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REFRACTORY: STORIES

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REFRACTORY: 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
Benjamin Littleton Shealy
August 2008

Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
Dr. Alma Bennett
Frank Day

ABSTRACT

Five short pieces of fiction comprise this creative thesis, which has been submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree Master of Arts in English literature. Themes explored in the works include various forms of human miscommunication, from the failure of language to convey meaning to the effects of fractured familial relationships. To achieve these ends, I employ several aspects of literary minimalism, including economy, simple diction, clear syntax, and omission. I discuss the influences, both real and literary, which inform these stories and how my work, in turn, fits into this literary tradition. In keeping consistent with these themes and influences, the majority of the stories in this collection have ambiguous conclusions. To me, this reflects real-life experience. Ultimately, it is up to the individual reader to decide what he or she feels the characters take away from their own stories.

DEDICATION

For my niece, Christiane, in whom I find inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank Keith Morris, whose constant guidance and support was the adhesive that gave a fledgling writer the strength to reach heights I never thought possible. Thank you.

I would also like to thank Alma Bennett and Frank Day for taking time out of their busy schedules to serve on my committee and share their insights. I truly couldn't have done it without you.

Finally, I want to thank Katie Keith, whose daily intellectual and emotional encouragement was the breeze without which I would never have been able to leave the ground. Perhaps Bette says it better...

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INTRODUCTION

I suppose the best place to start is the beginning. One November day back in the early twenty-first century, I went to meet with my undergraduate academic advisor to talk about registering for the next semester's classes. I was a History major back then, and I remember the dread I felt when he told me I had to sign up for either Business or Technical Writing as a degree requirement. I jotted it down and we went on to talk about other courses. As I was about to leave his office, he suddenly remembered a couple of his advisees having taken another class that fulfilled two different course requirements—it counted as three credits for technical writing and humanities. It was called “Structure of Fiction.”

My earliest stories—one, “My Sister Lover,” about a teenage boy falling in love with his new, overbearing stepfather's beautiful teenage daughter; the other, “Green Eggs & Jam,” about two twenty-something slackers working in a record shop—were slow to receive the accolades I had hoped for. Two things of note, though, are that my professor, John Conway, used the term “wet-dreamy,” one which he decided he'd coined, to describe the first story and that, to this day, I still hold the world record for SPPs (similes per paragraph). In the end, I got the credits and my GPA didn't suffer, but most importantly, the veritable seed was planted for future, more fruitful, cultivation.

I'll fast forward a few years to graduate school and Professor Keith Morris's twentieth century American literature seminar, where I was introduced to the writers who would inspire me to try my hand at writing fiction again. In my undergraduate literature classes, I had grown accustomed to reading novels or plays or poems; short stories were

few and far between. In this graduate seminar, though, we read many fantastic short stories by many great authors, from Barth, Barthelme and Borges to Calvino and Carver. There's one author, though, who I truly credit as the inspiration behind why I write fiction, and that's Raymond Carver.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Influences

In his essay "Fires," Carver says that "Influences are forces—circumstances, personalities, irresistible as the tide. That kind of influence, literary influence, is hard for me to pin down with any kind of certainty" (19). To a certain extent, I agree with what he's saying. Any literary work that has affected me either positively or negatively in the past is still swirling around in my mind somewhere. In that sense, I bring everything to the table. Just off the top of my head, I can think of works seemingly unrelated to where I wanted to go as a writer, either thematically or stylistically—from Barthelme's "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" to Nabokov's *Lolita* to Philip Larkin's "Church Going" to even *The Epic of Gilgamesh*—that occasionally popped up in my mind as I wrote these stories. But unlike what Carver said, some of my influences (one in particular) outweigh that myriad of voices.

In "Fiction of Occurrence and Consequence," an essay included in *No Heroics, Please*, Carver stated:

When a reader finishes a wonderful story and lays it aside, he should have to pause for a minute and collect himself. At this moment, if the writer has succeeded, there ought to be a unity of feeling and understanding. Or,

if not a unity, at least a sense that the disparities of a crucial situation have been made available in a new light, and we can go on from there. (150)

To put it simply, Raymond Carver's "The Bath" changed the way I read fiction. I can still remember getting to the end of the story the first time, shaking my head and making some sort of audible grunt. As you might remember, the story opens with Mrs. Weiss purchasing a birthday cake for her son, Scotty. Scotty is then promptly knocked down by a car. He spends the rest of the story in, well, I wouldn't want to call it a coma (but that's exactly what it is), with his parents by his side in the hospital. Distraught, the parents take turns going home and taking baths. At some point the baker enters Carver's story, making harassing phone calls to Scotty's parents. Why haven't they picked up the birthday cake? Where is his money? Now I assume my audience has read the story, but just to refresh your memory, I'll furnish you with a few lines from the ending:

She got out of the car and went to the door. She turned on lights and put on water for tea. She opened a can and fed the dog. She sat down on the sofa with her tea.

The telephone rang.

"Yes!" she said. "Hello!" she said.

"Mrs. Weiss," a man's voice said.

"Yes," she said. "This is Mrs. Weiss. Is it about Scotty?" she said.

"Scotty," the voice said. "It is about Scotty," the voice said. "It has to do with Scotty, yes." (*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* 56)

Logically, it's the baker on the line. But the tone is flat and the detail scant, and I immediately feel unsure as to who is actually on the other line. What if it's someone calling from the hospital saying Scotty has died? How can the reader be sure either way? In the later, "fleshed out" version of the story, "A Small, Good Thing" (from *Cathedral*), Scotty does, in fact, die, and his parents end up being fed fresh hot rolls by the baker (the rolls being the small good things). This revamped ending is touching, but I find it less appealing than the stripped-down, "surgically precise" version found in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*. As critic Charles E. May puts it, "My own view is that the death of a child is a mysterious assault that is unlikely to be assuaged by coffee and rolls, regardless of how well intended" (48). I only raise this point to show that it is not the story itself but the way in which it is told—with "no pleasantries, just this small exchange, the barest information, nothing that [is] not necessary," as Carver writes at the beginning of the story. This method of story-telling intrigues me.

Having said how influential "The Bath" is to me as a writer, I suppose I might as well get the "Minimalism" conversation out of the way. Of course, many critics have said that Raymond Carver was one of the original and most successful "minimalist" writers (Carver resented the label) to come out of the emerging movement in the 1970s. However, there are many different interpretations of what literary minimalism actually is. Critic Arthur Bethea defines it as "a style privileging economy, simple diction, clear syntax, and omission—such as commentary from an omniscient narrator—to provide an authoritative meaning for the presented experience" (101). Critic Kirk Curnutt emphasizes minimalism's connection to "a basic theme: the failure of the spoken word"

(246). These critical definitions can be used to describe the qualities in Carver's work that I strive for in my own writing, and that, in several ways, my stories could be considered *minimalist* in the same vein.

While the aspects of minimalism mentioned by Bethea and Curnett appear repeatedly in my works, what influenced me most of all about Carver's stories, particularly those in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, is their ambiguous, open-ended quality. As Carver himself said, "It would be inappropriate, and to a degree impossible, to resolve things neatly for these people and situations I'm writing about. The writer's job, if he or she has a job, is not to provide conclusions or answers. If the story answers *itself*, its problems and conflicts, and meets its *own* requirements, then that's enough" (*Conversations* 111). I feel that my stories work on this same level. I think the reader will agree that by the end of a given story a change has occurred within the major character, but I stop short of spelling out that change (consciously creating an epiphany for a character as a mere narrative device) for the reader.

The idea of leaving stories open-ended is just one component of the larger theory of omission in fictional works. Hemingway explores the relationships between the theory of omission and the writer and reader:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (*Death in the Afternoon* 182)

Carver further clarifies the concept, stating:

What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things.

(Fires 17)

I think this idea of omission, or what is left out, is best exemplified in my work through Patrick and Wendy's relationship. These characters are present in "Refractory," "Eighteenth," and "Truancy." There are passages of time between stories, and the reader must use the evidence provided (or alluded to) in the text to piece together the progression, or digression, of the relationship.

I'd like to point out another area to which I applied this notion of omission: dialogue. As Arthur Bethea pointed out, the technique of omitting clear antecedents for pronouns and locating important meaning in indefinite words can actually be found in texts much older than Carver's, such as Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." I, too, employed this technique of crafting wooly dialogue, omitting sections of sentences, which seems to result in a very natural but confusing conversation. Here is an example, from the opening of "Eighteenth":

"One of these days you're going to leave and we won't be here when you come back," she said.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he said.

"What do you think it means?" she said.

“You’re being dramatic,” he said.

Because these are the first lines of the story, the reader is immediately asked to find more meaning in the dialogue than what is actually written on the page. No names are used at first, but it quickly becomes apparent that the two characters talking are Patrick and Wendy from “Refractory.” When this connection is made, the details of the first story should return to the reader’s mind. At the end of that story, Wendy was pregnant and Patrick had been forced to leave home. He had also made no commitment to Wendy in any way. So, the use of the word “we” in the first sentence should point out to the reader that Wendy is more than likely talking about the baby, which means there’s been some passage of time. Another deduction the reader can make from the tone of the lines is that Patrick must still be doing some of the things he was doing in the other story, that Wendy is still upset about it, and that Patrick is still unremorseful. This type of dialogue proves most rewarding to the reader who is willing to look for deeper meaning in the words of these often inarticulate characters.

The structure of this dialogue sequence is effective because it requires the reader to think more critically about what is actually being said while simultaneously reflecting on the tension between characters. I think this type of dialogue seems much more natural and believable. The tension this causes—what Carver would call “menace”—underlies the surface of many of my stories.

On *REFRACTORY: STORIES*

The stories in this collection were written between April 2007 and June 2008 and are presented in the order they were written, which also seems to be the most logical arrangement. The Patrick and Wendy trilogy anchors the beginning, middle, and end of the collection, with “Jerry...” and “Pastor John” providing breaks in between. I find that this formula works well in giving the reader time to digest, say, “Refractory,” before starting on “Eighteenth.” I also believe it encourages repeat readings of the Patrick and Wendy stories, as the reader has to fill in the gaps that occur between stories and perhaps re-familiarize himself or herself with what has already happened. In this way the trilogy works a bit like the daily soaps Wendy watches on television.

I chose “Refractory” as the title for my first story for several reasons. The word “refractory” has three specific meanings, according to Princeton University’s *WordNet*: 1. “not responding to treatment”; 2. “temporarily unresponsive or not fully responsive to nervous or sexual stimuli”; 3. “stubbornly resistant to authority or control.” I initially chose to name the first story in this collection “Refractory” because I found the third definition to be a suitable label for Patrick Stevenson. But the more I thought about it, the more I connected all three definitions with all of my stories. For example, the first definition could pertain to Wendy’s mother’s health condition; the second definition can be used to describe Pastor John after he begins taking the pills; the third definition can be applied to Patrick, Pastor John’s son, Matthew, and even Pastor John himself. Of course, in the end, it’s the third definition that’s most relevant to these stories.

On the Patrick & Wendy Trilogy

Regarding his process of creation, Carver once said “I’m not just writing autobiography, understand. But many of those stories were suggested to me not by books, or by just “thinking up” things to write about, but by events that in fact did happen in real life” (*Conversations* 154). The major events that occur in the Patrick and Wendy trilogy actually happened to two people I know. One of them was my brother. Even though I was quite young at the time these events took place—the little brother in the first story is meant to represent me—the overall experience left enough of a mark on my memory that it became something I knew I wanted to explore in my fiction.

What interested me most about the situation from the beginning was how an irresponsible, rebellious teenager would deal with such a sudden change in fortune (discovering his girlfriend is pregnant). I wanted to put myself in Patrick’s shoes, to explore how this change in circumstance would impact his short and long-term decisions and even alter his life’s trajectory. From the beginning, this endeavor was to be, more than anything else, a character study of Patrick.

Patrick Stevenson isn’t a likeable character. He doesn’t do likeable things. But I hope the reader will be sympathetic to Patrick’s situation. When I work-shopped what became the story “Refractory,” one of the readers commented that he “knows this guy,” that he went to school with guys like this. In this sense, Patrick is the classic rebel. He drinks, smokes, and is popular with the girls. But I only use that as the jumping-off point for stories in this collection, which are more concerned with the “byproduct” of this way of life and how Patrick deals (or doesn’t deal) with the issue at hand.

