

Resurrection

I spent my sixteenth year swimming in the River Styx, passing from the living world to the dead one until no difference divided them. Even now I sometimes lose sight of the black-watered border severing and separating bank from shadowy bank. It's a razor edge we walk when our lives change all at once, when the native tongue turns alien and home is a place we've never been. Which I think is the definition of age sixteen.

It started in February. I've always seen signs in everything, made small prophecies. They come in threes. I like three because it's a balanced number, even-keeled. There is something solid between the two extremes, holding them together. Of course this is how God would speak. February is my worst month. You know how ponds look in the winter, with their fish locked deep inside? All those little living things are reduced to muted smears in the ice. I feel the same way in February when it seems winter will never end. Half-sunk, half-drowning, I can hardly move. In my chest the beating heart checks itself after every pulse, wondering why it should go on.

I began to go for walks in the mornings. Since I didn't sleep much then, I needed another kind of peace to wipe me clean and carry me from one day to the next. That's how I saw the first sign, walking in the woods. The ghostly sun, barely risen, hung above me like a sinner condemned. The sky was the cold remorseless blue of a glacier's guts. New snow had fallen in the night and it lay thickly over everything. My footsteps were muffled and my voice when I tried to shout out was swallowed, stolen so absolutely I thought it had never belonged to me at all. The sugared trees beneath their shrouds showed black and twisted witches' limbs, stark and barren as the season itself.

In the midst of that blank monochrome I was shocked by a line of bright drops leading to a sudden slash of red against the white. It was a cardinal, a male, irrevocably broken. On his

battered wings he'd flown the world long before I could have tethered him down. I cradled the smallness of him in my palm. In death we draw into ourselves, curling toward the center. The bird's stiff frozen body was like a fist in my fist.

In history class I learned that the Crusaders wore their crosses in red and white. Those pure and pale soldiers spilled the blood of the infidel who, after all, had invented astronomy and mathematics and had children of their own at home. My textbook said the war lasted from the eleventh to the thirteenth century but I disagree. It began long before and hasn't ended yet. Isn't it everywhere, between cat-claws and cardinals, in deserts across the sea, in cities? This kind of argument is what my teacher referred to as willful resistance of authority; she told me I made things more difficult for myself. Yes but why should they be easy?

March brought the second sign. It wasn't spring, not quite, but I could feel something starting to melt. The ice softened into slush and the snow became water that soaked the grass and ran in dirty rivulets alongside the road. The sun was tinged with yellow and the sky looked friendlier. Buds bristled on the bare tree-limbs; crocuses reached up with their green arms from the thawing ground of my father's garden.

The season was changing. I went to the woods on the warmest day we'd had yet that year. On either side of the path lay lakes, new-born and dotted with floes of dying ice. Everything looks different when it is submerged. The reflection diffracts, the surface shimmers and shifts. Even in muddy puddles there are galaxies, universes, each autonomous unto itself and yet connected to every other. Underwater, rotting leaves and fallen branches give themselves up to soil, good and dark and full of life.

I walked to the spot where I'd been before. The cardinal's body had freed itself from the weight of flesh, the heaviness that anchored him to Earth. In the end birds and men become dust

and then new birds, new men are born. All that remained was a small pile of bones and a single feather bright as the first flowers of spring. Bleached white, absolved; they are hollow and that is how he flies.

April fulfilled the promise that March had made. Some of the buds broke open and sent out small green leaves. Flowers bloomed like fists unclenching. The air smelled sweeter and the sun shone down benevolently -a golden doubloon, rescued by pirates from the sea's belly.

Robins came home and built nests to cradle their blue eggs. Small animals darted through the trees; the fish unfroze; the swollen river sang and laughed and spilled over its banks.

I was in love, in love with a girl whose hands were rough from gardening but still small enough to fit into mine like a puzzle put together. She knew how to make plants grow from the dead earth, how to make nothing out of something. She was gentle with children and animals. She was gentle, infinitely gentle, with me.

We packed a picnic and took it to the woods. There was a clearing where she spread a cloth on the grass, laying it lightly over the baby stalks. We'd brought cucumber sandwiches and fruit, iced tea. Food so light it hardly weighed us down. She linked dandelions and daisies into chains richer than any jewels. Her fingers folded stem over stem with the prayerful precision of a priestess preparing offerings for the shrine. Open-palmed she laid them before me and I became the temple, the altar. I felt like a goldfish resurrected, swimming again after having been suspended in ice.

And then, the third sign: two cardinals, male and female, began to sing above us. He glowed, a flare shot up from a sinking ship to proclaim *I exist, I exist!* She was less lovely but he loved her anyway. Is it possible to be reborn? His body could be the same one I had seen slain in the snowy silence of that February wood. He could be the March bones reassembled. I imagined

them clicking back together, the muscle sliding over them, then the flesh, then the feathers rising like lilies from desert sands. The dull eye glittering again, the ruby throat filled with music again. The girl I loved was sitting on our blanket behind me and singing with a voice that I'd heard once in a half-remembered dream. I turned away from the cardinals and turned to her, sank to my knees. I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her. I touched her hair and memorized the golden green of her eyes, the freckles on her nose. The trees around us became a cathedral; the light filtered through their canopy of branches like sunlight shining on stained glass. I thought surely we are kneeling in a chapel more sacred than stone and surely here's the heart of all that's holy.

A fire-feathered bird and his wife warbled until night fell, until they tucked their heads into their breasts and sailed towards sleep. The sky deepened from blue to purple and gave up its stars like a king bestowing largesse upon his subjects. I was sixteen years old and in love, tilting my face upward as flowers do when they search for the sun. She took my hand in hers and traced out old fiends: Heracles the hero, Leo the lion, Ursa the bear. A constellation means that what once walked the earth is now lifted up into the velvet endlessness of space. It is possible; renaissance, eternal life! We too are stardust, we of this world. Every bird and beast and teenage couple. Every rock and tree and river. All blessed, all born in heat and light and elements colliding like lovers unwilling to lose one another.

