

Finding Arcadia

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Finding Arcadia

A NOVEL

Steve Way

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Acknowledgement: The inspiration for some of this story came from the poem "Happiness" by Alfred D. Souza, and Nova's song "The Journey" was written in tribute to Souza's talented verse. Happiness truly is the journey and not the destination.

For Caroline

“By trying we can easily learn to endure adversity.

Another man’s, I mean.”

-Mark Twain

Prologue

A feeling of satisfaction filled me, a feeling of optimism. Christmas was a week away and there was a lot to be happy about. We were on our way home from the mountains, a huge Christmas tree strapped to the roof of our car. Dad was driving, with Mom riding shotgun. I was in the back, and as Mom and Dad sang carols to pass the time, I tuned them out and focused on more immediate matters. First and foremost, I was watching the falling snow, which had begun as a few flakes in the breeze only to become a full-blown blizzard. I was concerned about whether the snow would add up to something substantial back in Mill Creek, enough to cancel school to be more precise. I

already had a full agenda with this possibility in mind. First, I would grab my sled and get Zippo for a morning of downhill racing over on Gobbler's Knob. I would win, of course. Pretty much every time. After humiliating my friend on the slopes, we would amble into town for a cheeseburger and fries at the drugstore. Maybe a chocolate soda for dessert. Then an afternoon filled with adventures such as fort building, snowball fights, and other forms of frosty combat among friends. We'd stay out until dark, or dinnertime, or until we just couldn't stand the cold any longer.

As we entered Guilford County, I studied the road conditions along the shoulder of the highway. As expected, the snow was beginning to stick, accumulating in little drifts where the grass began. Rarely did we have weather conditions like this, and I was thrilled beyond words. The snow was coming down in chunks, big globs of icy salvation. School would most definitely be cancelled, of this I was sure. Not that I hated school. It was all right, I guess. It was simply a fact of life, something I accepted without question. Everybody had to go to school, didn't they? So why worry about it. Besides, my career as a full-time student spared me the endless chores my dad had waiting for me. Weekends were the worst. He'd start some dumb project, like painting the porch or cutting firewood, then he'd show me what he wanted done and I'd take over, only to watch him leave to begin a completely different project. Why was it that grown-ups never made time for fun stuff? Why did they just, well, work all the time? I'd never understand it if I lived to be a hundred. The only thing I knew for sure was that when I became a grown-up I'd always find time to play, have fun, and be happy.

Dad pulled off the highway in Greensboro to fill the gas tank, mumbling something about how awful it would be to run out of gas in the snow. Mom asked if I needed to go to the bathroom. I said I could wait, so then she asked if I wanted something to eat. Dad stuck his head through the open door and said no, it could wait until we got home, and then slammed the door shut.

Dad never spent money if he didn't have to, and stuff like eating and drinking could always wait. He acted like we were poor, like some of our neighbors were after the Big Drought and their crops died. I knew better, of course. We weren't poor, not even close. We were one of the only families that had a color TV, which said a lot. I even had my own money. Dad said it was important to manage money, so when I got my allowance I always had to set some aside. Money for a Rainy Day, he called it, which never made any sense to me. Why did people need money only on rainy days? Didn't they need it just as much on sunny days? This was something else I was positive about. When I grew up I'd be rich, and I'd be able to buy anything I want regardless of the weather.

Dad got back into the car and we pulled out onto the highway again. I liked the feel of the car in motion, the sensation of moving. Just the idea of having a destination felt pretty cool. It made me feel important, though I knew this was not actually the case since I was just a kid. Grown-up travelers always seemed like important people to me. They were always dressed in fancy clothes and carried suitcases and looked like they were always in a hurry to get somewhere. I have known for a long time that when I get the chance, I'm going to travel to neat places myself. Anywhere would be fine, as long as it was far away from my own front yard. Not that I don't like where I live, it's all right. Especially my room since Mom painted it. Before that, it had been stupid, a little kids room. Cowboys and Indians and stuff like that. It was definitely not cool. But last summer Mom painted over all the kid stuff and now it looks pretty cool, like a teenager room. Dad even let me put posters on the walls, so I bought pictures of Roger Staubach and O.J. Simpson and Bob Griese and surrounded myself with my Sunday afternoon heroes.

We were coming up on the Mill Creek exit when the car started to slide. Dad cursed and jerked the steering wheel, straightening the car and making Mom freak out. Dad said it would be a miracle if the county got salt down before someone died. I kind of knew what he was talking about, but I kept my mouth shut. Why did grown-ups always cuss about stuff like that? Who cared if the roads

got salt on them or not? Why couldn't they see the good side of things? The fact that the roads were icy and needed salt in the first place was a good thing, couldn't they see that? Icy roads meant people had to stay home, couldn't go to work or school. The way I saw it, this was something to be happy about. Why couldn't grown-ups just be thankful for the way things were, instead of complaining about everything?

Without any more slipping Dad exited the highway and started down Route 16. We only lived five miles down, but it was more than enough for me to peer out the fogged up window at the fields, houses, and barns. A thin white blanket covered it all, and my excitement grew with each passing mile. I couldn't wait to get home, turn on the radio, and listen for what I knew they'd be broadcasting throughout the evening – the list of Monday closings! Dad would be busy getting the tree set up, and Mom would be bringing the ornaments out of the attic. It was our tradition to eat junk food on Tree Night, and Mom would fix a plate of cookies while we got the tree just right. Mom would drink coffee, Dad would have a beer, and I'd probably have hot chocolate. It was the only night of the year that we didn't have a meat and two vegetables. Mom said it was important to always eat A Meat and Two Vegetables, though I wasn't really sure why. Something the government said we had to do, I guess. And when the government said to do it, you by God had to do it, right? But I didn't think the government would mind if we had cookies for dinner, just this once.

By the time Dad pulled into our driveway I was itching to get out of the car. I had things to do and I was anxious to get busy doing them. First, I wanted to call Zippo and see if he'd heard anything about them cancelling school. Then I needed to turn on the radio and get it on the right station so that Mom and Dad would be sure to hear the announcement when it came. Then, I wanted to...

Dad was yelling at me to make sure I fed Dodie and let her out to do her business before I did anything else. Dad was always telling me what to do, but that's how things worked, I guess. When you're a kid, people were always telling you what to do. That would all change, of course, when I became a grown-up. When I grew up, I wouldn't let anyone tell me what to do. For now, I'd take care of the dog, but there will come a day when I'll be the one calling the shots. I'll do exactly what I want to do, when and where I want. No doubt about it.

Dad parked and I jumped out of the car. I turned my face up to the sky and squinted into the falling snow, letting the flakes melt on my cheeks. Nothing could be more perfect than snow on this perfect day! No school tomorrow! Dad started to untie the tree from the car roof as Mom went to the front door. I twirled around and around, making myself dizzy in the front yard as the miraculous white snow tumbled down on top of me. When I couldn't spin anymore, I sprinted to the front porch and shook off before going inside. A warm glow filled me up inside and I was glad the trip was over. I was home, and I was happy.

"Are you going to stay in bed all morning?"

I didn't answer her. Instead, I lay on the rumpled bed with my back to her, my eyes closed.

"Well, are you?"

"I might," I finally said, yawning for emphasis. I rolled over and opened my eyes. Christine had gone back into the bathroom. Stifling a sigh, I shifted onto my back and examined the ceiling. The fragment of a dream taunted me, something half-remembered about Christmas, a long time ago. Concentrating on it only weakened the memory until it petered out, so I let it go. With a grunt, I swung my legs off the bed and sat up, slumping over the edge. My head ached, was pounding actually, and I chastised myself for the hundredth time about combining alcohol with my pain medication. After rubbing the crud from the corners of my eyes my hand strayed down to my stubbly chin. I'd neglected to shave the previous day. I'd been neglecting a lot of things lately.

Christine emerged from the bathroom. "So, you decided to get up after all."

"Looks like it."

"How do I look?" She stood in the doorway, a cup of coffee in one hand and her cell phone in the other.

"Stunning," I mumbled.

"Your sincerity is overwhelming," she said.

"Chris, you're just a paralegal, not a trial lawyer. Why do you have to wear such expensive clothes?" This seemed reasonable to me.

Instead of answering me, she fixed me with a glare that could freeze motor oil.

"What? What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing. If simply acknowledging that I've made the effort to look nice is that difficult for you, then I'd rather you say nothing at all." She turned to leave then stopped. "At least one of us is making an effort," she said with her back to me, then started down the stairs.