Patrick's actions in the first story essentially sever his ties with his parents, particularly his mother. The second story's action shows that he has been unwilling to reach out and establish a connection with Wendy and their child. The third story in the trilogy shows that while he may be coming to terms with some of his communication issues, the dialogue shows that he is still unable to verbalize his potential progress.

Wendy, on the other hand, is given no voice in the first story. In the second story, she voices her frustration, disappointment, and despair to Patrick, but he is not yet prepared to listen. By the third story, Wendy's character has reached an equal footing with Patrick's, but neither character makes that final push, at least within the confines of the story, to finally establish more of an emotional connection.

As I mentioned earlier, I initially approached the story of Patrick and Wendy solely from Patrick's perspective. "Refractory" illustrates this approach, as Wendy is given no voice in the story. However, as "Refractory" led to "Eighteenth," which led to "Truancy," something remarkable happened. Wendy's character began to develop her own voice. This is where the creative process really took over, for my recollection of the real-life event was devoid of this character's side of the story.

While I feel the reader can empathize with Patrick's plight, by the end of "Truancy," Wendy is the character that elicits more compassion. Regarding this authorial shift, I can honestly say that this wasn't a conscious choice I made as I was writing, say, "Eighteenth." Looking back at it now, though, I can say that by the time I wrote "Truancy" I was committed to giving a voice to a character who previously had none in either my fiction or my memory. So, in the end, an interesting change has occurred:

Patrick, who is without a doubt the main character in “Refractory,” gives ground to Wendy’s character in the succeeding stories with the end result of both characters’ stories having been moved forward. And though the ending of “Truancy” doesn’t provide a solution to every challenge posed in the three stories, I believe the reader will be able to see Patrick and Wendy’s situation in a new light.

On “JERRY BRUCKHEIMER...”

In his article “A Few Words about Minimalism,” John Barth wrote of the national decline in reading and writing skills as “the product of an ever-less-demanding educational system and a society whose narrative-dramatic entertainment and tastes come far more from movies and television than from literature” (Barth). To me, Jerry Bruckheimer is the embodiment of this decline.

Now clearly Barth was not the biggest fan of minimalism, and up to this point I have defended the style and even shown specific ways in which my works can be called minimalist. But every now and then I like to stretch my legs as a writer and try something a bit more imaginative, and, more often than not, these exercises involve the use of metafiction. Along these lines, I’ve always liked the idea of writing a famous person into a fictional story and trying to figure out, based merely on the person’s public persona, what he would think, say, and do.

Jerry Bruckheimer came to my mind as the possible subject of a short story because he churns out more consistently unintelligent Hollywood blockbusters—am I being redundant?—than practically any other film producer. In the words of the fictional Jerry, his films are “high stakes, no-holds-barred, thrill rides.” The story ended up being

a refreshing shift, if only a temporary one, away from the more serious themes of the other works in this collection. And although the tone is more lighthearted, Jerry still exhibits some of the fundamental character traits seen in the major characters of my other stories, such as an inability to communicate with the most important people in his life. In the end, I think I created a character with which the audience can identify, a successor to the Walter Mitty archetype.

Okay. I am more than a little embarrassed to admit that I had never heard of James Thurber's 1939 short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" until "Jerry Bruckheimer, Action Film Superproducer" drew comparisons to it in workshop. Now having read the story, I can certainly see the similarities between my story and Mr. Thurber's, but I'd like to point out a few things that differentiate Jerry from Walter. The most significant difference is that while Walter Mitty dreams of a life of heroism—in different episodes he's a wartime pilot, a doctor, a suave courtroom defendant—it is not his reality; Jerry, on the other hand, has the capacity to create his own fantasies—choreographed fight scenes, car chases, explosions—on film, thus making them more tangible. And while Mitty always snaps out of his dreams to his wife's demands and a diminishing sense of masculinity, Jerry never reaches the same awareness of reality; he truly believes that producing the chick flick will solve the problems with his wife and bring his stepdaughter closer to him. Critics have often seen Walter Mitty as one of the first examples of the emasculated modern man; I propose that "Jerry Bruckheimer" stands as a man who, though he shares some similarities with that archetypal character,

differs in that he is not aware of his own shortcomings and that due to his prominent position he has a much better possibility of realistically changing his situation.

I'd like to briefly mention another one of my inspirations behind my writing "Jerry..."—the daily-updated literature and humor website McSweeney's Internet Tendency. The focus, I'd say, is certainly on humor, but they're a literary-minded crowd, reimagining characters from literature or real people in comedic scenarios. Here's an example:

Holden Caulfield Gives the Commencement Speech to His High School

by Andrew Tan

You're all a bunch of goddam phonies. (207)

Now I find this sort of thing hilarious, and without some knowledge of the particular work the author is referencing the joke would be lost. And since McSweeney's receives regular contributions from some of the most critically acclaimed contemporary American writers (Dave Eggers is the founder), I've tried my hand at a few of these "reimaginings." The way I can tie this back in to a critical assessment of contemporary American literature is that these daily websites are at least to some extent replacing the traditional short story, particularly the comedic short story. I find myself a reactionary when it comes to this, for though even though I find these website entries funny, I feel that the traditional short story would serve some of the subjects well by prolonging the

reader's enjoyment and memory of the story. My hope is that "Jerry Bruckheimer, Action Film Superproducer" accomplishes this goal.

On "PASTOR JOHN"

"Pastor John" was originally another story written in the minimal style of "Refractory," but I realized (with some prodding from a couple of influential readers) that this character was too complex to be approached in the same way. Where Patrick is still a teenager, rebellious and replete of life experiences, Pastor John is a middle-aged father of three who has already been down that road and back. Furthermore, he is in a state of spiritual and professional (and possibly familial) quandary. So I went back to the story and revised it by adding more depth of scene and characterization. If "Refractory" can be likened to *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*-era Carver, then "Pastor John" is my *Cathedral*.

I think the character of Pastor John invited this sort of revision. It's clear that he hasn't always made the right decisions, but he does have positives in his life, though the negative aspects continually threaten to engulf him. There are people he cares about and people who care about him, and I wanted to shed more light on those relationships. In the end, this more detailed portrait of Pastor John allows the reader to feel more invested in his story.

Pastor John struggles with the thoughts that his life is not working out the way he had planned. He still cares about his family, but he finds himself drawn toward the life he led before marrying and settling down. The family has financial problems, his health is poor, and his faith is dwindling. After much soul-searching and pill-popping, Pastor

John eventually decides to go home and tell his wife that he is not going to continue in the same manner. But the story ends before he has actually committed any of his thoughts to action, leaving the reader to ponder if he'll actually communicate this decision to his wife.

When I decided to write a story in which the main character is a preacher, I knew I would have to make a comment on why I decided to do so. I haven't read too many secular works of fiction about religious leaders, so I suppose that alone says something about my background. As the reader can glean from the opening scene, the main character is an Evangelical preacher in the rural South. The details used are comparable to my own past experiences in a similar type of church environment. And though some parts of the story, particularly the opening scene, could be viewed as a condemnation of those experiences or of particular individuals, I would like to point out that this story is meant to be a vehicle for the main character and his internal struggles, and that the details are precisely that.

On Themes and Major Ideas

As I've pointed out, the major characters in all of these stories suffer, to varying degrees, from an inability to communicate with those around them. The fractured familial relationship is the most prevalent theme in the entire collection. Wendy is raised by a single mother. Patrick is forced to leave home, effectively ending his relationship with his mother, and to a large extent, his father, as well. And up until the point where the collection ends, Patrick has made very little indication that he'll be a father-figure to his child any more than Wendy's father was to her. And while Pastor John shows

affection for one of his children, his relationship with his wife and even his congregation are quite strained.

But even though the relationships in these stories are broken, the effects aren't necessarily permanent. With the exception of maybe Pastor John and his church congregation, I leave open at least the possibility of these relationships being repaired. Patrick's father shows back up in the last story, and even Patrick seems to be thinking more maturely about Wendy and the baby. Pastor John's situation is a bit more complex, but the reader does see him thinking in terms of his family at the end of the story.

I think the reader of my work has to put some of his or her own creative energy into the process to have a more fulfilling experience. For instance, the characters don't have epiphanies and several of the stories have either untidy or downright ambiguous conclusions. I think this reflects real-life experience. The making of a decision of great importance is usually drawn out and carefully considered. For the most part (with the exception of Patrick having to move out of his parents' house and find employment), my characters aren't forced into quickly making the decisions they're struggling with. It's more about the internal struggles of characters trying to establish some control over their own lives. And while the characters themselves are usually left with unresolved questions at the end, the reader, I hope, has gained enough insight into their dilemmas to be able to draw his or her own conclusions.

In the end, I think what stands out most in my works, all questions of form and style aside, are the characters themselves. Imperfect as they are, the reader, I hope, will

feel an attachment to them and at least sympathy, if not empathy, for their plights by the ends of their respective stories.

REFRACTORY

Patrick Stevenson has never been a fan of pulling out. Somehow, it just doesn't feel right to him. This has led to some complications in the past.

He was nearly eighteen, and the girl was seventeen. Both of them were still in school at the time. The girl went to school in the neighboring town and was therefore able to conceal the truth for months. It had also helped that it was late fall when she began to show. She wore oversized sweaters.

Not knowing what to do, the two had continued carrying the secret until there was no longer any real way to hide it.

"We're going to have to tell our parents," the girl said.

"I know. I just... You're sure you want to do this?"

"Do what?"

"I just thought you might think a little bit more about what we talked about."

"I already told you. I don't believe in that."

"We aren't together," he said.

"I'm having it," she said.

A year earlier, Patrick had been in love with his girlfriend, Debbie. They went to the same school, were in the same classes. She thought his clowning was cute. He had pursued her until she finally gave in. She even had sex with him. They were each other's first.

Debbie lived just a few miles down the road from Patrick, and since he was nearly seventeen, his parents had agreed to let him drive to her house on the weekends, provided her mother was there. He also drove her home from school in the afternoons. What his parents didn't know was that Debbie's mother didn't get home from work until after five. This was when they would have sex.

One day Debbie's mother was putting clean laundry in her daughter's room when she noticed a trail of ants leading under her bed. She lifted the skirt and looked underneath the bed, where she discovered several used condoms, covered with ants, inside a shoebox. Debbie's mother immediately called Patrick's mother. The mothers agreed that the two could no longer be together.

Patrick dealt with the breakup as well as he could. Debbie never did give him a full explanation for why she saved the condoms. It had something to do with her keeping a piece of him close to her. He had loved her, and if it hadn't been for the condoms, he thought, they would never have been caught.

The boy had never loved the pregnant girl, Wendy. She had simply been the next in line for him. He was screwing one of her best friends when she met him. He had always thought it was the reason she was interested.

“So what's the deal with you and Vicki?” she said.

“We're just friends,” the boy said. “Why?”

“That's funny. I've heard her say the same thing to other people. But I know more than they do.”

“What?”

“I’ve heard about you. And I’m just saying that if you two really ain’t together, I might be interested in you taking me somewhere sometime.”

Just like that, this girl came into his life. He thought she looked pretty good, and he liked how straightforward she was. “I bet you I’ll be fucking her soon,” he told one of his friends.

Patrick’s relationship with his mother had suffered since his breakup with Debbie. He blamed her, he blamed Debbie’s mother. He thought she would understand the urges of a seventeen year old, but she proved unforgiving in this case. She grounded him for six full weeks. No hanging out with friends, no telephone. It was right before Christmas break when it happened, which meant that he was completely isolated from friends for nearly a month. He tried to devise ways to see her. He thought of calling her after his family had gone to bed, but his mother took the phone off the hook in her bedroom. He thought of sneaking out of the house, pushing his truck into a roll on the street in front, and waiting until he got out of hearing range to crank it. But his keys were in the drawer of his mother’s nightstand. In retrospect, it wouldn’t have mattered. Debbie was at her grandparents’ house, in another state, for Christmas. By the time he actually saw her again, Debbie had moved on, and so the boy had no other choice than to do the same.

He resented his mother even more after the six-week confinement ended. His rebellion started at school. He stopped applying himself in his classes. He had always clowned, but now he actually made an effort to fail. He stopped doing homework; he

refused to take tests in class. He started smoking. He started drinking. He started pursuing a different type of girl. He snuck out at night sometimes to spend some time with these girls.

The first time he had unprotected sex with a girl—Sherry Colvin was her name—he decided he would never use protection again. They had been fooling around in the dark behind her cousin’s trailer one night, and he was shocked when she just put it in her. It made all the difference. He found the new sensations quite enjoyable, to say the least. Sherry turned out to be a regular for a while.

