

Brood
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NaNoWriMo 2010

The cicadas are here, hovering about my head, mating on the wing, getting ready to die. I am too, I suppose. Getting ready to die, that is. I wish I could say I had a good run at it, but that just wouldn't be true. It would be nothing more than a comforting lie, an attempt to placate myself at the very end. It would serve no other purpose but to make these last few weeks, or days, or minutes -- there's no telling how much longer there is -- more bearable.

People at the end of their days tend to have the desire to make the most of them, to live their last moments to the fullest, as if packing a hundred activities into that last year or month will somehow make up for a lifetime of inactivity, of complacency, of stagnation. But why do we do anything at all? For the experience? What is an experience but the flash of a moment, the blink of an eye, the flipping of a page? What is an experience without the time to cherish the memory, or the lesson learned? If we don't have time to live with the change that every experience makes in us, what is the point?

I have a friend -- no, I had a friend; monsters don't have friends -- who has a list of all the things he wants to do before he dies. He wants to go skydiving and to see the Eiffel Tower lit up at night, and to go swimming with dolphins, and I hope he gets to do all those things, I really do. I am not disparaging the idea of having dreams, of having goals, of having aspirations. I used to have those, a long time ago, long before the events that led me here. I couldn't tell you what they were, but I remember having them, that much I know.

Dreams, unnurtured, untended, poorly invested in, they fade. They wither. They die. It's nobody's fault but my own, I'm not trying to lay the blame anywhere but squarely on myself. Don't get me wrong, other people played a part in it, but they wouldn't have done had I not let them, hadn't invited and empowered them. Nobody has influence over you unless you let them.

It's 3PM on a Sunday afternoon. Summer has begun. Once my favorite of the four seasons, I no longer have an opinion on the matter. I no longer have opinions on many matters, really. One season is the same as any other, each day the same as the rest, each moment indistinguishable from the one that came before it. Things are slow or fast, big or small, warm or cold and I recognize all this at some level, and it is relative and somehow irrelevant at the same time. Nothing much matters to me, here, in the Barrens, in the woods, on the ground, beneath a tree.

It's where I've made my home, this small patch of ground, I try to take up as little space as possible, trying for once to make my footprint smaller than my worth, to make no impact on my environment. I've wreaked enough destruction on this world already, might as well try to reduce the damage as I can before I go.

You get thoughts like these, you have thoughts like these when you know it's your time. The cicadas do too. You might not think that they're thinking about much of anything at all, except, perhaps, for fucking enough to make a new generation of the little bastards, not that I'm holding any grudges, and not that I can really blame them. When it's time, and only they will know when it's time, they'll dig new tunnels, burrowing into the ground, and they'll lay their eggs deep in

the soil, and they'll wait, Good Lord how they'll wait. Seventeen years. That's how long it takes. Patiently waiting for the time to be right, and you could forgive them, being insects, and being underground, if they were a year off one way or the other, if they overslept, or jumped the gun. But they won't. They'll be back in seventeen years, eating through the soil, making their way back up to the surface, making their way through yet another cycle and if you asked everyone you knew, I bet none of them could tell you why.

What purpose do they serve? What good do they do? Have you looked at one up close? Have you stared into the eyes of one of these horrific, red-eyed, winged monstrosities? Go ahead, I dare you. It is not easy, nor is it pleasant. They are the monsters under the bed, the skeletons in the closet, the bogeymen of the insect kingdom. Look at one up close, look at ten thousand from a distance, and think, "There are people that eat these," and try not to vomit. That there are people who are not entirely freaked out by them is scary enough in and of itself. These are people without fear of anything, which means that they have no souls at all, which means they are capable of anything at all, except love. It's a good test for yourself -- measure the amount of soul you have by the level of revulsion you feel when coming face to face with a million copies of your worst nightmare. I no longer feel a thing, in that regard or any other. I am fucked.

Every day there are fewer and fewer of them. They're dropping like flies, if you'll pardon the expression. And every day, more of them are dropping. As I move through the woods, as I make my rounds, I see them falling, new patches in the living, moving, bubbling bark opening up, the ground around the tree trunks growing crunchier with the still twitching bodies, the feebly wiggling legs of the soon to be dead. I consider doing the same, going belly up, wiggling, pathetic, helpless. But I have too much to do.

"You'd better get going, Arthur. The photos won't take themselves," Sharon said, and she laughed, as if she had said something clever, which she hadn't. She was simply stating a fact. It was true. The photos wouldn't take themselves. That's why I got paid \$30,000 a year. It was necessary to have some semi-trained human being (monkeys lack the proper focus) available to place the object -- a candle holder; a salt and pepper shaker set; a paper towel holder -- in question on the photo table, make sure the lighting is correct, and push the button. Again and again. Until they've all been photographed. Until the end of time.

I sighed. I pushed my chair back from my desk, grabbed my notebook and a pen, looked around at my cubicle mates -- there were four of us stuffed into 50 square feet of modular furniture, computers, scanners, packaging samples, product samples. They were all pretending to be busy once Sharon entered our space. Moments before, we were debating about which chain restaurant within ten miles of our office prepared the best drinks. I was on the edge of becoming inappropriately angry about the topic entirely. A drink is a drink. Despite that, Paul was presenting the most salient points in favor of the Cheesecake Factory. Therese was pushing for T.G.I Friday's while Kate was campaigning for Bannigan's. I just wanted it all to end. Once Sharon had interrupted, the conversation had ceased and all four of our faces had turned back to our monitors, all effort being put towards making our backs look somehow productive. Unfortunately, I'd been the object of our supervisor's visit.

"I'm on it, Sharon," I said, standing up. I'd been avoiding going to the photo room all day long. The product developers had gone on another of their "research" trips to Target, which meant that they would be bringing back armloads of stuff for me to photograph. Not that I hadn't been working: the file server was filled with thousands of images of products, all misnamed or obscurely named. It was part of my job to search through a massive database of products and find the proper photos to associate with each item. They all went into the website, which nobody seemed to use, but everyone had an opinion about. There were thousands, tens of thousands, of images that needed to be corrected, and the more I did, the more there seemed to be. I spent at least two hours a day with the server and the database and the site and it didn't feel as if I'd made any progress with it at all. The only obvious result from all my work was a near encyclopedic knowledge of the company's products and product numbers. I could tell you the product numbers for the entire Green Apple Kitchen Line (#4327GAP - 4358GAP) or differentiate between the light red beaded wall sconce from 1998 (#1298LRS) and the slightly darker red beaded wall sconce from 2001 (#3106LRS) at a distance of 200 feet. These skills would get me nowhere in the real world, but at work, at least amongst my immediate colleagues, it made me something of a celebrity. My cubicle mates would try to stump me with obscure product numbers and even more obscure product number item extensions. It was just one of many games we played to pass the time in an otherwise stultifyingly boring workplace.

Sharon, meanwhile, had already forgotten about me, leaning languidly against the cubicle wall that formed the entryway to our little fortress of servitude. Paul's desk was nearest the entrance and she now cast her attention towards him.

"Hi, Paul," she said. "How's it going?"

Paul looked up from his computer long enough to flash a quick smile at Sharon. I rolled my eyes. Every day it was the same thing: Sharon would bury me with work, and bury Paul with bizarre flirtation. She knew he was married. We all knew he was uninterested. Sharon was attractive enough on an objective level, but once you got to know her, all her features somehow looked askew, as if her personality pushed things slightly out of place.

"It's going alright," Paul said, nodding towards his monitor. He was working on packaging design for a cookie jar (#9800-9955), zoomed into the image almost to the atomic level. Seemingly random colored pixels filled his screen, and he had been meticulously drawing selection paths around the image of the object so he could strip it out of the background and put it into his box design. Pathing took up most of his time, and he was the best of all of us at it. I had no idea how he knew which pixels he wanted and which ones were garbage, especially when he was zoomed in that far, but he always got it. He turned back to his work.

"Good, good," Sharon said inanely. She had a knack for standing in your presence for just long enough that it became slightly uncomfortable for you and anyone who happened to be watching. She never seemed to notice. "So you're coming out with us tonight, right?"

The packaging department had been awarded, at the behest of the company's owner, a night out on the town. There'd been a recent housewares trade show, for which the company had been woefully unprepared, and instead of letting all the salespeople who were in Chicago fail miserably without the packaging samples they needed (my suggestion) we'd worked ridiculously long hours, churning out designs, cutting boxes, gluing flaps. We had talked about the idea that we might get a cash bonus for our heroic work, but they'd opted for making us spend more time

together. The dinner had been the reason behind our earlier debate -- at least they let us choose where we went.

"Of course, I am," Paul said distractedly, adjusting some Bezier points, one hand on his mouse, the other hovering over the keyboard. "Wouldn't miss it."

I slipped past Sharon, notebook under my arm. "I'll be there too," I said as I passed her.

"What?" she asked, glancing in my direction, a look on her face as if she no longer knew who I was. It passed in an instant. "Oh, yes. Good, Arthur. I'm glad you'll be able to make it." She went back towards her office, the opposite direction of the photo room.

The photo room. My office. My hiding place. As much as I might have hated taking picture after picture, it was rare that anyone would bother me while I was in there, especially if I was nearly buried under a load of products. I could pile up samples, barricade myself behind housewares, make the very idea of coming in to talk to me reprehensible, unthinkable. Anybody who might be seeking me out only had to glance into the room, see a pile of candle holders, me with my back to the door, headphones on, music drowning out the rest of the world, and they would think twice about bothering with me. My email inbox was often full of requests and notes from people who knew better than to try to talk to me. Some of them I had convinced that I was creating art and shouldn't be destroyed; most of them just knew that taking pictures -- like many things -- just put me in a shitty mood.

But really, I didn't mind it all that much. As far as jobs go, this wasn't a particularly bad one. I worked for Cola Industries, the nation's third-largest importer of second-rate housewares from first-world nations (that is to say, China.) Nobody could ever tell me why the place was called Cola Industries. Nobody was named Cola, and we had nothing to do with beverage products (except for the occasional glassware sets we produced.) The office manager told me that she fielded endless calls from people who hadn't done the slightest bit of research and were looking for wholesale beverage suppliers, including the occasional call from Coca- and Pepsi-Colas themselves, the big guys looking to potentially buy us out. I didn't know whether to believe her or not, but it made for an amusing anecdote regardless.

Cola Industries was started by John Trammel, a 45-year old entrepreneur who had seen a burgeoning market in cheap household items that was getting bigger all the time with the advent of such retailers as Wal-Mart and Target. He knew there was no way he could compete with the high-cost design of Target, and Wal-Mart worked directly with their own Chinese factories, but he figured there would be inroads with the smaller stores. Dollar stores like Family Dollar, and large drug stores like CVS were starting to carry these products and needed suppliers. Trammel slipped right in with a simple business model. He hired teams of product developers as opposed to product designers. The main team of developers was a group of women, all in their mid-twenties, all inaccessible, unapproachable, incomprehensible (to me, anyhow) whose main talents consisted of being able to find the closest Target and buying two of each item that they thought was particularly interesting. They brought their loot back to Cola, piled one of each item in front of the photo room door.

The idea was that the items would get sent off to our factories in China. There, the fine, undoubtedly well cared-for and well-paid workers would recreate these items cheaper, quicker, shoddier than the ones on the shelves in Target. Cola spent more money on shipping than

anything else. Meanwhile, the salesmen needed to drum up interest in the items, and for that, they needed photos and that's where I came in.

The rumors were true. The product team had gone on one hell of a shopping spree. There were ten different candle holders, six picture frames, and five kitchen utensil sets. And it was all crystal. Fucking crystal. I'd never thought much of crystal before I started working at Cola, but once I started trying to take pictures of it, it became the bane of my existence. Trying to capture the details of a clear object against a blank background was a supreme pain in my ass. I sighed again, cleared a path into the room and set to work.

The photo room was a 9' X 9' drab, windowless box down the hall from the cubicle. Across from the door was a rickety photo table -- a few untreated 2x4s supporting a wooden platform. Behind the table, on a metal rack, hung a spool of white paper which I used as a background for my artistic masterpieces. To the side of the table were spools of paper of various colors (gray, black) and a mess of lost, broken, and forgotten samples. I kept meaning to spend some time to clean the place up, but I found that I never quite cared enough to actually do it. I kept telling myself that my time there was limited, that there was no point in settling in, putting down roots, that cleaning the room would only lengthen my stay, indicate some sort of commitment to Cola, to New Jersey, to things I just didn't have the capacity for commitment to. Not cleaning the room had nothing to do with my laziness and everything to do with my constant quiet struggle against my current existence. In front of the table were two Westcott photography lights: giant, blinding monsters that generated enough heat in the small room that even in the middle of December, I never had to wear a sweater to work. In between the two lights was the sigil of my office: the Canon Powershot A80 camera, a 4.0 megapixel job with a 1.5" vari-angle LCD display, featuring a 3x optical zoom and a 1GB compact flash memory card. It was a piece of crap, three years old and outdated by the time I'd arrived at Cola, and only getting older. Still, it took pictures, and it took them reliably, and there wasn't really much more that I needed it to do.

Most days, and with most things, I could get into a rhythm: grab an item, put it on the table, press the button, move the item, repeat as necessary. Occasionally I'd make a note if I knew that naming the photos later would be difficult. Often there were items that looked so much alike that it would be impossible to tell which was which once I'd transferred the photos to the computer. Two red glass votive holders with wire and bead accents that were only differentiated by the slightest difference in size were impossible to tell apart in photographs. Sometimes, one would randomly be chosen as "red_glass_beaded_votive_holder_sm.jpg" and the other got to be "_lrg.jpg." Never in my wildest childhood dreams had I ever imagined that this would be the biggest concern of my professional career, but there it was. I was living the dream.

Today, however, with the sheer amount of crystal, I had no such luck. Each item required a different photograph, attention and care, taking me out of the blissful, no brain occupation that this job had promised to be. After two hours of frustrating attempts at capturing the images, I'd only made it through half of the samples. Apparently I'd lost track of time, because as I stood in the middle of the room, contemplating how to shoot a particular candle plate willing it to be more photogenic, I heard a female voice just outside the room say, "Knock knock!"

I hate when people say "Knock knock!" Why not just actually knock? I shut my eyes, willed myself to be polite and calm. It was Therese, unquestionably my least favorite of my

cubicle mates. She and I got along alright on a day to day basis but she had a way about her that threatened to drive me insane. She was one of those people who would ask a question first before even attempting to discover an answer on her own.

I remembered a time when she was going on and on about how much she loved Fat Tuesday. The “holiday” was coming up and she was raving about it, but was lamenting the fact that it was happening in February.

“It’s going to be too cold this year,” she had whined. “We won’t be able to have our parade.”

“Parade?” I’d asked. It was soon after I’d started working. I hadn’t yet learned not to pursue any line of conversation with her. “You guys have a Fat Tuesday parade up here?”

“I love Fat Tuesday,” she repeated. “I work on a parade every year. But if it’s in February, it’s just not going to work.”

“Yeah, that would be difficult for sure,” I agreed.

“I hate how it moves around like that. I don’t know why it does that.”

“You don’t?” I asked. I was so naive.

“No. I think it has something to do with the Catholic Church.”

“Yes. Something to do with it. It’s always the day before Ash Wednesday.”

“Always?”

“Yes, and Ash Wednesday is 46 days before Easter and Easter is the first Sunday after full moon following the vernal equinox. So Easter can be between March 22 and April 25, which puts Fat Tuesday anywhere between February 3 to March 10.”

“What?”

“Fat Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday starts Lent. Fat Tuesday is the last party before the fast.”

“Are you Catholic?” she had asked, a suspicious look in her eye.

“Not at all, Therese,” I had answered. “If anything, I identify as Jewish.”

Her suspicious look turned to disdain.

“But,” I was quick to add, “I don’t practice or adhere to any particular mass market religion or faith.”

The disdain lessened, replaced by pity.

“No faith at all?” she asked.

“Well, Therese, I have faith. I have faith that life will suck, things will be shitty, I will die, and the world will eventually end.”

She frowned. I was quickly learning that I could easily instigate whatever emotion I wanted to in her, just with a few simple words, whether I meant them or not.

“How can you go through life like that?” she asked.

“It’s pretty easy. I follow my own path, I do my own thing, I make my own way. Whatever obstacles I face I either get past and beyond or I don’t. That which doesn’t kill me--”

“Makes you stronger, yeah, I know.”

“No. That which doesn’t kill me probably just wasn’t around at the right time or place. We’re very delicate things, Therese. So delicate that it doesn’t take very much to do us in. We don’t have very much time on this planet and there are no guarantees in life except for death.”

“That’s so bleak.” She looked like she might cry.

"No, it's really not. Look at it this way: nothing in the universe has any expectations for you other than that you are born and that you die. All the shit about potential and destiny and meaning? It's total crap. It's all marketing for Nike and Jo-Ann Fabrics and Glastonbury Press. It's just there so people can sell you something."

"It's not all about selling. People want you to live up to your potential so you can make something of yourself and make an impact on the world."

"But why?"

"Because, like, my parents, they want me to make a difference and be somebody and live up to my potential."

"But why? What does it matter if you make a difference in the world or don't? Ultimately you'll be gone and it won't mean a thing to you."

"But that's so selfish, Arthur!" she said. "You have to make a difference so that the world is better for future generations."

"Okay, so you're taking the selfless approach here and I can respect that. I don't feel that at all, not a bit, but I respect it."

"Thank you."

"But," I said, "where does that leave you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, here you are, working in the packaging department at Cola Industries. What impact are you having on the world?"

Therese frowned, bit her lip. "I don't know," she said.

"The only impact you're having -- and I'm not putting you down at all, Therese, trust me, I'm not -- is on Cola's bottom line, you know? And your own, really, since you don't do it for free, either. You go and take pictures of products, really nice pictures from what I've seen --"

"Thank you," she said.

"-- and you bring them back and Paul puts them on the packaging and the shit gets put in boxes and shipped to stores and sold, and who benefits? The owners, the salesmen. But is anybody's life better? Does anyone's life improve if they have a great candle holder or picture frame?"

"If it's really nice, maybe."

"Briefly, maybe, but we can agree, I think, that material goods don't have the kind of impact that we're talking about, right? They're fleeting things. You can't take them with you, if there is in fact anywhere to take things."

"Well, yeah, I guess you're right. I mean, there's something to be said for having your house decorated really nice, and for helping people do that with the stuff we sell, that's really cool."

"It is really cool, sure, Therese," I said. I was starting to learn my lesson. "Say, you went to college, right?"

"Yeah, I went to the College of North Jersey."

"And what did you get your degree in?"

"I got an Associate's Degree in Photojournalism."

"Photojournalism? Really? That's cool."

"Yeah, it was a lot of fun."

"And what are you doing with that degree?"

"Well, I'm.... I'm taking pictures of housewares."

"Right. I have a Bachelor's Degree in Microbiology. And a Master's in Applied Macroeconomoneuroplastology. And what am I doing with those?"

"Taking pictures of housewares."

"Exactly. Nobody's living up to their potential. And who's to say if that even is potential? Is there even anything that I could be doing with a Master's in Macroeconomoneuroplastology? I just got it so I wouldn't have to join the real world for another couple years."

"What is Macroeconomoneuroplastology anyway?" Therese asked.

"It's the study of the impact of 'take a penny leave a penny' trays in gas stations and convenience stores."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not," I said. I totally was. "It's a very specialized field. But, really, what good could that possibly do for anyone? Nothing. For nobody. I tells you."

"That's a pretty negative view too, Arthur," Therese said.

"Again, I tell you, it's not a bad thing. It's great to accept that we are going to go nowhere and do nothing with our lives, because that frees us up to do what is possible. What is realistic. There's no way I'm going to get a position on the Weekly Macroeconomoneuroplastology Review, the most respected Macroeconomoneuroplastology-related publication in the Western Hemisphere. I don't want to teach Macroeconomoneuroplastology and 7-11 doesn't exactly hire unknown Macroeconomoneuroplastologists off the street."

"Why did you get your Master's in it?"

"Macroeconomoneuroplastology has always been my passion. Even though I knew there was no future in it, I've always felt like those penny trays were calling to me, like they were leading me to the promised land, leading me to a better tomorrow."

"That's amazing," Therese said. "That's how I feel about photojournalism."

"But it's not, Therese," I said. "It's not calling me, or leading me anywhere. And there is no promised land, there is no better tomorrow. There's only now and slightly later from now. And slightly later from then."

"And what comes after that?"

"More of the same. Or something different. Who can say? And who really cares? All that we know is that it all ends. Eventually."

"What did this have to do with what we were talking about?"

"Mardi Gras?" I asked.

"No, Fat Tuesday."

"Oh. Right," I said, and I experienced that first incredible eye-rolling urge. Paul would later tell me about the time he first felt it -- five minutes after meeting Therese, she had commented on Paul's dreadlocks and asked him if he knew Bob Marley. Not if he knew Bob Marley's music, mind you, but if he actually knew Bob Marley. Because of his dreadlocks. Paul's eyes had nearly rolled out of his head. I think I should get some credit for having lasted more than a week. "Fat Tuesday. I don't know, Therese. I think the point I'm trying to make is that you should probably bundle up pretty warmly for your parade."

Plus, she did shit like say “Knock knock.”

“What is it, Therese?” I asked without turning.

“Oh, these look tough,” she said, entering the room and picking the candle plate up off the table. “You’ve got to mess with the white balance to get them to show up at all.” She looked up and smiled. “But you know that.”

Therese had once done my job but had moved on to bigger and better things. She was in charge of dealing with the photo shoots for all the actual products -- the wonderful trinkets that these samples would eventually be transformed into. Those shoots were done in an actual photo studio, taken by an actual photographer. Therese had gone from camera person to director, a distinction she never ceased reminding me of. I freely admitted that she knew more about photography than I ever would, that she undoubtedly could teach me a thing or two, that she had valuable advice, but her presentation was lacking and I could never accept any of it without a fight.

I took the candle plate from her, put it back on the table a little roughly, all semblance of politeness and calm out the door. “Of course I know that,” I scoffed. “I’ve been doing this for three months. They hired me for a reason.”

To her credit, Therese faced all of my instances of aggression with a smile -- an enervating, aggravating smile -- never confronted me on them. “Of course, Arthur.” She stood there purposelessly.

“What can I do for you, Therese?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “It’s 5:30. We’re going.”

I looked at my watch. I’d wasted the afternoon with the crystal pieces. I sighed again. “Fine, let me just close up here and I’ll be ready to go.”

Therese left the room and I turned off the lights and camera, gathered up my notebook and left the room. By the time I got back to the cubicle, the building was pretty much empty. Except for Therese.

“Where is everyone?” I asked. “Paul? Kate?”

“They went on ahead. Can I get a ride?”

“Therese, I have no idea where this place is,” I complained.

“Oh, don’t worry. I know how to get there.”

Driving with Therese was the only thing that was worse than working with her (though I imagined that living with her would be another story entirely.) I had driven her home from work once and found that she was prone to getting distracted, causing her to suddenly shout out hurried directions (“Turn right, now! Right now!”) Worse than that was her nearly incessant chattering. She talked about everything from the lyrics of the songs on the radio to the names of the streets and stores that we passed. I had only lived in New Jersey for a few months and was mostly unfamiliar with the geography and completely unfamiliar with their foreign customs and so driving took all my concentration. Therese hadn’t seemed to notice. The idea of ferrying her to and from this dinner was not attractive, but as everyone else had already left (something that left me fuming) I had no choice. I couldn’t very well show up without her, much as I might like to.

“Yeah, of course, let’s go.”

Therese and I grabbed our things and made our way through the office and the labyrinthine warehouse to the parking lot. I had arrived late that day, a fact that Sharon had been sure to make me aware of almost the second I stepped into the office, as if she had just been waiting for me to arrive so she could pounce. The fact that the lone remaining parking spot was a quarter mile walk from the front door had driven the point of my tardiness home better than any lecture from her could do. I hated being late for things, it was my biggest pet peeve when other people were late for things, and I had always prided myself on being on time for everything. There was just something about coming to work that kept me from making it there by 9AM though. Even if I woke up at 8, I still couldn't make it on time despite the fact that -- and this was the best damn thing about the job -- I lived a mere 10 minutes away. Somehow I would always manage to distract myself from the idea of leaving for work until it was too late. My subconscious didn't want to go either, wanted to protect me from it. I wished it had protected me from the entire state of New Jersey, but it hadn't. My idiot conscious mind won that battle. And now we were all paying for it.

Distracted by these thoughts, I walked in silence. I imagine that Therese had been talking the whole time, but I didn't hear her. My subconscious mind (protective as ever) had taken over, was nodding and making affirmative grunts when necessary and appropriate. Useful skill, that. I nearly walked right into my car which, by now, was the only obstacle in the otherwise empty lot.

"Here we are," I said, unlocking the door.

The less said about the drive, and the dinner, and driving Therese home, and getting lost out on the dark roads of rural New Jersey the better. Everything went pretty much as I had imagined it would -- Therese talked incessantly, Sharon flirted with Paul, Kate ignored me entirely. I have to admit that the drinks were good, but when you only drink beer, what do you expect? I could have gotten the same thing at Friday's, at Bennigan's, or back in Chicago.

The only conversation topic of note was about the impending arrival of the cicadas. We were apparently in the expected ground zero for the emergence of Brood XX, a 27-year cycle cicada whose domain spread from New Hampshire at the north end all the way down to Georgia at the southern end, and as far west as Ohio. The epicenter, however, the spot that the entomologists were calling the "dark gaping maw of the cicadosphere" clearly relying upon fear tactics in order to drum up sales for their myriad books newly published on the subject, each entomologist now a cicada expert, even if he or she had only ever studied mantises and their mating habits previously, everyone looking to cash in. Outdoor stores were selling cicada invasion survival equipment. *Cicadapocalypse* magazine published its debut issue, the sales figures for which were astronomical. CNN devoted hours of airtime to coverage of the event. And I thought it was all horseshit.

I thought back to 12 years before, in the back seat of a car loaded with friends, we drove around the suburbs of Chicago on the eve of a supposed cicada outbreak. While Greg drove, Bill sat in the front passenger seat, his father's video camera pointed out the window. We would occasionally stop pedestrians on the sidewalks and ask them what they thought about the coming of the cicadas. The footage we got wasn't very compelling, many people had no idea what we were talking about, and few people said more than "I'm for them" or "I'm against them" before turning away from the camera. The only piece worth saving was the bit where a kid on a

dirt bike who looked too long into the lens and didn't see the garbage can in his path. This bit kept us rolling but America's Funniest Home Videos apparently found no humor in it.

In spite of all the hype and our careful research, the cicada invasion proved to be a bust. The news reports fizzled out, magazine circulation slacked off, advertising dollars ran out and book deals for the cicada experts were cancelled. None of us saw a single cicada that summer to our great disappointment. The event, the hype, the fear were all soon forgotten.

But now, here it was again. A cicada invasion was once again the talk of the town. It was all anybody could think of. The conversation rankled me, nobody would listen to reason.

"I've been through this before," I said, for what the hundredth time that month. "It's all a bunch of hype and fear mongering. They need to keep us scared of something, so they're latching onto this."

"Who's they?" Therese asked.

"You know," I said. "They. *Them*."

"Who?"

I sighed, looked to Paul for help. He just shrugged. As my best friend in the bunch, the only civilized person amongst the savages of central Jersey, I often needed backup from him. He was usually quick to come to my aid, but sometimes he seemed to derive a sort of sick pleasure from watching me twist in the wind.

I turned back to Therese. "*They* are the government, the news media, the entertainment industry. Gun control nuts. Red state extremists. Fucking...fucking McDonald's and PepsiCo." I was on a roll, reaching for straws perhaps, but on a roll nonetheless. Once I got started it was hard to stop. "Think of everyone that benefits when we're kept afraid. Docile. Timid and meek inside our houses, too scared to come outside, much less to question a government edict that makes it legal to drag citizens out of bed in the middle of the night to question them without counsel present, to hold them indefinitely without charges, to make people disappear, erase them from the public record as if they had never existed. Think about how quickly emergency acts get passed. And look at all the revenue being generated. All the advertising dollars. All the protective gear being sold."

