Lacole and Other Stories: Adaptations of Three of Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories

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LACOLE AND OTHER STORIES: ADAPTATIONS
OF THREE OF EDGAR ALLAN POE’S
SHORT STORIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Bethany Amato Morgan
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Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

This Master’s thesis contains a creative adaptation of three of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories: “Ligeia,” “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and “The Purloined Letter.” I have always been aware of the art of adaptation but never actually studied it until Dr. Elizabeth Rivlin’s seminar on Renaissance Drama: Adaptations and Appropriations. I became interested in adapting one of my favorite nineteenth-century authors and rewriting his or her stories into a contemporary setting and context. I chose to incorporate the aspects of adaptation, gothic literature, and literary representation of religion into my stories.

My interest in Poe’s work began in the summer of 2006 in Professor Frank Day’s American Literature class. We read two of Poe’s short stories, in addition to some of his essays on literary criticism. I enjoyed the morbidity and psychological depth of Poe’s writings and decided to adapt three of his short stories into a contemporary context. Through the process of rereading and rewriting these stories, I made several changes to the original concepts. I hoped to prove a scholarship behind the stories I chose to submit for my thesis. I want my stories to reflect on certain elements from Poe’s writings, but I also desire my stories to stand alone. If the reader has never read Poe’s stories, he or she will still understand and enjoy my stories. If the reader has read Poe’s stories, he or she will enjoy the new approach to an old idea.

The scholarship of my thesis delves into the art of adaptation, the psychological depths of some characters, the smaller judgments of civil law, and
the aspects of devout and hypocritical religious figures. My personal interest leads me to explore the psyche of an obsessive lover (“Lacole”), the mind of a hypocritical student of theology (“Justice”), the minds of minimum-security criminals (“Justice”), and the minds of undergraduate college students (“The Stolen Will”). My final goal in the scholarship of these pieces was to consider the role of the palimpsest. I rewrote Poe’s works for my own purposes, yet the ideas of the original artist remain in my stories. Overall, my work employs the art of adaptation and creative writing in a tribute to Poe and to the process of understanding and recreating the mind of a writer.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LACOLE</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUSTICE</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE STOLEN WILL</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Adaptation, if done well, is a tribute to the original author and his or her original ideas. I have always been aware of the art of adaptation but never actually studied it until Dr. Elizabeth Rivlin’s seminar on Renaissance Drama: Adaptations and Appropriations. The class focused on Shakespearean and other plays, which were adaptations of earlier playwrights’ works. I particularly enjoyed rereading Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and a recent adaptation of the play, the novel *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley. I was intrigued by her interpretation of the various elements of incest, murder, and parent/child relationships. I found that, in this particular case, Smiley’s adaptation enhanced my enjoyment of the original play, and I thought to myself, “I could do that.” After this seminar, I became interested in adaptations on other levels. Currently, the most common art form in which we see adaptation is books or plays that have been adapted to film. Finally, I became interested in adapting one of my favorite nineteenth-century authors and rewriting his or her stories into a contemporary setting and context.

I chose gothic literature and characters with psychological depth as my preferred candidates for study and reworking. My first interest in psychological elements in fiction began with a high school reading of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. I enjoyed the physical manifestations of mental and spiritual anguish: the literal *A* on Hester’s chest and the envisioned *A* in the sky. I also enjoyed reading Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*. This novel’s narrator, Lucy Snowe, sees the spectacle of a nun dressed in black and white whenever Lucy is experiencing an inner struggle. Brontë also introduces a storm whenever something catastrophic or life-
changing is going to happen to Lucy. Again, these outward manifestations of inward turmoil were intriguing and poetic.

I also developed an interest in the representation of religion in various works of literature. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the harsh, rigid structure of the Puritan life is criticized. In *Villette*, the luxury of Catholicism and the austerity of Protestantism are both criticized. In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, “The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale” details the Pardoner’s hypocrisy. Not only is he a hypocrite, but he is also very honest in admitting it! I incorporated his characteristics of hypocrisy and manipulation in my story “Justice.” Another work which addressed religion is Philip Larkin’s poem “Church Going.” I saw the change in religion and the change in religious practices and faith as the poem’s narrator saw them. “Justice” also incorporates this idea through a narrator who studies theology for the sake of knowledge, and not for faith or its application.

After considering these aspects of adaptation, gothic literature, and literary representation of religion, I became reacquainted with Edgar Allan Poe. My interest in Poe’s work began in the summer of 2006 in Professor Frank Day’s American Literature class. We read two of Poe’s short stories, in addition to some of his essays on literary criticism. I enjoyed the morbidity and psychological depth of Poe’s writings and decided to adapt three of his short stories into a contemporary context. Through the process of rereading and rewriting these stories, I made several changes to the original concept. I hoped to prove a scholarship behind the stories I chose to submit for my thesis. I want my stories to reflect on certain elements from Poe’s writings, but I also desire my stories to
stand alone. If the reader has never read Poe’s stories, he or she will still understand and enjoy my stories. If the reader has read Poe’s stories, he or she will enjoy the new approach to an old idea.

I chose to adapt “Ligeia” because of the complex female character that she represents. My adaptation, “Lacole,” incorporates the foreign setting of German soil and a large, rundown New England farmhouse instead of a gothic abbey. I chose to narrate the story from the perspective of the town librarian. Through her interactions with a man in the town, she constructs the story of “Lacole.” This adaptation is doubly formed in the story, in that the librarian and her friend are paralleled to Rowena and Poe’s narrator. Also, the story that my narrator writes is similar to “Ligeia.”

I chose to adapt “The Pit and the Pendulum” because of its intense spiritual focus and my own interest in religious representation in literature. My adaptation, “Justice,” stays true to the prison setting, although the narrator works in the prison, rather than being a prisoner. “Justice” also stays true to the psychological effects of religion on the narrator. My adaptation deviates from the original’s stream-of-consciousness style of writing, and focuses more on a plot that reveals my narrator’s god-like mentality in his desire to execute judgment according to his own standards. As mentioned above, I incorporated characteristics from the Pardoner into my narrator, with the intent of causing my audience to despise and like him at the same time.

For my third story, I chose to adapt “The Purloined Letter.” In contrast to the darker tone of the first two stories, this third story is light and comical. My
adaptation, “The Stolen Will,” is set at a university with the primary conflict of recovering the stolen will of the university’s founder. With a twist of conspiracy theory and the simplicity of college student life, this story attempts to appreciate Poe’s humorous side. Instead of an actual detective, the main character is an intelligent student. I incorporated a few eccentricities of Poe’s M. Dupin into my story’s hero, Woody. Just as Dupin prefers to sit in the dark when he hears a problem, Woody lights cinnamon incense to calm the nerves of his agitated friend. Just as Dupin mimics the facial expressions and gestures of the person he suspects, Woody “walks” in his suspect’s shoes. And just as Dupin flawlessly solves the crime with emphasis on leaving the stolen item in the open, Woody also solves the crime by searching in the most obvious places, instead of the most obscure.

I incorporated several personal experiences in my three stories. I believe that by incorporating real-life situations, my stories develop authenticity and depth. For example, “Lacole” includes the settings of a small New England town and the city of Ingolstadt in Germany. The town setting originates from my childhood hometown, complete with the description of the old homes in the community and the inside of the small library. The setting in Ingolstadt originates from the week I spent there. “Justice” is set in a minimum security prison. The setting for this story derived from a very memorable personal experience I had while working in a prison for a week. The setting for “The Stolen Will” comes from my experiences at Clemson University and research I have done in CU’s Special Collections. While I did not remain completely true to my own personal
experiences, I believe that the details I incorporated have enhanced the reality and interest of my stories.

The scholarship of my thesis delves into the art of adaptation, the physical representation of psychological torture, the smaller judgments of civil law, and the aspects of devout and hypocritical religious figures. My personal interest leads me to explore the psyche of an obsessive lover (“Lacole”), the mind of a hypocritical student of theology (“Justice”), the minds of minimum-security criminals (“Justice”), and the minds of undergraduate college students (“The Stolen Will”). One challenge for me as a woman writer was to be able to write convincingly as a male narrator in two of the three stories. My final goal in the scholarship of these pieces was to consider the role of the palimpsest. I rewrote Poe’s works for my own purposes, yet the ideas of the original artist remain in my stories.

As a final note, in keeping with a true Poe style, my narrators remain unnamed. Their backgrounds are mostly unknown, and the audience never knows what they look like. Also, in honor of Poe, I have made my stories short enough to be read in one sitting. I hope that by reading them, my audience will appreciate the art and depth of Edgar Allan Poe, as well as my own art and creativity in adapting his ideas.
I was looking for a great romance. I needed one and the main character in my story needed one. The heroine of my great American short story was named Lacole. Unlike me, she had raven black hair, a high intellect, and talent.

I began writing Lacole’s story after my divorce case was settled with my ex-husband Lloyd and his little friend, Janice. I had published a few stories in happier days, and decided to fill my new single life with more writing. I stayed in the same town I grew up in, while my ex left the state.

Initially, I wanted my heroine to catch her husband in the middle of an affair and murder him. Naturally, she would never be punished, and the story would end happily. I wrote this version of the story in one night with the help of cheap wine and pictures of Lloyd without his head.

Eventually, even I admitted that this was no solution to my problem.

I worked at the town library, Tucker Public Library. In between dusting, rearranging, checking books out, and checking books back in, I tried to write Lacole’s story. I was stubborn, and I was also convinced that I would publish this one easily. I needed to write Lacole’s story for me.

The story was set in Germany. I really didn’t know very much about the country, except for books or pictures I had seen while surfing the Internet during my days at the library. I liked stories about Americans’ experiences overseas. Maybe I also felt that the new setting would be a new experience for me. But my story had reached a standstill because I lacked knowledge about the setting. I
didn’t know what people in Germany wore or even what they looked like. I could describe a few buildings from pictures I had seen, but I didn’t know the layout of the city or what the streets were like. I was stuck.