Patrick had sex with Wendy the first time at his friend Vance’s house. He had done Wendy’s friend Vicki and, after drinking some more, had dozed off in the bed with her. Wendy had stayed the night that night and had been with Vance. They bumped into each other in the wee hours of the morning on the way to the bathroom, where they had sex. Patrick cleaned himself up afterward and got back in the bed with Vicki. Within a couple of weeks, Patrick and Wendy were doing it with each other regularly.

Wendy preferred doing it in Patrick’s truck. She liked to do it on dirt roads. Within a few more weeks, he did her more than he did any of the others. Over time he even got a little lazy about pulling out. Wendy didn’t mind. She had done it with other boys and never had reason to worry. Like some of her friends, she assumed it wouldn’t happen to her. On top of that, she liked the way it felt when he went in her.

Her mother found out on a Wednesday. The girl walked in the door from school and the mother, more lucid than usual, asked her if she had put on some weight. The girl said no. It then occurred to the mother what it was. She told her daughter to take off the bulky sweater she was wearing. The girl confessed everything.

Patrick arrived home from his friend's house that afternoon. He had been drinking, and he assumed there would be time for the buzz to wear off before dinner, as usual. As he walked through the door, he saw the girl and her mother sitting in the living room with his mother. The girl stared down at her feet, emotionless. Her mother looked wearier than usual. Her complexion was sallow, and short quick coughs rattled inside her chest. His mother's expression was more frantic in nature. She sat on the edge of her chair with her hands under her legs and rocked back and forth. Her hair was loosely pulled back, and her eyes were simultaneously full of anger and despair.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Patrick?”

They had caught him off-guard.

“About what?” he said.

His mother sat completely still. She glared at the boy and breathed deeply as he turned his back to close the front door. She had not realized how long his hair had gotten.

Patrick took his time closing the door. He hadn't thought this day would come so soon. With his back still turned, he wiped one foot at a time on the doormat. He felt his face turning red. He felt his pulse in his ears.

“Don't play dumb, Patrick. I am not in the mood,” his mother said. “Now tell me what's going on.”

He started biting the inside of his bottom lip, as he was prone to do when he was nervous. He made eye contact with his mother, then quickly looked away. He looked at the girl, who did not return a glance. Her mother's bleak expression gave him a strange sense of calm. There was no wiggle room this time. No more nervousness and hiding. No more false hope.

The boy, made slightly more courageous by the alcohol, said, "Well, mom, it is what it is."

The girl's mother, her glance fixed onto the other side of the room, slowly nodded her head. She didn't dislike Patrick. She had experienced this same kind of situation before, when she was just a bit younger than these two. It had happened to her sister.

"Do you realize what you've done?" the boy's mother said. "The disgrace you've brought on this family?" She paused momentarily to wipe her nose. "Your father will be humiliated. You've probably cost him business."

The boy stood silently.

"He'll be home soon. I'll let you tell him," she said. Her eyes were red, but her jaw was also clenched.

The girl's mother broke her silence. "The wedding will have to be pretty quick. She's pretty far along."

His mother seemed to be playing out the possibilities in her mind when the boy lost his head.

“What are you talking about?” he said, looking over at the girl’s mother. “Did she not tell you? How could I even know if it’s mine? Did she tell you I’m not the only one? She’s been screwing other guys all along.”

The girl looked up for the first time. She couldn’t believe he said it. Both mothers awaited a response from her. She looked at the boy, who was biting his lip more frequently now. Tears formed in the girl’s eyes.

“Now don’t give me that shit, boy,” the girl’s mother said. “You take responsibility for what you did.”

Patrick had always regarded his father more highly than he did his mother. To him, his father was more caring, compassionate. He had attempted to soften the mother’s feelings regarding the Debbie situation, but both mothers together had created an impenetrable front, and the matter was settled. In the months afterward, it was always his mother who drove around in her housecoat looking for him when he missed curfew. It was always his mother who punished him. He heard her talk relentlessly to his father about being more assertive with him. But his father maintained his passivity. It was almost as if there was a fragile alliance between the boy and his father. Maybe the man recognized a part of his younger self in his son. Or maybe his wife simply made his decisions for him.

The boy didn’t have to tell his father the news when he got home from work. The mother beat him to the punch. The father stared at his wife in disbelief. He loosened his

tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. He fixed his gaze on the carpet and slowly shook his head.

“Are you going to say something to him this time, John?” the mother said. “Or are you just going to do what you normally do?”

The father moved his eyes from his wife over to his son. “What are you planning on doing now?” he said.

The boy, worn out from the afternoon’s turn of events, slumped a little more in his chair. His father’s helpless expression sucked out his last bit of defiance. “I don’t know,” the boy said.

“He says he isn’t planning on marrying her,” the mother said, making her way to the door. She looked back at the boy. “You two can talk about that for a while, I bet. I have to finish making supper.” She paused for a moment. “I’m sure your little brother is getting hungry by now.”

The father sat in the seat closest to his son. The boy noticed how worn out his father seemed. The man took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. His face was much older looking now than it had been the last time his son had seen him without his glasses. The skin on his jaw sagged. His eyes were more sunken. Moving slowly and deliberately, he wiped his glasses with his shirt. He put his glasses back on.

“Patrick,” he said. “You know I try to do what’s best for your mom and you boys. I try to provide for you as best I can, and I try to make sure you don’t go without having the things you need.”

The boy nodded.

“And your mother and I have tried to bring you up in a Christian home and teach you good morals and Christian values.” The father’s expression grew even more plaintive. He looked at his son’s face, the long hair covering the outside corners of his eyes. He thought about how young his son was. The father was at a loss for what to say to him.

“I know the past few months must have been unbearable, you trying to keep this secret and all.” He reached over the arm of the chair and patted his son’s hand.

The boy could hear his mother and little brother talking in the other room. From where he was sitting, he could see out the window, the yard and pets and bicycles and everything his father had worked to provide for his family. The gravity of his situation now became apparent. He was scared. And at that moment, he wished he could take back all the things he’d done to cause this man grief.

“It’s been really tough, Dad.”

The two sat in silence for a while. They watched the day’s last gleams of light disappear behind the trees, and then they looked out some more.

The mother popped her head in the door and saw the two of them sitting there.

“John. Supper’s about ready.” She lingered for a moment before closing the door back.

The troubled expression returned to the father’s face. He continued looking straight ahead.

“Patrick, listen,” he said. “We’re in a tight one. You know your mother wanted you out of the house before. And now, well, there’s this. She’s put her foot down. You really have to go this time.”

The boy already knew this time was different. He had pushed his luck too many times. There was hardly a point in protesting.

“Dad.” The boy grew more visibly upset. “Please don’t do this. I don’t have anywhere to go.”

The father straightened his back in his chair. He had promised himself to keep his resolve the next time. “Look, you’re going to be a father. You’ll have to provide for your own family now. Like I’ve done for this family. Don’t worry. I can probably pull some strings and get you a job in town.”

The boy swallowed hard. “What about school?” he asked.

The thought of the boy having to grow up so quickly, so much faster than he should have had to, saddened the father. The boy had received more end of the year achievement awards than any other student in his class in elementary school. Even middle school. The father had been so proud. Had imagined the boy going off to a big university, making something of himself.

“School? How do you expect to go to school and support a child? Working afternoons bagging groceries? Besides, you’re failing.”

“I’m not going to support it. It was just a mistake. She was never even my girlfriend.” The boy wiped his eyes. “I messed up, Dad.”

The father stood up and looked at the boy. He motioned for him to stand up. When the boy obeyed, the father put his arms around him. He was surprised to see that the boy's shoulders very nearly reached his.

"You did, son," the father said. "But don't ever say you aren't going to support that child again. It's your responsibility to provide for that girl and that baby. Life's going to be a lot different now."

For another brief moment, the two of them stood there in silence. Both seemed to be lost in their own thoughts, uncertain of what would come next.

The boy thought of impossible things. He wished he would wake up in the morning and the last few months would all have been a dream. There would be no Wendy, no baby, no being kicked out on the street. He thought of how all of it was his mother's fault. She had kept him from being with Debbie; everything else had happened as a result. He blamed his father for letting her do it.

Patrick let go of his father and took a step back. The father told the boy he could spend the night at a friend's house and that they would talk more about getting his things the next day when the mother would be more composed. The boy left his house through the back door, avoiding his mother. In his pocket was the twenty dollars his father had given him.

He met up with Vance and told him what had gone down. They got some beer and drove around drinking and smoking for a while and then went back to Vance's. Vance called up Vicki and told her to grab one or two of her friends and come over for an

impromptu party. In the meantime, the boys opened a couple more cans of beer and drank them and listened to the radio.

Vicki came over a little later, ready to have some fun. She had a friend with her. Sandra was her name. Vicki said a couple more people might be coming over later. The four of them drank a few together. After Patrick started feeling a little more easygoing, the girls asked him some questions. Things about what had gone on earlier in the day, mostly. After a while, Vicki and Vance started getting into things on Vance's couch, so Patrick and Sandra sat together in the recliner. They got to know each other a little better. She asked him if he was sure he wasn't with Wendy, and he said yes.

JERRY BRUCKHEIMER, ACTION FILM SUPERPRODUCER

Jerry's alarm clock begins buzzing violently. It's 5:59 A.M. He sits straight up in bed, completely disoriented. There's a beautiful blonde woman, naked, still asleep to his left. The red silk pillowcase accentuates the poutiness of her lips. "Jesus, what did I *do* last night?" he thinks to himself. He pulls the sheet away from his waist ever so slightly, just enough to reveal his own nakedness. Score. In the event the beauty awakens, he takes a moment to chub it up, but only just a little. He then turns his attention back to the alarm clock. As he reaches for it, the minute changes and *BOOM!* The clock explodes. The woman wakes up terrified, but Jerry is able to calm her down with kisses and shhhs. He bangs her, and then he calls Nick Cage to tell him about it.

Jerry's alarm clock clicks on, the soothing voices of the local adult contemporary radio DJs lulling him back to sleep. He reaches over and hits the snooze button. He's awake now, but he'll continue to lie in bed until the alarm goes off again in nine minutes. Feeling slightly chilled, he pulls the sheets back up around his neck. He stares at the ceiling, then at the chandelier his wife had insisted on putting in the bedroom. He doesn't see the point of it. "What if somebody was trying to rob us or kill us for some reason?" he had asked her. "All of those shards of glass would fall from the ceiling and stick in us, maybe in our necks or hearts, or our faces."

"Jerry, you're being ridiculous," she said. "I like it and I want it. Why do you always try to get out of doing anything for me? You only care about yourself."

Jerry looks over at his wife now. One side of her face is smashed into the pillow while the visible side bares a visible frown. He decides to go ahead and get up.

He goes into the bathroom and, as always, reaches for his beard trimmer first thing. He sets it to level one, the five-day stubble setting. He's in the middle of erasing yesterday's growth when he hears his wife's voice coming from the bedroom. He turns off his handheld device and sets it down on the marble counter. Sheepishly peeking around the corner of the door, Jerry holds his breath, hoping to hear his wife's snores.

"Did you say something, Linda?" he whispers through the opening.

"Close the door," she says, her eyes still shut. After a loud sigh, she forcefully turns back over in the bed.

"Sorry."

Sometimes the bathroom door doesn't catch when he closes it and it comes back open a little bit and then the beard trimmer noise wakes his wife up. He tries to remember to make sure that it caught, but sometimes, first thing in the morning, he's a bit groggy and forgets to double check. He makes sure the door catches this time. He even tugs on the handle without turning it. It's definitely closed.

Jerry turns around to walk back toward the sink and finish his trim. But there's a man wearing black from head to toe, crouched down on the other side of the sink. All Jerry can see is his gray eyes, narrowed into slits.

"How did you get in here? What do you want?" Jerry says.

The man says nothing in return. And then, without provocation, the man lunges at Jerry. Armed with nothing but a towel and a Norelco T765, Jerry proceeds to defend himself. The stranger lands a strong punch to his stomach. He hits Jerry several more times, backing him up against the door. Jerry swings wildly and misses. The man grabs for Jerry's trimmer and tries to wrest it out of his possession, but he loses his grip, the trimmer falling to the floor. Jerry fights back. He lands a couple of punches to the man's kidneys, but the man is unfazed. Jerry then grabs the ceramic soap dish and shatters it on the man's head. This fazes him. The momentum has now shifted. Jerry punches and kicks at the man, pushing him to the other side of the bathroom. Jerry beats him down into a fetal position in the corner. The man is no longer trying to attack, so Jerry takes a moment to catch his breath.

