it could, straining and breaking.

“THE POLICE ARE ON THEIR WAY AND THEY’RE COMING TO PICK HER UP!” It was Will, standing out in front of their house, hysterical and yelling at the man at the top of his lungs, jabbing a finger at Jessica. The man, who ended up being their neighbor’s brother, was confounded, and stood there next to his bike, looking back from Will to Anthony and his sister, who had started to walk away. Anthony was about to pursue her, but a cruiser pulled over the crest of the hill at that very moment, so he let her go and began walking back to the house. He looked over to the man across the street, who was utterly confused at that point, and walked over to him.

“I’m sorry, I thought that you were, well, I didn’t know what you were doing to her,” he stammered.

“It’s okay,” Anthony told him, “you didn’t know. I would have done the same thing.” He then turned around and walked back into the house.

Jessica was committed shortly after to a small hospital up in Hampsted, New Hampshire, and remained there for about three months, during which time Anthony’s father, after eventually hearing of the entire episode and proclaiming himself blameless for the whole ordeal and Anthony’s mother and step-father at fault, drove up a few times to visit her, both to Jessica’s pleasure and anxiety. This had all happened about two years ago.

“I’m sure it is, she’ll grow up eventually,” Anthony said reassuringly, attempting to believe it himself. She suddenly looked older, more world weary, and worn by the constant stress. Anthony had never really seen his mother like this: tired of trying, and tired of fighting. “Just wait till she gets to high school, Mom, things will get better then.”

“I really hope so,” she said trying to smile, “alright, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you later tonight.”

“Bye, Mom, see you when you get back,” he said as she shut the door behind her.

“Alright, time to read,” Anthony said aloud after a long sigh.

* * * * *

There was only one place Anthony ever read from, and that was the large sky blue rocking chair in the living room. Regardless of where it was, Anthony just needed the comfort of rocking while he read. He was one of those people who would bounce their leg up and down whenever he sat in a chair, probably because he needed to be in constant motion. Anthony was aware that he did it, but for what reason was beyond him. All he knew was that being completely still felt incredibly awkward and uncomfortable, and Anthony never much was the kind of person who could sit idly and do nothing. Maybe he was ambitious, or just hyper.

It so happened with the current living room setup that Anthony’s favorite chair sat next to the window on the far right side of the living room. So, as he ever did, Anthony plopped himself into the large chair, put his glasses on ever so carefully, and opened up his book.

Reading was something he enjoyed very much, but wearing his glasses was not. Anthony absolutely detested wearing them, and for more than one reason: First of all, he did not like the prospect of wearing them anywhere or to do anything. He felt restricted by them, as if an entire range of motion was taken away from him as soon as he put them on. His glasses fit his face, but only so well. He hated having to constantly readjust them because they always slid forward. He also felt that they never quite sat straight, and Anthony was the kind of person that needed symmetry, so he would finger them at intervals to check to see if they were level and if each lens was equidistant from his face. Worse than that though, was how after wearing them for so long he would develop an ache behind his ears from how they pushed outwards. The last reason, yet not as imperative as the first two, was that Anthony did not like wearing them because of how he looked with them on. He did not feel that they made him look like a geek- whatever that was. It was much simpler than that: after years of not wearing them, they were something that completely changed his appearance. Perhaps these feelings were unjustified, but nonetheless, that was how he felt.

Wuthering Heights had been by far one of the most unusual novels he had ever experienced, with its darkness, tumultuous emotions and the incredibly sadistic yet intriguing Heathcliff. Anthony was nearly finished with the book and had just finished reading the part in which young Catherine, not at all intimidated by her uncle's savagery, attempted to take the key from his hand which he used to lock her and Ellen in until she married Linton. He had beaten her, and as Anthony read it he suddenly felt very embarrassed and blushed, not wanting to continue reading, or to skip to the next chapter.

* * * * *

The phone rang, but no one had picked up yet.

“Come on, Chris. What, are you sleeping?” Anthony asked his friend, who had no yet answered.

Three more rings.

“Hello?” A voice deeper than his own answered in a groggy tone.

“Did I wake you, sir sleeps-a-lot?”

“ . . . yeah.”

“You are so damn lazy. It’s twelve-fourteen, how late were you planning on sleeping?”

“Proably to about two-ish,” Chris answered lethargically.

“Get up so we can do something,” Anthony demanded.

“Ehhh . . . alright,” he said after obvious deliberation.

“Good, take a shower and I’ll start walking over in about five minutes.”

“You’re not going to drive over?”

“No, it’s beautiful out, I want to walk.”

“Alright.”

“Then I’ll see you when I get there, bye.”

“Bye.”

Chris had been a friend of Anthony since freshman football, even though he had known him since the fifth grade. To most others the pair seemed odd, after all Chris was about 6’ 2” and weighted at least 260 lbs. By the next school year he was likely to be the biggest kid in school, and also the toughest, based solely on his size. Everything about

Chris was big: his head, his feet, his hands, his shoulder, arms and legs, yet he had a small mouth. He was a football player in most aspects, and also a typical jock, with some major exceptions though. These were all aspects of his personality. Chris was, for all practical purposes: one part jock, one part large and goofy, one part sympathetic and intellectual and two parts just plain ridiculous.

He was undoubtedly Anthony's best friend. There was no one else he would rather spend his time with, and as he walked out the door he began conjuring up activities for him and his friend to do on this lovely May afternoon.

Some of their most memorable past times consisted of the flaming snowball they had concocted that past February and hurled into the very busy street next to Chris' house (only to have to run out into the street and hastily stomp out the flames), stealing a couch from the house across the street that had been left out in the front lawn (which Anthony wrote and delivered a ransom letter for), going to the mall to taunt the overly-decorated mall security, and standing on the sidewalk outside Chris' house late at night watching cars pass by. They were never overly productive and often nothing more than mischievous for a majority of the time, but it was fun.

No one answered the door when Anthony knocked, so using the permission he was so often reminded of, he opened the seldom locked wooden door and invited himself into the office of Chris' mother's house. Anthony saw no one at the computer desk but did notice that it had been left on. He took off his shoes before anything else, then announced his presence to the house.

"Is that Anthony?" Chris' mother called out from the adjacent kitchen with excitement.

"Hello," he replied with a smile as he walked into the white tiled kitchen.

“How are you?”

Kasey, despite being a single mother of three, was still an energetic and fun loving girl of thirty-six with shoulder length blond hair, blue eyes, a beautiful smile and matching physique, not to mention a Harley-Davidson. She even caught the eyes of some of Anthony’s school mates.

“How do you like my new kitchen?” She asked him, extending her arms in a *ta-da, look at this* fashion. Anthony surveyed the area and found the freshly painted yellow walls to efficiently liven the kitchen atmosphere, along with the many green leafy vine designs that flowed along the wall at chest height which had been painted by hand.

“I did it all by myself.”

“It looks great, I like it.” Anthony complemented her as he mentally noted the sound of a shower still running in the background.

“Chelsey!” Kasey called from the kitchen.

The sound of a door opening not to far from the kitchen could be heard a moment later.

“What?” Chris’ younger sister called back from her doorway.

“Come in here and look at my new kitchen,” Kasey said.

With a sigh and some other vocalizations which she kept under her breath, Chelsey reluctantly entered the dinning room and came into the kitchen area, but soon stopped short with a widening grin when she noticed Anthony’s presence.

“Anthony,” she lovingly greeted him as she went up and gave him a hug. “You never come to visit me anymore.”

“I have a job, you know, but I’m here now, aren’t I?” he said with half a grin.

Chris' little sister was short and tanned girl of thirteen with dark hair, matching eyes and a beautiful smile. You could tell when you saw her that she was going to grow up to be gorgeous, as the signs were already starting to show. She was also very flirtatious, and consistently lavished her attention on Anthony and his and Chris' other mutual friend, John, whenever they were over. Why she did this, Anthony was not sure, all he knew was that he enjoyed her company, and yet, as she stood in stark contrast to his own sister (and wished Jessica was more like Chelsey) and was the sister of his best friend, he did feel some familial feelings towards her, which caused him distress whenever he found himself the object of her affections.

"Chris is still in the shower," she said as she stepped back and pushed her hair behind her ears.

"No surprise," Anthony commented, once again looking around the room.

"So, Chelsey, how do you like my new kitchen?" Kasey asked a little more imperatively this time.

"I love it," she answered as she walked over to the wall, "especially the little vines," she traced the design of a leaf with her finger, "they are so cute."

A door opened around the corner from the dining room and a cloud of steam rushed out, thinning as it rose up to the ceiling. Anthony walked across the kitchen as Chris stepped out of the bathroom with a white towel wrapped around his waist.

"When did you get here," he asked.

"A little while ago," Anthony answered.

“Oh, okay. I’m going to go change now,” he said, and walked two steps to the right into his bedroom. Anthony chuckled to himself and walked back into the kitchen to wait for his friend as Chelsey went back into her room and Kasey made her way downstairs.

“I had the weirdest dream,” Chris began as he walked back into the kitchen, “I dreamt that the Merrimack River flooded and for some reason I was floating down it in a truck bed, as Pop-eye.”

Anthony erupted into laughter immediately at his friend’s absurd comment. Chris, with a slight grin on his face because of how odd he knew his comment to be, shrugged off his friend’s reaction and opened the refrigerator.

“I don’t know how you can have such funny and interesting dreams, when rarely I dream at all, and when I do they are usually nightmares,” Anthony forced out, trying to suppress his laughter.

“Well, that’s just because you’re not an interesting person,” Chris said in a matter-of-fact tone as he closed the refrigerator door and turned around with a cold hot dog in one hand and a package wrapped burrito in the other.

“Only when I sleep,” Anthony said with a grin as broad as his face would allow as he watched his friend devour the cold hot dog in two bites and throw the burrito in the microwave.

“Did I tell you about the one I had last week when I was Spiderman and running around to people’s doors and jamming newspapers in them to keep them from closing?”

“And how you then suddenly were installing carpet with me, but I ran away when two guys came in and tried to mug us. Yeah, I remember that one.”

Shrugging his large shoulders, Chris picked up and began playing with a plastic spatula that lay on a thin metal grate which hung from the ceiling at head level between the microwave and the refrigerator with various pots and pans hanging from it.

“So what do you want to do today?” Anthony asked.

Chris shrugged, still fascinated with the spatula, then looked up at the beep of the microwave as if it woke him from a stupor. “Well,” he said turning to retrieve his breakfast, “first I’m going to eat this burrito, in two bites, mind you, then brush my teeth. After that it’s all up in the air.”

As promised, the giant consumed his burrito in two massive bites with such tact that one may have believed it to be his purpose in life, then, leaving his friend to his own devices for a few minutes, went back into the still steamy bathroom.

As often happened, Anthony was given the task of deciding the duo’s plan of action. Chris was not a follower; he simply did not care. He would have been perfectly content lying in his bed and watching television all day long.

Anthony walked back into the office and sat behind the desk next to the family Hewlett-Packard in the black leather executive-like chair that leaned back so far it almost tipped over. The initial decision came rather easily: they had to go somewhere. It was about half past noon, so every place they could want to go was open. They could go bowling, go see a movie, go to the mall, walk around Manchester, or hunt down other friends. Anthony decided that the mall was their best choice; besides, there was a CD that he wanted to purchase, so they would at least be there with a purpose.

With their destination decided upon, Anthony needed something else to pass the remaining time with, so he moved the mouse to take the computer out of sleep mode and

pulled up the web browser. Anthony was in the process of marking his own territory in cyberspace via the creation of his own website on a free server. It had taken him about a week to learn enough of the basics to do so, and he was currently designing a home page. Chris walked in after he had set the text to orange and properly placed a picture of himself saluting the observer in the upper left-hand corner of the page.

“So, what’s the plan, man?” Chris asked putting his hands in his pockets and rising up on his calves for a brief moment.

“Let’s walk to the mall,” Anthony answered as he put the computer back into sleep mode.

“Are you planning on buying something?”

“Yes sir.”

“Alright then, let us be off.”

* * * * *

The Mall of New Hampshire was about forty-five minutes from Chris’ house on foot: all the way up the long hill of So. Beach Street, back down Gold Street, right onto So. Willow Street, then cross ten lanes of traffic going both ways at the Manchester Auto-Fair dealer to reach the left side of the mall parking-lot.

The two walked abreast along the sidewalk, the afternoon sun warming their faces and the light breeze scurrying up the hill, tickling the hairs at the base of their necks. Chris, with his long arms swaying at his sides like thick organic pendulums with clubs attached to the ends, ambled up the hill in his long strided gait, with Anthony at his side taking one-and-a-quarter steps for each of his friend’s, but that did not impede or

encroach upon the semi-brisk yet leisurely pace he kept while musing to himself on the loveliness of the afternoon.

Anthony was a fast walker. He wasn't one of those hands-in-your-pants long-strided and meandering walkers. No, he simply walked fast. Not so fast as to be confused with a hustle, but quickly, briskly. Not either, was he one of those people who hurry so much that they lean forward in their walk, so as to be falling into each step. He had a quick pace, but not an unreasonable one. He seemed to walk with a purpose, with a destination in mind, not walking for the sake of walking, but walking to a destination and mindful of how long it took him. If he was to walk for the sake of walking, then walk he would, and at an easy pace, as he did not like to be rushed. Sometimes he could even be caught breaking into a jog or light run, not because he was late, but because he felt like it, as if time was running off the clock, so he might as well run too, perhaps to catch up with it, or to not let it get away from him.

“So, where do you think you would like to go to college?” asked Anthony.

“I'm not sure yet. I've been looking at schools where I can continue playing football mostly.”

“Well yeah, you are the best line-man that we have this year.”

“BC in particular. I've been talking to the football coach down there and he gave me free tickets to one of their games in a few weeks.”

“BC, really?”

“Yeah, but it is really expensive, plus, I don't think I'll be able to get in based on my grades. It would be nice to play division one football, though.”

“What are you thinking on majoring in?”

“I don’t have a clue,” Chris said with a laugh.

“You’re just going to be undecided?”

“Most likely, though I’ll probably major in something either sports or history related.”

