

Kol

2003

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Eli Feldblum, Editor Mark Srulowitz, Editor Meryl Kaufman, Poetry Editor Eli Feldblum, Layout

## Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, in the years preceding the Civil War, wrote: "Words - so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in the dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them." Two years ago, our lives and our freedom were attacked, and millions of people from all corners of the globe witnessed our towers collapse into themselves, our Pentagon ablaze, and the heroism of the passengers of flight 93 as they sacrificed their lives to save countless others. The healing process will be a long one, one that may never end for those who lost a loved one. One response, a response that many feel is appropriate, is to channel the grief and despair, the frustration and anger, into a lasting expression of thought. We feel that transferring our thoughts and feelings to paper may help us achieve inner peace. In his award-winning short story, Richard McCann writes that "the gift of life is saturated with death," but that it is still "dear ordinary life! Life as you hungered for it, with its pleasures and requirements." Perhaps, through eloquence and elocution, through the ancient power of the pen as being mightier than the sword, we can, as Americans and as citizens of the world, take solace in the strength, comfort, and gentle graces of literature and writing. Perhaps, while we can do very little to assuage the pain or replenish the losses, we can provide, even for only one fleeting instant, the pleasures of "dear ordinary life."

A Chinese proverb states the the "palest ink is better than the clearest memory." This adage has assumed a significant appropriateness in the past year, when many of us have questioned the power and limitations of language, and the modern significance of prose and poetry. Writing remains one of the most adaptive and creative ways for man to express himself and YU has been excellent in recognizing that need. The first annual reincarnation of Kol comes on the heels of the YC writing contests, including the Jerome Robbins Memorial Award. Many other submissions have come from the various writing classes and workshops that YU has recently offered. We dedicate this issue to the staff and faculty at YU for its

open and potent welcoming of writers.

Sincerely, Eli Feldblum & Mark Srulowitz, Editors

> "Enough pails of water -- a river" - Chinese Proverb

### Table of Contents

loo Hot
Kayla Klatzin6
Linger
Meryl Kaufman10
All the World's a Stage*
Matt Schneider17
The End of the Trail
Stephanie Epstein18
189th
Jessica Russak23
My Anthem
Mark Srulowitz33
His Walk of Life
Rami Berner54
9/11/01
Avraham R.C. Pittleman58
Room
Hesh Lewis61
For the Peace of your Captivities*
Ami Steinberger63
The Suicide King**
Eli Feldblum65

\* Winner of Best Poem in the YC Writing Contest

\*\* Winner of the Jerome Robbins Memorial Award for Best Original Short Story

### "Too Hot"

**K**ayla **K**latzin

The heat was unbearable that day.

"Hello Middletown! The temperature is currently 97 degrees," a cheery man said on the blaring radio. "Talk about a hot summer day! Hope you're all in swimming pools or by air conditioners—"

Judy shut the radio off. She couldn't take listening to that man anymore. If it was 97 degrees outside, it was several degrees more in her little bakery, Judy's Goods, that hot July day. She did not want to hear about swimming pools and air conditioners.

"Why can't these stupid fans work?" she muttered to herself, kicking one of the three flimsy fans.

"This heat is killing me!" Jake, her assistant, shouted from the front counter, as he wiped sweat off his very red face.

"Tell me about it," Judy yelled back. "Take as many drinks as you want."

As she loaded and unloaded more pastries and cakes into her large ovens, Judy wondered how she ever got into the business she now hated. Judy once liked to bake. As a kid, she would make cookies and cakes from scratch when her parents had guests, and nothing was more fun than coming up with her own original confections. That's why she decided to go into the baking business. What could be more fun, after all, than doing something you love all day long? Only too late did Judy realize the flaw of this logic. Baking all day, almost everyday, quickly stripped away the enjoyment.

Judy did not specialize in anything particular, so she made everything. Cookies, cakes for all occasions,

danishes, donuts, apple turnovers, Napoleans—the list went on. There was always something that had to be made, and despite having Jake as an assistant, she had to do most of the work. She was so busy baking she hardly had time to see customers delighting in her goods, one of the few things that made her happy. She had a fair amount of customers too, but so much money went into paying back the loan for her small bakery that she could barely keep herself afloat. On top of everything, Judy had to work around hot ovens in July without air conditioning.

