

# Breaking Points: Three Stories

by

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Class of 2014

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors from The College of Letters

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# Acknowledgments

My fingers would grow tired before I could reasonably acknowledge all those who deserve to be. To those who escape my thanks here, in writing, know that you are nonetheless recognized. To those who have over the years shared with me bits their own stories: without you, I would not have been able to write these stories, nor my own.

I am terribly and truly grateful to the faculty and staff of the College of Letters, for having taken a chance on my week-late application, and for having provided a space in which I could recognize my fears and transform them into strengths. To my classmates, and our immeasurable hours together, through the thickest and the thinnest of moments, our shared experience is one that I will not soon forget.

I extend a special thanks to those who have thrown more inspiration my way than I can possibly know what to do with. To Khachig Tölölyan, who for years has inspired me to voraciously hunger for understanding. An immense thanks to Charles Barber, whose eyes must surely be sore from reading and rereading my work; who has continually challenged by burgeoning ability to write, and who has both inspired me and shared with me who inspires him.

To those who have shown me what it means to recognize oneself within another human being: to Spenser, André and Derek, Samuel and Adam. To the Henry's, Evan, Robert, and Sidney, who have surrounded me with a humor and passion greater than I ever could have hoped. I would have long ago been lost without you, and have greatly enjoyed being lost with you all.

To Hannah, my sister, who has long provided me a role model, and to whom I feel closest to in this world. For providing me the incomparable comfort of knowing that there is an ear always willing to listen. To Barbara and Bruce, my mother and father, who have supported me in so many ways throughout the course of this life and this project, who have pressured me and allowed me freedoms at all the right moments. Who have given me the ability to chart a course through these torrid seas. There are no greater thanks than those which I give to you.

To all of you, thank you.

# Foreword

In a way, this thesis began two springs ago, for it was two springs ago that I first read Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. One of the last writings of Benjamin's life, *Mechanical Reproduction* came at an immense historical moment in terms of artistic cultural production. Nine years earlier, the first film with sound was released, *The Jazz Singer*, and with the advent of "talkies," film was suddenly a medium at the forefront of cultural production. Three-quarters of a century before that, the daguerreotype had popularized photography. But painting is where history *begins* – not the history of art, but the history of humanity. Our earliest documents, our earliest cultural productions. In his essay, Benjamin perceives a shift within of art and authenticity, as the function of artistic production undergoes a transformation brought about by the mechanization and mass exhibitionism of art.

These media, Benjamin writes, differ in terms of *aura* – that is, "what withers in the age of technological reproducibility of the work of art" (Benjamin 22). Benjamin's aura is a synthesis of features that establish a certain level of artistic authenticity. Implied in his essay is the notion that works of art ahead of mechanized reproduction largely retained this aura, with a sense of originality and a unique historical presence preserved. The authenticity that informs Benjamin's concept of aura depends on the original, but more importantly, the authority that is derived from the seat of originality. For pre-mechanized reproduction was not so much reproduction as *imitation* - even the most skilled forgery was not truly a recreation of the original, and thus the genuine artwork maintained its legitimacy even as it was "reproduced" (Benjamin 22). However, the invention of mechanical reproduction signified a great change in the world of art. This

“something new”, claims Benjamin, was the decay of the aura, as “The whole sphere of authenticity is outside [...] technical-reproducibility” (Benjamin 22). As such, mechanical reproduction marks a shift in the very function of art itself. The auratic object, endowed with historical significance, originality, and authenticity exists for the sake of those very qualities, what Benjamin refers to as “ritual function” (Benjamin 24).

In essence, he feels that the earlier works, the “cult” works, works that existed for the purpose of “ritual” retain a sort of authenticity that the later, reproduced works do not. But Benjamin was writing in a time of great political upheaval as well as artistic. Indeed, Benjamin wrote at the brink of film’s explosive entry onto the stage of popular culture. And while film still retains a central and perhaps even dominant role in cultural production around the world and to this day, the face of film has already changed greatly since Benjamin made his remarks. Indeed, to utilize a term and idea central to Benjamin’s very own remarks, the *technicality* of the reproduced artwork has changed, and changed greatly. The distance that Benjamin sees between painting and photography, and photography and film, is perhaps overshadowed by the advent of the digital work of art. But the film and photography of Benjamin’s time was the product of a film and photographic process that involved highly physical elements – chemicals, and light, and exposures – while the film and photography of today is a digital medium. It, in a way, never has a concrete existence in the world, even in the way that Benjamin’s reproduced works do. There must be, it seems, a new form of classification along Benjamin’s line of inquiry when the subject of inquiry itself has changed so greatly.

Then, in the fall, an anecdote from a course on Aesthetic philosophy caught a foothold in my mind. It was the story of an artist, a forger –Han van Meegeren was a Dutch painter who lived in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He enjoyed small-scale

success in the Netherlands. But the art community was harsh with his work, writing that it bore too great a resemblance to the Old Masters. One Dutch critic wrote that he was "[a] gifted technician [...] he has every virtue except originality." He, of course, took unkindly to these words, and moved his family to the countryside, in the South of France, and he set out to prove that he was more than an imitator, to produce a forger so brilliant that it was *better* than the masters. He spent six years on the technique, studied the existing works of the artist and then creating a new painting in their style. He developed chemical processes to harden the paint so that'd appear cracked and old. He sold his first forgery, a painting in the style, and under the name of Johannes Vermeer for an amount equal to the \$6.5 million US by current day standards.

In 1942, an agent acting on behalf of Van Meegeren sold *Christ with the Adulteress*, another forged Vermeer, to Hermann Göring for \$7 million US current day. When Allied forces uncovering Göring's stash and the painting was tracked to Van Meegeren. He was arrested for fraud and charged with what were, essentially, treasons acts. Caught colluding in 1945 with the Nazi Regime, Van Meegeren was facing execution. While in prison, Van Meegeren was forced to admit that he had forged this painting and others. He died of a heart attack before he could face trial.

Van Meegeren was painting on the razor's edge of what Benjamin might have referred to as an authentic work of art. While Van Meegeren falsely claimed his works as Vermeers, they were nonetheless truly works of genius, having fooled authenticators, critics, and Nazi officials alike. Indeed, if Van Meegeren's works are not deemed authentic, does this mean that they are reproduced? Benjamin writes that "In principle, the work of art has always been reproducible. Object made by humans could always be copied by humans." He does not explicitly say what takes place, in terms of aura, when

this act occurs. But, when he speaks of forgeries, Benjamin writes that the authenticity of a work is unaffected by it's being forged – which seems to imply that the forged work itself has little to affect on authenticity; no authenticity at all. But Van Meegeren's case is different, less a forgery than an invention; a study in style to the greatest of its extremes. "In even the most perfect reproduction," writes Benjamin, "*one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular [...] which bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject" (Benjamin 21). The time, the place, the situation that bore the work of art, argues Benjamin, is central to its authenticity. It is easy to see how this sort of value is vacant in a reproduced work. But are Van Meegeren's reproduced works at all? Forgery, reproduction, imitation, counterfeit – these terms all, in a sense, refer to the same thing: a sort of deception, a pretense to be the original when that is not the case. Van Meegeren, in studying form and style and then creating new works, as if the painters were alive hundreds of years after their deaths. But can it be said that his works were *inauthentic*? "The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity," writes Benjamin (21). But an invented painting by Van Meegeren is, in a sense, an original work: there is no other, *more original* version of it that exists in the world, and it has not been reproduced. What, then, is the correlation between technical ability and authenticity?

I had started Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* in my sophomore year of high school and never made it all the way through. I resolved to revisit this text in the summer before writing my thesis, and the novel had an unplanned relevance to my developing thesis project, seeming to follow a similar line of inquiry under a different heading. Pirsig's work is chiefly concerned with two things: a motorcycle trip taken by a father and son, and a philosophical inquiry into values, as the

title states. Pirsig's discussion is developed more into an exploration of the notion of "quality." In this aim Pirsig delineates between "classical" and "romantic" quality. He writes, "A classical understanding sees the world primarily as underlying form itself. A romantic understanding sees it primarily in terms of immediate appearance" (73). These concepts of form and appearance called back the stubborn question of Benjamin and Van Meegeren. In the context of authenticity and art, then, which quality holds more weight? Is aura created by a marriage of these two qualities? Is a work only authentic if it is both technically sound *and* is true in underlying form, in its "unique existence"?

"The romantic mode is primarily inspirational, imaginative, creative, intuitive. Feelings rather than facts predominate," writes Pirsig, "The classic mode, by contrast, proceeds by reason and by laws...which are themselves underlying forms of thought and behavior" (73). It seem intuitive that both of these modes are present in a work of art: the creative, imaginative drive, which drives forward the content of a work of art, and the reason, the logical act that manifests the romantic vision. In essence, Pirsig brings his "analytic knife" here to distinguish between modes of judgment – the aesthetic, the emotional, the sensory and the reasoning, rational, technical. He uses, fittingly, a motorcycle to describe the contrast between these two modes of inquiry. Through the romantic lens, the motorcycle is beautiful by virtue of what it appears to be - a gleaming body, polished metal, a streamlined aesthetic. Through the classical lens, however, the motorcycle is seen to be beautiful in much a different way, in the sense that it *works*, that it *functions* – fuel ignites, the pistons fire up, and the wheels move. The motorcycle gallops down the road. Two different ways of seeing, two different ways of determining value. Two values for the same thing.

It is here, where Pirsig's analytic knife cuts that I find to be the most compelling— this thin line between the authentic and the inauthentic, the presence or lack of aura. The breaking points of Benjamin's notions of authenticity. How far can you push an original work of art – whether painting, or writing, or photography and film – before it becomes inauthentic?

The body of this project is comprised of three short stories. My decision to explore the questions raised above through narrative, rather than textual analysis is multifaceted. A senior thesis is often described as the “culmination” of one's time as a student. How does one decide what form this culmination is to take? I define my thesis, my culmination, in these terms: the College of Letters is built upon a foundation of textual analysis, and rightfully so. Texts of literature, history, philosophy have been continual objects of critical inquiry within the major. And so, I have worked along side my classmates to break down texts, through multiple lenses: as historical product, as social commentary, as theory, as literature, as narrative. Teased them apart. Seen the way that they function. How ideas move. How stories move.

Over the course of my time, I feel that I have “specialized,” so to speak - found which discipline within this interdisciplinary major that I find most engaging: literature, and in particular, narrative, long-form prose. Thus, I see the goal of my culmination as the production of a text that could become the object of analysis for another reader, in the way that the texts found in the College of Letters have thus far to me.

All of these stories deal with artistic mediums and their claims to authenticity, as theorized by Benjamin in *Mechanical Reproduction*. The general course of Benjamin's text moves from the painting, an emblematic nonreproducible medium, to the photograph, and finally film – mediums defined by their very reproducibility. I have written three

stories that follow a similar trajectory. The first story, *Calling Card* follows the sale of a painted masterpiece with curious origins, and is concerned with the relationship between technical ability and authenticity. The second story, *Red Lights, Yellow Fingertips*, explores what is left when the photograph, the reproduced work of art, is destroyed. The third, entitled *Two Letters*, follows a narrative through its occurrence, narrativization, and finally, production as a film, and how the effects of these metamorphoses on the artist and the narrative itself.

These stories question the limits of Benjamin's claims about artistic integrity and aura. They explore the line between the auratic art object and the not. "To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts a shadow on the beholder is to breathe aura of those mountains of that branch." Here Benjamin illustrates the experience of aura as a moment, a state of experience brought about by certain stimuli, and ones' reactions to them. I have hoped to explore how this moment yet may be brought about *without* the work of art itself fitting so neatly into Benjamin's conception of the authentic. To inquire how and where the limits of artistic integrity and authenticity lie, and what defines this liminal space.

**Breaking Points:  
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*To Edwin Coe Williams,  
the first and greatest storyteller that I have ever known.*

# Calling Card

Al hated not doing things, and right now there was nothing to do. It was quiet at the shop that day. A few people came and went from the diner across the street, but that was about it. Only a few cars passed by, and no cars needed fixing. He had already fixed all of them that were going to need fixing, at least for a while. He had good business in the last few weeks, which meant bad business now. But this was just the nature of things in a place like Spencerville, and Al wasn't all that worried about the shop. He made enough to get by.

His nephew, Ernest came in at about nine o'clock. Ernest was still young. He had just come back from college and was trying to figure things out, now. He was a sharp kid. He'd asked Al if he could pick up a few hours here or there at the shop. Just to make sure he kept making the ends meet. Al was getting on in years and so he let Ernest take care of some of the heavier lifting. Ernest spent the morning cleaning and organizing the garage while there were no cars in it, which was a pretty big job after the last couple of weeks. Al made a pot of coffee and filed the invoices left over from last week. He wiped off the glass countertops. He put down the rag and cloth and he leaned on his elbows and stared out the window.

There was a car pulling into the dusty lot. It was barely moving, which was unusual for a car like this one. Cars like this often moved pretty quick, and they rarely stopped in places like this.

This one was a classic - grey, with what looked like leather interior. Tan. It was a beautiful car, both on the outside and underneath the hood. The car sputtered and groaned to a halt just barely out of the road. The door opened and a pair of polished dress shoes landed in the dust.

They belonged to a man. He was small, a good half foot below Al's six-foot two-inch frame. He was wearing a suit along with his nice shoes. His hair was dark and was slicked back and shiny against his head. He had a slight forehead, and dark sunglasses were too angular for an already sharp face. Everything about the man was unwelcoming. A city type, Al was sure. The man stepped through the gravel with the uncertainty of a man out of his element.

Al opened the door and stood in the doorway. The air conditioning was blowing on his back.

"Hey there," called the man, from a long way off. "Are you still open?"

"Yes sir," said Al. "What do you need?"

The man was standing there with his jacket open, hands on his hips. He was still wearing his tie. "Well, I was hoping you could tell me. Don't really know much about cars except how to drive them." He laughed. He had a wide smile that came up to the tops of his teeth. "Usually get someone else who knows better to take care of this kind of thing."

"Most people do," replied Al.

"Yeah, right. Well, my head just isn't wired like that, I guess." The man held up his hands as if he were at gunpoint. His smooth palms shone white in the sun. "But anyways, I was out there on the interstate and she started sputtering. Smoke started coming out from under the hood and all. Then it stopped smoking, but she didn't seem to be running as well as usual." He smiled again.

Just then, Ernest came out of the garage. He was wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, now heavily grease and soot-stained. He had a cap on backwards, to keep the hair out of his eyes. He was rubbing his blackened hands on a dirty rag.

“This is Ernest,” said Al, waving his hand. The man looked over at Ernest and Ernest nodded at the man. Ernest kept wiping his dirty hands on the dirty rag. “He’ll be doing that dirty work you were talking about.”

“How you doing?” said Ernest.

“Alright,” said the man.

“Why don’t you go ahead and drive her in,” said Al. “Where are you headed, then?”