I started to rise up, to follow her and continue the conversation, a half-formed apology developing in my mind. Then I thought I should quit while she was ahead. It was the mantra of our marriage.

"I have a late meeting, so I won't be home until after eight," she shouted from the foyer.

At last, I found my feet. "Wait a minute..."

The front door slammed closed.

"Love you, mean it," I said to her perfumed ghost. I slouched back onto the bed, feeling inexplicably exhausted. Noodles, Christine's Pomeranian, trotted into the room and came around the bed to stare at me. Noodles looked more like a mutant squirrel than a dog, and our hatred for each other was mutual. "What are you looking at?" I said, returning his stare.

“Yip.”

“Same to you, fleabag.” I listlessly extended my leg as if to kick the insolent canine, but he easily scooted beyond my reach. “Go on, get lost.” Noodles lifted his nose into the air like an elitist snob, then casually turned and strolled out of the room.

After shrugging on my battered bathrobe, I went downstairs to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. Christine’s farewell kept echoing in my mind as I absently reached into the cabinet for a mug. I knew exactly what she’d meant by a late meeting, and it bothered me that she could be so naïve as to think I didn’t. At least I thought I did. It didn’t make me angry, just insulted, I guess. As I turned to the coffee pot, I spotted the list taped to the carafe so I couldn’t miss it. I yanked it off and set it aside, then poured myself some coffee. Armed with caffeine, I went onto the back deck to begin my day.

The weather was warm and inviting, the sky so blue it stung my eyes. We’d had a monster storm the night before which had left everything damp, but there was no sign of it now. My hand dipped into the bathrobe pocket for the pack of Marlboros I secretly kept there and lit up, exhaling slowly into the humid air as I surveyed the landscape of my world. We lived in the stylish Belleview neighborhood of Greensboro, just north of the university. The neighborhood encompassed wide, tree-lined streets that highlighted quaint, Craftsman-style bungalows. It was a very desirable place to live, if you could afford it.

We’d lucked out on a foreclosure; otherwise, we’d still be living on the south side of town. One would imagine this would be enough for the average working class family – the average childless working class family. One would be wrong in this instance. Christine, never satisfied, had aspirations of trading up to the Oakcrest neighborhood, the personification of accomplishment and really old money. The domain of doctors, lawyers, and incredibly lucky heirs lived in Oakcrest, not middle class advertising executives.

What we did have was a quarter-acre tract surrounded by a dog-eared picket fence and a three bedroom, two-bath house with plumbing installed by the Roman Empire. I scanned the backyard, taking in the lawn that failed to thrive no matter how much Weed and Feed I gave it, a barbeque grill that hadn’t been cleaned since the Regan administration, and warped deck planking in desperate need of some kind of waterproofing before it totally collapsed. I sighed, knowing I would not be up to the labor involved to make things right, nor would I pay someone else to do it. As I went to stub out my cigarette, my eye landed on a pine tree along the back fence, an Eastern Hemlock Christine had called it. It seemed to personify everything that was wrong with the property. Its needles were brown and stiff, a dense mat of them on the ground around the dying tree. I seriously doubted if it would ever be truly green again.

Evergreen. I narrowed my eyes as the dream returned to me with perfect clarity. It was so real, it was almost as if I were reliving it all over again. It had been our annual trip to the Duncan Christmas Tree Farm in Blowing Rock. We went there every year to cut down the family Christmas tree, and on this occasion I had been seven, or maybe eight years old. After much discussion and tramping back and forth through the snow, we’d settled on a Douglas fir. Dad had cut it down with a saw and we’d managed to drag it down to the little shack to pay for it. Mr. Duncan was there, wearing a buffalo plaid cap, serving up venison stew and hot apple cider. I could hear Dad laughing behind the shack, where Mr. Duncan’s son brazenly dispensed moonshine to those brave enough to try it. And here I am, standing next to Mom as she is chatting with Mrs. Duncan. My nose is running in the cold mountain air, and my breath is pluming over a steaming cup of cider...

“Mr. Urquart?”

The dream winked out. "What?"

"You okay?" Standing by the side gate was Stewart Glick. Stewart, or Nerdy Stu as I referred to him, was one of those people who grow up, yet remain in a perpetual state of childhood, and thus nerdy. Nerdy Stu made a living mowing other people's lawns. He clearly saw an opportunity in mine.

"I'm fine, Stu."

He entered through the gate, and then hesitated. "Is your back better, Mr. Urquart?"

"Still healing, thanks. Couple more weeks I think."

Emboldened by my diagnosis, Nerdy Stu took another step into the yard and looked around. Then he faced me with a quizzical expression.

"Go ahead and give her a trim," I said, reading his mind.

"Yes sir." He grinned, then turned and vanished through the gate. I had no doubt he had his lawnmower parked nearby.

Before the injury that had prompted Nerdy Stu's inquiry, I'd pretty much taken care of the routine yard work on weekends. During the week I was the assistant to the assistant marketing director at Thurston and Alexander (yes, they had the unfortunate acronym of T and A for those of you keeping score), a regional advertising firm that provided marketing solutions to automobile dealerships. T&A targeted high-end dealerships like Mercedes-Benz, Porsche and Land Rover, and it was the latter of these that would prove to be my demise. Determined to demonstrate the commanding presence of their latest four-wheel drive model, T&A agreed to accomplish this marketing coup by comparing the vehicle to a mountain goat. As assistant to the assistant director, they tasked me with obtaining the goat.

It wasn't until I'd performed the minor miracle of actually renting a mountain goat that I found myself responsible for its welfare. Since this was the case, I was present at the photo shoot to ensure that the goat wasn't injured. A steep rocky slope to accommodate both the goat and the SUV loomed before me. Getting the vehicle up to the top proved to be child's play, the goat was another matter entirely. Since the goat was my charge, it was my job to coax the goat up the hill and photograph it next to the shiny car. Unfortunately, I knew nothing about how stubborn goats could be. As we neared the precipice, the goat lowered his horns, bucked violently, and down I went. A shattered vertebra at L4-L5 and fusion surgery had placed me on an unplanned six-month convalescence, and a moratorium on all yard work.

I started to go back inside when I heard Christine's parting words again, and I paused with my hand on the door. Late meetings she called them. I was convinced she was meeting someone all right, and it wasn't litigation she was discussing in those meetings. I'd stumbled onto what I now referred to as The Tawdry Affair by accident. Christine's cell phone had gone off while she was in the shower. Thinking it might be important, I'd flipped it open, expecting someone from the firm. To my surprise, the caller hastily hung up. Curious, I'd checked the call log and found dozens of calls from the same number. I hit redial. It went to voicemail. A little sleuthing revealed that the number did not belong to the law firm Christine worked for, but it did belong to one of its partners. Sure, it hurt. It hurt quite a bit, to be honest. Nevertheless, I decided right there and then to wait it out to see what happened. I needed proof before confronting her with such a potentially damaging accusation. I've always been somewhat of a procrastinator.

True to form, I decided to worry about it later and went inside to review my list of chores. Ever since I'd recovered my mobility, Christine had been leaving a list of things to do around the house that required my immediate attention. I wasn't reading anything malicious into this; I just thought she didn't want me to be bored. The List. She would sometimes tape it to the coffee pot like today, attach it to the refrigerator with a magnet, or simply leave it on the counter.

Hey babe,

The flag on the mailbox is loose, please tighten.

If you go to the store, please pick up some boneless chicken breasts and a can of mushroom soup.

Oh, and I've misplaced one of my earrings, the gold one with the peridot stone. If you have time, please check the bedroom. Thanks hon.

Luv you, Chris

I reread that last one. Yep, she was really asking me to look for her lost earring. I had a good idea where her earring was, and I did not intend to waste my morning searching our bedroom for it. Finishing off my cup of coffee, I opened the kitchen junk drawer and rooted around for a screwdriver to fix the mailbox. I heard Nerdy Stu fire up his lawnmower and I listened as it settled into a rhythmic cadence that rose and fell as it moved across the lawn. The sound reminded me of the summers of my youth. Lazy, humid days filled with mystery and adventure. Cut-off jeans and tee shirts. Barefoot on the creek bank, the feel of mud squishing between my toes. Musky nights and homemade ice cream. A coming of age, like that first kiss. And always the sound of a lawnmower in the distance, a soundtrack to the movie of my life.

The telephone rang, effectively ending my reverie. Chris had insisted that every room in the house be equipped with a cordless telephone so that a single call produced a cacophony. I left the junk drawer and grabbed the nearest handset. "Hello?"