“History?” Anthony raised his eye brows.

“Yeah, I really like history. It’s always been my favorite subject.”

“I never knew that. So, then you want to be a professor?”

“Either that or high-school.”

“Don’t be a high-school teacher. Professors get paid more and they can get their grad students to do their work for them.”

“Well, mostly just grading papers, but I don’t think that I want to get a Ph. D. It takes too long.”

“Well, I guess you’re right. You don’t have the patience to stay in school that long, do you?” Anthony asked with a grin as they turned onto Gold Street, a long, steep, dilapidated road that was a hazard even to drive on, or so it seemed from its poorly kept state, as if the city forgot about its existence, which was certainly suggested from the appearance that it seemed to be about three years overdo for repaving with the occasional large chunk of asphalt popped out like a piece of a gigantic faded black jigsaw puzzle.

“Not at all.” Chris paused, but then began again after a moment. “So where do you want to go?”

“I’d like to get out of this state, but still stay near the East coast at least. Unless I could go to Dartmouth,” Anthony answered, eager to discuss the subject.

“Dartmouth,” Chris said, raising an eyebrow in Anthony’s direction, “do you think that you might be . . . setting the bottom rung of the ladder of your dreams a bit high?” Chris

said more than asked, squinting one eye while raising the eyebrow of the other, apparently trying very hard to sound poetic.

“What?” Anthony asked with a laugh.

“Oh, fuck it: Aren’t you setting your hopes a bit high? Do you think that you might be setting yourself up for disappointment?”

“Not really,” Anthony answered, secretly hurt at the thought of not being good enough for Dartmouth, “I’m in the top forty of our class, ranked thirty-five I believe, which puts me in the top ten percent.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve been looking at Penn State, University of Miami, UCONN and the like, but I’m still not sure where I want to go.”

“What are you going to major in?”

“Biology.”

“You’re going to be a biologist.” Chris said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I think I want to do research, on metabolism and growth and stuff. You know, I was watching the Discovery Channel a few weeks ago and on this show a scientist gave this group of nematodes a heavy dose of anti-oxidants, and it ended up increasing their life span by about 100%.”

“Really? How long did they live?”

“About two weeks, but a week longer than the other worms that didn’t get the treatment. I guess that it serves as proof as to how much damage free radicals do to us.”

“So you are going to try and live forever, is that it?” Chris asked, smiling.

“Not necessarily, but if I could I certainly would try.”

“Friend,” Chris said overly gently and placing his large hand on Anthony’s shoulder, “I think that you would make a great mad scientist.”

Anthony could not help but chuckle at his friend’s mock sincerity as the two continued down Gold Street, the warm sun bathing their faces in its rays, the cool breeze rolling down the hill rustling their hair and the sound of cars occasionally speeding up the hill. Then, suddenly, Chris reached out with his right hand and grabbed the skin around the left nipple of Anthony’s chest, squeezing it and pulling away.

“Oww! Dude, what did you do that for?” Anthony said after taking a sudden breath in and stopping. Chris just looked at him and laughed. “I told you that I don’t like it when you do that.”

“I think you’re over-reacting a little bit,” Chris said condescendingly.

“No, I don’t think that I’m overreacting,” Anthony started to raise his voice. “I told you before that I don’t want you to do that. I don’t like it. I asked you not to do it anymore.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Chris returned.

“The big deal is that I asked you not to do it anymore but you still did. What the hell? What’s your problem? If I ask you not to do something then I expect you to listen to me if you respect me at all, but you didn’t so you must not respect anything I say. Jesus Christ. I don’t like it when you do that and if you respect me at all you’ll stop.”

“Okay, okay,” Chris said, trying to calm him down, “fine, just settle down, alright? It’s nothing to freak out about.”

It was obvious to Anthony that Chris didn’t understand. It wasn’t a difficult concept to grasp, was it? If Chris respected Anthony he would comply with his wishes, and all Anthony wanted was for Chris to stop pinching him. Sure, it was something that

Chris did to all of them, like some odd way of him to show affection, but Anthony didn't like it, so if he asked him not to do it, Chris should respect his wishes, right?

"I just don't like to be touched," Anthony said with his head down. Chris looked at him with something that might have been pity, and then put his arm around his friend and continued walking.

"I'm just fooling around, alright. Just joshing you. Joshing," Chris said.

Anthony, despite himself, gave a grin at Chris' use of the word "joshing," which he always found amusing, and though Chris having his arm around him made him uncomfortable, he held his tongue, afraid to say or do anything, afraid that he might over-react, or do something stupid.

"Just please don't do it again. I might just snap one of these days, and just end up hitting you."

"Really?" Chris said with a skeptical look.

"Maybe, I don't know, I'm probably long overdo for it though."

"What, hitting me?"

"No, snapping."

Chris made another move reach at him, but this time stopping short. Anthony though, saw it coming, and winced backwards.

"DUDE!"

"I was just kidding!" Chris said, laughing.

Anthony didn't say anything more this time. He wanted to do something. He wanted to hit him (just in the gut, though, a warning), or call him something, or just walk back home, but he didn't. He knew that Chris wasn't going to take him seriously, he rarely did,

but what could he do besides grin and bear it? He was afraid to act, afraid of how Chris would react, and afraid of what Chris would think, so he did nothing.

“Alright, which way?” Chris asked as the two walked through the main entrance. “FYE,” Anthony answered after taking in the vicinity and starting to walk forward without glancing toward his friend.

The Mall of New Hampshire was definitely large enough to harbor a number of outlets sufficient enough to provide amusement for those people who frequented it just for the sake of going to the mall, and teenagers constituted the majority of that crowd. Mall rats, Chris called them.

FYE, also known as For Your Entertainment, a record store, was on the other side of the mall from where they entered, and as they made the walk Anthony took in the crowd like a starved man. His blue eyes jumped quickly from one person to the next, observing each individual he passed as if he were searching for a particular face amidst the throngs of unfamiliar people. He wasn't searching for anyone though, he was searching for everybody.

Each person, each unfamiliar face was something that mildly excited him, made him grin. He didn't know quite why a trip to the mall made him subtly happy. He didn't know if it was the people, the atmosphere, the stores or something else, but there was something there that he found amusing. He had on more than one occasion suggested to Chris that they go to the mall when there had been nothing else for them to do, and he didn't even make that suggestion with the intent of a specific purchase in mind most of

the time. The thought had never occurred to him that he wanted to go to the mall for similar reasons that the alleged mall rats did, and if it had, he would have fought it by justifying his intent with mere observation, rather than gossiping and trying to impress the rest of the crowds, which, oddly enough, was just the reason why he enjoyed the mall as much as he did.

Chris, in contrast, absolutely loathed being around so many people. Whereas Anthony found excitement in the mall, Chris found boredom and irritation, although he did enjoy taunting the mall security who strutted around in their well-kept uniforms and wide-brimmed hats that made him silently laugh every time he saw one of them because they resembled the Canadian Mounties. He spent most of his time making smug remarks to himself about the people he passed, and checking out each girl that was within his age group.

With the social magnet that the mall was, trips there for Anthony and Chris usually were spiced with the adventitious meetings of other friends and acquaintances. It also happened this time that Anthony encountered one of his classmates while passing by the Disney Store.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Anthony,” a broad, yet short young man with thick dark hair and a face that never seemed to be able to completely cease smiling greeted him. He was with his long time and seemingly inseparable partner in crime, who was taller and thinner with tanned skin and grinning brown eyes.

“Mr. Hall, Mike. What are you two doing here?”

“Oh, the usual: harassing Mike at work and stealing stink bombs from Spencer’s.” Mike worked at the McDonald’s further ahead in the food court. Both had been in Anthony’s

classes since junior high, and although they used to make fun of him occasionally back then, they had warmed up to him after discovering that he wasn't a complete geek. The duo were currently in his U.S. History class, which made the hour long daily lecture more exciting. Anthony made sure to sit next to Adam to maximize his potential for amusement.

"We're going to the pits in Lichfield afterwards, interesting in coming?" Adam asked.

Chris was staring off to the right and starting to wonder away. Mike and Adam never really were friends with Chris, and Adam "never really learned to appreciate that kid."

"And why would I be interested in going?" Anthony asked.

"How about a microwave and a bottle of butane," Mike answered.

"What?" Anthony returned, half laughing.

"It's going to be legendary," Adam proclaimed.

"Come on," Mike seemed to plead.

As far as the butane was concerned, this was no real surprise to Anthony. Adam and Mike had a reputation for their exploits and activities, the most recent being a car chase down Brown Ave which nearly ended in an accident in the spirit of the highly acclaimed game known as Assassins, in which every player is given the task to "assassinate" one other player at a time with a small squirt gun.

"Naw, not today, I've got to go to FYE and then do some other things," Anthony answered.

"And by other things you mean nothing," Adam returned.

"Exactly."

“Okay, fine,” Adam said trying to sound serious but not being able to keep back a grin, “I see how it is. See if we invite you again to go and blow something up.”

“You know, I just might be okay with that,” Anthony replied.

“Alright then,” Adam said turning to Mike, “let’s go then. We’ve got work to do.”

“See ya guys,” Anthony said as they started to walk away.

“All set?” Chris asked, now back at his side.

“Certainly, shall we?”

“We shall,” Chris said ceremoniously as they started walking down the corridor again.

Being only mid-day the mall was packed with shoppers and loafers alike. The people moved noisily down the corridors in throngs, most respecting the natural flow of traffic and sticking to their right. The center of the corridors were lines with small booths selling stuffed animals, cell phones, pictures, trinkets, jewelry and incense. Occasionally there would be a car or Hummer parked at major mall intersections advertising its new lease rate, flanked by fake trees planted into the cement with their waxy and evergreen leaves, all oak shaped. The corridor walls opened up directly to the sparsely clouded sky overhead with “A” framed skylights. Although it certainly was nice to feel the warm sun from inside the busy shopping grounds, the light patter of rain or heavy assault of a thunderstorm was always a treat to witness from the shelter below.

As Anthony and Chris made their way down the corridor they heard the familiar buzz of the food court which was opening up to their left.

“I think I’ll get a burger afterwards,” Chris stated, as if the smell of food reminded him the he desperately needed something to eat.

FYE was directly across the food court on their right. The orange oval sign with FYE in the middle in blue letters was a familiar sight, along with the life size cutouts of Orlando Bloom and Darth Vader behind the glass panels.

“So,” Chris began as they walked into the store, “What are we looking for?”

“Metallica, And Justice for All. It is the next one on my list.”

Anthony found the CD with little trouble, and was about to walk over to the cashier when Chris stopped him.

“Isn’t that . . . umm . . . what’s her name?”

“Who?” Anthony asked his friend, a bit confused.

“That girl over there,” Chris said, pointed to a blond with shoulder length hair about Anthony’s height in the back corner of the store. She was thin, but not petite, about 110 lbs, with bright, inquisitive brown eyes, a cute face, pink lips, sharp jaw and perfect teeth. She was wearing a pair of white capris that accentuated her small glutes and slightly curved hips, a white pair of reboks and a cerulean long-sleeved collared shirt that hugged her ribs, outlined her delicately carved shoulders and contoured her small breasts.

“Your girl friend,” Chris completed his thought, though forgetting her name.

“You mean the girl that I’m currently dating,” Anthony corrected him. *It could be your fault, or it could be your parents’ fault, or your culture’s fault. You get acne because of any number of reasons so you might as well try every scientific and home therapy that you can get your hands on, because nobody knows and the experts are just throwing darts in the dark.*

“You mean the girl that kissed you last week and you made a point to come over and brag about?”

“Yeah,” Anthony said, not taking his eyes off her as she browsed through the classical music selections. *It could be you or it could be us.* “The same one that hasn’t called me back in a week. I’m going to go say hi.” Leaving Chris to browse the N’s and O’s, Anthony walked up behind her and whispered into her ear.

“Tchaikovsky, eh?”

The girl turned around startled, but gave Anthony a guilty smile. “I’m going on a Russian musical binge, and Tchaikovsky is next on the list. Besides, my music teacher recommended him to me.” She kept her eyes down, fingering the plastic wrapped CD case with her long and thin fingers, but still wore a smile.

“You never called. If this was something new I might have taken notice,” Anthony said with a grin. *Here, try benzyl peroxide, apply twice a day, maybe three times, but less if it burns, because, you know, it does burn away your skin.*

“I know, I know. I had work to do, then we went to go see a play, then I watched Tennis . . .”

“For the better part of a week? How do you live with such a monotonous schedule?” She didn’t say anything. *Here, apply this, clindamycin, at night before you go to bed, it will kill any bacteria on your face, but it might burn, so don’t apply too much.*

“Oh, Christina,” Anthony said sighing, “you’re simply too busy.” *Apply to your “T” zone, which is the middle of your forehead going down to the tip of your nose and its edges.*

“I know,” she replied, letting the smile fall from her lips. “I’m going to go pay for this and go get a cappuccino across the way. Meet me in there and we’ll talk.”

Something about how she didn't pass over his comment with a joke or nudge bothered Antony. Her tone was too serious for even light humor, and he could see the red flag. He didn't even bother to answer her as she waked away, and she didn't wait for a reply. *Here, take this pill, tetracycline, twice a day with plenty of water, it might help.* Chris was still where Anthony had left him. "All set?" he asked. "Yeah," Anthony replied, "let's go pay for this."

Christina was already walking out of the store when Antony paid for his CD. "I've got to talk to Christina for a minute, I'll meet you in the food court," Anthony said to Chris as they exited the store. "Alright," Chris said and walked off.

Anthony looked across the corridor to the small coffee shop and saw Christina standing in line. *Have severe acne? Take this, Accutane, it will shut down oil production in your sebaceous glands which can cause acne, but you'll have to come in for monthly blood work to make sure it isn't frying your liver, making your brain swell or destroying your vision or hearing; it also can cause depression and suicidal thoughts, as well as chapped lips and poor night vision and rashes. It works really well, though it might cause your acne to get worse before it gets better.* He replayed their exchange a moment ago in his mind, scrutinizing every word she chose and every facial expression she exhibited. *This is going to be bad,* Anthony thought. Still, he'd rather talk to her than not, so he nervously ran the fingers of his left hand over his face and walked into the coffee shop.