Sharon took her eyes off of Paul for a second and cast a dark but amused gaze in my direction. "Do you really believe all the things that you say?" she asked.

"Of course I do," I said. "If you can't recognize a vast, global governmental conspiracy underwritten by Coca-Cola and Frito-Lay and executed by CNN and Comedy Central when the proof is right there before your very eyes, then can you claim to be paying attention to what's going on around you?"

Sharon rolled her eyes at me -- something she did with frightening regularity. It was okay: I was used to it, and tended to return the gesture with similar frequency.

I turned to Kate who was disinterestedly poking at her barbecue chicken salad, looking like she'd rather be anywhere else in the world but there, a look I undoubtedly had mastered myself. "Come on, Kate," I pleaded. "You have to agree with me on this. Don't you think that we might be making a bit too much about this perceived cicada issue, something which we have no immediate evidence of, something which people are obviously profiting from to a ridiculous degree?"

She looked up for the briefest of seconds, saw that it was me talking, looked back at her

salad.

"Not even a half-hearted grunt? Not even that?" I asked. I turned back to Therese, "Wouldn't you agree that the topic of cicadas has dominated the conversation, not just at a micro level, here, amongst us, at Cola, in New Jersey, but all along the East Coast, and probably across the entire country?"

"Well, yes," she allowed.

"And wouldn't you also agree that by having us focus all our attentions on this subject, this irrelevant topic of something that is not even going to come to pass, that there are many people who benefit from it?"

"But, I --" Therese started, but before she could complete her thought, she was interrupted by Paul.

"They *are* coming," he said quietly.

"What?" I asked, incredulous.

"They're coming," he repeated. "They came before, and they're coming again."

Paul visibly withdrew from the conversation, slumped down in the booth. Sharon put a supportive arm around him, whispered comforting words in his ear while cutting me down with a dirty glance.

"What the hell?" I asked the rest of the table.

Therese leaned over and spoke quickly, "You never heard? Paul's father was killed during the last cicada invasion."

"Bullshit," I said automatically.

She shushed me. "It's true. You should really watch what you say about it."

"But..." I searched for logic in the universe, this particular corner in the universe, found none. "What the fuck? You guys have been talking about cicadas non-stop for the last month. How am I the insensitive one all of a sudden?"

"First of all, you're always the insensitive one," Therese said, displaying a rare moment of social insight. "Secondly, it's not that you're just talking about cicadas. It's the fact that you're denying that the cicadas exist."

"So what if I do?"

"Paul was accused of killing his father. They found him covered in his father's blood, raving about murderous insects. He'd completely lost it. It took several years of therapy before he could even function in society again."

"Jesus, I had no idea."

"He doesn't talk about it very much, for obvious reasons."

I looked over at Paul, he was glowering at me. Fuck.

"Sorry, dude," I said. "I didn't know." He slunk down further in his chair. Sharon tightened her grip on his shoulder, redoubled her whispery efforts. I smiled and shot Paul a thumbs-up. That didn't seem to work either.

I turned back to Therese; between her and Kate -- who still hadn't paid the least bit of attention to the discussion -- she was more likely to back me up. "Am I really supposed to have known this?"

"It was all over the news," she said.

"That was 20 years ago. I wasn't anywhere near here," I protested.

"That's no excuse."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure it is," I said, sulkily. Once again I had succeeded in turning an entire table against me. I wasn't sure how I'd gotten so good at doing it, but it was definitely my best skill. I never (or rarely, anyhow) intended to do it, but I almost always succeeded. Were New Jerseyans particularly thin-skinned? It didn't seem possible. They looked, more or less, like everyone else, but they were awfully sensitive. Though, I suppose it was entirely likely being in Jersey had affected my mood such that I was a bit harsher than normal. Or a lot harsher. I'd have to do some research. "Paul, I'm really sorry. I had no idea."

Paul had perked up a bit, had come back to himself enough that he was leaning away from Sharon, trying to get out from under her comforting arm around his shoulder. "It's cool, man," he said.

"We're good, right?" I asked. There was no way I could survive the rest of the night if Paul was pissed at me.

"Yeah, of course," he said. He gave me a weak smile, rolled his eyes in Sharon's direction, gave me a "What's up with her?" look.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," I said.

The rest of the evening went more or less normally, without further incident. Sharon and Therese gabbed about spring fashion; Kate was her normal sullen self; Paul and I managed some conversation about the greater qualities of hockey and boxing. And then it was midnight, and we had fulfilled our obligation to the higher-ups, had taken our reward/punishment and gone above and beyond the call of duty.

"Thanks for dinner, Sharon," Therese said as she got into my car.

I turned the key in the ignition. "Yeah, thanks for making us spend more time together instead of just giving us cash," I said under my breath.

"You're such an ass, Arthur," Therese said.

"Do you still want a ride?"

"Of course I do. How else am I going to get home?"

"I'm not sure. You might not want to have to find out." I backed the car out of the parking space, honked twice at Paul as I passed his car and turned out onto the main road. "I hear there are wolves out there."

"Why you...." Therese started, searching for words. "You're just a monster!"

"I'm not just a monster, Therese," I said. "I'm *also* a monster."

And that shut her up for the duration of the ride to her house. Aside from a few mumbled directions, she was silent. Yeah, I'd borrowed the line from a John Barth novella, but it was a good one, and I felt it applied. I *wasn't* just a monster. I had my moments, though. My moments of monstrosity when my inner demons fought their way to the surface, taking hold of my personality, making me, an otherwise reasonable person, into some sort of beast. They made me do things like threaten a good hearted, albeit annoying, young woman who wanted nothing more than for everyone to get along, for people to do their jobs, and for things to be okay. Unfortunately for Therese, that was against everything I stood for.

By the time I dropped her off, the silent treatment was a little much. Sure, I'd prayed for her to be quiet during the drive, but had I actually wanted that? Seeing the normally loquacious girl sit and fume was more than I could bear. As I pulled into the driveway of her parents' house, I

turned to her and apologized.

"Therese, I'm sorry. You know I don't know why I say the things I do. It's just a habit, a defense mechanism."

"Don't you trust us?" she asked.

"Trust? What does that have to do with it?"

"If you trusted us, you wouldn't have to resort to using defense mechanisms."

"I suppose that's true, but I think I do trust you guys. I'm just carrying around a lot of anger."

"From what?"

"From everything."

We said our goodbyes and I watched as she disappeared into the house. I realized I pretty much had no idea where I was; one Jersey neighborhood looked like every other. I wasn't used to statewide navigation -- give me a city and I can get around it. An entire state? That's another story altogether. Everything was different. Everything varied. There was no consistency from town to town. I made it back out to the New Jersey Turnpike by feel alone.

I thought about what I'd said to Therese, thought about my anger. It wasn't a lie. I had a lot of anger in me, about things that had happened a long time before. All of it paled in comparison to the anger of being in New Jersey, being stuck on the east coast. It was coming out now as I slammed the steering wheel with every wrong turn, every time I had to backtrack. This wouldn't be happening if I was back in Chicago.

Back in Chicago. Driving down the winding road, my brights on, lighting up the trees on the side of the road, the double yellow center line, reflectors embedded in the road, halfway between Therese's parents' house and God knows where, I felt a deep and urgent need to be back in Chicago. That need was always there, was a constant companion. It was at times such as this that it came to the forefront, that it demanded attention. I tried to fight it off, felt the battle in my head almost become physical, turn to twitches. Felt the little subconscious builders in my head trying to patch up the wall.

I switched to the AM dial on my car's radio. Sometimes, somehow, I was able to tune in WGN, its 50,000 watts of broadcasting power somehow bouncing off clouds, skipping across the atmosphere to find me, Chicago's lost and lonely son driving around the frighteningly long back roads of New Jersey. It was no use. The clouds must not have been right, the dips in the road just slightly too low. Whatever it was, all I got was static and hints of WNJ, Princeton's own. I shut the radio off, continued on in silence.

And coming back to myself, lowering the window, feeling the warm summer air, my left hand out the window dipping up and down like the airilons on a plane, like I used to do as a kid, until my parents would yell at me to keep my damn hands inside the car, somehow it calmed me down.

You might ask, like many others did, and rightly so, why, if I loved Chicago so much, was I out there in that Godforsaken place? Jersey wasn't all bad. There weren't so many opportunities to use your high beams back in Chicago and that counted for something. Jersey could be a maze, could be a mystery, a stark contrast to Chicago's straight forward grid of a layout. Every road could turn back on itself, a shortcut could turn into the longest day of your life. My love of an

adventure outweighed my fear of the unknown, took me down every little road I could find, got me lost as much as I could, and that wasn't too difficult.

And I'd been unemployed. Liked to tell people I lost my job because the dot com bubble burst, but that was only half the truth, and really, only the reason I'd lost half my jobs. Mostly, I'd just lost the heart for it, lost my way, lost my drive. And I was still, even nearing 30 years old, a petulant child, always needing to get his way, never knowing how to express himself, never *using his words*, or *his indoor voice*. And yes, the fact was that the President and CEO of the company I had most recently worked for was absolutely bat-shit crazy, that she had no grasp on reality, but who was I to blame her, to be angry with her for wanting me out of there. Our brands of crazy didn't mesh well, hers and mine, and I had done worse things than fire someone just to make myself more comfortable. It was her place, her company, and she had every right to send me packing. I just wished it hadn't lead to me packing up everything, moving across the country, moving there.

It was well past 2AM when I found my way back to the office, and from there down the familiar tree lined road that brought me, with a couple of right turns, directly to my front door. Apartment buildings in suburban Jersey were nothing like what I was used to back home. Everything was a complex, a development, a sprawling set of buildings, each with 8 to 10 units, laid out like the veins on a leaf, stabbing across acres of land that had been forest, or prairie just five or ten years before. The names of the developments were an attempt to hold onto this past: Prairie Glen, Hunters Cove, Forest Green. I lived in Pheasant Hollow, and truth be told, as much as I despised the way of life, the very existence of the subdivision, had there been a battle between neighboring developments, I would have fought and died for mine.

The buildings were like mini-motels, each unit had its own outside entrance. I turned my headlights off as I pulled up to park in front of building 31, knowing that Lisa, who lived in the first floor unit would be asleep and that my lights would shine right through her thin bedroom curtains waking her. I'd found this out a few weeks before through Lisa's strategic use of passive-aggressive post-it notes, and cold stares. I turned the car off, exited, closed the door as quietly as I could. The world outside was quiet, the sky clear, a few stars visible, more stars than Chicago, another thing Jersey had going for it, though just a symptom of the lack of city lights, a blessing, a curse.

I walked up the steps, my messenger bag slung over my shoulder, turned the key in the lock, opened the door, stepped into my apartment, my box, my cube away from cube.

The apartments -- all the same except for the "upgraded" units which had tile at the entrance instead of carpet -- were 900 square foot boxes. Living room and kitchen up front, bathroom and bedroom in back, carpeted throughout. Ineffective air conditioning and heat -- central in that there was one vent high on the wall between the two halves. There was no room for storage, no room for the ridiculous amount of stuff I had hauled with me across the country, as if I was going to live there, as if I was going to stay there, as if I needed all the books, all the trinkets, all the memories of all the pasts I was leaving behind me. Boxes, still full, untouched since I'd moved them in, lay piled wherever I could fit them: behind the couch, on high shelves in the closet, under a table.

I stood in the entryway, closed the door behind me, unsteady on my feet, realizing now that I'd probably had one too many beers at dinner, the long drive, the weight of the day. It all hit me at once and I nearly fell. I put out a hand to steady myself, knocked a book from atop the stereo which sat on a bookcase immediately to the left of the door. I struggled to remain balanced, let my bag fall from my shoulder, reached out blindly with my right hand, found the light switch, turned it on. And stood there for a moment longer. Though it lacked the charm of a Chicago apartment, or an apartment, really, anywhere else in the universe, as far as I could tell (admittedly, I am not familiar with rental properties on Betelgeuse) there was something about this place that I absolutely loved. It had a sterile quality that reminded me of corporate housing, that continued the motel feeling from outside. Somehow, it felt safe, like people would take care of me. Or maybe it was that it felt temporary. It wasn't home. It would never be home. But somehow it felt good.

I bent down and untied my shoes, then straightened again, flexed my toes in the carpet, turned off the light. I felt my way to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, let its light shine out, illuminating the outdated yellowing counter top, revealing a mass grave of empty bottles and takeout containers, a testament to both my excessive drinking and my incredible laziness. There were three beers amongst the condiments (ketchup, mustard, Worcestershire, some terrible cheap stir fry sauce), a wilting head of lettuce and half a carton of Camels. I grabbed the beers, popped one open on the Formica counter, adding another series of teeth-like dents, let the cap fall where it wanted, and retreated, bottles in hand, to the bedroom. I fell into my bed, alone, again.

The real reason that I moved to New Jersey, the ultimate reason, was for a girl. It was ill-advised, it was poorly planned, and it was just downright fucking stupid. The girl, she was gone. Me? I was still there. We'd known each other for three months before I moved, and less than three months after I got there, she was telling me to move back. I was still unemployed, still at a loss, still finding my way, and she was telling me to go back. She was right; it wasn't working out between us. I resented her for making me move out there (she didn't) and for making me think I had fallen in love with her (she hadn't.) She resented me for my neediness, lack of ambition, destitution, and my resentment. She'd told me not to come, not to pack up my whole life (pathetic as it was) and bring it all out there, and yet, I hadn't believed her. And I'd figured, hell, every once in a while, you have to mix things up. And so, I'd done it, to the disbelief of friends and family, and give them credit, not a one of them even told me not to do it (the bastards; would I have listened? Likely not. But I like to think that if someone had tried to talk some sense into me, I would have paid heed. Would have listened. Wouldn't have gone into ridiculous debt, killed my savings, uprooted the world.) So there it was, and there I was. All alone. In my box. In my bed.

The sun had been shining the day I arrived, and my bedroom had felt like a haven in a way no other bedroom of mine had felt before. I laid on the floor, on the carpet, making promises to myself, but that adventure was over. The drive out had been two days of anticipation and promise, immediately dashed by the reality of arrival, by my slim prospects of survival, by the first sight of the woman that had lead me out there with her siren call of...of what? She had made no promises, not even any implications of such. She had done nothing but dissuade me, while my friends were all encouraging, or, since my friends weren't really the types to go around

encouraging other people to do stuff, they were, at the very least, silent, and without opposition, and some of them helped me pack.

There had been a moment, when I was looking for an apartment, while I drove around Jersey in Julie's car while she was at work, and I realized what I was doing, the implications of what this apartment search meant, that I thought, I should just tell her that I couldn't find a place, that I can't find a place, that this whole ridiculous notion should be put on hold. By the time it had come to finding the apartment, she was on board. She'd stopped telling me not to come, and had started making plans, helping me look for housing (moving in with her was out of the question), hunting down jobs. Really, very helpful. The bitch. If only she had been more resistant.

Our relationship had started like all others, all romance, and late nights together, and late night phone calls when we couldn't be together, and dedications of love and devotion, inside jokes that had their own inside jokes, soft touches, kisses, the feeling that *I've never felt this way before*. I love how things start, when you're nervous about it, when you're waiting for that phone call, when you're hearing your story in every pop song that plays over the PA system at the grocery store, when you think the whole world can tell that you know a secret, and really the whole world just wants you to shut up and piss off, but you know what? Fuck the whole world, because you know a secret and you're not telling. I love all that shit. Who doesn't? It was a beautiful thing, that start, and New Jersey, fucking New Jersey, that little turd of a state, it fucked it all up.

Certainly, that's not fair to New Jersey. We would have been fucked no matter where we were, Chicago, Jersey, Peru, Kilimanjaro, it wouldn't have mattered. Because there's other stuff too, all the bad stuff, all the stuff that comes out when you stop being the person you are when you're trying to make someone like you, when you let your guard down and start being yourself. But you know what? I love that other stuff too. The stuff when it's been six months, and it might be a drag, and it might be hard, and you know too much about what she looks like when she wakes up and hasn't done whatever it is that women do to make themselves look the way women look and to make her smell the way women smell. And you know what it sounds like when she pees, and you know what it looks like when she's drinking red wine and her teeth are stained. I love all that shit too because it means comfort and it means familiarity and it means something safe and something warm and something real.

But not Julie. She hated it. Hated that I smoked, hated that I didn't believe in God, hated that I swore, ate meat, cracked my knuckles, seemed to hate everything about me. Which is fine. I'd hate me too. I do hate me too. I'm surprised anytime someone wants to spend more than five minutes with me, figure five minutes is plenty enough time to figure out that I'm not worth any more time, that those five minutes are five minutes that that person is never getting back, no matter how they try. And yet, there people are, lasting longer, staying around. God bless them. Julie couldn't hack it though, needed the excitement and freshness of something new all the time, and I couldn't give that to her, basically because I wasn't going to be anyone but me. I wish she'd figured it out before I made the move, but I can't blame her. You can't know how you're going to react to something until that something is real, and nothing was real until I went there.

Anyway, I'd moved to Jersey at the very end of October, fought through a miserable winter, been dumped, and dumped on. It was six months before I found the job, through a temp agency, at Cola. Before I found work, I would force myself to stay up until 6AM just so that I would

be so exhausted when I went to bed, that I would pass right out and not have to spend any time at all with my own thoughts. That habit had lead me to be bleary eyed and bleak each day, existing in some universe slightly off center from our own. Once I had gotten the job, all that had to change, but I had done it for long enough that it had been ingrained, and some nights I couldn't fall asleep until it was far too late to ever imagine waking up on time for work. I was living an incredibly unhealthy life, sustenance provided by the pizza and sandwich shops across the major road to the south of my apartment, a pack of cigarettes a day, no exercise to speak of, constantly dwelling in my thoughts, staying as far away from the reality of the moment as I possibly could. And never able to sleep.

And that's what lead to the drinking in bed. I was already too drunk to read myself to sleep; the very thought of trying to prop open a book, follow the words made me queasy. The same went for crossword puzzles, video games, and every other distraction that usually kept me from thinking prior to slumber. But I wasn't drunk enough that oblivion was right around the corner, was not slipping immediately to sleep. And that wouldn't fly with me. So, not entirely alone, accompanied by my bottles of Yuengling, my companion, my lover, my *medicine*. Two and a half bottles later, I am gone, into fitful, uncomfortable, and mostly useless sleep.

And I awoke, the remaining bottle held upright in my right fist against my chest, the perfect thing to wake up to. I finished the rest of the beer, warm and flat, immediately regret it, but what's done was done, no use crying over drunk beer, or something like that. It put me in the wrong place, but at least it prevented me from being able to stay in bed any longer. I threw the bottle across the room where it landed on the carpet with a dull thud. Sun shone through the cheap Venetian blinds. I struggled to turn on my side to see what time it was. My alarm clock's face was blank, offering no useful information. It felt like 8:30AM, I figured I needed to get moving. I had no desire to have another encounter with Sharon. Inevitably, we would have words, but I had no intention of adding fuel to the fire.

I started the coffee maker and jumped into the shower, my head cloudy, thoughts poorly formed, coalescing into angry imaginary conversations with Sharon leading to an angry imaginary conversation with Trammel which culminated with my angry and dramatic resignation from the job, the rest of my cubicle mates holding me up as a hero, quitting as well, a walk out, a work stoppage, four people bringing down an empire, four people taking on the world. Never mind that Therese was too timid to do such a thing; that Kate didn't care enough about anything to get on board with the cause; that Paul had a wife and kids to support; and that it was all a ridiculous fantasy predicated upon events that would never happen in the first place. I shook my head clear of the thoughts, focused on the business at hand. Left the shower, dried, dressed, coffee into a commuter mug, ignoring the mess of dishes, bottles, garbage, vowing to take care of it, this time, tonight for sure, for real this time.

Thus empowered, buoyed by my resolve to clean up my house and through that, clean up my life, I left for work, coffee in hand, bag on shoulder. It was looking to be a beautiful day. The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, it was late March and it was spring. Coming from Chicago where the extremes of winter and summer just melted into each other, I hadn't experienced a true spring for a long time. I stood at the end of the sidewalk for a moment, Sharon and her lectures be damned, and took in the weather. There was a hint of warmth in the

air, the promise of impending heat just at the edges of the remaining chill. I could almost feel the hemisphere dipping slightly closer to the sun. Summer was coming. Summer could fix everything.

Movement on the trunk of a large elm tree caught my eye. It was covered with cicadas. Dozens of them had attached themselves to the bark and even more were still emerging from neatly burrowed holes in the dirt. They were pale white and brown, and weak, fragile-looking but hideous. They'd been underground for 17 years and they were finally ready for their moment in the sun. My skin crawled, nausea borne of the previous night's drinking and revulsion at the disturbing image as the tree's bark seemed to be alive, rippling, bubbling. I wanted nothing more than to run, but I could not look away. I drew closer, staring into a thousand evil red eyes, trying to conceive of some possible reason behind this abomination of nature. I broke the stare, conceding victory in this contest to the cicadas.

Aside from the sound of the cicadas -- I could hear their shells hardening in the sun, sticky noises as they uncurled from their long slumber -- and the sound of a wailing siren in the distance, the morning was quiet. The parking lot was empty. The streets were devoid of traffic. I got into my car, turned it on, loud static from the car stereo greeted me and made me jump. I remembered the previous night's search for WGN and relaxed. I scanned through the AM radio stations looking for some news item that might confirm the horrible sight I'd witnessed, just to make sure I wasn't imagining it, but got nothing but more static, looked in my rear view mirror and saw that once again, the telescoping antenna had failed to extend. One more thing to deal with. The car's clock told me it was 10:45AM. Shit. I'd never been so off in a time estimate before. I hit play on the CD player and OK Go's "This Too Shall Pass" came on, the first track on my morning commute mix CD. I'd put it together a week after starting the job, realizing I'd need a musical pep talk of sorts each morning. Since the commute was so short, there wasn't time for much, so the songs needed to pack a punch. I'd opted for the OK Go, and an old favorite from my younger days, Ned's Atomic Dustbin's "All I Ask of Myself is That I Hold Together."

I drove north, and followed my curving road around a horseshoe which turned me back south. The light at Plainsboro Road was flashing red. The east-west traffic had the flashing yellow, and normally this would be a huge pain in the ass, making turning left onto the busy street a near impossible proposition, but this morning, even this major thoroughfare was devoid of traffic. I made the left turn and drove the quarter mile to Scott's Corner Road.

At the intersection, it appeared there had been an accident, which probably explained the siren I'd heard earlier. I turned down the stereo and slowed to a crawl to see if I could discern what had happened. From what I could tell, a car had been trying to turn right off of Scott's Corner onto Plainsboro. The westbound traffic had a flashing yellow light, and the car that SUV that had hit the car had apparently not slowed at all. The front end of the smaller car had been obliterated, and debris littered the road. The car had been spun around, the SUV lay on its side in a drainage ditch. Blood painted the street, and there looked to be something moving in each car. I slowed further still, trying to determine if the drivers were still in there. It wasn't until I came to a complete stop that I realized that the writhing mass inside the cars was actually a giant swam or cicadas. My nausea returned and my foot instinctively hit the gas. I slowed again and then crept through my left turn, one eye on the broken cars, one eye on the oncoming lane. There was still no other traffic on the road, but on these streets, a car could appear from out of nowhere, as

evidenced by the wreckage around me. Once I rounded the corner, however, I put my foot down, wanting to get as far away from there as possible.

I sped up the street, my mind racing. A half mile down the road, I calmed a bit, slowed the car a bit, took in my surroundings. I realized that there were cicadas everywhere, that what had seemed like a lot of insects near my house was nothing compared to what was out here. The area I was driving through was largely undeveloped, drainage ditches sloping down to fields of grass and dirt that stretched off into the distance. Everywhere I looked, I could see small holes in the ground, new cicadas struggling out of their underground dens. I shivered, my skin crawling more. The idea of a summer of seeing these monstrosities everywhere I went, their shells crunching underfoot, their red eyes seeing everything was unthinkable. For the millionth time, I wanted to be home.

Two miles down, the road made a slow curve to the east, past more fields and then into a heavily wooded area, the street cutting a path through trees that towered overhead. During the summer the thick foliage would completely block out the sun but the trees were just now starting to sprout their leaves and so the sun peeked through casting shadows across the road, causing a strobe effect that could be disorienting and distracting. I loved it, looked forward to it each day. It felt like driving through some otherworldly place, another adventure for me. Today, however, the thought of driving through what was undoubtedly a cicada-covered hell gave me pause. I slowed down, hesitated, then looked again at the dashboard clock. 11:03. I was screwed. Doomed to endure another lecture from Sharon. I hadn't even called. I hit the accelerator, felt the engine take hold, the wheels dig into the road, the car lurch forward and I zipped in amongst the trees.

The world was immediately different. The eerie silence that I'd experienced outside of the forest was gone, replaced instantly by a high pitched droning noise that was strangely similar to a phaser from the original Star Trek series. The car shuddered as if buffeted by intense wind, it felt as if I had slowed, like I was driving through thick tar. The noise was unnerving and was so loud that it caused me to instinctively raise my hands to my ears to try to block it out. The car swerved sharply to the left and I realized what a bad idea this was to while driving 70 miles per hour in a car with shoddy wheel alignment. I dropped my right hand back to the wheel, jerked the car back to the road and drove on. With my left hand, I groped for the lever to raise the window. Even with the window closed, the sound from the trees was still nearly deafening.

I gritted my teeth, clenched the wheel with both hands, willing the car to stay on the road which wound its way through the trees. I risked glances to the left and right. The forest was alive, the trees were moving. They passed in a blur, once brown trunks now black, brown, spots of white, dotted with the fiery red of the bugs' eyes. I drove through the living nightmare, now resisting the urge to look at anything except the road, but the road itself was coming to life. Here and there, the pavement was cracked and cicadas streamed upward and out, the crunch of dead insects under my wheels now faintly audible behind the constant hum, my car tires committing a mini-genocide that gave me some small amount of pleasure until I realized that for every cicada I drove over there were ten more live ones behind it and hundreds, or thousands, or hundreds of thousands more in the trees.

And then it was over. The stretch of road passing through the forest was only about a mile long, and though it had seemed while I was in it that time had slowed to a crawl, that I would

never make it through, the laws of physics hadn't been completely suspended. It had taken me less than a minute to make it. My car burst from the trees, into unfiltered sunlight and complete silence.

As fast as I was driving, I nearly missed Melrich Road. I skidded into a turn and came to a stop. I sat in the car, perpendicular to Broadway Street, stopped in the middle of the intersection. I tried to catch my breath, hands on the steering wheel, head between my arms. Slowly, I raised my head, and turned to the left. I don't know what I expected, but I do know what I feared: a black cloud of cicadas, billowing out of the woods like smoke, like death, like a Dementor. Scenes from a hundred horror movies flashed through my head, all more or less the same. The hero fights his way through a traumatic event, finds what he thinks to be a safe haven, and then he looks back. And that's when he sees that it's not safe at all, and he has to fight some more, or run some more.

I looked up and saw...trees. The forest. Nothing. I have to admit I was a little disappointed. Life is nothing without those dramatic moments. Perhaps I was a glutton for punishment, perhaps I still am, but I was primed and ready, all that adrenaline still in my system wanted to be used. It's not often, during the life of an office drone, does one get to utilize that fight or flight instinct (make no mistake, I was firmly in the 'flight' camp.) I looked forward to every opportunity. But, there was nothing. Breathing deeply, still breathing heavily, white knuckled grip on the wheel starting to relax, I slumped back in the seat, threw the car into park, closed my eyes.