Below us the ground was solid as if God held us in the palm of his own hand. Above us the sky curved from horizon to horizon. I lay next to a girl and whispered, *when you look at a star you're seeing it from light-years away. You're looking at the past. That light could be long lost by the time it reaches you.*

She reached over and held me. She said *there is no such thing as an ending, only a passage from one life to the next.*

The night was growing cold but beside me her arm burned where it touched my arm, her breath was warm and clean against my neck. Like Charon she stood at the ferry's bow, but asked for no coin and carried me away from death and into life. Somewhere, a star seared itself into supernova. The moon waxed and waned and waxed again. Nearby two cardinals slept wing to wing. In the heavens Earth spun on its axis through the seasons, the days and nights.

There is no such thing as an ending, the girl repeated. She reached for my hand and pulled me to my feet. We climbed aboard her ferry and slowly, sweetly, we began to row towards home.

Squirrel Day

Ancient, wrinkled tree trunks draped leafy branches on each other's limbs, interweaving myriad colors and textures under the fading summer sun.

"Hey sissy! You gonna run on home cryin' to mama again? Go on then, I ain't gonna follow ya." Harsh taunts reverberated through the forest, cracking the peaceful flow of light that fell through the spaces between leaves and spilled onto the spongy forest floor. A tall, wiry boy stood before his squat counterpart, one hand jammed haughtily onto a set of skinny hips, the other hand clutching a nearly-empty beer bottle. He glared down at the other, who stood dumbstruck, staring disbelievingly at a small wriggling body on the ground.

"Why- what'd ya do that for?" He spoke, hesitating, his sad voice soft and muffled. His eyes followed the jerky movements of tiny flailing limbs and his insides cringed as he felt a stab of pain in his abdomen, in the same place as the BB's entry wound in the dying squirrel. More blood seeped from the squirrel's wound than Ray had thought was possible, staining the dirt beneath it a muddy shade of red.

The squirrel didn't writhe as much now, succumbing to a slow numbness that spread throughout its tiny body. Each breath lagged as the heaving chest rose and lowered; small, clawed fingers curled into themselves. The taller boy glanced away from Ray's face and studied the bloody creature coldly, mechanically.

"Now look what you done. He's near gone, and there ain't no fun in it if he's dead." His voice remained emotionless, as if he were a television talking head, rattling off announcements on the six o'clock news-it wouldn't have made a bit of difference had his lines been about a murder or the winner of the local pie bake-off. When Ray snuck a peek up at his brother, he nearly shuddered when he saw the stony face, partially obscured by greasy blonde hair in dire

need of a wash and cut. He saw in his brother his own blue eyes scrutinizing the sorry heap at his feet, and it frightened him to observe this similarity.

Sticking one hand in the pocket of his dirty old jeans, Ray's brother lifted the bottle with his free hand and took a calculated swig, holding it upside-down for the last few drips that clung to the lip of the brown glass. Catching a spark of sunshine, the bottle illuminated a ring of light around its drinker's face.

"Well, if we're gonna do it," he said. Grasping the bottle by the neck, he suddenly flicked his wrist and brought the bottle down onto one of the stout tree trunks, sending bark debris flying and shattering the bottle into brown glass slices. The pieces lay scattered about the forest floor, eerily blending in with the nature of its surroundings--dry brown leaves and rich dark earth with bits of smashed beer bottle seemed the perfect collision of synthetic realness. If it had been there since before the thick trees had begun to reach up to the sun with pale, fleshy creepers, it couldn't have been more perfect.

Hunching his slight frame down to scan the ground, the tall boy passed over several glass fragments before he found his piece, smooth and curved, a beer-sticky crescent moon with an edge not unlike chipped obsidian, abruptly ending in a sharp point.

"This is what it's all about," he said, and repeated the phrase to himself under his breath, "...what it's all about." He sauntered to the twitching squirrel and squatted beside it for a moment. Reaching out to it, he then proceeded to slit open the skin, tenderly carving his piece of glass into the quivering flesh. The squirrel's jaw soundlessly snapped open and its entire body contracted and released, helplessly suffering the boy's rough fingers peeling back skin from bone.

Ray's stomach flipped as he watched the scene unfold. A dangerous heat crept up his neck and pounded in his ears as his brother casually dismembered the animal, his lips

twisted in amused concentration. Locked in a parallel place, Ray could only watch in horror as the squirrel proceeded to be taken apart. Then the glass sliced off a limb from the shoulder, and the shot of blood that was expelled from the joint hit Ray like an oncoming train.

Ray's throat tightened and his fists balled up. His brother was oblivious as Ray stiffened and quickened his breath while the squirrel slowly slipped away. In an instant, Ray unfroze from his position. Grabbing the nearest rock on the ground, he lunged toward his brother.

"Move!" he shouted, his voice breaking in the middle of the syllable, releasing the flood of angry tears that had been dammed up behind his eyes. Knocking his brother to the side, he dropped onto his knees and lifted the rock above the squirrel. It stared up at Ray with glazed eyes, blind with the pain of its skin torn from its torso. For a moment their eyes connected-Ray's bleary red eyes and the squirrel's death-stricken gaze met.

Ray squeezed his eyes shut and brought the rock down onto the squirrel. Bones crunched and blood spattered. A few drops of red landed on Ray, leaving unwashable stains imprinted on the fabric of his shirt. He grabbed the rock again and lifted it, brought it down upon the squirrel again and again, until the animal was barely recognizable. Exhausted, he let the rock drop and fell to his side, sobbing violently as his brother slowly stood up.