Don't touch your face, it will only aggravate it.

* * * * *

Chris was sitting down at a table for four by himself in the right half of the food court, off to the left of the McDonald's and Au Bon Pain counters. Anthony walked toward him with his head hanging halfway down, dejectedly, and sat down with a sigh. Chris stared at him for a moment as he ate a few French fries and then wiped his hands with a napkin and leaned forward.

"Alright, let's hear it," he said.

"Heh, not too difficult to read, huh?" Anthony asked him.

"No. So what happened? What did she say?"

"She dumped me."

"Yup, I figured that much."

"Really?"

"You can't hide it when you're upset or sad."

"Hmph. I guess that's a good thing."

"Makes my job easier."

Anthony was silent, wanting, but not wanting to say anything.

"So, is there any particular reason?" Chris asked after a moment.

"I don't know," Anthony groaned, dropping his head into his hands.

"You must have some idea. It was you and her, and she must have dumped you for a reason, unless she's a complete bitch, or slut." Chris explained.

"I don't know." Anthony returned, looking down at the crumbs on the table.

"Come on, you must have at least a bit of a clue. Listen, I know you, I know how your head works and how you overanalyze everything. You have some ideas, some theories, so let's hear 'em."

“Fine, FINE!” Anthony raised his voice, extending his arms to the side. “It was me, I’m sure of it. It was all me, everything was me. I blame myself. She didn’t do anything. It was my fault..”

“What are you talking about? How was it your fault?”

Anthony didn’t say anything.

“Anthony, come on, I know you want to talk about it. If you didn’t you wouldn’t be saying anything.”

“You asked me.”

“You answered.”

Anthony sighed. “I was scared. I didn’t do anything. Not a damn thing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You didn’t do anything.”

“I was scared of her, fucking terrified of her. I liked her so much that she made me shit my pants and go hide.”

“Hah, really? You like her that much?”

“I was scared to talk,” Anthony continued, ignoring Chris’ comment, “scared to say anything to her once we actually started dating. I couldn’t even look at her straight. I couldn’t look her in the eyes without turning to stone. I was afraid that I’d say something dumb or stupid, or that I’d upset her, or that I’d make her think I wasn’t interesting, or boring or whatever the fuck else. I was scared so I let her do all the talking, I barely said anything back, and what pathetic attempts I made were laughable. You would have laughed if you’d been there.”

Chris gave a laugh.

“It was pathetic. *I* was pathetic. I couldn’t do anything. I could have kissed her a dozen times, but I didn’t because I was scared, and when I finally did, it was already too late. I was even scared to touch her. What the hell! What am I supposed to do if I can talk and flirt with her but once we go out on a legitimate date I get scared and just shut down?”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Dude, I was afraid to touch her! What the fuck is wrong with me? I mean, I wanted to. I WANTED TO! You have no idea how much I wanted to sleep with her. I wanted to but I couldn’t. I can’t. I swear I can’t. If she came back here right now and just stripped naked right here in front of us and grabbed me and said she wanted me right now I’d fucking run for my life. I know it. I’d have a coronary.”

Chris couldn’t help but laugh now.

“I can’t even say it, I can’t even say it. I can’t say that I want to have sex with her without feeling dirty and uncomfortable. I can’t say it without feeling ashamed. What’s wrong with me? I’m pathetic. How the hell did I get her to like me in the first place?”

Chris sat there across from his friend whom he had known for more than four years, listening and giving Anthony his full attention. He saw this coming, knew that there was a good chance it would have ended like this. Messy.

“You’re a dick,” Anthony accused Chris.

“It’s not my fault once you start talking you don’t stop.” Anthony rolled his eyes. “You wanna head back to my place?” Chris asked, concerned, and now with a straight face.

It was done, it was over. There was nothing anyone could do about it now. Anthony had vented. He had said his piece and hoped that Chris would give him

something back. “Yeah,” he said, sitting back in his chair and running his left hand over his face, “let’s do that.”

* * * * *

Anthony walked back into the kitchen of his parent’s house. He told Chris when they reached his door that he felt like going home and taking a nap or something. Maybe watch a movie, but that he would come back over later.

“Listen,” Chris had said to him, “I know that you get nervous around girls. I’ve known. You can’t hide it, but you’re getting better, you’re making progress. I remember freshman year when you wouldn’t even look at girls, and when that one asked you to the semi-formal you tried to get me and John to go with you, but because we wouldn’t you never even said anything to her. You avoided her. I was surprised when you told me that you were going to go to the junior prom and went with those kids in your physics class, and when you told me that you danced with Christina there and asked her out later. You surprised me. I never would have thought that you had it in you to ask her out. I mean, buddy, she is *good looking*, and if you got her to go out with you on a few dates then she must have liked you. Come on, think about it, you went out with her. What’s wrong with that? Okay, so she ended up dumping you, but you at least got her to say yes. I mean, she could have said no, but she didn’t.”

“Yeah, I know,” Anthony had said back.

“One step at a time, right? At least we know that you can hook ‘em, so now you just need to work on dating them. Listen, Anthony, you’re my best friend, and I don’t like seeing you miserable. Sure I’m goofy and indifferent and I’m a jerk sometimes, but I do care, and I know it sounds corny or something, but if you need to talk about something, or you want advice, then Love Doctor Chris would be more than willing to help you out.”

Anthony chuckled at the thought of Chris’ words. It was a rare moment of sentimentality and sympathy from him, but well placed. Anthony felt depressed and more self-conscious than he usually did. He couldn’t stop touching his face.

It was four-thirty according to the clock on the wall opposite the door he entered into in the kitchen. He planned on going back over Chris’ later, but not for a couple of hours at least. He wanted time to vegetate. Watch a movie or something. Do something mindless just to avoid thinking for awhile. He felt like eating something. There was some ice cream in the fridge. Mint chocolate chip, his favorite. He grabbed a bowl from the cupboard and filled it with the ice cream, then grabbed a spoon and began to head for the living room to sit down and relax and watch a movie, but his eye was caught by the flashing of the red LED on the answering machine on the computer desk in the left corner of the dining room. Not suspecting anything, Anthony casually pressed the play button on the machine and ate a spoonful of ice cream.

“One new message,” the machine began in its electronic and monotonous voice, “received at two-thirty-three, Saturday, May seventh.” The machine beeped, then began with its usual background white noise. “Hey, Marcy,” a voice began. A male voice, not high, but not deep, rather plain, but it had an edge in it. Anthony recognized that voice, unmistakably. It was his father, and the realization washed over him in a panic, twisting

his stomach in knots. “You didn’t come over this week and I had taken out venison. I’m home today so give me a call back and you can come over for dinner, alright? Call me.” It sounded more like a demand rather than a plea or invitation. Shocked, Anthony stood in front of the machine for a minute not moving. Images of his father kept appearing in his mind, memories of his past visits, of his childhood, kept coming up in exactly the same way they did every week before he went over to visit his father. This time though, an image of a white room with blue carpets popped into his mind, along with a red boombox with blue speakers, only for the briefest moment. What that image was, he wasn’t sure. It was too brief, as if its head rose above the water only to be pushed back down a second later, resubmerged and hidden back within his mind. It felt somehow familiar, *deja-vu*.

He hadn’t visited his father that week because he was sick. He wasn’t actually sick though, he just said he was. The truth was he just did not feel like visiting his father that particular week. It wasn’t so bad though. It wasn’t like it used to be last year, when he didn’t have his car and would walk over to his father’s house after school, sit down at the kitchen table and do his homework, all his homework, and sometimes the next day’s, just to eat up as much time as he could, undisturbed. Then when he was finished he’d have to sit down in the other room - the only other room - with his dad on the couch and watch old westerns, *Frasier* and *Seinfeld* with him. That wasn’t the worst part though, no, those were the better parts of the evening. They would sit down to eat, the three of them, Anthony, his father, and his girlfriend Lisa, usually having venison with potatoes and corn. They would talk, about school, about TV, about the news, about his father’s hunting trips, about fishing, and then Lisa would make some comment, she’d say something, it

really never mattered what, and his father would tell her to shut up, that she was drunk and stupid, and then it would start. The yelling, the screaming, the swearing. Anthony would try to hide, would try to sink into the walls to hide from the violence and the abuse. He couldn't remember a single time he went over when an argument didn't break out. He couldn't remember a single time that he wouldn't find himself retreating into the bathroom while he heard them yell at each other, while he sat there with his head in his hands, praying for them to stop, hoping to god that he wouldn't hit her this time, that he wouldn't hear her fall to the floor or up against the wall, that his heart would start pounding through his chest with the anxiety pulsing through him in waves, wanting to open that door, walk up to his father and hit him right across the jaw with all his strength and then to kick him, again and again, in the stomach, in the face, until he was unconscious. Break his arms, his fingers, his legs, inflict every sort of harm upon him that he could, but make sure that he was still breathing, so that in the end he would know that it was his son, it was his own blood that did this to him, that disapproved of him, that punished him and made him suffer; His own son who hurt him as much as he could.

He never would, though. He would hide and avoid, he would cower as far away as possible and try to ignore it all, because in the end, he was afraid. He didn't want to call him back. He never wanted to call him back, he wanted to ignore him for the rest of his life and pretend that he didn't have a father, because, Anthony thought, having no father at all would be better than having the one he had. How he wished that he would get arrested for something, that the police would get a domestic disturbance call one night and they would find him and lock him away down on Valley street so he wouldn't have to see him any more. If only.

Reluctantly, Antony picked up the phone and dialed his father's number. He would rather go over tonight rather than provoke him by pretending he wasn't home. The phone rang, once, twice. *Oh please, don't be home*, Anthony thought. Another ring, four, five. Seven rings before the answering machine picked up, right? One more and he would be free. He heard a click.

"Hello?" A female voice said, warm and friendly.

"Hello, Lisa," Anthony answered, trying to sound pleased, though he was with her answering instead of his father.

"Hello, hunny. How are you? Are you feeling better?" She asked, happily and concerned.

"Yeah, I must of had some bad headache or something, because I went home Wednesday after school and laid down for most of the rest of the night and felt fine on Thursday."

"That's good. We wouldn't want you coming over here if you were sick. Dad can't afford to get sick and miss work, and we know how you're allergic to Felix."

Felix was his father's white and fluffy long haired cat.

"Well, I'm feeling fine today, so I certainly can come over for awhile. I've got to work tomorrow morning at seven, so I'd have to leave by about eight or nine, but I'll still come over."

"Okay, we're not going anywhere. Are you going to come over now? We were thinking about eating dinner sometime around six."

"I just got home from work, so I need to take a shower, but once I'm done I'll head on over. Probably in about a half hour or so."

"Alright, hunny, sounds good. I'll see you when you get here."

"Okay, Lisa, bye."

“Bye, hunny.”

Anthony hung up the phone, relieved that he didn't have to speak with his father. He imagined that he was out in the back yard tending to his garden. It was about that time of year. He would ask him when he went over how the garden was going. That at least interested him, but in the mean time he only had a half hour to himself before he had to leave, before it was all up in the air and he'd be walking on egg-shells for the rest of the evening.

Anthony wasn't in a hurry to get over there at all, and still planned on watching some TV before he went over to his father's house, but first he needed to go to the bathroom. Anthony laid the bowl of ice cream that was now starting to melt along the edges of the glass on the corner of the sink. His pee had a yellow tint. That meant that it was full of dissolved materials. Vitamins, sodium, urea, chloride, potassium; it could be any combination of such things. Clear urine meant that it was mostly water, that his body was well hydrated, that his kidneys weren't filtering mass amounts of toxins or nutrients out of his blood stream and concentrating it. Clear urine was good, was healthy; yellow urine was not so good, not necessarily bad, but not good either. Anthony's urine, though, was yellow.

He needed his urine to be clear. There was no scientific evidence, but he had searched for it, had read about it online, that one of the many ways of possibly controlling acne was to drink large amounts of water every day to purge your body of pollutants, to keep it clean.

Anthony's urine was not clear, so he should drink some water just in case. All these thoughts ran through his head. He had done extensive research on acne, desperately

trying to understand it, like some foe, trying to discover its weakness, its blind spot, so that he might exploit it. He looked into the mirror to conduct his second daily check and saw his usual self staring back at him. This gave him an immense sense of relief; nothing new, no new pimples or zits, and no signs of ones forming. He had been trying out the water method of control, drinking water nearly exclusively throughout the day, starting with three to four cups of it every morning. It was working well, but not perfectly. Every now and then he would see the ugly head of one breaking through his skin, and then he would be caught in that trap, the acne trap, that catch-22 where you suffer no matter what you do.

Your doctor tells you not to touch it, don't pop it because it will only increase the probability of it coming back and can lead to scarring, but it won't go away easily, no, it won't go anywhere for days. The first day it shows up, saying hi, then the next day it grows to its full size, plump, ripe, white with red swelling around its edges, tender to the touch and inflamed so that you can feel it on your face every second of the day. It sits there, taunting you, begging you to do something, just reach up and apply the slightest pressure with two fingers and you'll feel it pop and all that pressure will go away. It will crust over and maybe it will come back the next day and you'll do the same thing again or maybe it will just go away and leave a tender red spot for a week or two until it turns into an unsightly purplish scar for the rest of your life. You shouldn't do that though, because you'll regret it for the rest of your life, you should leave it alone, let it sit there, protruding from your face, a white dot against your tan skin calling attention to itself, the sebum, the puss, sitting there for all the world to see, to gander at so you can see their eyes going between your own and the zit every second, because they just can't help it,

they find it disgusting but they can't look away. You should leave it alone until it shrinks and goes away, anywhere from two days to a week, because then it might not leave a scar. Better to deal with short term embarrassment, humiliation, anxiety and depression than long term, right? Better to walk around for a week with every zit you'll ever get, untouched and ripe and throbbing white and red so it can call attention to itself and everyone can look at it instead of popping them and making them disappear and only leave a tender red spot on your face and a possible scar for the rest of your life that will never go away. Better to stay sane and detached and in control instead of letting it get to you every time you look at yourself in the mirror, every time you catch someone looking at it, every time you get embarrassed about it, every time you'd rather not look at someone because of it, every time you'd rather stay in bed all day and not go to school or appear in public at all on account of it. Better to pretend you don't have any pimples or zits at all, and that they don't make you look ugly, disgusting and greasy. Better to not find yourself obsessing over it every morning, every time you go to the bathroom, every time you see a cute guy or girl, every time you feel it throb, every time you feel the pressure of it when you smile or laugh. Better to remember that acne is a disease just as any other, and that its not your fault that you have it, but that there might be something you can do about it.