"Now tell me who sent you," he says.

Jerry doesn't notice the man's arm, which is slowly moving toward his combat boot. Suddenly, the man reaches down and pulls out a knife. He lunges. Jerry jumps out of the way, and the man rips a deep gash into the shower curtain. He lunges again, and this time he's able to wrestle Jerry down to the floor. The man is on top of Jerry and it appears that he is also stronger. He inches the knife closer and closer to Jerry's chest. Jerry is pushing the man's arms away as hard as he can. He's grunting and sweating profusely. Try as he may, he can't seem to get the upper hand.

But then, just as he feels he's done for, he starts to repel the man. He's growing stronger. He can only see the man's eyes through the ski mask, but they appear frightened. The man begins to panic. He drops the knife and runs toward the window.

Just as he's about to jump out, Jerry picks up the knife and throws it. It sticks in the man's back and he falls through the window. Jerry gets up off the floor and walks to the window. He can make out the form of a body lying motionless on the ground. The light from the bathroom reflects off of the tiny pieces of broken glass lying around the form. Jerry takes a moment to regain his composure. He finishes his trim, scoots the shattered soap dish to the side with his foot, then climbs into the shower.

Jerry sits down at the breakfast table in his jeans and black t-shirt. His orange juice is freshly squeezed, already poured, his toast crisp and perfectly brown. He likes a bit of burnt crust, too. A selection of cereal boxes has been placed before him, most of them containing bran flakes. Linda makes him eat all this healthy food. "I'll refuse to be seen in public with you the day you begin to look like George Lucas," she often tells him. He asks the maid for the day's newspaper. His fourteen-year-old stepdaughter is already seated at the table, eating a bowl of cereal and watching television.

"Hey, Alexandra."

Alexandra swallows her bite of cereal and slowly shifts her eyes from the TV over to him. She takes another bite of cereal. She looks back at the television. Jerry takes a sip of his orange juice.

"Whatcha watching?" Jerry says.

"CNN," the girl says without looking back at him. "It was on when I came downstairs," she sighs.

Jerry breathes out audibly and rubs his hands together as he surveys the cereal selection. “Anything good going on today?” he says.

“Politics, mostly.”

“That sucks, huh?”

“I guess.”

“No shootings or car wrecks or anything?”

“Nope.”

“I guess there’ll be days like that. Say, Alexandra, can you pass me the Wheaties?” Jerry says.

She reaches over and moves the cereal box about eight inches to where Jerry can reach it.

“I see you aren’t eating the Pirates of the Caribbean cereal today. Are we out?”

“No. It’s right there.” She casually points her finger to the end of the cereal row, never glancing away from the television.

“I thought it was your favorite. How come you aren’t eating it?”

The girl sighs deeply. “Look,” she says, “I’m getting a little too old for that kind of stuff. I’m tired of Pirates of the Caribbean cereal just like I’m tired of the dolls and the posters and the Halloween costumes and the autographed Orlando Bloom pictures.” She puts her spoon down and begins to get up from the table.

“But your mom said...”

“Mom says lots of things,” she says as she walks out of the room.

Jerry looks down at his cereal and then at the maid, who is picking up Alexandra's dishes to take to the sink.

"Geez, what's gotten into her?" he says.

The maid walks to the sink and begins rinsing the dishes without responding. Jerry takes another bite of Wheaties and glances down at the neatly folded newspaper. He looks back up at the television.

"Hey Maria, can you hand me the remote? I'm going to turn it to something good."

Thirty minutes and one *Baywatch* episode later, Jerry realizes it's time to go into work. He walks up the stairs to get his socks, sneakers, Pearl Harbor baseball cap, leather jacket. As he ascends, he thinks to himself "Maybe I'll take the jet into work today," and laughs. His smile quickly fades, though, as he wonders whether he hid the jet fuel well enough. If it got into the wrong hands...

He slowly and quietly opens the bedroom door. Linda is sitting up in the bed now with a freshly poured drink on the nightstand.

"What is it, Jerry?" she says.

"Sorry. I'm just trying to get ready for work," he says as he squats to open the drawer containing his socks. He stands up and walks toward his closet to grab his jacket. She gazes in the other direction.

"Do you need anything before I go?"

"No."

He walks toward the door. He looks back at her. She stares into her half empty glass. He walks out and closes the door behind himself. He sits on the top step and puts on his socks, then his shoes. He descends the stairs.

“Maria, I don’t want a driver today. I think I’m going to take the Porsche, or maybe the Aston Martin. Will you unlock the cabinet with the keys in it?”

He hasn’t driven in a while. He likes the freedom of the open road. Although the car is an automatic, he manually shifts gears. But as he gets closer to the city, the traffic slows almost to a stop. This doesn’t bother Jerry too much. After all, he doesn’t have a specific time to be at work. He just turns up the stereo.

Out here in the fields, I fight for my meals

I get my back into my living

I don't need to fight to prove I'm right

And I don't need to be forgiven

Singing along, Jerry pays little attention to the other vehicles on the road. He suddenly realizes he has misjudged the speed of the car in front of him and has to slam on brakes. He narrowly avoids hitting it.

But his car isn’t so lucky. The car behind him, a Hummer, has nicked the back of his Porsche. Jerry pulls over into the emergency lane. He turns down the stereo and puts his car in park. He gets out to assess the damage. As he approaches the back of his car, the Hummer swerves to the left, into the median, and back into the emergency lane in front of him, then speeds away. Now angered, Jerry jumps back in his car to pursue the vehicle. He quickly catches up, but the Hummer shows no sign of stopping. Both

vehicles speed past the unmoving traffic. A very young passenger in one of the stopped cars, a minivan, watches. “Mommy, mommy, where are those cars going?” A young man driving a hatchback and listening to his music too loud says “What the...?”

The Hummer turns onto the expressway with Jerry in hot pursuit. As the Hummer drives ever more recklessly, Jerry considers giving up the chase, but then he sees a young woman, blonde, wearing a gag, a red one, and hitting the back window with the palm of her hand. “Please help,” she seems to be trying to say.

The Hummer crosses the median and zips through oncoming traffic. Cars veer left and right in their attempts to avoid a head-on collision. Jerry stays close behind the vehicle. A car dodges the Hummer and runs into the side of another car. Careening down the highway in the wrong direction, Jerry and the Hummer driver only glimpse the backs of the bright, neon orange caution signs – Construction Zone, Speeding Fines Increased. A man in a yellow hardhat holding an orange SLOW sign has to dive out of the way to avoid being hit by the Hummer. Other construction workers gather to shake their fists at the two offenders.

A police car locates the action, turns on its sirens, and gets behind Jerry’s car. The three vehicles rip through the construction site. An oncoming car hits a concrete barricade and sparks fly in every direction. Another car hits a gravel patch and spins out of control. Suddenly, the Hummer takes a sharp left, and Jerry does the same. The police car reacts slowly, however. It goes straight for several more feet, but the two wheels on the passenger side go onto a construction ramp while the other two wheels stay on the road. The car flies off the ground and hangs in the air for several seconds. While

in the air, the back end of the car rises up and the car lands on its roof and skids across the ground. Brilliant white sparks spray out from the bottom of the car. Some fly into Jerry's windshield. The police car skids to a halt, the driver barely conscious. He tugs at his seatbelt, breaks the driver-side window with his elbow. He can smell the leaking fluid; a slow puddle of dark, black liquid pools around the tires. The policeman slithers through the window and breaks into a trot – his foot is badly injured. Suddenly, the sparks ignite and the car explodes. The burst of flames illuminates the faces of the onlookers. The policeman dives forward, landing forcefully on his chest.

Jerry thinks about stopping, but he can't forget his *raison d'être*. The Hummer is barreling forward through traffic and, with all of the commotion, Jerry loses track of the chase.

"Damn," he says.

Jerry's cell phone rings and he looks down at the screen. It's his home number. He grimaces a little as he says hello. It's Maria. She tells him Linda is throwing her things in, or at, a suitcase and that she's telling her she has to help. He asks how upset she is. The maid responds that she's very upset. She says she's very angry. Jerry breathes deeply and scratches his beard. He tells Maria to give his wife one of her pills. He says that should calm her down. He tells her to call him back if she has any more problems. Jerry hangs up the phone. He looks out over the expanse of vehicles and skyscrapers and blue skies above. He ponders what he can do to get things back on track

at home. After several minutes, he decides it has to be a grand gesture of some sort.

Then he calls Nick Cage.

“Nick, it’s Jerry.”

“Oh, hey Jerry. Where are you, man? *People* magazine is down here on the set asking me some questions about *National Treasure III* and I don’t know how much of the plot you want to give away.”

“The what?”

“The plot. Is my phone breaking up?”

“Not that I can tell.”

“Good, because I just went to the phone place yesterday and they said they had the most powerful network and I said good because I get some pretty important calls and I don’t want my phone service just cutting out on me.”

“It sounds pretty clear to me.”

“I ended up staying in there for a while, though, trying to figure out if I want my nighttime minutes to start at seven or at nine. I started thinking, who do I call between seven and nine? And is it really worth the extra cash to have my minutes start two hours earlier? What do you have, Jerry?”

“Well, I hope it’s seven because that’s about the time Michael Bay and I brainstorm about movies we’re going to make. By the way, there’s this really great movie idea I came up with...”

“Can I be in it?”

“Yeah. So anyway, this guy’s alarm clock goes off and just as he reaches for it...”

“Hey, hold on a second, Jerry. This reporter is still trying to ask me stuff. What can we tell her about this movie that isn’t a top priority secret?”

“Well, in this one we’re trying to find the Ark of the Covenant. See, it’s packed away somewhere in a big warehouse that’s got rats and stuff in it, and we’ve got to try and find it.”

“Okay, Jerry hold on.” Nick moves his mouth a couple of inches away from his phone and says, “Well, in this one we’re trying to find the, uh...”

“Ark of the Covenant.”

“The Ark of the Covenant. It’s buried under this warehouse and we have to find it.” He turns his attention back to Jerry. “Okay, Jerry. Anything else I should tell them?”

“Yeah. Tell them that it’s a high-stakes, no holds barred, thrill ride.”

He tells her.

“Okay, Jerry. One more thing. She’s asking me what we hope to achieve by making a third installment of the National Treasure series.”

Jerry thinks about it for a minute.

“Just tell her this,” he says. “We are in the transportation business. We transport audiences from one place to another.”

Jerry arrives at the office after lunch and sits down at his desk. Within seconds, a long-legged blonde wearing a pencil skirt and jacket walks in with the day's mail. As the woman walks briskly toward him, Jerry can't help but notice the light blue silk cami underneath her jacket.

"Hi there," Jerry says. He leans back in his chair slightly.

"Hello Mr. Bruckheimer," she says, setting the bundle on his desk. "It looks like you've got quite a few new scripts and things to read through today."

"Wow, that's a lot," he says. "Say, you wouldn't want to help me with these, would you?"

"I wish I could, Mr. Bruckheimer," she says, pausing momentarily before turning back toward the door. "But they've got me doing a million things today."

"Who does? Is it Bay? I'll get him on the phone right now."

Jerry grabs his office phone and brings the receiver toward his ear.

"Thank you for offering, sir, but really, it's fine. It's my job. Maybe some other time?" she says, forcing a smile.

"You sure?" he says, looking at her and then the receiver.

She looks at the receiver and then at Jerry and nods.

"Well, okay," he says, hanging up the phone. He makes eye contact again and smiles. "See you around, then."

She begins to open the door but suddenly lets go of the handle and turns back to face him.

“Mr. Bruckheimer,” she says, “I can’t go on like this. I knew from the moment I met you that I had to be yours. It was fate, I think.” She sits down on the edge of his desk. “Or maybe destiny.”

Jerry shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Then he notices her fantastic curves.

“Mr. Bruckheimer, I have to get you to see where I’m coming from. It’s just that ever since my brother died, I’ve really needed a strong man around, a man who makes me feel safe. And you’re that man. I see the way you are around the office and I go down to your sets every time I get a chance. And I even go see all of your movies, because I don’t wanna miss a thing you do, Jerry. May I call you Jerry?”

“Of course you can,” he says.

She smiles. Jerry smiles back. She inches closer.

“You’re so warm and caring, Jerry. The movies you make give the world hope. They make people want to live to fight another day. You just share so much of yourself with everyone else and I…” Her eyes begin to water. “I want to share something with you. Because, Jerry, I…”

She pauses and looks away. She takes a deep breath and looks back at him.