"Ray, you are *fucked* up." he said, shaking his head in disbelief. He turned and walked out of the woods, leaving Ray with the bloody remains of the squirrel.

Stains

"Puke. On my goddam white scrubs."

A small black button numbered "3" lights up with a melodic but almost condescending ding as the curse word springs from my lips. A ring of soft, pale yellow light surrounds the button, highlighting the chrome board. I try to imagine the face of an angel within the tiny halo, but I can conjure no seraphic image. Today is not the kind of day that brings to mind the beautiful faces of cherubs or Greek goddesses. No, today calls for expressions that sent me to detention in fifth grade, beneath the crooked nose of a pale-skinned nun who presided over unruly students. Detention that confined me within cold walls, like the thickly painted taupe panels that line the elevator shaft.

As I slump to a stop at the fourth floor, stale 7 a.m. coffee sloshes in my mug. The sound is like vomit hitting clean white linoleum. The ghost of that acrid smell floats near my nose, causing my guts to contract. Almost everything in this hospital holds a similar scent; pillowcases and grout, food trays and toilets. "Be wary of nausea and dizziness in patients," one of the residents said when I first started three years ago. I learned that this precaution was all the more applicable to children once a little girl unceremoniously emptied her stomach onto my brand new white scrubs during my first week after stating, "I feel funny." Coincidentally, this morning served me with another reminder to never wear white scrubs again.

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"I think I'm gonna hurl," Angie whispered to me. I raised my head to see her parents standing stiffly at the other end of the bed, each pair of J. Crew sweater-adorned arms folded. Angie's mother was very thin, her body's curves jutting abruptly into bony angles at her hips and elbows, while her father had an impossibly muscular neck and biceps that looked as though they might burst through his sweater if he flexed even slightly. Angie possessed the only two amiable

features I could attribute to her parents, which turned to me then; her beautiful, deep brown eyes outlined with long, black lashes widened and her slender nose, which twitched as she whispered urgently, "I'm really gonna blow chunks, I know it." I tried to avoid the pain in her eyes as I interlocked my fingers into hers and squeezed reassuringly, trying to pump a jolt of strength into her. She needed it more than I did.

Angie's parents hadn't noticed their daughter wriggling uncomfortably in the hospital bed, seeing as they remained on the far end of the bed, engaged in conversation with the doctor who had heroically entered the room. At this point, the doctors didn't know what was wrong with Angie. She had been feeling queasy since her parents admitted her with a severe headache and a fever. The stately doctor explained, "We've done a lumbar puncture and we're waiting for the results to come back from the lab. For now she's being treated for meningitis with I.V. antibiotics. We'll see if she responds, but we ..."

"I've been praying for Angela's soul, doctor. Nearly five times today. I know that the Lord won't take my baby girl away from me, without her first Communion," Angie's mother interjected.

Her words hung thickly in my ears, the way my mother's droning words stuck to the insides of the receiver as she preached. The doctor uncomfortably scuffed his foot against the floor tiles, but gave her a knowing nod, remaining neutral. Her deep, brown eyes looked towards Angie and instead rested upon me sitting beside the bed. "We've got you in our prayers, too." For a moment I was caught: same perfect almond-shaped eyes, only they were not beautiful like Angie's. They held something heavier, something more solid and sharp, like ice.

"Thanks, " I replied flatly, feigning gratitude. Then Angie let nausea get the best of her. As I stand alone in the elevator car, I thumb at the hem of my shirt, stained pinky-orange like artificial grapefruit juice. There are also faded spots of blood, prevailing through detergent

treatments and repeated washing. These white scrubs have the kind of scars that will never fade, like deep tissue scars from surgery and picked-off chicken pox. I shiver at the eeriness of dried blood residing on my body, and notice that the elevator shaft lacks insulation; the cold steel chills the waxy walls. They remind me of church: stark, sterile and blandly colored.

The elevator lurches at the sixth floor, and another ding announces arrival. I make my way through the wing to Angie's room. The fluorescent lights shone into every corner, creating sharp angles everywhere, accentuating black scuff marks on the linoleum and the new stains on my shirt. I enter Angie's room, and when she looks up the fluorescent lights highlight dark, bruise-like circles beneath her wide eyes. She smiles at me weakly.

"I'm sorry I threw up on YOU."

"It's okay, I never liked these scrubs much anyway." I wink at her and say, "Open up," as I stick a thermometer in between small pink lips. Angie straightens her back against the pillow and brushes frizzy, auburn curls out of her eyes.

"My mom says the doctors are gonna let me go home soon," she says as I examine the I.V. needle embedded in her thin wrist, avoiding her innocent gaze. "Do you think so?"

"I don't know, but I sure hope so." I raise my head and I am suddenly caught, wading through deep seas of dark molasses in her eyes. I reach for the thermometer and feel moisture on her skin. As I follow a red strip of fluid within the glass tube higher and higher, the overwhelming sound of my heartbeat fills my ears and I ask her, "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm hot," Angie offers, frowning slightly. The thermometer between my fingers reads 102.7 degrees, much higher than it was this morning. I pat her hands and walk quickly from the room, the thermometer held delicately between my fingers, scanning the hallway for a white lab coat. I see her doctor from earlier that day.

"There's something wrong with the little girl who puked on me this morning," I explain quickly, "her temperature is rising." He nods knowingly.

"She must be unresponsive to the antibiotics. We'll keep an eye on her tonight."

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I watch my breath form vapor while I stand in the elevator. At 6 a.m. the elevator shaft feels the same as the cold morning air outside, and it keeps me from drifting to sleep. I spent much of the night wrestling with my sheets, tormented by a dull sickness in my stomach and Angie's mother's words echoing in my skull. "We've got you in our prayers, too" I repeat, and the words float within the droplets of breath mist. My voice lacks emphasis, and the words drift over my lips, "We've got you in our prayers." I let the silence envelop my voice, shifting my weight slightly and a pen tumbles from my pocket to the floor. I kneel to retrieve it, and my bare knees contact the icy floor of the elevator car.