“Chicago,” called the man over his shoulder. He walked back to the car and got behind the wheel. The engine refused to turn over. “Won’t start,” he said.

“Looks like we’ll have to push her, then,” said Al. He waved to Ernest and they walked around back. They waited. Al shouted up at the man, “You coming?”

The man poked his head out of the window and looked back in Al’s direction. He pushed his glasses down to the end of his nose, and he said, “Someone’s gotta steer, right?”

Ernest and Al leaned into the tail of the car and rolled into the garage.

“How long do you think it’ll take?” asked the man when he got out.

“Can’t really say until we’ve had a look under there,” said Al, looked at the hood. “There’s a diner just across the street there. You probably saw it when you pulled in. We’ll give a honk when she’s ready.”

The man looked down at his watch and rubbed his eyes and then set out across the street towards the diner.

Al looked at Ernest. “All set?” he said.

Ernest nodded.

“Well, give a shout if you need anything,” said Al, and went back into the office.

Ernest opened the hood and looked down at the engine. He checked the usual suspects first: the coolant chamber, oil pan, alternator. He didn't see anything wrong, so he kept on. When he removed a part from the car, he placed it neatly on a table over by the wall. The grid grew into an array of greasy metal parts, sitting at right angles from one another. Finally, Ernest found that there was a crack in the radiator hose. He fitted on a replacement, clamping the ends tightly. He put each part back in the car, making sure it was secured and properly aligned. When it was all back together, he got behind the wheel and turned the key. The engine thundered to a start. The sound of its pistons firing reverberated loudly in the small garage space. Ernest nosed on the clutch, shifted, and backed her out of the garage.

He cut the engine and got out to see the man already headed over from the diner. Al came out from the office. His tie was blowing sideways in the wind, and he was chewing on a toothpick. He came up and stood with his hands on his hips.

“Well, would you look at that,” he said.

Ernest wiped his hands on the dirty rag. “Quite a car,” he said.

“I'd probably get her checked out by a specialist when you're there,” said Al, “You know, just in case.”

“Thanks,” said the man. “Well, great. I'm going to get going, then. What do I owe you?”

Al looked over at Ernest.

“Just needed some new radiator hoses,” said Ernest

“Seventy-five dollars,” said Al.

The man took out his wallet and started pulling bills from it. “Shit,” he said, “I’m short.” He stuck a hand into the pockets of his pants and suit jacket and rifled around but came up empty. “Will you take fifty?” he asked. “That’s all I’ve got.”

Al looked at the man and his suit and then at the car. “That’s all you’ve got?” he asked, rubbing a hand across his forehead.

The man nodded. “Sorry about it,” he said, like he wasn’t sorry.

“Well,” said Al, “if that’s all you’ve got then I guess that’ll have to do.”

The man smiled and slapped the bills into Al’s palm. “I appreciate it, bud. I owe you one.” He smiled. Al grunted and turned back to the air-condition office. The man looked around and then rummaged in the pocket of his suit jacket for a moment. He pulled out a sleek, silver case, opened the clasp, and took out a business card. He handed it over to Ernest and winked.

“If you’re ever in New York,” he said, with a grin, “you can come and get your twenty-five dollars.”

Ernest looked down at the card while the man walked over to the driver’s door. He stepped into the car and started the engine.

“What kind of business you in?” called out Ernest over the sound of the engine.

“Art,” the man called back, “If you’re ever looking to sell masterpiece, give me a call.” The man laughed and stepped into the car. He started the engine and it rumbled back to life. Then, he stepped hard on the accelerator. The thin tires spun for a moment, stirring up a cloud of dust in the lot, and then they caught, and the car shot out and roared down the road and out of sight.

Ernest coughed in the dust. When it cleared off, he looked down at the card. His thumb had left a dark smudge in the corner where he was holding it. In the middle of the

card, in trim, silver letters, was printed LELAND MORREALE, BROKER and under it, a phone number, and NEW YORK, NEW YORK. Ernest cuffed the card against the palm of his hands a few times and looked up at the road. Then, he went back to the garage to straighten up. He stopped off in the bathroom to wash his hands of the grease and dirt that had accumulated under the hood of the man's nice car.

He looked at himself in the mirror. His hair had gotten long. It was long, thick, and a little greasy underneath his cap. There were dark black smudges along his forehead and under his eyes and he'd let a short beard grow out around his mouth. He hardly looked like himself. His t-shirt had pulled at the collar and hung loose around his neck. Light spots of sweat collected along the back of his head and down his neck.

"What'd he say to you?" Al asked when he came back.

"Nothing much," said Ernest.

"Really something, working on a car like that, isn't it?" said Al.

"Yeah," said Ernest, looking out the window. He touched the card in his pocket.

"Really something."

The plane set down, and Ernest relaxed his grip on the armrests. It was a cool, wet morning in October, and the trees were coming around and shedding their leaves and the air was starting to get crisp. He looked over from the porthole window, now reasonably sure that the plane had safely landed. His hand brushed against the hand of the dull-looking man beside him, and Ernest pulled away. The man looked over at him. "New York," said Ernest, nodding his head. The man gave a polite, bothered smile, nodded back, and turned his head away from the window. The plane slowed, and the

airport came into focus. The pilot thanked everyone aboard for flying with them, and to make sure they came back again soon.

Ernest hailed a cab and asked for the Drake Hotel. He watched out the window as the cab snaked its way through the outer boroughs and then across the dark waters of the Hudson and onto Manhattan. The city begged questions from him: of dates and statistics and what kind of people lived where. In Spencerville, difference had always been a matter of degree. Everyone was nice folk, and someone was only different by way of not being someone else. But the city seemed like a place where variety was a matter of course. He imagined that this it couldn't be boiled down to an average person or place or thing that could speak for the rest.

The Drake Hotel was stately and crumbling, one of the last bastions of a midcentury grandeur being phased out by the times. Taller than any building in Spencerville, but not when compared to the buildings that surrounded it. It was made from brick that had been exposed to so many years of smoke and sunlight that it had taken on a dark, almost brown hue. The lobby smelled of wood and tobacco and shoe polish. It just barely reminded Ernest of home.

He checked in and mentioned that there should be a package waiting for him. The receptionist went through a door and came back a few minutes later with a long, thin shipping tube, wrapped in plain brown paper and taped heavily on either end. It was addressed to Ernest Campbell, postmarked a few days ear in Spencerville, Indiana.

Inside his room, Ernest placed his suitcase on the bed. Next to it, he set down tube. He hung his shirts in the small closet and folded his pants and placed them in the dresser. He put the suitcase, emptied of its contents, in the small closet. Things his mother would have wanted him to do. In the bathroom, he arranged his toothbrush,

toothpaste, razor, shaving cream, comb, into a neat grid by on the counter. He filled the sink with warm water and plunged his hands into the steaming basin, and then he splashed his face. Water ran down his cheekbones and forearms and dripped in small drops onto the marble countertop.

He dried his face and went over to the bed. He cut the tape from the ends of the tube and pulled out the plastic end caps. Carefully, he removed a furled roll of coarse cloth from the tube. He unrolled it gingerly on the bed. The paint made a sticky crackling sound as he smoothed the canvas against the bedspread.

Ernest sat on the bed, facing out towards the small glimpse of the city, and picked up the phone. He pulled the card from his pocket. He waited for a dial tone. Then, reading each digit carefully, he punched the numbers into the handset. The phone began to ring. It rang six times before it picked up. Someone had picked up the phone, but nobody spoke, nobody said hello, or who is it, right away. There was just silence and static.

Ernest waited, and then said, "Hello?"

"Hello?" the phone answered.

"Is this Leland Morreale's office?" he asked.

"Used to be," said the phone. "He moved, about a year ago. Maybe more. I can't remember."

Ernest waited for the voice to continue, but the line remained silent. "Do you know where I might be able to find him?" Ernest asked.

There was shuffling on the other end of the line. The voice barked an address and hung up. Ernest scribbled down the street and building number on a notepad printed with THE DRAKE HOTEL. It was already reaching into the afternoon hours, and Ernest decided to wait until the morning to see to Morreale.

Ernest's stomach ached from a mixture of hunger and anxiety and the cavernous excitement of being in a new place with more options than ideas. He took the elevator down to the lobby and walked out the door. It was brisk out. From both directions, people walked, quickly and slowly. Some had faces of restlessness and determination, and others, quiet and calm indifference. But everyone looked as if they had somewhere to be. Maybe this was the unifying characteristic, thought Ernest. There were a lot of people, back in Spencerville, who didn't have much of anywhere to be. They were just somewhere.

The sidewalk stretched out, until the street signs lost their shape and clarity and the traffic signals morphed into unfocused blots of light. From far enough off, he couldn't tell one face from another. He knew that Frank Tyler, who owned Spencerville's only grocery store, had a scar above his eye from when he'd tripped with a glass soda bottle in his hand. And that Jocelyn Everett, the daughter of Lee and Edith Everett, had fallen in the creek and almost drowned when she was young. Everyone knew that story and that scar. Everyone knew about everyone's stories and scars. Those kind of things decided who you were. They clung to you, like smoke in your clothes. Except you couldn't wash them out. But here, in the city, there were too many scars, too many stories for everyone to know.

"First time in the city?" said a voice, and Ernest turned. The bellboy, in a stiff-collared navy jacket was leaning on the wall, just next to the revolving door of the hotel.

A cigarette burned in-between his fingers. The bellboy had sunken cheeks, pale blue eyes, and yellowing teeth. He was young, but looked old. He looked like someone who had been smoking and working and standing on city streets making comments to strangers his entire life.

Ernest nodded and stepped back from the edge of the sidewalk. “Just trying to grab a bite,” he said. The bellhop took a drag of his cigarette and spoke as he exhaled. “Plenty of places to do that around here,” he said. “What are you in town for?”

“Just business,” said Ernest.

“Business, huh. Man, we’re all here on business, one kind or another,” said the bellhop, “I’m just trying to be friendly.”

“Hey, look, I didn’t mean start any kind of a thing. I’m just trying to get a sandwich,” said Ernest, “You know where I can get a sandwich?”

“Sure,” said the bellhop. He dropped the butt of his cigarette and ground it cynically into the cement with the toe of his shoe. He disappeared back through the revolving doors.

Ernest turned to his left, and started to the right. He walked defensively, with his hands balled and stuffed in his pockets. He chose the third café that he passed, and sat himself at a four-person booth that faced the sidewalk. He watched the people walk past outside. When the waitress came over, he ordered a tuna sandwich and a soda. He paid the check, and then tipped a dollar more than he thought was appropriate. There was little daylight. Ernest ran a quick a quick errand on the way back to the hotel. He stopped off at a small, hole-in-the-wall art store, and bought some supplies: a plain wooden frame, heavy-duty stapler, a box of heavy-duty staples, a spray bottle, and a role of thick, brown paper.

The sun dropped, and temperature dropped with it. Ernest hurried back to the Drake. A few blocks away, Ernest turned the corner just as the door to a convenience store opened. Two police officers walked out, mid conversation. One of them was tall and the other one was short. The tall one was big around, and the short one was skinny. The tall one was saying, "...you should have seen this guy. I mean, really, have some respect for yourself, right? Even a bum's gotta have a little respect."

"Excuse me, you meant so say 'homeless', didn't you?"

The tall one laughed and said, "Yeah, that's what I meant."

"Then what happened?" asked the short one. They turned and started walking down the sidewalk. The tall one pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"So then - get this - he looks right at me. Right in my eyes. And he just keeps on letting himself go. It's running all down the sidewalk now, and onto the street. He had this big scraggly beard and these eyes. He looked crazy, I'm telling you."

"Bums," said the short one. "Then what happened?"

"Well," said the tall one, "I told him that if he didn't cut it out, I was gonna haul his ass in. Guess what this guy does. He starts laughing. He's laughing at me while he's pissing, right there on the street." The tall one took a long drag of the cigarette.

"No way," said the short one.

"I'm telling you, it happened. I said it again, but the guy just keeps laughing at me. So you know what I did? I gave him a kicked, right in the knees. He let out this groan, and he fell down, right in his own stuff." The two cops laughed. Ernest caught his toe and scuffed his shoe on the concrete. The cops turned.

"You following us?" asked the tall one.

"No, sir," said Ernest.

“You listening in on us?” Ernest shook his head.

The tall cop looked at the short cop and they both laughed. Then the short one said, “you be careful out here, mister.”

Ernest walked quickly through the lobby and took the elevator back to his room. He cleared off of the desk, and laid the canvas paint down. He went over to the sink and filled the spray bottle with some water, and then he misted the back of the canvas until it started to slacken. He placed the wooden frame on top of the canvas, making sure that the edges lined up. Then, he pulled back the margins of the canvas until they were taught around the frame. He used his free hand to plant three wide staples along the edge. He did this to the other side. He cut and tore away the loose edges of the canvas, and then he turned the painting over. He brushed away a few particles of dust and held the painting at arms length. Happy with the result, he wrapped it in the heavy, brown paper, and left it sitting on the desk.

The bed was stiff and uncomfortable, but Ernest was tired, and he soon fell into an exhausted, unsteady sleep. For a while, he dozed between sleep and troubled thoughts, peering over the precipice of dreams before an errant honk or shout pulled him back to the lightless room, ten floors up from the street. The night wore on, and then relented, and the morning arrived. The sun rose to outshine the city lights, and though Ernest slept, he awoke to a heap of blankets, wrestled onto the floor.

He looked at himself in the mirror after he had showered. His hair was trimmed short, and his face was clean-shaven. He put on a neat, blue oxford and a dark grey suit. Finally, he tied a nice, knit tie, and pulled the knot up to his neck. He went downstairs

and asked for directions at the front desk. The city was simple, said the receptionist, that it was just a grid. She pointed at a map. Just go three blocks this way and then five blocks over, that way. Ernest left the Drake with long, confident strides. He was part of the great, bustling traffic of the sidewalks. It was like a game, avoiding all of the other people going all of the other ways. After a few minutes, Ernest realized that he had turned the wrong way from the door of the Drake. He crossed over a boulevard in what he thought was the right direction and started back the way. He found himself lost again and relented to hailing a cab.

When he arrived, Ernest stepped out of the cab, placed a hand above his eyes and looked skyward. He had never been inside a building so tall. He walked into the lobby. It was sheer and polished, made entirely of stone. The grey-white marble seemed to reflect back his emotions without consideration. A metal plaque aside the elevator held a long list of names and he traced with his finger until he found the one he was looking for: L. MORREALE - 20TH FLOOR.

Leland Morreale's office was behind one of the doors in a long, white hallway with glass lamps on the walls every few feet. He opened the door and went in. The waiting room outside of Morreale's office was tidy, somewhat tasteful, and excessively stark. The walls were unpainted, with only a few ultramodern, geometric prints hanging. The space was not large and it was not small - consummate but short of impressive, with low ceilings. A large window looked out at the midsection of the neighboring buildings. A few stories higher and there would be a view over the city, rather than into it. It was in something of a no-man's land between the street below and the executive offices on the floors above; middle of the pack, respectable enough.