I had never been so scared in my life. I don't get scared often. It's not that I'm some sort of tough guy or anything. In fact, I'm far from it. It's just that I've lived a relatively safe, sheltered life. I never enlisted in the army, never played sports, never took risks, took chances, hardly ever gambled even. There was just nothing in my life that scared me like that drive through the cicada infested forest had done. I remembered times as a kid: a haunted house visit when I was 2 years old that left me screaming my head off; an adventure game with scary creatures that made me cry; Michael Jackson's Thriller video that kept me from sleeping for weeks. Piddly, ridiculous shit, and all shit that happened before I'd turned 10 years old. Sure, I'd been startled, jumped, frightened by a scene in a movie, but there was nothing that left me shaking, that would stay with me like I knew this would stay with me. I laid against the headrest, breathing returning to normal. As the adrenaline left my system, I felt exhausted, like I'd just run ten miles, instead of having driven one. I could have taken a nap. I may have fallen asleep.

And was brought back to consciousness by angry, insistent honking. I started awake, hands flew to the steering wheel, bewildered and disoriented. The honking continued. I turned to my right, saw the bulldog logo of a Mack truck inches away from the passenger side window.

"Fuck fuck fuck!" I shouted. I put the car in drive and drove fast up Melrich. Behind me, the truck honked again took the right on Melrich and pulled in to the warehouses next to Cola. I gave the driver a half-hearted wave, mumbled, "Sorry," tried to look sheepish and contrite. "I, uh, just had a bit of a scare," I said more to myself than to the truck driver.

I turned right into the Cola Industries parking lot, which was nearly full as one would expect when arriving at 11AM. Sharon was going to have a field day with me. I didn't look forward to it, but there was music and it had to be faced. I drove the length of the building and squeezed into the very last available spot next to a yellow SUV that I recognized as belonging to Matt Waller, one of the senior salesmen.

My relationship with the sales staff was tenuous at best. They couldn't sell without my photos, so they needed me, and they recognized that. However, that need didn't translate into much in the way of their treating me with kindness or consideration. For the most part, I was their bitch. Often, after a long day of photographing samples, and then sorting, naming, cropping and color correcting the images, and then uploading the files to an outdated and poorly programmed website using our overburdened and decrepit DSL line, and then creating database entries which required me to name and describe each item once again, I'd find myself taking those same images and putting them all into a PowerPoint presentation, captioning the photos with the names and descriptions. If that wasn't all bad enough (which it was) I'd then have to figure out which one of our three slow-as-hell laserjet printers had enough paper and ink and wasn't being used by some executive to print out every one of their emails so they could read them while at lunch, or on a plane, or at home (they all had Blackberries, which were all set up to send and receive company email, but it seemed that none of them knew how to use them. I'd lead a seminar on the subject, much to the amusement of the IT department. It was the one and only time that one of my ideas had been executed. After that, I no longer had the energy or desire to make a suggestion. The executives all worked very hard at making it look like they were all working very hard, the only obvious thing that they and I had in common.) None of this work was particularly difficult. At worst, it was frustrating if only because of all the roadblocks that lay between me and getting my job done, and because of the inanity of the work. A crumbling technological infrastructure was one thing, but being forced to use that crumbling infrastructure in order to do redundant and irrelevant work was another. But, they'd all been doing this much longer than I had and I bowed to their superior knowledge. If they knew that they couldn't effectively attend a sales meeting where a PowerPoint presentation was going to be projected onto a 12 foot screen without having a 30 page hard copy of that very same PowerPoint presentation in their hand, then it was my job to make sure they had that printout, even if it resulted in the death of every tree in the forest.

However, this did lead, unavoidably, to my resenting the sales staff. It is the prerogative of every member of an IT department to resent their end users. Though I did not officially belong to that department, I ended up performing many of their duties, so I felt entitled to claim some of their rights as my own. Undoubtedly, they looked down on me as much as anyone else, if not more. I was just a new guy in the packaging department, a department whose IT demands were necessarily high, but whose computer knowledge, historically (and for the most part, currently) were ridiculously low. They didn't know me, as they say, from Adam, and had no intention of changing that from what I could tell. I had come from software, and as a programmer had been used to managing and maintaining my own resources until it became absolutely necessary to call in someone else (and even then, the first call would go to one of the three other computer geeks sitting near me before I would ever call IT.) It seemed ridiculous that I wasn't even allowed to try to fix my computer here, if anything ever went wrong. I didn't even know the administrator password on my machine. My weak attempts to get to know the support staff had failed. Being looked down upon by IT hurt, and my only option was to lord my knowledge over others (making sure that IT never found out that I was doing so, of course.)

Anyhow, all of this is to point out the fact that the sales staff and I had an uneasy relationship. For the most part, they were okay people -- just more folks who were being forced

to work with technology without any basis for understanding it and seemingly no desire to be educated on its use. But Matt was different. Even though he was the senior salesperson, he was younger than the rest of them, only about five years older than myself. He'd gotten his start at Cola because he was engaged to the senior vice president's daughter. It quickly became apparent (so I was told) that he was the best salesman the company had, putting up numbers that dwarfed the rest of the sales staff's combined. It was a rare case of someone being promoted due to their merits and not because of their connections (or, if it was due to his connections, at least he had the skills, and that was good enough for me.) Everywhere else I had worked, it seemed like people were promoted to their level of incompetency with the idiots rising, like cream, straight to the top. So, I respected Matt. He still treated me like a peon while we were inside the building, but out of it, he was friendly, talkative, and on a couple occasions, generous with a bar tab. It went a long way.

That's not to say that we were best of friends, by any means. I could tell that Matt had always been a popular kid and he exuded that confidence and cool -- undoubtedly that's where much of his sales skills came from -- and that always immediately put me in a deferential state. Had he let me, I would have certainly followed him around like a puppy, letting him point the way, picking up whatever scraps of experience he'd let fall to his feet. Though it wasn't his fault, I resented him for that control he had over me, whether he wanted it or not (he likely didn't know or care.)

It was Friday, and that meant Casual Friday, something I had once been morally opposed to. Coming from the software world where it was more or less always Casual Friday and dressing up meant tucking in your shirt, I had always dressed in what I liked to call Office Drone Casual anyhow. That basically meant a non-T-Shirt on top and a pair of non-jean pants. When I came to Cola, I fit right in (dresswise, anyhow.) When I learned of Casual Friday, I scoffed. Another bone the company threw its workers to make them feel like they were getting away with something. Then, when I realized how excited everyone got for Casual Friday, how they used it as a grand opportunity to express themselves, it nearly made me sick. Two weeks later, I was right there with them, actually planning out my Friday outfits on Wednesday night, thinking, "This will really knock their socks off." I could just say, "When in Rome...." to explain away my behavior, but really, I don't know how it happened. How I quickly fell in line with the corporate world, how easily I was sucked in.

Matt didn't give a shit about Casual Friday, that's how amazingly casual the guy was. Dressed in a tailored suit, he was smoking a cigarette and leaning against his car when I got out of mine. Even in this day and age, when smoking had become decidedly uncool, Matt still managed to pull off the classic smoker look. His last name might as well have been "Dillon." I waved quickly to him and started to hurry across the lot.

"Artie," he called to me. He always called me Artie, something that I normally hated, but what I usually felt was a false sense of familiarity from others actually felt genuine when coming from him. "What's the rush?"

"Sorry, Matt," I called over my shoulder. "I'd love to stay and chat, but I'd better get inside. Sharon's going to kill me and I'd rather get it over with."

"No worries, kiddo," he said. Kiddo was another thing that nobody else could get away with, especially someone a mere five years older than me, but once again, Matt pulled it off.

"Sharon didn't show up for work today."

I stopped in my tracks and turned. "Really?" I couldn't believe my luck.

Matt chuckled and flicked his cigarette butt toward the grass at the edge of the lot. I followed the arc of its path through the air, watched it land. I casually studied the grass for signs of recent cicada activity. There were none. Matt said, "Really. Paul and I thought the two of you might be, you know, together."

"What? No way," I protested. "First of all, I can't stand her. Second of all, Paul knows I can't stand her. Thirdly, she can't stand me."

Matt shrugged, "Eh, it was just water cooler talk. You know how it is."

I tried to regain some of my own cool, "Oh sure, I know that. Still. Can you imagine? Sharon and me?" I laughed nervously. The idea was revolting.

Matt looked at his watch. "Guess I better get going. Got a sales meeting up in New Brunswick."

"That's cool," I replied uselessly. He unlocked his car door. "Hey, Matt?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you, uh, did you see any cicadas today?"

"Don't tell me you're all caught up in the cicada hype too," he replied, grimacing.

"Oh, no way, man, it's just that," I searched for words. "Well. Did you see any today?"

"No. Why? Did you?"

"Well," I hesitated. Was it possible that I'd imagined it all? Nah. "I saw a shit ton of them just west of here on Broadway."

"Not possible, bro. I drove that same route here today. They haven't come out yet, man. They won't come out until May at the earliest."

"Oh, right. I knew that."

"So. What. Are you seeing things, Artie? Pressure finally getting to you?"

"Shit. I don't know, Matt. It's been a hell of a morning. Maybe I'm just dehydrated. Or completely insane. Not sure which I'd prefer right now."

"Whatever, Artie." Matt climbed up into his Xterra. "You'd better go. Those pictures won't take themselves."

I laughed, "No, you're right, they won't!"

Fuck. I am such an asshole.

I held my key card up to the black box at the side of the building and gave the door a pull. It didn't open. I swiped the card again; the light at the top left corner of the sensor remained red. Not a good sign, but my card had malfunctioned before. I looked to my right; being a Friday, with no deliveries expected or shipments going out, the loading dock doors were all closed. I had hoped to enter through the warehouse. It was easier to make a quiet entrance there than through reception. Not that Melina at the front desk would say anything about my late arrival, but I was still shaken from my morning commute and I wanted to get to the cubicle with as little human contact as possible.

On the west side of the building was a tiny smoking patio where, from time to time, I would step out for a break. I had studied the smoking habits of the other Cola employees over the months that I'd been working there so that I could safely avoid being out there with any of

them. I poked my head around the corner of the building. Thankfully, it was empty. I did another quick cicada check before making my way across the front lawn, which was criss-crossed with gigantic drainage ditches and covered in thick brush. The patio was a tiny oasis of calm in the midst of the chaos that was the face of the Cola building.

Covered in scratches, I made it to the patio door just as Greta and Helene, two women who worked on the second floor and whose job descriptions I had never quite figured out -- I had thought that maybe Greta worked in HR and perhaps Helene did something with accounting but the heads of those respective departments had each told me that wasn't true -- were coming out for their 11:30 smoke break.

Greta was finishing a joke: "...and then the priest says to the violin maker, 'Where are we going to find a Canadian at this time of night?'" she said.

"I don't get it," Helene said.

"Neither do I," Greta admitted. "I was hoping you could explain it to me."

I caught the door before it could swing closed. "Ladies," I said, tipping an imaginary hat in greeting.

Greta jumped. "Arthur. You startled me. I didn't even know you were here today."

"Oh sure, I've been running around like mad. Just now got a chance to take a quick five. And I'd love to stay and explain that joke to you -- it's really quite hilarious -- but I've got to get back to it."

"Don't let us keep you, Art," Helene said. "Those pictures won't take themselves."

"Watch out for the cicadas, Arthur," Greta said.

The ladies giggled like mad. I ducked inside. What was going on? Two very terrible things were happening: the first was that Sharon's idiotic comment about photos not being self-actualizing had spread like wildfire and was apparently everyone's idea of the funniest joke in the universe; the second was that a mere 5 minutes after mentioning cicadas to Matt, Greta already knew that I had seen (or thought I'd seen) a worrisome number of cicadas.

Or perhaps it wasn't so very terrible. Or, if it was terrible, at least it wasn't particularly odd. During my time at Cola, I had learned that nothing spread faster there than a bad joke (except for maybe gonorrhea). While it was annoying, it wasn't unusual. Also, it was entirely possible that Greta's cicada comment had nothing specifically to do with me but was just another general cicada-hype-related thing said in passing, like the hundreds of others so far that spring. I shrugged it off, determined to get to the relative safety of my cubicle and desk.

I was standing in a stairwell, the patio door behind me. To the left was a maze of cubicles full of low-level product devs and marketing drones. Through that maze and down a hallway was my own cubicle. Unfortunately, however, the cube farm was surrounded by a ring of offices the very first of which was John Trammel's. I had had two conversations with him during my time at Cola, neither of which had been a particularly pleasant experience. I had little reason to believe that he would choose this time for our third, but as late as I was to work and as unsteady as I felt, I think I could be forgiven for being a little paranoid.

Instead of the direct route, I decided to take a detour upstairs, threading through HR, IT, accounting, and whatever departments Helene and Greta worked for. I waved hello to people I barely knew, nodded to those I didn't know at all. There was hardly ever a reason to be up here, except when there was an issue with your health insurance, or, God forbid, with your computer.

The only place of note on the second floor was the almighty break room. I figured I'd stop in and grab a Coke before heading downstairs to the cube.

Before I could make it there, I ran into Tammy, the head of the Human Resources department. Tammy and I had had very few interactions. As much as I loved to rock the boat in an effort to keep things light, avoid work, and generally amuse myself, my antics had never landed me in her office. At the same time, I never had any issues with other people that I felt needed her attention. The last time Tammy and I had talked was when Cola had bought out my contract from the temp agency that landed me there.

So, imagine my surprise when she angrily stopped me at the door to the break room. Her imposing figure blocked my path. At first I thought we were going to do one of those hilarious dances where you and the other person both try to side step the other in the same direction. I smiled and turned it into a little jig, stepping left, then jumping right, but Tammy wasn't participating at all. She stood, hands on hips in the doorway, unmoving, and unamused. I stopped dancing, and put my hands on my own hips, mirroring her stance. I also tried out a similarly sour expression but found that it didn't fit on my face, uncomfortable like a sweater that's just a little too small for the T-shirt you have on underneath. All day long, something is just not right, you never quite get the hang of things. My smile returned, but that no longer felt right either. I tried a neutral expression. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

"Are you quite finished?" Tammy asked.

"I think so," I said. "Let me try a few more."

I cycled through surprise, anger, fear, sorrow, and confusion. I also gave a few more obscure looks a shot: hunger, inspiration, sleepy, and ill. I shrugged. Neutral was the proper look.

"What can I do for you, Tammy?" I asked.

"First of all, you can stop submitting requests for overtime."

"But I'm here more than forty hours a week. Sometimes I'm here 41. Or 42."

"Arthur, you're a salaried employee. You don't get overtime."

"Therese gets overtime."

"You should spend more time worrying about your own situation and less time worrying about hers."

"Well, that's just the thing, Tammy," I said. "I don't want to get pedantic on you here, but the fact is that I am worried about own situation. When I'm here longer than 40 hours -- and despite my earlier joking around, as it happens, I am often here 50 or 60 hours a week -- I feel like I should be compensated for it, especially if there's a precedent set whereby another salaried employee is compensated for her extra time here."

"Would you prefer it if every time you were here fewer than 40 hours you got paid less? How many hours have you been here this week, Arthur? You're just arriving at work now? Are you going to stay here until 8 o'clock to make up for it?"

"Tammy. Tammy Tammy Tammy. We need to take a deep breath here." I was exhibiting bravado I didn't actually have, confidence I didn't really feel. There comes a time, however, when you just need to fake it til you make it. I was constantly faking it til I was making it. Much to my surprise, Tammy actually joined me in a deep cleansing breath. Sometimes my bullshit actually worked. "I'm just saying that if another employee, another salaried employee receives overtime pay, I'd like to receive it as well, or at least know what the company policy on overtime is, so I

can know why I don't receive overtime pay and she does."

"Company policy," Tammy started, "is that salaried employees don't receive overtime. End of story."

"I see. And yet, I know an employee who is salaried and also receives -- " I stopped mid-sentence. "Tammy, we're going around in circles here."

"If Therese has a different arrangement, that's her business. If I were you, like I said, I'd pay more attention to my own business."

Under my breath, I said, "If you were me, you'd be good looking. And thinner."

"What was that?" Tammy asked, her face reddening.

"I said, 'Stiff blue per three, stewed see wood cooking. Bland dinner.'"

Sometimes I amaze even myself.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Tammy demanded.

"It's an old Yiddish saying. It means that society's demands on us are greater than we can bear. A commentary on how the world is turning too fast for human beings to truly keep up. That, as a group, we are advancing faster than our individual ability to adjust and adapt. That as society moves faster, we become more isolated, and therefore less likely to be able adequately manage our personal and professional obligations."

Tammy seemed to consider this for a moment and nodded. Sometimes I'm pretty good thinking on my feet. There's nothing like appealing to the ignorance of Jewish mysticism to make a point. I've found that people, especially sheltered New Jerseyans are loathe to reveal their lack of knowledge of anything, and are particularly hesitant to question anything to do with Judaism lest they be labeled an anti-semiter, or worse yet, an idiot. As the head of HR, Tammy was particularly sensitive to this. Constantly bombarding us with sensitivity and equality training, she had brainwashed herself into a state of political and social correctness that virtually handcuffed her when it came to having critical thoughts. That didn't keep her from criticizing me, of course, but it did allow me to wiggle my way out of a troublesome spot.

"That's very interesting, Art, but I'm not sure how it's relevant," she said carefully.

"I suppose it makes more immediate sense to my people. It's kind of one of those 'you had to be there' things, you know? Except 'there' is a few thousand years of suffering at the hands of Pharaohs, kings, dictators and the like. That oppression runs in our blood and makes for a distinct sense of history and humor. It's interesting, this shared experience that we have, that makes Judaism both a culture *and* a religion. This is something that I once railed against - that a person who wasn't particularly religious, who didn't believe in God, who didn't go to synagogue but still called themselves Jews. As I've gotten older, I've relaxed a little bit, if you can believe it. I've become less rigid, less black and white in my thinking. I don't care how people label themselves. Someone who calls herself a vegetarian but still eats chicken? Who cares? We're all allowed to define ourselves however we want to. It's no skin off my back. You know what I mean?"

I could see that my unceasing line of bullshit was having its desired effect. My ability to put words together in a way that made linguistic sense but made no actual sense had gotten me out of many a scrape before. Tammy's eyes glazed over. She nervously shifted her weight from side to side. She wanted desperately to get away from me. I had turned the tables.

"Anyway," I said. "Sorry to get all philosophical on you there. It's just something I feel

passionate about. What were we saying?"

"Um," Tammy said.

"Well."

"Yes. Ok."

"Great. I'm gonna go now. Photos to take and all that."

Tammy chuckled. "They don't take themselves."

I sighed. Tammy had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. "Yeah. So I've been told."

Tammy stepped out of my way and headed to her office. Even still, despite my numerous delays, Sharon's reported absence and my successful entry into the building had made me cocky and I forgot what time it was, and what that meant.

The break room was full of people taking their lunch breaks. I'm not sure how it had worked out this way, but the staff at Cola tended to eat in shifts, with the older employees eating earlier, while the younger folk ate later. Since the departments were more or less segregated by age -- product developers, IT, packaging design were all younger; executives, sales staff, HR were all in the early-bird special crowd -- it meant you could usually guess where an entire department was depending on the time. I stepped through the doorway into the break room and stopped dead in my tracks. The room was filled with the older folks, and they all stopped mid-sentence, mid-chew, mid-swallow to look up at my arrival. I waved, smiled, pointed at the soda machine.

"Just, uh, just here to get a Coke," I said. "You guys know how much I love Coke."

The room nodded as one. The break room contained the only aluminum recycling container in the building, and since it was upstairs from the cube, that meant expending a certain amount of effort in order to be a responsible citizen of planet Earth, not that I really gave a shit about that, but it was good to keep up appearances. Thus, my desk was often home to a stack of empty Coke cans. People mistook my apathy and lethargy for an extreme sugar and caffeine addiction and just loved to comment on it. I'm not hypoglycemic, I'm just lazy.

I made my way to the Coke machine, fed it a dollar bill, retrieved the can and my change and turned to leave. At the door, I found myself face to face with Cheryl, the head of IT. I said hello and tried to get around her, but she blocked my way

"Arthur Traum," she said, looking as sour as usual. "Just the person I wanted to see."

My luck had run out. I knew it had been too good to be true. I had almost made it to the relatively safe haven of my desk but I had pressed my luck, stopping for the Coke. Curse my love of its distinct cola taste, the sweet bite of the bubbles.

"What's up, Cheryl?" I asked, opening the can. I even loved the sound of the splitting metal, the escaping carbon dioxide. It was like music.

"It's about that web site of yours," she said, the words dripping like flat Coke from her mouth.

"The web site of mine?" I knew she was referring to the Cola Industries intranet site. Aside from the sales staff I was the only one who made use of it, but I had never claimed it and certainly felt no ownership over it. The site had been built by a third party web development firm -- one that, coincidentally, I had applied to upon my arrival in Jersey. I mentioned this to their project manager after a strategy meeting. He had given me a thin lipped smile and said that he

“vaguely recalled” seeing my resume. So much for that. “What about it?”

“Your photo uploads are tipping us over our bandwidth allotment. You’re going to have to reduce the file size. Or something.” She smiled, saccharine sweet and just as cancerous.

“You mean to tell me that uploading a couple hundred 30k files each month is putting that big a dent in our bandwidth allowance? That’s just not possible.”

The smile vanished, evaporating like Diet Coke on a hot summer day, leaving behind a sticky residue of disdain. “Oh, it’s possible, mister,” she said. “I’ve been examining the logs and prior to your work on the site, we never went over the limit. But now that you’re here....” She let her sentence trail off.

I took a noisy sip of my drink, using the time to contain my anger. I hated this woman but my goal was always to keep the IT people happy, or at the very least, not completely pissed off at me. I counted to five in my head, took a deep breath and countered, “Cheryl, you do know that the work I’m doing, the bandwidth I’m using, it’s all valid company-related work, right?”

“Yes, I know that. I’m not accusing you of misusing the company internet connection. I’m just saying that you need to do more with less.” I winced at the business speak. Usually IT professionals eschew business doubletalk for tech talk -- equally indecipherable, but at least grounded in something close to reality. I supposed that Cheryl’s rise to head of IT had come with a biz-speak training course.

“Cheryl, what about all the people who *are* misusing the company internet connection? Shouldn’t you be going after them so that people who are using it properly can actually do their work?” I knew for a fact that there were people who were downloading non-mission critical items at work (hell, I was one of them; certainly not the worst transgressor, by any means) and undoubtedly there were members of IT who were streaming episodes of Star Trek, or whatever the current nerd favorite TV show was.

Cheryl shot me a dark glance. “Of course. We’re always on the lookout for those who are misappropriating company bandwidth. It’s just as bad as stealing stationery, you know.”

“Oh, I know.” I took another long slug of Coke. Delicious. “So, are we done here?”

“Yeah, we’re done,” Cheryl said. “Just try to keep your file size down, ok?”

I didn’t reply, tried to move past her. We did a little dance in the doorway, each of us moving to the same side as the other, comedic hijinx of the highest caliber. Finally, I just turned around and walked across the break room to the opposite door leaving the IT head in my wake.

Exiting the break room from the west exit as I did put me in something of a delicate position. It forced me to take the stairs down and cut through the secondary warehouse and then through the cutting room, a place that I usually avoided at all costs. The cutting room was where we made all our mock up boxes. After Paul pathed out Therese’s photographs and put them into the package design, he would send that file to our large format printer. There, a team of workers -- whose names I never learned and whose only skills seemed to be a resistance to the toxic chemicals contained in various adhesives -- would mount the prints onto pieces of corrugate. The corrugate was then cut on the cutting machine.

I’ve never loved a piece of machinery more than I loved that cutting machine. It dominated the cutting room. It was a 12’ x 20’ table attached to which was an arm that traversed the length of a table. Attached to that arm was a device which could traverse the length of the arm, thus

could cover the width of the table. This device contained both a razor sharp blade and a scoring wheel, both of which could rotate 360 degrees. The surface of the table was covered with a grid pattern and at each grid intersection was a tiny hole. When the corrugate was placed on the table surface, and a button was pressed, a vacuum was created with the holes holding the corrugate in place. Using a control panel at one end of the table, the operator could move the arm and the cutting head and mark the registration points at opposite corners of the package design. Connected to the table was a computer which contained the die for the sample box. Once the corrugate was in place, the registration points marked and the die was loaded, all the operator had to do was press a button and the machine would do its thing.

Watching it work was mesmerizing. The table seemed to come to life when it was in motion. The arm would zip up and down the table while the cutting head would raise and lower the blade and scoring wheel, twitching back and forth across the design, cutting the box out of the cardboard, and scoring the folds. Moments later, it would stop. The box cutouts would then be taken to the same team of workers who had mounted the print to the cardboard who would then put the box together, folding it and laying down a thin line of hot glue for the one seam that mattered.

I would have spent a lot more time in the cutting room if it weren't for one thing: Carlos. Carlos was the table operator. He had come to Cola from the same temp agency as I had, and had only been there for a month longer than I had. When I learned that, I cursed. It could have been me running that table. Carlos had no appreciable skills, nothing that made him particularly suited for the job. It wasn't a job that required appreciable skills, and that made it a perfect job for me. They had sent him to a two day seminar to learn how to operate the table. That's all it took. And that's all he did all day long -- cut boxes.

Actually, that's not entirely accurate. Saying that he cut boxes all day long makes it seem as if there were boxes to cut all day long. It was only before a trade show, or some other big sales event that Carlos was ever close to what we might call busy. Those days, he might cut 30 or 40 boxes. The rest of the time, there might be 3 or 4. And so he spent his time roaming the halls of Cola, making awkward passes at the women, and talking everyone's ear off about Puerto Rico.

'Los was Puerto Rican, and he never shut up about it. At every opportunity, he would regale us with stories about how beautiful Puerto Rico was, how hot the women were, and how good the food was. He was particularly passionate about his Latin roots, meaning that he celebrated the hell out of Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day, but, the funny thing was that the guy couldn't tell you the difference between or the meaning behind the two holidays. Also amusing was how often Carlos referred to Puerto Rico as his "country." Each and every time one of us in the packaging department corrected him -- usually just Paul or me; Therese never made the distinction and Kate didn't care enough to pay attention -- he accused us of being racist.

Carlos was easy enough for me to deal with when I had back up, if Paul or some other friend was with me. But by myself, I found him unbearable. I hoped against hope that he would be elsewhere but as I had guessed before, my luck had long since run out. Carlos was seated at his desk, apparently actually doing some work. Sometimes there would be issues with a die that required Carlos' intervention, and I had to admit that he always seemed to get them right. On the

other hand, it didn't ever seem to be much more than moving a couple digital points to new locations. To give the guy some credit, he always figured it out.

I tiptoed into the room, hoping to sneak past Carlos, but it was not to be. Before I'd made it five feet, he spun around on his chair, stopping me with a glare.

"Oye, Papi," Carlos said. He called every male Papi, and all the attractive females were "Mami." Women he didn't find attractive didn't even have names to him. "You know people aren't allowed to take a shortcut through the room."

Carlos had waged a campaign against people cutting through the cutting room ("The cutting room is for cutting, not for cutting through.") because, he said, it distracted him, which, with such a dangerous piece of equipment (it wasn't) could lead to injury or even death. More importantly, exposing such a sensitive and expensive machine to more people increased the odds that it would malfunction.

The problem was that the cutting room connected the offices of the product developers and the package design cube with the warehouses. The amount of traffic between the two areas was extremely high, and asking them to take another route was like asking modern European seafarers to ignore the Suez Canal and sail all the way around Africa to get to East Asia. Alright, perhaps it wasn't quite like that, but it would be an inconvenience. I had just taken the hypothetical travel-round-Africa-route and I wasn't about to retrace my steps when I was so close to my goal. Besides, Carlos's campaign to outlaw use of the room as quick passage from one part of the building had never officially succeeded. The higher-ups had placated Carlos by making vague promises of enacting some such rule, but had never actually issued any memos to that effect.