"Good morning," a decidedly cheery voice said. "I'm Debbie and I'm calling from Union Health regarding important information about a worker's compensation claim. May I please speak with Mr. Brian Urquart?"

"Speaking."

"Good morning, Mr. Urquart! Would you please verify your date of birth and the last four digits of your social security number for me?"

"Urquart, Brian A. Date of birth August 7, 1966. Serial number 2947." I couldn't help myself.

"Thank you! One moment, please." There was a pause filled with the soft clacking of computer keys. "Thanks for holding. This call may be monitored for training and quality assurance purposes."

"Okay."

"Let me see..."

I could picture Debbie twisting a strand of hair around her finger, maybe even putting it in her cheerful little mouth.

"...Are you still employed with Thurston and Alexander Marketing?"

"I sure am."

"Wonderful! According to our files the date of your claim was January 9, 2009, is that correct?"

"Sounds about right."

More clacking. "Mr. Urquart, based on our records, your disability coverage is scheduled to terminate in two days. In order to..."

"No," I said flatly.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm sorry, Debbie, but your records are incorrect."

"I assure you that there's no mistake, Mr. Urquart."

"Please check again. According to my records, I've still got two weeks."

"I have your file on my screen, sir. There is no mistake. Your benefits expire on Thursday. In order to extend your benefits you'll need an examination by a panel physician before the expiration of the claim. If you decide not to extend your benefit period, a report will be submitted to your employer stating that your status has been upgraded to full duty."

"Have you ever had back surgery, Debbie?"

"Failure to comply with the policies and procedures outlined by Union Health constitutes insurance fraud and subjects the guilty party to civil and criminal liability, up to and including prosecution for fraud under criminal statutes."

"You're not a real person, are you Debbie?"

"It's been a pleasure assisting you today, Mr. Urquart. Is there anything else I can do to assist you with your claim?"

I thought about how to respond to that one, and I almost said something I knew I'd regret later. Almost. "No, I think you've pretty much ruined my day, Debbie. Thanks."

"Thank you, and have a safe and pleasant day!"

I hung up the phone and went into the downstairs bedroom we used as an office and consulted the large calendar tacked to the wall above the desk. Running my finger along the rows of days, I counted the weeks. She had to be mistaken, it was just that simple. My finger came to a stop on Thursday, July 9, six months to the day I went under the knife. For whatever reason, I'd circled the twenty-third in red. I had somehow added two whole weeks, which meant that Debbie the Android was right! I was supposed to return to work this Thursday.

Disoriented, I collapsed into the rolling desk chair. Six months already? No, I definitely wasn't ready to go back to work. I still had some serious healing to do. I was mumbling to myself, my face in my hands, when I first heard it. Initially it was just a buzzing sound, a high-pitched hum like a mosquito. Then the buzz faded and I heard a barely discernible voice. In a tranquil, melodious voice it said, "Go on." Then everything became silent.

With trembling fingers, I snatched the pack of cigarettes from my pocket and shakily lit one. Exhaling slowly into the sacred atmosphere of the house was a major faux pas, but at the moment I wasn't thinking clearly. Or maybe I was and I just didn't care. Either way, it wasn't every day that I had an epiphany. Was that what it was? I wasn't exactly sure what had happened, as I wasn't accustomed to hearing voices. Maybe I'd been under too much stress. Yeah, right. That had to be it. Lying around all day with nothing to do but Christine's list. No, stress wasn't the answer. Lack of sleep, maybe? No, I got my usual ten hours a night. Maybe I was just going crazy. Now that seemed like a logical explanation.

Assuming I was still sane, I decided that the answer had to be medical, not astrophysical. A simple medical condition, scientifically diagnosed and clinically treated. I remembered that I'd been having headaches lately, some real knock-down, drag-out doozies. Migraine headaches caused hallucinations, right? Dismissing the probable fact that my headaches were hangover-related, I turned on the computer and Googled "migraine". Of the choices provided, I clicked on Wikipedia, not because I had a preference, it just sounded kind of cool.

A neurological syndrome characterized by altered bodily perceptions, severe headaches, and nausea. About one-third of people who suffer migraine headaches perceive an aura – unusual visual, olfactory or auditory sensory perceptions.

There you go. I was relieved and disappointed at this discovery. Relieved that it was something curable. Disappointed, because I rather liked the idea that I'd had an epiphany. It had a nice ring to it. Anyway, who would have thought something so pedestrian would plague me? At my age, you'd think I wouldn't have to worry about these things. Funny that at forty-three I didn't really feel old. My mind kept telling me that I was still young and vital, ready for any challenge life might throw at me. It's just that my body refused to cooperate. If those two could just get together and work this thing out, everything would be peachy.

I left the computer and went back to the kitchen, deciding that I'd mention the episode to my family doctor the next time I saw her. Back at the junk drawer, I grabbed the screwdriver and then walked out the front door. As I approached the mailbox, I caught a blur of motion in my peripheral vision. When I turned, I saw Noodles sprinting down Brevard Street as fast as he could go. "Noodles! No! Come back!" I screamed, knowing it was pointless. On three occasions, the mangy cur had escaped, and each escape had required scouring the neighborhood on foot to get him back. Dropping the screwdriver, I took off in pursuit. I couldn't actually run, so I loped in his general direction. As I heaved myself along the sidewalk, I imagined Noodles lying in wait by the door, waiting for the opportunity to present itself. I caught a glimpse of him as he rounded the corner onto Periwinkle, and then he was gone.

A gnawing ache in my back forced me to slow to a shuffle. I arrived at the corner, hoping against hope that he would be sitting there with his idiotic grin, wagging his idiotic tail. He was not. Slouching now, I placed my hands on my knees, panting. I wasn't in the greatest shape and I'd forgotten to go to the gym again. That made five years in a row. "Crap." Then I heard footsteps

slapping the pavement behind me. I swiveled my head and saw that Nerdy Stu was running up to me, his shoes bright green.

"The dog again?" he asked, sweat glistening on his forehead.

"Again," I confirmed, out of breath.

"You want me to get him for you?"

"There's an extra twenty in it for you if you can get him home before eight."

"No problem, Mr. Urquart." With that, he trotted north on Periwinkle, his reedy voice calling out for the fugitive canine.

With Stu the Dog Bounty Hunter on the case, I decided there was nothing left to do but go home. Walking down the sidewalk, I fired up another cigarette. We all have to die of something, right? Nearing the house, I spotted Bill McCoy lounging on his front porch. The McCoy's were our next-door neighbors and we spoke on occasion, though I avoided it whenever possible. Bill was a retired city cop and a real pain in the ass.

"That the new jogging look?" he asked as I approached. Clad in a wife beater, cotton shorts, and a high and tight haircut, Bill still looked like a cop, intimidating and unapproachable.

"Morning," I said. "Yeah, I'm making a fashion statement today. What do you think?"

"Hum." He sucked on a White Owl cigar and blew the smoke out slowly. "You after that dog again, ain't you."

"Right, I confess," I said, trying for humor and failing miserably.

Bill considered me for a moment. "You should take the time to train that mutt better."

"Right again, Bill. Maybe you could take care of that for me. You know, make him a police attack dog or something."

Bill snorted. "Ain't the right breed for police work. Dog like that ain't good for nothing except eating and making turds."

Couldn't argue with that one. I flicked the ash off my cigarette and then took one last puff before flipping it neatly into the street, which prompted a scowl from Bill. "Well, it's been nice chatting, but..."

"How's the back?" he said, obviously not ready to disengage.

"Much better. I'm supposed to go back to work on Thursday."

"Hum."

He didn't say anything else, just continued to squint at me, which made me uncomfortable. It felt like I was being interrogated, and I hadn't done anything wrong! I started to walk away before his beady eyes could bore a hole through my skull.

"You tell that pretty wife of yours I said hello."

I stopped. "I'll do that, Bill," I said without turning. "Have a nice day."

"Hum."

Before he could devise another way to engage me in conversation, I scurried across our front lawn toward the door. I glanced at the mailbox, the screwdriver lying on the ground below it. Nope, too risky. Bill would undoubtedly spend the better part of the day smoking his cigars and watching the street, ever vigilant for the slightest hint of malfeasance. He might even rise up out of his chair and approach me as I worked, providing suggestions on how best to repair the mailbox. No, best to leave that one for later.