“I love you. I love you, Jerry. There, I said it and now it’s out in the open.”

Jerry sits silently for a moment. He sees how she’s sitting there, so beautiful, and so vulnerable.

“Don’t cry. Come here,” Jerry says, motioning with his hands.

She walks over, sits in his lap, and turns to face him. He smells her hair and the back of her neck for a moment before putting his arms around her and pulling her close.

“Oh Jerry, please hold me for a while...and then have me. Jerry, I want you to have me.”

He holds her tightly, then reaches up to brush her hair out of her eyes. He wipes the tears away with the back of his hand and runs his fingers through her hair. They kiss. Jerry keeps one hand around her while gently unbuttoning her jacket with the other. She helps him take the jacket off. She turns and straddles him and raises her arms so that he can take her shirt off. She passionately kisses him once more and then stands up, drops the skirt, and turns around.

Jerry fingers through the numerous movie scripts and pitches for films or TV shows, only glancing at every third item. He sees a few worth looking at more closely.

Mr. Bruckheimer,

I have a movie idea to pitch, and I'd really like to see what you think. It's about a rodeo champion who becomes involved in gambling with a guy he doesn't know is in an untouchable crime organization. When he can't bring himself to take the fall in a competition he was told to lose, he disappears. Now it's up to his twin brother, fresh out of jail for stealing cars, to straighten up his act and find his brother. The only problem is that he's suffering from kidney failure and his missing brother is the only person in the city with the same blood type. So he's forced to start stealing cars again, but now it's to save his brother's life...and his own. He doesn't find his brother in time and dies, but then an old scientist who once worked on top-secret military projects finds him and rebuilds part of his body out of manmade material. Steel mostly. He comes back to life and wreaks havoc on the crime family, blowing up their cars and yachts and houses until they finally give back his brother. The rodeo champion is both happy and sad to see his brother, because although he saved his

life, he's only part human now. The rodeo champion knows there's only one thing to be done. So they go back to the old doctor and he performs the kidney transplant. Now with a working kidney, the decision is up to the brother. Does he want to be superhuman or does he want to be a regular guy again? He decides to be a regular guy so he and his brother can hang out and it won't be weird. After all, they have a lot of catching up to do because of the whole prison/kidnapping thing. So everything ends up okay and the old doctor even lets the brother put him in his "5" in case he ever needs to be a man machine again. I don't really have a working title for the project yet, but if you could think of one, I'd be okay with that. How about *Vanished in 8 Seconds*? Do you like that? The most amazing thing about this project, Mr. Bruckheimer, is that you can have one actor play both of the lead roles, because they're twins. I was thinking about somebody with a strong background in movies of this type. You know what I'm saying? Anyway, just have your people get in touch with my people and maybe we can get a go on this thing. Or you could just call me. Or I could call you.

Yours Truly,

Vin Diesel

Jerry looks up and to the left for a moment while still holding the letter in his hands. "I know who would be perfect for this," he thinks to himself. "And he'd really like that part at the end about the phones. Hell, he could probably even do some improv about the nighttime minutes thing he was talking about."

He adds it to the "Yes" pile. He flips through the stack some more. A reality show pitch catches his eye:

Gladiator

Premise: The show's producers are granted access to the most dangerous death row inmates in America. The inmates are then given an ultimatum. If they waive all of their human rights by signing a legally-binding form, they will have the opportunity to fight for their freedom. The show will start with sixteen fighters and each week two inmates will fight, gladiator-style, on the Coliseum-like set with the week's randomly selected weapons. One gladiator will be "terminated" each week until the season finale, which will be a 3-way fight, with the winner being awarded his choice of defense attorney for a chance at an appeal. Pay-per-view only. Government approval pending.

"Linda would kill me if I made this show," he thinks. He decides to put it on the back burner for now. He looks down and notices his message button blinking on his phone. He picks up the phone and calls Rose, his secretary, because he likes her to tell him the messages rather than listen to them himself.

"It was your wife, Mr. Bruckheimer. She says she needs you to pick Alexandra up from school today."

"Oh, okay. Did she say why? Is everything alright?"

"Yes sir, everything's fine. Maybe you should listen to the message, though."

"Oh Rose, just tell me what it says."

The secretary cups her other hand around the bottom of the phone and says, "It's more of the same, Mr. Bruckheimer. Slurring and cursing about neglect and other women...some really bad things. Please, sir, why don't you listen to it?"

"Because it's better coming from you."

He places his elbows on his desk and rests his head in one hand. He looks across the room and fixes his gaze on one particular picture. It's Jerry and Linda and Alexandra—who's quite small, about seven—on a boat off the coast of Spain, celebrating a shooting wrap up. They're all wearing sunglasses and smiling. Linda has on a red sundress and Alexandra is holding a Spanish doll that she would hardly let out of her sight for what must have been three years. He knows they've had their ups and downs since then, but every time it gets really bad, something comes around and picks it back up again. He just has to figure out what to do this time.

Confident that he'll come up with something, Jerry turns back to his paperwork. He flips through several more items and lands on a pitch for *G Force*, in which a specially trained squad of guinea pigs is dispatched to stop a diabolical billionaire from taking over the world. "Hmm, one for the kids," he thinks. "Oh, why not," he says aloud. He places it in the "Yes" pile.

Then, suddenly, a hot pink cover catches his eye. "Now what in the hell is this doing in here?" he thinks. He pulls the screenplay out of the stack and on the front, in red cursive ink, is written *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. The name seems familiar to him, but he finds himself wondering who would have the nerve to send something like this to him. Tim Firth, Tracey Jackson, Sophie Kinsella. The names don't ring a bell.

"Fucking chick lit. I'll bet nothing happens at all," he thinks. He flips quickly through the pages. "But there could be maybe a curbside bombing or something like that while they're shopping."

Then it occurs to him where he's seen the book. "This book is at the house," he says. Linda read it. He remembers her buying it at the airport before one of their trips and talking to him about it on the plane. He doesn't remember what she said at all, but he remembers the pink cover. And he remembers Alexandra asking to read it even before she was old enough.

Involuntarily, he almost tosses it aside, but something in the back of his mind causes him to continue flipping through the pages. He thinks of his wife at home right now and how they've lost touch. And Alexandra, too. If he made this movie, he thinks he could get things back to the way they were before, like they were in the photograph. He knows he's made mistakes in his family life, but could making this film bring them back to his corner?

He casually glances back at the pictures on his wall—posing in kevlar vests with Will Smith and Martin Lawrence, standing on the bar with the Coyote Ugly girls, walking through smoldering plane wreckage in sleeveless shirts with Nick Cage. What would his associates think of the decision he's mulling over right now? He wonders if Nick would be interested in doing something in a movie like this, but soon realizes that, no, Nick's too hard for that. And though he trusts that Nick will respect his decision, he knows that some of the guys will poke fun at him. He doesn't even want to see Bay's face. But he decides that this time it isn't about image—it's about family. He sits idly for a few more minutes and then, triumphantly, says, "I'll make it. For Linda. I'll make it."

Jerry looks down at his watch and realizes it's time to pick his stepdaughter up from school. He puts on his leather jacket and Pearl Harbor baseball cap and picks up the "Yes" pile from his desk. On his way out of the building, he stops by his secretary's desk to hand her his selections and have her contact the parties involved.

"Here you go, Rose," he says. "See you tomorrow." He turns and begins walking toward the exit.

"Sir," she says, holding up the pink screenplay. "Surely you didn't mean to include this one," she says jokingly.

Jerry looks at her, straight-faced, wide-eyed. He swallows hard. His secretary's grin quickly melts away, her chuckle transforming into a nervous throat-clearing.

Jerry looks around at the other secretaries and various office workers in the room. Many are peering in his direction. Now others are looking. Typing noise and chatter levels have decreased considerably. One receptionist, not having looked up, continues to chat away on her telephone. The receptionist next to her kicks her foot. Receptionist number one frowns at her neighbor, who casually points at Jerry.

"I'm going to have to call you back," she says.

Noticing that his palms are suddenly sweaty, Jerry wipes them on his pants. He takes a deep breath. Everyone else in the room does the same.

"Yes, Rose," he says. "Yes I did." He takes another breath and nods in affirmation. "I'm going to make *Confessions of a Shopaholic*," he says. He pauses. "Actually, I'm going to need that back from you. I want to take it home and give it a closer reading tonight."

The secretary, shocked, hands Jerry the screenplay. For a brief moment, there's perfect silence. Then, an intern puts down a stack of files and begins to clap, slowly at first, then gaining momentum as others join in. Another intern has the foresight to turn up the John Williams score already playing through his monitor. The first receptionist blots at the corner of her eye with a Kleenex, while the second furiously presses the numbers on her phone. Bay's personal assistant shakes his head in disgust before being promptly escorted out of the room by two security guards.

Script in hand, Jerry holds his head high and walks toward the door. As he exits, he hears someone behind him calling his name. He turns back. It's the blonde.

"Mr. Bruckheimer," she says, walking briskly toward him. "I'm really sorry to bother you."

"It's alright. What can I do for you?"

"I'm kind of embarrassed, actually," she laughs. "I just realized I've seen you almost every day since I started here and I've never introduced myself. I'm Lily," she says, reaching out her hand.

EIGHTEENTH

“One of these days you’re going to leave and we won’t be here when you come back,” she said.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he said.

“What do you think it means?” she said.

“You’re being dramatic,” he said.

The boy squinted to see the road as the afternoon sunlight beamed through the dusty windshield. The girl sat next to him, having refused to get out of his truck. Both had been silent since. After several minutes, the girl reached into her purse and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She rolled down the window a few inches, put one to her lips, and lit it. She inhaled, exhaled, then inhaled again.

He kept his eyes fixed straight ahead.

“You doing that around the baby?” he said.

She gazed out of the passenger window and exhaled.

“Following in your mother’s footsteps?” he said. “A lot of good it’s done her.”

The girl turned her head quickly toward him.

“Why are you being such an asshole?” she said.

“Because you shouldn’t be smoking. Just think about it.”

“So you can smoke but I can’t?” she said.

“I’m not the one whose mom has cancer,” he said.

“And you don’t spend enough time with the goddamn baby for *that* to make a difference, either, right?”

“And exactly how much time do *you* spend with her? You leave her for your mother to take care of all day while you go off to school and joke around with your friends. I go in to work at five every morning so you’ll have money to buy baby food and clothes and diapers,” he said. “And you’re spending it on cigarettes.”

The girl took a long puff and finished off the cigarette. She reached up to throw the butt out the window. She let go of the cigarette only to have it blow back in the truck and land somewhere behind the seat. She immediately turned around, placing her knees in the seat, and searched blindly for it.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Nothing,” she said. “The, uh, cigarette butt came back in the window.”

“What? Did you find it?”

“I’m looking for it.”

“Fuck, Wendy.”

He pulled the truck over onto the shoulder.

“You still haven’t found it?” he said.

“Help me look.”

“Just get out so I can slide the seat up. What are you doing? Hurry up!”

She opened the door and jumped out onto the embankment. He immediately slid the seat up and rummaged through various items, mostly empty beer cans, some crushed, some not. He found the cigarette and quickly threw it out of the open passenger door. As

she prepared to get back in the truck, he held up the jacket he had left behind the seat and revealed a half-dollar-sized hole the burning cigarette had left in the arm.

“Look at what you did,” he said. “Why don’t you pay attention to what you’re doing sometimes?”

“I’m sorry, Patrick. It’s not like I meant to,” she said as she got back into the truck.

“That was my only decent coat. Now what am I supposed to do?” he said. “Just wear it like that?”

“I said I was sorry,” she said. “What else do you want me to say?”

He cranked the truck back up and pulled back onto the road. She adjusted her seat to where it had been before and put on her seatbelt. The sun was beginning to disappear behind the trees. The girl shivered and rubbed her hands briskly against her upper arms.

“Can I turn up the heat a little?” she said.

“That’s as high as it’ll go,” he said.

The road was all too familiar to him. It connected his place to hers. He knew all the curves in it and all of the houses alongside it. He had driven it early and late and had even once bragged to her that he could do it with his eyes closed. But the trips had become more infrequent over recent months, the familiarity of the road stirring altogether different emotions.

The boy continued staring straight ahead. The girl looked at his face for several seconds, but he never returned a glance. She sat quietly, seemingly lost in thought.

“Patrick,” she finally said.

“What?”