"Carlos, you know that nobody supported your campaign more than I did. I was with you all the way on that one," I said. I had made supportive but noncommittal noises anytime Carlos had cornered me to discuss his idea. Once I determined that Carlos wasn't saying anything that had any value or interest to me, I could nod and smile with the best of them.

"Yeah, yeah, Art, so why are you coming through here, man?"

"I'm not coming *through* here, 'Los," I lied. "I'm coming *in* here."

"Oh yeah? What'chu need, man?"

I looked around for something, anything that would require my being in the cutting room. Usually there was no reason for me to enter the room at all, except to occasionally cut through to the warehouse (where I had no business being most of the time) or to watch, in awe, as the cutting table did its thing. Once in a while I would get corralled into putting boxes together, or doing some other task (which I referred to as "arts & crafts") which required my presence in the cutting room, and my skills at ignoring Carlos. My eyes landed on an Xacto knife.

"Dude, I have been all over this building looking for Paul's Xacto. I borrowed it yesterday and misplaced it. You know how he gets."

Carlos's face fell when he realized I wasn't in the cutting room specifically to visit him. As much as he hated people walking through, he loved people just stopping in (which completely undermined his arguments against people cutting through) and would visit with me for hours, making it an effective diversion and a decent hiding place, once I got past the quality of the company. I think was also disappointed that I had a valid (if false) reason to be there. But, if there was anything Carlos enjoyed, it was gossiping about co-workers.

“Ay dios mio,” he said, seizing upon the opportunity to talk some trash. “That guy goes loco if you even touch it without him asking. One time I saw his wife in here and she was cutting something with it and he went bananas, holmes. He was all ‘You know how much I love that Xacto knife’ and ‘I would never take your car without your permission’ and shit like that. It was la cosa más loca que yo había visto en su vida.” When he got excited, Carlos would often slip long strings of Spanish words into his sentences. I had just enough high school Spanish that I could follow him for the most part. It didn’t much matter; Carlos wasn’t a man of subtlety, nuance and subtext weren’t part his of repertoire, nor his repartee. Missing a phrase here and a sentence there wouldn’t dramatically affect one’s participation in a conversation.

“Yeah, he sure does love that blade. It’s kinda weird, but what are you gonna do? I used to work with a guy Phil, right? On his desk he had this coffee cup and he kept his pens and a ruler and scissors and shit like that in it, you know?”

Carlos nodded. “Okay.”

“And the coffee mug, it wasn’t even special or funny or anything. Some vendor had given us a bunch of them so a whole lot of us had them. So like, it wasn’t a unique mug by any means. There’s no way it even had sentimental value for him.”

“Uh huh.”

“And he didn’t mind if you took his pens, or used his scissors or whatever, but boy, let me tell you, if you touched that goddamn coffee cup, he would go apeshit. I mean, I saw this dude lose his freakin’ mind over that cup. Touch it, bump it, fuckin turn the damn thing? He’d go off on you about respecting other people’s property. It was some real unbalanced out of his mind shit.”

“Dude sounds crazy,” Carlos said.

“That’s the thing. Phil was the calmest, most level-headed guy there. There were times when I was going off on some project managers and he was cool as ice, practically holding me back. I mean, this guy just had nerves of steel. Just don’t touch his cup.”

“Just don’t touch the cup,” Carlos agreed.

“There was this one time that we took another one of the cups from the cupboard and replaced his cup with it. We were all sitting around waiting for him to come in to see if he could tell.”

“Did he notice?”

“Yeah, I don’t know how he knew, but he knew. It was surreal. He just flipped out on us. I thought he was going to quit. Or kill someone.”

“So what happened?”

“We gave him his original cup back. He chilled out. Eventually. Didn’t talk to any of us for a couple days, which was a real pain in the ass since we were working together on a project.”

“Wow. Some people, huh?”

I nodded. “I know. But I’m just saying, you know, you never know what’s going to set someone off, and you can’t really explain it, and it doesn’t have to make sense. It just is.”

“Yeah,” Carlos said. “I see what you’re saying.”

“Well, look, if you see Paul’s Xacto, let me know, alright?”

“Will do, holmes.” Carlos pounded his heart with his right fist, his way of letting me know that he meant it.

“Anyhow, I should go,” I said, moving towards the exit closest to the package design

group.

"Yeah, man, you know what they say, those pictures won't--"

"Take themselves," I finished. "Yeah, I know. I'm working on it though."

Shutting the door of the cutting room behind me, I found myself mere feet away from the cubicle. A trip that should take five minutes at the most, it had taken me nearly a half hour to traverse the building. I couldn't believe I'd finally made it. I rested for a moment against the cubicle wall, listening to the bickering coming from within.

Paul's voice: "It's *fake*, Therese. It's *not real*."

Therese: "How do you know that?"

"Because, Therese, I looked it up on Snopes.com and it said *it's not real*. Also, because I saw the same email 2 years ago. Also, because nobody would actually publish a real how-to website on how to make a bonsai kitten."

I could hear Kate say something, but because she spoke so quietly and in a monotone, I couldn't make out any of the words. I was surprised that either Paul or Therese could understand her, but apparently Paul heard her perfectly because he replied directly. "Kate, there is no valid reason to censor the website. Anybody who is stupid enough to believe the website is real -- no offense to either of you, of course -- has bigger issues. And anybody who's insane enough to try it probably already has a freezer full of body parts."

"Ewww, gross," said Therese.

"I'm just saying," Paul replied.

Therese scoffed. "'Just saying,'" she mimicked. "You're just saying that you think it's okay for someone to post instructions on how to abuse kittens on the web."

"There are much worse things out there, Therese! And we shouldn't be looking to censor the web, especially not a site that's so obviously a joke! The site's owner can't and shouldn't be held responsible for what people do after they look at the site. You can't blame Ozzy Osbourne for suicides, Dexter for murders, or Grand Theft Auto for carjackers. If people are fucked up, they're fucked up. End of story."

"You sound just like Arthur," Therese said. I smiled. It was true. He did.

"Well, there are worse people to sound like," Paul said. "Where is that dude, anyway?"

If I'd needed a cue, that was it. I love making a good entrance. I stepped around the corner. "Have no fear, my friends. I'm right here."

"Heeey, Art," Paul said. We high-fived.

Therese and Kate, who had both been facing the center of the cubicle, turned their chairs back towards their desks.

"Ladies," I said, walking to my desk. "Nice to see you again."

I fell into my chair, exhausted from running the obstacle course that was the Cola Industries building.

"Hey Art," Paul said, "don't get too comfortable."

I sighed. I just wanted to sit at my desk, maybe waste some bandwidth out of spite. "Why not?" I asked.

"Time for lunch."

Immediately rejuvenated, I jumped from my chair. "Cool. Let's grab Jimmy."

Jimmy Fargus was a product developer who actually developed products. Unlike the Four Shoppers, Jimmy actually came up with new ideas, drew up designs, made prototypes and had products developed. His main focus was decorative lighting. It may sound lame, but he wasn't just working on new strands of Christmas lights, or LED wreaths or the like. He had come up with some truly innovative ideas for holiday and year-round products that were going to hit the shelves at CVS in a matter of weeks. He was one of the few people at Cola that were actually doing creative work. He was also the only person at Cola that Paul and I hung out with. And we were pretty much the only people that he would talk to.

Jimmy had once had a desk in the room that served as the Shoppers' office, but had quickly demonstrated that not only did he not play well with others (especially if those others thought that being creative meant buying something and copying it -- we were holding a cubicle pool based on how soon it would be that one of the Shoppers went out and bought one of Jimmy's products and brought it into me to have it photographed before sending it off to China to be made cheaper) but that he needed much more space than the Shoppers could afford to give him. Somehow, the powers-that-be couldn't find any room for Jimmy anywhere else in the building -- 250,000 square feet and not a spare room for Jimmy. So, they'd given him an old shed on the north edge of the property. Jimmy had told us that he felt like a kid whose dad had let him take over the garage for his band's practices. He wasn't complaining. He worked best when he was uninterrupted by the constant distractions of modern office life. And I understood why the office managers were happy to have Jimmy out of their hair. There'd been a brief period when he'd worked in our cubicle. It didn't last long. If the mess Jimmy constantly left behind him wasn't bad enough, the smell clinched it. We were all thrilled when he was authorized to take over the shed.

Jimmy was an eclectic man, to say the very least. He had a multitude of tics and strange mannerisms that made him tough to be around for very long, especially if you were trying to get some work done. I found his random outbursts and strange noises unbearably distracting. He was an eccentric genius, and he was only 29 years old. I didn't know what happened to him to make him so twitchy, jumpy, and high strung. I figured that either He had been born that way, just wired to be constantly moving, shaking his foot, twiddling his thumbs; or else he had some trauma in his past that he wasn't sharing with me. Jimmy's eccentricities aside, he was a great third member of our daily whiffle ball excursions.

Paul and Jimmy and I eschewed the break room for our lunches. Instead, we would drive the three miles into Cranbury to Cranbury Park, wolf down our food and spend the rest of our lunch hour playing wonderful games of whiffle ball. I'm not sure how the tradition started, but it was the only thing during the day that any of us looked forward to -- well, I know it was for Paul and me; it was impossible to say what went through Jimmy's mind.

Paul and I made our way through the building, a much less interesting adventure than my entrance had been. We crossed the parking lot and headed into Jimmy's shack.

I went to knock on the door but Paul just opened it and said, "Knock knock!"

"Really, dude?" I said with disgust.

"What?"

"'Knock knock'?"

"What about it?" Paul asked.

"Knocking and saying 'knock knock' aren't the same thing."

"Sure, they are."

"No, really, they're not."

"Can I ask you a question, Art?"

"Of course."

"How often do you get people telling you to relax?"

I had no immediate answer for him, though, to be honest, it's something that happens quite often.

Paul walked in, leaving me holding the door.

Jimmy kept the one room shed dark, most of the time, but when I finally made my way inside I found it to be brightly lit by a dozen floating fish-shaped lamps. Paul was standing in the middle of the room gazing up at the lights with a look of child-like wonder on his face. I joined him. Each of the lights was cycling through a set of soft pastels, and though they each put out an incredible amount of light, more than one would expect, it still maintained a gentle quality, and was not glaring or harsh in any way. Jimmy was seated at a long table, tinkering with a lamp that had somehow malfunctioned.

"Jimmy," Paul breathed, "these are amazing."

"Yeah, Jimmy, these are awesome. When did you come up with these? I thought you were snowed under with your holiday things."

"What? Oh. These are just something I've been messing with in my free time."

"In your free time?" I asked, disbelieving. "...Ok."

"Anyway, I wish you'd tell Trammel how much you like them," Jimmy said, looking up from his work. "He thinks they won't sell."

"He thinks they won't sell?" Paul exclaimed. "They're floating fucking fish lamps."

"Yeah. He says that fish shaped stuff is done. Last year."

"Does he know that they float? Like. In the air?" I asked.

"Yep."

"Um, Jimmy?" Paul asked.

"Yeah?"

"How do they do that? Float, I mean."

"Oh, it's really quite simple. The excess thermal energy generated by the light in the lamp is used to heat a small capsule of gaseous iron maganate, which, when it expands creates a negative gravitational index."

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"Yeah. A chemist friend of mine who works for NASA hooked me up with it. Here, check it out."

As he spoke, he gave the tail of the lamp he was working on a quarter turn. It lit up purple, cycled through green and red. He held the fish in his open palms and shortly, it floated out of his hands. He gave it a gentle push and it joined the rest of the lamps just slightly over our heads. The lamps gave the room a peaceful, ethereal feel. I wanted half a dozen of them for my apartment.

"How much would these retail for?" I asked.

"That's the thing. Right now we'd have to sell one for \$13.99. I'm trying to get the cost down to two for \$10. You know how Trammel feels about the Threshold."

The Threshold was the name Trammel had given for what he felt was the price point that an average consumer would buy something. It varied from product to product, but there were some general rules. For something like this, which fell firmly into the novelty lighting category, Trammel stood firm at two for 10. When something had been dumbed down, cheapened or otherwise fucked with in order to fit in Trammel's pricing structure, we said that it had been "Thresholed."

"You mean these things are only \$14? And the only reason Trammel doesn't want to produce them is because they're fish? And you might not be able to make them two for ten?"

"Better products have been axed for worse reasons, Arthur," Jimmy said solemnly. "Is it lunch time?"

"Yes, it is," Paul said. "I'm starving. Let's go."

As was tradition, Paul drove us to the park in his black Volkswagen Jetta. We listened to the latest Beastie Boys album on his stereo. He had the windows down, the sunroof open. I sat in the back, straddling the center, buffeted by the wind but not minding being windblown at all. These little summer moments -- cruising down 130, hanging out with friends (or the closest approximation I could find in New Jersey), listening to good music, free from immediate worry -- were what I lived for. I could pretend I was in a movie, that "Triple Trouble" was part of the soundtrack, that there was an audience just on the other side of an imaginary screen watching as the opening titles (never the ending credits) rolled, eager for the story to start.

We pulled into the parking lot at the park. As soon as I saw all the trees that surrounded the place, I felt a shiver run down my spine as if a thousand cicadas had just skittered across my grave. Through all the events of the morning, the obstacle course of getting from my car to my cubicle, I had managed to suppress the intense terror I'd felt while just driving to work. Now that I was faced with trees, wildlife, wilderness again it was all coming back to me. Jimmy and Paul piled out of the car. I remained frozen in the back seat.

Paul had made it halfway to the picnic benches where we normally scarfed down our food before he noticed that I wasn't with them. He turned back, and called my name but I didn't respond. I barely registered that he had spoken. In my head I relived my morning commute: the accident, the drive through the forest. The images played over and over in the theater of my mind.

Paul's voice coming from close at hand to my left snapped me out of it. "Art? Buddy? You coming with us?"

"What?" I shook my head to clear the daze. I still stared straight ahead, keeping a watchful eye on the trees. "I. Yeah. Look. Remember what I was saying about the cicadas last night? About it all being hype?"

Paul's voice was even and low when he replied. I didn't look over at him, but I could guess that his expression had darkened. "What about it, Art?"

"I think I was wrong." I turned to face Paul. "I mean, really really wrong."

Eventually Paul and Jimmy got me to leave the safety of the car by assuring me that the park was cicada free. We sat at the bench, eating our lunches (I'd forgotten to bring one; Paul shared a sandwich with me) in silence. When we had finished, I went to get the whiffle ball bat but Paul stopped me.

"No, Art, you should tell us what's going on."

So instead of our usual diversion, we sat at the table, and my friends listened as I told them everything that had happened that morning.

"That's fucked up," Paul said when I was finished.

"I know. I don't know what to make of it," I admitted.

"You're tired, you're stressed. You were hungover. Dehydrated. There are a million reasons you might have seen that."

"You're sure you haven't seen any cicadas?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm certain. Every time there's another brood, I pay close attention to what's going on. I'm still looking for the bastards who killed my father."

I stopped short. "What?"

"You know my dad was killed by the cicadas, right?"

"Yeah, Therese told me last night. Paul, I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, it's cool."

"I don't understand how you can be so calm when we're talking about cicadas, especially with what happened," I said.

"It's taken a long time. It used to be so bad that I'd freak out if someone talked about their Volkswagen Scirocco or circadian rhythms, much less talked about actual cicadas. It was a while before I could even bring myself to think about what happened on that horrible day."

"So what actually did happen? Can you tell me?"

"Sure, man, but some other time, ok? For now we should play some whiffle ball."

"I agree," said Jimmy

We both looked at Jimmy. He'd been uncharacteristically quiet during the whole conversation. He hadn't even interjected any of his strange noises, and never once randomly repeated something either of us had said.

"Jimmy, what do you think about all this?" I asked as Paul went to his car for the bat and ball.

"I think *they're coming*," Jimmy said in a raspy voice that was not at all his own.

I took a couple steps back from him. "What? What did you say?"

"I said 'I think *they're coming*.'" he repeated, in the same voice.

"Who's coming, Jimmy?"

"They are."

"Who are they?" I asked.

"You know. *They*."

Paul returned with the game equipment. "Let's play ball!" he exclaimed.

"I'm ready if you are," Jimmy said.

We went back to work a little late. Knowing Sharon wasn't in made us a little less nervous about getting back on time. By the time I reached my desk, it was already 1:45PM and I

had yet to do a lick of work. If I hadn't had such a nightmare of a morning, it would have gone down as the best work day ever. As it was, there was still enough for me to be worried about what with the phantom cicadas. And then, of course, there were all the crystal pieces that needed to be photographed. Even if Sharon wasn't around, I still had the joy of answering to all the product developers, who were undoubtedly itching to send their goods off to China and get their sweat shop quotes back.

But, who was I kidding? I'd already made my bed -- my not-going-to-do-any-work-that-day bed -- and there was no way that I was going to switch gears and start being productive. I was lost for the day. Done. I twirled around in my chair.

"Who wants to play a game?" I asked.

Therese turned around just so she could roll her eyes at me. "Are you going to do *any* work today?" she asked.

"I don't think so. I think this day should be written off as a loss."

"Maybe it should be written off as a personal day."

"Therese, I know you like pretending to be our mom, or our boss, but you're neither," I said. "Thank Christ for that little blessing."

Therese sighed, but knew she wasn't going to get through to me. As much as she nagged us, she would never rat me out. As much friction as there was, we were still family in a sense and when it came to us versus the outside world, we would stick together until the end. Internally, it was another story, of course.

"Anyhow," I continued, "it sounds like Therese is out. Kate, how about you? Care to play a little chair ball? Or forklift jousting?" Those were two of our favorite pastimes.

Kate's only response was to flick me off over her shoulder with her left hand. At least I knew she was listening. Paul laughed.

"Alright, Kate. Your objection is noted. What about you, Paul? Buddy?"

"Art, you know I'd love nothing more than to play a game right now, but I've got 20 piggy banks to path."

"Shit, Paul. Can't you do one and then use the same path for them all?"

One of Cola's biggest sellers was a piggy bank. They were shaped like classic piggy banks, but each one was a different "character." There was a pirate, a wizard, a football player, and about seventy other designs. They were ridiculously cheap to produce, but a pain in the ass to make packaging for.

"I could," Paul said, "if all the photos were the same." This last bit he projected in Therese's direction.

"Oh what the hell, Paul?" Therese was immediately defensive. "You think I can just somehow get each photo exactly the same just to save you some effort?"

"You could give it a shot," Paul countered.

"Paul, Therese told me it would be really easy to do it, but she didn't feel like taking the extra time to do it," I said. "Because. Um. She likes to piss you off."

"Arthur!" Therese exclaimed. "I never said any such thing. It's not true, Paul."

Paul rose to the game. He knew how much I liked to start arguments, no matter who or what was involved. It wasn't as good as forklift jousting, but it was good sport nonetheless.

"Sure, Therese. Just like you don't make sure to put white piggy banks on white backgrounds

whenever you can.”

White on white, obviously, made for the most difficult pathing. Whenever Paul had to do what amounted to actually drawing the form of a piggy bank due to an extreme lack of contrast he would chant, over and over again, “Stop the white on white violence. Stop the white on white violence.” It became a mantra for him.

“Paul, what am I going to do? The piggy banks are all white and they want them on a white background.”

“Why does it matter what color the background is if I’m stripping it out of the background and putting it into this design?” Paul waved at the rainbow colored box sample sitting on his desk.

Therese fumed, fumbling for a good reason. What had started as a game of wind-up-Therese had begun to ring true and become serious. Paul raised a good point. “That’s just what they want, Paul.” She tried to appeal to our collective sense of helplessness and victimization at the hands of the higher ups in the company. Not a bad tactic, actually. We were all painfully aware of how ridiculous some of the edicts could be, especially when it came to product photography. Therese was required, if at all possible, to include broccoli in any shot that featured food. If she didn’t, she was forced to appear before a shadowy review panel (affectionately known as the Cola Death Squad -- not because they would actually kill her, but because the head of the panel was Dr. Stephen J. Death, one of the nicest and most approachable executives at the company) and defend her decision. If it was found that she could have used broccoli, she would have to stage a reshoot, the cost of which would come out of her paycheck. Consequently, she used broccoli in everything. We had no idea why the company was so hot to photograph the vegetable, but we suspected there was some money exchanging hands between Cola and the National Broccoli Advisory Board. We had no evidence to support this claim, but could think of no other reason for it.

But, though we could sympathize with Therese’s hands being tied in regards to the use of a higher contrast background for the piggy bank photo shoots, that wasn’t part of the game. The game’s tagline was “No Remorse - No Regret - Never Relent - Never Surrender” which was basically a summary of the entirety of the rules. The only thing that it didn’t cover was “No Talking About Therese’s Shoes” which was really just common sense. We were only trying to have fun, not send the poor girl into therapy.

“You’re bringing *them* into this, Therese? Now who sounds like Arthur?” Paul asked. He turned to me and said, “No offense, Art.”

“None taken,” I said. “Happy to help.”

“I do *not* sound like *him*,” Therese protested. “His ‘they’ is a non-existent shadowy cabal made up of elected officials and corporate bigwigs. His ‘they’ is the product of watching too many movies, playing too many video games, and smoking too much dope.”

“Hey!” I exclaimed. “I stopped smoking dope years ago. It made me paranoid.”

“Well, I think it stuck, Arthur. You’re obviously delusional.”

“Delusional? Me? Just because I think there are better ways to run a business? And because I think -- no, I know -- that while it appears that we live in a democratically governed free market society that there are actually five people -- Donald Trump, Bill Gates, Ted Turner, the cryogenically stored brain of Dick Cheney, and Wesley Thomas, a 53-year-old farmer from

Akron, Ohio -- that are secretly in control of everything?"

Paul added, "You also think that all the hot sales assistants want to sleep with you."

"Alyssa totally does. She told me so last Thursday."

"I think that must have been a dream."

"No, it was definitely real. We were walking down the street and she said, 'Arthur, I need you to make me a woman.' And I said, 'Alyssa, I'm not God. I can't just make you a woman.' And she said, 'No, stupid, I want you inside me.' And I said, 'You mean you want me to like climb inside your skin.' And she said, 'No, dummy, I want you to take me to bed.' And I said, 'But it's only 11:30, you can't possibly be tired yet.' And she said, 'No, you idiot, I want you to have sex with me.' And I said, 'Oh, yeah, I knew that's what you meant.' And then all of a sudden, we were in Detroit, only it wasn't really Detroit. And she turned into Hilary Clinton. And there was a talking rabbit. Now that you mention it, that was probably a dream."

"Probably. That's a good one though."

"I have to remember to write that down in my dream journal."

Therese threw her hands up and growled in frustration.

"I did hook up with Susan though," I continued.

"Oh yeah!" Paul said. "I'd forgotten about that."

Susan was a former sales assistant who had left Cola about a week after I started. We flirted at her going-away party and since I had not yet had enough time to display my complete unsuitability as a mate to everyone through my unprofessional behavior, my petulant attitude, and my bad personal grooming, Susan had considered me fresh meat, viable and available, and had allowed me to escort her home.

I smiled, fondly thinking back to that night. "That was fun."

"Wait a second," Paul said. "That's not what you told me."

"What?"

"Come on, Art, 'fess up. There are no secrets or lies in the Cubicle of Truth."

"I thought we had stopped calling it that," I said. We had been going back and forth on the official cubicle name. Much work time had been devoted to the very important debate. "I thought we had settled upon Plagueville."

"Regardless of the name, Arthur, the fact remains. Once a Cubicle of Truth, always a Cubicle of Truth. As long as you reside here, you shall be bound by its laws."

"Crap."

"So, tell the audience what happened, Arthur."

"Alright," I started, already warming to the story. My people love telling stories. It is in my blood and it doesn't matter if the story shows me in a good light or not. In fact, the worse off I come across in a story, the more sympathetic (or just pathetic) I appear. Or so I thought. It was a Jewish thing. I think. "So Susan and I are hanging out at her party in the break room, and we're both pretty tipsy...." Alcohol was normally forbidden at all company events, whether Cola-sponsored or not, but Susan was incredibly resourceful. Her brother was Cola's legal counsel and had found numerous loopholes in the company alcohol policy. Ever since then, as long as the event took place on an odd-numbered day, within three days of a major holiday (of any nation, creed, or culture) and was not taking place near computers or heavy machinery, we could get away with drinking booze on site. It was known as the Susan Initiative, and we thanked

her for it weekly. "So I said, 'Would you like to come back to my cubicle?' and she said, 'Is that what you packaging kids call it these days?' And of course, I was confused by that because what else does anybody call a cubicle. I mean, a cubicle is a cubicle, right? I suppose some people call them 'cubes' but that's really more of an abbreviation than anything else."

I could tell that I was losing my audience. Therese looked like she might fall asleep, Kate looked even less engaged than ever and even Paul, who normally listened with rapt attention to any story that I might tell seemed uninterested. He had turned back to his computer, and while I knew he was listening, I could tell from the back of his head that he was growing bored.

"Anyhow. I realize you guys are all busy so I'll just cut to the chase. After a bit of witty repartee, a little back and forth, we cut out of here and head over to her place. Now I don't know if you know this, but you're about to: Susan has a dog."

"We know," Paul groaned. Of course they knew. We all knew. Susan talked about nothing but her dog, pretty much all day every day. I had only known her a week, but already I had been shown pictures of her dog and told stories about her dog a dozen times. I have a pretty strict "Don't tell me about your dog unless he's on fire or he cured cancer" policy, but, being new in town, and eager to make friends, I had listened intently.

"Right, of course. So, Susan and I are making out, things are getting pretty hot and heavy, and she says, all sexy like, 'Well, I think it's time we went to bed.' And of course I'm thinking, hell yes, it's time we went to bed."

"Jesus, Art, we don't need to hear this," said a voice. I nearly jumped out of my chair.

"Who said that?"

"Oh fuck off," Kate said.

"So *that's* what your voice sounds like. Who knew?"

She dutifully extended her middle finger. "Who would want to hear about you hooking up with some random PA skank?"

"Well, Kate, perhaps you didn't hear Paul when he reminded us all that there are no secrets or lies in the Cubicle of Truth. Or maybe, just maybe, you didn't care. Maybe you don't care about following the rites and rituals, the traditions time-honored and tested. Maybe you just don't care about our little family." I turned to Paul. "Paul, I don't think Kate cares about our little family."

"Kate, stop not caring about our little family," Paul instructed her.

"Thank you, Paul," I said. "Now, where was I?"

"You were about to hook up with some random PA skank," Paul reminded me.

"Oh yes, thank you again, Paul. So, I was about to hook up with some random PA skank. What was her name again?"

"Susan."

"Right, Susan. We go up to her bedroom and she points to the left side of the bed and says, 'That's my side.' And she points to the right side and says, 'That's your side.' And I'm thinking, 'This broad is into some seriously kinky shit!' I mean, getting all into it with sides of the bed and shit? It was heavy. Heaaaaaaavy."

I wish I knew how many frustrated sighs I have elicited to this point in my life. The number might well be in the millions. The billions. Impossible to know. Whatever the total was, I knew I could add 3 to it right then.

"Fine, so I climb into bed on the right side, which is fine with me, cuz that's where I usually sleep anyhow, but I'm not thinking about sleep at all right then of course, if you know what I mean. And I think you do."

"We know, Art," Paul said.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes," said Therese. I was overjoyed to know that she was still even paying attention.

"Positive?"

"Jesus, Art, get on with it," said Kate. I was winning points left and right.

"Okay." I paused. "Because I was talking about sex."

"We know," my three colleagues said in unison.

"Okay. So I get into bed on what she has designated as my side, and she goes into the bathroom and I'm doing the whole thing where I'm taking my clothes off under the covers, and then I'm lying there. Right? Naked. Right? In Susan's bed?"

More sighs. I wondered if there was a Guinness record.

"And she comes back from the bathroom and she's wearing this horrible nightgown –" Paul leaned back in his chair, hanging his head over the backrest, smiling like a fool. "I love this part so much," he said.