We hardly saw new people in our town. Most people pass by us on Route 202. Maybe that’s what initially piqued my interest in the stranger who entered my library one day. The library isn’t really mine, but I’ve worked there since I was fourteen. I open the library at 9 o’clock every morning and lock the doors at 6 every evening, except for Sundays.

This Tuesday morning began like any other. Though it was April it felt as warm as July. I could walk to the library from the little house I rented on Walnut Street. This particular morning I was mulling over my story and the problems I was having with the setting. I knew my characters and I knew my plot, but I needed the right places to put them in.

At the library, I stowed my books and purse under the counter and retrieved a set of keys from the drawer. There were twelve books in the drop box near the door. Two of the books were Nancy Drew novels that the Stanton twins had probably just finished reading. I imagined they dropped the books off on their way to softball practice by the town hall.

I replaced all the cards in the little pockets on the back inside covers of the books. That’s when he came in. He wasn’t tall or handsome or peculiar at all, but he was noticeable somehow. He wore jeans, sneakers, and a navy blue sweater.

“Hi,” he said. His head was covered in little black curls.
“Why, hello,” I replied, setting down a children’s book about ducks. He simply stood there looking around the library’s atrium. There wasn’t much to see. Besides my desk, there was the black and gray tile floor, the slightly vaulted ceiling with a window, some leafy plants, and a plaque dedicated to Mr. Ernest W. Tucker, library founder.

“Can I help you?” I looked him over, deciding that he wasn’t dangerous. Maybe he was just lost. It was not a common occurrence for men to enter the library unless they were old, or they were accompanying their children.

“I came in here because everything else in town doesn’t open until ten.”

I moved authoritatively from behind my desk. “Actually, we don’t open until ten either. I’m just here to straighten everything before people come in.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the man said taking a few steps backward.

“You don’t have to leave,” I said quickly. We both paused. I didn’t want to chase him away. His presence increased our town population to 8,003. “Can I help you find a book?” I eventually directed him toward the classics, which in our library was a separate section from the rest of the fiction. I reshelved the twelve books and then readied everything on my counter. To my right was the long box of index cards from items people had checked out. The box contained alphabetical tabs so the cards were easier to find and place back inside the books. Next to this box was an ink pad and date stamp. To my left was a can of mismatched pens and pencils and an outdated computer and inkjet printer. The surface directly in front of me was completely clear.
I picked up my white feather duster and began dusting the fake plants.
The section of the library with the bookcases and books was shaped like a
horseshoe around the atrium. I occasionally glanced in the direction of the
stranger. He looked to be almost forty years old. His nose hooked, giving him a
bird-like appearance, not ugly, but not wonderful either. He was standing still
with an open book in his hand. I kept dusting.

Finally at ten, I propped open the heavy wooden door and flipped the
open/closed sign around. I heard movement behind me.

“T’d like to check this book out.”

“Do you have a library card?” I asked walking back to my counter.

“No, I just moved here.”

“Where from?” I asked with a smile.

“Germany, actually. I moved into the old Heindel house.”

I paused in surprise. “That house hasn’t been lived in for years.”

He laughed. “I know. It’s in pretty bad condition.” His teeth were
crooked, but he had a nice smile. His eyes were a green-yellow-brown mixture.

“Well, we can sign you up for a library card if you intend to stay in town
and aren’t just passing through.”

“No, I’m staying.” He set his book down on the counter. I asked for his
license and logged the information into the computer. His name was Aaron
Heindel. The license was German, but I tucked away the information on his
birthdate and height and weight. He was thirty-eight.

“How long were you in Germany?”
“I went over as a student initially and ended up staying for almost twenty years.” I pulled a new gray plastic library card from a drawer underneath the card box. That sounded perfect. Lacole could fall in love with a student.

“I’m writing a story about a young man in Germany.”

“Oh?” He smiled either from politeness or a very mild interest.

“He’s a student there.”

“No kidding.”

After activating his library card, I checked out his book and handed both back to him. I fumbled for something else to say.

“I-I’m having trouble writing my story.”

“What sort of trouble?” He removed his wallet from his back pocket and flipped it open.

“Well, I’m writing a bit of a love story between this young man and a young woman who already lives in Germany. They’re both very young and really attractive,” I added quickly.

He closed his wallet and put it back into his back pocket.

“The trouble is that I’ve never been to Germany. I’ve never really been outside of my town very much.” I stopped talking.

“Is there a good coffee place around here?” he finally asked.

“Uh, yes. Yes, there’s Kimball’s Bakery right across the street in that yellow house. You have to go around the side or you won’t see it.” I clicked my card box shut. “They have the best hot chocolate and bagels,” I told him. It didn’t
seem likely that he would be persuaded to stay. I smiled to let him know that he was free to go.

“Thanks.” He turned to leave.

“Are you busy?”

“Not right now.”

“I mean, will you be really busy with the repairs on the Heindel house?”

He shrugged.

“I’d like to ask you some questions about Germany, if that’s okay.”

He nodded and said he’d come back on another day. I watched his back disappear down the front steps. I could have skipped around the library for the rest of the day. Very few people come into the library in the morning. In the afternoon, mothers with small children often come into the children’s room. They would read to their children or encourage the little ones to play with the box of library toys. I spend my closing time vacuuming up cracker crumbs from the carpet.

The following morning, Aaron came to the library just after ten. He held the door open for Mrs. Davina Rayburn. But instead of coming in, he simply let the door close and left.

“Good morning, Mrs. Rayburn,” I said, somewhat distracted.

“Good morning, dear. What lovely sunshine we’re having!”

I smiled in response to the retired elementary school teacher. Mrs. Rayburn returned her novel, *The Paris Dancer*, and shuffled into the fiction section. She came every Wednesday to check out a mindless romance novel.
Sometimes she would come on Wednesday afternoons, when I read two storybooks to the preschool age children.

Mrs. Rayburn owned one of the many large houses in the community. Her house was yellow with a turret on each corner. In contrast to Mrs. Rayburn’s comfortable and occupied home, the Heindel house was unoccupied and forbidding. Because of its lack of occupants, the Heindel house had been romanticized with stories of ghosts and prisoners. No one had lived there since long before I was born. People in the town wished to renovate the big house and keep it updated, but no one could contact the owner, Vera Heindel. I figured that Aaron must be a distant relative who either inherited the place or was living in it for an indefinite amount of time.

Mrs. Rayburn was checking out *The Last Kiss*, when the library door opened. I looked up to see Aaron Heindel. He was holding a foam tray with two coffee cups and a white paper bag. He nodded politely to Mrs. Rayburn and set the cups down on the counter. Mrs. Rayburn winked at me before taking her book and exiting.

“I brought you a bagel and some hot chocolate.”

“You didn’t need to do that.”

“Well, I wanted to. You were the first person in this town to be nice to me.” We sat down on the bench in the atrium and ate. I asked several questions about the house he was living in, and what his plans were. Aaron explained to me that he had inherited the old farmhouse seven years ago from his great-
grandmother, Vera Heindel. He had never seen the place until last night when he arrived in town.

“But I have plans to fix it up and restore it to its original look,” he said.

We talked uninterrupted for over an hour. No one else came into the library. I wanted to ask about his experiences in Europe, but whenever he talked about himself, Aaron only mentioned stories about his relatives and the strange history revolving around the Heindel house.

That evening I wrote more of Lacole’s story. She was older than the young American student. She had been born and raised in Italy by an Italian mother and a German father. Because of her thorough education, she was fluent in four languages: English, Latin, German, and Italian. The student, Jeremy, came from New England roots, but due to a troubled childhood, he had left America to study abroad. To help with his expenses, I killed off Jeremy’s wealthy father, leaving him the sole heir to a large fortune and two houses, one on the beach and one in the New England countryside.

After almost two weeks of visits and long conversations, I finally asked Aaron to tell me about Germany.

“First, let me read your story. Then I can tell you what you’re missing.” It didn’t take him long to read the few pages I had written. In the meantime, I checked the computer system to see how many postcards needed to be sent out for overdue books. Only one postcard was required.
When Aaron had finished reading, he walked up to the counter. “Here’s my suggestion. You tell me what you want your characters to do, and I’ll give you a perfect place for them in Germany.”

So we worked together.

The next week was my prescheduled spring cleaning time for the library. The doors were locked and kept closed all week, except for Friday afternoon when the town council hosted a small party inviting contributions for the library.

I wore old jeans and a t-shirt instead of my usual dressier clothes. Aaron looked equally grubby and fashionless. He had agreed to help me sort through the stacks of donated books in the basement. I also needed to remove all the books from the shelves, dust thoroughly, and then put everything back. It was a slow, but profitable time. I liked this week because it broke up the monotony of the library routine.

“So after Lacole and Jeremy see each other in the coffeehouse, then what happens?” Aaron passed a stack of books down to me from the top shelf of the sciences section.

“Then the narrator is almost tormented in his mind about what to do.”

“Is he in the coffeehouse drinking gallons of coffee?”

“No, he needs to be somewhere more thought-provoking.”

Aaron frowned and continued wiping the shelves down.

“Make sure you wipe all four sides and the very top of the shelf,” I called up to him.
“I spent a long time in Ingolstadt. That would be the perfect city for this coffeehouse and everything else to take place.”

“What’s in Ingolstadt?”

“That’s where Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* originated. It has an old university, stone streets, and some history from the Protestant movement.” He shook his dust rag. “There’s a great big cathedral near the center of Ingolstadt. Maybe he does his thinking there?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think a cathedral is right, but maybe I’ll save that for later.”

“I know,” Aaron held his hands out for the books. “The Donau.”

“The what?” I handed him the books in their correct order.

“That’s the German name for the Danube River.”