Morreale's secretary was somewhere between the aging ends of youth and midlife. Her hair was pulled back into a taut bun and she wore thin-framed reading glasses on the end of her nose. She was not unattractive, but she sat behind the desk with a dispassionate expression that belied a weariness of the years she'd spent managing someone else's affairs before her own.

"Name?" she said, without looking up.

"Ernest Campbell," said Ernest, "I'm here to see Mr. Morreale."

She scanned over the appointment sheet on her desk. Ernest noticed that it was scarcely filled. She looked up at him with inquiring, furrowed eyebrows. "Do you have an appointment, Mr. Campbell? I don't see you here on my schedule."

"Well, I don't have an appointment," said Ernest. "But I've got something here that I think Mr. Morreale would be interested in." He gestured and she looked at the wrapped painting clutched underneath his arm. "I have this," he said, pulling the worn business card with the black fingerprint from his breast pocket. She considered it for a moment, and then looked up at him told him to have a seat, motioning to the sofa. She picked up the phone, prodded a button and spoke into it quietly.

In the morning sunshine, the building across the street reflected back the image of the building in which Ernest sat, which reflected back the other, again and again; the image within the image of the other. He was lost for a moment in which building was which; they refracted infinitely, almost past the point of meaning. What he saw in the windows across the street was both what it seemed to be and was not. There was no distinguishing the two. In their reflections, they almost became one. Perhaps, on the twentieth floor, across the street, another man in a suit with a wrapped masterpiece sat in

a waiting room and stared directly back at him. He could hear, faintly, the sounds of the street below.

Ernest waited. After a while, the secretary's phone rang. She listened for a moment and hung up. "Mr. Campbell," she said, formally. "Mr. Morreale will see you now."

When Ernest entered, Morreale was seated behind his desk, his hands folded in his lap. He had dark hair, almost too dark, against the paleness of his skin, and narrow shoulders. His suit, while of noticeable quality, seemed to fit in the wrong places. He wore a thin, manicured mustache on his upper lip. His eyes were fixed on Ernest.

Ernest extended his hand and said, "Ernest Campbell."

"Mr. Campbell, how glad to meet you," said Morreale, and then he motioned to the chair. "Please, have a seat. Is it alright if I call you Ernest?"

"That's fine," said Ernest, "that's how we always do it back home."

"Good, I like that," said Morreale, "I'm Leland Morreale, but I suppose you know that already."

"Are you from the city?" asked Morreale, "You look awful familiar to me. I can't quite place it, though."

Ernest hesitated for a moment. "Yes," he said, "I'm from the city. Maybe we've passed one another on the street."

"Huh," said Leland, with his tongue poking the side of his cheek. "So, what is it that I can do for you, Mr. Campbell?"

"Well, it's a bit of a long story," began Ernest, "but the short of it is that my grandfather died not too long ago. I didn't know him well, but everyone said he was a collector. Turns out he had all these things up in this little storage space, over on

the...on the West side. Nobody wanted to deal with it, after he passed away, whatever it was he'd been keeping in there all of these years. They were about to scrap the whole lot of it, clear out the whole thing. Somehow, the management got ahold of my number when they were trying to get ahold of him after he'd stopped paying. See, I'm the last person still around whose related to him. So I went over there to pick up his things and-

”

“And you found something,” interjected Morreale.

Ernest nodded. “A painting,” he said.

“A painting,” echoed Morreale. He leaned back in his chair and smiled. “Tell me, Edgar, what kind of history do you have with art?”

“Well, I'm a painter myself, sir. I've studied it in school.” said Ernest.

“Ah. I see.” Morreale stood up, and walked towards the window. Hands in his pockets, he took in the skyline for a moment, as if the city were a script from which he was about to read. “Listen,” said Morreale, still looking out of the window, “If I took a moment for every bright-eyed kid that knocked on my door, I wouldn't have enough time to live my own life,” he said. “Look. I understand. Really, I do. Don't think I've never stood where you're standing. At least, figuratively, you know. But you can't just walk in here with your grandfather's art project and think that it's going to be worth anything to me. How'd you find me, anyways?”

“My grandfather didn't paint it,” said Ernest. “But I think if you'd just-”

“My receptionist said you had my card. How did you get my card?”

“It's a Carrasco, sir,” said Ernest. “An original.”

Morreale stayed at the window, but his disinterested manner had stiffened. He spoke towards the glass and asked Ernest, in an even voice, to repeat what he had said.

“I said that it’s a Carrasco, sir. The real thing. ”

Morreale turned back from the window and walked slowly towards his desk.

“Unwrap what you’ve got there, will you?” he said.

Before Morreale’s hungry eyes, Ernest slowly tore away the brown paper he’d wrapped the night before. Then, the rich colors and textures loaded into the bleached white, glass-walled office. The dark greens and pastel golds of the foreground seemed to transplant life into the stark whiteness of the room. The painting looked greatly out of place in the office, which added to the immense depth and weight that the canvas seemed to hold. It seemed to hang magically, almost uncannily, from Ernest’s hands.

Morreale reached out a tentative hand towards the canvas.

“Beautiful,” said Morreale, under his breath, “It’s beautiful. May I?” Ernest nodded and handed him the canvas, and Morreale received it gingerly. He brought his nose close and looked first at the finest details. Then, he held the canvas away, squinting his eyes as if to see it from far off. The canvas felt glorious in his hands. He was holding a centuries-old work, with his own hands. This painting was as old - perhaps older, than the city itself. His heart leapt at the prospects of what he held. What a privilege; what an opportunity! For a moment, Morreale felt greater than himself, his office, the building, even the city. He was now part of a tradition as long as any, and more respectable than most.

“I’ll admit,” he said, “I have a special place in my heart for the modern, as you can surely see. But I love works like these also. This is the Renaissance, no?”

“The Baroque, sir,” said Ernest, “I believe.”

“The Baroque, yes, that’s what I meant.” Morreale drank the painting in with the whites of his eyes. “This is beautiful. A masterpiece, no doubt,” he said. Ernest smiled to

himself. “And I’ve never seen it before...an undiscovered work! Do you have any idea what this could be worth?” He didn’t seem to be looking for an answer, and so Ernest didn’t supply him one.

When he had finished, Morreale turned back to Ernest. He asked why Ernest’s grandfather had never sold it. “Or donated it,” Morreale added as an afterthought. But Ernest responded that he didn’t know – he had simply stumbled across it, unearthed by accident amidst the forgotten keepsakes of a relative he had hardly known. He could only guess as to where it had come from. Morreale nodded as Ernest spoke, as if it were even favorable that it had seemingly come from nowhere.

“The first thing I need you to do,” said Morreale, “is to promise me not to tell another soul about this. Not one. Wrap that up and take it back with you, right away. Take a cab. Tell you what. I’ll pay for it. For now, just go back to your hotel. I’ll make some calls. We’ll have a little get-together tomorrow evening. I know just the place - I used to have openings there all the time. It’s perfect. It’ll be wonderful. Here’s the address.” He stopped to scribble on a piece of paper, which he tore off and handed to Ernest. “I’ll see you tomorrow night, then,” he said, picked up the phone and jabbed at a couple of buttons. Ernest moved to leave. Morreale pulled the phone away from his mouth, “And be sure to bring the painting,” he added.

The following evening, Ernest put on a blazer and took a cab to the address that Morreale had written down. He had the painting, rewrapped, under his arm. He took the elevator up, and the door opened into a swirling mass of people and smoke and alcoholic breath. Morreale spotted him quickly and pulled him into an empty corner of

the space. Morreale stood close to him and spoke quietly. His breath smelled of cigarette smoke and whiskey.

“Here’s how this is going to go,” Morreale was saying, “I’ve invited a lot of powerful and well-known people here. They’re rich, most of them, and they know people. Someone in this room wants to buy the painting, or they know someone who does. And when they do, we’re both going to do well. Very well. You do want to sell it, of course. You wouldn’t have come to someone like me, otherwise. That’s right, isn’t it?” Morreale clapped a hand onto Ernest’s shoulder and squeezed.

Ernest nodded.

“Great. Now, off we go.”

The gallery had expansive, unadorned walls and was filled with beautiful, aging people. They held drinks in one hand and cigarettes and cigars in the other, between wrinkled fingertips. They laughed loudly when there was nothing to laugh about. They moved slowly and languidly in their decade-old fineries. They spoke often of the great things their children and grandchildren were doing. But they were a jovial group, and Ernest began to enjoy himself amidst their infectious, blind satisfaction.

He spoke to an older, roundish man who had spent his years in the theatre, and his young wife, who was lovely and drunk and spilled her martini on the floor in front of Ernest’s shoes. An elderly woman in a blinding velvet dress and too much lipstick grabbed him with a gloved hand, and said into his ear, a thick voice, that he was a very nice looking young man.

Morreale pulled him away and introduced him to the partygoers in waves. Ernest was congratulated on his good fortune, insisted upon that discoveries such as these are golden for the art community as a whole. “It goes beyond us as individuals,” he was told.

To each who asked, which was many, he explained how he had discovered the painting. Morreale would interject that Ernest was himself a painter, and the guests would then ask about his own work, and in what gallery it was showing. He replied stiffly that it was not, and with diplomatic words they urged that he was young, and that there was still time, and that success is as much about skill as it is about luck, and more about who you know than what, and a whole slew of other useless councils.

A cry of metal against glass rang out and the crowd turned to see Morreale standing and beaming by the windows. Behind him, against the matte black of the sunless buildings, winked countless windows and taillights. Next Morreale, an easel had been erected, and on it the painting now leaned, covered by a pale cloth.

“Thank you all so much for coming,” started Morreale. “This is truly an exciting night for myself, and for all of us, and for our guest of honor, Mr. Campbell.” He inclined his glass in Ernest’s direction. There was scattered applause, and he continued. “These are rare moments indeed. Even those of us who have devoted our entire lives to the world of art rarely are allowed opportunities such as these.” He beamed around the room, “Now, some of you know already why we’ve come here, others of you I haven’t yet told, and you must be dreadfully curious. I won’t keep you all waiting. No, even *I* am not that cruel. I present to you, Carrasco!” With a flourish, he whipped the cloth away. There was a collective, contrived gasp, followed by voracious applause. “As you can all well see,” began Morreale once more, in a loud voice, and the applause died away. “the work here beside me is an exquisite one, a masterstroke in the hallowed history of art. Just looked - the colors, the drama, the subject. The technique! It transports us, back in time, to the moment that it was painted. It makes us feel as if we know what it was like

to live, to paint, in the 17th century Spain. This, my friends,” his smile widened, “is why we live for art. And remember, no touching. Cheers.”

Slender glasses of pale champagne were raised toward the ceiling. Faces turned to smile at one another in recognition of their fading entitlement, gaily ignoring their own declines. What was there to worry about in such a moment?

The band struck up a tune and the voices in the room rose to accompany it; before long, the party was back in full swing. Morreale flitted around the room. The attendees reveled in their collective, receding glory. They churned around the apartment. One woman knocked a glass to the floor and laughed as if it were times of old. They all indulged in the good fortune that had little to do with them, if at all. They nonetheless savored what they saw as this new achievement of theirs, and spoke not infrequently of their own past successes, as if to compare them to what was happening now and to insist that things had always been better before.

Ernest was standing at the edge of the room, politely sipping his champagne and enjoying the privileged view out of the windows. An older, distinguished-looking man approached and introduced himself as Paul Sandoval, an old classmate of Morreale’s from college. He asked the same questions most had, about the painting and where it had come from, but he spoke with what seemed to be genuine interest, rather than the calculated enthusiasm the others had felt obliged to give. This man hung to Ernest’s words. His eyes narrowed and opened, and he nodded along with Ernest as he spoke.

“What was it that you said you do?” said Ernest, when he had finished his story.

“Well, I’m really just a good friend,” said Sandoval, “but in a official capacity I do consulting work for Leland.”

“Forgive me,” said Ernest, “But what does a consultant do in business like this?”

“Well, it can mean a lot of things. Sometimes, I’ll help select paintings for purchase, or for sale. Introduce people. Him and I have largely different tastes. I myself prefer the pre-Modern period. I find works from the previous centuries to be more...lively, somehow. I’m not as fond of all the sharp lines and geometric shapes. Call me a purist.” He laughed. “My specialty, by chance, is the Baroque period, so it’s a lovely and exciting surprise for a work like this to appear as it has. It’s not as if you painted it, of course, but somehow I feel as if I should thank you.” He inclined his glass towards Ernest, and then took a sip. Ernest smiled and sipped at his own.

“You just lend your opinion, then?”

“On occasion I’ll help appraise paintings as well. But most often, I work as an authenticator. It’s easy enough, if you know how to do it. There’s great money to be had as well.”

“An authenticator. So you can tell if a painting is real, if it’s a forgery or not?” asked Ernest.

Sandoval nodded and drank from his glass.

“How hard is it? Can you tell just by looking at it?”

“Sometimes, yes. It depends, of course. But we have much more sophisticated tools these days. It’s quite incredible, really. I still believe, personally, that the eye is the greatest detective, but if need be, I can send off a paint chip and have it analyzed to date the carbon. Who would have ever imagined science and art coming together like that?”

“Yes,” said Ernest, “who indeed.” Ernest glances around the room over his glass. “Have you seen the painting yet?” he asked gesturing.

“No, not yet,” said Sandoval. “Waiting for the crowd to die down a bit. I prefer to take my time with a work. I’ve got nothing against any of these people” – he waved his hand over the room- “But them and I, we’re here for different reasons.”

“Would you excuse me for a moment?” said Ernest.

“Of course,” said Sandoval, and Ernest disappeared into the party, leaving the authenticator standing by the window.

Sandoval stood admiring the view, but he’d seen it many times before. After a few minutes, he saw that the crowd around the painting had ebbed, and he made his way across the gallery floor.

He spent a moment examining the painting from a distance. Then, he leaned in and examined the brushwork. The strokes were short and deliberate, the tone yellow and brash. It was exquisitely rough, no doubt bearing the characteristic traces of Carrasco’s style. Sandoval guessed that it might have been one of Carrasco’s earlier efforts from the purposefulness, unnatural attention to detail.

The painting depicted a knight in armor, atop a horse. He bore a lance and looked off, past the edge of the canvas. The hollowed cheeks of the mournful knight were dark and shadowed, and the thin horse’s muscles and bones could be seen against its matted grey coat. The knight sat, gilded and lean in silver armor, framed by deep green trees. The sun glinted off of the individual metal scales on his armor. In the background, the faint image of a castle could be seen at the bottom of a large expanse of churning blue sky, dotted only by a few slight clouds. The paint itself was aged, cracking off of the surface of the canvas like the waves of a turbulent sea.

His eyes traced down to the artist’s signature.