"Good to have you back, Paul," I said. "So she's wearing this horrible nightgown –"

"Describe the nightgown, Art. Come on."

"Good lord, Paul. I don't come over there and...tell you how to... design cookie jar boxes."

"You do that all the time."

"Touche. Point being, you need to let the man – that's me – tell his story. Okay?"

"Yeah, sure, Art."

"It is appreciated. And don't fear, I will of course describe the nightgown. It was so hideous that it requires description. It is a quintessential part of this story, for the point at which I saw that woman in that nightgown was a pivotal point, not only in the evening, but, sir, I would posit, in my life."

"Duly noted."

"This nightgown –"

"Yes?"

"It was chartreuse."

"No!"

"And it was frilly."

"Say it isn't so!"

"And it was three sizes too big. Also, it was made, obviously, in Sri Lanka."

"Anywhere but Sri Lanka!"

Therese made the mistake of interjecting: "How did you know it Sri Lankan?"

"I'm glad you asked, Therese," I said. I really was. "Before I knew you guys, in a previous life, I was the office coordinator for the Midwest's largest importer and exporter of silk."

"They imported *and* exported silk?" Paul asked.

"Yes, sir, they did. And we dealt mostly in Laotian silk, which is, as I'm sure you know, the highest quality silk you can find. And I was trained to detect the presence of any bootleg silk, silk of lower quality, cheap silk. I'm speaking of *Sri Lankan silk*."

"Why is their silk so bad?"

"Their worms have bad attitudes. The silk isn't made with love like Laotian silk is. It's made with something that more closely approximates ennui."

"Well, who can blame them? They're silkworms. They're forced to make silk for hours on end with low pay and in dangerous conditions. They have no connection to the end product, no say in how their silk is used, and no way to provide a future for themselves or their families. They live paycheck to paycheck, hand to mouth, always worried about how they will pay next month's rent. Silkworms of the world, unite! Rise up as one and overthrow your oppressive taskmasters!"

"Paul?" Therese asked.

"Buddy, I said, 'I hate to say it, but they might be right.'"

"About what?" Paul asked.

"You may have been spending too much time with me."

"Undoubtedly."

"Anyhow – I knew right away that Susan's nightgown was made from inferior Sri Lankan silk, but still I stayed in her bed. A lonely and desperate man will put up with many things, even a horrible nightgown, just for a little affection."

"Don't I know it," said Therese.

This time we all looked at her.

"What?" she asked. "I just mean.... Oh, shut up."

I shrugged. "So she slides into bed, and I'm about to slide over to her to resume our, you know, activities –"

"You mean sex, right?" Paul asked.

"Yes, Paul, sex," I confirmed. "Sex of the sexiest kind."

"That's sexy sex!"

"It sure is, Paul," I said. "It sure is."

I nodded at Paul and smiled, and held the expression and the pose, imagining credits rolling over my beaming face. Therese scowled. Paul gave me the "wrap it up" signal. I broke the freeze.

"So, before I can slide to her side of the bed, she's shouting a name: 'Reginald! Reginald!' And I'm thinking this lady is so ready for action that she's already calling out the wrong name in bed! Usually they wait until the throes of passion."

"The *throes* of passion? Don't you mean the *throes* of passion?" Therese asked.

"I appreciate the flattery, Therese, but there are no lies in the cubicle of truth," I said.

Therese rolled her eyes. "No wonder Julie dumped you."

Paul spun around in his chair. "Low blow, Therese. That's a foul. 5 yard penalty. You're playing with a man down for 2 minutes. Yellow card. Arthur Traum, shooting two."

I held up a hand, waving Paul off. "No, no, Paul. It's okay. I'm a big boy. I can handle it." I wept inside.

Paul shrugged magnanimously. "If you say so."

"Anyhow, did you know that Reginald is Susan's dog's name?"

"Did not know that. Never paid that much attention to her."

"I hadn't either. Was totally surprised. The dog's name is Reginald."

"Interesting."

"Knew that," Therese said.

"Of course you did," Paul and I said in unison. We exchanged a virtual high five across the room.

"So, what happened?"

"Well, Reginald came bounding into the room and jumped on the bed. He got under the sheets and laid down between Susan and me. I guess right down the middle is Reginald's side."

"That is sooo cute," Therese cooed.

"Cute? Reginald's a Great Dane! The damn thing nearly killed me! If I hadn't been on 'my' side of the bed, I would have been crushed."

"Good thing Susan was so specific with the side of the bed you should have been on," Paul observed.

"No kidding," I replied. "If I'd been an inch or two to the left, it would have been curtains for me. Want to guess what happened next?"

"You had a threesome with Susan and her dog?" Kate asked.

Jaws dropped again.

"You know, Kate, I may not have given you enough credit before," I said. "Do you want to get a drink after work?"

"Drop dead, Arthur."

I held my hands up. "Ok, ok. Just asking. Anyway, Susan turns off the light, and says 'Goodnight.' I'm lying there thinking, you know, what the fuck? Minutes later, I hear her, not snoring, but you know, sleep breathing. I hadn't banked on just having a fucking sleepover, and I certainly hadn't intended to share a bed with a former sales assistant *and* her oversized dog, so I'm tossing --"

"Turning," Paul put in.

"Fuming," I added.

"Fussing," Paul offered.

"I'm pissed. And there's no way I'm going to get to sleep. And I'm about to just get up and get my shit and get out when Susan wakes up and says, 'Arthur, is Reginald taking up too much space?' And I said, 'Well, he's a big dog, you know?' And she says, 'Why didn't you say something?' And I said, 'It's ok, I have enough room.' And she says, 'Man, I fucking hate that.' And I ask, 'What are you talking about?' And she says, 'When someone has a problem with something and they're just sitting there stewing about it and not saying anything.' And I said, 'It's not really a problem.' And she said, 'Yeah, right, you're tossing and turning and fuming and fussing and you're saying you don't have a problem?' 'That's right,' I said, 'there's no problem with the dog.' 'So what's your problem?' And I said, 'My problem is that you're a total lunatic! You invited me over here with the implication that we'd be having sex and then you bring your fucking giant dog into bed and go to sleep! What the hell kind of hookup is that?' And she said, 'Hookup? What kind of woman do you think I am? I just needed you to look after Reginald when I go out of town tomorrow!'"

Throughout this part of the story, Paul's laughter was increasing from anticipatory twittering to full blow guffaws. When I delivered the final line, he fell out of his chair and was pounding the floor gleefully. He'd heard the story a dozen times before and it never failed to slay him. I appreciated his enthusiasm, but I was beginning to wonder how genuine it was. The other

two occupants of the cube did not have a similarly positive reaction which was not surprising, but was somewhat disappointing nevertheless.

"I was referring to the fact that you think that the cicadas are here, that they've invaded, that they've taken over the Scott's Corner Woods."

I looked from Therese to Paul, gave him a questioning look. Paul shrugged.

"I didn't tell anybody," he said. "You've been with me the whole time, remember?"

"Word gets around fast," Therese explained. "Especially when one of our own is going absolutely bonkers."

I was quickly losing control of the game. If I didn't act fast, what had started a sure win would turn into a crushing defeat. My record was currently 8-0 and I really wanted to remain the only undefeated player in the league. Playoffs were coming up soon and I needed home field advantage throughout if I wanted to stand a chance and go to the office championship.

In desperation, I said, "You'd have to be bonkers to think that everything is exactly as it seems on the surface."

I immediately regretted it though. It was the wrong tactic to use. I didn't want to keep the focus on myself. Worse than an actual defeat in the argument, I was risking losing her interest. There were many ways to win -- and to lose -- at this game, but at a very basic level, if Therese turned back to her work before she made at least one of any number of her hilarious, exasperated sounds, it was all over. I watched in horror as her chair started to turn. I needed something, and fast.

I decided to retreat. Backtrack and look for a better angle of attack. "The piggy banks told me they'd prefer to be photographed on a green background."

Therese's eyebrows went up in disbelief. Paul shook his head, disappointed. "That's non-sequitir, Art."

"Like fuck it is," I protested. "It's just appealing to the absurd."

"What are you two talking about?"

"Nothing," I said quickly. I'd take defeat over a disastrous reveal of the nature of the game to Therese. That meant immediate disqualification, appearance before the review board, fines, and possible suspension.

"They're fucking with you again, Therese," Kate said.

"What? What do you mean?"

"It's this little game they play."

I glared at Kate. She knew of the game but did not participate. "Kate," I said. "What are you doing?"

"It's this little game they play where they try to get you arguing about ridiculous things, try to get you pissed off."

I turned to Therese. "Don't listen to her. She's gone bonkers. Isn't that what you'd call her? Bonkers? Because she's making up some ridiculous story?" I turned back to Kate. "Kate, why are you making up this ridiculous story? Maybe you're playing a game where you try to make Therese mad." I looked at Paul. "Right, Paul? Doesn't that seem like exactly the kind of thing that Kate might say if she were trying to make Therese mad?" To Therese: "Right? Make you mad?"

Kate play game?" Total desperation mode. To Kate: "Seriously? Shut up? Please?"

Therese stared at me. Then, though I scarcely believed what I was hearing, made noise 17-B, a combination scoff / sigh / throat clearing and turned back to her computer. It wasn't the highest-scoring end to a round, but it did mean points on the board for me. I looked back at Paul to make sure he had heard it. He nodded and jotted down the results in his log book. He wasn't the most trustworthy score keeper, but he did have the best handwriting. I did a little fist pump in celebration.

"You guys are assholes," Kate said, flicking us off. That meant points for both of us in that league as well. Not a bad day of competition, all told.

"My work here is done," I said, leaning back, fingers laced together behind my head.

"Actually, Art, from what I can tell, your work here hasn't even started." Paul pointed at the sparkle-covered pink "Princess" clock on his desk. "It's almost 4."

I sighed. "Fine. If you want to go and spoil what might be the best day a Cola Industries employee has ever had in the history of this company, go right ahead, mister." Paul chuckled and nodded. "But know that you're disappointing all my fans, particularly little Heidi Swanson."

"Who's Heidi Swanson?" Paul asked.

"I'm glad you asked, Paul," I said. "Heidi Swanson, aged 8, of Lawrence Township, New Jersey, is a Brownie, a 4H Club member, active in her Sunday School choir, an aspiring pianist and clarinetist, an accomplished papier machet artist and also one of my biggest fans."

Paul, fortunately, had the amazing ability to actually get work done while I went off on my flights of fancy. Otherwise, we'd all be way behind in our tasks instead of just me. "Why would Heidi Swanson be particularly disappointed?"

I wiped away an imaginary tear. "Heidi was just diagnosed with Third Stage Multiple Systematic Acute Chronic Flombosis of the neck."

"That's terrible!" Paul exclaimed. "She's so young!"

"I know, and she has her whole life ahead of her. I was fortunate enough to visit with Heidi at the New Brunswick Flombosis Center last week. She's an amazing young woman. You know how I'm always saying that kids are useless and should probably be illegal?"

"You do always say that."

"Yeah, well, she makes me not want to say that. She really gives me hope for her entire generation."

"That's an amazing feat in itself."

"Anyhow, my visit with Heidi was cut short because of a particularly painful flare up of her disease. It was frightening to see how it completely took over her features, her face twisted in agony, her hands clenched in rage. The nurse rushed in and began administering an ancient Thai method of joint rearranging, that while very painful and uncomfortable, is the only thing that even temporarily can ease the effects of the... What did I call it? Framboiseis?"

"Flambonie," Paul suggested.

"Frombosis!" Therese shouted angrily. I smiled. Getting her involved in this conversation meant bonus points for me. Paul took his hand off his mouse to make another notation in the log book. He didn't miss a beat.

"Yes, Flombosis. Thank you, Therese. So, as I was leaving, Heidi called to me. Her voice was weak, she sounded not like a girl of 8, but like an old woman of 35. Do you know what she

said to me?”

“What, Art?” Paul asked. “What did she say?”

“She said, ‘Mr Arthur, please, for me, this coming Friday, it would mean so much if....’ And she trailed off, too weak to continue. I approached her bed, knelt down at her side and took her frail hand. ‘What is it, sweetheart?’ I asked. ‘I’ll do anything for you.’”

“This is incredibly moving,” Paul said.

“I was very nearly in tears myself,” I admitted. “Heidi gathered all her strength -- she really is such an amazing little trooper -- and said, ‘It would mean everything if on Friday you would do as little work as possible.’ And then she was gone, her tiny hand fell limp at her side, her eyes rolled back in her head, her breathing uneven. I looked with desperation at the nurse who pushed me aside. My head reeling, I nearly passed out myself. I don’t remember leaving the room, but the next thing I knew, I was hunched over in the hallway, vomiting like there was no tomorrow. Moments later, the nurse came out and told me that it had been a close one, but that Heidi had survived the attack, and that if it weren’t for true heroes like myself, people like Heidi would have nothing to hope for, nothing to live for. I know that were I to actually engage in actual work-related activities, I would be letting her down, letting her whole family down, but most of all, I’d be letting myself down. Also, I really don’t feel like it.”

“Well, the answer is obvious, Art,” Paul said. “You shouldn’t do anything even remotely job related.”

“I appreciate your support and understanding, Paul. I really do. Perhaps you’d like to make your support go farther by making a small donation? Any amount will do. Every little bit helps.”

“I wish I could, man. I really do. Times are tight and all the money I earmarked for charitable donation is all tied up. If you hit me up in January, I’ll be able to do something for you.”

“I understand, buddy. Therese? Kate? Donations to a hero?”

“Bug off,” Therese said.

“Child hater.”

“I don’t have any money, Arthur,” Kate said. “But, there’s a box of Wheat Thins in the cupboard you can have.”

I jumped to my feet. And crossed the cubicle to the snack cupboard. “A capital idea, Kate. I’ve really worked up a hell of an appetite doing all this not working. You will be remembered, my dear, dear Kate.”

“You have no idea how happy that makes me,” she said.

I grabbed the box, opened it, shoved my hand in and reeled back, tossing the box over the against the cubicle wall. It landed on a desk sending Wheat Thins everywhere. My three colleagues exploded in laughter.

“What. The. Fuck?” I demanded.

Amongst the Wheat Thins I had felt...something. Like a bug. A giant bug.

Closest to where the box had landed, Kate picked it up and fished out the offending object. “Oh, there you are, Howie!” she cooed. She tossed ‘Howie’ at me. I fumbled with it, playing a solo game of hot potato until I realized that it was just a piece of corrugate that had an insect-like design mounted to it and had been cut to the shape of a cicada on our cutting table.

“What is the meaning of this? Paul?”

"We made that thing months ago. It goes from drawer to cupboard to snack box to shelf. Hide Howie is one of our old games. Welcome to it."

"Not. Fucking. Funny."

I hated being the center of attention. Well, at least in this sense. Everyone looking at me. Everyone laughing. I suppose I could have just taken it in stride, said, "Ha ha, nice joke everyone." But the switch had already been flipped. I was in fury mode and I didn't know how to come back. I growled impotently, clenched my fists, held my breath, wanted to punch something, wanted to punch one of them, growled again. Rage coursed through my veins, I was seeing red, no, seeing green, the edges of my vision colored with The Incredible Hulk's angry venom.

I stalked out of the cubicle, could still hear Kate and Therese laughing, hear Paul call my name. "Hey Art, come back." But I wasn't going back. There was no going back. Around the corner, could hear Kate say, "That was priceless." Could hear Paul say, "Come on guys, lay off. Art, come back, man." Could hear Therese say, "He'll be fine. He'll come back," and then, quieter, "He deserved that." Couldn't really argue with her there. Wasn't used to tasting my own medicine. Found it bitter. Disagreeable. Never able to take a joke.

Found myself thinking about when I was a kid: A family canoe trip, mom, dad, sister, rowing down the Scioto River in Ohio, I'm just four years old. After we've reached our destination, my sister and dad tricked me into eating a spider, I don't remember how, just remember realizing what they'd done, the betrayal. My mother livid with them, but the image in my mind of her laughing, her anger not at what they'd done, but at what they'd produced: sad Artie.

Another: at 12, my sister 16, her boyfriend put a handful of potato bugs in my Coke, got me to drink it in the dark, the feeling of potato bugs on my mouth, in my mouth. Becca and Charlie laughing, me running from the house, trying to spit the taste, the texture, the feel from my memory, nobody coming after me and that's all I wanted was someone to run after me, to apologize, to bring me back. Isn't that all we want, when we are running? Someone to chase us?

More: I am twenty-one and there are ants in my pants and I need to dance. I chuckle in spite of myself.

But really, why is it always insects? And why is it always food? At least I know why I reacted the way I did. I've looked at the photos from those times and I know the before and after pivots around that canoe trip. Before is smiling Arthur, happy Arthur, proud Arthur. After? That's when sad, gloomy, glaring, sour, upset Arthur came out. I wish I could find happy Arthur again.

And beat him up, that naive little brat.

I retreated to the photo room, my safe haven, my home away from my home away from home. In my absence, a number of items had piled up. It looked like someone thought we should get into the magnet production game: there were at least 30 2 inch diameter refrigerator magnets in a bag with a note attached.

"Arthur: Please photograph these in sets of seven. It should be obvious which set each magnet belongs to. If you have any questions, feel free to stop by. Cheers, Steph."

Stephanie Green was probably my favorite of the PD team. Of the freakish alien women I'd met in New Jersey, she was the most normal. Or the best of the aliens at seeming normal, anyhow. It was hard to tell with freakish alien women. I'd almost asked her out once, but

somehow the conversation had been derailed and turned into a lengthy awkward silence punctuated by her hinting at the fact that I should probably get off the hood of her car so she could drive home. I'm not good at taking hints sometimes. I stretched that one out into a half hour.

It was probably for the best that we never dated, though. Not just because I would have totally fucked it up and thus caused immeasurable awkwardness in the workplace, but also because, even before that, even before I managed to drive her away with my terseness, my inability to talk (only present after 3 months of dating; prior to that I would have talked her ear off,) my lack of drive, motivation, ambition, organization, cleanliness, courtesy, and consideration, things would have been weird. Would I have prioritized her photos? Probably. I actually already did that, taking Steph's candle holders before all other comers, going so far as to photograph them, go back to my desk, crop and color correct the photos, then moonily send her detailed emails about the images' names, locations, and general qualities. And I'd leave the rest of the stuff for another day. But then, would I not come to resent how many items she brought me to photograph? Would I not curse every time I saw another candle holder piled up outside the photo room, another one of her notes with her i's and j's topped with giant circles and her signed name surrounded by tiny hearts and smiley faces? Would not the drudgery of another doomed relationship lead me to forget that I had forgotten her alien nature, that I had looked past her Jersey accent and her Jersey hair? Undoubtedly. It was better this way: a (most likely) one-sided workplace crush that lead to (presumably) harmless flirtation. Not to say that I would turn away from a (drunken) tryst with her, though, knowing my history and luck, that would somehow leave me trapped in a too-long too-boring too-silent relationship. Hell, it'd probably be best if I never dated anyone ever ever ever again.

The bigger question was, what the hell was Stephanie Green doing with magnets? Candle holders were her domain. Was she branching out? Was Cola branching out? It was a mystery that I had to get to the bottom of.

With my theme music playing in my head ("duh duh duh da duh dun da duh dee duh dah duh dee duh da da da duh dahhhhhh") I stole over to the PD room, knocked on the door frame (did not say "Knock knock!") and entered. The Four Shoppers looked up at me, acknowledged my entrance and went back to whatever it was that they called work.

Except for Kelly. Ostensibly their leader (though not the department head; just the Alpha Female in the room.) She was on the phone but she immediately clocked me entering the room and she fixed me with a glare and beckoned me over. Kelly was all about mirrors and clocks. Fucking mirrors. Want to sell a mirror? Take a picture of it, then select the shiny, reflective part -- the part that makes a mirror a mirror -- and make it look like clouds. That's right, I said clouds. Photoshop has a handy filter for this. I never knew what it was for before I started at Cola. Apparently it's for mirrors. Clocks are generally easier -- just make sure the hands are at 10 and 2 (positions that aren't just for driving -- with hands at 10 and 2, the clock evokes the golden ratio, making it more attractive to the customer.) Head bowed and humble, I approached her desk. It was best not to make eye contact, or really, to look at anything but one's own shoes. Risking her ire was a dangerous game, one that I played almost every day, but always from a distance. Face to face, Kelly was a force to be reckoned with. I preferred passive aggressive measures, at a safe remove.

I approached her desk. She nodded me into a chair. I sat.

"...that's why it's flawed," she said into the phone. Her anger was palpable. "I explained it already.... No, it's not because it's cheaper.... What don't you understand?.... They're replica Muslim prayer rugs.... So, devout Muslims leave an obvious flaw in each rug they make because only God can be perfect.... It's true, I asked a Muslim guy at my gym.... Fine, I'll get you his number.... Fine, bye." She hung up the phone.

"That flaw thing is bullshit, and if it's not it's incredibly asinine."

"I don't care what you think, Arthur," she said.

"Seriously, it's all a marketing ploy by Muslim prayer rug weavers. Some tourist was pissed because the quality of the souvenir prayer rug he had bought wasn't up to his incredibly high standards and complained about it. Rather than just swapping out the rug for one that didn't have a flaw, the guy just fed the tourist that incredibly ridiculous line. Can you imagine if everything they did they did like that? It makes no sense." I paused. Kelly was barely listening. I went on anyway. I didn't really have anything better to do. "But check this out, the flaw in the whole story is the idea that unless the rug makers *deliberately* leave a flaw in the rug, that it would be perfect which is just not true, since not only is God the only one around who's allowed to be perfect, He's also the only one that can actually *be* perfect. Even if the rug maker doesn't leave the flaw, his prayer rug wouldn't be *perfect*. It'd just be a prayer rug of some certain amount of quality."

I stopped, thought it about some more.

"Are you done?" Kelly asked after a moment or two.

"Not really," I said, for I had considered another angle. "What the hell is a 'perfect' prayer rug anyway? Is there some Platonic ideal prayer rug out there? Is perfection a prayer rug that will perfectly cushion a supplicant's knees as he prays? Or one that will somehow expedite the delivery of the prayers from prayer to prayee? Or is it just some perfection of the pattern in the rug, some ideal design that would make the rug superior to all others?"

"Please, stop," Kelly said.

"Ok, but one more thing: what if the ideal, perfect prayer rug is one that ostensibly appears to be perfect except for one particularly obvious and purposely made flaw? What if by making that flaw, the rug maker is accidentally making the most perfect prayer rug that was ever made?"

"You don't ever stop, do you? And you don't ever actually have a point."

"My point is this: by interfering with the process of making something, by putting something into our creations in order to placate an imaginary friend who lives in the sky, we are limiting ourselves in ways that we shouldn't be. We should all just strive to do the best work we can, knowing that no matter how hard we try, we will never attain perfection, whatever perfection might be, whatever that nebulous concept might be."

"'Strive to do the best work we can?'" Kelly asked. "That sounds like good advice for you, Arthur."

"Oh, without a doubt. My efforts are often paralyzed by the fact that no matter how hard I try, I know I'll never get it quite right."

"So it's not laziness then?"

"Oh, that's a big part of it."

Her anger, already, as I mentioned, pretty high, grew stronger. I knew exactly how to exacerbate a problem. I was nearly perfect at it.

"So is that why I've got a ton of product samples gathering dust on the floor of your photo room? Where are my photos?" she demanded.

"Whoa, Kelly, calm down there. I was just about to finish them up but I needed to talk to Steph first." At the mention of her name, Stephanie looked up. I flashed her a smile and waved. She gave me a sympathetic look, but quickly went back to her work lest Kelly catch her giving comfort and support to the enemy (i.e. me.)

"What did you need to talk to her about?" Kelly asked.

I was filled with a sudden insubordinate urge. "Kelly, really, it doesn't concern you."

"Doesn't concern me? In what way does anything that has to do with this department not concern me?"

"In the way that Cynthia is the department head and you're not," I suggested.

Her face turned bright red. "What did you say?"

Time to back down. "I said I'll have your photos for you first thing tomorrow morning."

"First thing tomorrow? How long have you had those? Over 24 hours. Make it happen, Arthur."

"Fine, Kelly. Let's all just take a deep breath and calm down, okay?"

"Don't you tell me to calm down you overgrown paranoid geeky drug-addled socially inept freak."

It was my turn to go red. "What did you say?"

"I said, get me my fucking photographs."

As angry and hurt as her words made me, and as fearful of direct conflict as I was, I had to admit that I found her outburst of epithets to be something of a turn on. What does that say about me? Probably more than I'd like it to. I was so thrown off that I practically staggered away from Kelly's desk, and found myself standing in front of Stephanie who, after making sure that Kelly was no longer paying attention to me, looked up at me with concern and care, her eyebrows knitted in worry. I waved it off.

"Don't worry about me, Steph. I've heard worse and from people who I like better. And who like me better."

Stephanie kept her voice to a whisper. "But still, Art, she shouldn't talk to you like that. I don't care if you are a completely incompetent worker and at best, a mediocre photographer, nobody should ever talk to another person like that. It's just not right."

"Oh, uh, thanks, Steph," I said. Her assessment of my job skills hurt more than Kelly's did, and went a long way towards killing any lingering arousal I felt from Kelly's words. "That's really nice of you to say."

She raised her voice to a theatrical level, making sure that Kelly knew we were talking business, "So what did you need to see me about, Art?"

"Oh, that," I said. I couldn't even remember why I had gone to see her in the first place. Something about magnets? That sounded right. "Um. So. Magnets, huh?"

"Yes. Magnets. Mr. Trammel thinks they're the next big thing. They're the perfect way to express your personality when you're not near your car's bumper stickers or wearing a hilarious T-shirt."

Distractedly, looking over at Kelly, wondering if she was as forceful in other arenas as she was in the office, I replied, "Oh. Yeah. Expressing my personality. Of course that's something I'm most interested in doing."

"You've always been good at expressing yourself, Arthur."

I looked back at Steph. She was smiling. It was a weird smile, one I'd never seen on her face. It was lopsided and sweet. Dear God, was she falling for me? I was conflicted. My crush on her was borne of opportunity and proximity rather than any great desire. Like most modern American males, I could fall for anyone who showed the slightest bit of interest. It was only in rare moments of extreme clarity that I might see through such false infatuation and break free from it.

On the other hand, the last few months had been particularly lonely. I was stranded, on my own in the worst state in the history of our great nation. Paul and his family had taken me in, more or less, tried to keep me from going stark raving mad, but there was only so much they could do. And there was only so much I could take of hanging out with his kids, a 6 year old boy and a nine year old girl. Don't get me wrong, they were wonderful children. It was just the look of pity in their eyes as they let me win game after game of Connect Four that I found unbearable.

I looked back over at Kelly. There was no chance of anything happening with her. I know that Luis, one of the warehouse guys, had gone out with her a few times. He was too much of a gentleman (or so he claimed -- I think he just didn't like me enough) to reveal any details, but from what I gathered, Kelly only dated Hispanic guys that were over six feet tall, drove red cars made in a factory that was on Greenwich Mean Time, lived in 1200 square foot apartments north of New Brunswick, spoke three languages, knew the rules to Brazilian League Football, scored between 1000-1200 on their SATs and could harness a donkey using six feet of twine and a food processor. I failed on so many levels when it came to her.

I looked back at Steph. She was starting to look better and better in my eyes. I smiled at her and said, "Well, around you, Steph, I feel like I can just say anything." I wasn't usually prone to such shmaltzy declarations, but desperate times call for desperate measures, or something like that. "Say, would you like to go have a drink this weekend?"

Before Steph could answer, Kelly skewered me with another glare. She must have sensed that we were no longer talking about Cola Industries related topics. I could sense her gaze burning into me without looking over. I think Stephanie did too because she immediately turned back to her computer and started typing randomly at her keyboard. When I did finally muster the courage to look back over at Kelly, she pointed angrily at the doorway. In case I didn't get the message, she said, "Arthur. Get. The. Fuck. Out."