“A river would be a good spot.” I moved aside, so Aaron could shift the ladder over to the next section of books. “He could take walks by the river.”

“What’s his problem again?” Aaron began removing the next row of books.

“He’s not sure if wants to start something with Lacole, because he might be leaving.”

Aaron made large sweeping motions with his dust rag. “If this is a true love story, he would sacrifice his home and stay with Lacole.”

I smiled. “I think so too.”
The next day we tackled the basement of the library. One large room in
the back of the basement was set up with a smaller version of the counter upstairs.
All the walls in this room were lined with bookshelves.

“Why isn’t this room part of the library?” Aaron asked, dragging his
finger through the thick dust on one of the shelves.

“It used to be, but the library wasn’t bringing in enough money to heat this
area, or to pay for a second librarian.” I came and stood next to him. “We sorted
through all of our library books, and put the most useful ones upstairs. The rest
were sold.”

The other two rooms in the basement were filled with old tables, a broken
globe stand, extra bookcases that didn’t match the rest of the library, and boxes of
donated books. While sorting through the books, we developed the next part of
my story.

“So one day, Jeremy is sitting on a bench by the river.”

“And all the German people are walking by or riding their bikes past him,
because most people in Ingolstadt ride bicycles everywhere,” Aaron added.

“Right.” I was making two stacks of books, hardcover and paperback.

“And Jeremy has finally decided that he wants to stay in Ingolstadt to be with
Lacole, but he hasn’t told her that yet.” I began sorting through another box.

I pictured Jeremy walking across one of the many bridges that arch over
the Danube. He sees Lacole sitting on a bench. Apparently she has been watching
him cross the stone bridge and walk down the path by the river. She sits with her
long legs crossed and her slim neck wrapped in a purple scarf. The Danube quietly slips past her.

“Where do you live?” Lacole would ask Jeremy.

Aaron had told me about his apartment around the corner from the Hubmaier monument. Lacole and Jeremy would walk from the river into the city, past a store that sold Birkenstocks, past the Hubmaier monument. Shortly after passing the Hubmaier monument, they would turn a corner and stop in front of Jeremy’s home.

“What did your apartment in Ingolstadt look like inside?”

Aaron looked around him as if measuring the basement. “It was only about as big as these two rooms. The outside was blue. It was actually a lawyer’s office and residence that had been renovated into two apartments. No one lived in the apartment above me, because I rented that one too.”

“You rented both apartments? Why?”

Aaron shrugged. “I had the building to myself. I kept the upstairs locked and the electricity disconnected from it. My apartment was one large room with a closet kitchen and bathroom.” He groaned as he stood up and moved several stacks of paperbacks to a nearby table. “It was a funny building. The walls had no light switches, so I used lamps.”

I decided that Jeremy’s apartment would be exactly like the one Aaron had. And for Jeremy, Lacole would be the first person beside himself to ever enter his home.

“What was it like inside?” I asked.
“The walls were a beige color. Something really interesting was the carved wooden choir rail that penned half the room.”

“A rail?” I stood and leaned backward, trying to stretch my stiff back muscles.

“I just assumed the lawyer had put it up to separate his desk from the rest of the office. It even had a little gate with an iron latch. I made that area into my bedroom.”

I pictured the rail in my mind. I imagined Lacole tracing her fingers over the carving in the wood after she moved in with Jeremy.

It took two days for Aaron and me to sort through the books in the basement and clean them up. We categorized them and spread them across the atrium floor. Using printer labels and small amounts of packing tape, I labeled the bindings of the books. Aaron was in charge of gluing little envelopes on the back inside covers of each book. Late Thursday afternoon, we both sat behind the counter while I entered each book and its information into our computer system.

“What happens to Lacole and Jeremy after they move in together?”

“They live together happily for several years. They do the same things they’ve always done: walk by the river, visit the cathedral, and read in the coffeehouse in the evenings.”

“That’s it?”

“No, Jeremy develops an obsessive jealousy with Lacole. He feels like her writing is more important to her than he is. He envies other people she talks
to. Then Lacole gets sick with cancer, and Jeremy feels guilty, thinking he caused the cancer with his obsession.”

On Friday, Mrs. Rayburn and some other women from the town came to help set up for the library donations. I gave a short speech about the new books that were added to the library. Then people trickled in and out of the library for the rest of the afternoon. There were lemonade and cookies on the front lawn. Boxes filled with discarded books lined the walkway and the wide stairs leading up to the library’s front door.

A wooden box with a lock sat on my counter. The hole in the top allowed people to make donations. Several people bought books. Some people ate the cookies, drank the lemonade, and then left. Around three o’clock the crowd became busy with children. Some of them bought books with money from their parents, and the others just wanted a snack. Finally, at five, Aaron and two other men combined the leftover boxes into three and carried them downstairs to the basement. The tables were cleared away and everyone went home. The last car to pull away was the Carters’ van with the big yellow lemonade cooler in the back window.

Aaron totaled the checks, while I counted the cash.

“Two hundred sixty-two dollars,” he said.

“Better than me,” I sighed. “One hundred forty dollars and fifty cents.” I put everything back into the wooden box and locked it.

“How much did you make last year?”
“Just under four hundred dollars, so we did better this year,” I said in mock cheerfulness.

“Feels like a lot of work for not that much in return.” Aaron rubbed his neck.

“Thanks for all your help.” I shut down the computer for the weekend.

“If you want, I’d be happy to help you fix up that house.”

“Well, maybe not too much helping, but would you at least like to see the inside?” Aaron offered to pick me up in the morning.

During the short drive through town and up Bascom’s Hill, he told me about hauling the debris and old furniture out of the house.

At the very top of Bascom’s Hill, we turned to the right, passing through a set of stone walls and opened iron gates. The driveway was faded with weeds growing through the cracks. It circled in front of the house, a large, sprawling gray home with a wrap-around porch on two levels.

He led me up the steps that stretched across the whole front of the house. We crossed the porch and then entered the double doors. The rooms were small in a colonial style with tall ceilings. Every room had a fireplace with built-in bookcases on either side. The kitchen was almost the size of the whole library. There were three large islands in the middle of the kitchen with numerous cupboards and drawers. Aaron told me that the large circular table in the back of the room served as a work table and a dining table for the servants. A dining room and ballroom completed the downstairs. Upstairs were eight bedrooms with bathrooms and plumbing from the 1940s.
After giving me a tour of the servants’ quarters and the outbuildings, Aaron pointed out the two Dumpsters he had rented for the purpose of gutting out the house. I helped him carry old furniture and broken planks outside. Then we both set to work sweeping and scrubbing the wooden floors.

“Does anything happen after Lacole dies from cancer?” Aaron grunted as he pushed his sponge hard against the dirty floor.

“After visiting this house, I think I know what to do with Jeremy. He will leave Germany, very stricken and troubled by Lacole’s death. He returns to the old family house he had inherited a long time ago in New England.”

“This is working out to be a very tragic love story for poor Jeremy,” Aaron said.

I pictured Jeremy breaking everything he could get his hands on in the house. He would live in solitude for some time. In a drunken stupor he would imagine he saw Lacole again.

“Does Jeremy ever recover?” Aaron asked doubtfully.

“No, but he finally decides to fill the void with something else. With another woman.”

Jeremy met Ruby, the blonde town librarian. Where Lacole was strong, talented, artistic, and independent, Ruby was weak, simple, kind, and content with her small existence. Jeremy needed a woman who was the complete opposite of Lacole. Someone pliable and controllable. Someone whose occupation and pursuits would never make him jealous.
Aaron and I continued trading work with each other at the Heindel house and the library. Naturally, people in the town talked about us, though most of the gossip drifted away by the end of the summer.

My character Ruby began to experience jealous pangs because of Jeremy. Though they were happy together in their New England home, Ruby felt that she did not see all of Jeremy. He seemed distracted, often talking about his home in Germany. He critiqued the small town for its lack of interest and culture. Often Jeremy would stare at the wall of their living room without speaking for several minutes. Ruby imagined that he could see Lacole, or that he missed her. Perhaps Jeremy envisioned a portrait of Lacole on that wall.

I wrote Ruby’s story with a passion as it fell into a jealous spiral. The more Ruby pushed, the more Jeremy withdrew.

One Friday, I was reading to Miss Hendlen’s first grade class, when Aaron walked into the library. I had not seen him since that Monday and wondered why he stayed away so long. I finished the storybook about trains and carefully stepped over the six-year-old children to reach my friend.

“I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“No. How’ve you been?” I talked in a quiet tone so the eighteen little eavesdroppers wouldn’t hear.

“I’m good. I’m going out of town this weekend to pick up some stuff for the house.”

“Do you want me to help you on Monday?” I felt my question came too quickly.
He looked around the children’s room before answering slowly, “Sure.”

On Monday, Aaron was mostly quiet. I chatted away without really paying attention to what I talked about. He seemed pensive. I thought that if I kept talking he would stop thinking about whatever it was that was pulling him away from my presence. I didn’t see him for the rest of the week.

The following Tuesday, I closed the library a little early and stopped by the bakery to pick up some muffins. I knew Aaron’s favorite was blueberry. Armed with a white bag, I drove to the top of Bascom’s Hill. The week had been rainy, which Mrs. Rayburn told me was good for her flower garden.

I knocked, but received no answer. Walking into the house, I heard footsteps in the kitchen.

“Aaron?” He walked into the main hall, and stood looking at me. “I was worried the rain was keeping you back from town. I brought some blueberry muffins.”

“Thanks.”

I offered to help him, and we began painting. I told him the most recent developments in my story. At this point, Ruby was losing sleep over Jeremy’s lack of interest in her. Aaron listened to the story without speaking for a long time.

We continued painting one of the front parlors of the big house. After I finished speaking, the squish and swish of the rollers filled the room. Finally, Aaron spoke.