Abruptly, I can recall my church, and the uncomfortable feeling of the cold wood block on my knees in the pew. There is a voice, thickly monotoned, that boomed from the pulpit, but I can't connect the voice to a face. I remember my mother roughly nudging me so I'd keep my head down and eyes closed during prayer. I kneeled, goose bumps crawling up my thighs while I clasped my sweaty hands tightly together. The priest was announcing the names of those we must include in our prayers in a detached, droning manner- the same way as at every Sunday mass. I remember that distant voice saying the name of my grandmother, followed by "you are in our prayers." A cold twinge shoots up my spine as I remember asking behind closed eyes and folded hands why my grandmother was still in the hospital after the whole congregation prayed for her recovery. I looked up quickly to check the pews, crowded with people. I remember squeezing my eyelids shut and praying as loudly as I could inside my head for grandma to make

it, doubting my own volume. The church began to fill with voices chanting together, emulating the monotoned priest, and I shouted my pleas behind closed lips but the sound of the congregation grew until I could barely hear myself.

I emerge from the cold elevator and before I am aware of indoor warmth a familiar loud beeping fills my head, followed by hurried footsteps and someone calmly issuing emergency orders. Now my heart sinks behind nervous, sloshing guts and I turn to see the commotion coming from Angie's room. I run into the room and meet a throbbing, flat green line on the heart monitor, Angie's beating heart brought to a halt, just a solid line pulsing on some piece of machinery, its ringing eulogy in my ears. I look at the bed and glimpse her still head upon the pillow while nurses and doctors buzz around her like angry bees, yelling commands. I barely notice them while waiting for Angie to open those dark, beautiful eyes so no one has to worry and I can let out the breath I've been holding. I stand at the edge of the room with shaking hands while the fluorescent lights glare down upon the scene and all my mind can process is the flat lining heart monitor screaming softly.

"Angie ran a fever of 107 degrees. She passed shortly afterwards." I sit with Angie's parents in a small waiting room on the third floor. Angie's mother holds a cross pendant between her fingers as I continue to explain in medical terms what had happened with false composure. Angie's father closes his eyes, his jaw flexing as Angie's mother breathes sharply, leaning against his steady shoulder. "I'm very, very sorry." But I know they can barely hear me, already far away from the hospital even before I open the waiting room door and gently usher them out.

When I open the front door to my apartment, warm air greets me. I change in the dim bathroom light spilling into my bedroom, and even in the dark the stains on my white scrubs are unmistakable. Vomit and blood are embedded permanently between each cotton fiber, between

patient's names and birth dates, deep within the sterile hospital fabric. I slide them off my tired body and slowly carry the dirty, crumpled pile to the wastebasket.

Herb and Swen

Herb stepped cautiously into the small wooden boat. It convulsed with each dark wave and seemed barely able to keep itself afloat. The small cove where the boat was docked was only slightly protected from the open ocean by a long, tree-covered island some distance away. The salty sea air caressed Herb's nose, and he sneezed. He gathered all his fishing tackle around him and made sure it was organized. If his gear was not in a specific order, Herb would have felt slightly nauseated. He nodded to the young Swedish man with untidy blond hair that was to be his captain for the duration of the excursion. Wearing a dark green top and cut-off khakis, he seemed a bit too young to own his own boat, but what did Herb know about the Swedish youth? He was just a middle-aged guy from Nebraska who had come to Sweden for a relaxing fishing trip.

Herb hadn't really wanted to leave the good old U.S. of A., but his wife and mother had insisted he get away for a while. He hoped they had not somehow found out about his drinking, not that he had a problem, mind you. Still, the two women had really pushed him to go on this trip. Herb gazed up at the overcast sky with some irritation. This was not an ideal day for fishing, nothing like those clear Nebraska skies he loved so much. He looked back at the Swedish youth, who was preparing to cast off the lines that were holding the boat to the dock. "Let me introduce myself," Herb said as he settled himself into his seat, "I am Mr. Walker. I am from America" He stressed the syllables of America slowly, as if to pound that fact into the poor Swedish boy's head, while pointing to a small American flag sewn on his jacket sleeve.

"My name is Swen," the young man replied in an audible accent, "Welcome to my country, Mr. Walker. I will take you to best fishing in Europe today, you do not regret it."

Herb hoped he would not regret this trip, although the waves of the Baltic Sea were looking a bit rough. He stowed his lifejacket underneath his ample bottom. Luckily, Herb was

not the kind of person that got seasick. He was a steady sort of person and took great comfort in knowing this fact about himself. The wind ruffled his graying hair as his eyes traced the path the boat would follow after leaving the cove where he had embarked.

Swen sighed. He always felt a bit uneasy when he went out on the ocean, and this American was not helping. Mr. Walker, as he preferred to be called, seemed to Swen like he was one of those American fools you only heard of on the news. This man obviously thought he was better than anyone who didn't speak English. *Probably voted for the Bush*, Swen thought with disgust. His strong, calloused hands steered the boat in the direction of a very reliable fishing spot. He knew that the American would complain incessantly if he did not catch any fish on this outing. Swen did not enjoy ferrying tourists around on this rented boat, but he had to make some money while he was between jobs. He was able to cheaply rent the boat from his uncle and earn a few extra euros while he decided if it was worth it to return to school or not.

After a few minutes of following the coast south, staying very close to land, Swen stopped the boat. "Here is the best fishing in Sweden," Swen half-shouted over the wind, which had picked up sharply as they left the cove, "You fish all you want, just tell when you are done."