All this Anthony knew. All this he thought about every day. All this he obsessed over, just the same as the next person with acne. Looking in the mirror, he ran the fingers of his left hand over his face. Already the skin over his cheeks was becoming rough, was starting to show small indentations where former pimples had grown and receded. It wasn't smooth like the skin other people had, it was rough, uneven and un-uniform.

Sugar can make it worse, he thought to himself, and looked down at the bowl of mint chocolate chip ice cream. It always happened this way. He would go three or four weeks without, nearly eliminating sugary snacks from his diet entirely, and he would get few, if any pimples during that time, then he would get a craving, he would forget once again that sugar would make it worse, would hold on to some hope that if he indulged just once and drank enough water that a breakout might not happen. Then he would indulge, and sure enough, one or two days later, because the effect was always delayed, new pimples would start to form, and he'd once again become furious with himself, for his weakness and his stupidity. This time though, he was able to stop himself. He looked down at the bowl of ice cream and then back at himself in the mirror. No, he wouldn't make the same mistake this time. He could resist, he could prevent it this time. He was sick of it, sick of the outbreaks, sick of the depression, sick of the embarrassment, sick of walking through the halls and corridors with his head down, trying to avoid the eyes of everyone.

Not this time. He grabbed the bowl of ice cream, opened the toilet lid, scooped it all in and flushed.

“No temptation, no problem,” Anthony said to himself, but he wasn't done yet. He was having one of those rare moments of complete will power where he could do anything that he believed would do him good, and in this moment he walked back into the kitchen, opened the freezer and dumped the rest of the carton of ice cream into the trash.

Anthony let out a sigh and looked up to the ceiling, closing his eyes for a moment.

* * * * *

At four twenty-seven Anthony pulled up to his father's house, parked his car and stepped out of his hot red, '94 Honda Civic Del Sol. The same car that he bought only seven months ago, the same car that he spent his entire savings account on to buy, the same car that he traded in his Grandfather's '88 blue Jeep Cherokee for and felt ashamed for doing now, the same car that he drove every day to school or work, and the same car that he drove to his father's house when he visited him.

His father lived on a small plot of land on the South side of the city not far from either his house or his high school. He walked up the narrow concrete driveway, past the hedgerow of recently planted bushes - an attempt at either privacy or aesthetics - past the four year old sapling planted in the middle of the lawn on the right (probably a maple), surrounded by patches of crab grass, and onto the front three steps in front of the white storm door, flanked by a small rock walled rose garden on the right adjacent to the house. Anthony knocked on the door of the blue paneled sided shack, with a living room that doubly served as a bedroom, a kitchen that also served as a dining room, a bathroom with an upright shower and a laundry room that also served as a closet, storage room and cupboard.

His father came to the door and opened it.

"Hey Anthony!" he greeted his son cheerfully. He was a middle aged man with dark, tanned skin from years of working vinyl siding and window installment outdoors, thinning brown hair, a beer gut, calloused hands, glasses, a rounded nose and an edgy voice.

“Hey Dad,” Anthony greeted his father as he stepped in and embraced him.

“So you were sick Wednesday?”

“Yeah, I felt miserable; I think it had something to do with the burrito I ate at school because I felt fine on Thursday.”

“School’s goin’ well?”

“Yeah,” Anthony answered, nodding his head, “well as usual. I wouldn’t settle for anything less.”

“Good, that’s what I like to hear,” his father said, taking a second to look his son in the eyes. “Take your shoes off and come on in.”

Anthony took his shoes off and placed them next to the wall along with his father’s work boots and some of Lisa’s shoes, behind were the front door opened inward, below his father’s coat rack and next to the TV on the right: an old Panasonic he bought back in the 80’s with a twenty seven inch screen and a wooden swivel base. It weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds and still had the two wholes in the aluminum grated speaker covers Anthony had made with a pencil when he was five. There was a dresser to the right of the TV pushed up against the divider between the two rooms, a couch sat in the middle of the floor across from the TV with its bed pulled out and made, covered with a maroon comforter. There was about two feet of space between the edge of the bed and the TV, and a foot of room on the right of the bed between it and Lisa’s dresser and two feet of room on the left between it and the wall behind which the bathroom sat. There were deer antlers hung up on the wall above his dresser along with a full mounted deer head of an eight point buck, a similar pair of six point antlers hung up above Lisa’s dresser, and a black boar head hung on the wall to the left. Its tongue could be taken out

and his father had told him the story of how the one-hundred and seventy pound boar had charged him before he took it down with his thirty-odd six. There was also an old painting hanging above the coat rack next to the door of man in the Alaskan Tundra wrapped in furs next to a fire with a large and full moon in the background. It was framed with stained and un-sanded two-by-fours, but Anthony loved that painting.

His father told him that one of his old friends painted it for him after they went Elk hunting in Alaska. The man in the painting resembled his father, but had a thick beard, much thicker than the simple mustache his father had now, or the full but trimmed beard he wore years ago. He told Anthony that the man in the painting had a long beard because his friend had trouble painting faces. It resembled his father still, he could see it, but that was not the reason he liked the painting: it was the coolness of the painting, the blending of the whites, blues and grays, the arctic tone and the moonlight, the glow of fire and the man standing upright next to it, alone and remote, with snow capped mountains in the distance behind him. It was man and nature, and it breathed tranquility, representing man in his natural habitat. It reminded him of a Jack London story he read once called *To Build a Fire*, except it was missing a dog, and a dead man. It embodied so much for Anthony's father, being an outdoorsman himself, and much the same for Anthony, whom if he shared only one thing with his father, was a love of nature and natural surroundings. It was the one thing that his father owned that he wanted, and the one thing that he resolved to get one day from him.

"I took out some venison for tonight, and potatoes and corn," his father said to him as he walked into the kitchen.

"Sounds good."

“When do you want to eat?”

“I, I don’t know, I’m not terribly hungry just yet. I could wait another hour or so. What about you?” Anthony asked his father, somewhat hungry, but not willing to eat until his father was ready.

“I can wait until six.”

“That’s fine with me. So ah . . . so, how’s the garden coming?”

“Good, come on out and I’ll show you,” his father said, walking through the storage room and out the back porch.

There were actually two rooms at the back of the house: the storage/laundry room and the porch. The porch, small, made of sky blue painted two-by-fours and large enough for only two and a half people at a time was really a green house. His father had installed unframed fiberglass coverings running from the railings to the overhang, as well as across the porch door, which he had constructed himself. Small shelves were hung on the railings on either side of the porch, on top of which sat empty eighty cell seedling starter trays.

Anthony followed his father down the porch steps onto the patio, which consisted of large square of concrete laid out on top of the lawn with a trellis covering the walkway down from the steps and a maroon tent covering a circular glass table with four large patio chairs and a stereo and a small TV fit onto small shelves on the corner of the left tent leg closest to the house. Behind the patio were two sheds, the one of the left having been constructed along with the house, an old tool shed mostly, with ply wood floors that bowed in the center and were brown and musty along with the rest of the shed. Adjacent to that was a newly built shed, twice as long with white paneled siding and a small ramp

leading up to a door that belonged on the front of a house, not a shed. It also had ply wood floors, but new, still pungent with the smell of lumber. There were two shelving units along the back wall on which sat cushions, a comforter, a sleeping bag and some hunting gear; a stereo and speakers were in the middle of the other. Two compound bows hung on the left wall, and a freezer stood in a corner on the right, filled with venison and vacuum packed trout and garden vegetables. From the ceiling hung a dark piece of wood suspended by a rope secured on each end with two metal rings meant for securing hooks through. It was where Anthony's father hung deer, skinned and butchered them. On the bottom shelf of the left-most shelving unit was a chest his father had created himself, and inside it were tanned deer hide.

Lisa was sitting at the table on the patio listening to the radio and sipping on some iced tea when Anthony and his father came out.

"Hello, hunny," she said getting up and walking over to give Anthony a hug, as if he was her own child. "How you doing?"

"Fine, a little bummed that I have to work tomorrow, but I'll manage."

"Yeah, you'd rather come over here and visit us, huh?" She said playfully.

"Heh, I'd rather do pretty much anything than work," Anthony returned with a grin.

"Well get used to it, you got to work to get by in the world," his father added, seriously and apparently unaware of the facetious nature of his son's comment, squelching the subject.

"So," Anthony said, diverting his attention to the garden on the right, attempting to prevent an awkward moment, "what do we have over here?"

“Well,” his father said walking over to the left edge of the garden, “there’s two rows of radishes here as usual, two rows of spinach, three rows of green beans, a row of cherry tomatoes and two rows of plum tomatoes, these two rows are mounds of zucchini and those two cucumbers, and this last row are pumpkins.”

“Going to grow and make your own Jack-o-Lanterns, huh?”

“Yeah, Jessica asked me to grow some for her last year,” his father returned with a serious expression.

Anthony was silent for a moment. His sister rarely visited his father, and though Anthony was admittedly his father’s favorite child, he was prone to take such measures necessary in order to attractively bait the hook he cast before her so that she might bite, such as the planting of this crop of pumpkins or buying his fluffy white cat more than six years ago, knowing that Jessica was a fervent cat lover. “No, ah, corn this year?” he asked, the question a legitimate one, but mostly wanting to avoid discussion of his sister at all costs, or rather, an assault on her character by her father.

“Not this year,” Anthony’s father began, now talking very matter-of-factly, “it’s not good to grow corn every year. It sucks a lot of the nutrients out of the soil, which is why I usually rotate where I plant it each year, but you also need to take a year off growing it every now and then or else you’ll kill the soil. That’s why a lot of farmers ruin their crops after a few years of growing nothing but corn. It’s easy to grow but it will kill the land.”

“I see. That’s too bad, no corn on the cob this year. You’ll have to buy it, but it never tastes as good as garden fresh corn.”

“Yup,” his father said, giving him a pat on the back, “but I’ll be planting some next year. You wanna come over and help me plant them and roto-till the garden next spring?”

“Not particularly,” Anthony returned, knowing that his father was teasing him, “but we’ll have to wait and see. I think I’d like to help you plant them though. I want to know how to grow a garden. I think that it’s one of those things that people are loosing touch with.”

Anthony’s father didn’t say anything in return, only put his arm around his son’s shoulders and gave them a squeeze, hiding his own smile, confident in his success as a parent and making sure that his son would turn out the way a man should be. “Take a seat,” he said, motioning to one of the four chairs at the table on the patio where Lisa sat. “So, how is school going?” Lisa asked him.

“It’s going well. I’m starting to apply to college, though, so that’s a real stressor,” Anthony said sitting down.

“Yeah,” Lisa answered, seemingly excited at the thought, “where do you want to go?” “I’m not sure yet. I’ve really just started. I’m getting a lot of help from my guidance counselor at school. I’m actually just starting to look around at schools I’d like to apply to. I’ve got to look at colleges and check out their size and what programs they offer and what their social atmosphere is like and whatnot. I do know that I’ll be applying to UNH though; everyone is applying to UNH as their safety school.”

“Why, is it a bad?” Lisa asked, her voice suddenly getting deeper and more serious.

“Oh no, UNH is a good school, it just is a state school, so anyone who lives here has a pretty good chance of getting accepted there, and the tuition is supposed to be lower for the same reason. I wouldn’t have a problem going to UNH though.”

“Oh, but you want to go someplace better though.”

“Well, naturally,” Anthony said, amused, “I’d obviously like to go to some ivy league school like Dartmouth, but I’ll just have to wait and see what happens. And then once I

get in somewhere I have to find a way to pay for it. I just really hope that I get good scholarships, because I don't want a lot of debt."

"So if you don't get any scholarships then you'll have to take out loans?" Lisa asked
"Yeah."

"Oh," she said, retracting her neck in an obviously concerned and disparaged way.

"It's not so bad though," Anthony quickly returned, aware of her obvious ignorance to the entire business of paying for college and how it does not drown and cripple every young college hopeful, "you can get government loans and private loans from companies specifically for school, and you don't have to start paying them back until after you graduate."

"Oh, well that's not so bad."

"Not really, so long as you get some kind of scholarship, otherwise you'll be \$50,000 in debt or more when you graduate."

"That's not the sort of thing you want hanging over your head, especially when you're trying to study," Lisa said, reflecting more so to herself rather than aiming the comment at Anthony. "So what do you think you want to do?"

"Umm, I'm not sure exactly just yet, but I'm pretty sure that I want to do something in biology."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I've always liked biology, especially anatomy." Anthony answered, not wanting to go into further detail on the subject of his scientific interests for fear that his father might proclaim it blasphemous, unholy or sinful to pursue such acts in obvious defiance of the great maker - an obsessively pious nature he had inherited from his mother, who

always sent Anthony birthday and Christmas cards with either Jesus or Mary on the cover that made him feel slightly sick. His father, though, had remained silent the entire time, sitting down across from Lisa with his arms crossed and wearing a brooding expression.

“I can’t help you pay for college,” he interjected all of a sudden.

“What,” Anthony mechanically replied, turning to him.

“I said I can’t help you pay for college.” His expression wasn’t even blank or serious: it was edgy, angry, agitated. He spoke like it had been a subject already long debated, one that his son had hinted at every time he saw him, and one that he found extremely annoying. Anthony was taken back by the out of place and unwarranted comment his father made, one that he thought he might have detected a hint of hostility in. “I don’t make enough money as it is to fix my truck. I don’t have a steady job and can only take on jobs when I find them. If I’m sick then I don’t get paid, and in the winter it’s even harder to find work to do. I don’t have money to go throwing around.”