“I’ve decided to go back to Germany for a while.”
I didn’t turn around. Slowly, I rolled the rest of the paint off my roller and lifted it off the wall. “When?”

“In two weeks. I’m still renting my apartment there.” He took a deep breath and then sighed. “I think I’ll live there for the fall and winter, and maybe come back to this house from April to September.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” My voice sounded strange. I coated my roller with more paint and continued rolling.

After a long silence, Aaron cleared his throat. “How are you going to end your story?”

“Well, clearly Ruby is jealous of Jeremy’s love for Lacole.” I stopped there. “But I can’t decide if Ruby waits for him to love her, or if she simply leaves Jeremy and goes back to her old way of life.” I heard the hiss and splat of an air bubble being squeezed from my roller.

“I guess it all depends on Jeremy.”

“No,” I said. I stopped rolling and turned. “It doesn’t depend on Jeremy. I mean, right now the story does, but it shouldn’t.”

We finished painting the room and I went home. I couldn’t end my story. The next morning, Mrs. Rayburn came into the library with her usual short, quick steps.

“How was the book?”

“Dull. They don’t end up together!”

Dull. That was Ruby’s ending. I could have her murder Jeremy to prevent him from leaving. But that seemed out of character. I could have her die from
depression and lost love, but Ruby was stronger than that. Maybe she could just be okay.

I walked home that evening just before the sun set. I watched the cracks in the pavement pass under my feet as I placed one foot in front of the other. There were several places where tree roots buckled and reshaped the sidewalk. I pictured the sidewalks by the Danube and imagined they must be similar. Even the slight chill in the air must be similar. I could see Aaron sitting by the river. Not in the library, or at Kimball’s, or even at the Heindel house, but by the Danube.

I lifted my face to watch the leaves. In the lingering sunlight, they glowed yellow-green. All of a sudden, I tripped and stumbled over a root jutting into the sidewalk. I laughed and looked around. I laughed again. “The story of my life,” I said. But no one was there to see me trip and talk to myself. I walked more carefully. My long shadow appeared and disappeared between the trees’ shadows. I figured I wouldn’t be able to finish my story any time soon. But I knew I eventually would finish it. So I walked, avoiding the cracks and bumps in the way.
JUSTICE

I was a theology student at one of our nation’s oldest and most well-respected universities. I arrived at college on scholarships and government loans, but in an unwise moment, I requested only two-thirds of the standard loan amount, thinking I did not need the full amount, and this way I would have less debt when I finally graduated. I figured out about mid-semester that, although my school bill was paid, in about three weeks I would no longer have cash for gas or food or anything. So I looked for a job.

McDonald’s was hiring, but that wasn’t really an option for me. Numerous other restaurants were hiring, but most of my friends ate at those restaurants and I was not attracted to the idea of possibly having to serve them. My friends did not struggle with a lack of money. They used their parents’ credit cards. Only a few people worked, and they were pitied and generally avoided. Finally, I put my name in with a temp agency. I was told I probably wouldn’t get any better than eight or nine dollars per hour. They called me three or four times with offers to be a ticket-seller for different events in a nearby coliseum. I refused the jobs and told them not to call me unless they had a job paying over ten dollars an hour. I knew my situation was dire, but I also understood the importance of maintaining my pride.

I only had twenty dollars and was beginning to feel desperate. Now understand, I had no pressing needs. I had a meal-ticket so I wouldn’t starve, and I needed to go nowhere. But money provides security and, for a college student,
fun. I would never call home and ask my mother for extra cash. She worked hard enough as it was. I had almost decided to give in and accept the ticket-selling job, when the agency called me with good news. The position was data entry. Did I have ten-key typing skills? Yes, I did, and very good ones at that. The hours were third shift for twelve dollars per hour. I thought the details sounded all right. Then the agent told me the location of the job, the county jail.

I never considered myself a devoutly religious man, though I made certain that others perceived me as such. My mother and other ladies from my hometown knew me as a “nice boy” and “good son.” I attended church services regularly with my mother. Whenever I attended church functions and potluck suppers, I sat with the elders and deacons to chat about theology and church issues. I periodically taught Sunday school for the seventh and eighth graders. They liked the fact that I remembered their names and made the lessons easy to remember. But in all fairness to the devout and serious practitioners of religion, I was not one of them.

Theology was an important aspect of life that I felt everyone should know about. I felt it was part of my human responsibility to be well-educated in such an important field. But most humans didn’t know a thing about God. By mastering theology I elevated and separated myself from the average human. I knew more than they knew, and I knew more about God. I accepted the job at the county jail. I needed the money. And the job would increase my knowledge of humanity in its lowest form. But I was particularly interested in the process of judgment and punishment meted out in the prison.
After a few questions, I learned that I would be in the basement of the prison with Neil, the guy who oversaw the canteen. Neil received daily shipments and filled daily orders of snacks for the inmates. My job consisted of entering the data from the shipments and entering the data from the different orders. Neil would supervise me for two days and leave for ten days, during which I would be alone with the three inmates responsible for filling the orders.

Monday morning at the ungodly hour of 3 A.M., I was being escorted by a short, fat, bald guard through a series of thick metal doors down to the basement of the prison. The prison was minimum security, meaning that most of its inmates had committed crimes of petty theft, failure to pay child support, wife battery, and the like. We passed through a series of double-doored stations. The guard swiped his badge, and a large metal door slid open. After it closed behind us, he swiped his badge at the next door. Every time we entered a hallway or the elevators, we passed through one of these stations. Fat black women in a windowed booth would nod and let us through. Many of these hallways and corridors had windows, and I saw a few convicts through them. None of them looked too scary, but I felt very cold. The guard and I never talked.

The basement was windowless, and the strange fluorescent lights were dim and wavy. The guard brought me to the canteen and left me with Neil. Neil was tall, maybe in his mid-fifties with a receding hairline. We shook hands and then he motioned me to a dumpy desk with an old computer and printer on the top. There was a green, rusting filing cabinet, a cracked leather chair, and stacks of papers. Neil gave me a stack of papers that had come in with the previous
shipment and guided me through the data entry process. I’m pretty quick with computers, so it didn’t take me long to catch on to the system. Once Neil felt that I understood, he showed me the process for entering the inmates’ orders.

“Now, one very important part of this job is checking the balances on the inmates’ accounts. Once you enter the order, the computer will automatically subtract the amount from their account.”

He continued to explain that if the account had a negative balance, then the inmate was denied his order. He also told me that if the inmate ordered more than he had money for, I could select a few things from his order that he could afford.

I thought the system of ordering snacks and treats while in prison provided an interesting illustration for a sermon. In the fashion of Jonathan Edwards, I found myself urging these sinful inmates to realize their position in the hands of an angry God. Prison and its bars were simply a warning to these wayward individuals. Their accounts, which I later learned were filled by wives, girlfriends, and mothers, would one day run out. At some point, they would no longer be able to enjoy the sweet and sinful pleasures of life. There would one day be a reckoning.

At 4 A.M., Neil left to pick up the inmates. He told me to sit and continue entering the orders. Tomorrow I would go with him to pick up the workers.

I felt pretty comfortable, considering the circumstances. The canteen was a large rectangular room with only one entrance. The desk faced the door with the chair’s back to a wall. In the back of the room all the boxes were on shelves
by category. The boxes had been cut in half diagonally to provide easy access to
the various items within. I stood and walked once around the length of the room.
Unlike other hallways and corridors of the prison, this room had no cameras.
After a quick look at the open doorway, I selected a snack size bag of Doritos
before sitting down again. I made sure I ate the bag quickly, remembering to wipe
the orange dust off my fingers before Neil came back.

Neil returned with three canteen workers. I shook hands with each of
them. George was a short white guy with an orangey red goatee. He didn’t look
anyone in the eyes and was characterized by an annoying rapid laugh. Diff was a
tall, slim, and aged black man. His eyes drooped at the corners and he spoke
softly. I wondered what Diff stood for, but never got around to asking. Perry was
about my age. He was short with a round face and a large gut. His eyes slid from
my legs up to my face in the way a perverted man looks at a woman.

They each grabbed a small stack of orders and headed to the back of the
room. I didn’t have much contact with them during the morning. I made sure
they always had a stack of orders to fill.

I settled into a type of routine in entering the orders. A prisoner named
David Everson asked for four bags of potato chips, a toothbrush, four cookie
packages, four Snickers bars, a deodorant, and a pair of socks. His account
showed only $10.51. I typed the order for the toothbrush, socks, deodorant and
three bags of chips. I enjoyed denying the inmates’ requests for certain items. Did
they really deserve to eat the same snack foods that non-criminals ate? Where
was the justice in that system?
George talked loudly and complained. Maybe it was the complaining that made him seem loud.

“Can you believe they make us get up so early? It’s not enough that they put us behind bars. They have to torture us too!”

“Yeah,” agreed Perry.

“I should write a letter to our senator,” George continued.

“Yeah,” said Perry.

The morning continued in this same manner. Perry’s vocabulary never expanded. He simply agreed with everything George said. Sometimes George would talk to Diff, but Diff seldom answered. Perry never talked to Diff, but he watched him with an eerie voyeurism. Diff’s upper body was disproportionate to his lower body. His legs were long and skinny and from his waist to his shoulders he was decidedly shaped like a triangle.

“You almost done?” Neil had been reorganizing the boxes closest to the door, but he paused to talk to me.

“Just about.”

“Good, we’ll walk the guys to breakfast and then grab something to eat for ourselves.”

I nodded in response. The inmates were never allowed in the hallways, elevators, or corridors without someone to accompany them. Neil granted an exception to this rule when one of the guys asked to use the restroom. Diff used the restroom more frequently than the other two. Perry always watched him come and go.
Around 7:30 A.M. Neil told the guys it was time for breakfast. I logged off the system and off of the computer. Neil and I walked side by side down the hallway with the three workers behind us. At the end of the corridor, Neil passed his badge over a black pad on the wall, and the metal door slid open. They passed in front of us, and Neil beeped his badge again to shut the door.