The American nodded and began to cast off, sending his line far out into the dark waves. While Mr. Walker was busily preparing to do some serious fishing, Swen leaned back and used all his weight to heave an anchor overboard to prevent them from drifting. Then he sat down on the hard wooden bench and crossed his arms over his bright orange lifejacket. The glistening waves captivated Swen's eyes, and he allowed his mind to wander out of the boat and do a few laps. He traced his left ring finger unconsciously while thinking wistfully of his mother who had passed away a year ago, last spring. Swen normally enjoyed fishing, but today he did not want to be out on the ocean, sitting across from this middle-aged man.

Herb felt a rush of adrenaline when he cast his fishing line into the water. He liked the way the hook skimmed weightlessly across the water and then sank. Herb settled back after making sure everything was in the right place. It was time to let the hook and the worm do their work. His thoughts turned back to home as Herb relaxed into the monotony of fishing. He hoped that his son was managing the lumber company all right. The business could be complicated, but Herb had figured out most of the tricks in his thirty years in the trade. Herb comforted himself, remembering that his son had inherited Herb's sensibility. His son knew almost as much about the business as Herb did.

The two men sat across from him each other in the boat for hours. Every now and then the silence would be interrupted by Herb hauling in a fish. Finally, dusk began to creep over the rugged ocean landscape and Swen stood up to haul in the anchor. Herb stood up too, and replaced all of his fishing gear in the bottom of the boat. Swen began to rock the boat slightly with the effort of pulling up the heavy anchor. He took one step back and barely nudged Herb's behind. Herb, however, lost his balance and tipped over the edge of the boat and into the choppy water. Swen yanked the anchor into the boat with one last effort and then turned to see where Herb had fallen.

Herb forced his head out of the water and flailed about, yelling for help. His lifejacket lay forgotten in the bottom of the boat as Herb's eyes found Swen's. The two men's gazes locked for a split second. Swen made a move to jump, but then hesitated. In that instant, Herb's head sank below the water. Swen shook his head vigorously, kicked his shoes off and dived into the water. His powerful legs churned the water as he went after Herb's retreating body. After a few panicked moments, flesh met flesh and Swen dragged the motionless body towards the surface.

They exploded out of the water and Swen made a beeline for the already drifting boat. He hauled the American man's body on to the boat and forced the water out of his chest. Herb opened his eyes and began coughing violently. Swen let a huge sigh burst out of his heaving chest at this joyous sight-- he had just saved a life.

Herb lifted up his head and looked Swen in the eye, "Thank you. Thank you for saving my life," he lay back shakily, unable to sit up from exhaustion.

Swen nodded in acknowledgement and started up the boat's motor, shivering uncontrollably. He reached under his seat and pulled an old, threadbare blanket which he draped over Herb's shaking body. Turning the boat back to shore, Swen looked back out over the frothing water. There was no way to tell where the water had been punctured by their bodies. The waves had erased all the evidence.

Anticipation

It was not a warm day, but not a cold one, either. The sun was glowing dimly from behind a smattering of clouds the color of slate, and beyond that, far away, the sky was a faint foggy white. It was one of those days in late August, at the end of summer, that signals the onset of fall. The prospect should have been dreary, like the day itself, but instead there was a vague stirring of excitement in me, an alertness of my senses, because it seemed a storm was on the way.

Whether Candace knew what was coming, I didn't know and couldn't tell. She paid barely any attention at all to the weather, unless it directly affected her playing, which it did quite frequently but bothered her quite infrequently. At the time, she was racing about the playground, making her way from the swings to the monkey bars to the merry-go-round, wanting to enjoy them all before it was time to go home. From where I sat at a green-painted picnic table, I watched her climb up into a swing, one fashioned for children, but she did not sit in it correctly, and I assumed she thought herself too old for that. She turned around, spotting me through the dark lenses of her sunglasses.

"John!" she called out, shifting anxiously on her swing. "Come push me!"

I got up from the bench and made my way across the sandy ground to her, more than happy to oblige.

Candace was not my daughter, though people who saw us together often seemed to think so. Apparently there were similarities in the shapes of our noses, in the way we laughed. But we were not biologically related. She was the six-year-old daughter of Heather, my girlfriend, and in my opinion, closely resembled her more so than anyone else. It was hard not to see a young

Heather in Candace's face, and when the two of them were together, it was unmistakable. The only differences, of course, were that Candace had albinism and was much younger.

I placed my hands on her sides and pulled her back, watching her hands grip the chains tightly as she braced herself, excited. I counted down from three, unable to stop from grinning as she wriggled in anticipation, and then pushed her forward, up and over me, as high as I could, which was the way she liked it. Candace shouted joyfully and I stood back to watch her soar forward and glide back again as she pumped the chains, not wanting to lose her momentum.

I was continually amazed at my ability to please her. All it took was a push on a swing, a movie watched together, a playful addition to one of her doodles, because I was what she called "good at drawing." It wasn't hard to fall into the role of parent when I met the two of them, not when I realized that.

Candace began to slow down, tired from the effort of pumping the chains and now content to let her swing begin its descent to hover over the ground again. She dragged the toes of her sandals along the ground and watched me, the corners of her small mouth turned up in a dizzy, satisfied smile.

The sky had darkened considerably and I glanced up at it, squinting my eyes against the bright white of it. The sun had all but disappeared and a gentle wind swept through, rustling the leaves of the trees and, as I noticed when I looked back down, Candace's hair. She remained seated on her swing, oblivious to the sky and the trees and the wind, digging her toes into the sand again and undoubtedly awaiting another push.

It was the kind of day that made one draw in his breath. The air was crisp and fresh with the taste and scent of anticipation, the delightful realization that something was about to happen. Candace tugged on the chains.