“Anthony,” Lisa said, addressing his father, “I think that we can spare some money for your son to go to college. Not all of it, but just help out a little.”

“I didn’t expect you to help me pay for college,” Anthony replied to the air around him, his expression blank from the shock of his father’s attack.

“No,” his father said back to Lisa, his eyes narrowed, “I told you, I don’t have enough money to help him pay for college, and stop the *we* shit. It’s my business.”

“Oh, excuse me,” Lisa shot back, now letting a little edge into her voice, “maybe then you don’t need my help bending siding, installing windows and all that other stuff that I help you do that you couldn’t do by yourself.”

“I don’t need your help at work at all,” his father said, now leaning forward and jabbing a finger at her, “You know, you know why I bring you to work with me? So you won’t spend all the money that *I* make. If I left you at home then you’d go shopping and shit and then we wouldn’t have any money!” His father’s voice now rising to a roar.

“Oh, right, and how am I supposed to do that Mr. Provider when you have to take the truck to work, walk?” Lisa shot back, equally intensely.

“No,” his father quickly returned, knowing she caught him yet still not relenting, “you’d get ride from one of your bitch friends, like Nora.”

“I haven’t talked to Nora in over a month, and who’d drive you to all of your jobs because *you* certainly don’t have a license since you lost it from a DUI.”

“It’s not my fault that you’re friends don’t like you.”

“No, I haven’t spoken to her because every time she calls you tell her I’m not home!”

“Yeah, because if you talk to her you fuckin’ go out shopping or bring over your crack-head brother David.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s a really nice way to talk about one of your friends, Anthony!”

“That asshole’s not my friend!” His father laughed, “Why would I want to spend time with you brain-dead brother. All he fuckin’ does is talk about fuckin’ stupid shit and sit down and say that he feels sick.”

“That’s because he had a heart attack two months ago and is still taking medication!”

“You know what, just, just shut up. You’re upsetting Anthony.”

“I’m upsetting him! You’re the one who refuses to help his son pay for college. To help your son get a good job and make a lot of money. You’re the one who is refusing to help him pay for his future.”

Of all the things that had ever come out of Lisa's mouth, those words, Anthony felt, finally did her justice. The story of Lisa's life, if it was to be related, would be a sad one. She had been, in her youth, a rather attractive girl, and perhaps still would have remained one today if she hadn't drank and smoked so much: two habits which contributed to the premature formation of wrinkles on her face and to the seemingly raggedness of her hair. She would have been rather attractive for a fifty-five year old, yet she was closer to forty-five. Still, despite her sometimes weathered appearance, she still remained thin and tan, the latter being attributed to her many years spent down in the tropical regions of Florida before coming back to New Hampshire, the former being on account of her naturally petite build. In both personality and attitude, though, she remained motherly, stubborn, ignorant and cheerful, much the same as a typical cheerleader character in a Disney channel sitcom. These were not her major flaws though. In fact, she might have got on rather well in the world had she been possessed solely by those qualities, but alas for her, she also suffered from a progressively increasing lack of self worth and the inability to leave behind her abuser. Indeed, there might have seemed to be a disparity between her lack of self worth and the attack she was currently making upon Anthony's father, but in reality there was no such thing, as her lack of self worth enshrouded solely her belief in her own ability to find another man to provide for her, a deficiency of confidence that Anthony's father had crafted himself in his own masterful way (the same way he did to Anthony's mother before she divorced him) just the same as he might give her scurvy by denying her vitamin C. Thus, despite the abuse she incurred at his hand repeatedly, she never sought to put it to stops, though she both resisted and provoked it with her pugnacious attitude. Anthony thought her point

did her justice, for although she might have been weak and pathetic and at times an alcoholic, unlike Anthony's father she did seem to care and have a conscience, and was barren of the more psychopathic tendencies his father possessed.

"I wasn't going to ask for money from you," Anthony, who had been deathly silent during their shouting match, afraid to even move, finally put in, though meekly. "I don't want to ask for money from anyone, but I'm supposed to get information from you for the FAFSA form."

"What's that?" Anthony's father asked, turning to him, still edgy and slightly snarling. "It's a form for financial aid. You're supposed to give them the income of your parents and they use that to figure out . . . to determine how much I'm expected to pay each year."

"I don't think so," Anthony's father said.

"Anthony," Lisa snapped at his father, "*Your son* needs tax information so that he can go to college. Don't tell him that you won't give it to him."

"I'm not going to. Why? So the government can tell me that I have pay for my son to go to school and then take more money from me and increase the taxes on my house? I'm not going to give them that shit."

"What else is new: you don't file taxes now," Lisa said under her breath, sitting back in her chair forcefully."

"I'm not going to give away what little money I have!" his father shot back at her, apparently hearing her, and now turning back to his son. "Why don't you tell your mother to use the fuckin' child support I send her every month and that she threatens to take my house with if I don't pay?"

“YOU MEAN THE FUCKING TWENTY-THOUSAND YOU OWE HER FOR ALL THOSE YEARS YOU NEVER PAID CHILD SUPPORT BECAUSE YOU THOUGHT IT WOULD FUCKING GO AWAY, YOU FUCKING PRICK!” Anthony thought to himself, clenching the arms of his chair and heat rushing to his face.

“Oh yeah,” Lisa said, standing up, her voice now raising to match his father’s, “stand here and insult his mother in front of him, THAT’S REALLY FUCKING MATURE, ANTHONY!”

Not having any particular come back or retort in mind, Anthony’s father stormed from the patio and stomped his way into the house, doors slamming in his wake. Anthony merely sat where he was, faintly disbelieving what had just occurred due to the insanity of it, yet also not surprised in the least. He was already sick of his visit. He wanted to go home. He wanted to go over Chris’s house and tell him how much of an utter shit-bag his father was and then to take every glass out of the cupboards and smash them on the floor.

Lisa, who was now cooling down and just as concerned as always, saw the distress written all over Anthony’s face, stood up and gave him a tight hug from behind the chair, resting her left temple on the upper right side of Anthony’s head, and then pulling away and walking into the house.

Anthony sat there for awhile longer, fantasizing slamming his father’s head through the thick glass of the patio table and then shoving the broken shards down his throat and making him swallow them. He couldn’t sit there though; he couldn’t remain there when his father came out, because then that would trigger him to continue the conversation they had left hanging about the patio, the oppressive and hot-headed words

trapped beneath the maroon tent, kept from being allowed to ascend and disappear into the atmosphere.

Anthony stood up and made his way into the tool shed in which his father kept his bows and other hunting equipment. There were two bows hung up on the wall on the left, a larger one with a smooth wooden grip and a smaller camouflaged one: Anthony's father had bought the latter for him last Christmas in his most daring attempt yet to turn his son into a hunter like himself. Listening to countless stories of his father alone in the woods throwing an arrow or slug through the heart of a deer since he was little had produced an almost romantic impression on his mind regarding the sport, but he still was very resistant to the notion as it was an activity that his father practically lived for, and therefore for Anthony, embodied much of what his father was. Nevertheless, he had been practicing with it whenever he came over since his father bought it for him, and actually enjoyed practicing shooting at his father's foam deer that perpetually stood in front of the new shed, grazing. Anthony enjoyed nearly every sport that didn't involved harming another person, including archery. He thrived on competition; it pushed him and made him aspire to be greater than he was, a quality that would largely help in the success of his later life. For now though, Anthony removed the bow from the wall and grabbed three field tipped arrows from the shelf to his right, intent on pretending the deer bore a more familiar face, one that he wouldn't mind damaging.

He stepped down the 30 degree inclined ramp leading up to the shed and dragged the many times slaughtered deer to the right of the shed so that any shots he missed wouldn't ruin the siding or break the front window, then he paced out twenty yards, which almost perfectly coincided with the rear-right corner of the blue paneled shack.

Anthony unfastened the three fingered leather archer's glove that covered his first three fingers with a soft yet firm tan leather so that he could pull back the bow string without hurting his fingers, placed it on his right hand and fastened the Velcro strap above his wrist that still dangled with slack as the glove was too big for his hand. Anthony then bent down and picked up one of the aluminum camouflaged field-tipped arrows on the ground next to him and clipped it to the bow-string, making sure that the feathers made a triangle pointing away to his left so that they did not brush up against the bow and would fly straight. He then took a breath, raised the bow by the grip with his left hand at an angle of about thirty-five degrees above his chest and started to pull back on the bow string with his right hand as he brought the bow down with his left hand so that his arm was perpendicular to his body.

Anthony pulled the bow back with his right hand: he was shooting right-handed. Perhaps such an observation would have gone unnoticed to 90% of the population, but for anyone who knew Anthony they would have scratched their head at the orthodoxy of this action when he was clearly a southpaw whenever he ate or wrote or performed any other action that required fine and precise motor skills with his hands. Perhaps it was an insignificant observation made that that hypothetical person, at least for a majority of the population, but for that small and select pool of lefties, those whom the Romans would have cruelly and prejudicially called *sinister*, it was a puzzling thing. Unlike orthodox individuals, lefties do not take their preferred hand of choice for granted, and are always interested in that genetic and hard-wired predisposition that causes them their minority status.

Science tells us that we use our brains to control opposite sides of our bodies, and that the right brain is the language, musical and creative hemisphere while the left brain is the mathematical, logical and analytical hemisphere. This is the origin of the prejudice that lefties are often stubborn and illogical, but somehow wield amazing powers of creativity and interpersonal skills. Why are lefties so rare? Is there some advantage to being left-brained as opposed to right-brained? Do lefties and righties really think differently? Such thoughts run through the heads of southpaws whenever they are forced to assess their own “oddness,” find a left-handed desk in a classroom or clean the ink from their hands after using a pen. Such thoughts ran through Anthony’s head whenever he found himself preferring to perform an action as if he was right-handed, simply because it felt more natural. Yet how could he be both left-handed and right-handed at the same time? He wasn’t ambidextrous because he could not write with his right hand and he could not throw a baseball with his left hand. The life of his actions was divided into two camps, being either right or left-handed, but never both.

Lefties were regarded as freaks by many people, but Anthony was neither righty nor lefty. Was he some sort of freak among freaks? *Once in every ten generations a boy will be born that will defy the handedness of all camps and will walk the path of both, uniting the powers of both brains into one body and mind, into one set of hands.* Left-handedness is supposed to be genetic, but no one in Anthony’s family in the last two generations was left handed.

There are disadvantages to being dominant in either hemisphere of the brain, the optimal condition being the ability to use both sides in concert so that they may compliment each other. Was Anthony a rare instance of each half of his brain fighting for

control over one body, or were they working together? His right side was obviously his stronger side: is that why he performed most physical activities on his right while performing actions of finesse with his left? His apparent exclusive ambidexterity never ceased to cause him to wonder, and never cease to make him feel both unique and alienated from the rest of the two camps.

The questions of his own oddities running through his mind, Anthony closed his eyes and swiped them all aside, brought the bow string to his right cheek and looked through the small hole of the peep-sight on the bow string, at the sights mounted on the left of the handle and aligned the red, twenty yard sight pin up with the foam heart of the fake deer. His fingers released the bowstring, sending the green feathered arrow arcing through the air and jabbing into the foam deer slightly above and left of his mark.

“Eh, still hit the lungs,” Anthony said to himself as he bent down to pick up another arrow. The second flew at the target and joined its brother slightly below it. The third slammed into the upper left corner of where the deer’s heart would have been. Three successful shots.

“Good grouping,” he heard his father say from around the corner of the house as he came down the steps of the porch. He met Anthony as he walked up to the thrice slain deer, smiling as if the relationship between him and his son was as natural as the spring time. “Two in the lungs and one in the heart, you would have taken him down with any of them. Think that you can hit a live deer though?” His father asked after pointing to each arrow.

“I would try to,” Anthony said as he placed his hand on the target, making an ‘L’ with his forefinger and thumb and placing the first arrow between the two to hold the target and

twisting and pulling out the arrow with his right hand, not bothering to even glance at his father.

“Well, you’re pretty good at hitting them at twenty yards,” his father continued, Anthony taking a slight amount of pride in the compliment, “but do you think that you can hit it from a tree stand fifteen feet high?”

“I don’t know,” Anthony answered, imagining the angle and how he would have to adapt to compensate for the shot.

“Here,” his father said, turning around and disappearing behind the left side of the shack. “We’ll find out,” he said, returning a few seconds later holding a twenty foot ladder and resting it up against the left side of the roof of the porch.

A wave of excitement ran through Anthony at the prospect of shooting at the target from the roof of the house. It would be novel and exciting. It would be challenging and the perspective very different from what he was accustomed to. Eagerly, Anthony walked over to the ladder and climbed up.

He was now about fifteen feet above the foam deer, but still had a good shot, as he was to the deer’s left while it faced right, leaving the perfect angle perpetually open to him. Anthony pulled back the bow string and found his mark through the peep-sight. He heard the porch door open and Lisa began to speak.

“Anthony, do you want baked or mashed potatoes?” she asked his father.

“I told you: baked,” his father answered with a growl.

“And what do you want for vegetables: peas and carrots or corn?”

“Will you just fuckin’ make something and shut up!”

“Well, what the hell, I don’t want to open up a can of corn for you to bitch that you wanted peas and carrots afterwards.”

Anthony concentrated, leaving both eyes open but squinting, and exhaled, pretending to send all his distractions away on the tail of a breeze.

“Lisa,” his father yelled.

Anthony released the arrow.

“Shut up!”

The arrow shot down from the porch roof and into the deer’s heart.

“Nice shot, Anthony,” his father complimented him.

He had escaped for a moment, but the sound of his father’s voice dragged him back to the painful present. Anthony bent down to pick up another arrow as he felt the door of the porch shut. He pulled back his second arrow, took aim and released. The arrow stuck in the deer an inch below the last.

“You just might be ready to go out and start killing ‘em now,” his father grunted as he started to climb the ladder, Anthony hearing it shake.

He bent down to pick up the last arrow and notched it. It would be so easy, he thought, so easy to just pull back the string and wait for his head to rise above the plane of the roof, to release the arrow and watch the pointed field tip puncture his soft cornea, travel through his plump and imperfect eye and come out through the retina, like a skewer spearing a cherry tomato, and then tear through the tender and under-used brain tissue behind it, killing him instantaneously as he fell backwards and crashed down onto the grass.