For a while, they stayed there, transfixed. He couldn't be sure if what he saw was a feature of the landscape or of the autograph. A stray detail, perhaps - a strand of grass or a groove in the dust. But then with increasing certainty, Sandoval was convinced that there was something *off*, if just slightly. A false step in the artist's signature. He looked again, hoping that he was mistaken. But indeed, there it was. A spare *r* in the artist's name. And artists did not misspell their own names. Artists did not err in their signatures. Suddenly, he looked upon the painting with fresh, suspicious eyes. There was so much undeniably *right* about the painting: the composition, the brushwork, the colors and lines - it all looked just as Carrasco looked, in what was known of him. He was famed for his ability to convey movement, even in scenes of immense stillness. This painting achieved as much. But, now that Sandoval looked, it was all slightly strained, amateurish. Its features did not cohere; its many features fought against one another for a hold on the canvas. Sandoval waited, staring at the painting. But that ineffable quality, that moment of wonderment that a true masterpiece arouses failed to come forth. The individual parts, yes, they were all there. But it did not cohere, as it should have. The technique was masterful. But this was not a painting - or at least not the painting that it purported to be. This was a mosaic of technical flourishes: beautiful in its own right, but a fraud.

Sandoval turned and searched the room for his young partner in conversation. When he could not find Ernest, he sought Morreale, and asked for a word. He relayed his suspicions off in a corner, in private. Away from them, the guests continued to simmer in one another's company, unknowing of deception in the midst of boiling over.

"Are you certain?" asked Morreale, with barbarous eyes.

"Yes," replied Sandoval. "It's a forgery. Without doubt."

The two searched the gallery but could find no traces of Ernest. Everybody at the party could recall seeing him but nobody could say when or where. An hour ago. Just minutes. During the toast. They couldn't be sure.

Morreale raced down on the street. He called out in either direction, straining his voice. Passers-by turned with startled, confused looks. But none of them were young, furtive faces. None of them had fooled him, a man in decline amidst a crowd in decline, into believing that he had stumbled upon a masterpiece. It was all about to change, until it wasn't. He pounded the soles of his leather shoes on the pavement. They slapped against the misted sidewalk and the sound rang down the street.

A few days later, the steps out in front of Ernest's house creaked, and there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," called Ernest. The screen door clattered shut, and heavy, graceless footsteps came through the house.

"Didn't expect to see you back around here so soon," said Al from the doorway.

Ernest was sitting in his studio, in dim light. His suitcase sat by the door, unopened. In the corner, an untouched canvas rested on an easel. Ernest was quiet, contemplative. On the tables and the floors, books were piled and dog-eared - histories of Spain, of art, of Vasquez and El Greco and Carrasco. Light fought its way through the edges of the curtains and illuminated the tins of paint arranged in huddles on the floor. Paintbrushes leaned against the inside of a white bucket, submerged in cloudy water.

Al pulled a chair and sat with a sigh. "You know, you'd be fired if you weren't family."

“Sorry about that,” said Ernest.

“Where’d you go, anyways? It isn’t just nothing when someone disappears from around here you know. People start getting worried, asking questions.”

“Just took a trip,” said Ernest.

“Where to?”

“Went to the city for a few days.”

“Huh,” said Al. “What are you doing back here, then?”

“Just wasn’t the place for me, I don’t think,” said Ernest. “You understand.”

“Sure.” said Al, “I sure do.”

Ernest said nothing. After a minute, Al stood up. “I’ll see you at the shop, then?”  
said Al.

Ernest nodded. “At the shop,” he said.

Al looked hard at Ernest, and bit at his lip, and then he left. Ernest watch him go. He heard the door rattle shut and then the heavy steps on the stairs. He reached over and swirled a thin paintbrush in a tin of rich, blue paint. All of the painters who had come before him had led up to this very moment, to his next work. It all led to him. He looked at the canvas. He thought about what he would paint next.

# Red Lights, Yellow Fingertips

Charles' mother was driving home from the grocery store. At the end of the block, she passed a group of young boys. She looked for her son, but did not see him. When she pulled into the driveway, she found Charles standing on top of the house. He was looking around, over the tops of the other houses in the neighborhood. He had his hand over his eyes, trying to see through the sun. She saw him from a way off. He was sticking out from the roof like a skinny, pale chimney. She pulled up in the driveway and got out of the car. She left the car door open and shouted up at him.

“What are you doing, Charles?” she called. “Get down from there.”

The young Charles looked down at her. “You should see the view from up here,” he said.

“What do you see?” she called back.

“All sorts of things,” he shouted. A plane flew by overhead and Charles looked up and watched it. The plane left slivers of white contrails in the sky.

“Well come down off of there when you've finished” she said, “I'll fix you some dinner.”

Charles climbed down onto his hands and knees and hung from the gutter by his fingers before dropping down into the grass. He got up and brushed himself off before going inside.

Charles' mother sincerely hoped that he would stop climbing onto the roof, not out of worry that he would hurt himself, but for fear that her husband would be the one to find him there. Frank had long supposed - or, perhaps, long wished - that Charles would grow to be an exceptionally normal boy and, after that, an exceptionally normal man. Peggy hoped as much, too. Albert said that normal boys, who color well in-

between the lines and do as they are told, are the boys who grow up to become doctors and lawyers.

Peggy shared her husband's dreams but few of his pressures. All she wanted was to raise a good-natured boy.

As it turned out, Charles was something of a good-natured, abnormal boy. He kept to his self much of the time. He struggled to mesh with the other boys at school. His mother often asked how things were going with friends at school. She never asked him about girls, and he found this odd. Nobody would have said that Charles Rodale was really a part of things. But he found that he enjoyed watching things. Like football practices and pep rallies. He sat and stared with focused eyes. When the receiver would reach out to grasp a ball, the moment seared into Charles' memory. He began to walk around, imagining he was taking snapshots with an invisible camera.

He had just finished mowing the lawn, and he was drinking lemonade and looking out the window when the mailman walked by and dropped a few envelopes in the mailbox. One of them was addressed to him. Inside, there was a plane ticket to Billings, Montana. It had his name on it, stamped in neat, inky letters. The flight was two days later. He packed some things in a small suitcase the next day, and the day after that he hugged his mother and shook his father's hand, and then he got on the plane.

Charles waited in the airport lounge. Charles knew it was him the moment that Rex walked in. He was young and lanky, and he introduced himself with a forceful handshake and a sharp smile. "Rex," he said, "Rex Rodgers." Rex's real name was Reginald, and he was from California. He was handsome, with those high, shadowy

cheekbones and thin lips. He carried around a little notebook with him all the time. He scribbled in it constantly with one of those pens that can write upside-down. Charles could tell right off that Rex was as proud of that pen as just about anything. He and Charles were made to share a motel room for the week they spent on the story.

Before bed, Rex would hold the notebook above his head with one hand and write into it with the other.

“What do you write in that thing?” asked Charles, one night. They had been passing between them a fifth of whiskey and were edging on drunkenness.

“Lots of things,” said Rex, “usually just ideas, or whatever. Just unformed thoughts. Stuff that doesn’t make sense in my head yet, but that I know I can make sense of if I try hard enough. But if I don’t write it down, I’ll forget it.”

“What happens if you lose the notebook, what then?”

“Well, I haven’t lost one yet,” said Rex, “but hey, thanks for the idea.”

“No problem,” said Charles.

Rex put down his notebook and turned over in his bed.

“Hey, Charlie,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“What does your old man do?” he asked.

“Why do you want to know that?” asked Charles.

“You can tell a lot about someone from their old man,” said Rex.

Charles’ father had worked on an oilrig for thirty-five years. He had been worn out for the last ten, and had just retired. “Engineer,” he said, “my old man’s an engineer. How about yours?”

“He owns a factory, back in California.”

“What do they make?”

Rex sat up. “You know those little rubber things they have on the bottoms of chairs? On the bottoms of the legs? So you can push them around, you know?”

“Sure,” said Charles.

“They make those.”

“Huh,” said Charles.

“Pretty cool, right?” said Rex.

“Yeah,” said Charles, “Pretty cool.”

They woke early and drove out of the city. They parked up on a ridge that overlooked a great expanse of grassland. In the distance, herds of buffalo swirled like whips of dense, heavy smoke, on the plain. Rex watched them and wrote in his notebook. Charles set up his camera equipment and turned his lens towards the crowd of buffalo. He found them difficult to capture - more difficult than the ordinariness of daily life. The things he had shot before were still, or they stopped to allow him time to focus and adjust. But the buffalo paid him no favors while they grazed. For split seconds at a time, they seemed to frame themselves perfectly in his viewfinder: a hulking head turned, mid chew, as if to say, “if you’re going to do it, you should do it now.” But, hampered by inexperience and nerve, Charles lost the best of his shots.

Then, Charles’ world rapidly expanded. It grew from the suburbs of Philadelphia to what seemed, with each assignment, to be a further corner of the globe. He thought he could see just about everything, up there on that roof, when he was a kid. But he couldn’t have seen all of this.

Within the magazine, Julia was a pen, and Charles was a camera, and the two didn't come together as much as he would have liked. They worked on different floors, and while there was no explicit rule or regulation that forbid intermingling between the two groups - or even an encouragement not to do so - the reality of it was that they largely kept to themselves. Charles was taking the elevator down at the end of the day when Julia stepped on. It was crowded, and she stood near the doors, with her hands clasped in front of her. Charles stared at the back of her head.

Over drinks, Charles asked Rex about the tallish woman with the wavy light brown hair and the green eyes. Rex whistled and raised his eyebrows.

"You've seen her before?" asked Charles.

"I've seen her before," said Rex.

"You know her?" said Charles.

"I know her. Her name's Julia. Julia Levin, I think. She's a writer, too. We've only spoken once or twice."

"She seeing anyone?"

"Not that I know of, but I don't know much of her. She's quiet. Keeps to herself a fair amount, you know. Not exactly making small talk with everyone in the office."

"Do you think she'd come out with me?"

Rex looked him up and down. "Probably not," said Rex, "But you never know."

Charles grinned over his drink. "That's great news," he said. "I think I'm going to do it anyways, though."

"What are you going to say to her?" asked Rex.

"I have no idea," said Charles.

Rex was mistaken, for once, and Charles was relieved; Julia agreed to go out with him. Charles hadn't wanted to make a big production out of it. He took her to a decent restaurant, with decent food. She was closed up at first. She answered in short sentences, just a couple of words at a time. They had level conversation, about where they'd grown up and gone to school. About parents, pets, trips to other places. Once she got laughing a few times, Charles saw what he was certain to be the true nature of Julia. It appeared for moments, here and there, like candid action shots. Blurred, and hard to catch. But there. They had a few drinks, and Julia began to talk loudly. He suggested that she be a bit quieter, and she suggested, laughing all the while, that Charles be a bit less uptight. Charles walked her home. She thanked him for dinner. He thanked her for coming out. She wished him goodnight and went inside.

Charles saw her again the day after. She smiled at him. He said that he had a good time last night, and she said that she'd had a good time, too. He asked her if she'd like to do it again sometime. She leaned back and forth on the pads of her feet, and then she agreed.

She was a few years older than Charles. He wasn't sure if it was just her age, but she seemed to have it all figured out, like she knew exactly what she wanted. She was attractive in a crooked kind of way. Her face was pretty, but it was asymmetrical. One of her ears was a different shape than the other. If she wore lipstick, it smudged around the corners of her mouth. She laughed too loudly or not at all, and she smiled with just one side of her lips. She drank beer, and ate with her hands as often as she could manage. Sometimes, she went days at a time without showering.

For years, they enjoyed a sporadic, far-flung love affair. They photographed and wrote the world and one another. He thought, but never said, that he felt they completed

each other. The word and the image. They had both done better work in their short careers, but there was no denying that what they created together was somehow more alive. They lobbied to be placed on assignments together. They slept in tents in the wilderness and made gritty coffee over campfires in the cold mornings. Their work was all romanticized visions of the world and was hardly printable.

After a couple of years, they decided to settle down, or at least start trying to. They chose a nice midsize apartment in Park Slope. After another couple of years, they were married. Charles asked her to marry him in a bustling city center in Phuket. The ceremony was small, and they had it upstate. Their parents and Rex and his wife and a few people from the magazine came to the ceremony.

Charles found work as a studio photographer, capturing unmoving things against white backgrounds. Pretty sterile, the whole thing, but it paid. Julia landed a column in the post, and contributed to a few different magazines in the city. And so, they found that they'd started something of a life for themselves in the city, though they still longed for the rest of the world, at times.

Charles spent late nights in the darkroom with his work, and sometimes a flask of whiskey. He rolled up his sleeves and filled the basins with exact, measured amounts of their respective chemicals. He spent long whiles focusing his shots through the enlarger before printing them, adjusting knobs and levers by one notch. He soaked and bathed and rinsed his shots, and then clipped them up on the walls and stared at them incisively. One of these nights, he fell asleep with his head resting in the crook of his elbow. He startled awake in the acrid glow of the red bulbs and looked at his watch. It was five-thirty in the morning. He arrived home at six, as the sun was rising above the city. Julia was in the kitchen.

“Where were you?” said Julia. “You smell terrible. Were you drinking?”

He shook his head. “The chemicals,” he said, “from the darkroom.”

“You spend too much time there,” she said.

He walked past her and got in the shower. When he came out, she was standing by the bed.

“Did you hear what I said?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, putting on his pants, “I heard you.”

“Why did you ignore me?”

“I didn’t ignore you,” he said, “I just didn’t have anything to say.”

“Did you pick up the things I asked?”

“I don’t remember you asking me to pick up anything.”

“I did, Charles. Yesterday afternoon, before you left, I asked you to get my dry cleaning on your way back. And we need coffee filters. We can’t make coffee now, Charles.” She always called him Charles.

“I’m sorry, Julia. I forgot.”

“You know, it can’t be good for you, shut up in that room with all those chemicals. Your fingers are turning yellow, Charles. And there are always bags under your eyes.”

“I like it there, Julia. It’s relaxing for me there.”

“What about here? It’s not relaxing for you here?”

“Of course it is. It can be. But sometimes it’s not.”

Charles shouldn’t have said this. It was the true thing to say, but it was not the right one. Julia cooled off after a few days, though She always did. They both did, whenever they got in a spat. They couldn’t stay mad at each other, although Charles had

a suspicion that she tried awfully hard to, sometimes. They spent the next five years in this way. It was a happy, youthful marriage peppered with the occasional embittered remark and subsequent fallout. But most anyone would say that they had a pretty good thing going, Charles and Julia. They didn't have the whole thing figured out, but then again, who did?

They spent halves of Saturdays without leaving bed, like children just learning to discover each other's bodies. They were held together by the glue of relative youth - they knew well enough that they loved one another, but they didn't always know how to show it or how to make sure it all held together. But they were sure that whatever issues they did have, they weren't bad enough to pull them apart, not just yet. It was way too early for that sort of thinking now. They had an awful lot of time to live, and an awful lot of time to figure things out.

On the morning of the accident, Charles woke up late. Julia was already awake, making coffee. She had to be in early at the office for a meeting. Charles had a shoot that day, but it didn't start until the afternoon. He walked sleepily into the kitchen.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," she said. She was reading the newspaper and didn't look up.