I entered the house and stood in the foyer, lost. I had two days left, and I wanted to make the most of the time I had before returning to my indentured servitude at T&A. I wanted to do something meaningful, something spectacular, but nothing came to mind. With a sigh, I trudged upstairs and took a shower. I emerged rejuvenated, the bathroom murky with steam like a mystical rain forest. Using the back of my hand, I swiped a section of the mirror, revealing my sweaty reflection. I shaved the two-day stubble from my chin, then dried off and threw on a pair of khakis, a tee shirt, and a pair of flip-flops.

Ready for anything but with no real stirring plan of action, I decided to hit the grocery store and eliminate at least one of Christine's bullet points. Back in the kitchen, I scribbled a note to Nerdy Stu to leave Noodles in the backyard and left it taped to the front door. With keys in hand, I climbed into my BMW convertible (a company perk), cranked it, and backed out of the driveway.

2

The Food Barn was only a few blocks away, making it convenient for picking up last minute items, like boneless chicken breasts and mushroom soup. As a cook, Christine wasn't shabby, and her culinary skills eclipsed my own. She could expertly prepare close to a dozen different meals that were definitely edible. My own cooking methods included the likes of scrambled eggs, macaroni and cheese, and frozen entrees heated in the microwave. Based on her shopping list, I guessed she was planning to make one of her specialties, though I wasn't sure when she was planning to make it. Perhaps I wasn't even the intended recipient, and she was planning to impress her illicit lover with a hearty serving of chicken Marsala after inadvertently losing another piece of jewelry.

After parking in front of the Food Barn, I bypassed the large shopping carts and grabbed a small hand basket instead. The Barn was too expensive for weekly shopping, and I only needed a few items. I decided to add beer to the list as well, to while away the afternoon hours. After finding the chicken and soup, I wandered over to the refrigerated beer aisle. One of the reasons I liked the Barn so much was that they had a great selection of imported beers on hand, chilled and ready for consumption. I grabbed a six-pack of Heineken with my free hand and headed to the checkout.

The usual midmorning shoppers were there in force, a mix of unemployed mothers who carried about them a perpetual harried look, and a good number of retirees, who seemed content to wander the air-conditioned, Muzak filled aisles without actually buying anything. Seeing that the 12 Items or Less lane was unoccupied, I picked up the pace to get there before someone could beat me to it. I've always found that I'm competitive in stupid, unimaginative ways. As I approached the coveted express lane a woman in Spandex pushing a cart loaded for bear cut me off. Seeing that I intended to use the lane as well, she started off loading her cart onto the conveyor belt, as if to say Sorry, I'd let you go before me but, alas, I've already begun the process. I fell in behind her and watched as she struck up a conversation with the cashier. They chatted easily, and it wasn't a stretch of the imagination that Spandex Lady held sway with the girl ringing up her groceries. Of course. How else could she have violated the 12 Item Rule so easily?

The cashier, a teenage girl with braces and impossibly large breasts, took each item individually from the conveyor, and then held it at shoulder height as she continued conversing with Spandex Lady. Apparently, bagging the groceries wasn't in her job description. I felt myself becoming annoyed. "You're up to twenty-one," I said to no one in particular. I believed it was my civic duty to keep track, since one never knew when these unacceptable practices might be called into question.

Ignoring me, the cashier continued her conversation with Spandex Lady. "No, it was Tom who said he was the one who got stood up Friday night, not Sandy," she said, smacking her lips as she spoke. "Now, if Tom knew his head from a hole in the ground he'd know better than to go spreading rumors like that."

Spandex Lady chuckled and nodded her approval with this sentiment.

"Excuse me, ladies?" I said.

"I know, I know! I told him that Sandy should just tell him to..."

"Hey!"

The cashier stopped mid-sentence and glared at me. It was a look I was accustomed to. "Yes?" she said, a pound of hamburger suspended over her shoulder.

"I hate to be a nuisance, but do you think we could speed this thing along?" I said, indicating the Express Lane sign with my elbow. "My beer is rising to room temperature as we speak, and I don't like warm beer."

The cashier's face sagged while her eyebrows arched, a sure sign of teenage angst. "Sir," she began an octave lower. "I'm with a customer. I will get to you in a minute."

The disrespectful tone I could handle. The delay, though unfair, was tolerable. However, the way she enunciated customer was totally unacceptable. It was said as if to imply that I, with my meager load, was not worthy of a certain degree of courtesy, that I was less of a person, that I was a non-customer. Instead of arguing further, I set the little plastic basket on the conveyor belt next to

an extra large bag of Fritos, walked around Spandex Lady, and exited the front door.

After walking to my car, I stuck my hand into my pocket, pulled out my car keys, unlocked the door and went to open it with my other hand. It was then that I realized that my other hand was still holding the six-pack of beer. I had just shoplifted! I looked around sheepishly, expecting the Food Barn SWAT team to descend upon me. Everything appeared normal, no sirens, no accusatory stares. I'd committed the perfect crime. I furtively opened the car door and slid into the driver's seat, stashing the beer on the floorboard. As an afterthought, I covered the beer with an old newspaper that had been residing on the passenger seat for at least a month.

When I pulled into my driveway, I chanced a glance at the McCoy's place. The sentinel was gone, which was a good thing. I didn't think I'd be able to stand another interrogation, especially now that I was actually guilty of something.

Where'd you get that beer, Brian? Hum?

In reality, it wasn't Bill I was worried about. Christine would undoubtedly demand an explanation as to why I'd made the trip to the Food Barn and purchased beer but neglected to pick up her requested groceries. Maybe the truth would be best. Yeah, right. Then I'd have to explain everything, the larceny included. Maybe she wouldn't even remember asking me. Maybe I'd just worry about that when the time came.

I collected my now lukewarm beer and casually strolled up to the front door, just in case Bill was peeking out his window. Nothing to see here, move along, move along... As I approached, I noticed that my note to Nerdy Stu was missing. Entering the house, I put the beer in the refrigerator before moving to the patio door. I moved the blinds aside and looked out. Noodles was sitting on the back deck looking very pissed off with a piece of rolled up paper wedged into his collar. I slid the door open. "Well, it looks like at least one of us got caught today." Noodles just snorted and walked slowly into the house. I snatched the paper from his collar as he strolled by. Nerdy Stu had added his bill to my note.

Mr. Urquart,

I found him over by the elementary school.

\$30.00 for the lawn maintenance.

\$20.00 for tracking services rendered.

Total Due: \$50.00 (w/o gratuity)

I'll stop by later to collect. Thanks for your business!

Tracking services? I chuckled at that one. I crammed the note into my pocket, and then decided to tackle the mailbox again. Now that Bill was conspicuously absent I believed the coast was clear. A quick check of the foyer confirmed that Noodles wasn't plotting another escape. I slipped through the door and closed it quickly behind me. The screwdriver was right where I'd dropped it earlier. I picked it up and shoved it into my back pocket, and then I examined the mailbox flag. A screw holding the flag to the side of the box had rusted and appeared to have come loose. See? Nothing

to it. Just tighten the screw. Holding the nut on the inside of the box with my hand, I turned the screwdriver with my other hand. The nut spun easily in my grasp. No, this operation was going to require more imagination than I'd thought.

Leaving the screwdriver inside the mailbox, I went back inside for a pair of pliers. Back at the junk drawer, I removed a ball of twine, a jar of safety pins, and a mysterious piece of black plastic whose origin and purpose would forever be a mystery, then found the pliers. Back at the mailbox, I grabbed the nut with the pliers and turned the screwdriver with all my strength. With a wrenching groan, the screw broke in half, and the sudden give threw me off balance. My feet crossed and I tumbled to the ground.

I rose unsteadily, disgusted with my lack of mechanical acuity. A gaping hole, three times the original size, now yawned where the screw had been. The flag, once the goal of my repair job, lay bent and useless on the ground. Grabbing the hand tools, I hobbled back to the house and found the duct tape. I seemed to remember somewhere that real men could fix anything with duct tape. Back at the mailbox, I picked up the mangled flag, twisted it into a semblance of its former self, and then taped it to the side of the mailbox, covering the gaping hole with additional strips of tape. I stood back and inspected my handiwork. It looked like crap. The flag, no longer hinged, would be forever in the raised position and I wondered if this would, in fact, cause the mail carrier to go postal.

With the duct tape proudly looped around my wrist like some kind of Gothic bracelet, I went back inside the house. Leaving the tape on the counter, I stood pondering my next move. The List, as far as I could determine, was done.

But I did go to the store. Funny, they were out of chicken and mushroom soup.

But I did fix the mailbox. Duct tape is much better than a stupid old screw.

But I did look for your earring...