“How come you hardly ever come to see the baby and me anymore? She isn’t going to know you. Do you want her to grow up like that?”

“I told you. I go to work at five every morning so she’ll have what she needs.”

“Yeah, but you get off at two. You could come by in the afternoons.”

“After I’ve been working for eight hours?” he says. “I’m tired in the afternoons.”

“But you can hang out with your friends and drink beer? You choose them over us.”

“What do you want from me? We don’t live together. I told you I would come by when I can.”

“But you don’t. You come by once a week to drop off some money and you leave after twenty minutes. What would your dad say if he knew what you were doing?”

“What, are you going to call him and tell him?” he said. “Is that what you’re going to do?”

The boy clenched his jaw and tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

“You know what?” he said. “I’m not doing this.”

He stepped hard on the brake pedal and brought the truck to a stop in the middle of the road.

The girl's back stiffened and her eyes opened wide. She watched in disbelief as he shifted into reverse, made the three-point turn, and headed back the other way.

"But I thought..."

"No," he said. "I'm done talking."

"What about tonight? We're supposed to spend time together. It's my-"

"Not anymore."

"Please turn back around. We don't have to-"

"No."

Without thinking, she grabbed the steering wheel and began trying to turn it as the truck moved rapidly down the road.

"Wendy! Let go!" Patrick said, gripping the wheel tightly. "What are you doing?"

"Turn back around," she screamed.

The boy struggled to keep control of the vehicle. He tried prying her fingers off of it one at a time, but she refused to let go. "Wendy, stop it!" he yelled. "You're going to make us wreck."

"Don't take me back home. I want to stay with you. I don't want to go..."

Patrick then grabbed her wrist and twisted it as hard as he could. She let out a cry and pulled away from the steering wheel.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he said. "You could've killed us both." He looked over at her. She was crying and gently holding her wrist. "Don't ever do that again," he said.

The girl slouched back down in the seat and got very still. She alternated between staring at the clock on the dash and gazing out of the passenger window. She then noticed that they were within two miles of her house. She sniffed several times and brushed her hair away from her eyes. Staring straight ahead, she began to speak.

“I keep hoping you’re going to wake up one day and realize that you have a family and that you’re going to stop treating us like this.”

“Do we have to go through this again?” he said, looking at her with a pained expression.

“I don’t want you to say anything back. *I’m* talking,” she said, still crying.

He nodded and looked back at the road.

“Patrick, I know you’re still having fun with your friends and messing around with other girls, but it’s not that easy for me. You can go to work and come home and drink and never think about it,” she said as she wiped her nose on her shirt sleeve. “But I come home from school and every day, every single day, she’s there. I have no life. Nothing except the baby. I stay at home on the weekends with her and I wait for you to come by or call or do something. But you never do. I keep waiting on you to change, but you’re not going to. You’re never going to.”

She buried her face in her hands. The boy searched for something to say, something to make her feel better. But nothing came. He pulled into her driveway and slowed to a stop in front of her house. She wiped her eyes roughly with her sleeve, trying to make sure she got all of the smeared makeup off of her cheeks. She turned and made

eye contact with him. Neither spoke. She began crying again, but she didn't look away from him. Her mother, holding the baby, opened the door to the house.

She picked up her purse and opened the door of the truck. "You can come in and see her if you want to," she said.

The boy remained silent for a moment. Then he turned the engine off and got out.

PASTOR JOHN

The Call to Worship hymn concludes, and Pastor John sits back down in the armchair to the left of the pulpit. One of the deacons takes large, booming steps toward the front of the church to read the weekly announcements. He gives Pastor John a steely glance before turning to address the congregation. Pastor John thumbs through his Bible and hymnal to find his bulletin before realizing that he's sitting on it. He discreetly shifts his weight to one side and gives it a tug, but there's still too much weight on it. He leans over even farther, until the arm of the chair digs into his armpit, snatches the bulletin with his other hand, and sits quickly back up. He looks up and discovers that several people have been watching him.

The first thing Pastor John always notices is the multitude of expressions, mostly ranging from glum to smug. He needs only to look at the corners of the mouth. A downward turn indicates the former, while a slight upward turn indicates the latter. Pastor John counts the heads. He gets to 22, loses count, and starts again. 41. Only three children. One surly, pimply teenage boy. The rest are old, their hair various shades of white, gray, blue. One woman in the fourth row attempts to open a Butterscotch (Pastor John doesn't know if it's a Butterscotch, but he imagines that is what this woman has); the plastic crinkles and cracks, her arthritic fingers twisting and untwisting the wrapper. She coughs to hide the noise, but Brother Alvin is not deterred from the task at hand. "A spaghetti supper will be held Friday night to support our Troops and their families..."

Brother Alvin announces that Clarence and Judy Crawford will be having their fiftieth anniversary celebration in the fellowship hall this coming Saturday, the nineteenth, from two to four.

Pastor John looks down at his bulletin. He sees that the “weekly receipts given” column doesn’t match the “weekly budgeted needs” column. He skips down to the bottom of the list. “We are still looking for an interim youth minister,” it reads. “Discipleship training will be cancelled until further notice. If you would like to volunteer...” Nobody will volunteer. He still prays at times for the strength to forgive and to overcome the bitterness he felt after the church voted to deny Janice the position. They already paid the preacher, they’d said, so why should they pay his wife, too? He gazes out into the sanctuary, looks at the beautiful stained glass windows, and the deacons.

Brother Alvin asks if anyone has a prayer request. Betty Brown says Billy Nelson is having surgery on Wednesday. She doesn’t say what kind. Brother Alvin asks if there are any others. Frances Moseley says her cousin is having a rough go of it. Buck Savage says his brother-in-law has got a touch of the cancer. Brother Alvin says he’ll add them to the prayer list, then asks the congregation to bow their heads and think of those on the list as they go to the Lord in prayer.

In his sermon, Pastor John touches on several of the topics he knows so well. The road of excess, redemption, salvation. He ends with a rousing altar call for those who haven’t accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, for those who are lost, or for those who fear they have backslidden in their faith. The congregation sings the first two

stanzas of the invitation hymn, “I Surrender All.” Pastor John appeals to the organist and pianist to play through the song one more time. He pleads to the members of the congregation to come to the altar if they feel the Holy Spirit tugging at their hearts.

How is he supposed to find new members in this dead end town? Why are his regular churchgoers so unresponsive to his efforts to fill them with conviction? Where are the young people? How did he end up in this place? In this line of work? To hear his wife tell it:

“You were on death’s doorstep, dear. You were in the devil’s clutches. Alcohol and prescription drugs. You promised the Lord you would devote your life to spreading His Word if He saved you. He offered you salvation and grace and you accepted. And then you met me. At Bible Study, remember? You still had the casts on your legs.”

He remembers.

“You’re right, you’re right,” he says. “I just lose sight of the big picture in the day to day sometimes.” He reaches across the table for the salt and pepper and shakes the shakers one at a time over his chicken and rice casserole.

“You can never lose sight of the Lord, dear,” his wife says. “Why would you say such a thing?” She turns her head toward their three children—Joshua, 6; Matthew, 4; Christina, 2. “Matthew, you aren’t getting any Angel Food cake until you clean your plate.”

“But I don’t want any more. I’m full,” Matthew says.

“Then you don’t have any room for dessert,” she says, clearing her throat from a sip of tea. “You may be excused from the table.”

“Daddy, why’d you want to drink all that alcohol?” Joshua says. “It’s bad for you.”

“See, Janice? I don’t know why you have to talk about that in front of *them*. They’re old enough to repeat things they hear now,” Pastor John says.

“You don’t have anything to be ashamed of, John,” she says. “You were on the path to destruction, but you saw the light.”

“Like Paul,” Joshua says.

“Yes, Joshua, like Paul,” Janice says.

“But I want dessert,” Matthew says.

“Matthew, what did I say?” his mother says.

“His name was Saul,” Joshua says, “but on his way to Damascus...”

“No! I want dessert!” Matthew screams. He hits the table and begins to cry. His sister begins to cry.

The father stands halfway up and bangs his fist on the table. “Not another word, Matthew. Look at how you’ve upset your sister. Go to your room.”

“But I want...”

“Now!” He shakes his head and mutters “Jesus” as he sits back down. Matthew gets up and runs, screaming, away from the table. Christina cries harder. Janice is speechless for a moment before addressing her husband again.

“John, what’s the matter with you?” she says quietly.

“Forget it,” he says, rubbing his hand from side to side across his lower back.

“Is it your back again?” his wife says.

He frowns and nods.

“Why don’t you go get in your recliner?” she says. “I’ll bring you some Advil.”

Later in the evening, when the pain in his back has receded slightly, he gets up from the recliner to find Matthew and apologize for raising his voice at him over dinner. He peeks in the door to the room the boys share and discovers that Janice has already said prayers with them and tucked them in. Joshua is already sound asleep, but he notices Matthew turn his head toward the doorway and squint. After a few seconds, Matthew loudly whispers, “Daddy.”

“Shh, don’t wake up your brother,” John whispers back as he slips into the room and eases the door closed behind him. He feels his way through the darkness and sits down on the side of Matthew’s bed. Matthew sits completely up, looking concerned.

“Daddy, what is it?” he says, more quietly.

“I just came to check on you and tell you I’m sorry for yelling at you earlier. Do you forgive me?”

“I forgive you, Daddy,” he says. “Does your back feel better now?”

“It does,” he says, trying not to think too much about it. He moves his hand along the top of Matthew’s comforter until he feels one of his legs. He pats it a few times. “So you’re still my buddy?” he says.

“Still buddies,” Matthew says.

As he tucks his son back into bed, he asks him to promise to try really hard to listen to his mother and do what she says. Matthew promises he'll try. John tells him if he's really good, he'll take him driving one Saturday afternoon and they'll drink all the Pepsis and eat all the candy bars they want, just the two of them. He kisses him on the cheek and tells him goodnight. He walks over to Joshua's bed to straighten his covers, but they're still perfectly straight. He quietly leaves the room and closes the door. From the hallway, he can see Janice in their bedroom, ironing the clothes the children will wear to Vacation Bible School the next day.

On Tuesdays he visits the church members now living in the local nursing home. Some don't realize he's the current preacher at their former church. Some know who he is. Others don't know that they know. Mrs. Banks plays the piano at the 10 A.M. Tuesday service. Although he'd never say it to anyone, Pastor John thinks her playing is God-awful. Still, Mrs. Banks is more coherent than the others, and he finds her to be one of the most devout people he knows. He wonders why she's in here. She says her son does business in New York.

Pastor John preaches a variation of the same sermon to the nursing home residents every week. Deathbed salvation. He only has to tweak a few details to make it just different enough from the previous week's message. His mind starts to drift off in the middle of the sermon as he thinks about the things that are troubling him—how to spiritually rejuvenate his church congregation, how to stretch the income to cover the needs of Linda and the kids now that he knows she won't be getting the job, how to

bridge the growing gap between where he is in his current spiritual state and where he knows a man of faith should be.

He catches himself before very long and looks up from the lectern. Only a few people have noticed his trailing off. Many of them are asleep. Others are distracted by the excessive coughing of their neighbors. As he feels as though his very life force is leaving his body, he turns toward Mrs. Banks. She looks at him patiently, smiles, and nods. He clears his throat, readjusts the clip-on microphone, and continues the sermon. Instead of closing the service with the usual hymn, “I Surrender All,” he gets Mrs. Banks to break into a rousing rendition of “Love Lifted Me.” Still, a number of the congregation has to be woken up after the benediction.

“Another wonderful message, Pastor John,” Mrs. Banks says, picking up her hymnal from the piano and slowly standing upright. “How are those little ones of yours?”

He turns around to address her a bit too quickly and aggravates his back. “Oh, they’re a handful, Mrs. Banks,” he grimaces.

“I bet they are, Pastor John, I bet they are.” She looks at him for a moment. A concerned expression forms on her face. “Pastor John, is everything alright?” she says. “You seem troubled.”

He doesn’t know why he decides to confide in her at this moment, but he tells her about all of the problems he’s having and how close they are to becoming crises. He tells her it’s almost too much to handle.

“Well, I sure am sorry to hear that you’ve got so much on your mind, Pastor John,” she says. “Sometimes it seems like everything is just coming at you all at once.” She reaches out a frail hand, rubs it up and down his shoulder, and smiles. “But I don’t believe the Lord would give you more of a load than you could carry. Sometimes life gets terribly difficult, but if you pray about it, and I mean really pray, He’ll give you the strength to endure and find peace. And I’ll be praying for you, too.”