"John, what are you doing?" she inquired, watching me through her purple-framed sunglasses.

"Nothing, baby. I think it's going to rain soon."

She looked around her, then up at the sky, leaning back on the swing in order to do so, seeming to be considering what I'd just said. To her, I knew, it could not possibly be about to rain, but I could not possibly be wrong, either.

"Do we have to go home?"

I smiled, meeting her gaze again. Her toes were once more kicking at the sand, drawing it up in the small indentation under her swing. "Not yet," I told her. "One more push."

As I pushed her up, giving a grunt for emphasis, Candace squealed and we began to feel the first drops of rain on our arms and heads. I stepped back to watch her swift, pendulous swinging, her jubilant legs suspended under her and their rhythmic bending and straightening. A gust of wind brought more raindrops and Candace pushed back against the chains to slow herself down again. She abandoned the swing before it had come to a complete stop and ran to join me.

Together we made our way back to my car, parked just below the boughs of a pine tree. Candace opened the unlocked passenger side door and climbed in, seating herself down. I got in as well, pulling my door shut behind me and reminding her of her seatbelt before I started the car.

"You ready for school to start, kiddo?" I asked her as I backed out of the empty parking lot. "First grade. You're in a grade now. Are you excited?"

"Yeah," she said, almost breathlessly. "I can't wait for school."

"One week," I reminded her, reaching over to move her sunglasses up to the top of her head, perching them atop her hair. "You'll be learning all sorts of things."

She was quiet for the rest of the way, as I drove from the park up the narrow little road to the condominiums where we lived. Rain had begun to fall more swiftly and I turned on the windshield wipers so that I could better see the road. Thunder growled faintly in the distance, but I didn't suppose it would draw any nearer; wild, thrashing rains and roaring thunder were of summer thunderstorms, in the heat of a July night.

I parked in our driveway and removed my light jacket before I got out, handing it to Candace to cover her head with, which she did, running up to the house with it billowing out behind her like a cape in the wind. I followed her up, at a much slower pace, letting the cool raindrops land on my skin without care. The air smelled and tasted crisp in my nose and on my tongue, that of fall, that of changes.

It wasn't only the seasons that were turning, I mused as I let myself into the warm and well-lit home, eyes glancing over the slightly mismatched but comfortable furniture and Heather's décor: flowers in vases, candles, and other such accents. I had a clear and wonderfully distinct feeling that life was about to as well. Candace would be starting school in a week's time, I would be applying for a new job even earlier than that, and my time would become more limited but that would prove to be beneficiary because limited time tugged the words out of me. I needed to write. I hadn't done so all summer. But it seemed, I thought right then, that I would, soon.

Heather appeared in the doorway, breaking me from my reverie and inviting me back to reality with a smile and a question. "Did you and Candace have a good time?"

"Yeah, we did," I replied with a smile to match hers. Heather was the type of person who could draw smiles out of people when she wanted; all it really took was one of her own.

"Hope you didn't get too wet out there," she said, looking me over and probably taking note of my rain-soaked shoulders, the places where the wetness had darkened my shirt.

"It's not so bad," I told her. "We left just as it started. I should blow over pretty soon."

She nodded and hung up my jacket in the little closet beside the door. "It's been looking kind of dreary all day long," she said conversationally. "Summer's almost over, John. Can you believe it?"

"No, I can't."

"It seems like it's just begun." Heather gave a little laugh at the irony of things; of course, this was what she said every time a good thing came to an end, that it had barely started at all. Summer just happened to be a prime example because I knew it was her favorite time of year. I myself preferred fall, just as the leaves began to turn. I could do without the long, dismal period that came after, between fall and winter, when everything was barren and brown and cold.

I sat down on the couch and stretched my legs out in front of me. Heather sat beside me, turning toward me after a moment.

"What're you thinking about, John?"

"Hm?"

"You've got that look on your face like you're in another world." She smiled, knowing that look well.

I chuckled, thinking that through before I responded, unsure myself where I'd been, exactly. "I'm thinking about my novel."

"Your new one?"

"Yes. 'New' meaning 'not started,' of course."

She laughed. "What's it going to be about?"

"I don't know yet, and when I do, I'm not telling. You'll have to wait until it's done." I knew Heather, an avid reader herself, despised this, but I didn't tantalize her for my own amusement. It seemed that every time I began to describe a story before it was finished, words

failed me, and I found myself drawing away from the idea and growing to hate it. Turning the thoughts into words cheapened them somehow.

"Well, I'll make sure you have lots of time to yourself to work on it. It's about time I got to see one of your stories." She never had, not a complete novel, not yet.

Heather, though not a writer or an artist, understood this quirk of mine, however, and had always seemed enthusiastic about my work and eager to provide the best conditions possible for it. This often led to her disappearing for hours, in order to give me my 'peace and quiet,' as she called it, which I might have been grateful for had she not been the person I usually went to when I was seeking advice or the answer to an odd question. Candace was equally interested in my writing, though she wasn't always the biggest help; she seemed to always suggest I write about a cat, decidedly her favorite animal, and what I suspected she wanted for Christmas.

Soon, Heather disappeared into the kitchen, and moments later I heard water running and pots and pans clattering, as though she were about to start preparing dinner. I guessed Heather wanted to give me the opportunity to get a head start on my writing. Not wanting to disappoint her, I got up as well and started to the stairs.

I headed upstairs to the office where the computer was and seated myself in my chair before my cherry wood desk, which was right beside a smaller desk with a smaller chair, one for Candace should she want to sit and draw while I typed. At the moment, the room was empty, and I didn't bother to turn on the light before I turned on the computer, content to sit in the semi-darkness with the vague illumination from the screen.