Oops. That was an outright lie, and I wasn't in the habit of lying to Chris. Stretching the truth occasionally, maybe, but lying? I couldn't do that. However, I sort of resented her asking me to look for her earring when it was obvious it wasn't in our bedroom. If she wanted to continue the charade that was her business, I just didn't want any part of it. Knowing what I had to do, I let out a resigned moan and went to the refrigerator for a beer. Might as well enjoy myself, right? I told myself that the alcohol would help ease my back pain. I told myself I deserved a beer after having such a crappy morning. I told myself it was five o'clock somewhere. But I knew I was only kidding myself.

I entered our bedroom and flipped on the overhead light, which activated the ceiling fan at the same time. The décor was pure Chris. The crown molding had little yellow roses stenciled onto it, which, if you looked at it sideways, appeared as a rather disturbing insect infestation. Around the bed was a frilly dust ruffle that I never understood, since dust continued to accumulate under the box spring even with the ruffle. Chris even had a small collection of perfume bottles arranged by size on her dresser, some of it so expensive she only wore it on special occasions, which numbered exactly one for the past year.

The room definitely lacked a masculine presence, unless my grubby boxer shorts and dirty sweat socks were manly. These I had strewn carelessly across the floor on my side of the bed. I set my beer down on the nightstand, and then started scooping up armfuls of dirty laundry from the floor. This I deposited on the bed for lack of a better place to put it, creating the illusion that a search had occurred. With my hands firmly planted on my hips, I scanned the room for other possible hiding places, and my eyes fell to the bed itself.

Using the bed for support, I hunkered down on all fours and then gently lowered myself. After lifting the aforementioned useless dust ruffle, I peered underneath, allowing my eyes a moment to adjust to the gloom. As expected, I did not see the elusive earring. I did, however, see something unexpected. Among the stray dog toys and a mateless bedroom slipper, I saw a wooden cigar box. Knowing that Christine didn't smoke cigars, the presence of the box was somewhat of a mystery. I grasped the edge of the box and slid it out from under the bed. The dustless lid suggested that the box was frequently accessed.

I regarded the box, debating on whether to open it or just put it back. I figured nothing good could be contained therein, and opening said box would be akin to Pandora's dilemma. Oh, what the hell. I cracked open the lid and looked inside. My heart sank. Inside the box was the irrefutable evidence of Christine's betrayal, the proof I'd put off looking for. I removed a small bundle of personal correspondence bound with a red silk ribbon. I shuffled through the stack, but found no addresses, just a sickening list of endearments.

My Love. Dearest Christine. Sexy Momma.

I tossed the letters aside, unread, and removed a plain manila envelope sealed with a clasp. Judging from the heft of the package, I guessed that it contained photographs. The last thing I wanted to look at was amateur porn starring my wife and some overpriced lawyer. I dropped the envelope next to the love letters, unopened. The last item was a rectangular vinyl notebook that looked suspiciously like a checkbook. I picked it up and slowly flipped it open. There were no checks inside, but instead a meticulously maintained register and some deposit slips. I thumbed through the register until I came to the most recent entry, entered less than a week ago. My eyes moved to the balance column.

\$243,877.34

All feeling left my fingers and I dropped the register with a gasp. A quarter of a million dollars? No way. It had to be some kind of joke. I picked it up again, flipped to the first page, checked the date, and saw that it only went back four months. Impossible! But, what if there were other registers? There had to be, since there was no way Christine could have covertly amassed such wealth in such

a short time. If it really did exist, that is. But what if it did? My mind slowly grasped the meaning of such a possibility. If it was real, if it wasn't some kind of twisted joke, then it had to mean that she'd been doing this, embezzling from me, for years. It meant that Christine had been skimming our accounts and placing money in her own secret account since, well, since we'd gotten married.

The overwhelming question then was why. Why would she do it? To buy a new house? To take an exciting Caribbean vacation? To leave me? With the checkbook in hand, I went downstairs to the office. I just assumed that Christine's clandestine account was with the same bank that held all our joint accounts, so I logged onto our banking website. I queried the site with the account number printed on the deposit slips, and was redirected to an entirely different website. What the hell? When the new website loaded, I saw a scrolling message that this unknown, smaller bank belonged to our larger bank and that the website was under construction. However, if I wanted to check my account status, I could freely do so. Hmm. So, the account originally opened with this smaller bank was now located in our bank. Interesting.

I entered the account number again, which brought up a screen that listed only one account. Christine's account. I clicked on it right away, anxious to see what was in there, only it asked for a password instead. Crap. I tried the password I normally used for our joint accounts. INCORRECT, PLEASE TRY AGAIN. I wracked my brain, trying to think of a word that only Chris would use. Then it hit me. I typed noodles into the password box. Bingo! The entire account history flashed up onto the screen. As I paged through it, I was amazed to learn that her devious siphoning had been going on for over nine years. Nine years! It literally knocked the wind out me. I scrolled back up to the top and was just about to sign off when something in the upper right hand corner caught my eye. I stared at it, convinced it was another hallucination. I lightly touched the screen with the tip of my finger. No, it was really there. The name on the account, that is. To my utter astonishment, it was my name, Brian Urquart. Huh. So, I guess she needed to use my name in order to electronically transfer funds, or something like that. I admit I'm not really knowledgeable about such things, but in a weird way it kind of made sense. Using my name on the account would eliminate suspicion.

Ablaze with this new enlightenment, I erased all my browsing history, a trick I'd learned at work when Christmas shopping on Amazon, then shut off the computer. I had to resist the urge to wipe down the keyboard to banish any incriminating fingerprints. I returned to the bedroom and replaced the contents of the cigar box, including the checkbook, and returned the box to its original position underneath the bed. Then it hit me. How could she be so stupid? Why would she leave something so dangerous right under our bed? Was she really that naïve? Perhaps, but another thought crept in behind that one. Maybe, just maybe, this was her plan right from the beginning. Perhaps it was her intent for me to find it, just as I did, and then confront her with the evidence. It would be apocalyptic, to say the least, a catalyst to set her free from me at last. So, there it was. But what to do with it? "Nothing," I said to the empty room. At least, not now. I'd keep it to myself, and decide what to do about it later.

With The List now truly completed, not to mention Christine's foul plans detected, I wistfully chugged my beer, finishing it in one long gulp. A quick glance at the nightstand clock confirmed what my stomach had been arguing for the past ten minutes. It was well after one o'clock and I was starving. I headed to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. The dim glow of the interior light revealed some moldy leftover Chinese food, a shrunken tomato, and a half empty box of Hostess cupcakes. And my beer, of course. Unless I wanted to feast on catsup and salad dressing, my choices were severely limited. I grabbed the cupcakes and the remaining beer, and made myself comfortable in the den. From my position on the recliner, it was simply a matter of reaching for the nearest telephone and hitting the speed dial for Pizza Hut. Once I knew my large sausage and onion pie was on the way, I unwrapped a cupcake and clicked on the television. Christine had insisted on contracting for the most expensive cable package available, and who was I to argue

that? Two hundred dollars a month gave us access to untold thousands of channels ranging from Algebra Today to Yoga for You. I preferred the sports channels myself, so I flipped it to ESPN and found a Braves game in the bottom of the seventh.

Chipper Jones had just stolen second when the doorbell rang. Amazed at how quickly my pizza had arrived I heaved myself out of the recliner and hurried to the door. When I opened it, there stood Nerdy Stu.

"Hi, Mr. Urquart."

"Stewart."

He fidgeted nervously. "Yard okay with you?"

"The yard is fine."

"And the dog?"

"Yes, thanks for finding him." I reached into my pocket and pulled out Stu's makeshift invoice. "Fifty plus tip, right?"

"Um, yes sir."

I removed three twenties from my wallet. "Here you go."

"Thanks," he said, snatching the money from my hand and pocketing it smoothly.

"You're welcome," I said, and started to close the door.

"Is Mrs. Urquart around?"

I stopped and regarded him through the half-closed door. "She's at work, why?"

"Well," he stammered, "I noticed that her boxwood over there needs pruning and I was thinking that as long as I'm here..."

It was no secret that Nerdy Stu had a hard-on for Chris. He wasn't alone, as I continued to learn. "That's okay, Stu, the bush is fine."

"Maybe if I came back later?"

I stared at him. The gall. The nerve. "I'll be sure to pass along your offer," I said with an edge of bitterness. "I'm sure that if she needs assistance manicuring her bush, she'll be in touch."

"Um, what I meant was, um, that..."