“That’s the dining hall and kitchen,” he explained. “We’ll come get them in about twenty minutes.” He pointed back down the hallway to another door.

“That’s the staff kitchen.”

As we walked down the hallway an inmate passed us pushing a handtruck loaded with stacks of boxes. The print clearly read, “Chicken. Not for human consumption.”

Neil and I picked up our plastic cafeteria trays and selected our food. Fried chicken, rice, beans, chips, and pudding were our options. I had never seen such dark colored chicken in my life. Two inmates stood behind the counter ready to serve us. After Neil politely asked for a small helping of each item, I permitted the inmates to give me a spoonful of the other items. I took one bite of each and decided I was not hungry.

“Is this the same food the inmates get?”

“No, theirs is worse.”

The men behind the counter watched us eating. They wore the county uniform, a lighter blue jumpsuit with prison-issued slip-on shoes. In addition to the regular uniform they wore tieless aprons and showercaps on their heads. Neil explained that the prisoners were not allowed to have shoelaces or any form of
string as a precaution. He also took the opportunity of relative privacy to inform me about our three workers.

“Diff is dependable. He’s quiet and steady in his work. If something comes up and you ever need to leave them for a period of time, Diff is trustworthy.” Neil paused, taking a large spoonful of the watery pudding. “I think we will have problems with Perry.” He tapped his spoon thoughtfully on his tray, then leaned in and spoke quietly. “Lately I’ve been missing small amounts of food from the canteen. A candy bar here, a bag of chips there, a toothbrush. Nothing major, but definitely important enough to warrant attention. George is all bark and no bite, but Perry,” he said, pointing his spoon at me, “Perry is shifty and troubled.”

I considered what he had said and then asked, “Can I ask what are they in for?”

Neil looked sideways at the three security guards eating chicken. “I’m really not supposed to discuss their personal cases, but I can give you brief details since you’ll be working with them.” He glanced at the men behind the food counter before continuing in a low voice. “George hasn’t paid child support in about fourteen months. He calls himself a conscientious objector, but the truth is that he can’t get a job because he can’t read.”

My eyebrows raised.

Neil nodded. “Perry beat his girlfriend and son, and Diff stole shopping bags from the trunk of someone’s car.”
After twenty minutes had passed, Neil left to retrieve the three workers from the cafeteria, while I walked back to the canteen. From the back of the canteen I could see through the doorway, straight down the corridor. No one was in the hallway, so I selected more chips and a Little Debbie cupcake from the boxes. The rest of the morning continued pretty much the same.

I wondered what happened with these three and with the other inmates. At one point when the three guys left the canteen to bring the broken-down boxes to the laundry room, Neil filled me in on their backgrounds. He even showed me a brief report from the prison psychologist on each of them. George had grown up without a father. His mother dated a series of boyfriends, none of whom were ever kind to George. As a result, George had followed in the footsteps of his unknown birth father by dropping out of school early and by knocking up three women. Perry had been raised by his father and uncle. Few details were known about the nature of his upbringing except that he had grown up in church and attended private schools. Perry had been kicked out of five private religious schools before his father finally sent him to public school. The psychologist made several marks about Perry’s shifty eyes and potential for trouble. She also wrote several comments on Perry’s abuse of his children and wife. Diff had grown up on welfare with six half-siblings, his mother, and his mother’s friend. The psychologist characterized Diff as trying to control as much as he could, since his earlier life demonstrated complete lack of control. Diff was the only college-educated criminal among the three canteen workers. His crime of theft had been the first misdemeanor he had ever committed in all his fifty-something years. He
didn’t even have a speeding ticket or any other mark against him. The psychologist claimed that his digression into the lifestyle of his childhood was a natural manifestation of that way of living.

The three men came back into the canteen, and I went back to my orders. I wondered how some of my professors would characterize the actions of these inmates. More than likely, they would point to the doctrine of Hamartiology in these men, Hamartiology being sin. These guys were not intended to be criminals. I figured that they could have chosen a normal, civilian lifestyle if they had wanted to. They had the choice to turn their backs on their environment.

Since Neil had told me about the thief, I tried to watch the men unnoticed. Which of the three men would be most likely to pilfer small items from the canteen? Perry, the least admirable of the men, in my opinion, was the most likely. Any man who hit a woman or child was not a man. His lack of masculinity could easily lead him to commit further immoral acts, such as stealing items from the canteen. Perry often watched Diff’s movements with something like pleasure. After studying the three workers myself, I noticed a repetition in Diff’s movements. His arms moved smoothly in lifting and reorganizing and packing the various items. He would lift a box ten times before setting it on the shelf. His motions were repetitive and controlled as though he were concentrating on particular muscles in his arms and shoulders. I soon realized that Diff was using the boxes as a means of exercise.
Perry never watched George. He listened to everything George said and always agreed with him. George, for all his loudness and complaining, seemed the most fearful of the three.

I realized that George’s eyes had that look. People often say that there’s a look that a man gets, when he has spent time in prison. I tried to see this look in the men’s faces as they worked. Diff’s face was always cast down as he steadily filled his orders. Perry’s eyes were shifty and disconcerting in their intense gaze. George seemed the closest to this idea of the look. George rarely maintained eye contact, yet he was afraid to withhold eye contact. His eyes were never still. They darted back and forth, and he frequently turned around while working. He watched the boxes and he watched Diff. Diff, in particular, scared George. If both men reached for the same item, George would laugh, make a quick joke, and then let Diff take the item first.

I imagined George as a dead-beat father outside of prison. He would joke often with his children, trying to win them over with favors or special treats. George would even be afraid of his own children, I believed. The idea of being responsible would be too much for him. He would probably laugh it off loudly.

The psychologist’s reports got me thinking about how each of these men might become converts. One thing that had interested me in theology was the human tendency to turn to a God when they hit a rough patch in life. These three guys as criminals were prime candidates for a conversion. While I denied three men their entire orders based on empty accounts, I mused over the conversions of these three.
George’s conversion would be easy. He seemed intent on pleasing and gaining the approval of whomever he was with. If he spent enough time with the proper preacher or priest, he would slowly change his ways. He would sit in the back of the church on a Sunday morning attempting to sing the hymns. He would peek during prayer and lift his hands with open palms if other people were doing the same. George would eventually show up to church in a tie and dress shirt. He would carry a Bible that he never read during the week. He would cry when the reverend or father talked to him about his duties as a parent. His conversion would be weepy, and it would be a great relief to him. George’s conversion would be an act of survival.

Perry would never be converted. With the exception of the unpardonable sin, all sin was considered equal. However, Perry had stooped so far down morally that he had no hope. Perry had abused his wife and children. He also embodied the entire sin of the lust of the eyes in his sideways glances. As often as he watched Diff, Perry watched me as well. The difference was that Diff remained oblivious to Perry’s looking, while I was aware. Maybe Perry lusted after my freedom. At the end of my first day, I would walk out the doors and drive away. He would walk back to his cell with an escort. Maybe Perry lusted after Diff’s physical control and stronger physique. Diff controlled George in that George always sought to please or befriend him. Diff controlled Perry because Perry could not take his eyes off Diff’s motions and exercises. Perry didn’t deserve a conversion.
My thoughts were interrupted when Neil asked me how many orders I had left to type. I told him fifteen. I also told him that nine inmates had been denied because their accounts were empty or too low. Neil returned to the filing cabinet, and I went back to work, thinking about Diff’s conversion simultaneously.

Diff’s conversion would be the most complete and the most beautiful. Any man with the ability to control his body down to the very muscle movements possesses the soul of a devout believer. Diff was, in short, a possessor. If he were converted to a life of faith, he would not have faith; he would possess faith. Diff’s wordless possession of the canteen created a second prison within the grand jail. He controlled the actions of the other two men. He even controlled Neil and me, in that we both dwelt on his actions with curiosity.

Just before eleven o’clock Neil showed me the program for entering the day’s totals. I printed out an expense report and followed Neil’s instructions for placing the report in a large envelope. We all left at the same time. Neil locked the canteen door and led the way to the elevators. We passed through several stations where he swiped his badge. Finally, we dropped the three workers off at section C of the prison. Neil signed the clipboard and turned to me.

“You’ll pick them up here tomorrow morning at 4:00.” Neil’s face had aged through the morning. His eyes were dark, and his skin seemed to be drooping from his cheek bones. We said goodbye, and I drove away.

All my classes were in the afternoon. I had just enough time to shower and finish the last few minutes of homework before I headed to the classroom. I felt as though I was washing the prison off my skin. I was tired from the new
experiences of the day. Even though I was removed from the prison, it stayed with me all day.

I felt as though I wore the same expression George wore, fear. I had spent the morning looking over my shoulder in expectation of a violent inmate or a careless security guard. I was furious at Perry’s watching me, and I had felt powerless to stop him. I guess the look comes from the fear of becoming a victim.

I nodded off during most of my classes, except for Dr. Clifton’s. He posed the question “What is justice?” to us. Someone answered that justice was being fair in the treatment of others. Someone else said that justice was doing what was right according to an established system. Most of my classmates agreed on the idea that justice was being fair.

I thought about my first experience with justice on the day I went to traffic court for a speeding ticket. There were about thirty of us in the room, all ticketed by Officer Harling. While waiting for my turn, I listened to one guy telling his story to the judge. The guy had been caught driving with a suspended license for a second time. He told the judge that he drove to work so he could stay current on his child support. He then begged not to be thrown in jail, but rather to be placed under house arrest. If I were the judge I would have thrown him in jail without blinking. The judge, a woman, gave him house arrest and told him that if he got caught driving again, then he would go to jail. I left traffic court after paying my fine, and I thought about our system of “justice.” I have to pay a fine for driving fifteen over the limit, and a man who obviously does not deserve a third chance
gets away with deliberately breaking the law. As I drove away from the small
courthouse, I wished for the power to give true justice to a true criminal.