I beat a hasty retreat. As I passed through the doorway, Kelly said, "Come on. Those pictures won't take themselves."

As if I didn't know that already.

I made my way back to the photo room. As I approached, I saw a shadowy figure hovering over a pile of samples. I called out. The figure looked up briefly and then turned with a snarl and stole away, disappearing around the corner. I quickened my pace, but by the time I reached the corner, the figure was gone. The warehouse door swung shut. He or she could easily lose him or herself amongst the endless rows of shelves and boxes.

I returned to the photo room, perplexed. What had he (for the sake of simplicity) been doing? There didn't seem to be any samples missing, which was a good thing. Sample theft, even of products that were never going to be developed, was punishable, if not by death, then at least by firing, or threats of firing. They were insanely strict about it. That's not to say that I didn't have at least a dozen items that I'd liberated from Cola's collection, but each one was taken in the most careful manner possible, sweating, adrenaline-filled missions to obtain a set of flatware or a novelty lamp. When I first arrived at Cola, I laughed at the fear exhibited by my colleagues. Fear of doing wrong, fear of being caught taking some useless item. It wasn't long before I felt the fear too. Unquestionably, had any of the items turned up missing, I would have taken the blame for it -- nobody would believe a story about some shadowy figure. I scarcely believed it myself, it had shaped up to be a remarkably strange day. My mind was opening to the possibilities of the existence of things beyond my control or experience.

I stepped into the photo room. Everything there was as I had left it the day before. The troublesome crystal candle holder remained in place on the shooting table. I switched on the lights and the camera and started snapping pictures.

"Heidi Swanson is going to be so disappointed," Paul said from the doorway. I looked at my watch. Barely half an hour had passed, but I had managed to finish with the crystal pieces, all of the picture frames and nearly the entire bag of magnets.

"Oh, fuck her, man," I replied, snapping off another photo. "To be honest with you, I think she's faking."

"Kids these days," Paul said, looking through some old, broken picture frames that were stacked in a corner. "It's amazing what they'll do to get a little attention."

"I blame the parents. They're so concerned with their own lives and their careers and who's going to win this season of America's Next Favorite Grape Stomper, or whatever, that they don't spend enough time with their kids. Children end up being raised by television and heroin. It's no wonder that they turn to things like stealing postage stamps, plagiarizing presidential speeches, falsifying election results and faking made-up diseases."

Paul nodded solemnly. "I lose sleep at night worrying that my own kids will end up the same way. Do I spend enough time with them? Do I pretend to be interested enough in whatever ridiculous shit they tell me? Am I too protective? Not protective enough? Being a parent isn't easy, Art, no matter what they tell you."

I put a supportive hand on Paul's shoulder. "You're a great father, Paul," I said. "I've seen you with your kids. You're amazing with them. There are so many times I would have told them to just fuck off, or at least that they were dumb dumb stupid heads but not you man. No matter what happens, you just seem to smile and nod and take another shot of Jim Beam."

"Ahh, sweet bourbon," Paul said. "Of all the things I keep in the first aid kit, I think it's the most important."

"Paul, I've never told you this before, but...."

"What is it, Art?"

"If I could have picked my father," I said, "I would have picked you."

"Seriously, Art, sorry about the whole Hide Howie thing."

"Oh, don't worry about it," I said, shrugging it off. "It was just bad timing is all. Also, I have a long history of bad experiences with eating bugs."

"Therese and Kate are actually kinda worried about you."

"No kidding? And I thought they didn't care."

"They don't, really, but when you disappeared, they figured you'd gone right to HR."

"Like I'm going to go to HR?" I asked. "I've committed more HR violations in the few months I've been here than Trammel has in his entire career. That guy would have to grope an intern a day for a year just to think about catching up with me."

"That's what I told them," Paul said. "But they were worried you weren't thinking straight. That you had come unglued."

"They might not be far off. I might just be losing it. When I came back to the photo room, I could have sworn I saw a gremlin poking around in the sample pile. I tried to give chase, but it ducked into the warehouse."

"Jesus, dude. What the hell is going on with you?"

"I really don't know. Is it quitting time yet?"

"Just about. Fuck it, let's get out of here. Want to get a drink? I'm buying."

"What about, I don't know, your kids? Doesn't Tyler have soccer practice or something?"

"What am I?" he asked. "His personal assistant? I don't know his schedule."

"Thattaboy," I said.

I switched off the light, left the photo room and turned to close the door but found that Paul had stopped to pick up a candle holder from a stack of things I had yet to photograph. I turned back from the doorway. "Let's go, Poindexter."

Paul looked up. "Poindexter?"

"Yeah, I don't know. First thing that came to mind."

"Weird. Anyway, look at this candle holder."

"What about it?"

"It's not a sample from Target or anything. It doesn't have any labels on it."

"Must be a prototype." Often, when a factory had dutifully copied a sample sent to them, they would send a prototype back to us. Usually these would just be approved and go on to Therese for the actual packaging photographs. Sometimes they came to me for another quick and dirty picture for a sale sheet or whatever. I didn't really care what happened to my photos, so long as they weren't used for evil. Or, since everything here was used for evil, I didn't care so long as the photos weren't used to super evil.

"Well whatever it is," Paul said, transfixed, "it's the most beautiful candle holder I've ever seen."

"Now who's losing it? Put that shit down and let's go."

"Eh," Paul said, tossing the candle holder over his shoulder. "You're right."

Paddy O'Irish was a faux Irish bar just minutes away from Cola Industries. On the rare occasions that we went out drinking after work, O'Irish was usually the place we'd go. They had a generous happy hour which included a free buffet of greasy fried food, attractive bartenders, and, perhaps most importantly, extremely comfortable bar stools. I beat Paul there on account of having rudely cut him off on the way out of the parking lot. I wasn't usually such an aggressive

driver, but man, I really wanted that drink. He pulled up next to me, still shaking his fist out the window.

"You must have a lot of pent up anger to be shaking your fist for that long," I said as we walked to the door.

Paul looked at his right hand, still shaking in the air. "Oh, I forgot I was doing that. Sometimes it gets stuck." He lowered his arm.

"You should get that looked at." I held the door open for him. "After you, sir."

We walked into O'rish, which was crowded for being so early on a Friday. The tables surrounding the bar were all full, many with Cola Industries employees to whom we nodded and waved as we squeezed past. The bar was plenty busy as well, but we managed to snag two stools just as a young couple was leaving.

"We were waiting for those chairs," said a vaguely familiar looking 20-something to my right. He and his buddy moved closer to me than I felt was socially acceptable. I sized him up, figured I could probably take him so long as Paul took care of his friend. I was a lover, and not a fighter, and also, most of the time, not a lover. Usually it took three or four drinks before I started thinking about how awesome it would be to get into a fight, but I'd had a hell of a day, and I wasn't above doing things out of their usual order.

"Oh, sorry," I said. Paul started to rise, but I put a hand on his shoulder, pressed him back down into the stool. "Hey, don't I know you from somewhere?"

The guy studied my face. "I don't know."

"I swear I've seen you before," I said, stroking my chin. I had no beard at the time, but it was useful as a thinking aid nonetheless. I snapped my fingers. "I've got it! You work for PackCo, don't you?" PackCo was a box company in the same industrial park as Cola.

"Yeah," the guy said. "How'd you know?"

"We," I indicated Paul and myself, "work for Cola Industries. And we are big fans of your boxes. Not too heavy, not too light. Great sizes. Easy closure. Just fine, fine boxes all around."

"Bully for you. I said my friend and I were waiting for those chairs."

"He said 'bully,' Art," Paul said, his voice full of awe. *Ironic* awe. "Did you hear that? He actually said 'bully for you.'"

"I heard him, Paul." I turned back to the PackCo employee. "Say, do you remember that wicked kickball tournament last month?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Yeah, see, do you remember how Cola kicked PackCo's ass?"

"I don't see what this has to do with those chairs."

"Well, we won the Cranbury Cup. You remember that, right? Yeah. And the winner of the Cranbury Cup automatically gets priority seating at O'rish. It says so right on the trophy."

"I don't remember hearing that," the guy said.

"Oh, it's true," Paul affirmed. "It's tradition. Goes back twenty years." Never mind the fact that Paddy O'rish opened 18 months ago.

"Sounds like bullshit to me," the guy's friend said.

Just then, Stella, O'rish's friendliest and most attractive (yes, I asked her out; yes, she said no; yes, I explained it away by telling myself that I didn't want to go out with her in the first place) bartender approached and said, "Hello, boys, what can I get you?"

"Stella, could you explain to these gentlemen here about how the winner of the Cranbury Cup gets first choice of seating here?"

Stella looked at me, and then at the two gentlemen in question. "Oh yes," she said, "it's a long-standing tradition. Goes back twenty-five years."

Disheartened, the two PackCo employees retreated to the other side of the bar. Paul and I ordered Yeunglings and drank them in comfort and style.

"That, my friend," I said, "is why I always tip my bartender generously."

"Do you really think their boxes are so great?" Paul asked.

"They're not bad, actually. I moved here using PackCo boxes exclusively. I wonder if I could get sponsored."

"Probably not now that you denied some of their top level executives seating in a crowded bar."

"Those guys are bigwigs?" I asked. "You're kidding, right?"

"The wingman is at least. You just bullshitted the PackCo CFO."

"No fucking way!" I exclaimed, looking across the bar at the two guys. They were standing awkwardly between the kitchen door and a potted plant. "He doesn't look like he's a day over 12."

"Some sort of child prodigy," Paul said.

"I'm serious. Is he even old enough to drink? Hey Stella!" I called, leaning forward in my stool. "Did you card those guys?"

Stella looked to see who I was talking about, then turned back to me, a cross look on her face. "Don't press your luck, Art." She was beautiful when she was totally sick of my shit. Most women are. That's probably why I'm so frustrating all the time. I just can't resist a woman who's completely fed up with my annoying quirks.

"You might want to keep a low profile, Art," Paul suggested.

I sat back in the chair. "And why would I want to do that?" I asked.

Paul pointed. "Kelly's here. With Cheryl. And Tammy."

I looked over. "PD, IT, and HR all at the same table? What are the odds?"

"I don't know, but I do know that they've been looking over here a lot."

"They can't get enough of me."

"That's probably it," Paul said. "Or else they're plotting to kill you."

"That does seem much more likely," I admitted. "Still, either way, it's nice to be thought of. Maybe I should go say hello."

"Are you kidding me? Haven't *you* had enough of *them*?"

"Oh, Paul, I love all women. Even them. Besides, Paddy O'Irish is sacred ground. It's sanctuary. Like in *Highlander*. You can't harm each other in a church. This is our church." I stroked my beer bottle lovingly. "And this is our God."

Paul rolled his eyes, normally a gesture and expression that we reserved for the women of Cola (and the men as well, I suppose, but there were fewer of them, most of whom we didn't interact with, and none of whom we'd want to see in a Women of Cola calendar.) Sometimes, however, it was necessary for one of us to put the other in his place, keep each other honest, or at least keep each other from becoming a total fucking idiot.

"Sorry," I said.

"No worries. Look, while it would be nice to think that what happens at Cola stays at Cola, and that their anger at you doesn't carry over to the real world, but we're not in some fantasy land where everything is black and white and neatly compartmentalized."

"We're not?"

"As much as you might like us to be, no, we're not."

"Well that just fucks everything up for me, doesn't it?"

"Possibly," Paul said. "But it's possible that it makes everything better as well."

"How's that?"

"No idea. But, it's better that you know now, before you do something stupid like.... Where are you going?"

I had risen from my chair and was walking over to the table where the three ladies sat. Their conversation ceased and they watched my approach with interest. Kelly wore a dark expression on her face, but really, what could she do to me? We were in public, or at least, if Paddy O'Irish didn't exactly count as being "in public" it was as in public as we ever got.

"Ladies," I said, smiling. I lifted my beer in a toast. "Cheers and good evening to you all."

The three made vague presence-acknowledging noises.

"So," I said.

Silence.

"Uhhh," I continued

Silence.

"Well," I concluded.

Awkward silence.

"Am I interrupting something?" I asked.

Tammy cleared her throat. "Art, could you excuse us? We were having a...conversation."

"I noticed. It looked...intense."

"It was. Would you mind leaving us to it?" Cheryl asked.

"I couldn't help but feel that it had something to do with me, so I thought I'd weigh in."

Kelly tried a different approach: "Arthur. Fuck off on out of here."

"Whoa whoa whoa!" I exclaimed. "That is uncalled for, Kelly, though I must admit I really like your spirit. Always have. Respect. That's what I have for you."

"Stop talking. Stop spouting bullshit. We have to hear that enough at the office, we don't need to hear it after work."

"Well, Kelly," I said sadly, "if that's how you really feel, I have but one option."

"To leave?" asked Tammy.

"What's that, Tammy?" I asked. I spoke just loud enough to be heard clearly over the noise of the room. "No, I don't think I'd like to go sailing with you, but I appreciate you asking."

"What?"

"What are you talking about?" Cheryl asked. She didn't--"

"Damn it, Cheryl, if you had only bought me that digital planetarium, I would know for sure how much top notch technology at prices geared for educators really means to you."

"Seriously, Arthur, if you don't go right now, I'll have you kicked out."

"Kelly," I continued loudly, "even if you are pregnant, there's just no way that it's mine. The math doesn't add up."

Kelly was out of her chair faster than I thought was humanly possible. Her hands flew towards my throat. I instinctively jumped back, but she was a woman on a mission. She was just about to wrap her hands around my neck when, fortunately for me, Paul stepped in between us. He managed to separate Kelly from me and make her take a few steps back.

"Come on, Kelly," he said, using the voice I recognized as the one he used to defuse potential explosive situations at home. "You know he was just messing about."

Kelly was still seeing red and was not hearing a word Paul said. "That fucking asshole."

Paul persisted. "Kelly. It's Arthur. He does this. He can't help it."

"It's true!" I offered. "I can't!"

Paul waved me off. "Go sit down," he ordered. But his parental voice didn't work on me. I wanted to watch.

Kelly did seem calmer. Her voice was so quiet that I could barely hear her when she said, "I'm going to kill him."

She sounded serious. I almost believed that she had it in her.

"Kelly, he's not worth it," Paul said. "Come on."

Somehow, that had the desired effect. Kelly cast one more glare in my direction and then returned to her chair. It wasn't until everyone started talking again that I realized that the crowd at the bar had gone silent as soon as Kelly had erupted. Now the world around us resumed. Paul put a firm hand on my shoulder and lead us back to our stools.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to get fired. Or killed," he said.

"Did you mean it?" I asked.

"Mean what?"

"When you said that I wasn't worth it. You don't think I'm not worth it, do you?"

Paul slapped his forehead. "You're kidding, right?"

I shrugged. "Of course I'm... kinda ...kidding."

"Good God. Okay, I think it'd totally be worth it if Kelly killed you. Is that better?"

I smiled. "Much. You've made me the happiest boy in all the world."

Paul finished his beer. I had been trying to flag down Stella since I'd sat down again. She was actively ignoring me. Paul had better luck. He ordered two beers. Stella shot me a dirty look. I'd been getting a lot of those lately.

"Say, Stella?" I asked sweetly.

"What is it?" she snarled.

"I'm uh, really sorry about all that. I didn't mean to cause any kind of disruption--"

"Yet somehow, you always do."

"I know. It's strange. I think it's a chemical imbalance or something."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Yeah. Anyway. Could I buy a round of drinks for those ladies over there?"

Stella looked over at the table. The trio was gathering their things. "I think they're done drinking, Arthur."

Tammy, Cheryl and Kelly made their way out of Paddy O'Irish. I opened my mouth to call out to them but Paul punched me in the shoulder before I could say anything. "Can it, Art. You're not allowed to talk anymore."

"Well, that's no fun," I complained. But, it was fair.

It wasn't long before the bar emptied out. Most of the happy hour patrons had families to slink home to, or dates to get ready for, or mass murders to plan. By 6:30PM, only a handful of people remained; the lost, the lonely, and Paul. He'd been having a conversation with two women sitting to his left, giving me the cold shoulder. I'd kept to his instructions, not saying a word for a half hour. I sat silently, pretending to sulk, trying to garner sympathy from Stella, or really, anybody who was willing to show me some. None was forthcoming. I wasn't surprised.

Finally, I grew tired of sitting by myself with nobody to talk to. I tapped Paul on the shoulder.

He turned towards me. "What is it?"

"I'm gonna go."

"No, sir. You are not. You are going to sit right there and think about what you've done." Paul was using a parental voice again. This one was more effective. I stuck my lower lip out further, strengthening my pout. I tried to puppy-dog my eyes, but I had never been very good at that. Paul ordered us more beer.

"This is boring, Paul!" I whined. I leaned back to get a glimpse of the two women he'd been talking with. They were attractive. They looked like they must be from Philadelphia. "Can't I at least talk to the ladies?"

"No, Arthur, you can't. You're not even allowed to talk to me right now. This is going against the rules. Is highly irregular. Doesn't make any sense."

"Paul? Seriously? I'm sorry. I won't be bad anymore. I didn't mean to.... Well, I kinda meant to. I always kinda mean to. But I won't mean to. I won't. I won't be bad. I won't make it worse. I won't do a thing."

"That's right, you won't do a thing. You'll just sit there, drink your beer, and be quiet."

I folded my arms across my chest and lowered my head, full on sulking mode.

"What's with your friend?" one of the women asked.

"He's been misbehaving," Paul explained. "He's in a time out."

"What did he do?" the other woman asked.

"He let his inflated sense of self and his love of the absurd and non-sequitir get the better of him. He also seems to have lost his sense of self-preservation. I'm hoping some time to think about what he's done will do him some good." Paul paused, and then said in a sad voice, "Frankly, I think he might be beyond my help."

"That's terrible!" the first woman said. She leaned around Paul and patted my arm. "You're lucky to have such a good friend to take care of you."

I opened my mouth to speak, but Paul stopped me with a look. I nodded instead.

The evening wore on, and without anything else to do -- Paul wouldn't even let me read the newspaper -- I got drunk. In between beers, I snacked on the cooling mozzarella sticks and chicken wings that made up the free buffet. It was 9 o'clock when Paul finally decided to call it a night.

"I'm sorry I had to be so strict with you, Art," he said. "You know I normally enjoy nothing more than having a drink and a conversation with you. I just figured that it would do you right to experience a few hours of silence."

I looked at Paul plaintively, asked him a question with my eyes, my palms turned

upwards, my shoulders shrugged.

"Yes," he replied, "you may talk now."

I exhaled loudly, felt like I'd been holding my breath the whole time. "Fucking hell, Paul. That was brutal."

"I realized I might have been a bit too tough on you," he admitted. "But if I've learned one thing, it's that it's deadly to back down once you've handed out a punishment. Makes you look weak. Can't afford to look weak."

"Seriously, I know how to be quiet. I live alone. I go days without talking to anybody."

Paul considered this. "Maybe that's the problem. Everything's pent up inside you and when you're around other people, you have to let it all out. You need to learn how to be quiet in public."

I rolled my eyes. It felt weird to do it at him.

"What have we learned?" he asked.

"Yeah yeah. Sometimes it's better to just keep your mouth shut."

"Not everybody appreciates the Arthur Traum sense of humor."

"You do though," I said. "You *love* it."

Paul sighed. "Like Tina loved Ike."

We headed outside, into the night and parted ways at our cars.

"See you Sunday?" Paul asked. He was planning a barbecue for Sunday and his wife had promised that some of her few remaining single friends would be there. The idea of a set up excited and frightened and terrified me. It was an amazing opportunity, rife with possibility, but somehow juvenile, unattractive. I had agreed to go, to give it a shot, to *make the effort*.

"And be on your best behavior," Paul reminded me.

"You know, I'm not *a/ways* an asshole," I protested.

"Be on your best behavior," he repeated.

"Alright, alright. I'll leave the clown shoes and the taser at home," I said. "But your kids are going to be sorely disappointed."

"They'll get over it," Paul said. "It'll be nice for them to see Uncle Arthur behaving like an adult for once."

"They call me Uncle Arthur?" I asked, shocked. "They don't call me Uncle Arthur."

Paul sighed, caught himself, like he'd let something slip he hadn't wanted to. "No, man, it's just a figure of speech."

My eyes widened with realization. "They *do* call me Uncle Arthur. Holy shit!" Impulsively, I threw my arms around Paul. "This is the greatest thing ever!"

"Yeah yeah," Paul said, escaping from the hug. "Hooray for you, my kids think you're the 'shinle', or whatever it is they say these days."

"It's shizzle."

"Shinle, shizzle, what's the difference? They're all ridiculous words. Everything they say is gibberish, what's it matter if I can accurately reproduce it or not? Look, just do me a favor and don't tell my brother about this, alright? They don't even call *him* uncle. It's either 'Steve' or 'Buttface.'"

"I wonder where they learned that," I said, suppressing a grin.

"Yeah, where could that have come from?"

"A mystery for the ages. Best not think about it too hard, might lead you down some dark and twisty roads you don't want to travel."

"I'll keep that in mind. Anyhow. Sunday. Barbecue. Bring something. Salad. Steak. Whatever."

"Yeah yeah, I'm on it. I'll be there. I'll be good."

Paul got in his car, drove off. I stood, watching him, opened the door to my car, was about to get in when I heard a noise from across the lot.

Paddy O'Irish took up a small square of land southeast of Cola Industries. The bar itself sat on the north edge of the plot, with the parking lot just south of the front door of the building. The bar and the lot sat at the east end of a large stand of trees. I'd never thought about it before, but standing there, that night, I put two and two together, realized that the sum I'd arrived at was that that stand of trees was the very eastern edge of the Scott's Corner Woods. I was still getting used to the idea that there could be that much undeveloped country in the world, especially in the east. Hadn't we moved west, ripped natives from their land, conquered the wild, manifested our destiny (or was it that our destiny manifested us?) all because we had run out of room out here? And yet here, all around me, was untouched land, undiscovered country.

The noise was faint, barely audible over the sound cars driving on Route 130 at my back. But I heard it again, and realized it came from the woods. And normally, I wouldn't pay heed to a noise coming from a forest; forests make noises. Regardless of whether anyone's around to hear them or not, trees fall, birds chirp, animals howl. Even the long, slow process of a plant growing is noisy, creaking, groaning, stretching towards the sun. But this noise was different, deliberate, a click, a whisper, a summons. I took two steps across the lot towards the woods, and suddenly felt the alcohol catch up with me, staggered, steadied myself on the trunk of my car, deep breaths. The noise came again. I gathered my wits, my strength, most importantly, my balance. Surveyed the empty space in front of me, the lot almost empty now, nothing between me and the woods but a lamp post and faded white lines painted on the pavement. I took another deep breath and left the safety and support of the car, the first two strides strong and sure, but once again my balance left me, my legs trying to go in two different directions, I somehow managed to lurch to the lamp post, leaned heavily against its concrete base.

"Well, I definitely shouldn't be driving," I said to the lamp with a comical shrug. "That would be bad." Fortunately, the lamp didn't respond, even in my drunken state, I knew that would be a sign of more bad things to come. I leaned against it, once again gathering the troops for another assault on the woods. The noise kept coming, slightly louder now, more insistent. It was a tapping, a siren, a steady breeze, white noise, black noise. Calling to me. Drawing me to it. And there I went.

I went more carefully, rightly figuring that slow but steady would win this race. I made it to the edge of the woods, the toes of my shoes just kissing the dirt where it met the pavement of the lot. The noise, loud now, drowning out the cars, a gunshot, a coyote, a promise, a nightmare. I took a tentative step between two trees, looking up, they towered above, blocking out the sky.

My eyes forward, struggling to make out more than shapes in inky blackness, I shouldered my way past tree trunks, through the undergrowth, there were no paths here, just trees, growing too close to each other, struggling to suck up enough resources from the soil, like

a reservation, as if trees too had been forced from their land, uprooted, made to move, a trail of tears and leaves, crammed into smaller and smaller plots, truces broken, treaties ignored.

My mind racing, now the thoughts in my head generating enough volume of their own to drown out the noise that brought me there, I stopped, pausing against a tree, waiting, looking for some reason that I had come into the woods at all.

And slowly, my eyes adjusted, and what had seemed to be leaves gently moving in the wind -- and there was no wind, the night was still, serene, except inside my head -- were them, were they.

The cicadas, up close, like this, my worst fears. My hand, supporting my weight against the tree, now covered with the insects. They were everywhere, crawling calmly up my hand, between sleeve and skin. I felt them on my legs, into my pants. They dropped from branches above onto my head. It was an episode of Fear Factor, a nightmare, a horror film.

Somehow, I remained calm. Strangely calm. Acutely aware of a cicada crawling across my face, joined by more, the feeling of its legs, its feet skittering over my eye should have been enough to send me into a frenzy. Somewhere in my brain, panic was fighting to take over, but it was the lesser emotion, it was fighting against an unknown source of calm, the calm was winning and I wasn't even trying.

I was covered in bugs. An observer might have seen my clothes rippling, my face in constant motion. An observer would have probably fled in terror. If I could have somehow seen myself, I would have likely fled in terror.

And then, somehow, they started invading my mouth, shut tight as it was, my ears, my nose, squiggling and squirming inside my body, making beelines for my brain, chewing along the way, eating as they went. Still, somehow, I remained stock still, unable to move perhaps, but not wanting to move. I was more scared of my lack of fear than anything else.

It wasn't until they started whispering my name that I screamed.

And came to, thrashing wildly, lashing out, eyes wide open but not seeing for a moment, spitting, trying to get rid of the cicadas in my mouth, but there were no cicadas in my mouth, just Stella, standing back, looking horrified, probably sorry she stopped to try to help me, but saying my name quietly, repeatedly. I finally recognized her, tried a weak smile. I was slumped against the side of my car. Groggy, confused, cloudy, but conscious. I sat there, letting my head clear. Sudden panic, I brushed at my arms, my neck, but I was clean, clear of cicadas. I shuddered at the memory, the fear and confusion I should have been feeling during the attack now washing across me, scrambling back tight against the car door, as it came back to me. I took deep breaths -- so important, breathing -- steadied myself, steeled myself, prepared myself, stood up.

"Arthur?" Stella asked. "Are you alright?"

"I. I'm okay. I think." My voice sounded strange, like it was coming from someone else, like it was coming from a million miles away. But it was no lie. I felt fine. Not drunk, not even tipsy. Just confused. A pretty constant state of being for me anyhow. Not drunk but confused. I was used to it. I looked at my watch: 10:30. Fuck. What time had it been when we left the bar? 8:30? 9? I had no idea. No concept of time.

"How long ago did Paul and I leave?"

"I don't know," she said. "Like 2 hours maybe? Have you been out here all this time?"

"I guess so," I said. I wasn't sure.

She still kept her distance, but her hands held out, ready to catch me if I were to stumble, and just that slight gesture almost made me cry, as horrible as I was, she still wouldn't let me fall.

"What happened?"

"I must have...passed out? Fallen asleep?"

"Jesus. I overserved you again."

"No, no," I protested. "Well, maybe."

"I'm going to call you a cab."

"Actually, I'm fine now." I walked, slightly unsteady at first, my legs numb from having been tucked underneath me, awkward. I stamped feeling back into them and took confident strides across the lot, but not too far, not daring to get close to the edge of the woods. I looked back at Stella for approval. She had her hands out still, a look of confusion -- or was it revulsion? -- on her face. "Yeah, I think I'm okay to drive."

"You think? That's not good enough."

I walked back to my car. "Stella, I'm many things. An idiot, a scoundrel, a rogue, an asshole. But I'm no drunk driver. Trust me on this."

"I don't know," she said. I wanted to think that her worry came from concern about my well-being but reason dictated that it was due to fear of losing her job and the lawsuits that would result from my wrapping my car around a telephone pole.