"Goodbye, Stu." I closed and locked the door, then tossed his crumbled invoice on the counter. When I'd resumed my position in the recliner, I started having second thoughts. I often did this whenever I did rash things. I didn't just burn bridges, I used enough dynamite to totally eliminate them. Maybe I'd been a little rude to the guy. What if he was too embarrassed to come around after what I'd implied? Who would mow my lawn if my back were acting up? What if Noodles escaped again? I knew I had the right to be stupid, I just didn't want to abuse the privilege. I opened a beer and guzzled it all in one fell swoop, then opened a third and decided not to sweat

the small stuff. I'd worry about Stu later.

My pizza arrived fifteen minutes later, and I devoured all but two slices. For dessert, I inhaled another cupcake and washed it all down with two more beers. Sated and feeling a decidedly pleasant buzz, I sank deeper into the recliner. It wasn't long before I dozed off to the sound of Steve Phillips announcing that it was all tied up and going into the tenth.

4

I awoke, immediately sensing that I was in trouble. A quick glance confirmed that the television was off, though I had no recollection of doing so. Confused, I blindly reached for the remote control, and then realized that it had vanished.

"Another productive day, I see." Christine was standing to my left, the remote dangling limply from her hand.

"Hey, Chris," I slurred. I started to get up out of the chair, which only caused an avalanche of beer bottles to go tumbling onto the floor. "You're home early," I said, stating the obvious.

"The meeting was canceled," she said without elaboration, and then tossed the remote into my lap.

"Oh?" I said, hoping I sounded more surprised than I felt. "That's good, right?"

Christine shrugged and walked into the kitchen. "I'm going to change. Any chance you saved me some of that pizza?"

I looked into the pizza box. "One slice or two?"

"One."

After some effort, I got out of the chair and carried the pizza slice into the kitchen, put it on a plate, and nuked it for twenty seconds. Then I poured a glass of Chianti and arranged the paltry meal on the counter for her. Chris ate like a bird and probably wouldn't even finish the single slice. She insisted on maintaining her size two figure through self-deprivation, and who was I to argue with

that? The way I figured it, her obsession with her appearance was the basis for her insistence on birth control. Christine's reluctance to bear children was thus the basis for my vasectomy, and the Urquart name would die with me. I had no regrets to date.

Christine returned wearing sweat pants and a University of North Carolina tee shirt, our alma mater. Though she'd majored in education, she had yet to teach one single child. I secretly believed that she abhorred children, all children. She took a seat at the counter and nibbled on the pizza. "So, what did you do today?" she asked, picking a piece of onion off her pizza and delicately placing it on the edge of her plate.

I took a seat across from her. "The usual."

She took a sip of wine and eyed me over the rim. "Meaning nothing."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Really. Just what would you say, then?"

I could tell that she was bristling with sexual frustration and cruising for a brawl. However, I silently vowed not to let her get to me. "I talked to the insurance people for one thing. They said I can go back to work on Thursday."

"About time," she mumbled, wiping a string of cheese from her lower lip. "You were going stir crazy, you know."

I wasn't crazy about the way she emphasized the word crazy. "Agreed. However, you know, it did give me time to think. I've been thinking about a lot of things..."

"Tell me about Noodles," she said, abruptly cutting me off.

"What?"

"He got out again, right?"

"Yes, but..."

She pushed Nerdy Stu's invoice across the counter.

"Yeah, he took off when I went out to fix the mailbox. He's back, safe and sound."

"Right." She pushed the barely touched pizza away from her and took a long sip of wine. "Speaking of the mailbox, I think I'll give David a call and see if he can do anything with that mess you left out there."

David Spiers was the neighborhood handyman. Young, buff and exuding testosterone like aftershave, he was a common sight in the neighborhood. I saw him often, always painting or repairing something, his mane of blond hair wafting in the breeze. David was the kind of guy you often saw depicted on the covers of romance novels, all pecs and abs. "You don't have to call Tarzan," I objected. "The tape is just a temporary fix. I'll deal with it, okay?"

"Like you so competently deal with everything else around here."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She stared at me briefly with her unfathomable brown eyes. "Nothing."

"Come on, Chris. Tell me."

She threw her hands up and exhaled loudly. "If you must know."

I can tell a lot about a woman's mood just by her hands. If they're holding a gun, she's probably angry. Christine wasn't armed, but I could tell she was mad. I nodded for her to continue.

She appeared to gather her thoughts and then leveled an intent gaze at the bridge of my nose. "It's this damn house," she said at last.

It was the last thing I expected. "The house? What about the house?"

"How long have we lived here, Brian? Five years now?"

"I guess. So?"

"So, I suppose you're content to just live here forever."

I blinked. Where was this coming from? "What's wrong with the house?"

"I'd just assumed that this was a starter house," she said, her gaze shifting toward the ceiling. "A couple of years and then we'd start looking for something better. Something bigger."

I was stunned. All this over the house? "Maybe we could look for something else," I said weakly.

"Like that would fix everything," she said.

"I just didn't know you hated this place so much."

Her eyes found mine again. "You know what I hate? I hate that we never go anywhere, we never do anything. Day in, day out, it's the same old routine. When was the last time we threw a party, or even went to one for that matter? You're always too tired, like that New Year's thing down in Charlotte. You wouldn't even discuss it."

She was right, of course. I didn't intentionally go out of my way to avoid social events, I just kind of let them slip through the cracks.

"A little excitement wouldn't hurt, you know," she continued. "A woman needs a little passion now and then." Her eyes became moist, and for a moment, I thought she might start crying. Very uncharacteristic of her. "When we got married you promised me that there would never be a dull moment." The sentimental moment passed and she snickered bitterly. "Well, I've got to tell you, Brian, it's been painfully dull around here for a very long time."

"Chris, if you'd just..."

"Speaking of passion," she charged on, "when was the last time you showed any romantic interest in me, huh? Sex is a two-way street, Brian, and I can't always be the one to initiate intimacy in our relationship."

What the hell? My mind flashed to the cigar box upstairs. No, she'd been getting it on a regular basis, I had no doubts about that. Then, as if to punctuate Christine's accusation, Noodles trotted

up to my stool and threw a critical yip at me.

"Chris, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were feeling like this, as if I didn't care or pay you enough attention. Maybe now that we've talked about it..."

She laughed, interrupting me again. "You call this talking about it? Really?"

I couldn't tell her she was wrong, because she wasn't. Everything she'd just told me was the absolute truth. It was rather unfair of her to throw it at me all at once, but to be honest she'd pretty much summed up our differences. I started to tell her this, but the words just wouldn't form in my mouth. She apparently took my slack-jawed silence for disagreement, which just seemed to make her angrier. In her fury, she appeared to come to some kind of decision, and I saw something dancing around the corners of her mouth, something itching to be said. I braced myself for whatever it might be.

"The bottom line," she started, "is that I'm bored to death. I'm bored with this house, this life, and..."

I waited, expecting her to finally come clean about my long-held suspicions.

"...I'm bored with you," she finished.

Not what I'd expected, and it was definitely a statement that defied a satisfying response. "So, I guess the problem is that I'm still around.

Her normally agate eyes became onyx, her voice frosty. "I voice my concerns and what do I get? Sarcasm. Nice." She slurped the dregs of her wine, and then slapped the glass on the counter, breaking off the stem. The pieces rolled toward the edge of the counter and then stopped. "I'm going to bed." Christine, with Noodles at her heel, stormed out of the kitchen and up the stairs. A moment later, I heard the bedroom door slam.

I was still a little dazed. How had we gone from the mailbox to my disappointing sexual performance so quickly and viciously? It was only after she'd left that I was able to come up with some choice comebacks, and I continued the conversation as if she'd never left. "You want a mansion? Give Donald Trump a call. Oh, and I'm sorry but all your friends are assholes and the thought of making small talk with them at parties makes me vomit. And let's not forget my inability to satisfy your carnal desires! By the way, when was the last time you got it on with a broken back?"

Thinking myself very clever, I grabbed the bottle of Chianti and chugged its remaining contents, then wiped my mouth on my sleeve before getting up and moving to the den. After kicking off my flip-flops, I removed an old afghan from the backrest, and then stretched out on the sofa and covered myself. I closed my eyes and willed myself to relax, but sleep was elusive. Fragments of the day crackled through my mind like cellophane, finally coming full circle to the argument with Christine. Putting this aside, I focused on more pleasant memories of the past, which blended with current events to form a strange tapestry that left me yearning for something ill-defined. Weariness and wine eventually dulled my senses and I drifted into an uneasy slumber. And dreamed.