As soon as 6:00 P.M. came, I fell onto my bed and slept soundly. I woke
around midnight and stumbled to the bathroom. The bathroom’s fluorescent
lighting reminded me of my new job. I would be trapped in that room with those
men for two weeks. I still wished for the opportunity to give real justice to
someone who deserved it, someone who got away with too much.

I completed some of my reading for homework before I left for the prison.
This time they gave me my own visitors’ badge, which I had to keep in my
pocket. I beeped my way through the corridors and elevators until I arrived at the
canteen. Neil was standing in the back of the long room with a clipboard and
pencil in hand. I never wrote in pencil because I preferred the permanence of pen.

Neil greeted me. “Morning. I just finished cataloging the missing items.”
“What did you find?” I asked.

“Four bags of chips, a Little Debbie cupcake, two toothbrushes, a pair of
socks, and three candy bars.” Neil tapped the end of the eraser on his clipboard as
he said each item.

“What do you think you’ll do?”

“Well, unfortunately we have no cameras in the back. This front one
works,” he said, pointing to the right hand corner near the door. “But we can’t
possibly catch the thief that way.”

“Do you still think it’s Perry?”
Neil shrugged. “I can’t say.” He walked to the filing cabinet and began rummaging for something.

I sat down at the computer and booted up the system for the day. When I had entered the first three orders, Neil turned to me. I paused my typing, waiting for him to speak.

“About two months ago, we had a problem with one of our canteen workers. He was sneaking items out of the canteen and hiding them underneath the trashbag in the bottom of the trashcan in the restroom on this floor.” He looked up at me. “We eventually caught him, added time to his sentence, and cycled Perry in here.”

“Is there anything you want me to do while you’re gone?”

Neil sighed. “Just make sure the guys are never alone in here. Watch them carefully, but since you’ll be busy and the thief is sneaky, you probably won’t catch whoever it is.” He made space in the tightly packed cabinet and slid the folder back into place.

I continued entering the new orders. There were several men who had ordered large quantities of snacks yesterday that also had big orders today. “Do they really eat all of this in one day?” I asked.

Neil shook his head. “No, they mostly gamble with it.”

Just before 4:00 I stood up to get the workers.

“Don’t forget to sign them out,” Neil called after me.

I felt somewhat important to have a badge that allowed me access through the prison. The numerous electronic doors made me uneasy, however. There was
no quick escape, if I needed to leave for some reason. My badge allowed me through any door that had a black electronic pad next to it. The doors with white pads were for high security officials only. Even though I was clearly dressed as a civilian, the guards and station keepers always eyed me warily. I wondered what would happen if I was accused of a crime I never committed and was consequently imprisoned. I liked the system of justice, and I definitely agreed with the punishment properly fitting the crime. But as with any human designed system, there were flaws, and sometimes the innocent suffered. In my studies I learned that God was just and God saw all. This doctrinal idea was intended to give comfort to believers. But since I only knew and did not believe, I found no comfort in it.

The three guys were waiting when I arrived at section C. Perry’s head was down, and he watched me through his eyebrows, smiling. I nodded to them and signed them out of the area. Diff walked next to me, and the others followed. George was joking and talking loudly, but I paid no attention to what he said.

We settled down in the canteen and began our regular routine. My eyes burned from the dim lighting, the glare of the computer, and my lack of restful sleep. The idea of the thief and possibly catching him kept me awake. Periodically, I glanced over at the workers. Diff had begun his exercises.

As I absentmindedly watched his movements, I saw a toothbrush disappear down his jumpsuit sleeve. I blinked. Diff continued his exercise motions, now raising and flexing his arms from the top shelves to the lower
shelves. It happened so smoothly I wasn’t sure if I had seen correctly. I almost
smiled, an idea of justice forming in my mind.

I turned back to my computer screen and continued entering the orders. A
few minutes later, Diff excused himself to the restroom. Perry’s sideways glance
followed him down the hallway. After Diff returned and began his exercises
again, I walked down the hallway to the restroom. No one else was in there. I
lifted the trashbag out of the barrel and looked. In the bottom of the trash barrel
were two candy bars and a toothbrush. I replaced the trashbag and left the
restroom.

At breakfast I brought up the subject of the thief. “I think I saw Perry
steal a toothbrush today.”

Neil looked up with slightly raised eyebrows.

“I’m pretty sure I saw one disappear down his sleeve. He went to the
bathroom shortly afterward.”

Neil considered this information for a moment. His eyes lighted. “Next
time you see Perry doing this, you need to catch him in the act.” He paused to
drink his water. “I’ll talk to security and ask them to put an extra man in our
hallway. Next time you see Perry take something, send the guard after him into
the bathroom. If he finds something underneath the trashbag and Perry’s in there,
we’ll have caught another thief.”

I nodded. Neil’s previous suspicion of Perry made everything fit together
nicely.
Neil cut through the lump of mashed potatoes on his tray. “I wonder why both thieves would use the same tactics.”

“Maybe the second thief thought he would be less likely to be caught if he imitated the first.”

Neil nodded at this comment. “Seems foolish to me.”

I leaned back in the hard plastic chair. “Well, we’re not exactly dealing with the most intelligent people, are we?”

Neil chuckled.

I enjoyed imagining the various responses to Perry being caught in the act of stealing. Diff would continue exercising and never show any surprise. George might make a few jokes. Neil would be relieved, but would still look old. Perry’s wife and kids would be relieved and maybe even glad. And Perry? Perry would watch Diff every time he saw him. He would want to do something, but would never be able to. And I would be satisfied at having done my duty.
I was sitting in the living room of my apartment with my roommate, Woody, one rainy afternoon. He was arranging and rearranging the icons on the desktop of his computer. Our apartment was sparsely furnished: a couch, an armchair, a pink beanbag, and TV trays made up the living room. The dining area consisted of a folding table and four folding chairs, one of which was broken. In the two bedrooms there were beds and piles of clothing, books, and odds and ends. Woody kept his bicycle in his bedroom.

We had just finished eating a pizza. I was in the armchair unsuccessfully trying to study, and Woody was enthroned in his pink beanbag with his laptop. I heard someone pounding up the staircase to our second floor apartment. Quick, heavy strides stopped right in front of our door and someone thumped loudly.

“Hey!” came a muffled voice.

“It sounds like Ben,” Woody commented without looking up from his computer. I stood, stretched, and opened the unlocked door.

“Where’s Woody?” Ben asked panting.

“The door was unlocked,” I replied.

“Where is he?”

I motioned with my chin and closed the door after he strode into the room.

“You gotta help me.”

Ben had been Woody’s best friend since grade school. I had once asked Woody why he and I were roommates and not he and Ben. His response was that
I was clean and quiet, whereas Ben was dirty, loud, and inconsiderate. Ben was over six feet tall, weighing almost three hundred pounds. His cheeks were so fat they made his eyes squinty, giving him the appearance of jolliness or nearsightedness. His light-colored hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat. Though it was only late April in South Carolina, the weather felt like July.

Ben was about to continue talking, when Woody held out his hand for silence. He slowly rose and picked up a box of matches from the mantle.

“Woody . . .” Ben began, but Woody silenced him with his hand again.

I settled back into my armchair to watch the proceedings. Woody, in his usual fashion whenever there was a crisis, began to light several sticks of incense placed in an intricate incense burner on the mantle. He claimed the cinnamon aroma relaxed those who smelled it. Personally, I usually got a headache or a nauseated stomach from so much cinnamon in the air. After Woody had lit twelve sticks of incense using only two matches, he sat back down in his pink beanbag and looked at Ben.

“You are so weird,” Ben said. Woody nodded as though agreeing, but said nothing. “Anyways, I need your help.”

“Of course you do,” Woody replied calmly.

“The problem is not that complicated, but I think the solution might be,” Ben said with an unusual gravity.

“Are you hungry?” Woody asked.

“What?”
“Are you hungry? Do you want food?” He enunciated his words as though talking to a deaf person.

“Are you listening to me?” Ben asked in a high-pitched voice.

“As long as we are talking about uncomplicated problems with complicated solutions, I think we should be physically prepared. Now a simple solution to the simple problem of hunger is for you to eat our leftover pizza. Once we have solved a simple problem, we can work on solving your greater problem.”

Ben looked as though he wanted to punch Woody. Instead he went into the kitchen and grabbed pizza from the box on the stove. He came back into the room chewing and dropping crumbs. I watched where the crumbs fell so I could vacuum them later.

“First things first,” Ben said around a large mouthful. “I need you to keep whatever I tell you a secret.” He swallowed and waited for Woody’s response.

“That’s stupid,” said Woody. “You can tell your story or not tell your story, but you shouldn’t begin by demanding secrecy.”

“Just talk,” I told Ben.

“I just found out from my sister, who’s friends with Melanie Drexel, that the folder of papers containing the original charter of the university is missing.”

“You’re wasting my time and my incense,” Woody said, settling his laptop back onto his lap.

“Listen!” Ben insisted, snapping the laptop shut with his big greasy hand. Woody’s eyes narrowed at the glistening handprint left on his laptop.
“They know who took it!”


Ben favored me with a withering glance. “She’s President Drexel’s daughter.”

“And Ben’s been trying to ask her out all year. It’s tragic really.” He turned back to Ben. “This is really a very boring story,” said Woody. “If they already know who stole the documents, then what’s the big deal?”

“The person who stole the documents still has them.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“Because he hasn’t used them yet. Look, the guy that took them has been snooping around the Special Collections area pretending to do research for a big project. He’s related to the family that founded the university.”

“Now that is interesting,” Woody finally perked up. “He sounds familiar.”

“What does Melanie look like?” I asked.

“She’s pretty hot, if that’s your type.”