"Judy, Mrs. Brown is here!" Jake shouted. "I gave her the birthday cake, but she wants you to add a few more flowers."

Judy felt like screaming. Mrs. Brown was her most annoying customer. She was never satisfied with anything Judy made for her. Judy wondered why Mrs. Brown kept coming back. She wanted to tell her to get out and stay out, yet somehow Judy contained her anger and mechanically added on the extra flowers.

"Here you go, Mrs. Brown," Judy said, faking a smile.

"I swear I will smash it in your face if you don't like it now," she thought as Mrs. Brown scrutinized the corrected cake.

Judy smiled wickedly at the thought of chocolate cake all over Mrs. Brown's overly made-up face and perfectly set blond hair. She imagined throwing it fast and hard, so that the only thing visible would be her blue eyes and pouty mouth.

"This will do, thank you," Mrs. Brown said in her light English accent, then paid and headed for the door. "It's dreadfully hot in here. You really should do something about this heat."

Judy's face reddened, but she had no time to think about Mrs.

Brown. She had to get back to work. For another straight hour she baked, but then she couldn't take it anymore. Her brown hair was sticking to her face. She was sweating so much that that her clothes clung to her body, weighing down her slim figure. She felt aged, like she had suddenly jumped from thirty to forty.

"That's it!" Judy said aloud.

She left everything, walked over to the sink, turned on the cold water to maximum pressure and placed her head beneath the faucet. Never had she felt such relief, such pure exhilaration. She entered a daydream state, filled with visions of swimming pools, spectacular waterfalls, picturesque lakes, winding water slides and mint chocolate-chip ice cream. She had no intention of turning the faucet off for a long time.

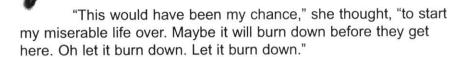
"Judy! Judy!" Jake yelled.

"Huh?" Judy muttered as she turned off the water, annoyed at this interruption. Then she smelled the smoke, and saw the fire.

"Oh my G-d! Call the fire station!" Judy screamed.

How could she have been so negligent? She had left the oven on at full heat with several dozen chocolate chip cookies inside that needed only another minute to bake. She had no idea how long she had been underneath the faucet, letting her mind carry her away.

Judy and Jake evacuated the bakery. They had nothing to do but wait as the July sun baked down on them. Judy's thoughts took over her. Her bakery, certainly, would burn to the ground if she had refused to let Jake call the fire station.



The firemen came a minute later, and the fire was out a few quick minutes after that. There was a lot of smoke from all the burnt cookies, they explained, but very little damage. They assured Judy that life could go on as usual for her.

She wiped the sweat from across her face and walked back to her fireless bakery, Jake following her lead.

"So much for that thought," Judy muttered.

She turned the radio on.

"Hi again, Middletown! The temperature has reached a whopping 100—"

Judy cursed the cheery man and threw the radio to the floor, destroying it with a dozen rage filled kicks. She felt like the heat was a devil taking possession of her. She knew she was out of control, but she didn't care. She lit a match and smiled grimly.



### "Linger" Meryl Kaufman

It had been a long night and all Alan wanted to do was get into bed and end this thirty-seven hour day. His body ached and begged for rest. His bright green eyes screamed and fought to stay open for just another minute. Fleeting thoughts of the night's events bounced around his head. He needed a shower, badly, but it could wait until morning, or whatever time he happened to awake.

Tuesday started off like any other day. Alan woke up late and ran to class, managing all the while to give off the impression of being put-together, like he always did. About twenty-five minutes into class, his cell phone vibrated against his thigh. He slipped out his chair and briskly walked outside. He glanced at the unknown number flashing on the caller-ID screen and flipped the phone open. As soon as he answered he knew who it was. She hadn't called him in a couple of months, which was a good sign since she only called when she was in trouble.

"Alan, Oh thank G-d it's you," said the voice on the other end before he could even say hello.

"Nina?" Alan asked even though he knew who it was.

"Yeah, it's me."