My word processor, completely at my will, could churn out an empty document anytime I wanted one; that did not surprise me. What did was the sheer whiteness and vastness, waiting to be filled up with words, if only I could find the right ones. This document, the one I had just

requested, could either become a novel -or I could abandon it, lacking the inspiration to finish it, after two hundred words.

I leaned back in my chair, studying that screen thoughtfully. My cursor blinked ceaselessly, lazily, waiting for the words to appear but at the same time seeming to know that it had all the time in the world.

I didn't notice when Candace came in. I only realized her presence when I felt her leaning on my chair and looked down to see her peeking up at me from under my arm, an almost mischievous look on her face, as though she suspected she shouldn't be bothering me. I didn't mind. Smiling, I moved my arm to wrap it around her, pulling her to my side.

"Are you writing a story, John?" she asked quietly, a peak of curiosity in her voice.

"Not yet," I told her, "but soon."

She smiled. "About a girl? A girl who wanted a little kitten more than anything in the world, so she went to the pound to get one?" Candace, wise with the knowledge of pet adoption, spoke of no other way to get a cat than to take in one from the pound. It was senseless to buy from a pet store or a breeder, she said, when the ones at the shelters were the ones who really wanted owners.

"That's a good idea for a story," I said quietly, leaning down as though to share a secret with her. "Why don't you write it?"

"I can't write stories."

"Yes, you can. Go sit down at your desk with some paper and I'll help you spell the words."

I watched as she went to sit down and gathered papers from the little cabinet under her desk, arranging them in front of her as she planned out her story. She then selected markers and

began to decorate a cover. I turned back to the computer screen, listening to the soft sounds of her diligent working, and willed my own words to come.

"John," she said after a moment, "how do you spell 'collar'?"

I told her, spelling it out slowly to give her time to write it down. Then I turned in my chair to watch her bent over her desk, using her thick markers to write out her story. Candace, whether she shared my interest in writing, inarguably had a boundless imagination, and needed little time to think before she began working. I envied that about her, along with endless other things, particularly her childish perception of the world: the belief that everything was new and exciting, that any ordinary day had the potential to be an adventure, that everything could be turned into a story.

Together we worked on our individual projects, Candace writing and drawing with her markers, myself seated in front of the screen and brainstorming, until Heather called us downstairs for dinner.

First Amens

Declan walks downstairs into that end-of-the-hall room one September morning to see his older brother's natural habitat one last time before it is tuned completely into a static display of brown cardboard boxes: perfectly geometric, unexplainably cold. He flops on Jamie's unmade bed, a tangle of spartan blue sheets displaying great holes of mattress, and inhales that unique smell of a boy's room, a combination of woody cologne and sweat.

Jamie has begun packing, and a strange combination of tchochkes from the past eighteen years is strewn about the floor and desk as he decides what memories will support his new image as a college man, and what would be better left in a blue plastic tub stashed somewhere in a corner of his parents' basement. Declan nudges a battered stuffed cow out of the way with his foot as he sits upright to take a closer look at Jamie's memorabilia. Dog-eared paperbacks. Empty cans of Coca-Cola. Abandoned college brochures from schools that Jamie never had an interest in attending. And then it catches his eye: a picture of the two of them in the backyard.

He picks it up and examines it, remembering the day in a flash of memory. It was mid-July; the sun pounded relentlessly, turning the faces of his brother and sister into suspicious, dark-eyed masks in the photograph. The trio had tired of the sandbox, overgrown with plants and filled with chipped shards of plastic toys purchased on a whim at a discount store. Instead, they moved to the swingset. Jamie shimmied up the metal ladder and hurled himself onto the monkey bars, hoisting himself vertically to a sitting position far above the heads of Lindsey and Declan.

"Watch this," he boasted. *"I bet you guys can't do this one."* Slowly he rose to a standing position, the noonday sun blasting him, black silhouette against a white background. Declan shielded his eyes to look closer.

"I want to try!" he shouted. Their mother suddenly appeared at the door, storming out to save her babies from harm.

"James Gregory, get down from there!" she shouted. He lowered himself with easy grace, falling to the ground catlike.

"You can try," Jamie whispered to Declan as their mother pushed the trio together, placing arms on shoulders and pushing bangs out of eyes for a family picture. *"But you're on your own when it comes to getting down."*

A quick white burst of light exploded from the camera, and the three children pulled apart from each other. Lindsey called her mother over to the far corner of the yard to mourn the wilting heads of the tangerine-and-cream lilies of the valley, and Declan decided to make his move. He laboriously jerked up each step of the silver ladder that led to the monkey bars, wincing as his palms grazed the steaming metal coating. Eyes squinting in concentration and a pink tip of tongue just visible in the corner of his mouth, he hoisted himself on top of the bars, his arms shaking with effort. Only one move left. He slowly, aching stood up, arms outstretched to help hold his balance, but his bare feet, sweaty from the day's heat, made him slip and thump flat on his back on the ground below.

Declan opened his eyes, noticing only a dull, throbbing pain in his back and a metallic taste in his mouth. He could hazily see his mother sprinting towards him out of the corner of his eye. Suddenly, a smirking face appeared in his line of vision. Jamie.

'See, I knew you wouldn't be able to. "

In a strange way, that was a turning point for Declan. Maybe that was why he stopped following Jamie around and imitating his words, mimicking his actions. But time had something to do with it too; Declan realized that when Jamie came home from school with cooler, tougher friends that he had been demoted to second-string status.

Declan didn't know what exactly had prompted the avoided glances in the school hallways or the awkward conversations during the rare occasions they were alone together, but

he knew that fundamentally, something had changed between them. He rarely spoke to his own brother anymore, his brother living in a room a floor below him. They had wholly separate groups of friends; he congregated in a corner of the cafeteria with his fellow overachievers and watched Jamie claim his seat at the artsy table near the center of the room. Occasionally their cliques will overlap and he'll hear a bit of gossip about what his brother had done the previous weekend; he feels disconnected, like he's hearing gossip about an uninteresting celebrity.