Charles poured himself a cup. He walked over to the window and put one of his hands in his pockets. The sun was bright that day, and it was warm by the window. He looked down at the people walking by on the street.

"Hey," he said, turning back, "what do you say we get ourselves a dog?"

"A dog?" said Julia, looking up.

“Yeah, a dog. Or maybe not a dog. But some kind of pet.”

“I like dogs,” said Julia. “Dogs are a lot of work, you know.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you’ve got to take them for walks, and feed them, and play with them.

And all sorts of other things. It’s a lot of time, having a dog.”

“I know what it means to take care of a dog, Julia. I mean why are you saying that they’re a lot of work?”

“They are a lot of work, Charles.”

Charles walked back over and sat at the table. He was grinning.

“You don’t think I can take care of a dog, do you?”

“I didn’t say that, Charles.”

“I can take care of a dog, Julia.”

“I’m sure you can. Please, Charles I don’t want this to turn into a whole thing. Not right now. I have to leave soon.” She looked down at her watch impatiently.

“Well, I want to know,” insisted Charles.

“It’s because it’s a whole other life you’re taking responsibility for. More often than not you come home late at night or not at all and you smell like liquor. I know it’s not just the darkroom. You said it yourself that you don’t like being here. Listen, Charles, I love you, and all I mean is that I don’t think it’s the best idea for us right now. Besides, the city is no place for a dog. Let’s talk about this tonight. I’m going to be late. I’m going to have to take a cab.”

The cab driver that picked up Julia outside the apartment was having a hell of a day already. He was late to work because the kids were slow moving, and he'd had to make sure that they'd gotten on the bus to make it to school on time. When he got to the depot, his boss had chewed his ear off because it was the second time he'd been late that month. If he was late again, said the boss, there were gonna be some consequences. He didn't have time for coffee. Then, the car was low on gas, and so he had to stop before picking up his first fare. It was an old lady on her way to Brooklyn. The cab got stuck in traffic going across the bridge and the driver had his ear chewed off, again, by the old lady. This time, it was about summers in Paris. He could have cared less about Paris, he wanted to tell her. When he dropped her off, she left a poor tip. He stopped to get a cup of coffee. And so, when Julia came down off the steps and held her arm out into the street, this cab driver, in this cab, happened to be driving down Union Street.

"Where are you headed?" he asked.

"9th and 43rd," she said, and the cab sped off. They came out of Park Slope and onto Flatbush Avenue and across the bridge. The traffic had died off, a bit. Julia sat in the back and looked quietly out the window, thinking about dogs. They got over into Manhattan, and were crossing the lower end of the island. The traffic got bad again. Julia looked at her watch. When things started moving again, the cab driver pressed hard on the accelerator.

Maybe if he'd woken up a few minutes earlier, or if the kids hadn't fought over who got to brush their teeth first, or if his boss had spent one less second giving him the business, or the car had needed just a little less gas, or maybe a little more. Maybe if the traffic on the bridge hadn't made him listen to the whining old lady for so long about her rich friends, maybe if he'd had time for coffee earlier in the day. Maybe, if Charles had

decided to sit at the table instead of the looking out the window with his coffee, maybe if he hadn't seen a happy-looking couple walking their dog down on the street, maybe he wouldn't have brought up dogs at all. Maybe Julia would have had time to take the subway, or hailed a different cab. Maybe then, the cab would have been easily through the light, and the cab driver wouldn't have punched it to squeeze through the yellow.

If all of those things hadn't happened, or had happened one second earlier or one second later, then the other cab wouldn't have been hoping for green, trying to shoot the light. And then, maybe, the two cabs wouldn't have collided. Julia wouldn't have screamed when she realized the other car wasn't going to stop. She would have made it to her meeting on time, and an hour later, Charles wouldn't have gotten a call from a number he didn't recognize as he sat by the window, looking down at the street, thinking about red lights and yellow fingertips.

Charles stood still in the hospital. Everything was happening around him. They all told him something. The doctor told him she had passed nearly instantly. That she probably hadn't felt much of anything. The police officer told him that it was an accident. The cab driver told him that he was sorry. There was nothing to prosecute, nothing to go after. It was just the case of two people trying to get where they were going a little bit faster, trying to take advantage of those moments between the changing lights.

The officer took down some of Charles' information and said that someone would be in touch with him before long. Then the officer grasped him by the shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," he said, "There isn't nothing anyone can do about it, sometimes. Just a bad accident - just bad luck. Loads of bad luck, everyday. There are people for

you to talk to, if you want. They'll let you know about all of that when they call to follow up. These things happen sometimes. Ain't no sort of reason to it."

Charles' world had begun small, in a little town outside of Philadelphia. Then, it grew by an order of magnitude - first it was Billings, Montana. The Redwood Forests in California. Brazil. Germany. Australia. When he was married, it shrank, for the first time in his life. It molded to the size of the city. After the accident, Charles' world narrowed even further - to an inert apartment, lined with photographs of absent faces.

For long whiles at a time, he remained in the apartment. He walked around in his pajamas, holding the camera. He captured the little worn spots in the tile where they had both stood to brush their teeth. He looked at himself in the mirror and decided that he was beginning to look old already. He captured the kitchen sink, where she had tied the cornflower blue apron he'd bought around her waist. The living room, where she sat in afternoon light and wrote.

But in the backgrounds of his photographs, he could see other photographs. Sometimes they were just far-off places, which were far-off enough already. But sometimes, he could make out Julia's face, framed on the walls in the background of his shots. A photograph of a photograph of a moment. It all was a matter of habit, but it all made him feel even further away.

He turned himself away from the apartment, and began again to photograph the city. The buildings he photographed, they were filled with people and offices, with activity and life. But from the outside, through the lens, they looked to Charles little more than converging lines, crude and cold. He had an idea, to ask strangers to stop, so

that he could capture their faces. Some agreed, and some told him a few words about their own lives. But when he developed these negatives, their smiles seemed to him hollow, and he soon abandoned this endeavor. He stopped photographing altogether.

One afternoon, Charles brought a box of photographs to the kitchen table. He looked through them at random. First from his earliest years. They were dog-eared, creased, and poorly shot. Then from his time at the magazine. Then Julia. After a while, the pained desire to shoot welled up in him again. Of what, he did not know, which was, in a way, freeing. He put on a coat, and laced his shoes. He selected a camera body, and a lens. He looped his camera strap around his neck, and he left the apartment. He moved without thinking, on the impetus of emotion alone.

Halfway down the stairs, he paused just long enough for the pained logic of his past to flood his mind. He stood still on the worn steps of his building, one hand grasping the banister. Then, he turned back. He returned to the kitchen and continued looking through the photographs, long into the night.

When his head drooped and he dropped a stack of prints onto the floor, he left the memories spread across the kitchen table, and brought himself to bed.

Two days later and uninvited, Charles knocked on the door of a brownstone on the Upper East side. The house belonged to Rex, who had ascended to an editor position at the magazine some years previously. He heard Rex yell, and moments later, Alice Rodgers answered the door. She smiled and greeted Charles. She looked at him as if he were a child. From the doorway, Charles could see the Rodgers family gathering for supper, and he could smell a roast in the oven.

“Alice,” he said, “I know it’s a bad time, but does Rex have a moment? It’s important.”

“Of course, of course. Please, Charlie, come in.” She opened the door a bit wider to let him in. “Just take your shoes off at the door.”

In his socks, Charles walked down the hall, past the maple grandfather clock and the school portraits, and into the kitchen. Rex had aged, but was still a wiry character who seemed to move as if there were some otherworldly force animating his thin limbs. He was setting the dinner table along with his two young daughters, and he looked up quickly when Charles, rather than his wife, entered the room.

“Charlie, Christ, how have you been? Here, you want a drink? Let’s have a drink.” He turned to his children. “Darlings, you finishing setting the table. Remember, gentle with the plates. And forks go on the left.”

Charles followed him into a book-lined sitting room, where Rex picked up two glasses and pulled the top from a crystal bottle of. “You still drink scotch?” he asked.

Charles nodded, and Rex poured the two glasses.

“I haven’t heard from you since the funeral,” said Rex. “You know how sorry I am. The magazine misses her. We all miss her.”

“Will you tell be about the magazine?” asked Charles, “How are things?”

“The magazine is fine. Just fine. I hardly recognize anyone anymore, though. All these kids, they barely look older than the girls.”

“That’s good,” said Charles, swirling his glass and glancing around the room. Behind Rex’s desk, on the bookshelf, were neat stacks of little notebooks.

“Is everything alright, Charlie?”

Charles looked off.

“Alright,” said Rex, “out with it.”

“You know I wouldn’t ask you for something unless I absolutely needed it,” said Charles.

“You must have needed an awful lot of things over the years, then,” said Rex.

Charles blinked at him. “Alright,” said Rex, “what do you need?”

Charles spent another moment looking anywhere but at Rex. Then he said, “I need you to get me my old job back.”

Rex looked at Charles for a moment, and then took a drink. “No you don’t,” he said, finally.

“Yes, I do.”

“Charlie, even if I could give you your old job back - which I can’t - I don’t think you’d like it. It’s crazy, Charlie. Look, I’m not saying you can’t take a photograph, because you know that I think you can. But is that really what you think you want? We’re not kids anymore, Charlie. It takes it out of you, running around the world like that. And the industry’s changing, everything’s going digital now. It’s not the place for you anymore. Hell, it’s hardly even the place for me. I’m gonna be on my way out of there, before long.”

“You don’t understand, Rex. I need to do something. And that’s all I know how to do. This studio work, I can’t do it anymore. Have you ever tried writing in a room where there’s just white walls and a white desk and a white lamp? Everything’s white. No inspiration at all. It’s like working in a vacuum. That’s what it feels like. You don’t understand, Rex.”

“Maybe I don’t. But I know that the magazine isn’t the answer, not anymore. Charlie, you have to look somewhere else. I don’t know where, not off the top of my head. Let me think about it, though.”

Alice called out from the kitchen.

“You want to stay for dinner?” asked Rex. “I’m sure Alice made enough. We can talk about all of this afterwards.”

“No, thank you,” said Charles, rising to his feet.

“Are you sure?” said Rex.

“Yes, quite. Thank you, though. Maybe another time.”

Rex walked him to the door. Charles bent down to put on his shoes, but struggled, and sat down on the floor instead. When he stood, his back was covered in dust.

Rex said, “Stay in touch, will you?”

Charles nodded. “Enjoy your meal,” he said, and then he left. Rex stood on the steps and watched him go.

The next morning, Charles took down the framed photographs that had hung, for years, on the walls.

He pulled the albums of neat prints from the bookshelves, and dug out the boxes of unsorted Polaroid’s from the hall closet. He took the framed shot of Julia from the bedside table, the small square prints above the desk. He stacked them all neatly into cardboard boxes, and placed the cardboard boxes in the back of the car.

Then, he called up a friend of his who had a place over in Staten Island with a garage, and asked if he could store a few things, for a little while. He would have asked Rex, but Rex would have asked questions, and he didn't feel like answering questions about it. He wouldn't have known the answers to Rex's questions, anyways.

And then, Charles sealed the visual archive of his life in a dusty, cluttered garage in Staten Island. He left his life's work with rusted rakes and old engine parts, surrounded by weeds and tall grass. They were all he'd ever known, those pictures. But now, he didn't know what else to do.

Charles found a job at a small photography shop in the West Village. A man a few years older than Charles owned the place. The storefront was narrow, deep, and brightly lit. Charles worked diligently under the harsh fluorescent lights. It was good distraction from the big things, all of these small things to check off the list each day: stock the film, clean the glass, polish the lenses. He could leave each day with the sense of having completed something. Therapeutic, small steps. Part of a greater catharsis. Among the colorful graphics, the stock photos, the glass-walled cases of lenses and camera bodies and boxed rolls of film, Charles absorbed himself in something other than himself.

He again found a particular kind of peace in the darkroom, under the red lights. He worked carefully with the exposed rolls of film and the chemicals and dyes. He was an old hand at it now. He fixated on the mechanical processes, the technique. He worked with focus, on the work at hand and at his hands at work. He hung the

snapshotted memories of countless strangers on the line with clothespins, as if he were airing out wet laundry to dry.

He lost himself again under the red lights, and found himself in the lives of others. Charles felt that he was developing more than photographs, but memories. He wasn't simply developing them; no, he was exalting them. The most mundane, the most ordinary of things! He immortalized all of them. He transformed them from shadowy negatives to colorful prints, into things that would be framed and placed on mantelpieces and hung on walls to later be admired. When they looked at them, nobody would think of him, of Charles, the man who developed their memories. But he was there nonetheless, a part of the process as important as the moment itself.

Every now and again, he'd see a corner of a face, or an eye, a mouth, that looked like Julia. For brief moment, he was sure that it was her, and his imagination jumped at the possibility. But these were moments from other people's lives, and he was an outsider to them. He handled them, processed them, made them beautiful. Of this he was sure. But no matter how badly he wished that he could, he was far removed from these moments that he saw of other people's lives. Other people's moments. Not his own. And they had already happened. There was nothing he could do to change them.

“Do you do lessons here?”

The questioner was a young boy. Charles had seen him before. He was in the store often, but Charles had no memory of having rung him up for a purchase. He was still small, at that age just before he was likely to grow by an order of magnitude. Bony wrists and skinny ankles. He wore an inquisitive, freckled look and a baseball cap, out of

which stuck tufts of blonde, unruly hair. He had on white sneakers and faded jeans, a white t-shirt.

“What?” said Charles.

“Lessons,” the boy said again.

“Lessons?”

“Photography lessons,” said the boy.

“Oh. No, we don’t do those here,” said Charles, “Sorry.”

The boy turned to leave, and Charles went back to his work.

A few days later, the boy was in again, scanning the shelves with his hands clasped behind his back. The young boy had been bothering Charles’ thoughts for the last couple of days. He reminded Charles too much of himself. As a boy, Charles would do much the same thing: come in, hands held carefully away from anything breakable, looking at the things that he couldn’t afford.

“How about those lessons?” called Charles across the floor. “Have you found anyone, then?” The boy came over to the counter.

“Not yet,” said the boy.

“I guess I could teach you some of the basics,” said Charles.

“You’d do that?” said the boy. “Really?”

“Sure,” said Charles.

“You’re a photographer?” asked the boy.

“I am,” said Charles, “Well, I used to be. Now, do you have a camera?”

The boy shook his head.

“That’s alright,” said Charles, “Tell you what. Meet me in the park tomorrow afternoon. Four o’clock, by the lake. We’ll start there.”

“How much?” asked the boy.

“Don’t worry about that, for now,” said Charles.

The boy smiled and turned to leave. “Tomorrow, then. Four o’clock,” he said.

“What’s your name?” asked Charles.

“Henry,” replied the boy.