"Oh, hey Nina, what's up?" Alan responded nonchalantly, pretending he couldn't hear the nervousness in her voice.

"Um... not too much, how are you?" she asked, not interested in the answer.



"Oh you know—the regular stuff. College is good. I don't love my classes, but you know, who does. I'm hoping to get a good internship this summer—"

"Alan, I'm in a lot of s--t."

"There's a surprise," Alan mumbled under his breath.

"I wasn't going to call you, but I had no other choice."

"Nina, you never have another choice."

"Fine, forget it."

"Oh come on Nina, don't pull that crap with me. I am always fixing your messes."

She started to cry, "It's just that I have no one else to turn to."

Alan couldn't handle the crying; it broke down all his defenses, and Nina knew it.

"Alright, alright. How much do you need?"

"Well... It's not only that..." Nina's voice began to trail off.

"What do you mean Nina?"

"Well I sorta need you to come with me." Her voice became more and more childlike.

"Come with you where?" Alan was beginning to realize he had been sucked deeper into this then he would've liked.

"Detroit." Nina whispered.



"WHAT?" Alan yelled, although he had clearly heard her.

"DETROIT!" she screamed back.

"S--t Nina-"

"I know, I know Alan but..."

"What in G-d's name do you need to do to Detroit? F--k! You know what, I don't want to know. You know you have the biggest sucker for a brother, don't you. I don't know why I still bail you out of this s--t. I don't even wanna talk to you. Just meet me at the Port Authority at three. How much money should I bring with me this time?"

Alan knew that this time it would be a more then a couple of hundred. He wondered if would have enough.

"Ten thousand." She mumbled.

Goodbye car, Alan thought to himself.

"Alan, I am so sorry."

"No you're not. Just be there at three. Bye."

It took Alan a while to get all the money together. He cleaned out his entire checking account, pawned the watch he had gotten for his high school graduation, and the last two thousand he borrowed from a loan shark. He had no idea how he was going to pay him back, but he tried to not think about it. He swore to himself that this would be the last time, even though he knew she would probably come crying to him the next time.

When he met Nina at the Port Authority she looked worse then he had even seen her, thin and with old makeup crusted around her eyes. She flung her arms around him; she reeked of smoke and G-d only knows of what else. Tears rolled down her cheeks and rubbed against Alan's face. Her tears made him feel dirty.

"Thanks Alan, I owe you big time."

"Yeah, I know," Alan said, knowing there was no way that she would ever pay him back.

The bus ride was long and silent. Nina tried to make conversation, but Alan's responses were cold and abrupt. He just thought about how he had spent the last three years working and saving. It's not that he really needed a car, and it wasn't so much the idea of not having a car that bothered him. It was just that he had turned himself around since high school. Back then he and his friends spent most of their days finding new places to smoke pot where they wouldn't get caught: the path hidden by trees that ran alongside the highway, the clearing behind the trains tracks, and in his backyard when his mom wasn't there, where Nina had smoked pot for her first time with Alan. It had been three years since Alan last smoked anything. Those days were long gone, as were many of his friendships from back then. Nina was his last connection to his past and he seemed unable to shake her. He felt that since he was the one who introduced her to drugs in the first place, he couldn't just turn his back on her. Plus, she was his little sister. His patience with her was wearing thin however, especially now that she was pulling him down with her. Because of her, his proof of straightening himself out, namely his bank account, was empty.

"This is the last time," he muttered under his breath, to soft for Nina to hear.

Nina had bought a lot of drugs on "credit." She had a month to sell it all and give them their five thousand dollars, and if she didn't get it to them on time then the amount would double. And if she didn't pay after that, then no amount of money could save her. She was scared; she needed her big brother to come protect her. Rationally, they both knew that Alan couldn't really do anything to these drug dealers, but it was comforting to Nina to know that she wasn't completely alone.

They met Larry, the dealer, in an all-night coffee shop in downtown Detroit. There were three other large men with him. Alan looked like a lamb in a den of lions in his Dockers and long sleeved polo shirt.

"Hey, Larry," Nina said nervously.

"Well, well... look who it is."

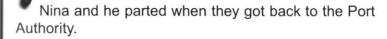
"I have your money."

"You f--king better."