I was instantly aware of the scent of mown grass and the sound of my best friend Zippo's voice. "Wimp."

The light was westering toward that hazy twilight between the end of another steamy day and the promise of a cool evening. Mosquitoes buzzed around my ear, occasionally mooring themselves in the sweat that trickled down the back of my neck. I was sitting cross-legged on the ground in a semicircle of my childhood friends. The cut-off jeans I had on offered scant protection against the scratchy ground, and I absently worried about chiggers. I was rubbing my thigh as Zippo continued.

“Or are you just a big, old chicken?” he taunted. Zippo was stout, with a crew cut and chronic dandruff. His mother had a habit of dressing him in boldly striped shirts that, no matter how often or hard he tugged at the hem, could not disguise his impressive waistline. Zippo’s real name was Robert, but everybody, including me, called him by his nickname. I was never sure where that name came from.

The question directed at me hung in the air like a bad odor, and the others were anxiously awaiting my response. Zippo was to my left. Seated next to him was Rhonda, who was thirteen and had a leg up on puberty. She was a good four inches taller than the rest of us, and rumor had it that she was the first girl in our class to wear a training bra. Not that any of us boys understood what a training bra actually was or exactly what it trained. Her long blond hair, parted in the middle and tied off with ribbons, matched every girl of my generation who imitated the Brady Bunch girls.

On my right sat Stacy, otherwise known as Lacy Stacy. For Stacy, popularity came as easily as breathing, and she projected an air of aristocracy like a beacon. While the rest of us were faithfully clad in denim and hand-me-down tee shirts, Stacy always wore something frilly and girlish. Her parents were wealthy, which meant that they weren’t farmers, and Stacy seemed to flaunt this fact whenever the opportunity presented itself. Nevertheless, she continued to associate with the rest of us and the reasons for this eluded me. Perhaps we validated her sense of self-worth.

Zippo gave me an impatient nudge in the ribs.

“Who you calling a chicken?” I boldly asked, though in reality I had no idea what had prompted the fowl comparison.

“You’re a chicken if you won’t do it!” he said. Zippo was not in possession of an impressive vocabulary.

“Okay, okay,” I stalled, not anxious to dive into the tempest unprepared. “So, what exactly do I have to do?” I sounded like a complete idiot. Rhonda giggled and Stacy was blushing, actually blushing!

“What are you, deaf or something? Do I have to hold your hand too? Now, are you going to take the dare or not?”

Then it hit me. I was playing Truth or Dare, the game that required nerves of steel as well as a vivid imagination. I even remembered this game in particular, though I found it odd to be remembering something that was unfolding before my very eyes. “All right, you don’t have to have a cow about it. I’ll do it, okay?” I said, getting to my feet. Standing among my seated friends, I looked first at Rhonda, who was grinning up at me sadistically. Then I looked at Stacy, who had taken a sudden interest in a firefly that had landed on her wrist. I held my hand out to her. “Coming?”

“Wait a second,” Zippo objected. “Ya’ll have to do it here in front of us. How else are we going to know that you really did it?”

Stacy frowned at Zippo in disbelief. The firefly, momentarily forgotten, took flight from her limp arm.

"That wasn't a part of the dare," I challenged. "You didn't say anything about watching." I had him there. Zippo, though not the brightest kid on the block, did know the rules. My challenge was a valid one, and if he'd taken the time to craft the dare more wisely, I wouldn't have had a prayer.

"All right," he conceded. "But you have to swear that you'll do it, both of you have to swear."

"I swear," I said solemnly, raising my hand.

"On your mother's grave," Zippo added.

"My mother ain't dead yet, moron."

"Geez, on your great-grandmother's grave, then."

"I swear, already!"

"You too," he said, pointing at Stacy. "Swear on your great-grandmother's grave that you and him will really do it."

Stacy ignored the offer of my assistance and stood on decidedly shaky legs. I'd never seen her look so uncomfortable, like she might throw up or something. The thought didn't make the task any easier.

"I swear," she said quietly.

"Okay. Good enough. Go ahead," Zippo said with a slight wave of his plump hand, dismissing us. He was clearly reveling in his role as dictator, as temporary as it might be. It was so Lord of the Flies it was almost scary.

I began walking away from Zippo and Rhonda, and took a stealthy glance over my shoulder to make sure Stacy was following. She was, much to my chagrin. I also noticed that Rhonda was craning her neck to watch us depart. We were behind Zippo's dad's old tobacco barn, so all we needed to achieve privacy was to round the barn and use it as a shield. As we made our way around the corner, I saw Mrs. Zippo taking down laundry from the line strung between the barn and the house – a few striped shirts remained – and that we would be in her full, unobstructed view. Since an adult audience was out of the question, we tiptoed as quietly as possible and slipped into the darkness of the barn unnoticed.

It was noticeably cooler in the barn and my skin broke out in goose bumps. I wasn't sure if it was the cooler air or the mixture of fear and dread I was feeling that caused the fine hairs on my arms to prickle. At the moment, twelve years seemed like an eternity, but not nearly long enough to have mastered the fine art of kissing a girl. I wasn't really ashamed of the fact that I'd never kissed a girl (family, of course, didn't count) but now that I was faced with the reality of it the responsibility overwhelmed me. I really didn't want to screw this up. What would Stacy think of me if I did? I felt dizzy and my legs were rubbery.

The tobacco barn was no longer used for drying tobacco and had become the final resting place for unwanted farming implements. I saw several bales of hay, barely discernible in the dusky light, stacked up along one side of the barn and I led Stacy over to them. We sat down on one of the bales simultaneously and I suddenly realized I was holding her hand, gripping it a little too tightly.

When did that happen? I released it and wiped my sweaty palm against the side of my shorts. I had to shift a little to my right as the rough stalks of hay dug into my flesh. Stacy was still and quiet, her wide blue eyes sweeping the interior of the barn.

My mouth, I discovered, had gone dry, as if all my spit had gone on vacation, and I found it difficult to swallow. Something the size of a golf ball had mysteriously lodged itself in my throat. I watched Stacy as her head swiveled around like an owl. Eventually she turned and our eyes met. She returned my curious stare with an expectant look and it dawned on me that she was counting on me to make the first move, to take charge, to be the man! I desperately fumbled through my mental files trying to remember how I'd seen it done before. I'd witnessed adults do it countless times, in person and on television, a meeting of the faces, a slight tilt of the head, a gentle connection of the lips. It was so simple any fool could do it. So why was it so daunting a thing?

"Well?" she said softly.

A choke escaped me. "Guess we should just get it over with, huh?"

"I guess."

Taking this as my cue, I leaned forward at the waist, moving my face toward hers. I waited a moment, but she didn't react.

"Shouldn't we close our eyes?" she asked.

"I don't know." Of all the stupid questions, and at a time like this! "What do you think?"

"I think we should close them."

"Okay."

I started over, this time with my eyes clamped shut. I bent forward again, this time sensing her moving in my direction, feeling her warm breath against my cheek. I reached out and placed my hand on the small of her back, guiding her forward. Our lips moved slowly through the small, dense space between us, homing in as if they had minds of their own, until at last they touched.

There! Her lips were firmly planted on my own, thereby completing the kiss and the dare. See? Not so bad after all. I started to pull away, letting my hand fall away from her back. However, Stacy countered my retreat by an advance of her own. She moved forward aggressively, the crook of her elbow locked behind my neck. Her mouth, still pressed doggedly to mine, forced me to continue the kiss whether I wanted to or not. I was unsure if this was a continuation of the original kiss, or if it had morphed into something entirely different. A fluttery lightheadedness washed over me. I opened my mouth slightly to gasp, only to find Stacy's tongue darting through the gap, exploring. Our tongues then met and intertwined, caressing each other.

Now not wanting it to end, I leaned in even closer. My breaths came faster and a stream of air rushed through my nostrils. I was vaguely aware of something stirring below, urgent and exciting. I kept my eyes tightly closed, and behind my eyelids, I saw bright pinpoints of light, the proverbial fireworks. And then she stopped.

Releasing the headlock, she unceremoniously pulled away from me. When I opened my eyes, I saw Stacy looking at me with a slightly pouty expression. There was not an ounce of guilt or self-consciousness in her appearance and I instinctively knew that this had not been her first kiss. Her earlier reluctance had been nothing more than a well-rehearsed performance. What I'd just

experienced had clearly exceeded the bounds of the dare and I was totally unprepared for the confusing emotions that followed in its wake. Stacy stood up. "You're a good kisser," she said in the matter-of-fact tone of someone reciting a book report.