Even in his own house, with a going-away party raging above him, he feels like it would be difficult to interact with Jamie. He'd already walked through the living room once to grab a drink, and felt every lip-ringed male and choppy-haired girl in the place turn to stare at him.

"Jamie's friends with the valedictorian?" someone asked.

"That's his brother. And he's not the valedictorian, he's only a junior."

"No way that's Jamie's brother. And if he's only a junior, then explain to me why he was in all of our classes?"

Declan retreats back to the basement as soon as possible.

Suddenly the door swings open and Lindsey, his oldest sister, walks in. "Hey, Dec." she says with a puzzled expression on her face.

"What are you doing?"

"Not much," he mumbles. "I actually just found this picture of us on Jamie's desk; do you remember this?" She stares at it for a minute.

"Not this day especially. God knows Mom was always trying to get us out of the house, and I got the privilege of supervising you two. Why?"

"No reason. So, do you know when Jamie is leaving?"

"You can't wait to get rid of him, huh? Want to move into this room when he goes?"

"No, I was just curious."

"Why don't you know that? You do live with him. By the way, Mom asked him upstairs who your good friends at school were and I'm pretty sure he just invented names. Unless you actually do know someone named Fredrick Cowlington."

Declan laughed. "No, I can't say that I do." He pauses for a minute, uneasy about verbalizing the thought. "I don't know. He does his thing and I do mine, and I guess our paths don't really cross too much."

"But he's your brother. Are you just going to stop talking to him permanently because it's kind of hard and you don't really have that much in common? If you did that, you would never talk to anyone you're related to. That's why they're called your family, not your friends."

"I know. It's just that. ..with him, I always feel like I'm just the tagalong little brother, and he feels like I'm beneath him or something."

"But who's fault is that? Maybe he does condescend to you. I don't know. But if he does, you're letting yourself be condescended to. And I think that's almost as bad."

She swings her long legs back over the arm of Jamie's leather chair and heads for the exit.

"I'm going upstairs. You might want to come up and say goodbye. And don't worry, the majority of the Hipsters Association have left."

Declan thought about it. True, Jamie bullied him, harassed him, called him names when they were younger and avoided him for the most part now. But he wasn't an entirely bad person. He reflected back on the time Jamie handed Declan his ice cream cone when Declan dropped his, and didn't even tease him about the violent streak of pink that appeared when the scoop of strawberry rolled down his shirtfront. Or even more recently, when he walked into his English class to hear Jamie telling Sarah Patterson that Declan wasn't actually that much of a nerd; he was kind of funny when you got to know him.

Probably, he was expecting too much. Maybe brothers weren't supposed to be friends when they grew up, because no one would make an effort to draw a sibling towards you with compliments and jokes the way you would a friend. With your brother or sister, you'll always be linked together, regardless of your terrible personality or complete inability to compromise. The relationship is unconditional, and hadn't someone said once that unconditional love was the same as indifference? Maybe that's why Jamie avoids him.

Declan trudges upstairs and notes happily that the house is indeed empty except for those who live there. The family stands at attention in their tired living room. Declan shuffles across the scarred wooden floor and grabs a spot against the wall next to his father. They silently observe as his teary-eyed mother hands Jamie a blue-and-red wrapped package. His childhood favorite colors.

"Don't open this until you get there, okay?" Her voice cracks as she tries not to cry.

They sit down at the table to eat cake. Declan stabs at the garish pink frosting, smearing it around the white plate to make a more pleasing color. He looks across the table, noticing that Jamie appears as uncomfortable as he feels.

I would be absolutely terrified to go to college, he realizes. First, you'd have to figure out a facade of respectability, of normalcy that you could present to the outside world. People dislike the unknown, so you'd have to stuff your personality into one of those awful, boring boxes that for some reason are considered acceptable ones. It didn't matter if you got tired of playing the Funny Frat Boy or the Pretty Girl; your friends would look at you strangely if you broke out of the mold. And without a tribe of individuals who dress and think and act like you, you'd be stranded in college. A lifetime of solitary meals and Saturday nights spent staring at the walls of your dorm room is all life would have in store. At least in high school you had a neutral location

that you could retreat to when your peers weren't interested in associating with you. Did Jamie lie awake at night worrying about these things too? Was he even a little bit nervous?

The room is silent except for the clink of metal against china until finally everyone finishes. Jamie stands up from the table, and the family chats idly until he makes an announcement.

"Well, I'm not all the way packed yet, but I'll go get the boxes I have and we can start putting stuff in the car."

Lindsey gives Declan an expectant look from across the room. He repeats a sentence over and over again in his mind, adding a word here and there even though he's ashamed he can't just come out and say something. Though it's not easy, he forces the words out.

"Jamie? Do you want any help?"

"Okay. The boxes will probably be too heavy for you. But I guess it's worth a shot."

So Declan traipses down the first-floor stairs one last time. He carries boxes up the stairs, stuffs them into the trunk of the family's station wagon, and waves goodbye to Jamie and his mother as they walk towards the car. Suddenly Jamie lopes back towards Declan.

"Hey, Dec?"

"Yeah?"

He addresses the scuffed toes of Declan's black hightops. "Wish me luck, okay? I'm not sure how the whole college thing is going to work out."

Declan finds his voice. "Sure. But I know you'll be fine." *What if being the artsy, cool, untouchable older brother is what Jamie thinks I expect from him?* he wonders. *Does he think I won't like him if he seems unsure or something?*

He walks back into the house, his mind full of final goodbyes and new beginnings, and carefully copies down Jamie's school email address from a pile of papers on the kitchen table.

Maybe he'll use it one of these days.