Alan handed him a white envelope. Larry took all the money and counted it twice.

"You're f--king lucky that you got this fag to pay up for you." Larry turned to Alan. "Hey - I hope she f--ks you good tonight."

Nina started to respond, but Alan pulled her arm and they walked out.



"Hey Alan, thank you so much."

"This is the last time Nina. No more money and no more trips to Detroit. It's time to clean up or you're on your own."

"I'm gonna pay you back."

"Ok, but that's not what this is about."

"Really, Alan, I will."

Alan walked through the back door of his house to find his mother sipping her morning coffee with a piece of burnt

"Hey, mom."

toast.

"Alan, where have you been, you look dead?"

"I Just had a lot of studying to do, I didn't sleep that well."

"Don't lie to me Alan. I'm your mother."

"I told you, I was studying!"

"Then why are your eyes all red?"

"Because I'm tired." Alan ran his hands through his dusty blond hair.



"S--t Alan," his mother said as she began to cry, "I thought you stopped doing that stuff a long time ago."

"Mom, I did. I'm not stoned, I swear."

"I can't believe it. It's enough that your little sister is all screwed up. And you know where she got that from, don't you?"

"I know, ok! Just trust me this time. I know it's hard to believe in your own son, but just try, just once."

Alan walked out of the kitchen and up the creaking wooden steps. He glanced into Nina's room as he passed it. It still looked the way it did when she was just a kid – a lot of pinks and purples, dolls and stuffed animals neatly set up on her bed and dresser. His own room was a mess, strewn with clothes and books. He fell on his bed and buried his head in the pillow. He reeked of Greyhound bus and cigarettes. The smell seemed to linger with him for weeks. And every time that it snuck up his nose it took a minute for him to remember whether it came from Nina or from him.



The stage doesn't end with the polished wood. It goes beyond the hovering blues, greens, yellows, and reds. It extends past the orchestra pit,

And out through the brass doors.

It tiles the lobby,

And paves the sidewalk.

I search backstage at every turn, A dressing room of my own, to rehearse some lines. But the doors bear only the names of every Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

"Hamlet, you're on!"
The call is so loud. So close.
Where is this stage manager?
"He is closer than kin and less than kind."
Why is it I only see him in reflection?

I throw on Bottom's assed mask
And creep out a back door.
I take five among family, friends —
But the spotlight strains its neck to catch even those corners.

Who is the spotlight man?
Why am I always blinded from seeing his face?
Can't he see he is missing part of the show?
"This is a great moment, you fool! Romeo
Is about to profess his love for Juliet,
And you're on me?"

I pick up Feste's coxcomb, And sneak behind a shrub. But I know this is no curtain. Every exit another entrance.



# "The End of the Trail" Stephanie Epstein

Red rocks rose from the ground like abstract monsters. Below, glowing cliffs stretched endlessly into gravelly clay, fire-like, lying heaped in windswept piles. Far off in the distance the mud eventually met with vast red mountains that enclosed the world in a spectacular circumference that rose from the ground like flames. The sun, a scorching crimson sphere, hung in the Utah desert sky sending down sharp blades of heat. Beth felt her skin beginning to burn.

"I don't get why they're called 'red rocks,'" Robert said, "they look orange to me."

"Like my hair?" Beth asked, a heavy note of sarcasm weighing down her voice.

"Like your hair," he nodded in agreement.

"I'm a redhead!"

Robert looked off into the distance, avoiding one of the many fights Beth picked on a regular basis. She wondered why he wouldn't just say her hair was red. Make her happy. Lately they had been fighting so often, bold, passionate, tearful fights always ending in a fumbling attempt at lovemaking. Even leaving their problems under the reconciliatory bed was becoming a pattern all too familiar. Sex was losing its potency to fix the cracks.

The two walked up to the sign that read: "Hell's Arch, 4.5 miles."

"Do you have enough water, Beth?"

In answer, she started down the trail, tears gathering in the corners of her jade green eyes.

Robert trotted a few steps to catch up to her and tugged on her backpack to slow her down. "Where you running to? Are you okay?" He looked at her in confusion.

She shrugged him off and forced a smile. "Yeah. PMS, you know."