That night, Charles closed up the shop. He locked the cases, turned off the lights, bolted the door, and drew down the metal shutters. As he rode the subway home he stared at the images on the walls of the subway tunnels - for movies and TV shows, insurance plans and ski getaways. Then, the doors closed, and the car began to move again. The images stayed where they were, fastened to the timeline of the tunnel. The car gained speed, and each image blurred past with such great succession that they lost their form and shape and instead became muddled swathes of color that could hardly mean anything to anyone who saw them beyond the fact that they saw them at all. Then the lights of the platform died away and the window showed only the dark interior of the subway tunnel, dotted now and again with fluorescent lights. The lights told him that he was moving.

The row of cameras still sat on the mantle. Each had its lens cap securely in place. Their straps hung down and formed loops of cloth, nylon, and leather above the fireplace, which was never used. From left to right, the cameras became newer. Now, even the newest ones had begun to accumulate a thin coating of dust. Charles thumbed down the line, and pulled the oldest from the shelf. His first camera. He sat at the table and disassembled the body. When the pieces lay organized and neat on the table, he

cleaned them. Each piece he handled with care, as if it were the last time he might touch them. Then, just as raptly, he reconstructed the camera. When he had finished, it gleamed - far from new, but illustrious.

He arrived early in the park, and sat on a bench below an old oak tree. He had never sat on this particular bench, under this particular tree before, but he resolved to return at his earliest convenience. It was a nice spot, there. The yawning branches and the wide leaves of the oak brought Charles a feeling of protection, and connectedness.

The camera rested in his lap. It felt very heavy compared to everything else. It was still in the summer months then. Charles wore a linen shirt and a short brimmed hat in the warm weather. He watched as many people came and went past. In the lake, beyond the path where strangers streamed past, he could see clear reflections of the trees and, beyond them, the skyline of the city's buildings. Charles watched a family pass by. The mother and father held their a young child was by either hand. Up, shouted the father, and the boy jumped, swinging forwards, and then backwards, and then he landed on his feet, laughing.

Charles noticed Henry approaching, and he clapped his hands to his knees and stood up.

“Henry,” he said, “you’ve made it.”

“Hello, Mr. Charles,” said the boy.

“Charles is my first name,” said Charles. “Here, I’ve brought you this.” He hefted the camera, and then placed it into Henry’s waiting hands. “Careful with it now,” said Charles. “Put that strap there around your neck. Keep that around your neck. Whenever you’re using it. Promise me you’ll do that. That’s the first lesson.”

Henry straightened his ball cap, and looked up at Charles. He was looking into the sun, and he had to squint. The camera seemed to pull at his neck. Henry was eager to learn, and he asked as many questions as Charles had answers for. Anyone who looked at the two wouldn't have thought that they were strangers.

Hours later, the sun was barely hanging on above the tops of the buildings, and cast large, skyline-shaped cutouts of light onto the grass. When the sun did finally dip beneath the rooftops, Charles and Henry became silhouettes. They were shapes - one eager to learn and the other eager to teach; outlines of a black void that reminded them both, in an oddly reflexive way, that there was always time to become something better. Or at least something different.

At the end of the day, Henry lifted the camera over his head and held it out, towards Charles.

“You keep it,” said Charles.

Months passed in which Charles hardly thought at all of the accident. He found activity and substance with which to fill his days. Between the shop and his lessons with Henry, time began to slowly heal the wounds that Charles had picked at for so long, all while looking away, as if to convince himself that the pain was dull and general, a part of life that everyone was made to endure.

Sometimes, as the their lessons ebbed with the evening seaboard light, Charles thought that the young boy who turned to him was in fact his own likeness: a screen-printed Charles in adolescent form who had, as if by a rare cosmic privilege, been pulled through the ether to allow him some form of absolution. A younger self, returning to be taught by the older; the younger teaching the older in kind.

Charles imagined that he saw much of himself in his young student. The cause of this, perhaps, was the boy's praiseworthy progress over the course of a few short months. Charles believed that the boy's progress could not help but reflect attractively on his own ability. But with each exposure of Henry's that Charles developed in the darkroom, Charles came to realize that the boy's shots could likely have found their way into the printed pages of the magazine, perhaps even over his own work. And then Charles' feelings of pride were glazed by a slow blinking warning light of guilt, for the jealousy and even resentment that he was beginning to feel towards the work of his young pupil. A jealousy of the boy's unencumbered excitement - his lack of a history.

The end of summer months took on a personality different from their earlier, cooler, companions. The heat slow-roasted the waste of the city and the smells permeated the sidewalks, streets, and homes. On one of those days, Charles bought two sodas: one for Henry, and one for himself. Henry gulped down the drink thirstily, wincing slightly at the carbonation hitting the back of his throat.

The boy had been staring like a cinematographer at the perspiration sprinting down the side of the glass soda bottle. By now the two had spent many quiet moments together, and their cooperative pensiveness was nothing new.

"You know, my mom wanted me to thank you for doing all of this," said Henry, breaking a silence. "She asked me to tell you that a while back. But I didn't until now, for some reason. I don't know why."

Charles looked at him in reply.

"Why are you doing this, anyways?" he asked.

Charles took a drink and then said, "Why am I teaching you?"

The boy nodded. Charles thought to himself for a moment.

“Aren’t there other things you want to do, instead of this?” asked Henry.

“Sometimes,” said Charles, “sometimes the things that are best for us are the things that we don’t want to do.”

Henry looked off and was silent.

“I don’t take pictures very often, not anymore,” said Charles.

“Why don’t you?”

Charles looked at Henry, and then down at the camera resting on the table.

“That’s for another time,” said Charles.

Charles walked home that day, as he couldn’t much handle the flustered air of the subway tunnels. Exhausted from the heat and with sore feet, Charles climbed the two flights of stairs that brought him to the apartment. He missed the lock the first two times, stabbing tiredly with his key. Inside, he collapsed onto the bed and at once his mind gave way to sleep.

The phone woke him. It was still dark outside and Charles fumbled around in the dark until he picked up the receiver. He could hear sirens in the background.

“Hello?” he said, sleepily.

“Charlie, thank God you picked up. It’s Walt. Listen-”

“Walt? What is it? It’s late.”

“There’s been a fire. You better head over right away. The whole thing’s going down. Jesus, man, what am I going to do? You gotta get over here, right quick.”

“Alright. I’ll be right over.”

Charles hung up the phone and looked at the clock. It was 3:35 A.M. Then it hit him, what Walt had said. There was a fire. The garage, the photographs. Charles jumped from bed. In the faint light, he pulled on his pants and a shrugged on shirt and a light summer jacket. He jogged down the steps and around the corner to where his car was parked. He sat behind the wheel and was about to turn the key when he thought better of it and went back upstairs. He flicked on the overhead light and picked a camera off of the mantelpiece before heading back out.

There wasn't much in the way of traffic, so he got over there fast enough. From a few blocks away, he could see the flashes of red and blue and hear the sirens. He had the windows down, and he could smell the smoke. It was dark but he could see the billowing charcoal clouds, illuminated against the sky by the streetlights below. Charles parked at the end of the block and got out. He looked at the scene for a brief moment, and then he raised the camera and took a quick photograph before walking towards the burning house.

Walt was standing outside, in the middle of the street, in boxer shorts and slippers. The fire had run over most of the first story and was tracing up the sides of the house to the second level. The white of the house had been blackened, and the opened windows puffed smoke like square, latticed mouths. The fire was going, but seemed to be on the way out by now. The firemen were spraying water on the smoldering house. The garage still flickered with spongy, wet flames. Charles took a picture of the trucks and the firemen, then one of the house and, finally, a shot of the garage, still alight. His heart was beating quickly and he was having trouble calming it down. He balled his fists. Inside of that garage, kindling those flames, were his photographs. Burning away.

“I can't believe it, Charlie would you look at all this?” said Walt.

Charles shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "Do they know how it started?"

Walt shrugged. "Could have been electrical, I guess. Maybe gas. I'm sure they'll figure it out in a day or two."

Charles looked at the burning house and then back over at Walt.

"I'm glad you're alright," said Charles.

"Me too," said Walt.

They stood and watched the flames. Charles took off his jacket. "Do you have insurance for this kind of thing?" asked Charles.

"Yeah, I do," said Walt, "It'll be fine, I guess. They're just things, after all. But man, what a nightmare."

Charles looked over at the policemen and the fireman. One or two of them were busy with the hoses and levers. The others were standing around, talking.

"I'm sorry, about all your stuff," said Walt.

Charles glanced at the burning garage. "It's alright," said Charles, "These things happen sometimes. Besides, there's nothing much we can do about it now."

The firemen put out the last few stubborn flames. The house kept smoking like an old campfire. It was just about dawn by then, and the sun came up with the company of the grey smoke. Walt was called over by a police officer.

Charles stood for a few moments and then approached a fireman who was coiling the thick hose. "Is it safe to go in?" asked Charles, pointing at the garage. The fireman looked over at where he was pointing and nodded. Charles picked his way around the side of the garage. Only the skeleton of the building was left now; the thin walls and the insulation had been burned away. Morning light shone in and lit up the charred objects inside. The place radiated a strange, extraordinary warmth. For all the

ruined things, Charles thought it smelled nice in the garage. Something was sweet in the smell of the sterilizing fire, in the crunch of the ash. Charles toed his way to where he'd unloaded the boxes with Walt's help.

The cardboard had gone first. The photo albums had been melted into hunks of plastic. Their hunter-green bindings were still visible, but had been singed and twisted by the heat. He reached down to pick one up. The plastic was still hot and seared the tips of his fingers, and he jumped back. The glass of the framed portraits had shattered, and the prints inside had seared away. The loose photographs were indistinguishable in the wreckage, either burned away entirely or melted into the heaps of ash.

Charles looked down at the ruins of his work. He stood with his hands on his hips, matter-of-factly. He took a photograph of the burnt remains, and then he made his way out of the garage. He waved to Walt, and then he walked down the block to his car and left.

He developed the photographs of the fire and glared at them in the red light. The flames looked rich. The white house, the black smoke, the blooming redness of the fire. It was all beautiful in its destructiveness, like bottled chaos. Like the raw, realness of nature taking back what it once owned, the captured image of the ways that the world works, no matter how you want it to work.

Like an indescribable moment of understanding the true way of things.

Charles framed the photographs of the fire, the gutted garage, the burned house. He hung them on the wall above the mantelpiece and the cameras.

The next spring, on a day just like any other, although this one was warm and the air was beginning to feel damp and heavy, Charles was out walking. It was the kind of day when you walked a bit faster and felt a bit lighter in the sunshine, but also made you drag your feet, not wanting to go back inside just yet.

There were many people out, walking on the streets without any seeming objective in mind. A young couple stopped Charles. The man was wide in the right places, the wife narrow and pretty. They looked extraordinarily happy together, and they stopped Charles in the midst of a conversation, as if there were hardly enough time in the day to fit in all that they loved to do.

“Excuse me, sir?” said the man. Charles stopped short. “Would you mind taking our picture?” Charles hesitated for a moment, and then agreed. The man looped the strap around Charles’ neck, as if he didn’t trust Charles to do it himself, and gingerly placed the camera into his hands. Then, the young man turned back, wrapping an arm around his young wife, and the couple posed and spread a pair of sincere smiles. “Make sure you get some of the city in the background,” the man chimed. “Do you know how to work the camera? There’s a little button on the top there.” Charles nodded, and brought the camera to his face. He looked through the viewfinder at the man and the woman. They looked happy. Like he and Julia had. He adjusted the frame and focused the lens, and then he pressed on the shutter release. The camera convulsed, and the frame blackened for a moment, before the lens reopened and the viewfinder flooded again with light. Charles did not look at the picture.

“There you are,” he said, handing the camera back. His hands were shaking. The couple thanked him, and Charles parted ways from the two lovers.

A while later, Charles returned home. He let the windows open and decided to sit down with a book for a while. He chose an old favorite of his, one that he hadn't read in quite a while. He pried it open. In the top left-hand corner of the first page, he had signed his name many years ago. He began to read, without hurry.

Nearing the midway point of the novel, he turned the page, and an object slid from between the leaves of the book and caught in the breeze from the open window. It flitted down and landed facedown on the floor. Charles looked down at it. It was white, about the size of an index card, but squarer. Slightly reflective. Charles closed the book and set it on the table. He swung his legs over and planted his feet, and then he leaned down. He had to bend it slightly with the ends of his fingers to lift it off of the hardwood. He hooked his nails under and turned it over in his hands.

He looked at it. It was an old Polaroid of Julia. She was smiling at the camera, at Charles. He remembered now taking this picture. He hadn't thought it very good, had stuck it in an old book to use as a bookmark. He wiped at his eyes. Then, Charles tucked the photograph back between the pages of his book and began, again, to read.

# Two Letters

Catherine sat at the table and watched her husband wrestle down a plate of reheated meatloaf. She'd eaten her own supper with the children two hours earlier. He looked, and ate, like a sad, tired man, chewing slowly, almost painfully, but he was only thirty-five. He set down his fork and rubbed his temples.

"Was it bad today?" she asked.

"No. No worse than usual. Just a lot to do, is all." He reclaimed the fork and poked at the meatloaf, mixing it with the mashed potatoes.

"When will it wrap, do you know?"

He laughed. "They said the end of April, but who knows? Maybe it'll never get finished." He placed a portion into his mouth, and added thickly, "I wouldn't be surprised."

Catherine looked away. "Don't say things like that," she said.

"Why?" He stared at her, his mouth open and the mass of half-chewed meatloaf visible inside.

"Why should you? The children might hear you. We don't need that sort of negative energy in this house anyways. And close your mouth when you chew. God, I'm so tired of that."

He swallowed with an audible gulp. "The kids are fast asleep," he said. She glared at him.

"You know, Peter, I thought this was what you wanted. This is all you said you ever wanted."

"This is what I wanted."

"Why are you speaking in the past tense?"

"I'm not. You are."

“Christ, Peter. For a writer you really have a way with words sometimes.”

“Thank you.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“It wasn’t?”

Catherine looked at him.

“I just didn’t think it was going to be like this,” said Peter, “I thought this one would be different, for some reason. It’s my story, you know? I guess I thought that would make it easier.” He looked down at his plate.

“Well, I’m going to bed,” said Catherine, rising from the chair. She moved slowly and painfully, as if there were tiredness inside her body that couldn’t be traced to any one source.

She turned back at the banister and spoke in a hushed voice. “I meant what I said, about you being the one who wanted this. But it’s not perfect. Nothing is. So don’t you come back here and take out your frustrations on the children and me.” She sighed. “I’ll see you upstairs,” she said, and walked up, into the darkness.

Peter said nothing, and watched her go up the stairs. The meatloaf had become tasteless and vile in his mouth. He scraped the rest of it off into the garbage. Then, he put a handful of ice and poured a splash of whiskey into a glass, turned off the kitchen lights, and downed the drink in the dark. He climbed the stairs and slipped noiselessly into bed beside his wife. She was already asleep.