Pastor John glances down at his tie, straightens it, then looks back at Mrs. Banks. “Thank you for those kind words, Mrs. Banks,” he says. “It certainly helps to know I have people like you supporting me in my Christian walk.” He gingerly turns back to the lectern to get his Bible. He tells Mrs. Banks he’ll see her next week and gives her a hug.

“Just put all your faith in Him and He’ll be good to you,” she says. “I know He will.”

As he drives out of the nursing home parking lot, Pastor John realizes that without the spiritual support of people like Mrs. Banks, he would have faltered long ago. He finds this thought quite comforting. He smiles inwardly, whistles a hymn, and taps his fingers on the steering wheel. As he approaches a green light, however, a vehicle to his right runs its red light, and Pastor John has to slam on brakes. He forcefully hits the horn, throws his hands up in the air, and yells something. The driver of the other vehicle, looking confused, drives quickly through the intersection. The incident dampens Pastor John’s spirits a bit.

Now moving again, he remembers he needs to go by the drug store to pick up some Advil. As he walks toward the door of the drug store, he sees two teenagers standing on the other side of the building. He thinks of the youth ministry at the church. He feels around in his coat pocket, and, sure enough, he still has a couple of Bible tracts left over from the last time he went witnessing. He approaches the teenagers, a boy and a girl, both wearing hooded sweatshirts and oversized jeans. They're huddled together, passing a cigarette back and forth. They inhale quickly and blow the smoke out even faster.

"Hey guys, what's going on?" the pastor says in his most teenager-friendly voice. "I was wondering if I could talk to you for a minute."

The teenagers stare at him blankly.

"I was just wondering if you've ever been exposed to the Gospel." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the tracts. "Did you know that the Lord can give you everlasting life if you only accept him into your heart?"

"Not interested," the boy says.

"Now just hear me out," Pastor John says. "I'm the pastor down at First Baptist and I'd really like to see you there this Sunday." He holds the tracts out to them. "The Lord can change your life if you let Him. Just read these and find out what miracles He has in store for you."

"We said we're not interested," the girl says, handing the cigarette back to the boy.

Pastor John eyes the cigarette. “You know, you really shouldn’t be doing that. The Good Book says your body is your temple.” He thinks for a minute. “How old are you kids, anyway?”

“Hey man, just leave us the fuck alone, okay?” the girl says.

Feeling his face getting hot, he looks away for a few seconds. He then turns back and addresses the girl. “Suit yourself,” he says, “but eternity is a long time to spend in Hell, which is where you’ll be going if you keep up this attitude. I was in your shoes once upon a time.”

Angry at himself for losing his cool, he turns to walk away.

“Yeah, go fuck yourself,” the boy says, flicking the cigarette butt at Pastor John’s feet.

Pastor John turns back around. “You know what?” He points at the boy. “Fuck you.”

Both of their mouths drop. They don’t say anything else to him. Feeling shocked himself by what he’s just said, Pastor John quickly rounds the corner and enters the drug store.

He walks past the liquor store, two doors down from the drug store, on the way back to his car. He stops for a moment and gazes into the window. He eyes the scotch, the whiskey, the bourbon. He thinks a drink would be nice right about now.

On the drive home, he tries to decide whether or not to tell his wife about the altercation with the teenagers. A long time ago, they had made a pact to keep each other informed of their spiritual steps and missteps so that one could help the other up when he

or she was down. Soon after they married, though, he realized that he had a few more spiritual flaws than she did, and he began to omit things. It had started as a little thing here and there. Getting angry at a bad referee call on television or a bad driver on the road, for instance. But the little things had built up for nearly eight years, and now he was unable to tell her about things such as his unwillingness to forgive the hypocrisy of many of his church members, or that every now and then she could stand to be a little less self-righteous.

He rounds the corner into the neighborhood and decides he won't tell her. As he approaches the front door, he hears singing. He walks in the door.

“Okay, Joshua,” Janice says, “show your father what you learned today.”

“Okay, Mama.” He stands in front of his father with his hands behind his back. “Zaccheus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he,” he sings. “He climbed up in the sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see...”

“That's great, Joshua,” Pastor John says, not looking at him. The little one walks into the room rubbing her eyes, having just awoken from a nap. “Where's Matthew?” he says.

“He's in his room. He hit his sister,” Janice says.

“And as the Savior passed his way he looked up in the tree.”

“You're going to have to do something with him, John.”

Pastor John sighs deeply. He watches Christina climb onto a chair close to her mother and stand in hopes that her mother will notice and pick her up. But Janice is still awaiting a response from John. He sees the chair begin to tip over. Without thinking, he

lunges toward the child. But his back tenses up and he falls to the floor in agony at the same moment the baby hits the floor. Janice swoops the child up into her arms as she begins to cry shrilly. Pastor John makes more of a grunting sound.

“And he yelled, ‘Zaccheus, get down from there! For I’m going to your house today.’”

He spends the rest of the evening in bed. His wife brings him Advil every couple of hours, but the pain doesn’t let up.

“Don’t we have anything stronger?” he says.

“No, of course not,” she says.

He eventually finishes the bottle of Nyquil, which helps him to doze off.

A quick, sharp pain wakes him a couple of hours later. The house is dark and Janice and the kids are asleep. He shifts slightly, hoping his backache will subside. When it doesn’t, he gets out of bed and walks to the kitchen to get something to drink. He sits down at the kitchen table. All of the things that have been worrying him come flooding back. He decides not to do anything work-related the next day. He presses his fingers up to his temples.

The next morning his back is still no better. He lies in bed, face down, for most of the day. His wife calls the family doctor, a member of the congregation, to make him an appointment, but he has no available appointments for several days. Pastor John tells his wife he can’t preach the Wednesday night service. She leaves Matthew with him and takes the other two children to church with her. She comes home and says people are

talking. As she gets into bed she asks him to pray about the situation. He says it isn't helping. She tells him she thinks he's beginning to lose sight of all that's important. She turns away and falls asleep.

He wakes up prepared to trudge through the day's churchly duties. On Thursdays he visits the sick and shut-in. It has never provided the spiritual lift he'd hoped to gain from going door to door sharing the Word. As he goes from one house to another, he's told of kidney ailments and walking pneumonia and heart palpitations and low blood pressure and high blood pressure. One of his stops is Mrs. Green's house. He doesn't know exactly what's wrong with her. He thinks an easier question to ask would be what isn't bothering her. He tries to share the Scriptures in between complaints. She interrupts him in the middle of a reading.

"I'm sorry, Pastor John, but I have to take my medicines on the hour." She puts out her cigarette in the ashtray and reaches for two medicine bottles on the table next to her recliner. "If I don't, I won't remember which ones I've taken and which ones I haven't." She chases the pills down with a gulp of Pepsi. She thinks for a minute and shifts slightly in her chair. "Say Pastor John, would you mind getting up and getting me a bottle of medicine? I'd get it myself, but my legs have been hurtin' me today."

He looks surprised. He straightens up in his chair and clears his throat. "Sure, Mrs. Green. Where is it?"

"It's on the kitchen table in there. It's called Lopressor. I surely do appreciate it, Pastor John."

He finds a multitude of medicine bottles on the kitchen table. As he's looking for the one bottle, he comes across a large bottle of hydrocodone. Before he realizes what he's doing, he opens it up, pops two into his mouth, chews them up and swallows them. He takes a few more and puts them in his coat pocket. Now, afraid he'll be found out, he puts the whole bottle in his pocket. He returns to the living room with Mrs. Green's medicine and leaves promptly thereafter.

As he drives toward the next house, his back pain subsides. He empties the contents of the medicine bottle into his coat pocket and tosses it. He sifts through the pills with his fingers and observes how similar they feel to beans, the hard, counting kind. He feels quite pleasant now and not much like reading Scripture. He decides to skip his next scheduled stop, the Odoms' house, and continues driving instead. He turns the radio to the station that plays the songs he listened to in his younger days. He takes another pill. He admires the scenery.

He walks in the front door to see his wife wearing her Sunday clothes and hurriedly attempting to comb Joshua's hair.

"Where have you been?" she says. "We have to be at the church in ten minutes."

"Out visiting," he says as he slowly looks down at his watch. "What's tonight?"

"It's the last Thursday of the month, John. We have the church singing tonight."

She tells Christina to sit down in the chair and begins to put on her shoes. "And Matthew says he isn't going. It's about time you dealt with that, don't you think? He says he doesn't like church, John."

“Well I didn’t either when I was his age.” He pauses. “I guess he can just stay with me...I don’t think I’m going to make it tonight.”

Janice looks up from her daughter’s feet and glares at him. “Again, John? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, it’s just...” He sucks in the insides of his cheeks in hopes of obtaining a little moisture for his dry mouth.

“It’s just what? Still your back?” She puts the baby’s other shoe on. “People at church have been talking,” she says. “They think you’re backsliding.” She stands up and looks at her husband. “Just tell me one thing, John. Are you living your life for the Lord?”

John stands with his hands in his pockets.

Janice picks up the baby and turns around. “Come on, Joshua, we have to go.” She walks out with the two children without looking at her husband.

He lurches into the living room and turns on the television. He gets comfortable in his recliner and flips through the channels until he finds an action movie.

Matthew eases inside the doorway. His eyes span the room until he’s certain no one else is there.

“Daddy, can I watch TV with you?” he says.

“Yeah, buddy. Come on up here,” he says fuzzily. He shifts to his left to make some room.

Matthew climbs onto the chair and squeezes in next to his father. He unblinkingly watches the fight scene. “I like this movie,” he says.

Pastor John slowly glances over at Matthew. He reaches his hand up and brushes the side of his son's hair down with his fingers. He looks back at the TV. "Me, too," he says.

Janice and the other two children return home from the church service. She hears a terrible racket coming from the living room. She walks in to see a man hacking another man's arm off with an axe. Appalled, she quickly turns off the TV. She then discovers her middle child and husband asleep in the recliner. She thinks of screaming at him. She thinks of slapping his face. Instead, she gently picks up Matthew and carries him to bed.

Pastor John awakens early the next morning, still in the recliner, with a throbbing pain in his back. Looking around to find that no one else is awake yet, he digs deeply into his pocket, pulls out a pill, and quickly attempts to swallow it. The pill lodges in his throat, so he walks into the kitchen and chases it down with a glass of water. By breakfast, the pain has subsided. Pastor John is in a pleasant mood as are the children, who are bouncing off the walls from the pancake syrup. Janice never directly addresses him over the course of the meal.

On Fridays, Pastor John goes to his study in the church to work on Sunday's sermon. On his drive to the church, he notices how lovely the day is, and, instead of taking a right to head to the church, he keeps going straight. He continues driving, out of his district, then out of the neighboring district. He drives for an hour or more, finally stopping at a package store on the fringe of the next town. He discreetly enters, purchases a pint of Jim Beam White Label, and exits. He gets back into his car and

heads back the way he came for a few miles until he's in rolling countryside. He turns a couple of times onto smaller, unevenly paved roads. He finally sees an open, grassy area off of the road and pulls his car up to a tree line, blocking him from the view of potential passersby.

Pastor John gets out of his car, takes off his jacket and tie, and sits on the hood. He takes his first swig of whiskey and coughs. It's been a long time since he's had any, but after a few more sips, the faintest of memories come back to him. He remembers the nights years ago when he would sit and drink on the tailgates of trucks with friends. He had no worries and no plans back then and would spend hours just relaxing under the open sky. He feels a sense of freedom now that he hasn't felt in eight years, and he realizes that he has, in fact, missed it.

He thinks about how sudden the change from his past life to his present life had been. Maybe he was spiraling out of control by the time of the car accident. Maybe he did have to make a conscious choice to survive and change his life. He found God, that was something he did on his own, but Janice had urged him to become a preacher. He thinks about how he had taken on the mantle in those early days, how hard he'd worked at fitting the ideal image, all the while knowing that one day the truth would come out. He's always known that it takes a truly extraordinary person to be a leader among men, and he's never felt like one in a million.

As the sun lowers in the afternoon sky, he stares off into the horizon. He waits. He closes his eyes. He waits some more.

Having spent hours with only his thoughts, he decides that he will simply go home and tell Janice that he can't be a preacher anymore, that he can no longer take being under that ever-critical gaze. At best, he thinks, she'll support him and they'll move away, start a new life in a new place, that he'll get a regular job and maybe she'll even get one, and that he and she and the kids will all sit together on Sundays at their new church. He takes a sip from his bottle and thinks about the prospects. He watches the sun until the trees obstruct his view.