Anthony pulled back the string as he saw his father out of the corner of his eye step onto the roof of the porch with his own bow and triplet of arrows.

“Hang on, let me shoot first,” he said, bending down to place an opened red and white can of Budweiser covered three-quarters of the way up with a blue cozy that read, “God must love stupid people, he made so many of them.”

Or maybe he should just fall, dive head first down onto the concrete patio and break his neck. Would the fall kill him? Anthony’s father notched his own brown aluminum arrow and pulled back the string on the massive bow. He’d let his son try pulling it back before, but Anthony couldn’t do it. His father quickly took aim and released the arrow with a snap, (Anthony wincing at the sound) the arrow racing down to its target and slamming into the deer next to Anthony’s first shot, burying itself in the target halfway as the deer rocked back and forth. The tip of the arrow causing an exit wound.

Anthony shot his last arrow next, this time though, hitting the deer a foot to the left, where the deer’s stomach would be.

“Well, you can’t be perfect all the time,” his father commented, Anthony remaining quiet and expressionless, still looking down at the target, “but you can’t hit a real deer there. It’d die eventually, but that’s not a clean death. It would end up running away and laying down somewhere hundreds of yards away to die. You’d never find it. If you’re gonna kill a deer you have to be humane and kill it quickly: you don’t want it to suffer.”

Anthony did not respond to anything his father said, but wondered how killing anything could be humane.

“Anthony,” his father said to him, realizing his son’s distance, “is there something wrong?”

“Nothing, I’m just trying to imagine what it would be like if this was real,” he quickly answered, the response preplanned.

“Well, it’d be mostly the same, except you’d have to move very slowly. If the deer sees you, even though they rarely look up, then you’ve got to be extremely still, or you’ll spook it. If it doesn’t see you though, then you should remember that when deer are startled they always duck down about four to six inches, so if they hear the bow string snap then they might do that, which is why it’s usually good to aim slightly below where you want to hit them. You also got to remember that the arrow is going to hit them at an angle, so you should aim for the upper half of the heart to ensure that the tip of the arrow travels down through the rest of it, because if you hit it low then you might miss the heart or only wound it.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to hurt them for no reason.”

“Exactly, that’s why you need to hit ‘em in the heart or lungs,” his father said, notching an arrow and pulling back the bow string.

Anthony breathed a long exhale, hiding the stress under it. “Yeah.”

They continued to practice for a short while longer, until Lisa came out and told Anthony senior that he needed to grill the steaks, also taking the time to compliment the two on their accuracy with a light chuckle.

“Yup, like father like son,” Anthony’s father said, slapping his son on the back cheerfully, Anthony subtly cringing as if he’d been jabbed with a fork. “Alright, I’m going to start grillin’ the venison, you gonna keep shootin’?”

“No, I think I’m not going to spoil my streak and go watch TV.”

“Okay, it’s not a good idea to shoot too much anyway: it can actually make things worse.”

Carefully descending the ladder after his father, Anthony walked across the back lawn and into the shed, placing his bow on the wall next to his father’s, further playing up to the illusion that father and son were a perfect pair. A chip off the old block, like father like son, as if Anthony was destined to attain the greatness that his father had, as if there could be no greater goal for either father or son and that from the day that he was birthed from his mother’s womb and his father held him up to his warped heart that he was constructed in his father’s likeness, bound to become a man of the same quality and molded after him in the same way Adam was from god. The thought made him sick.

Walking inside the house Anthony could smell the tenderized venison sitting on the counter, along with the corn heating up on the stove.

“Done shooting?” Lisa asked Anthony.

“Yeah.”

“Just going to watch some television till dinner’s ready?” she followed up, smiling.

“Yup, that’s the plan,” Anthony answered, walking past her and sitting on the perpetually folded out couch-bed.

“Hunny, is something wrong?”

“No, I’m fine,” Anthony answered mechanically, turning on the TV.

“Anthony,” Lisa said, putting down the forks and knives she was taking out of the silverware drawer, “if you need help paying for college me and your father are going to help you out.”

“That’s not it,” Anthony said after letting out a sigh, “I don’t expect anyone to help me pay for college. I don’t want any one to help me.”

Lisa had nothing to say. She did not know what to think, nor what to do, so she stood there in the kitchen, watching Anthony change the channels on their old swivel TV, feeling sorry for him, guilty for him, feeling that it was somehow her fault that they – her and Anthony’s father – would not be able to help Anthony in any substantial way.

While Lisa finished setting the table and Anthony’s father charred the tender deer flesh, Anthony sat on the edge of the couch-bed watching a Discovery Channel documentary on endangered Bengal Tigers in India.

“ . . . the once noble jungle lords and one of the most popular of the big cats for their vibrant orange coats and elegant black stripes, at one time roughly a hundred years ago with numbers over 100,000 strong, are now sadly set upon the ever-growing list of endangered species, numbering according to some experts only 2 -3,000 today. These big cats, who have had over 95% of there species wiped out by human causes are still today poached for their furs and driven from their ancestral homes by human encroachment . . .” Anthony had stopped listening. Born with a sentimental and empathetic nature, Anthony, who was worked up every time he watched Trauma: Life in the ER on TLC and saw a dying baby or a deformed person, Anthony, who every time found himself on the verge of tears as such sights, Anthony, who cursed god proclaiming that it was not fair for them to suffer so, this time wiped away the forming tears in his eyes at the sight of poachers dragging one of those limp, majestic creatures across the jungle floor and the thought of the human race carelessly and joyfully wiping the beautiful felines away from the world forever. It was perhaps the strength he was gifted with, or the curse laid upon

him, to feel the world around him so intensely, and to find himself forever discontented with the world and its people as it was and they were when compared to the way he felt it all could be.

The back door closed and Anthony heard the footfalls of booted feet across the kitchen.

“Tigers?” he asked his son, piqued with curiosity.

“Yeah,” Anthony said after a sniffle.

“You know, if I had the money I would love to go on a safari and kill a tiger,” his father said, intently watching two tigers clean each other on the screen. Anthony turned to his father in disbelief. “Hunting the hunters, the kings of the jungle, there is no greater trophy than a tiger.”

“But it wouldn’t be fair: you’d have a gun,” Anthony protested.

“Do you know how many poachers get killed by tigers every year? They’re jungle stalkers (*no, that’s the Panther*, Anthony thought), they could easily creep up behind you and tear your throat out. It would be the ultimate hunt, the ultimate game.”

“But they’re endangered.”

“Exactly. That’s why you’d have to kill one before they become extinct.”

Anthony was silently outraged at his father’s desires, as he knew that there could be nothing gained by arguing with him; he believed his logic to be sound.

“Alright,” Lisa called out from the other room, “dinner’s ready, come on you two.”

Anthony got up off the couch-bed and turned the TV towards the kitchen so that they could watch it while they ate. Dinner this week was the same as every week: venison

with a baked potato and either corn or peas and carrots. Not to say that Anthony's father ate the same thing every night, but that he wished to always serve his best food to his son whenever he came over for dinner, and Anthony, who did relish the meal each time, appreciated it.

Anthony poured himself a glass of water before sitting down to join his father and Lisa, sitting with his back to the TV in his usual spot at the table. For the part-time, once weekly family of three, conversation at the dinner table was naturally occurring and jocular (thanks to a Herculean effort on Anthony's part) - albeit coming off as affected - but today it was sparse. Anthony, still reflecting upon the documentary, remained quiet, while Lisa and his father had built up a wall of tension between each other, which served as the only thing barring them from vicious argument. The silence though, to Anthony, was many times more hostile than any strained conversation that might occur. He would rather probe them with neutral questions which he already knew the answers to in hopes of engaging the two and causing them to once again speak with each other on friendly terms, a tactic which had proven reliable before.

"So, how's work?" Anthony asked his father, now halfway through his dinner. "Goin' normal as always. We're doing a job over off Mammoth road right now ripping out old windows and installing new ones with better insulation," his father answered, getting up from the table and opening the refrigerator.

"How many?"

"About sixteen," he answered, sitting down again, then opening another can of beer, the rush of pressurized carbon dioxide escaping from the wide-mouth opening. It sounded like such an affectation to Anthony, reminding him of a crisp spring morning when the

dew hasn't yet lifted from the ground and hovers about the grass and low hanging leaves, or the sound of someone biting into a fresh apple picked right off the tree. It was a crisp sound, so full of freshness and vitality, but escaping from the crude and pretending mouth of a beer can.

"And that's all you have to do? Doesn't sound like it would take very long."

"No, but we're also going to add a mudroom to the front of the house, so we've got to lay new foundation, build it, put some windows in it, side it and carpet it. It will probably take all week if everything goes well."

"Nice," Anthony said, reaching for his water.

"That reminds me, Anthony," Lisa chimed in, "the owner said that she wasn't going to be home Monday morning, so she wants us to show up around one."

"What are you talking about," his father shot at her, shattering the barrier of tension that was keeping them from each others' throats. "I talked to her on Friday and she said that she knew she wasn't going to be home but that we could start anyway."

"I know that she said that, I was there, but she called earlier today and said that she changed her mind and that she didn't want us to start until she got there because she wanted make some changes to the layout of the mudroom," Lisa returned.

"What the fuck are you talking about."

"The home owner doesn't want us to start the job until she gets there at one so that she can talk to you about the job," Lisa repeated, this time louder and obviously annoyed.

"Shut up, Lisa, you're a fuckin' drunk," he said dismissively.

"What the fuck are you talking about!" she yelled back, standing up, "you've had more to drink than I have."

“No, Lisa,” Anthony’s father said, still sitting and raising his voice, “you’ve been drinking since fucking one and you’re drunk.”

“Even if I started drinking at one she called at twelve-thirty! It’s on the god-damn caller ID, see for yourself!”

“Lisa, sit down! You drunk and you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Anthony’s father reiterated himself, seemingly attempting to avoid a fight. Anthony, meanwhile, remained seated with his head down, nervously poking at his food.

“I’m not making this up! Check the caller ID!”

“Okay, Lisa, fine,” his father said, attempting to humor her, but suddenly becoming very agitated once he found the call on the caller ID.

“There, you see.”

“I am not going to wait until one to start a job,” his father said to the caller ID, the blood vessels in his face dilating.

“Why the fuck didn’t you believe me?”

“I told you: because you’re a fuckin’ drunk!” Anthony’s father spat at her.

“Oh, yeah, sure, Anthony. I’ve had three fucking beers today! What number are you on?”

“I don’t fuckin’ care, Lisa, just shut up! I’m not going to go start a job at one!”

“Well what the fuck do you think you’re going to do then, start working while she’s gone so that she can fucking yell at you when she gets back because you didn’t listen to her? I talked to her, Anthony; I told her that we wouldn’t start until she got back.”

“I don’t care what the fuck you said, you’re not the one who runs this business!”

Anthony could feel the temperature and tension rising in the air around him. He felt himself growing hot, his stomach unsettled as if he drank too much coffee. His hands

were starting to shake. They were going to come to blows this time; he could feel it. The argument was going to spiral out of control until he started hitting her, again, just like so many times before. He didn't want to be around for it. He couldn't take that kind of anxiety; he felt as if he was going to have a panic attack if he remained in the room. Not that he would get dragged into it; he never was. The two would swear and yell and fight and argue as if he were just a piece of decorative furniture, as if he never noticed, as if they didn't care. He had no idea what to do. He wanted to prevent it somehow, to make them both stop, but he was convinced there was nothing he could do to stop them. He imagined standing up and asking, begging, demanding that they stop, and his father yelling in his face to shut up, maybe even hitting him, and there would be nothing Anthony could do. What could he do to control his father, to stop him?

Anthony quickly picked up his plate, scrapped the remaining food off into the garbage and placed it in the sink, keeping his head low as he walked around the two. Neither of them seemed to take notice.

“Oh, yeah, that's a really good idea, Anthony. Let's do exactly what the homeowner asked us not to do so she can fucking fire us.”

“Jesus Christ, Lisa, don't fuckin' talk to me like you know how to run a business or go about a job. You don't know the first fuckin' thing about any of it.”

“I've been working with you for three years, Anthony! I think that I've picked some stuff up!”

“No, Lisa, you haven't! You still don't know the first fuckin' thing about siding or installing windows! I always have to tell you what to do at every job and you still fuck

up!” Anthony could hear the saliva and spit accumulating in his father’s mouth as he walked past him and into the bedroom. He was boiling over now. He was a stick of dynamite and the fuse nearly spent; Anthony could hear it burning as he walked into the bathroom and shut the door behind him, just like he did so many times before. He felt safer in the bathroom with a wall between him and the violence. It was the only way he could protect himself, the only place he could hide. He would sit down on the toilet with his head in his hands, fantasizing about making them stop, about slamming his father’s head into the wall as many times as he could and then straddling him when he fell to the floor and hitting him again and again and again, until he was laying out unconscious in a growing pool of his own blood.

“Yeah, sure, Anthony, I don’t know a fucking thing but you know everything because you’re a fucking man.”

“That’s right, Lisa! You’re a fuckin’ stupid bitch just like you’re fuckin’ stupid bitch friends and mother. You’re whole fuckin’ family is bunch of fuckin’ morons and screw-ups.”

“Oh, yeah, and your fucking family is so much better with your psychotic brother Eric, you fucking hypocrite!”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP, C***!” Anthony heard his father scream through the wall, and then heard Lisa slam into it, shaking the entire house, the medicine cabinet in the bathroom shaking violently.

There it was. His father had snapped. Lisa had once again so tactfully pushed him past the breaking point until he lost control. Anthony could never figure out why, but

Lisa seemed to enjoy it all. She never backed out of an argument, never backed down from his threats, and never ceased taunting him, even after he had raised his hand to her.

Anthony heard her groan after the impact, but Lisa, this woman who had stayed with Anthony's father for more than three years and for some reason braved (or ignored) all the abuse suffered at his hands, refused to cower before him.

"THAT'S REALLY FUCKING MANLY, ANTHONY, BEATING ON A WOMAN!"