In the morning, Catherine felt Peter rise and heard him toe across the bedroom floor with sock-clad footsteps. She lay in bed, waiting for the alarm to go off. The day

stretched out before her with an arresting openness. The children would return from school at four; Peter, she guessed, after dinner time once again. She never knew. Catherine tried to suppress her frustrations with Peter's work life and its irregularities. They were superficial and superfluous, her criticisms, and she felt strongly that those who found things about which to complain in the midst of lives such as these were those who didn't deserve to have such lives in the first place.

What she now had – it was funny, she thought, to think of one's life as a possession – was what she had hoped for as a girl and, by the time she was a young woman, convinced herself that she would never attain. Catherine was born in Silver City, New Mexico, and had grown up in Albuquerque: the “big city”. Her father worked at the scrap yard, where he tore apart the elements of rusted out cars and melted them down into reusable ore, to be bought by manufacturing firms and repurposed. He came home in the evenings smelling of rust and beer and never said much. That much heat can break down men into ore also, Catherine thought. Her mother waited tables at a buffet restaurant in town. She would return with the tired, leftover demeanor of a harassed waitress and a smile held so tight that, by the end of the day, she struggled to depict any emotion aside from a strange, synthetic collectedness.

As a girl, Catherine found and immersed herself in books, which had the ability to render worlds that seemed so far from the flat, taupe world of New Mexico. She read enough that in the end neither of them, the dull reality of the high plains nor the vivid fictitiousness of the her imagined worlds seemed particularly real. Her parents could afford no more than the public schools for Catherine, which she did not mind, having understood expensive, private schools as an abstract notion rather than some actual physicality that she might have longed for. Like the worlds of her novels, the Eastern

Seaboard and its red-brick and glass academies seemed far away and unreal. Any life other than this one, of one-story adobe houses and faded stucco and baked clay ground, seemed to grow smaller, until it was nearly too small to even try to grasp. A future at all different from this present began to feel unachievable.

But then, Catherine won a partial scholarship to a state college in the Northwest in her senior year, and her parents had teared with pride and worry, thrilled at her escape and fearful of the complications it would bring. As she saw it, she had escaped, and it was all the more rewarding that she had never expected to. Even more, the setting of the Northwest was something out of one of her books, fraught with towering trees and deep rivers. She was excited at the idea of living where the mountains and forests dropped off into great, rocky beaches and spitting waves. She imagined it was a place where things happened, where forces of nature collided and people made lives in their midst. It was the setting for the novel of her life, the first of her own choices.

Like any first semester of college, it was nearly winter before Catherine had so much as realized that it was fall. The landscape changed in color and texture, the heavy greens softening into yellows and finally to shades of brown. The world seemed, as it grew colder, to grow richer. It rained and the skies were grey, but Catherine found that she did not mind.

She had been invited to a party by her roommate's friend's friend, and was sitting on a musty, stained couch by herself. She had been introduced to a lot of people and remembered a couple of names. It was all very overwhelming to her, having come from where she did, and she faltered in the midst of the rapid socializing. She found that she

liked, strangely, sitting down in such a situation. From a different angle, the whole party took on a different air. She felt removed from it all. The people moved and swirled but she watched them in the way that she watched traffic, or people in the train station.

Nearing the moment of her giving in, a person materialized and lowered himself slowly onto the couch beside her. He let out a deep sigh and clapped his hands to his thighs.

“Helluva party,” he said, turning to her with trembling, slurred words. “What’s your name?”

“Catherine,” she said. “What’s yours?”

He seemed to be about average height, she guessed, and lanky. He had a good-looking face. Thin, without much facial hair. Straight, thick eyebrows. He had a constellation of freckles under one of his eyes. He had short, scraggly brown locks of hair, which despite the clear efforts he’d made to coerce them into lying flat, had decided instead to stick up at odd lengths and angles from his head, giving him a disorganized look of formalness. The dissonance of this appearance, combined with his clearly drunken demeanor, rendered him comical and unthreatening.

“Don’t you recognize me?” he asked.

Catherine squinted at him.

“We’re in class together,” he said, “The American Novel.” Catherine smiled at the thought of being seen.

“Oh, right,” she lied, “You look a little familiar to me.”

“Well, anyways, I’m Peter.” He offered his hand. “By the way, what you said in class the other day, about how there’s no religion in the *The Great Gatsby*, that was really great.”

“You think so?” said Catherine.

He hiccupped and nodded.

“Well, thanks,” she said.

He took a drink and looked around. “Quite a scene, isn’t it?”

“Who do you know here?” asked Catherine.

Peter pointed at an unfamiliar boy across the floor. “That’s my friend,” he said, “he knows somebody who lives here.”

“I don’t know anyone here,” said Catherine. “Do you like it here?”

He shrugged.

“Let’s go somewhere,” she said.

“Oh. Okay, alright.”

“Unless you’d like to stay?” said Catherine.

“No,” said Peter, “Let’s go.”

They walked out of the house and started down the street. Catherine walked as if she had some place in mind, but she did not; nevertheless, she was enjoying the feeling of purpose and purposeless at one and the same moment. She looped a hand around Peter’s elbow and grasped the inside of his arm.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Catherine. “I just want to go somewhere.”

They walked for a while and found themselves in the park. The place was nearly empty. They only passed one or two people on the lamp-lit path through the greens. They didn’t say much while they walked, but both felt the feeling of being in the company of someone who is ineffably, but undeniably, on the same page. They walked without speaking for a long while, as if they had already spent moments of both silence and noise in one another’s company, and as if it were something of a matter of course.

After a while, Catherine said to him, “It’s late. Walk me home?”

“Alright,” said Peter, and they started off back towards campus. The streets were deserted now, and they walked in and out of pockets of darkness between each of the street lights. He brought her to the entrance of her dormitory. She pulled her arm out of his, but he caught her hand.

“Will you have dinner with me?” he asked. “Tomorrow evening?” She blushed and smiled. She liked the way that he said “evening” rather than “night”.

“Alright,” she said, “Tomorrow evening.”

The midmorning sun streamed in through the kitchen windows and Catherine cut away the crust from a turkey sandwich. He was still such a child in so many ways, she thought. But then, most intelligent men are, in one way or another. He’d never quite figured out how to dress himself, and was still hopeless when it came to laundry. Granted, the things that he now wanted were less tangible than they had been in the past. But the previous night’s bitterness, as she saw it, was evidence of Peter’s continued childish dissatisfaction. She had hers, and he had his. She supposed everyone did, in some form or another. While he had never said it overtly, she presumed that Peter wrote stories much for the reason that she read them – as a means of escape, even from the more comfortable of lives. She had wanted to write, and imagined that there was an even greater catharsis in the act of writing beyond simply reading them; the ability to fashion a world, rather than buy a temporary pass into one.

Despite their manifestations, Catherine knew that her husband’s resentments were not, of course, with her, but with them – the money, the power, the means. Any

number of terms that refer to the same thing: the unseen fingers pulling at the far end of the strings. But, like any human being, Peter's emotions were often misdirected, towards her and the children and the leftover meatloaf and mashed potatoes and nearly every other thing that was not, in fact, the source of his troubles. It was them, the support, who are blamed first for problems of structural integrity, when his paralyzed contempt for the system was at its freshest, like drying cement in which any foreign object can still make a simple, and painfully permanent impression. But she understood this, and she had never managed to lie to herself about the nature of her husband's work or the ways that he went about it.

The day was warm and bathed in a comfortable enough heat, like most were in Los Angeles. It was strange, she thought, that the landscape never changed here. You could sleep for six months and the day you fell asleep on would be indistinguishable from the one on which you woke up. A comfortable sort of stases, the ease of changelessness. But the thing about a lack of change is that you hardly realize that things aren't changing. She couldn't say that she missed much the seasons of New Mexico, where the flat plains would cover in snow in the winter, hardly concealing the earth underneath. But she wasn't sure about this, either. In a way, she did miss it. It had seemed so large and imposing when she was young, the flatness and openness, but she wondered how it would strike her now.

So, as she drove through the pleasant, unchanging weather towards Studio City, Catherine wondered which parts of her life were the light layer of snow, and which were the hard, baked clay underneath – what changed with the seasons, and what remained constant. She wasn't sure. But the snow was easy on the eyes, even if each step reminds you that the snow is soft, and only an inch thick. What's there – what's always there,

below, is the hard earth. And while it's not as beautiful as the snow, it is solid ground underfoot. What you look for, and what's there regardless, underneath. Which is the life, and which is the fiction.

“They're completely divorced from the story as a work of art. It's just business to them – I mean, I know that in the end, all of this is about the money. I'm not stupid. But God, it drives me insane that this has to happen like this, that nothing can be made without them” – he heaved out the word them – “But you've got to jump through all of these hoops just to get anything done. Anything! What a racket.”

He was pacing in the kitchen with a mug of steaming coffee. He had to leave for the studios in just a few minutes. The kids weren't up yet. Catherine sat at the counter in a white terrycloth robe.

“I mean, there was still gesturing, way back whenever. That's what it was all about. It was always for political power or favor or money. But it didn't come at the expense of the art. This, this process of taking something raw and real and whittling it down until there's nothing left but scraps, for the masses to gnaw on, planted firmly in dirty stadium seats with their hands stuck in bathtub-sized buckets of popcorn? Horrible.”

He waved his hand in gesture, and coffee spilled out over the ceramic rim and sizzled into the crook of his hand. It landed in clearish-brown drops on the tile and left streaks down the side of the mug.

“Oh God dammit,” he said, shaking his hand.

“Quit it, you’re going to get stains on everything.” Catherine wiped the coffee from his hand.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

“A little,” said Peter

She pulled away the napkin. The skin was raw and slightly irritated, but the burn was minor.

“You’ll be fine,” said Catherine, “I think you might survive.”

“Just another goddam thing,” he said, “Now how am I going to write?”

She looked at him, deeply, in his eyes. They were angered and frustrated and childish and she knew that in these moments he didn’t want to be pitied or built up, but just to be reaffirmed that coffee spills and bureaucracy and the lackluster reality of dreams does, in fact, happen to everyone.

“You’ll be fine,” she said again, “Just fine.”

The next evening, Peter knocked at the door of Catherine’s dorm room. She answered in a cocktail dress that she’d bought earlier that day at a thrift store, and stood in a pair of her mother’s old, worn heels. She felt awfully adult and awfully childish about the whole thing - the date, the getup, the man at her door. It was like a childhood fantasy coming true in the strange space one finds between childhood and adulthood. The realization of a dream that you suddenly realize is neither as here nor there as you once thought. Peter said that she looked nice, and she looked down at the scuffed toes of his shoes and thanked him. She thought he looked nice, too.

They walked out of the dorm, to a restaurant downtown. Catherine slid into a booth and Peter went off to get drinks at the bar.

“What do you want?” he said, “I’m buying.”

“I don’t know,” said Catherine, “what do people drink?”

“What do people drink?” repeated Peter, “how am I supposed to answer that?”

“Well, what do you like?” asked Catherine.

“I like gin, myself,” said Peter, “gin and tonic. It’s good. I think you’d like it.”

“I’ll have a gin and tonic, then,” said Catherine.

He came back with the two drinks. Catherine tentatively sipped at hers. She thought it was bitter, but she told him that he liked it. They talked first about what they knew to have in common. Their classes, what they liked and didn’t like about school. They traced back to the beginnings of the semester, of moving in and starting college. Then they spoke of their pasts. Peter had grown up on the East Coast. First in Massachusetts and then in upstate New York. He had a mother and father and a younger brother. Catherine told him about New Mexico, about the plains of brush and the low, faded mountain ranges. He said he wanted to see it there, and she told him that he didn’t. They finished their drinks and Peter went off for another round. Catherine was already starting to feel rather buzzed.

They struggled to hear one another over the static roar of the restaurant, so they shouted instead. Any gaps in their conversation were eased over by the help of their drinks. They were far too focused on one another to notice each other’s flaws. After they’d eaten and downed a few more cocktails, they left the restaurant. It was a weekend evening, and the streets and sidewalks were busy. They threaded through the people out walking. Catherine put her arm through his, again, and he looked over and smiled at her

with the side of his mouth. They walked to the end of Main Street, where it dropped off from the shops and restaurants and theaters and transformed into dark, residential streets.

“What would you say,” started Peter, “if I asked if you’d like to come back to my place for a while?”

They walked a few more steps.

“I suppose that’d be alright,” said Catherine.

“It’s still early, how about one more drink first?” asked Peter.

Studio City is low and flat and seems to go on for miles, little boxes of moldable interiors that can be made to look like anything imaginable. The city, the forest, the high plains, everything in-between and everything outside, they all existed inside of pinkish-beige boxes. Made by human hands. Realities painstakingly constructed and then torn down and hauled away to make room for the next diorama of a distant time and place, as far as needed in the past or future.

With a visitor’s pass and parking tag, Catherine parked the car and began the short walk to Studio 22-C, where the guard had informed her that *Two Letters* was being filmed. A modest narrative with a correspondingly modest budget, the move was shooting largely in constructed interiors and with little need of computer generated anything.

Studio 22-C was a large warehouse of ideas, with great machine-movable corrugated doors. On either side, smaller double doors stood still for hardly a moment as pages and assistants and publicists came and went from the sound stage. Catherine

turned sideways to avoid a burly man with a steel wool beard speaking into a handset. The inside of the studio was lightless in some corners and lit to solar levels in others. The grey, unpainted concrete walls were snaked with thick, brown ropes of ivy, leading upwards to the latticework of steel beams and industrial lights that hung from the ceiling.

Between her and the constructed scene was a minefield of craft tables, foldable chairs, and silver plastic trunks, opened and disemboweled, their tendons of lights and cables spilling outward. In the far corner, the interior of a 50's Americana kitchen had been copied from elsewhere and pasted, surrounded by a milling crowd of people. Catherine had met the actors who were to appear in the film months before, along with the director and the producers. The rest of them she did not recognize. Gerald Greenberg, a handsome, rugged man of 50 or so odd years was costumed in faded jeans and an oatmeal-colored shirt, made to look slightly worn and dirty. Alongside him, seated at the kitchen table, lounged Audrey McMahan, the female lead, and a young, unheard-of actor by the name of Joseph Hartling. Peter and the producers had wanted a new face. Out of the hundreds that they had auditioned for the role of young Paul, Hartling had been the only one to have gained a definitive nod of approval.

A group of men and women, with stern faces and dog-eared scripts rolled up like makeshift periscopes emerged from a corner. Catherine recognized Mary Flint, from the Production Company, and Timothy Rose, executive producer. Behind Timothy shuffled Darren Reynolds, the young director, and Peter. He was staring straight ahead and his face was red and ashen. He walked stiffly alongside Darren, to whom he was not speaking.

Peter was, by nature, something of a stiff man. But even in his most inflexible of moments, Catherine rarely saw Peter as she saw him now: arms unnaturally straightened,

and not swinging as much as being forced forwards and backwards by his shoulders. His feet hardly lifted, more dragging across the shiny concrete floor than anything else.

Catherine approached a young man who looked inexperienced enough not to question her.

“What’s going on here?” she asked, “What’s the holdup?”