TRUANCY

Inside the house, it was dark and cool. The curtains were drawn. The mail was piled on the dining room table. The air was stale, with a faint scent of garbage that needed to be taken out emanating from the kitchen. She closed the door, took a few steps, dropped her purse on the floor, and fell into the recliner.

For the past few weeks she had coasted on emotion, but everything was done now. The hospital. The wake and funeral. Sitting there in silence, she realized that this was the first chance she had had to go through all of the events in her mind. She was surprised that nothing really stood out and that she couldn't put all of the right feelings in the right places. She sat in the chair for a while, thinking vague thoughts, before deciding that maybe she was hungry.

She opened the refrigerator and stared at the various vegetables, casseroles, and desserts a couple of her mother's friends had brought in the past few days. Attached to some of them were notes on which were written things like "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away," and "Good food nurtures the soul in a time of need." Others simply had pieces of masking tape stating the names of those to whom they should be returned. She looked in the sides or tops of the containers. She counted three different dishes containing green beans and cream of mushroom soup with onion straws on top. She couldn't decide which of those ingredients she disliked most. The longer she looked, the less she knew what she wanted to eat. As she finally just grabbed a casserole dish and wondered why they always had to have Ritz cracker crumbs on top, the kitchen phone rang. It was Patrick.

“Are you just getting off work?” she said, placing the dish on the table.

“Yeah. I just walked in the door,” he said. “Do you want me to come over?”

“No,” she said, “you don’t have to do that.” As she waited for him to speak she opened the cabinet to get a plate and glass.

“Listen, I’m really sorry I couldn’t make it, but I told you that I could only come if I could find somebody to cover my shift…”

“You don’t have to explain it all to me,” she said. “I remember what you said before.”

He told her he’d come over later if she wanted him to, she said okay, and they got off the phone.

The girl scooped out a spoonful of casserole. She heated it. A few days earlier, she had been angry at him for not coming to see the baby for the past three weeks. But she felt more indifferent about it now. She decided it was just another displaced emotion. She took her plate and walked back into the living room. Sitting back in the chair, she soon felt a ringing in her ears. She looked up at the blank television screen and realized that this was the first time she could remember being in the living room this time of day with the television off. She quickly reached for the remote, turned it to the soap her mother always had on, and began to eat. Onscreen, the muscular man held the curvy woman tightly and kissed her neck while her head tilted toward the ground.

The boy hung up the phone and walked to his own refrigerator. He grabbed a can of beer and headed to the sofa. He opened his beer and sipped from it. Finding the stillness of his place a bit uncomfortable compared to the industrial hum at his job, he

reached behind his head and turned on the radio. He bent down, loosened his laces, and took his boots off. Settling back down into the couch, he found a spot on the opposing wall and fixed his gaze there.

His immediate thoughts were not of Wendy, but of Diane, who had ended it with him a couple of weeks earlier. Things had moved along quickly with them. She even moved in for a time. He had felt good about her being around, being there when he got in from work or when he decided not to go to work. But he knew deep down that she was really just confused about what it was she was supposed to be doing with her life. He had wondered exactly how much clarity a twenty-year-old should have about life goals and things of that magnitude. In the end, she never got used to the fact that he had a baby, as much as he tried to sidestep the issue.

He sat there for a while, just thinking. After a few moments he squeezed his eyes shut and breathed out forcibly. Then he got up, grabbed another beer, and headed toward the shower. He stopped to turn up the radio so he could still hear it from the bathroom. He had always enjoyed taking showers and baths, usually only getting out once he discovered his fingers were shriveled like prunes. He sat down and let the water stream over him. His can of beer perspired from the side of the tub.

Several hours had passed between when the boy and girl ended their short conversation and when he arrived at her house. As she dozed in the chair, he sat in his truck and tried to decide whether to go to the door. The car wasn't there, and he thought maybe she had given up on him and gone to a friend's. He knew things were going to be awkward and that she would probably be extremely angry at him. He waited for her to

open the front door and stick her head out, but when she didn't, he turned off the engine and got out.

The rapid knocks startled Wendy. She slowly opened the door. Patrick had already begun to head back toward his truck. She called out to him and he turned around, surprised.

“Where’s the car?” he said. “I thought you had stood me up.”

“It’s still in the shop,” she yawned. “I don’t have enough to get it fixed yet.” She looked out across the yard and back at Patrick. “You coming in?”

As he walked inside, he noticed how quiet the house was. “Is the baby asleep?” he said.

“She’s not here,” she said. “Becky and her mom offered to keep her for me just until all this funeral stuff is over. They’re bringing her back in the morning.” She reached down to the floor, gathered her plate and glass from earlier, and walked toward the kitchen. Turning her head back toward him, she said, “You should see her, though. She’s all over the place, and talking up a storm.” She briefly attempted a smile before turning and entering the kitchen.

Patrick now felt considerably more uncomfortable. He had expected the baby to be there as a buffer. Now, he wasn’t sure how Wendy would act toward him. He briefly tried to think of an excuse, some way to get out of there, but nothing came to mind. He looked around the living room, first at the television, then the bookshelf, the ceiling fan, the playpen. Wendy returned to the room, rubbing her eyes.

“You look tired,” he said.

“I am,” she said. She removed an oversized book and two plastic dolls from the couch. “I was staying in the hospital with mama every night there for a while and I wasn’t sleeping at all.” She sat down on the couch. “I guess I haven’t caught up yet.”

Patrick slowly made his way over to the couch and sat down next to her. They remained quiet for a moment. The only movement in the house was the flickering of the muted television screen.

“Are you okay?” he said.

She looked at his face for a moment, then away.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s weird. Everything feels out of place right now. I just feel kinda numb.”

He waited for her to look back at him, but she didn’t.

“I really am sorry I didn’t make it to the funeral.” He swallowed hard. “You know I would’ve been there, but work...”

“I know. You already apologized. Your dad apologized for you, too.”

Patrick shifted slightly in his seat and waited for her to explain.

“He came to the funeral today,” she said. “I didn’t know what to think at first. But he came up to me and said he was real sorry and he gave me a hug. And he said he’d like to see the baby sometime.”

Patrick did not respond. Wendy looked down at the ring on her index finger and began turning it. She studied it. Though smudged and missing a stone, it had been her favorite piece of her mother’s jewelry since she was a child. Her mother had told her it would be hers one day.

“I tried calling you,” she said. “So many times.”

“My phone got turned off,” he said. “I just got it turned back on.”

“So I guess I shouldn’t ask you if you have any money for me this week?” she said.

He began biting the inside of his lip as he often did when he felt accused. She kept a fairly emotionless expression. He faced down at his feet. She breathed in deeply and looked at him.

“I’m trying to get back on my feet,” he said. “I didn’t have a job for a while there, you know, but now I’ve got one again. So I’ll give you everything I owe you as soon as I can.” He stopped talking and looked up, toward the front door. “I need a cigarette,” he said. “Do you want one?”

“I quit,” she said.

He asked her if she wanted to sit outside with him while he smoked and she said okay. He pulled one out of the pack, put it between his lips, and lit it. He took that first drag and she felt envious. She thought about how much she’d gone through and that nobody could fault her for needing one. She could always quit tomorrow, when Becky brought the baby back. It would be like getting a fresh start on things.

“Give me one,” she said.

They both sat on the steps enjoying their cigarettes and looking out across the yard onto the highway and the occasional car. They took turns swatting at gnats or mosquitoes, though they weren’t as bothered by them as they let on. Being outdoors,

with simple things diverting some attention, they both felt more at ease. She began unconsciously biting her nails, as she always had. He said she shouldn't do that, that it's a bad habit, as he always had. He told her he had a few beers in the cooler in the back of his truck and said he was going to get one. He asked her if she wanted one, too, and she said sure.

They sat on the tailgate, sipped their beers, and attempted small talk. He asked her if she had run into any of their old friends that he didn't see much of anymore, things like that. She responded minimally, a name and a place or a yes or a no and not much in the way of details. After a longer lull than usual, she said,

“So, how are you and Diane?”

Patrick finished his beer and reached back into the cooler for another one. He took his time feeling his way through the slushy water for another can. He found one, pulled it out, wiped around the top of it with the bottom of his shirt, and opened it.

“What have you heard about it?” he said.

“Just that she wasn't staying with you anymore.”

“Who tells you all these things?” he said.

“Oh, I probably hear a lot more about you than you think,” she said. “People I don't even know come up to me in the diner all the time telling me about something crazy you did or something they think I deserve to know. They always end up making me feel like shit, telling me something I didn't expect. I wish I could at least hear things from you instead of some person that just wants to stir up something.” She examined the side of her beer. “Can I have another cigarette?” she said.

He set his beer down and reached into his pocket for the pack. “Well, they were right. She left,” he said, handing her the cigarette and lighter. “There’s not really a point in us talking about it, though, is there?”

“No, I don’t guess so,” she said. “Me and the baby just haven’t seen much of you since you started seeing her, that’s all.”

“Well, what about that guy you were seeing?” he said.

“I guess my baby and my mama were too much for him. He stopped coming around.” She paused for a moment. “Nobody really comes around anymore.”

Patrick briefly thought about how jealous and angry he’d felt when he first heard she was seeing someone else, even though he knew he had no right. He took a sip from his beer and thought about the last thing she’d said. He looked around at her yard and at her house and sensed the absence of her mother. He had never experienced the death of even a grandparent before. And this was her mother. It wasn’t that he was very close to her, but he couldn’t wrap his mind around the fact that he would never see her again. He wondered if Wendy would be able to stay there now that her mother was gone; he wondered if anyone in her family would help her with the bills. He tried to think of where she would go. He liked knowing she was here, that they were here, and he liked knowing it was something he could depend on.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I mean, about me not coming around. I’m gonna do better about that.”

She took a long drag from her cigarette and slowly exhaled. “You’ve said that before, so I don’t think I’ll be holding my breath. But I’ve got the baby and she needs me, and I’ll be there for her no matter what.”

The conversation dwindled. After a few moments, Wendy looked over at Patrick, who seemed to her content to look at the trees and stars and anything else. When she was around him, even for a short length of time, she found herself caring about him again. It made her mad at herself. She couldn’t figure out why he didn’t feel the same way about her, or at least the baby.

She found herself thinking about how she had looked in vain for her father at the wake and funeral. How she’d tried, in her mind, to add years to the face she vaguely remembered in hopes of being able to recognize him in the crowd. She found herself wondering if, years from now, her mother’s image would be as indistinct. She suddenly felt weighed down, and a little upset. She thought if Patrick would just put his arm around her she wouldn’t feel like she was suffocating. But they just kept sitting there in silence, thinking separate thoughts.

Wendy eventually hopped down from the tailgate and told him she was exhausted and that she probably needed to get some sleep. Patrick agreed. He got down, put the empty cans back in the cooler, and closed the tailgate. He could tell that she was getting upset, and he tried to think of what he could do to make her feel better.

“Are you going to be alright?” he said, wiping his hands on the legs of his jeans. “I could stay and hang out a while.”

“That’s okay,” she said. She brushed the top of her hand under her nose. “I’ll be alright. Things will be better tomorrow.”

He told her he’d come by and see her and the baby the next day when he got off work. She said okay. She thanked him for the drinks and smokes and walked toward the steps to her house. He opened the door to his truck. They said goodnight to each other. She walked inside. He got in the truck, closed the door, and cranked it.

She closed the front door and leaned against it. The faint light from one lamp was all that kept her from complete darkness. She looked around the room for a moment, unsure of what to do with herself, and then she broke down. She slumped to her knees for a while, but when she gathered herself a little, she stood up and walked over to the framed pictures lining the bookshelf. She took in all of the pictures—her mother holding her as an infant, the two of them at the river when she was seven, the two of them at her last beauty pageant, her mother holding the baby. She looked up one shelf, at her high school diploma. She reached up and removed it from the shelf. She gently touched the embossed letters on the cover. Wendy thought about how her mother had insisted on her staying in school and graduating. How she had held the diploma in her hands, saying “Now, that’s something,” and walked around the living room in search of the perfect place to display it. She let go of everything that had been building up inside for the past several weeks and longer.

After a while, she decided to open a window and get some fresh air. As she raised the blinds, she saw that Patrick’s truck was still sitting in her yard, and he was still inside. He looked up and saw her in the window. The layers of glass distorted what light

there was to the point that neither could distinguish much more than a form against a backdrop. But neither looked away. They stayed this way for some time.

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