"You're no fuckin' woman."

"What are you going to do, hit me? What a man you are! You're a real fucking man, Anthony!"

"Man enough to hit you if you don't shut your fuckin' mouth!"

"That's really fucking mature, Anthony!"

"I TOLD YOU TO SHUT UP!" Anthony's father screamed again. Anthony thought he heard his father slap Lisa as he once again felt the floor shake.

"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO, BEAT ME UNCONSCIOUS? FUCK YOU! I'M NOT GOING TO SHUT UP!"

That was the last word he heard her say before it all happened, before he felt the whole house start to shake again and again with every footfall, before he heard a body slam up against the wall again, before his heart was beating as fast as it possibly could, before his pupils completely dilated and his eyes opened as wide as they could, before his stomach seemed to crumple itself up into a knot, and before he heard the sound of someone choking.

Anthony had been a blind witness to countless fights between his father and Lisa. He'd heard him slam her up against the wall numerous times before, push her up against

the fridge, throw her down on the kitchen floor, slap her and throw her out the front door and land on her head, scraping her palms and cheeks. He had bore silent witness to the whole hellish event more times than he could remember, no matter how hard he tried, but never once did he ever hear the sound of choking come from beyond the walls of the bathroom, or hear any other sound that terrified him so and made him fear for a life. In the depths of Anthony's mind that sound called out to him like a familiar voice into the quiescent abyss, wafted into his sinus like crushed Hartshorn salt^{*}, inspiring and awaking that courageous and defiant part of himself that had been smothered by the overpowering fear he had of his father.[†]

Before he fully realized what he was doing, Anthony, riding the cresting wave of his courage propagated by the sudden landslide of his hatred, burst out of the bathroom and calmly, yet forcefully, stepped into the kitchen with clenched fists. What he saw finally completed that chain of associations that had his unconscious had tried to unearth in the early hours of the morning. What he saw was his father, back turned towards him, holding Lisa up against the wall with his left hand gripped tightly round her throat and her wincing as she fought against the iron like grip encasing her. Immediately, Anthony's mind dived deep within itself and unlocked that memory more than eleven years ago of when his father had cruelly slammed his eight year-old self up against the light blue walls of his room at nine-o'clock in the morning: this sight he bore witness to serving as the intentionally forgotten key.

^{*} Ammonium carbonate: when crushed the salt is sometimes employed as smelling salt, causing an unconscious person to have an inhalation reflex and waking up.

[†] A pun on the double meaning of the word *inspire* along with *smothered*: In addition to the more common meaning of the word, in a biological sense it means to bring oxygen into the lungs by the act of inhalation.

“Let her go,” Anthony whispered, his hands at his sides, clenched into fists and shaking.

His father, hearing his son come into the kitchen, turned his head over his right shoulder, keeping Lisa pinned against the wall. “What?” he asked forcefully, his face contorting into a mixture of confusion and anger at his son.

“I said let her go,” Anthony repeated, this time louder and more confident.

“Who the fucks side are you on?” he yelled at Anthony.

“I . . . ah . . .” he stuttered.

“Are you telling me that you’re siding with this bitch? You’re goin’ to betray your own father?”

Anthony remained motionless, shaking with hot tears beginning to well.

“What kind a son are you? Never betray your own blood. Never betray your blood. Honor thy mother and father, Anthony!”

“No.”

“What did you say?!”

“Anthony,” Lisa forced out, both hands attempting to free herself from his grip, “stop it, look at what you’re doing to your son.”

“SHUT UP, LISA!” he screamed, slapping her hard across her face with his left hand.

“STOP IT!” Anthony burst out, taking a step forward, his eyes red and wet, still shaking, as if he was attempting to keep it all in, using all his strength to restrain himself, or desperately fighting against the paralyzing fear his father was holding him at bay with.

“And what are you going to do about it?” his father demanded, slapping Lisa again, Anthony hearing her cry out.

He could do nothing: Anthony, try as he might to embrace the battle cry that his soul was crying out, to reach out with his right hand and use it as a conduit for all his hate between himself and his father, to strike at this man before him who stood as such a threat to all of his ideals, he choked, as if it was him pinned up against that wall, and felt like a tractor trying to bulldoze through a mountain. His heart was on overdrive, and his body was sick with anxiety, but he remained motionless, attempting to break out of the stone form his father had encased him in.

“What are you goin’ to do, stop me?” he repeated, slapping her again. “Are you goin’ to fight me? Are you goin’ to fight with your own father? Huh, little boy?”

He could feel the tension rising in him to unbearable heights, but he still somehow could no move his leaden legs. Anthony began to breathe harder and faster, his chest heaving as his breath flowed forcefully in and out of his nose.

“HUH?! WHAT ARE YOU GOIN’ TO DO ABOUT IT,” he yelled, slapping Lisa again.

“WHAT, HUH? WHAT?!” He slapped her again, and again.

He was going to hit him. Anthony was going to hit his father. Stepping forward with his left foot, Anthony raised his right hand, clenched tightly into a fist, began rolling his shoulder over and extending his arm towards his father’s face.

He couldn’t do it. He had stopped short. His fist, stopped halfway through the motion, hung in the air, shaking, as if it was being held back by some unseen force. He could not follow through with it, he could not touch his father, for fear that he would not be able to defend himself. Anthony slowly let go of his fist, his hand still wrought with tension, while his father let go of Lisa and turned to his son.

“You little son-of-a-bitch,” he said, reaching out and grabbing his son by the chin.

“You’d hit your own father? Or are you too scared? ANSWER ME!” he screamed, slapping Anthony across the face.

Anthony could not remember a moment in his entire life that stung more deeply than that slap he received at the hands of his father. He kept his head down, tilted to the right, in the direction his father had hit him.

“This is bullshit,” his father said hoarsely, turning around and storming out the back door.

Lisa had remained still, sitting against the wall during the encounter between Anthony and his father, but stood up as soon as he walked out. Anthony also picked his head up after his father had departed, running his forearm across his eyes.

“I’m leaving, and I think that you should too,” Anthony said to Lisa, who, with a look of confusion and frantic indecision, looked between the back door and Anthony. Anthony, though, could not be bothered with Lisa. He turned around, put his shoes on, and walked out the front door. As he started his car and backed out of the driveway he imagined Lisa leaving to stay with her friend Nora for a few days and his father calling and harassing her until she came back, just like she always did, and he wouldn’t even apologize to her.

* * * * *

Anthony knocked on the door to Chris’ house for the second time that day.

“Howdy,” Chris greeted him as he opened the door. “Feeling balanced now, collected yourself. Ready to face the world again?” Chris asked facetiously.

“Yes, I am,” Anthony replied with a smile. Chris was the exact form of medication he needed at that moment to stop brooding, to stop the self accusations of cowardice.

“Well, come on in, friend,” he said, making a very over exaggerated hand gesture.

Anthony, very appreciative of his friend’s intentional foolishness, returned in kind with a gracious bow and entered, following Chris into the kitchen and hoisting himself up onto the corner of the kitchen counter where he usually sat. Chris leaned up against the counter opposite him that separated the kitchen from the dining room.

“So, what did you do during our brief interlude?” his friend asked him.

“I just watched a movie, ate some ice cream, hung out of the couch. You know, nothing particularly special or ambitious.”

“Heh, welcome to my life.”

“I know,” Anthony said with a laugh, starting to feel better, “it’s a scary place.”

“Indeed,” Chris said, nodding his head. “So,” he continued, slapping the front of his thighs, “it’s only seven-twenty-seven: what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know, what do you want to do?”

“Oh, I know what I want to do.”

“Good then, and what would that be?”

“I’ll show you,” he said, pushing himself off of the counter and walking over to the cabinets on Anthony’s left. From what looked like the top shelf from Anthony’s angle, Chris pulled out a glass bottle filled with a clear liquid. Smirnoff Triple Distilled Vodka, it said.

“You’re going to steal your mother’s liquor?”

“No, *we’re* going to drink it.”

“Won’t she get mad?”

“Eh, it’s possible, but she won’t be coming back anytime soon to find out. She probably won’t find out for quite a while, that is, if she even remembers having it at all. It’s been here for a few months now and she still hasn’t opened it.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s out somewhere with Scott, you know, that guy I baby-sit for sometimes, and she doesn’t usually come back until late when she goes out with him.”

“You think that they’re seeing each other?”

“Scott? No way, he’s got some girl friends. They’re just drinking buddies.”

“Girl *friends*?” Anthony asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yup, at least two that I know of: he usually goes out with one of them when I baby-sit for him.”

“Are you tempted to let them know?”

“His girlfriends? Eh, sometimes, just to see him freak out, but no, not really. If anything I think that he deserves it. I mean, he gets enough stress from Scotty.”

“Scotty, wait, is he the guy with the autistic kid?”

“Yeah,” Chris said, returning to his spot at the kitchen counter and leaning back, holding the bottle of booze by the neck. “I don’t think that you’ve seen him yet. He’s eight but looks like’s six, and he’s a troublesome little kid too. If you walk in front of him with a glass he’ll just look at you dumbly until you pass by, and then he’ll try to knock it out of your hands.”

Anthony laughed. “How many times has he got you?”

“Enough. I’ll just be walking by and he’ll be looking up at me all dumb and stupid,”

Chris started, attempting to imitate Scotty, “and then he’ll just swipe at my glass. I remember the first time he did it to me: I was just thinking, ‘what the fuck.’” Chris put his hands out in front of him, reenacting the scene, and let them fall to his sides.

“That’s pretty funny. I’d laugh if I saw him do it.”

“You would, wouldn’t you, you chaos loving bastard.”

“Hah, I sure would.”

“Alright, let’s tap into this. What do you say?” Chris asked Anthony, lifting the bottle up off the counter and putting it back down.

Anthony only stared towards Chris, looking inwards and reflecting on his personal relationship with alcohol, even though his eyes pointed elsewhere.

“What’s the matter?” Chris asked.

“I . . . I’m not sure that I feel like it tonight.”

“Oh, come on. That’s all the more reason to. Forget about her. We’re going to have your favorite drink: White Russians.”

“They’re not real White Russians.”

“So what, come on, I’m going to make you one,” Chris said, standing up and going over to the fridge.

This was not going to be Anthony’s first time drinking. In fact, the two usually got their hands on something once a week. Chris took out a gallon of milk from the fridge, along with a bottle of chocolate syrup. Anthony’s favorite drink was an imitation

White Russian. A real White Russian required Kahlua, which they never had, so Chris cleverly substituted chocolate syrup for it, which worked out fine every time.

“Here,” Chris said, handing him a glass and beginning to make one of his own. Anthony held the glass in his hand, looking down at it as if trying to penetrate through its opaqueness to discover some secret truth.

“Cheers,” Chris said, motioning with his glass. Anthony extended his to meet his friend’s and then brought the drink to his lips.

Anthony rolled off the couch and onto the floor laughing. “No, no, come on, come on,” he forced out between fits of laughter, “dude, what time is it?”

“I told you, it’s the same time that it was when you asked me three seconds ago.”

“Alright, alright, okay,” Anthony chuckled, “but seriously, what time is that?”

“Are you serious?” Chris asked him, laughing himself, “You’ve asked me what time it is at least thirteen times in one minute.”

Anthony broke into another fit of laughter, and then pulled himself to his feet. “Fine, I’ll see for myself,” he said smiling, his eyes distant. “Chris, you got any more cookies, I’m hungry.”

“We already ate them all.”

“Who would have thought Oreos and White Russians would have been so good!”

“Where are you going?”

“I told you, I’m going to the bathroom. What, do you want to help?” Anthony asked his friend, closing the fridge.

“Dude, the cookies weren’t even in the fridge.” Chris laughed, walking into the kitchen to check on Anthony, who now was slowly falling to his knees laughing.

“I know. I have no idea what I’m doing,” he said, running a hand down his face.

“Alright, I want you to go to the bathroom and try to sober up at least a little bit so that you don’t break something.”

“Okay, okay,” Anthony said standing up and making his way towards the bathroom.

Chris shook his head as Anthony closed the door behind him, and then opened the door to turn on the bathroom lights, which were on the wall outside. After Anthony finished urinating he washed his hands in front of the large mirror hanging on the wall in front of him. It was huge. You’d have to actually try to not accidentally see yourself in it, but Anthony didn’t think he had a reason to avoid his own stare. He found one though: after he washed his hands he cupped them and splashed his face with the cold water, only to find two newly formed zits when he looked up. *Sugar makes it worse.* The first was sitting on the right corner of his mouth below the edge of his lips; the second reared its ugly, white pustulous head up from the base of his nose on the lower right side. He didn’t have trouble finding either one, his eyes being too well trained at mechanically surveying his face for them. Their presence sobered him up immediately as his expression quickly changed grim and a powerful feeling of guilt flooding into him for the ice cream earlier and the cookies only an hour ago. All his chemically mediated happiness was suddenly stanchued by this discovery, and as if somehow connected to the spots on his face, the memory of what had happened earlier at his father’s as well as with Christina all with one thread. They all seemed to come at him at once, drown him, as if they were all the same,

each the logical conclusion of the other, and all stemming from himself. Problems that he should have been able to prevent.

Anthony suddenly felt sick. He could feel the head-on clash of his morals and his actions within his stomach. He was disgusted with the hypocrisy of his actions. After years of blaming and hearing the blame be placed upon the alcohol his father consumed regularly for his problems, Anthony, who had more than once happily engaged himself in the activity, was now being crushed under the mountain of guilt his mind was dropping upon him for pursuing the same crude pleasures that his father did. How could Anthony, who swore up and down nightly and made promises to god that he would never resemble his father in the least, look at himself in the mirror when he encroached upon the character of that very man? How could he face himself, or pretend to face himself, when his actions spoke with so loud a voice against him?

Turning away from that frowning reflection in the mirror, Anthony sidestepped to the toilet, bent down onto his knees and plunged the index finger of his right hand down his throat, causing a gag reflex. His stomach suddenly began to seize and convulse, causing him to keel over and grip the sides of the toilet with both hands as the burning hot sin ascended from his stomach and spewed out his mouth, singeing the sides of his throat and mouth as it escaped, leaving the warm acrid taste to linger on his tongue and within the crevices of his teeth. Anthony's body continued to force the contents of his stomach out, his muscles continuing to squeeze his entire abdomen and allowing him no interval for breath as the mixture of digested food and stomach acid drooled out from his mouth.