"Ok, look, I don't do this for anyone, but desperate times call for desperate measures."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Stand back." It was a superfluous statement. She was already standing back, keeping a safe distance between us. I went into my routine -- a ridiculous song and dance that I will not describe here. Suffice it to say that while I made a complete and utter fool of myself, the song and dance required an incredible amount of physical dexterity and concentration, none of which I would have possessed were I the slightest bit intoxicated.

When I finished, the look on Stella's face had not changed -- she was still just as incredulous, baffled, and disgusted by me as before. I shrugged, asked her if she thought I was okay to drive.

"I guess you must be, though I can't believe anybody would do what you just did if they weren't totally bombed. You must be desperate to get home."

"You have no idea."

I waved to Stella as I drove off, the distraction causing me to misjudge the turn onto 130, drive over the curb, skid over grass, and then lay some rubber when I finally hit pavement. I hoped she wasn't regretting her decision to let me drive, and, more importantly, that she wasn't calling the cops. Paul was going to be pissed that we could no longer go back to O'Irish -- there was no way I was going to show my face there again after that performance -- but he'd get over it. There were plenty of crappy bars for us to choose from in the area. Most of them weren't crawling with Cola employees, too, so as far as I was concerned, it was about time we'd changed venues anyhow.

Despite my insistence that I was alright to drive, I took it slow, turning off the highway at

the first opportunity. I didn't know how I'd sobered up so quickly and I didn't exactly trust it, so I figured better safe than sorry, and there was nothing safer in New Jersey than the dark, quiet side streets.

This road, like Scott's Corner, skirted the edge of Scott's Corner Woods, riding the southern border of the forest. I tried to keep my eyes forward, on the road, but I was drawn to look at those damn trees. The forest seemed normal. Of course it did. It had no reason not to. Everything was normal except in my head, and it seemed that now, everything in my head was normal too. But still, driving alongside the woods made me nervous. I turned left at the next intersection, a road I had never driven on before. This could be a dangerous proposition with these winding, looping back roads. I was used to relying on knowing where Lake Michigan was for my internal navigation system to work, but in Jersey, I didn't really have anything except for the highways and some landmarks. Every journey out of my usual area of operations necessitated a lengthy consultation with MapQuest and all routes were strictly adhered to for fear of ending up in the middle of God-knows-where. Once, I thought I'd take a shortcut while driving to a strip mall and ended up wasting the entire day just circling back to where I'd started from. Though that was the last thing I needed at the moment -- I just needed to get to my apartment, to my bed, to the only thing that passed for a safe haven for me -- the need to get away from those woods even though I knew there was nothing in there, and the only thing that would do me any good to run away from was my own head.

The road I was on twisted. Turned. Doubled back on itself. Became a cruel joke of a road designed years ago by city planners who had waited all this time for me to arrive and take it, my desperation providing them with unceasing joy and amusement. I hated being the butt of a joke, but being the butt of a joke played who knows how long before, by some pencil pushing city planner, or whoever had put together this God awful street, well, that really pissed me off.

And, fuck, I was well and truly lost. Again. And again. A constant state of being for me. Again. And no worries, just lost. No worries, not chased, not a million miles from civilization, not desperate (well, somewhat desperate,) not running out of gas, or running out of water, or running out of time. Just lost.

The lights ahead, the lights of a busier road, gave me a brief surge of hope, but then I remember that it didn't mean anything, that without a grid, without a plan, it probably wouldn't help me at all, I didn't recognize the street name, I turned onto it anyway.

And thought to myself, No worries, just lost. No worries just lost. And drove. Calmly. Until the migraine hit.

The headache was alive, was wet and liquid and slimy, oozing around on top of my skull, between skin and bone, over one eye, then the other, tears flowing freely from my right eye, salt sting causing me to squint. The pain throbbed in my ear, silent, but speaking to me in ways I couldn't have ever hoped to understand. Telling me things I shouldn't know about myself like, "You are weak," and "It would not take much effort at all for me to kill you." I was at its mercy, and the headache, it knew it, could taste my submission, I gave up everything I had, everything I was for it, and still it pressed on, bending my neck, forcing my head into my hands, my fingers massaging my temples, tracing patterns that in other situations could summon Gods or cast spells. Past my neck and into my stomach, causing nausea that would never cease, would

never lead to the disgusting but ultimately relieving act of vomiting, would just settle in my stomach, throbbing like my head, throbbing until I wish I had more hands, or someone else, somewhere to comfort, to hold, to massage, to touch all the places that needed touching, needed soothing.

My head was on fire. There were explosions in my brain, bright sunbursts in my vision. I felt unsure that I could finish the short drive home. My fingertips were tingling, my feet numb and asleep, I could barely feel the gas pedal. The world had returned to normal everywhere except in my head. The streets that were desolate that morning were filled with cars, each one piloted by a driver that I was convinced was trying to kill me, couldn't they see that I was under duress? That I was singularly incapable of safely navigating my vehicle? Why did they keep going?

A brief cessation of my brain's hostilities allowed me the clarity to realize that I was the problem, some train of thought lead from blaming the world to blaming me. A light bulb appeared over my head, cartoonishly bright, and then its light flared up to a level of intensity that transformed it from a symbol of inspiration into an object to be feared. The bulb exploded, showering me with sparks and flame, pressure building up further, making me dizzy. But the inspiration remained: I should stop the car. I pulled over to the side of the road.

The shoulder was narrow, barely wide enough to fit my car before it sloped off into a drainage ditch, spread out to a field, a field that was empty now, but would soon be ready for planting, or, hell, I'm no farmer, maybe it was already planted. It was dark. I couldn't tell. I kept my eyes squeezed shut anyway.

My breath came short and sharp. I concentrated on it. Tried to draw it out. Breathe. Deeper. Good. I turned off the car, sat, once again with my hands on the wheel, at ten and two, drawing the golden ratio, feeling no comfort from it. Cars zipped past. It was 11:00, I registered the clock as I turned off the car, the numbers quickly losing meaning as they faded into the background of my mind, I lost all concepts time, lost even the concept of concepts. I had enough sense left to press the button for the hazard lights. The muted green arrows flashing on the dashboard were unobtrusive, but the repeated clicking noise became a tattoo in my head. My head screamed at me. I considered screaming back, decided against it. Opened my mouth to just say a calming word perhaps, screaming wouldn't help anything here, words of wisdom, a soothing voice, Paul's voice of reason. Nothing came out. My mouth dry and barren, I longed for a glass of water. I longed for a commute that didn't lead to me freaking out on the side of the road, gripping the steering wheel, questioning my sanity. Mostly, I longed for something to interrupt this pain: a punch in the head to give me new pain; a bullet in the head to end all pain.

My cell phone rang, the Motorhead "Ace of Spades" ring tone now the worst idea I've ever had. I managed to wrest the device from my pocket, but my hands were unsure what to do with it, the messages from my brain ("Answer it!"; "Shut it up!") travelling too slowly, my extremities relying too much on muscle memory that wasn't there, needing direction, guidance from a brain that was busy elsewhere. Fingers fumbled across buttons, found success somehow, the phone was silenced though its external display was still lit up, its bright artificial light stabbing into the back of my eyes. I tossed the phone towards the passenger seat, it bounced off the center console, a dull thud that sounded like a shotgun blast, and landed in parts unknown.

The headlights of passing cars flashed in my rear view mirror, intermittently lighting up the interior of my car, jabbing new fingers of pain each time. I twisted the mirror up so it would no

longer reflect cars behind me. Cars going the opposite way, some with their brights on, still lit up my car. Closing my eyes was no help, explosions of color leaked in through the corners, and shutting off my vision enhanced the sound, cars roaring past, covering my ears amplified the sound of blood rushing through my veins, my heart beating fast.

Impulsively, I threw open the car door. A pickup truck doing 60 down the narrow road veered into the oncoming lane to avoid it, its driver laying on the horn, punishing me in ways he could not possibly know. I collected enough sense and courage to look behind me before I exited the vehicle. As wonderful as it would have been to just end it all right there, I didn't feel like being pasted across the front of a passing SUV. I wasn't suicidal, I was just running out of options.

I pulled the door partway closed to allow a string of three passing cars go by, their engines painfully loud, the smell of the exhaust stinging my nose, seeming to fill my head further, destroying all the work I had done to control my breathing. I toughed it out. Waiting for them to pass. Slipped out the door, slammed it shut out of habit and immediately regretted it, the noise louder than anything I had heard. I left it behind.

I staggered around the car and towards the field, eyes half closed, the field pitch black, I stumbled down the sloping berm, through the ditch and clawed the dirt back up the other side. I had no aim, no goal, no plan. I figured I was half a mile from my apartment, but I felt like I was light years away from any sense of home. I stumbled awkwardly through neat rows of dirt, the field just recently plowed, I guessed.

No escaping the headlights, once beacons of light and civilization, now symbols of darkness and oppression, symbols of light and pain. The agony in my head drove me further onward, as if it knew what was best for me. As if there was something left in me that could take me off to safety, as if some sense of self-preservation still remained, as if there was anything still in me that would do me any good. There wasn't. I knew it. There hadn't been for ages, probably gone before I moved to New Jersey, definitely done with since then. I thought of home, of house, of my box, driven on towards it, and I stumbled, fell to my knees, knees in the dirt, arms raised up towards the sky, striking the most dramatic pose possible, even in the midst of all the agony, something in me left that needed to strike a tableau, to create an image that nobody would see, but to make the movie in my head live out in real life. Begging for a sign, begging for a reason, begging for something.

So that's when it started to rain, and I mean it really started to rain. Lightning flashed across the sky, jagged branches of blinding pain. Thunder crashed, louder than gunshots, louder than traffic, louder than God. And the rain itself, cold needles stabbing at my face, instantly soaking my hair, my clothes, shivering in the cold, dirt turning to mud, my knees sinking into the earth. I love the rain, I love the rain, I do, and I love the drama of the moment, I am laughing at the drama of the moment, I have my head thrown back, my eyes closed to the pounding rain, my mouth wide open to taste the rain, this brief shining moment, this glowing moment in my heart, this rain washing away, washing off, the soot and sin of the day, of the month, of this lifetime, like holy rain, and maybe I was making too much of the rain, maybe it was just making me wet, prone to catching pneumonia, ruining my clothes, making me think in hyperbole. I lowered my head, took a breath. The headache had subsided, even with rain pounding on my head, and the noise and the light, the pain had ebbed. I lowered my arms to my side. Shook my head at myself. Little victories mean so much. Make me forget the bigger picture issues. I was overjoyed, there

was relief, reprieve.

I struggled to my feet, turned to look for the flashing lights of my car's hazards. Strained to see through the driving rain. Now that I was ready to be part of society, the storm had finally brought the isolation I had been searching for. I remember thinking it was important to be careful what you wished for, took a step, my foot stuck in the mud, and I fell down, face forward, no attempt to break my fall.

And awoke to bright sunlight shining through a window. I was in bed. I was in my own bed, I realized, after the wave of disorientation passed. My own bed, my own home. I looked down to see that I was wearing -- assuming this was Saturday -- yesterday's clothes. They should have been coated with mud, still soaking wet, but they were clean and dry, as was I.

I raised myself up on my elbows, craned my neck to look out the window, saw my car parked just outside the building. It was a beautiful day. There were no signs of a storm passing through. The ground seemed dry, the sky was bright and clear. The ground was free of debris, the trees seemed untouched.

And I thought to myself, did I black out twice last night? And end up somewhere else without recollection of how I got there? Is this how the universe wants to play it now? As if I didn't have enough else to worry about. A stranger in the strangest land, just trying to get by and this is how you're going to treat me? I had brief thoughts of fighting back. Saying, "Ok, world, the gloves are off, no more mister nice guy, I'm not pulling any punches anymore." But what, really, could I do? How could I react? Wouldn't any rebellion on my part be futile at best? What would I attack? The universe was worse than any guerrilla terrorist with no country to attack, no bases to capture, no uniform to identify itself. There was literally nothing I could do. More than that, wouldn't declaring war on the world, the universe, fate, God, whatever, wouldn't that just risk the ire and wrath, if there were ire and wrath to risk? Wasn't my best bet just to grin and bear it? Sit back and shut up? Take it like a man? Most likely, undoubtedly.

But that didn't sit right with me. I knew I wasn't the best person, wasn't the best human being around, wasn't going to win any awards for humanitarian efforts, wouldn't ever be nominated. I didn't volunteer my time, I didn't donate to charities, didn't make much of an effort to recycle. I didn't even make much of an effort at the job where I was getting paid to make an effort. Furthermore, while it wasn't my goal to make other people's lives more difficult, I wouldn't blame anyone for looking at it that way.

All that aside, I knew I wasn't the worst person on the planet. I'd never killed anyone, never even hurt someone (on purpose.) Hadn't been in a fight. Hadn't stolen (from the poor) or cheated (at anything that mattered.) There were mass murderers who went free, dictators who lived in luxury, CEOs who robbed the pension plans of their employees and were never caught. I'd never, to my knowledge, ever ruined the life of someone else, deliberately or otherwise.

And yet there I was being punished, and though my beliefs didn't run that way, I felt like dropping to my knees and shouting, "Why, God? Why?" And maybe that was a little paranoid, and definitely that was a little martyrish, but I was beginning to feel like something or someone was out to get me.

Ever since I'd met Julie, I'd felt a little that way. We fell for each other right off the bat, too soon and too quickly. We hadn't gotten the chance to get to know each other at all before she

moved to New Jersey and I was faced with a choice of letting yet another thing slip away from me or doing something about it for once, making a choice, taking a stand, making the effort, making a change. And just to spite the cruel fates who put us together just to tear us apart, I'd done what nobody had thought I'd do. I set out, set off, on my own. And I'd fallen right into their clever trap.

And so I'd arrived, virtually penniless, relying on Julie's company's cafeteria for meals, relying on my parents for gas money, relying on Julie herself for any sort of entertainment or diversion. At first, she was happy to do it, and at first, I was happy to accept it, but it quickly grew stale for us both, and that's when resentment set in. Suddenly, she was all Sex and the City when all I could afford to be was Sanford & Son. I knew I was dragging her down, but I was firmly entrenched in the muck, and it was really fucking lonely down there, and I wanted some company.

But, if we're telling the truth, I was lonelier then than I was here, now, lying in my bed. Before, Julie and I were alone together, and that's the loneliest kind of lonely there is. Staring at each other in silence over plates of cafeteria food, each of us waiting for it to be late enough that she could go to bed and I could go back to my apartment, wallow in my homesickness, and distract myself with whatever media I had at hand. It was a shallow existence, and even the kick in the ass that came from her dumping me hadn't driven me to make it any more meaningful.

My phone rang. It was the house phone which I rarely used and just hadn't gotten around to cancelling. I debated ignoring it. My common practice was to let it go to voicemail which I would then delete without listening to. The only people that called me were creditors and I saw no point in talking to them. They wanted money. I didn't have any. What was there to discuss, really? But, it was Saturday -- I assumed -- and as determined and dogged as they were, they had yet to start calling me on their days off. I was sure it was only a matter of time before they did, but for the moment at least, weekends were safe.

I rolled out of bed, saw my shoes neatly lined up by the bedroom door, my jacket hung carefully over a chair, and realized that either I must have been completely wasted when I got home, or someone else had undressed me. If I had been conscious when I entered, my shoes would have been flung in two different directions, my jacket tossed on the couch in the living room.

On my feet, I was surprisingly steady. I looked down at the floor and felt none of that disorienting vertigo that usually comes with a hangover. The carpet felt soft and comforting between my toes. I wondered where my socks were.

The phone continued ringing and I idly thought how surprising it was that the noise wasn't driving pain into my skull. Even on my best days, being awoken by a ringing phone caused some amount of discomfort, or maybe it was just annoyance and paranoia. Either way, I was completely unaffected by the noise, just drawn by curiosity to the device.

I found my way into the dining room -- it wasn't so much of a room as the empty space between the kitchen and the living room. I had turned it into a mess of an office: desk, computer, chair, phone, boxes full of stuff I should have thrown away rather than cart halfway across the country. The phone rang again. I checked the caller ID: Paul. I picked up the handset and pressed the talk button.

"What's up, Paul?" I asked.

"Art," he said. I could hear exasperation and anger in his voice. "Where the hell are you?"

"I'm at home, Paul," I replied. "I don't want to be a dick, but you did kind of call me on my home number."

"Ha fucking ha," he said, unamused. I could hear what sounded like a party coming from his end of the line. "Why aren't you here?"

"I just woke up. Say, do you know how I got home last night? Shit got kinda weird."

"Last night? No. Why would I know how you got home last night? We didn't hang out last night."

"Sure we did. We went to O'rish, stayed there late, left around 9:30. I think. I mean I know you drove off without me, but I thought maybe. I don't know. Something happened to me."

"Art, that was Friday night."

"Yeah," I said, starting to get a little exasperated myself. "I know. Friday night. Last night. Whatever."

"Today's Sunday, dude." I could hear him sigh and shake his head and then silence. He was probably holding the phone away from his face. Exasperated. "What happened to you?"

"It's Sunday?" I asked. "Hold on a second."

I couldn't believe it. I'd never lost a day before. I swiped the computer mouse across the desk. The screen lit up. I moved the mouse pointer up to the upper right hand corner of the screen where the system clock lived. I clicked on it, and it displayed the day and date. It said it was Sunday too, but I still wasn't convinced.

"Art?" I heard Paul say.

"Yeah yeah. Hold on."

I put the phone down and looked around for my cell phone. It was where I always put it when I get home: on a bookcase just inside the door. Lying next to it, perfectly neatly, were my keys. I picked it up, pressed a button on the side illuminating the display. Sunday. Noon.

"Paul! I'll be *right* back," I called to the phone, not knowing whether he could hear me or not.

I unlocked the front door, pulled it open. Unexpectedly, it only opened six inches, snapped to a halt by the chain which I must have fastened last night. *Two nights ago*. It was starting to sink in.

I undid the chain, threw the door open and walked swiftly outside, down the stairs, to the sidewalk. It was a pleasant day and the concrete should have been warm under my feet, but I ran so fast towards the newspaper box by the main road, that I didn't register it. I skidded to a stop at the box, and peered inside. It was the Sunday fucking paper.

Breathing heavily, I jogged back to my apartment.

"Hell, Paul," I said, gasping for air. "You were right."

"You were checking to see if I was right?" Paul asked. "Jesus, Art. Did you actually think I might fuck up what day it was?"

"What? No, Paul, of course not. I don't think you're that incompetent. I just.... I dunno. I don't remember coming home last – Friday night. And either I slept all day and night yesterday, which seems unlikely, or I completely lost Saturday."

"Weird," Paul said, not sounding particularly concerned or sympathetic.

"It's more than weird, Paul," I complained. "It totally sucks. You know how much I love

Saturdays!”

“You do love your Saturdays,” Paul agreed.

I heard a female voice yelling in the background. It was unmistakably Paul’s wife, Paulette. No, I’m not kidding about that. You can’t make this stuff up. It was unfortunate, but the heart wants what the heart wants; you can’t choose your soul mate. They were definitely made for each other, right down to their names. If I ever met a girl named Arthurina, I’d want to get to know her because undoubtedly we were meant to be together.

“Paul! Get off the fucking phone! You’re supposed to be tending the fucking grill!”

“Hold on, Art,” Paul said. I could hear the noise of him lowering the phone and cupping the mouthpiece. “I’m fucking talking to Art, Goddamn it!” I could still hear him as clearly as if he were speaking directly into the phone. They yelled at each other like nobody’s business, but it was all out of love. “Get off my fucking back!”

Paulette’s response was not as clear. I could hear that she was yelling, but Paul’s hand did manage to muffle that.

“That’s what I’m fucking trying to do, Paulette!” was Paul’s reply. “That’s why I’m on the fucking phone with him!”

Again, Paulette’s muffled response.

“He knows to bring some beer!” Paul yelled. “You think he’s a fucking idiot? You think I’m a fucking idiot? You think I didn’t tell him to bring some beer? You think I didn’t tell him to bring some food? A dish to fucking pass? Like some fucking pasta salad?” Real quick, Paul was back: “Art, you’re going to bring some pasta salad, right?”

Before I could reply, he was gone again. “Yeah, he said he’s gonna bring some pasta salad. Now get off my back!” He brought the phone back to his face. “Sorry about that, Art.”

“No worries, Paul,” I said. “Tell Paulette I said hello.”

“Hey!” Paul yelled away from the phone. “Art says hi!”

Paulette’s response – “Hi, Art! Get your fucking ass over here!” – was clearly audible.

“She says for you to get your –” Paul said.

“Yeah, Paul, I heard her. In case you hadn’t noticed, your wife is loud as hell.”

“So what’s all this about losing your Saturday?”

“Shit, man, that means tomorrow’s Monday,” I sighed, realizing the implications. “I only get one day away from Cola?” I shuddered.

“What a drag,” Paul said. “But hey, look, you’d really better get your ass over here. You feeling alright?”

“What? Yeah. I feel great. Better than I have in a few days, actually.”

“I guess that’s one benefit of sleeping a day and a half, huh? Maybe you just really needed it.”

“Yeah, I guess. After Friday night, I must have. Dude, it was so crazy. After you left O’Irish, I was about to leave but I heard this noise coming from the woods –”

I was interrupted by another shriek from Paulette: “Paul, get the fuck off the fucking phone and come make a fucking hamburger for your fucking son!”

“Art, I really gotta go. Just come over here and we’ll talk, ok?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on my way.”

“Hey. Don’t forget to take a shower,” Paul said, and hung up.

"Don't forget to take a shower? Who the hell does he think I am? Stupid Paul telling me to take a stupid shower like I don't know if I need to take a shower or not."

I put on a clean shirt, and a pair of jeans. I didn't need to take a stupid shower. I didn't want to take a stupid shower. Stupid Paul and his stupid showers.

I left the apartment, threw on my sunglasses. I approached my car cautiously. It was a link to the past couple days and I felt wary as I opened the door. Nothing happened. Got in the car, started it. Everything fine. The radio came on, tuned to a local classic rock station. Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire Was Playing." Normally, I would have changed the station, all the while yelling, "This song is neither *classic*, nor *rock*!" I let it play as I drove to the liquor store across the street.

Maybe I wasn't clean enough – I was getting some funny looks from the other patrons in the store. I grabbed a 12 pack of Yuengling and a bottle of Ketel One for Paulette. I'd found that Paulette spoke three languages: English, Italian, and Vodka. Vodka was her preferred language for peace offerings.

At the counter, the owner of the store, Ali, gave me a concerned look. "Chief?" he said. He always called me Chief. It was cute. It made me feel at home. Aside from Paul, I sometimes thought of Ali as my only friend in the entire state.

"What's up, Ali?" I asked. "How's things?"

"Things are good, Chief. How are you?"

"I'm great," I said with a smile. "Never better."

"Are you sure?" Ali asked. He still hadn't begun to ring up my sale. A woman got in line behind me. I turned and looked at her. She was cute. I smiled.

"Oh. Uh. I," she stammered. She took two steps back, then turned and walked down an aisle. "I forgot to get some.... Stuff."

I turned back to Ali. "Everything cool?"

"Yeah, cool. If you say it's cool. It is. Cool." He was nervous; now punching numbers into the cash register as if his life depended on it.

"Slow down there, sailor," I said. "I'm not in a huge hurry here."

"Sure, slowly, slowly," Ali agreed.

What the hell was going on? I surreptitiously sniffed under my right arm. I smelled alright. I'd put on deodorant. I'm not an idiot. I turned and scanned the store. Was Ali trying to signal me about an armed robber? Was there someone behind the counter with a gun pointed at Ali's head while he tried to tip me off? It seemed unlikely.

"Ali?" I asked. "Are you sure everything's alright?"

"Yes, yes, of course," he said, visibly sweating now. "Everything's fine. Your total is \$47.39."

I gave him my debit card, completed the transaction, and took the bottle of vodka and the 12-pack. "Alright, Ali. Thanks a bunch. Have a nice Sunday, buddy."

"You too, Chief." He didn't sound like he meant it.

I left the store, placed the booze in the back seat, and got into my car. As I turned the key in the ignition, I could see the woman who had shied away from me approaching the counter. She and Ali were speaking closely, frantically, with occasional gestures in my direction. What

had them all excited? I couldn't possibly smell that bad. I took a glance in the rear view mirror. I didn't look all that bad, I thought. Hell, I'd slept for a day and a half, how bad could I look?

I drove across the parking lot to the grocery store. You might say that's laziness, but it was a big-ass parking lot, and I was in a hurry. I ran into the store, went straight to the deli counter and got a couple pounds of pasta salad. The man behind the counter asked me a couple times if I was alright. I assured him I was fine. What was the deal with everybody's concern? I was starting to worry about it myself. I felt fine. Hell, maybe Paul was right and I should have taken a shower.

It took me about 45 minutes to drive to Paul's house from mine. He lived in a nice neighborhood tucked away in a small town right around Jersey's midsection. Any further south and he would have been in the Pine Barrens, which are creepy and terrifying, what with the Jersey Devil and all the feral people that Mulder and Scully found there. Along the way, I passed through small towns and rural areas, the landscape changing rapidly from one to the other. I took Route 1 down to 295 and over to 195. The side of the road went from heavy forest to outlet mall and when I saw signs for Six Flags I turned off, headed through familiar territory towards his house. My eyes constantly scanned the trees, after just a couple days of paranoia, it had become habit to look for cicadas, to keep an eye out for trouble. I saw nothing unusual.

Paul's driveway was full of cars, as was the street in front of his house. I had thought this was going to be a relatively intimate gathering of a few friends, but apparently it had turned into something more. Multi-colored balloons tethered together and tied to the streetlight on his lawn, his mailbox, his car, and several other stable points announced a Pre-Summer Blowout. I certainly hadn't signed on for this. Paul knew I hated big parties, undoubtedly the reason he had led me to believe that this was just planned to be an excuse to bust out the grill, christen it for the season, get summer started right. His idea of getting the summer started right varied wildly from mine, it seemed.

I had to drive around to find a place to park my car, and that alone might have been enough of an excuse for me to turn around and go home, blow off the barbecue, spend the rest of the day working through the 12-pack of beer and the pasta salad. If I felt particularly motivated, I might even start in on the bottle of Ketel One. But, I had committed to it, had told him I'd be there, had driven all the way down, and had promised myself I'd make more of an effort. Life wasn't getting any more interesting the more time I spent on my couch and I had nobody to blame but myself. As annoying as it might be to go through with this, I had to view it as an opportunity to meet people, to get out there, to expand my incredibly limited horizons. I had been hermitted away for too long. The long winter, my knee jerk depression over Julie, my fully justified depression over being stuck in New Jersey and my natural isolationist attitude had all made it incredibly easy to shut myself off from the outside world. If I wasn't careful I would soon turn into a fully fledged, card-carrying agoraphobic. I decided to give it one more try. If I couldn't find a spot within 2 blocks of his house, then I'd know it wasn't meant to be.

Just as I was about to give up, and my mind got used to and started looking forward to the idea of spending the rest of the day inside, at home, drinking beer and eating junk food, a car pulled away from Paul's house. I cursed to myself as I slid into the spot and turned off the car. I took a couple deep breaths, and then got out. Grabbing the bags of booze and food, walked up to

the front steps.

As I approached, I noticed Paul's son, Corey sitting on the front porch, fully engrossed in his Nintendo DS. Corey and I got along great, the first kid I could say that about since I was an eight year old myself, and even then I didn't do so well with people that age. I've always been too nervous, too careful, and too quiet to deal with kids. It was only around adults and only recently that I was able to find a voice, ridiculous though it might be. Somehow I had found common ground with Corey. We both liked the same video games, the same comic books and the same television cartoons. He and I had bonded over a marathon session of Super Mario Kart. Even though he beat me every time, I still managed to earn his respect by making the races somewhat close. Ever since, he'd known that we were on pretty much the same level. He was a mature kid for his age and I had, more or less, the brain of a child. You throw in some common interests, a few games of Mortal Kombat and my complete inability to fool or lie to a child and it seemed that I had found a friend for life. It helped immensely that I didn't have to deal with any of the repercussions of disciplining or caring for a child. I, of course, left all that to Paul and Paulette. They were the experts, the ones who'd signed up for it. I always had trouble yelling at someone else's kids or dog. It just didn't seem right.