Ben glared at both of us. “Are you done? Well, this guy has been trying to prove for some time now, that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the school was actually willed to his great-grandmother, a niece of the founder, and not to the founder’s own daughter and son-in-law.”

“So he stole the charter and original will to prove his theory,” Woody said.

“But that would be hard to prove,” I chimed in. “Why would someone leave an estate to a niece instead of to a married daughter?”
Ben shrugged. He was evidently pleased with himself for finally holding our attention. “Apparently, the old gentleman thought his niece better deserved it. But the son-in-law was an important senator and he managed to hide the documents and turn everything in his favor.”

“At least that’s what this descendant is claiming,” Woody interjected.

I looked from one to the other. Conspiracy theories always interested me. Especially a conspiracy that involved a one-hundred-year-old college. “What does he stand to gain from it all?” I asked.

“You mean, besides his rightful inheritance and financial gains from the university?” Ben answered sarcastically. I understood why Ben was friends with Woody. Woody was quirky but very fun and generally laid back. On the other hand, I never understood why Woody put up with Ben. Ben’s arrogance was as big as his size, and his sarcastic comments made him the least desirable guest anywhere.

“He wants his family formally recognized, and he wants the name of the university changed to his great-grandmother’s maiden name,” Woody told me.

“What about the football team?” I asked. “What would the new name be?”

“Bergenhoffer.”

Woody smiled when Ben said the name.

“Bergenhoffer University?” my voice squeaked a little.

Ben shrugged again. “It’s not very pretty.” He turned back to Woody. “I really need your help.”
“What for? You already know who it is.”

“Yes, but I need to impress Melanie, and you’re the only one that can help me do that.”

“I can’t believe you care more about that girl than about the fate of the football team.”

“So, you’ll save the day by using my brains and then you’ll get the girl,” Woody said.

“Well, yeah. But Melanie also said that the university needs to retrieve the documents before they are destroyed. Plus other trustee members have a specific interest in making sure the documents are returned without public involvement. President Drexel fears that if the thief realizes the investigators are on to him, he will never return the documents, or he may destroy them altogether.”

“Nice imitation of a girl.” I laughed. “Why would he destroy something that proved his legitimacy as the rightful heir?” I asked.

“Without the original charter documents or the original will, the university would be subject to long legal battles and possibly lose funding,” Woody answered thoughtfully. “It’s one of those things where, if the guy can’t find a way to get his university, he doesn’t want anyone else to have it either.”

We sat silently for a little while. The situation was an interesting thing to think about in view of the monotony of the past few weeks. I truly wanted to be involved only so I had a front row seat to all the action. Maybe I would be interviewed about the part I played in the recovery of these valuable old papers.
“Melanie thinks the board of trustees is hiding something,” Ben said. He then went on to describe several meetings between these older trustees, which Melanie had overheard or eavesdropped on. “Several of them are grandchildren of the first trustees.”

I leaned forward. “How come no one’s ever heard from this guy before, or from his family? Is this the first time this story about the wrong inheritance has surfaced?”

Woody shook his head slowly and stood. He talked while walking to kitchen. “No, everyone has heard the story before, except for you apparently.” He motioned to me over his shoulder. “Other members of the family have been paid off or silenced by threats and discouraging stories about the documents being placed in a vault somewhere else.”

Ben followed Woody into the kitchen, and I did too. I figured I might as well eat more pizza before our guest wolfed it all down.

“What’s this guy’s name?”

“Lew Berg.”

“You mean the guy that stayed with us for a week last year?” I asked.

“The very same,” Woody answered, drinking his diet Coke.

Berg was a History major, who specialized in United States history. He was extremely quiet and always seemed to be studying old documents. He had talked to himself most of the time he stayed with us. I had written him off as a strange friend of Woody’s. A nice enough guy, nothing special.

“And Berg is short for Bergenhofer,” I said.
Ben rolled his eyes.

“So, what you want us to do?” I asked.

Ben ignored me. “Woody, what do I need you guys to do?”

“Well, without being able to read your mind, I would say that you want us to get the documents from Berg. We should make sure they’re scanned and carefully preserved. Naturally I must involve my father who is an estate lawyer. And most importantly, we need to keep the trustees, investigators, and president out of the whole mess.”

I laughed. “How can you do all that?”

Woody addressed Ben instead. “Have you already searched the Special Collections to make sure the documents are actually missing?”

“Yes. I searched the whole place with my sister and Melanie. They thought I would be good protection because of my size,” he added smiling.

“Tell me about your search.”

Ben leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. “Well, first of all, the students are not allowed in the back rooms. Only the staff members of the Special Collections department are allowed to go back where all the important stuff is kept. So we thought that Berg may have hidden the documents instead of walking out with them. We figured they’d be somewhere in the regular study room.”

“Let’s drive,” Woody said.

We left the apartment, not bothering to lock the door. Woody grabbed his camera from his room before we left. I grabbed a notebook and pen. We piled into Woody’s Jeep and drove towards campus.
Ben continued his story about investigating the study room with his sister and Melanie. “The study room has several tables and desks with chairs around them. There’s a large checkout counter, much like the library, and there are three bookshelves containing old yearbooks and previous issues of the university magazines.”

“And the room is carpeted and has large ceiling tiles,” Woody added, turning onto Route 347.

Ben stopped and looked at Woody uncertainly. “I never thought to check the ceiling.”

“I know,” said Woody, “but the documents are not in the ceiling tiles.”

“How do you know that?” I asked from the backseat.

“Keep talking,” Woody said.

“Anyways, my sister pulled out all of the yearbooks and flipped through all the pages. Melanie did the same thing with all the issues of the university magazine.”

“What did you do?”

“I went behind the desk and checked everything in the shelves underneath the countertop,” Ben answered proudly. “There were a few backpacks, because Special Collections does not let people take their backpacks into the study area, just in case a student tries to steal something. There were a few stacks of papers, some strange book ends, a dictionary, a ball of rubberbands, and stuff like that.” Ben stopped abruptly and grabbed the car door as Woody narrowly missed hitting another SUV in his efforts to change lanes quickly.
“Watch it, Woody! Are you crazy?”

“Just keep talking.”

“So I looked through the papers I found and checked inside all the backpacks. We found nothing.” He shook his head. “He must have taken the folder with him.”

“Would they let a student handle the charter and will by themselves?” I asked.

“No,” Woody answered. “They usually let the students look at scans or copies of the documents, but never the real ones. The real ones are in the climate controlled vault.”

Being cramped down in the basement of an old brick building with nothing but dusty books and faded papers did not interest me. I knew Woody had spent time down in Special Collections when he researched a special project on the founder of the University for founder’s day. He had patience for that sort of job. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if Woody had known about the inheritance mix-up a while ago. Maybe that was why he had allowed Berg to stay with us last summer. Maybe Woody and Berg were in on it together. I looked out the car window at the trees. Woody did seem to know a lot. And why would he have invited a creepy guy like Berg to come stay with us?

The more I thought about that week last summer, the more I remembered how creepy and sneaky Berg was. And Woody just seemed too interested in the whole situation.
“Anyone feel like ice cream?” Woody asked, already turning off the main road. We stopped and ordered ice cream cones in the smothering sunshine and heat. Everyone else at the ice cream store wore shorts and tanktops. I wondered if they would feel much affected if the university’s name was changed to Bergenhoffer.

“I wish South Carolina was climate controlled,” Ben grumbled. He was sweating again.

“How could Berg get the documents from the vault without anyone knowing? Does he have an accomplice?” I asked. I watched for any signs of flinching or discomfort in Woody’s demeanor.

“Possibly,” Woody answered. “What day were the documents stolen?” he asked Ben.

“This past Wednesday, why?”

“I’ve done some research in the Special Collections before, and there are four people who regularly work there."

“I can’t even breathe out here,” Ben huffed.

We took the melting ice cream back to the Jeep and continued driving.

“Charlotte is a middle-aged lady who directs the whole department. She works every day except Sunday and Wednesday. Eric and David are GAs who work Thursday through Saturday. Then there’s Angela who covers that checkout desk on Wednesdays. Angela is the newest member of the Special Collections team and she is easily . . . persuaded,” he finished.
I thought that last comment sounded fishy. Woody was not a ladies’ man, but some women are attracted to geeks. Maybe a woman who worked in Special Collections would be geeky enough to fall for Woody’s brains. It definitely sounded like Woody had used innocent Angela for his own purposes.

“So you think Angela helped him take the documents?”

Woody paused to give a choice hand gesture to a woman he just cut off. “I don’t think she did it knowingly. But Angela is known for giving people access to the copier in the back office and for letting people look at high security documents as long as they’re under her supervision.”

“How could Berg have stolen the folder without her noticing?”

Woody bit into his cone with a loud crunch. I was thankful we didn’t take my car. Ben had already chomped into his cone, and the passenger seat was littered with crumbs and dark spots of melted ice cream. Woody and I would end up cleaning out the car together.

“Angela is easily distracted. Plus if Berg had been going into the Special Collections often, she may not have been as watchful with him. He could have made copies of the originals one by one and possibly switched them.”

And she definitely wouldn’t be watchful of someone as sweetly conniving as Woody Fitzgerald.

We drove the last mile in silence. Saturdays on campus were always strange. Only a few dedicated students were still on campus completing papers or projects. With finals coming up, I was actually surprised to see so few students around. We parked outside the Special Collections building and walked in.
Woody greeted someone who he introduced to us as Eric. He told Eric he had lost something in one of his trips there. Eric told him to look around and went back to his reading at the desk.

Woody began walking around the room scrutinizing every piece of furniture, book, or article in sight. I followed closely on his heels, looking at everything he looked at. I watched his face for any signs of guilt, but he looked calm. I bumped right into him once, when he strode quickly across the room to look at a loose ceiling tile.

“Would you watch what you’re doing?”

“Sorry, Woody.”