After about fifteen seconds Anthony gasped in a breath of air and then continued to breathe heavily between attempts at swallowing and spitting out what remained in his mouth. Yet, as if his superego was not yet done punishing him, his stomach continued to heave and contract even after it had emptied itself. The dry heaves continued the purging, each painful contortion causing Anthony to groan as he found himself wishing something besides the sound of his own pain would escape from his mouth, and finished within a few minutes.

Anthony wiped his mouth with a piece of toilet paper and stood up, still slightly bent over on account of the pain.

“You don’t look so hot,” Chris, who was leaning up against the kitchen counter eating a sandwich, commented as Anthony stepped out of the bathroom.

“I threw up,” Anthony replied weakly.

“Huh, maybe milk and alcohol don’t go together so well after all.”

“Heh, maybe.”

“You shot for the night?”

“I think so. I’ve got work tomorrow too, so I should probably get to bed soon. What time is it?”

“Not that again.”

“No, I’m serious.”

“You were serious then too, at least you said you were.”

“Just tell me what time it is.”

“Nine-thirty-two.”

“Okay, I’m going to hit the road then.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you later, maybe tomorrow.”

“Alright,” Chris said, watching his friend walk out the front door and wondering just how much brooding Anthony had left to do that night.

* * * * *

It was a clear, breezeless night that Anthony began his walk home in. The stars were out in full, with a light peppering of clouds across the sky to occasionally blot them out. Anthony walked down the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets and his head dejectedly tilted down. He was replaying the scene at his father’s house over and over again in his mind, alternating between the depressing truth and fantasies in which that punch was not held back, but rather plowed through his father’s face and sent him reeling back against the kitchen counter where he would smack his head up against the cabinets and fall to the floor unconscious, the police arriving shortly after and arresting him on charges of domestic violence and illegal possession of firearms (only after Anthony revealed to the police officers their secret location in the hollow above the cabinets). Why did he stop? What held him back? What prevented him from standing up to his father once and for all? What stopped him from attempting to give him the beating that he so rightly deserved? Anthony had no answers to the self made accusations and continued to both buckle at and pursue the attacks.

“What is wrong with me?” Anthony began, talking as much to Orion, Gemini or Pegasus as to himself. “I had the chance to hit him, I had the chance to give him what he

deserves, and I choked. I could have followed through and ended it all right there. I could have stopped him from hitting Lisa. I could have stopped the abuse, but I ran into the bathroom like a fucking scared child just like I always do. So what if he ended up knocking me out or beating me up: I would have stood up to him and wouldn't have to deal with his shit anymore because he'd know that his son hates him and I'd know that I actually tried to do something about it. What the hell. I should be standing up to him, I should be protecting her, not hiding like some six year-old. What the hell, Anthony, are you going to hide from him for the rest of your life, are you going to run from him? Are you going to avoid him and never see him again because you're scared to confront your father? I know I want to. My god! How I want to beat the shit out him, but I don't, I can't. Is this why I'm so afraid of everything? Is this why I'm always running away from confrontation? Do I have some kind of father complex where I'll never be able to stand up for myself until I stand up to him? Is that it? Is that the key? Is that the simple truth behind all my ticks and fears? Did he somehow cripple me by not encouraging me or not being enough of a father, by never being around to give his son the confidence that he needs to face the world?"

"I bet you it has something to do with that. It has too, he had to do something to fuck me up, just like he did Jess, but I could have stopped it. Maybe if I had hit him then some sort of weight would have been lifted off my shoulders, maybe that would have changed everything. It's got to be symbolic of . . . something. Yeah, by not being able to face my father I can never stand up for myself to any other male figure older than me, because he's supposed to be . . . ah . . . what is it? My male archetype, the person that I use to generalize the rest of the male sex: if I'm afraid of him then I'm probably going to

be afraid of every other guy. No, that's too much of a stretch. I probably just need more . . . confidence." Anthony let out a deep sigh, as if to exhale the vapor of all these feelings that were being heated up inside of him, and inhaled, attempting to infuse himself with the tranquility of the silent night around him, yet that did not stop his mind from leaping between those three events which occurred that day. He could not help seeing some larger connection between the three, some all encompassing action or reason from which they all seemed to stem, some thing, some one thing, that he had within his power to affect, that would have prevented the advent of each, as if they were the falling of dominos, and he needed only stop the tipping of the first.

When Anthony reached the front of his house he noticed the black Toyota Rav4 parked in the drive way, signifying that his parents had already returned home. Anthony glanced in through the living room window as he walked past the house towards the side door, seeing flashes of light from within that emanated from the TV.

"Looks like Will's still up," he said to himself, rounding the corner of the driveway and walking up the stairs into the mudroom. Anthony removed his shoes and entered the house in silence, taking his time to slowly open and close the door to minimize the amount of noise he made. Not that he was trying to avoid anyone or sneak down into his room unnoticed, Anthony was simply that type of person (if indeed others of the same brand existed at all) who walked everywhere on the balls of his feet, who, after years of doing so intentionally, mechanically and unconsciously walked about with the lightest footfalls as possible, who performed every action with an attempted gracefulness and gentleness, and who seemed to be intentionally avoiding the notice of everyone. He'd been accused of sneaking more times than he cared to remember by his mother at night or

in the morning when she'd turn around and find Anthony standing in front of or next to her when she didn't hear him walk in, or at work when he'd walk up to a coworker and ask them a question, only to have them start and turn around with a fright. It was never intentional, and Anthony obviously never saw himself as sneaking up to anyone on these occasions. He would claim that they simply didn't pay attention enough.

That was yet another poignant example of Anthony's character. Thus it was that Anthony, silently and stealthily without intention, walked into the living room to find his step-father Will sitting down in a chair and watching TV.

"Hey, Will."

"Hey, Anthony. How was work?"

"Eh, it was fine."

"Handling fruit not so exciting today?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Never is. Mom go to bed early?"

"Yup, she was tired, fell asleep in the car on the drive home."

"Okay . . . well, I'm going to brush my teeth and go to bed."

"Okay buddy."

Anthony thoroughly brushed his teeth, flossed and rinsed with fluoride, and then opened the medicine cabinet to retrieve his acne prescription topical cream. *Apply size of a dime nightly after thoroughly cleansing face. Use less if excessive dryness or irritation occurs. Do not use in conjunction with other acne medications without notifying your doctor.* Frugally, Anthony squeezed out a smear at a time across the index finger of his right hand and rubbed the white cream over his cheeks, chin and nose. When he was finished he put the tube back and went to the bathroom. He heard Will close the recliner

on the chair, get up and walk heavily down the hallway into the kitchen, open the refrigerator and crack open a can. It was a beer, and Anthony knew this because it was the only canned beverage that Will drank, and the only liquid he usually consumed after eight o'clock. He suddenly felt disgusted with Will, his mind shooting back to his father and the seeming affectation of the opening of his beer can.

Anthony waited by the door until Will passed by and then opened the bathroom door. "Night, Will," he said, not bothering to look to the side while he opened the door to the cellar and walked down the stairs to his bedroom. He turned on the light switch to the right of the doorway to find his room just the way he left it: his bed snugly tucked into that space at the back of the room that fit it so perfectly, his TV on its stand to his right, followed by his dresser, his bookcases to his left along the wall and his desk and chair on the wall opposite them. Stepping into his room, Anthony began to take off his shirt and opened his closet door to place it in the hamper when he got there, followed by his pants and socks. He always left a pair of shorts that he wore at night on his bed, which he grabbed and put on after closing the closet door.

It had been quite a day for him, quite a dramatic day, and one he felt he never needed to have. He was reluctant to let it end on so bad a note though, so, figuring that he needed to do something constructive before he went to bed, Anthony dropped down on his knees in the middle of his room, placed his hands palms down on the carpet slightly wider than shoulder's length apart and extended his legs so that he supported all his weight on four points, (hands and toes) making a straight line with his body from his heels to the back of his head. He relaxed his arms and chest slightly, allowing his elbows to bow outwards while he lowered his chest to the floor enough to touch his nose to the

carpet, then he pushed himself back up, only to repeat the cycle another thirty-nine times. He continued to perform repetition after repetition, set after set, until his chest and arms burned and he was breathing heavily. He continued to propel himself up after letting himself fall down to the carpet time after time, playing the scene at his father's house over and over in his mind until he was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to expunge the ordeal from his memory forever.

The forming beads of sweat glistening on his back, Anthony stood up and placed his hands on top of his head and began pacing the length of the room until his breathing returned to normal. Pushups would have to do.

“And thus ends another day,” Anthony said to himself once he felt relaxed again, walking over to the light switch on the wall, flipping it off and crawling back between the warm covers that he woke up beneath only thirteen hours ago. He lay there, rolling over from side to side occasionally, softly breathing through his nose and allowing his mind to drift off. Allowing it to jump from topic to topic, from each day's event to the next like little islands of thought in a shallow sea of free association, like a frog jumping from one lily pad to the next, occasionally missing its mark.

As Anthony slowly drifted off to sleep he thought about his shift the next day, and hoped that Christina would not also be working. He thought about how whenever she came in their boss always had her cut melons and make fruit cups with sliced strawberries, blueberries and buttercream. He thought about how she always stayed behind the counter, talking with whoever was wrapping the bunched broccoli or filling the front case with watermelon quarters, jars of peaches and grapefruit, or vegetable and fruit platters. He wished that his boss would let him stand behind the counter and cut fruit

for eight hours. It was an easy job. He imagined himself cutting the watermelons, wrapping them in plastic wrap and placing them on the scale, printing out the price tags and sticking them on the upper right corner of the quarters. It was a Sunday, so the store was naturally packed, and he had a full rack of watermelon to quarter. Christina then came out the door from the back room, pulling a flat metal cart that carried boxes of apples, oranges, iceberg lettuce, brussel sprouts and wax beans. Funny, he didn't think that she was supposed to work that day, and he didn't notice her come out of the freezer that was to his right.

“Hey, Anthony,” she greeted him, sounding tired, “how are you doing?”

“Oh, you know, fine, good, well: the usual,” Anthony answered with a smile as he began to wrap a melon quarter.

“You're always doing well. Why do you always seem so happy?”

Didn't she know? Didn't she know why Anthony could never suppress a smile whenever she was around, why he started to glow whenever she walked by him or said hello? “I was just born happy. I'm a mountain of impregnable happiness with sheer cliffs.”

She laughed. “That's an interesting metaphor.”

“Isn't it? Actually, I'm really just one dimensional, a flat character. I don't have other moods. I'm perpetually good humored. I'm that guy in every story in the background that's always happy and optimistic.”

“You joke about it, but it almost seems true sometimes. I like it; you always seem to cheer me up. I just can't help it.”

“What can I say; I’m extremely virulent,” Anthony replied facetiously. They always had so much fun just talking about things, anything. There he was, flirting with her, and her flirting back.

“You know, I’m sorry about what I said earlier,” she said, looking down and turning a fruit cup around in her hands. “I was . . . I think I was expecting too much. I should have given you more time, or just . . . initiated things myself. It was obvious that you were scared. I shouldn’t have held that against you.”

They were making so much progress. She was apologizing. Anthony was going to get another chance, but that was when the front doors to the store slid open and his father walked through. Christina saw him, got scared and ran into the freezer to hide. He walked up to Anthony and started yelling at him, saying that he being too loud, that he was sleeping until Anthony woke him up.

“What are you talking about,” Anthony asked him, confused. His hand slowly slid along the cutting board to find the large cutting knife.

“I said I’m trying to sleep so shut the fuck up!” he yelled at him, his voice echoing through the store. Anthony suddenly felt disoriented, and then it happened: his father reached out for him, his arm growing to twice its length and unnaturally bending around the top of the counter that stood about chest high, grabbing Anthony around the throat, and then the setting changed, as if a tsunami crashed through the store and washed it all away, leaving behind the small, white walled and blue carpeted room that lay underneath.

Anthony was once again a young boy of eight, his father had him suspended in the air by his shirt and below his feet lay a red boombox and a microphone. His father whipped him around and slammed him up against the wall next to the door.

“It’s nine in the fucking morning, what the hell are you doing? Me and your mother are trying to sleep! You better shut up and be quiet. I don’t want to hear you again. Nobody cares what you have to say so keep your fucking mouth shut,” he spat in Anthony’s face, and then slapped him so hard that he fell flying to the right, falling, falling through the floor and leaving the white walled room behind as he sank into the surrounding darkness.

He was escaping, falling, and as he did he gradually metamorphosed back into his seventeen year-old self. The room was disappearing now, only a white speck in the distant dark, like a twinkling star in the night sky. The darkness was encroaching upon him, wrapping itself around him with its relaxing and soothing tendrils. He was just about to be set free; he was just about to let go when he felt something tugging at his navel. He stopped; he was snagged, suspended as the darkness started to recede. Then he felt himself being pulled upwards, making him thrash like a fish on a hook, making him feel sick. He could feel the rush of air as he sped upwards, the speck starting to enlarge as it once again took the form of that white walled and blue carpeted room he grew up in. He heard the heavy falling of angry footsteps as the temperature started to rise, but this time it was different. Anthony suddenly remembered the knife he grabbed, the one he had been using to quarter the watermelons. It had been there in his hand the entire time, he just never realized it. In a sudden realization of the control he had over the situation, Anthony reached up with the knife and swiped at the line. It snapped, continuing upwards as he remained there, suspended between the room and the abyss below.

As he looked up he saw the room shrinking, until it once again became nothing more than a twinkle. The anxiety gone, Anthony closed his eyes and relaxed, allowing the surrounding darkness to envelope him.

* * * * *

A strange thing sleep is, how while actively thinking the brain slowly begins to slip, allowing itself to glide from association to association, until the process of actively thinking begins to fade out while the unconscious slowly fades in, gradually transforming thoughts into dreams, or nightmares.