"Thanks. So are you."

"I guess we should get back. Rhonda will be gossiping all over school if we're gone too long."

I made no move to leave. The kiss had left me with an unexpected souvenir, and the potential for eternal embarrassment was very real at that moment. Were it not for the darkness of the barn I would have been a goner. "Let her talk, I don't care," I said while concentrating on every unpleasant thing I could conjure up: road kill, algebra equations, boiled turnips.

"Suit yourself." With a shrug of her petite shoulders, she turned to leave. Then she stopped, and in a melodious whisper she said, "You really should go." Then she was gone.

I let out a sigh of relief and sprawled out on the hay bale, looking up fixedly at the barn rafters. I was feeling content, yet unfulfilled at the same time. It was a new experience for me, an uncharted region that required some consideration. I was pondering this when I felt moisture on my face, as if some unexplainable drip had materialized from above. I raised my hand to brush it away when I encountered something warm and hairy.

I awoke to Noodles' tongue on my cheek, lapping up the remnants of the Chianti. "Ugh!" I pushed him away and sat up. Bright sunlight was streaming in through the patio door. A new day had dawned.

5

The house was oddly silent, and when I entered the kitchen I saw that The List was uncharacteristically missing. I wasn't sure if this was a new development because of my pending return to work, or if Christine had left early and simply forgotten to write it. I assumed the latter and that the reason Chris had departed before dawn was to avoid further confrontation. She had, however, left a message.

Last night's cancelled meeting is on for tonight. I'll be home around 8. Please be awake – and

sober. We need to talk.

I reread her note twice. There could be no mistake, tonight was the big night. By all indications, Chris was ready to take the big plunge. I guessed the previous night's discourse had been the trigger she'd been waiting for.

I'm not really sure how other people's minds work, and I'm not really sure I want to know. My own mind operates like a movie projector, displaying memories and future scenarios like an amateur film production. The projector clicked on now, and the film began. I saw them together, lying on a silk-sheeted bed, sweating and reeking of sex. Christine was in focus, but the mystery man with her was unformed, amorphous, some kind of special effect. Chris was tittering as she revealed her plans to him, berating me while promising him a life rich with romance and excitement along with solemn promises of fidelity. The ghostly shape replied, making promises of his own. A fine home. Trips to Tuscany. The movie concluded with them toasting their promising future together and driving off into the sunset.

When it was over the film unspooled, slapping against my brain as the reel spun around. I mentally clicked the projector off and opened the refrigerator, inexplicably parched. Grabbing the nearest beverage, I thumbed off the cap to the milk jug and chugged it right out of the container. I drank so hard and fast that it burned my throat, but I continued to pour it down until the jug was empty. Exhaling loudly, I tossed the empty container into the sink, unconsciously wiping away the white rivulets that coursed down my chin. I was so preoccupied that I almost didn't hear it. I paused, listening for the voice to repeat.

Go on. You really should go.

A tiny, unmeaning sound, like an echo.

"Go where?" I said to the empty room.

There was no response. The voice, or whatever it was, was gone. However, an idea began to bloom in its place, a sweet, audacious idea. Never having served in the military, the term preemptive strike seemed peculiar to me, but that was what I thought of at that moment. It seemed so utterly appropriate. Why should I sit idly by while she dictated the terms of my life? I've never been a man of action, at least not when it came to acting boldly, but maybe this situation was different. Maybe this situation absolutely required an irresponsible and foolish gesture. As I pondered this, my hand absently reached for my cigarettes, and then I realized that they were still in my bathrobe pocket. With a growing sense of exhilaration, I raced up the stairs to our bedroom, fished out a cigarette from my bathrobe, and lit up with a malicious grunt. My idea was cunning, devious and perfect. It was perfect because it was the last thing anyone would expect me to do.

I moved into the bathroom, taking one last drag on the cigarette before dousing it in the toilet. As I searched my reflection in the mirror, I asked myself what I really wanted, what my true motives were. As I thought about it, I began to believe that perhaps a preemptive strike wasn't really that appropriate after all. It conjured up images of bombs dropping and villages ablaze with napalm. It was all much too hostile for my taste, and I had no desire to hurt anyone. It was true that Christine didn't love me, and if I was really being honest with myself, I didn't love her anymore, either. Perhaps I never really did. So, where did this leave me in the scheme of things? Why not let the situation unfold as it was meant to and be done with it? If she wanted to leave, who was I to stop her? We could simply go our separate ways and leave it at that. What was I hoping for, anyway?

But consider this. Wouldn't it be much more satisfying if I left her before she could leave me? Would it make a difference? It was pretty much like washing your car in the rain. What was the point, right? It was downright childish and petty when you thought about it that way. So why was I feeling so excited, so giddy? Then, in a rare moment of lucidity, it came to me and I understood. It all boiled down to semantics. It wasn't the thought of leaving that was scratching my itch. There was nothing to gain by running away from a bad situation. However, I had everything to gain by running to something. But what?

I stared at my image in the mirror, forcing my mind to come up with an answer to that very question. My personal movie projector switched on again, and the mirror became a screen. On it, I saw myself as a boy, a satisfied and happy youth, playing with my friends and enjoying my life. I snapped my fingers and the movie ended, but not before I was able to come to the realization that I now knew what I needed to find. Happiness, contentment, meaning. What I had to find were those intangible feelings I'd somehow lost along the way. There simply had to be something better for me out there, beyond stubborn goats, broken mailboxes and unfaithful spouses. So that's what the angelic voices had been telling me, the epiphany beckoning me with its siren. All I had to do was heed the call.

I rubbed my chin, pondering this revelation. The dreams and memories, there was a reason they were all coming back to me. They were pointing me toward a simpler time, a better place commonly known as childhood. So that's where I needed to go, but how? I couldn't travel back in time, I couldn't be young again. As glorious as that sounded, I wasn't even sure I wanted to be a kid again; there were too many advantages to adulthood I didn't want to forfeit. If I couldn't physically achieve childhood, then maybe I could achieve it via genius loci. Perhaps a place, an actual physical location, existed where life was uncomplicated and simple. Maybe there was a place where one could live the life of a child in spirit. Maybe I could find that place, and maybe, just maybe, I could be happy again.

Downstairs in the office I sat at the desk, turned on the computer, and waited for it to boot up. There had to be a place, an actual geographical location that was unassuming and uncomplicated. A word popped into my head, and when the computer signaled it was ready to go to work, I typed it into the search engine.

Utopia: an ideal community or society where all the evils such as poverty and misery are absent.

Utopia, huh? I knew Utopia was a mythical place, that it wasn't real, but it sure sounded good. Okay, now we're cooking! So, where on earth could I find the equivalent? I studied the related search terms cited at the bottom of the page. The Garden of Eden? Nope, too Biblical. Shangri-La? Nah, too Asian. The Land of Nod? What the hell is that? This wasn't helping at all. Everything listed was just as imaginary as Utopia. I scrolled down and saw one I'd not heard of before: Arcadia. Hmm. I Googled it, and apparently it was an actual place, not fictional, and was somewhere in Greece. I didn't really want to live in Greece, but I clicked on it anyway. A region offering rural simplicity and contentment.

This was interesting, since the definition of Arcadia used the same adjectives I'd just been mumbling to myself. As I continued reading, I learned that there was an Arcadia in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains in southern California. Well, if there was one in Greece and one in California, wouldn't it stand to reason there might be even more offerings? I closed out the Google search, brought up the mapping function, and entered Arcadia as my destination. Besides

California, I was surprised to see that Arcadia was also in Florida, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska and Ohio. I took a deep breath and cracked my knuckles, then settled in for some intensive research. It took almost three hours, but I checked on each and every Arcadia in the United States. After careful consideration and a little bit of hand-wringing, I chose Nebraska.

Arcadia, Nebraska was primarily agricultural, sparsely populated, and extremely rural. Based on its description I imagined gun-toting, banjo-picking rednecks abounding, but I quickly banished the image. I refused to believe that such stereotypes populated my Arcadia. But if not rednecks, then who? Well, farmers, of course, a profession that wasn't entirely foreign to me. I didn't think my current career would seamlessly transfer to Arcadia, as there couldn't be much of a need for marketing executives in such a place. This didn't bother me in the least, since I pretty much hated marketing anyway. I could do something else, right? I could be truck driver, or a short-order cook. Maybe I could be a teacher. The alternatives were endless. *

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