“I don’t know,” said the young man. “Some kind of problem. They did the scene about ten times. I don’t really know why or what, but something wasn’t working, for one reason or another. That’s for sure. People started getting bent out of shape, on both sides of the camera. The actors were getting mad and so the director got mad and then the producers started losing it. Never seen anything like it before.”

A grainy voice crackled through a radio clipped to his belt and he nodded at her and set off.

An authoritative voice rang out. “Alright, listen up folks. Lets take a 15. Grab a coffee. Gerry, Audrey, Joe, can I have a word?” The crew scattered, and Catherine approached Peter with the roll-top paper bag in hand.

He was facing away from her, so she said to his back, “I brought you lunch.” Peter spun quickly on his heels, and she saw from his red-rimmed eyes that he was nearly in tears. Of anger or sadness, or a mixture of the two, she couldn’t be sure.

“What are you doing here?” he said harshly. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“I’ve never once visited you on set. How do you think that makes me feel? I thought you might like a sandwich. Last night you seemed so upset, is all. It’s turkey and cheese. What’s wrong?”

Peter looked off.

“What’s wrong?” said Catherine, again.

“They’re changing my script,” said Peter. “They’re changing my story.”

“How? What are they changing?”

“They don’t think it’ll sell well if, after the accident, he’s, you know, not the same. They want it to be a neat ending. A tidy ending, with no loose strings. They want the credits to roll and the book to be shut.”

“It’s just a movie, Peter. It’s just a story.”

He glowered at her. “How can you say that, how can you say it’s just a story?”

“I’m just being realistic, Peter. What does this change, in the end? This doesn’t change anything. It’s still your story.”

“It’s not just a story,” said Peter, his voice rising, “this is my life. This, all of this, was so that it wouldn’t have to be in my head anymore. But that’s all gone, now. Now there’s going to be just a watered-down version of it, out there in the world, and it’s still going to be there, in my head. Nothing will have changed, after all of the this, and the point of all of this was to change everything. To see it all happen outside of myself. Maybe then, things would be different. Maybe he’d see it and forgive me, I don’t know. Maybe not.”

“Peter, I think you just need to calm down. There’s no sense it getting worked up about-”

“Stop it, will you? Will you just stop it?”

“What do you want me to say, Peter?”

Peter had become progressively drunk as they walked. He lived in a brick two-story house, ten minutes from campus, which he shared with four others. His room was on the first floor, and looked out at the slick, misty streets over a row of hedges.

“This is bad,” he muttered as he opened the door with Catherine’s help, “this is all bad. Everything is terrible.”

Catherine laughed. “Everything is not terrible. Look – here’s your bed. How about a glass of water? I’ll get you a glass of water.” She walked quietly to the small kitchen and found the glasses. When she came back to the room, he had managed himself into the bed, and his head was planted firmly on the pillow.

“Here, drink this,” she said. With two hands he tipped the glass toward his mouth, letting half of the water down the front of his shirt.

“Can I tell you a story?” he asked, wiping his mouth.

“It’s getting late,” said Catherine. “What’s it about?”

“Me, something that happened to me. When I was younger,” he said.

“Is it long?”

“It’s not short.”

“It’s late,” said Catherine.

“Nevermind, then. It’s nothing.”

She chewed her lip. “No, please do,” she said. He gave her an uncertain look. He took another sip of water. “Please,” she said, “I’d like to hear it. Really.” She pulled over the chair from his desk and sat.

“It’s not a happy story,” he warned. “Well, it’s happy at times, I guess. And sad at others.”

“Let me have a drink of that water, first,” said Catherine. Peter handed over the glass and began speaking:

“We were young then - you know, so young that not all that much seems to matter. When you’re a kid you don’t much think about consequences. There are consequences, but they’re not real consequences, when you’re a kid. Sure, you do things wrong, but people don’t blame you so often for them. Your parents will tell you that what you did was wrong, you might lose a privilege or two for a while. Everything goes back, you know, back to normal. Like it never really happened at all.

We lived in this big, old farmhouse on a big, old piece of farmland. It was upstate, like I was telling you. The rooms were big and all the walls were white. A lot of the floorboards creaked. You know the kind of place. There were the four of us: me, my mom and dad, and my brother, Tom. He’s four years younger than me, Tom. Things were pretty good, for the most part, out there in the country. My dad used to get drinking sometimes, though, and then him and my mom would get yelling he’d just go off for a couple of days and disappear. It was just the way he coped with things. When that’d happen, my brother and me, we’d go for a walk or play ball, you know. It kind of brought us together, our parents fighting, in a really backwards sort of way.

When we moved there, my mom picked up gardening. She planted a few things in the garden, bought a few chickens that she kept in a coop out back. My dad and I had to build the coop one afternoon. The gardening started out as a hobby at first, but then she really got into it, my mom. It made sense, I guess. My dad was gone all day at work, and my brother and me were off at school most of the time. We were already growing up, so she started growing something new.

And she was protective of that garden like nothing you've ever seen. She wouldn't let any of us step a toe inside it, not even my father. He said to me one time that the quickest way into the dog house is through mom's garden."

He laughed and stopped to take a drink. "What was I saying? Oh, right. So one day my brother I were playing ball, playing catch. Nothing too intense, you know, just the usual. Well I was the older brother, right? So it was kind of my duty to rough Tom up a little bit, you know? Teach him that the world's a tough place sometimes, that things can be unfair and you just gotta deal.

I decided to give him a throw way above his head, just to make him run. I threw it way overhead. Tom was running as fast as he could, looking up at the ball in the sky. So, he's running, running, running, right, and he's not looking at where he's going, he's just looking at the ball, just trying to catch the ball. Well, what happened was he ran right into mom's garden. Took a few steps in it before he realized it and when he did he leaped out of the way, it was really something. I'd never seen him jump so far. It was probably the most athletic moment of his life.

I ran over and we both looked down at the garden. There were these big, deep footprints in the dirt. You could even see the lines from the bottoms of his sneakers. But the big problem was that he had stepped on a few of the vegetables. And he had stepped on them hard. He was at a full run, you know. So we're sitting there, looking at these crushed little tomatoes and broken squashes, and they're all mushy on the inside. It was really a mess, the whole thing.

Tom looked up at me. There were already tears starting in his eyes, because he knows we're about to get the business. He looked at me and he asked, why'd you throw it like that?

I didn't say anything. I just looked down at the crushed vegetables. Stared at them. There was something about them just lying there like that.

Then he said that I had to tell mom that it was my fault.

I said that I wasn't saying that, that it wasn't my fault.

He started crying then, full on, and said in that choked up kind of voice you get when you're crying, that he was just trying to catch the ball. So it was my fault for throwing it. I just kept looking down at those crushed vegetables and the footprints in the dirt. I didn't say anything else. Eventually my brother ran off inside.

It must have been pretty obvious, you know. We must have had it written all over our faces.

My mom asked me right off what was the matter. I looked at Tom, and Tom looked at me, and when I looked at her she was looking at the both of us. She asked again. I looked at Tom again, and then I said in a quiet voice that Tom had run through the garden.

She really flew off the handle then. And Tom started crying but he didn't do anything. He just stood there, crying. My mom told us to go to our rooms and then she went out to see what kind of damage we'd done. We didn't know what was going to happen, and you know it was almost worse that way, not knowing. Just sitting there in our rooms, thinking that we were going to be grounded for life or the whole world was going to come crashing down on us.

I woke up pretty scared the next morning, if we're being honest. I peeked my head out the door and then I went down those creaking stairs. Each step felt like I was stepping on glass, or something. My mom and dad were sitting right there in the kitchen. My mom asked me in a real calm voice if I had any part in what'd happened. I said no,

that we were just playing catch, that was all. It was an accident. That Tom just wasn't paying attention. She told me to go get my brother up. I went back up the stairs and knocked on his door. There was no response, so I knocked again and called his name, but still nothing, so I opened up the door.

He wasn't in there. That was the first thing I noticed. His bed was made all neatly. His sneakers and his backpack were gone, I noticed. Over on his desk, there were two pieces of paper. I walked over. One of them had "MOM & DAD" written on it, and the other one said, "PETER". I stood there looking at them for a minute. Then I heard my mom yell out from downstairs to hurry up. I picked up the one with my name on it. I remember clear as day what it said:

Peter,

You lied, and you know it. I don't get why you lied, but you did. It hurt my feelings, a lot. Now mom and dad hate me for ruining the garden. I don't want to live anymore with a brother who lies and two parents who hate me. So I'm running away. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but probably a while. Tell mom and dad not to worry about me too much. I'll be fine. Maybe I'll see you, when we're grownups.

-Tom

I put that one in my pocket and looked at the other one. It said that he was sorry, that he didn't want them to be mad or to worry, but that he was going to go away for a while, that he thought it was best that way. It didn't say anything about me. My mom yelled out again.

I went back downstairs and showed her the note. I thought about fessing up right then and there, you know? But I didn't. I couldn't, I guess. I was still scared of getting in trouble, especially now that things had gotten all worse. I can't let myself forget that, that my brother had run away and I was just sitting there worrying about myself.

Well if things had gone to hell before, they really went to hell then. My mom called all of his friend's parents to see if he'd gone to one of their houses, but he hadn't. We didn't know where he could have gone. It was pretty rural country, you know. He could have been anywhere. Then she called the police. My dad drove around all day, and my mom sat by the phone all day, but nothing happened - no word, no news. And then it got dark, and they really started worrying. And I was worried too.

They found him, two days later. It was some guy out for a walk, actually. With his dog. It was the dog that spotted him, I guess. He was just out in the woods, and the dog started barking at him. He didn't have any food or any supplies or anything, so those two days had really done a number on him.

He was fine, you know, by most means. No broken bones, just a few cuts and bruises from the brush. Dehydrated. But after that, he was never quite the same. He didn't say anything for a couple of days, spent most of his time in his room, alone. And he'd get mad, really easily, and then he started acting up. He got sent home from school for hitting another kid. And then came the doctors and the therapists and the psychiatrists. A whole parade of them and a whole parade of different diagnoses and medications and sessions. It just went on and on. I can't even imagine how much it must have cost, all of that. He'd seem to get better and then he'd get worse. Had to switch schools, after another incident. He wouldn't talk to me, and he'd barely look at me. That

was almost eight years ago, now. He didn't tell me until years later what'd happened out there in the woods. He said there was this man, this man who made him do things...Toms going to graduate from high school this year, if he can keep it all together. He's been kicked out of four schools, already. My parents think he's gotten better, but I think he's just gotten better medicated.

I don't know what's going to happen to him, now. He was fine before it, before the accident, you know? But now he's...And my parents, they've been all out of sorts too. They know something's up, but they act like it's not, like if they just keep looking away from it the whole thing will sort itself out. A lot of the doctors, you know, they said that these conditions must have been underlying, that anything could have triggered them. Maybe he picked up the whole running off thing from my dad. But, you know, I threw that baseball. One baseball and one little lie, that's all it was."

The day of the premiere was clear and bright, and it stayed that way towards evening. Catherine threaded jeweled earrings into her ears and Peter tied a stately black tie. He remarked into the mirror that he wished it had rained instead.

"Don't say things like that," said Catherine, scrutinizing her reflection, "Not today." She fixed a strand of hair across her forehead. They called and left the children with a babysitter. Peter asked if she wouldn't mind driving. Catherine climbed into the driver's seat and started the car, casting sidelong glances at her husband, who picked at his collar and pulled on his cuffs. He stared silently out the window.

"Are you going to say anything?" said Catherine.

"What? About what?"

“I don’t know. About anything. How you’re feeling. About the movie, about the premier. About anything, goddamit. I just can’t stand the silence.”

“What do you want to know? What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to say what you want to say, Peter. This all has very little to do with me and a whole lot to do with you. Just say something, please, rather than just letting it boil inside you until you get upset.”

“You already know how I feel about all of this,” said Peter.

“Well, I want you to say it anyways. It’s good for you, to talk about how you feel.”

“Alright, Catherine,” said Peter, “That’s enough.”

She focused on the road and Peter went back to looking out the window. There was traffic getting down there and it took longer than Catherine had hoped. They were a few minutes late. When they pulled in, Catherine cut the engine. She leaned across and placed a hand on Peter’s knee. He put his hand on top of hers and squeezed.

“Peter,” she said, “Peter, look at me.”

He turned his head and she looked at him, and then they went in.

Peter watched the film with blank, glassy eyes. Catherine glanced over at him a few times during the film. He was sitting low in his seat, and he was pressing the tips of his fingers together. His shoulders were hunched, wrinkling his tuxedo. He watched the climax and the conclusion of the film with a sort of resolute indifference. He shot a scathing glance a woman in the next row who stifled a sob when the family was reunited. The final shot zoomed out from the hugging family to show a generous farmhouse, surrounded by green fields at sunset, and then it faded to black.

When the credits rolled, there was a good deal of clapping. It went on for a good while. The director beamed, the actors beamed. Proud of their accomplishment. When his name ran down the screen, Catherine looked over at Peter and gripped his arm. He looked at her and smiled, slightly. Then he looked back at the screen. The smile faded, but didn't quite disappear.

They shook a few hands after the show, but Peter worked to steadily move them towards the exit. Out in front, he handed the tag to the valet. While they waited, Catherine looked at her husband. He looked different. He was standing straight, and his jaw was held tight. He always stood that way. But in that moment, Peter looked different, somehow. Maybe it was his face, or the way he was holding his shoulders. Unburdened, if only slightly. The story hadn't ended how he had wanted it to, but then again, few of them do. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. The evening air rolled in from the coast.

The valet came around with the car. Catherine pulled a few dollars from her purse and handed them to the attendant. Peter took the keys and slid in behind the wheel. He started the car and pressed on the gas easing the car out of the lot and into the early evening traffic. He drove for a while, and then he took a turn away from their route home.

"Where are we going?" asked Catherine. He blinked and looked at the road.

"Peter?"

"There's something I want to see," he said. He drove up into the hills, to the farthest end of the last street. It was almost dark, and the hills were quickly become black silhouettes. He parked the car, cut the engine, and got out. He left the door open and started walking.

“Where are you going?” called Catherine, but he didn’t respond. She watched him take a few steps in front of the car, brightly lit by the headlights. She got out and started after him, barefoot. He disappeared around a bend, and when Catherine came around, he was standing on a spot that overlooked the valley. The sun was going down and the lights of the city were coming up. They stretched way out in every direction. Peter stared out at the lights and smiled. It was impossibly quiet. When Catherine walked up beside him, he said, “Beautiful, isn’t it?” She placed an arm around his waist.

“All of those people,” he said, “All of those people just wake up every day.”

Catherine looked out at the boulevards and avenues, the brightly lit parking lots and dark alleyways, the empty parks and the busy streets and sidewalks. She could see Hollywood, and downtown, and then a little ways out, the small houses on the coast. Then, clear of it all, lurked the black mass of the ocean. A few lights blinked way off in the distance. Beyond that, she couldn’t be sure.

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