From the end of the sidewalk, I called out to the boy. "Hey, Corey! How's it going?"

Corey looked up from his Nintendo, saw me and let out a shriek. Oftentimes we would play games where I would chase him around the yard or around the house: Ghosts and Goblins or Ghouls and Gremlins or Run the Hell Away From Arthur or whatever. Corey would nervously laugh and scream as I pretended to run after him, letting him escape time and again before finally capturing him and, of course, tickling the bejesus out of him. He stood up, and without taking his eyes off of me, ran like he was running for his life. Usually there was some setup to the game, some instigation on his part, an opening move, an attack. I didn't remember him ever just taking off like that. I trotted for a couple steps before I remembered I was carrying a heavy load what with the beer and food and vodka.

"You go on ahead, Corey!" I called. "The Arthurasaurus will catch you later!"

I stopped to catch my breath. Between the couch and the cube, the bad diet and the booze, I was way out of shape. I'd never been much of an athlete but lately it had gotten pretty bad. Not so bad that I couldn't run around with the kid, but bad enough that accidentally jogging five steps while carrying 20 pounds of consumables was going to cause me to pant. I dropped the booze, bent over, and put my hands on my knees.

Paul came running around from the back of the house.

"Art?" he yelled. "What the fuck did you do to Corey?"

I looked up, confused. I started to talk, to explain that I had done nothing to the kid, that he was just playing around, but the expression on Paul's face when he saw me effectively cut me off. Paul stopped short, and held up his hands, a sign of submission, an attempt to placate an angry beast. His face was filled with concern, but there was fear creeping in at the edges.

"Art?" he asked, anger gone, voice trembling. "Is that you?"

I laughed. It came out choked and unsure, but I tried to exude confidence. Suddenly, things were falling down inside my head. Paul's reaction to the sight of me tipped them over, upended my sense of balance. Still, of course it was me.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked. I chuckled, as if to prove my point, but that

too came out wrong.

“Art....” Paul was keeping his distance. It was obvious that he was scared.

“Paul, what’s wrong? What’s...” Words were coming harder. “What’s wrong wrong? I’m Art wrong Paul what’s Paul?” And weirder.

“Jesus, Art, you really don’t look so good.”

“Buddy thanks for what the looking support good enough.”

Paulette’s voice echoed between the houses as she approached from the back yard.

“Paul! What the fuck is going on? Why is Corey curled up in a ball, refusing to come out?”

“Paulette,” Paul boomed, turning away from me to face her. “You stay in the back!”

“Like Hell I will,” she cried.

“I mean it, Paulette! Stay in the back!” Paul’s voice sounded unlike anything I had ever heard before. Commanding, unrelenting, unyielding. Paulette must have been similarly impressed because aside from a startled, “Huh!” she said nothing more. Paul turned back to me. I assumed Paulette had retreated to the back yard.

“Art, are you sure you’re not... dangerous?”

“Dungeruss? Why me dungarees?” It was getting harder and harder to match the words with my thoughts. My thoughts themselves were jumbled, messy, but not nearly as bad as the words I was choosing to express them. I felt tired. Exhausted, really. Like I could sleep another two days straight without thinking of waking up. My eyes watered. I fell to my knees.

Paul came quickly to my side. He leaned down and helped me back to my feet. He threw one of my arms around his shoulder and half-carried, half-dragged me into his house. Most of his guests were in the backyard, enjoying the swimming pool, eating food, playing badminton. Paul tried to get me upstairs, but I could see several people I recognized through the sliding doors that lead to the porch. I wrestled out of his grip and staggered down the hall, pinballing my way, disturbing family photographs that were hung on the walls.

“Trammel?” I asked, shock and fear superseding whatever ailment had laid waste to my speech and logic centers before, allowing me to at least get out one word, clearly and concisely. I turned back to Paul, holding myself up by the moulding around the entryway into the kitchen. He saw the question in my eyes, my raised eyebrows, the confusion on my face.

“Yeah, buddy,” he said. “I know, it kinda sucks. Word got round the office and pretty soon everybody was coming. Even Trammel.”

I turned back to look outside. Trammel was on Paul’s back deck, wearing an apron from our Lighthouse Living Decor series (#29873LLD), manning the grill. Steph was standing uncomfortably close, leaning against him, laughing at everything he said. I rolled my eyes in disgust. Trammel was known to be something of a ladies man, constantly hitting on every female that worked for him. Rumors abounded of his success with the women, and what impressionable, starry-eyed 20-something housewares company employee wouldn’t want to go to bed with the boss? One of the very few one-on-one interactions I had had with him had been outside the front door of the building. I was returning from lunch and had watched as Trammel smacked the ass of his PA as she went inside only to turn around and flirt shamelessly with a sales assistant. As I approached, Trammel had winked at me and said, “It’s good to be the king.”

Certainly it was. Who was I to deny that? When you’re ambitious and lucky enough to rise to the top of an empire, no matter what empire it is, you’ve got to take advantage of the

spoils, right? That it was a third-rate housewares producer in a nowhere town, making money by exploiting cheap Chinese labor and cheap American aesthetics was neither here nor there. The man owned his own company, his own multi-million dollar company and you had to hand it to him, he knew how to play it.

The part I hated, the part that made my skin crawl every day since then was that when Trammel winked and said what he said, I smiled and laughed and winked back and I had felt good about it. God help me, for a minute there I had felt flattered that Trammel had brought me into his confidence, had made a joke with me, had not chucked me on the shoulder, but had very nearly, very spiritually, might as well have chucked me on the shoulder as he passed me on his way to his cherry red Corvette. The feeling left quickly, left completely as he gunned his engine, peeled out of the lot, leaving for the day at one in the afternoon, I couldn't deny that it must be good, that it was undoubtedly good, and should be the goal of every man, to be the king, to be on top, to have the power. But I couldn't deny that I also felt dirty, that I needed a shower. I was ashamed that I had let him charm me, that I had let his power lead me on. And I had hated him ever since.

And then there he was, directing his charm at Steph, pretending to be an every man, pretending like he knew how to use a grill all his life, like he was like one of us, or like he could take on any task that any common man could do, and do it better, because he was that good, because he was the king. And Steph, goddamn her, she was falling for it. But I couldn't really blame her either. She basked in his attention, glowed from it, glowed like no woman had ever glowed around me. They were at the center of my vision, the edges hazy, blurry, indistinct, as if a spotlight was shining down on them, obscuring all else. My hand, planted against the wall, shaking, unable to support my weight, and I went to my knees again. All this in a matter of moments. Down on my knees, on the floor again. And I saw the other Cola employees in Paul's kitchen. Saw Kelly and Tammy and Cheryl standing there, standing there and staring at me, amusement, horror, disgust, all writ large upon their faces. They made no move to help me and the rage burnt, and burnt, and it bubbled inside me, I could feel it, throbbing through my veins, could feel it replacing my blood with its steam. And could feel Paul put his hands under my arms and pull me to my feet, drag me back down the hall, the urge to kick and yell, scream epithets, bloody murder, crazy shit, all suppressed by Paul, by Paul's voice, by Paul shushing me, whispering sweet nothings, using his calming powers, and I was silent, but the rage was still boiling, my mouth its usual exit point closed, the rage boiled.

He pulled me into the powder room, just inside the front door, sat me on the toilet, closed the bathroom door behind us. He knelt down in front of me, somehow managed to repress his own fear and revulsion, looked into my eyes, sat down, his back against the vanity, his knees up, arms wrapped around them, concern on his face.

I shook my head. Breathed. Let it out. Carefully: "I'm. Corey. So sorry."

Paul waved his hand in dismissal. "Don't worry about it. You didn't do anything."

I felt calmer in the dim room, alone with my friend, comforted, safe. Whatever was happening to me was happening, and I had a sudden acceptance, something I rarely felt. It wasn't often that I could just let things go, but somehow I was letting this go. I shook my head again, felt like maybe I was dislodging the cloud, the fuzz. I slapped my hands against my thighs, could barely feel the impact, but the motion itself was comforting. I did it again. Paul looked at me

quizzically. I shrugged.

"Don't know," I managed to say. I swallowed, my mouth sticky and dry. I could feel things at the edge of my brain, fighting to get into the calm center I'd constructed, tearing at the hastily built wall that was protecting what was left of my sanity. "Water?"

Paul reached up to the sink counter, pulled himself to his feet. "Of course," he said. He turned on the tap, filled a cup, handed it to me.

I drank greedily, dimly registering the cup as being part of the Saharan Safari Expedition Bathroom Set (#4958SAF.) The water felt inert somehow, heavy. I could barely swallow it. When I managed to, I coughed, spraying water at Paul's knees.

"Sorry," I said again. That word came easily at least. I'd been saying it all my life. It was permanently etched into my vocabulary.

Paul waved off my apology again, brushed at his knees. He leaned against the sink and crossed his arms across his chest. "What is happening to you, Art?"

I shook my head, shrugged. Nonverbal communication was easy, those motions too were etched in muscle memory. Ask me any question and I can answer with a shake and a shrug.

"I'm worried, buddy. I've never seen anything like this." Paul stopped, considering. "Probably shouldn't go to the hospital, they might start, I don't know, experimenting on you."

I managed a chuckle. Dry, forced, habitual. I didn't know if what Paul had said was funny, but I knew that under the circumstances, he would try to be, I figured a gambled laugh would be a safe bet. Anything to make it seem like I was still normal, or getting normal again, or something. I was desperate, had no plan, had no ideas, and had no way of effectively communicating, the shutoff between brain and tongue getting worse, my mouth hung open, working intermittently, opening, shutting, grunting noises, half words, syllables all I could manage to produce.

"Don't try to talk, Art," Paul said. He was staring at me, fear returning, my mess of a face must have been disgusting to look at. I felt for him on some level, at some place in my head or my heart, still capable of feeling something. Mostly I was numb, but there were places where things like compassion still managed to come through. It had to have been tough to sit there, put on a brave face, keep talking to me as if I wasn't a rapidly decaying hideous monster. God bless Paul, his friendship deeper than I deserved. I didn't blame him for looking scared, for letting the revulsion show through, the fact that he was there, the very act of just being there, that was way more than I would have managed had the roles been reversed. I don't know what I would have done but I wasn't ever very good in a crisis situation. I probably would have panicked, run for help, headed for the hills.

I wondered, somewhere in my head, how long he had been doing this for me. How much of his companionship had been him humoring me, him placating me, him putting up with me. Defending me to others, defending others from me. Trying to teach me, calm me, shut me the hell up. How much of a burden must I have been all this time, how much of a monster had I always been? Paul was my best and only friend in the state, and the fact that he had stuck with me, had taken me into his home, taken pity on me hadn't changed the fact that I was still a total asshole. I had provided some cheap childcare, sure, and probably some entertainment along the way, an amusing diversion once in a while, a way to pass the time. But if were taking accounts --

and I'm sure Paul wasn't doing that, for if he had, he'd have quit me long ago -- the bottom line was way out of balance. I knew that friendship wasn't about ledgers and payback but there had to be some balance, right? I often felt like a sponge, or a dead weight, or an albatross around the neck of anybody who made the mistake of letting me travel alongside them for any length of time.

How much longer could he keep it up? How much longer could I, in good conscience, keep being a dead weight on his life? And now, my conscience, it seemed, was fading. Or had I ever had one in the first place? It didn't matter. Paul was whispering to himself, no, he was talking to me, but it was quiet, far away, even though he was standing right there in the cramped room with me, I strained to hear him.

"Maybe you should lie down for a while," he was saying, his voice so quiet, barely audible, which I found soothing, I think I did anyway.

I nodded, and Paul helped me to my feet. He opened the powder room door and peered outside, looking both ways in the hall, making sure the coast was clear. I don't know why he was trying to be so discrete, but I appreciated it, I really did. I didn't want to see anyone else, didn't want to see the horror reflected in someone else's eyes, see my own face reflected in their fear.

The hallway was empty and Paul ushered me out into it. He helped me up the stairs, so difficult for me to navigate them I had to lean on his shoulder, hold tight to the banister the whole way up. I could hear loud conversations from the kitchen, squeals and shouts of children from outside, the chattering of -- no, I couldn't hear that, not then. But I could barely hear Paul, right next to me.

"We'll figure it all out, Art," he said. "It's all going to be okay."

"Think I'm potentialating funnily," I said. I'd meant to say I was finally living up to my potential. I thought that maybe I was. That maybe all along this was what I'd been meant to be, everything terrible I'd ever done, from the individual lives I'd ruined, or if thinking I'd ruined them was too egotistical, then the ones I'd made worse. Or annoying. Or whatever. All those lives I'd touched. All those people. All the dirty looks, the snide remarks, the backhanded compliments. The time I'd wasted. The tricks I'd played. Turning life into a game. Making everything fun. My lack of ambition, lack of drive, every sin I'd committed coming back upon me. "Sins revisited," I said.

Paul made a funny face, ignored me, continued up the stairs with me on his arm. We reached the top, Paul steered me to the left, towards the guest bedroom where I'd stayed plenty of times before. He seemed nervous now, looking over his shoulder. Nervous like someone was following us.

"We'll get you right as rain, buddy," he said. I nodded, gratefully, maybe, though I can't be sure if I was, if I felt that, if I believed him, or if I cared. I was getting used to being what I was becoming, to becoming what I should have always been.

Paul led me into the bedroom, left the light off, sat me down on the bed, went and lowered the blinds and drew the curtains across the windows. The room went mostly dark, a sliver or two of afternoon sun slanting through. He turned back to me, found me still sitting upright, right where he'd left me, unmoving, unblinking, unmoved. He lowered my head to the pillow, lifted my legs, slid them onto the bed. His touch was so gentle, I remember that thought penetrating, that thought getting through, that feeling being felt. He patted my head. I could see a crooked half smile on his face in the dim room.

"Try to get some rest," he said. "I know you just woke up. You slept all day yesterday too,

huh? Maybe you just need some more. Just get some rest. Just lie here, Art, and maybe when you wake up you'll feel a lot better. And I'll try to figure it all out. Don't worry."

And he leaned down, with his hand on the top of my head, and he leaned down and he kissed my forehead, and I remember thinking how many times I had seen him do that to his kids, to his son and daughter, in a darkened room, a sick child in the bed, his hand on the top of his or her head, leaning down to kiss their forehead before leaving them to get their rest. He had told me before that he felt so helpless, so useless when his children were sick, that it was the most painful feeling in the world to know that his kid was suffering and there was nothing he could do about it but make them comfortable as possible and kiss their foreheads and hope they knew that he loved them. And something turned in me, something very slight, a slight twist, something, and I knew the love Paul had for me, the pity he felt for me, the protectiveness, that he would make everything alright, that it would all be okay, and for a second I could feel the comforting coolness of his hand on my forehead and it seemed to penetrate through everything, spread through my body, quelling the fire, bringing everything back into focus and I opened my mouth to tell him that everything was going to be alright, that I was going to be fine, that I loved him and trusted him and knew that he could fix anything, and then it was gone, his hand was gone, the words were gone, the feeling was gone, and Paul walked away from the bed.

"You wear the sins of yourself on the plastic sleeves of the hearts of your mind in these days this troubled times with happiness so near far so close but over there, the reasons never being what reasons shouldn't be you wear the sins you *were* the sins, it's never registered, it never registered that what you did is what you do is what you are is who you are is how you wear your hair is how you wear your face." It came out in one unbroken stream, the words finding purchase on my tongue as easily as a mountain goat on a narrow ledge. I didn't know what they meant at the same time that I did, could feel exactly their meaning, and Paul stood there, listening, quizzical look on his face, unable to make sense of it, of my outburst, trying to decide, probably, if it was my usual gibberish or fever talk or something else entirely. He nodded once, as if it was all perfectly clear, and he left the room, shutting the door behind him.

I lay there, my eyes closed, and I wondered if I would ever sleep again. I wasn't tired, felt like I didn't even know what tired was, didn't remember ever having slept, wouldn't know how to do that if my life depended on it. I remembered bits of stories I'd told myself in the middle of the night, couldn't remember if they were dreams, or if they'd happened or if it was just more lies I'd told for my own amusement. I wasn't sure if it mattered.

Or maybe my eyes were open, open wide, seeing everything for the first time. Wouldn't that just be poetic and beautiful? Fitting? A resolution! What a wonderful turn of events it would be if finally, at long last, I had learned my lesson and as I lay there, realizing all that I had done, repenting within, vowing to make amends, to make everything right, to say "I'm sorry," and to actually mean it, to actually follow through on it, to actually make good, pay my dues, live up to my potential, accept responsibility. To become everything I'd been fighting against, to give it the old college try. To say "I'm sorry" to the world and have the world say, "Arthur, it was pretty touch and go there for a second, but we see that our tough love worked and that you've changed and you've become a better person and what's more, we forgive you." How wonderful it would be to be truly and completely forgiven.

And as I lay there, my eyes wide open, I thought I could feel tears leaking from my eyes,

running down my face, and I thought, maybe I am being revitalized, rejuvenated, reborn. Maybe I am becoming whole again, human again, just one man amongst many, but at least that, at least finally a man. New energy borne from hope flowed through me, lifting me up in bed. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, sprung to my feet, pushing off with my hands on the edge of the mattress, and for one brief, glorious moment, I stood, strong, firm, steady, sure. And then I stumbled forward, only avoiding crashing to the floor by catching the corner of an old desk with a flailing, outstretched hand. I regained my balance, fell towards the bathroom door and somehow got inside. My hands planted on the sink, shakily keeping me upright, I risked using one to turn on the light. Risked a look at my reflection and all the hope and all the enlightenment and every thought of a changed, improved, saved, reborn me all disappeared with that single glance.

Standing there, looking in the mirror, I was struck by how quickly a familiar face can become completely foreign. I'd always marveled by how quickly something or someone unknown can become familiar. You could know someone for a very long time, but never really know them at all, and then suddenly, after a night of drinking, a different kind of conversation, a kiss, their face is different, and you know their face differently, and you are attuned to expressions and their meanings in a way you had never known possible. It doesn't take much for that switch to be flipped. And now I realized it worked the other way as well. I studied my face intently. Its features, my features, the ones I'd known all my life, the ones I'd be able to recognize anywhere were nowhere to be found. Staring back at me was someone else, someone completely different. A monster, a devil, a demon. A zombie.

I used to be able to stand in front of a mirror and have entire conversations with my eyes, figure out exactly what was going on in my head, what had been buried, and what was bubbling just beneath the surface. I didn't need therapy, I didn't need analysis. I just needed my eyes. My eyes, once -- according to men and women, friends and lovers alike -- my best feature, striking, piercing, sharp and blue were now sunken, dead, dull. My eyes (along with my quick wit and sharp tongue, of course,) my best method of expression, now said nothing to me. They were silent. Dark. Shallow pools of vacant thoughts. Seemingly empty sockets made my face seem skeletal. Skin was drawn tight across hollow cheeks. My nose, once full and fleshy had lost its shape, sunken in. My jaw was slack, my mouth hung open. It seemed a natural expression of shock and dismay but I found that I felt neither of those things.

Indeed, as I observed all this, took stock of the changes, it was with an unnatural calm, the same calm I felt during my dream about being covered with cicadas in the woods. I was completely detached, like it was somebody else that was looking at the features of somebody else. I should have been terrified.

"I should be terrified," I whispered.

I reached out to turn on the faucet and came up short when I noticed my hands. If people thought my eyes were my best feature, my hands weren't far behind. Strong, safe, expressive, with long dexterous fingers, my hands could do no wrong. They were someone else's hands now. Somehow swollen and withered at the same time, the hands of a monster and an old crony. I fumbled with the faucet, learning how to use new fingers, they seemed far away, not numb, just someone else's. Somewhere else's. Somehow I managed to turn on the water, it came out fast and clear. I ran my hands under the stream, splashed some on my face, see if I

could clear my head, and I felt nothing. Intuitively I knew that the water was freezing cold, but did not feel the shock that I expected, the refreshment, the jolt. Felt nothing.

I turned the water to hot, waited until I saw steam rising from the bowl of the sink. Tentatively, I placed my hands under the water again, and still I felt nothing. I could vaguely sense that the water was running over my fingers, but wasn't sure if that was just because my eyes told me that it was. But there was no heat. I watched my fingers, pale, gnarled flesh going red. I held my hands under for a long time, transfixed by the site of my own flesh boiling before my eyes. Somewhere along the line, it struck me that perhaps this wasn't the best idea though I wasn't entirely sure where that feeling came from. It felt like a deeply buried instinct, some voice from some old self, some voice that didn't sound like mine, but might have sounded exactly like mine, it was hard to say anymore what was mine and what was not. I turned off the water.

I had to get home, get out of there before this got any worse. I wasn't sure if being at home would do me any good, but I knew for a fact that I couldn't face any of the people at the barbecue. I could no longer face Paul, tender and pure as his love might have been for me, I knew there were limits to what a man might do for another man, even if he considers him his brother, or his son. I was not Paul's child, and he was not my father, and however close we were, it wouldn't be long before he no longer recognized me, before he reacted like Corey had, screaming, running away, chased by a real monster this time, no longer a child's game. It was bad enough having the image of Corey's face twisted by fear and terror, so real, etched into what was left of my fading memory, the last thing I needed, the last thing I wanted, if there was anything left that I wanted, was for Paul to look at me the same way.

I wondered how difficult it would be for me to sneak out of his house. I didn't think it would be too much of a problem, and it didn't escape my notice that it was something of a good sign that discretion still mattered to me. Everybody seemed to be in the backyard, and the normal noises of the barbecue filtered up through the windows. The front door was at the bottom of the stairs and I doubted that anybody would be between me and my escape.

I slowly opened the bedroom door, scanning the hallway. It was empty. I stepped out, avoiding, by habit, the squeaky spots in the floor. I had snuck out of this room so many times when I was staying here, unable to sleep, wanting to play one more game of Mario Kart when everyone else in the house had gone to bed. I knew the floor like the back of my hand -- though I was rapidly losing familiarity with my extremities. I took three steps into the hall before I heard a quiet conversation to my right.

It was coming from Corey's room. The door was partly open. I hid in the corner of the wall and the door and looked in. Corey was in his bed and Paul was sitting at its side, holding his son, rocking him gently and stroking his forehead. Corey was crying quietly. Paul attempted to reassure him, whispering to him, telling him things would be alright. The tableau it created there was in stark contrast to the scene we must have presented before. I knew that Paul should be comforting his angels. He didn't need to waste time taking care of a demon. I took one last look in the room and escaped down the hall, and down the stairs.

At the foot of the stairs I was met by Tammy, Cheryl and Kelly, the three weird sisters, the furies, the fates. I imagined snakes wriggling through their hair, hissing and biting. The ladies stood in a semi-circle, blocking my exit, rubbing their hands together, cackling with glee. I didn't have the strength to deal with them, or the strength to turn around. Would it be so bad, I

wondered, to finally submit? I'd come so far. I'd gotten nowhere. Nowhere to go. I staggered forward to meet whatever awaited.

Surprisingly, they parted, and the snakes in their hair retracted, disappeared. They were not cackling, nor rubbing their hands together. They were no more or no less than three women from New Jersey who worked for a housewares company.

"Jesus, Arthur," Cheryl said as I passed. "You look like shit."

I nodded, felt for the front door.

"I mean really," said Tammy. "Are you sick? What are you doing here? I can't afford to get the flu right now."

I shrugged, struggling with the knob.

"Why don't you go home?" asked Kelly. "And stay there."

I figured I might do that. The door swung open. I stumbled outside.

The late afternoon air was thick, and that's all I remember. It felt like I was trying to walk through grease, or lard. My balance wasn't so good, so I was forced to lurch forward, crouched, keeping my center of gravity low.

I used to be normal, a real little boy, with, as I said, hopes and dreams and everything. Living in New Jersey, yes, and working in a dead end job, yes, but normal and real where it counts. And now, now I am this. Whatever this is. Whatever I am. Dying, expiring alone -- no, not alone, 10,000 of my closest insect friends are constantly with me -- in the haunted woods.

Can you imagine that I am taking the time to write this down? I find it hard to believe, and yet here I am, this notebook, which has seen better days, my other constant companion. It is water damaged, I have no way to protect it, nothing to shield it from the elements. Summer has been wet so far, as had been predicted. Hurricanes in the Gulf travel northward, waning, ebbing, but still strong by the time they reach us here in the woods, still great storms, lighting up the sky, destroying the silence, bending centuries-old trees with their winds. During these times, I huddle in whatever shelter I can find, more out of habit than anything else. I don't feel the cold, I don't feel the rain, but I still feel the need to hide from it, the fear that losing the need for shelter will mean losing my last shred of humanity, my concern for losing my last shred of humanity likely being my last shred of humanity, having lost every other shred already.

The notebook is blood-stained too, was blood-stained when I picked it up, pulled it delicately from a rapidly expanding pool of red, blood that was already soaking into the ground, staining the other items that had fallen from the backpack, an intense scene of violence, an explosion of pens and papers and a water bottle, and some clothing, all of it arcing slowly through the air, scattering, hitting the ground like rain, each thud of impact amplified in my ears against the background noise of the blood rushing through my veins, and more blood rushing out of veins.

That was the last time I ate, and it wasn't out of hunger. I haven't felt hunger, haven't felt anything, but especially not hunger. A drive to feed, yes. Are drives feelings? It is not my feeling, not my drive, it seems to come from somewhere else, somewhere inside me, but not coming from me. It is both intensely present and close but at the same time, something else entirely, somewhere else entirely. It's tough to know which voices in my head are my own, and which are actual voices, coming from some other source, what of the scratching and skittering I hear is in

the trees and what is in my head, if the tingling, the numbness, if that's real, if the nothing that I feel is actually something, or if I'm just making it all up.

That last time I ate, the blood, the skin tearing between my teeth, pulling, shredding, visceral and violent, the sheer violence of it all, like sex, like being born again, like tearing myself apart, tearing the world apart. It broke my heart, it took the last ounce of strength I had to crawl away from the scene, to rid myself of the image. These violent terrible things we do, whatever they are, they leave scars on us in places we wouldn't expect, in ways we could never recognize. We may think we have escaped unscathed, that we are free of harm, that we are whole, and pure, and good, but we are lying to ourselves, and that is the only way we can get by.

But those scars build up. It's inescapable. There are layers upon layers of scar tissue inside. Some of it is right on the surface, easily agitated, irritated, reopened even, at the slightest instigation, the wounds, though healed, are torn apart, the pain and regret and despair relived so easily. Sometimes it's just a twitch, a shudder, and sometimes it is more intense, more dramatic, more traumatic. Other scars are buried deep, long forgotten, deep down, buried under other scars, hidden behind walls, cleverly disguised as other memories. But they are never gone, and the right words or the right scent or the right noise is all it takes for these old wounds to be made fresh and be relived.

I don't have time to forget these things I've done, I don't have the strength, the will, the motivation to do it. There is no time like the present, but really, there just is no time. The woods are all around me now, and the woods are falling down, and I am not there to hear it, and I do not know if it is making any sound.

My head is falling down now. My head is falling apart now, and I am less and less who I am, more and more I am someone else. I ripped through the last threads already, I felt the tendons stretch and tear, I tasted the blood, so much blood, all my blood, I tore myself apart, I tore the old wounds open, I tore the mask that was my face, and revealed my true self, the inner being, the inner beast. It was the end of lies, the end of my great lie that I had matter, that I had meaning, it was the end of the great charade.

There are monsters in the Pine Barrens. I know that now. It's not just a legend, and it's not just the cicadas, and it's not just me, though certainly we are all part of that.