After a thorough search of the room, Woody motioned for us to leave. I was about to follow him, when I noticed he had left his cell phone on one of the back tables. I was about to say something, but decided to watch Woody instead. Once we were outside Ben asked, “Well, did you find anything?”

“Am I carrying anything with me?”

Ben sighed. “No. I really wanted to find that folder. I think I would have had a shot with Melanie if I did.”

“No offense,” I said, “but don’t you think she’d be turned off by your fat, egotistical act of heroism?”

Woody interrupted. “Describe the folder for me again.”

“It’s a dark, brown-colored folder that’s acid-free. It’s as stiff as cardboard and it’s designed to protect old documents, such as the ones we were talking about.”
“So it’s almost a dark brown?”

“Yeah.”

Woody said nothing more as he got into the car.

“Hey, Woody,” I said, buckling up, “can I use your phone?”

“Isn’t your phone in your pocket?” he answered. He was right, and I couldn’t think of anything else to say. We drove back to the apartment in silence. I called Woody’s cell phone the whole way back to our apartment. He never picked up.

The rest of the week was spent studying, making plans for the summer, and pulling all-nighters to finish final projects. I almost forgot about the missing papers . . . well, almost. I glanced at Woody while we sat studying. He always sat in his pink beanbag chair with his laptop computer open. As far as I could tell, he did nothing out of the ordinary.

On Thursday, when Woody was in class, I searched his bedroom. Besides his bed and a dresser, his room was bare. He kept his clothes pretty neatly folded or hung up. I was rummaging through his stacks of books when I found a large envelope. I opened it and was just looking inside when I heard the apartment door open. I only had time to see something yellowy like parchment paper, with black scrawly writing on it. I shoved the envelope back in with his books and quickly stood up.

“What are you doing in my room?”

“I, uh. I was trying to find your Shrek CD.”

“Here it is,” Woody said, taking it off the top of his dresser.
I took the CD and walked into the livingroom. That was when I noticed his cell phone on its charger. How did he get it back from the Special Collections? He must have gone back down there again, or maybe Berg got it for him. I knew something was up, but I didn’t have anyone to tell. Normally, I would tell Woody when I had a situation like this one.

On the Friday of finals, Woody and I were sitting in the apartment studying. Leftover Chinese food sat in containers on top of the stove. Woody was preoccupied in his pink beanbag, and I was tired from too much cramming and too much stress from the whole situation.

We heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. The same heavy footsteps stopped outside our door. Then someone knocked.

“Come in,” I called. The door opened.


“No one can find the folder with the documents in it.” Ben sighed. “President Drexel is afraid the situation can’t be kept quiet any longer. And Melanie is really worried about her dad.” He said this last sentence with a whimper.

“Don’t worry about it. You did everything you could.”

I looked at Woody through narrowed eyes. He sounded so confident and so careless.

“I thought for sure that we would find it that one weekend.”
Woody stretched his legs out in front of him. “And what would you do with the folder if you did find it?”

“I’d give it to Melanie and her dad. President Drexel is an honest man. He would make sure that the documents were taken care of and everything was set right.”

“Do you have Melanie’s cell phone number?”

Ben looked up. “Yeah, why?”

“Then you should call her and tell her that you have the documents.” Ben stared at Woody blankly.

“I knew it!” I yelled, jumping up from my chair. I turned to Ben. “The documents have been in his room this whole time!” I ran into Woody’s room, found the envelope, and returned triumphantly.

Woody looked at me strangely. He reached down and pulled out a folder from underneath the beanbag. On the outside of the folder was a large colorful picture of Spiderman in action. Inside the folder were several yellowed documents of importance.

“See, those look exactly like this one.” I reached into the folder and pulled out a similar piece of parchment paper.

“What are you doing with my knock-off Declaration of Independence?”

“Your what?” I asked. My voice sounded small.

“Give me that.” Woody took the envelope and paper from my hands. “I got this in Washington D.C. when I was in high school.”
Ben laughed hysterically, and I sat down in my chair. “Shut up, Fatso. She’s still not going out with you.”

Ben wordlessly grabbed his cell phone and the folder and left.

“I thought you and Berg were in on it together.”

I looked at Woody, waiting for an explanation. When he didn’t speak, I finally asked him, “How long have you had that folder?”

“Since the day after we searched Special Collections.” He settled back into his chair with a satisfied smile. “I found the folder, not the Spiderman folder, but the one that actually contained the documents in it, on the day we looked.”

“Why didn’t you say anything or take it right away?” My voice squeaked slightly.

“Ben is very awkward and not very tactful. He would have given us away. All I would have had to do is show the brown folder and he would have yelled or grabbed it. He was too excited about impressing Melanie to really be trusted. Plus with Eric there, it would have been entirely too risky. I left my cell phone on one of the tables, so I had an excuse to return the day after.”

“Yeah, I saw it there. It made me suspicious of you. Is Special Collections even open on Sunday?”

“No, but during my many trips to that place, I had struck up a friendship with Angela. We both liked dusty old books.” He smiled after saying this, knowing how much I disliked anything dusty.

I rolled my eyes and stood up to get something to drink. Woody followed me into the kitchen talking. “So I called her and asked her to let me in where I
could get my phone. We had also both noticed Berg’s hovering in the area. Since I had been asked to research the founder for the university’s celebration, I took the opportunity to discover as much as I could about Lew Berg.”

“Is that why he stayed with us that one time?”

“You know what they say—keep your enemies close.” I nodded and swallowed the soda I had poured.

“I struck up a friendship with Berg on the basis of history. We got along pretty well, though I think he distrusted me.”

“And he was right,” I interrupted.

Woody opened the refrigerator and grabbed his usual diet Coke. “Well, in the process of my research I came across the controversy with the Bergenhoffer family and the university. I thought the information was interesting, but never told anyone about it, not even Angela.”

I grabbed a fortune cookie from the leftover Chinese food stash. “And then Ben showed up with the news that the papers had been stolen.”

“That’s right. I was surprised, but at the same time, I had almost been expecting it.”

“You acted so confident, I was sure you knew something about Berg,” I accused. Woody smiled. “So when we went to Special Collections and started searching, how did you find it?”

“I put myself in Berg’s shoes.”

“What?”
“No, I really did. He and I had spent some months studying in the same proximity, so I knew his habits and ways. Angela also grew to trust Berg and allowed him to use the copier for free, much like she did for me.”

“What do you mean, you put yourself in Berg’s shoes?” My fortune cookie told me that a wonderful surprise was coming my way. I popped one half into my mouth.

“I retraced his movements. Didn’t you notice when you were following me around the room?”

I chewed and swallowed. “Yes, but I was so intent on copying you, I didn’t actually pay attention to what you were doing.”

“Berg frequently consulted the dictionary at the checkout desk. So I searched the dictionary and the desk for clues that Ben may have missed.”

“Were the documents inside the dictionary?”

“No, but apparently Berg had taken several pages out of the dictionary. I’m not sure what he did with them though. What appears to have happened was that Berg found himself alone in the study room on a Wednesday. I wasn’t there, and Angela had probably gone into the back room. He must have decided that he would finally take the risk of sneaking off with the folder. He walked behind the large desk, grabbed his backpack and was attempting to place the folder inside when he heard Angela coming back from the back room. Quick as a wink he hid the folder.”

“Where?”
“Right in plain sight.” Woody walked back to his beanbag. “It was brilliant.”

“What do you mean, right in plain sight?” I asked, following him with a fist full of fortune cookies.

“There’s a small stand for flyers, papers, and such on the top of the checkout desk. Most of these flyers are organized into the same brown folders that the department uses for the old documents.”

“That is brilliant,” I said, suddenly laughing.

“Poor Berg must have been out of his mind. He left the folder in the frontmost spot and told Angela he was leaving.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “How else could he have explained why he had his backpack.”

“Exactly.”

I sat in the armchair musing over the whole situation. I admired Woody’s intelligence in figuring out the obvious. Secretly, I was happy that the very section which Ben had searched proved to be the place where the folder was hidden.

“Why did he leave the folder there until the weekend, when you found it?”

Woody shrugged. “He knew it was safe in plain sight. Plus, the detectives were watching him and might have searched his place. He was probably waiting until he found a place to hide it safely. Until then, if someone had stumbled across the folder on the top of the checkout desk, they would have blamed the staff for carelessness.”
I pictured Ben as the hero, bringing the folder and its contents to Melanie.

“What will happen to Berg?”

“He’ll get the recognition he wants and part of university funds. I’m not sure how it all works. He’ll also probably get some time in jail, unless they don’t press charges. But I doubt they’ll change the university’s name.”

“I’m glad to hear that!” I picked up my book and began studying again, without really seeing the page. After a few minutes of puzzled thoughts over the folder, the documents, the conspiracy, and the returned order, I put the book down.

“Hey, Woody.”

“Yeah?”

“Does Berg know it was you who found him out?”

Woody smiled. “Of course! I thought he could at least take comfort in the fact that he had never trusted me from the start.”

“How does he know?”

“When I went back on Sunday, I had a stack of natural brown folders in my arms. Angela came and opened the door. As soon as the door opened, there was a large crash in the back room. She rushed back there to see what was going on, and I switched the folders.”

I looked at him wide-eyed. “What happened in the backroom?”

“I paid two freshmen to accidentally hit a baseball through the back window. No real damage, just a new window.”

I laughed for a long time. Woody did too.
“I have one more question.”

“What’s that?”

“When you switched the folders, did you put any decoy papers inside to trick him?”

“No. I just included a personal note from me that only Berg would understand.”

“And that’s how it ends,” I said pushing two halves of a fortune cookie into my mouth.

“Ben gets the girl; I get the praise; the President keeps his school; the trustees get what they deserve; and Berg gets his recognition and money.”

“What do I get?” I asked, careful not to spew crumbs everywhere.

“You get the Declaration of Independence.”
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