The two hiked in silence along the rugged dirt trail, solitary figures in the scorching early morning heat. The beginning of the path was mostly flat, occasionally peppered with hills and curves around shelves of great red boulders. A small pile of red stones intermittently marked their way and Beth attempted to look busy by searching for the next man-made rock formation.

After the first thirty speechless minutes a grouping of stones told the two the trail continued off the dirt ground and up onto the large flat rocks. Soon the path would take the two out along steep cliffs offering spectacular views of the distant mountains and the bizarre wind formed arches.

As Robert took Beth's hand to help her up onto the rocks, he nervously paused. "I think we need to discuss something." He pulled her up onto the rock and looked away.

Beth stood motionless watching his saddened face. Could he possibly have found out? She began to ring her hands nervously, and kicked loose bits of dust and rock onto the ground now a few feet beneath them. "Okay..." she responded tentatively, but then she walked past him and continued to climb.

Beth felt overwhelmed. How could he know about her affair? Had she slipped up somewhere; had someone seen her entering his apartment? She began to picture Eduard, his hard body, the taught musculature of his chest, his dark skin and hair. As Beth glanced furtively over her shoulder at Robert, she thought



how even the slightest wind could probably knock over his towering but wiry frame. His fair hair and perfect teeth, that nervous smile appearing subtly on his lips – she could not help but ask herself: how could I possibly hurt him?

"Hey, wait up." Robert caught up to Beth, and slightly breathless, tried to keep pace and speak at the same time. He did not sound angry, simply nervous. "Listen, I know the past few months have been a little strained between us, and I think it's because when you keep avoiding a discussion you need to have, things get awkward."

Beth simply grunted in assent. As she thought about Eduard all she could picture was his chest. Why couldn't she remember anything else about him? She could imagine the raw callused feel of his hands on her breasts but she could not remember the taste of his mouth or his dark lips massaging hers. She certainly didn't love him. She had promised herself that after this trip she would not go back to see him again. And now, when she was finally ready to commit herself fully to the man whom she knew she loved, he had discovered her secret.

Robert's words were slow and careful. "Beth, I know since we moved in it has been tough for us. And sometimes when things get difficult, you feel stifled."

"It's not that you were stifling me. You shouldn't think that."

"I know... I know. But sometimes if you feel that way you look for another outlet to vent your frustrations."

"That wasn't really it, Robert. I just needed to ... explore."

"You needed to explore?" Robert stopped. The two were now hiking along the edge of a rocky cliff that overlooked ragged

sagebrush and cacti. Beth suddenly realized how high the two of them were above the invisible valley below.

"You know, find out what I really wanted. See if I was really happy. Can we keep moving?" She nudged Robert along and the path soon widened out and became a dirt trail again through high pillars of rock.

"I'm not sure if I understand you, Beth, but I guess I just feel like the only way to fix problems in a relationship is to be completely honest. We have a good thing. I love you and I don't want us to screw things up."

"It seems like I am the one who is screwing things up."

Robert continued on like he had not even heard her. "I should have discussed this three months ago with you when it became an issue."

"You've known that long?" Beth was shocked. How could Robert know she was sleeping with another man every weekend for so many months and simply carry on like nothing was different? How could he sleep next to her each night knowing she sometimes shared another man's bed? "I didn't mean to hurt you," Beth said, now crying.

He stopped her gently. The two were standing under a delicate arch, a thin red arm stretched gracefully over their heads. The blue sky shone brilliantly and clearly overhead, but it was cool in the shade of the giant rocks.

"I don't know what you're talking about Beth." Robert seemed confused as he looked into her eyes for some clue.

Horrified, she realized he had no idea what she was talking about. So what was he... Beth began to feel nauseous. The



narrow walls of rock beside her began to spin.

Robert continued, "But whatever you're talking about, I just want you to know that Laura means nothing to me, and I'm willing forget about her if you can forgive me. We need to try to work out issues instead of just pretending there aren't any."

"You cheated on me?" Beth's head throbbed and she began to feel the wafting heat again.

"I'm sorry Beth. Can we talk about this?"

"Let's just go back."

"I want to resolve this."

"Just forget about it. I don't want to talk about it."

"Beth?"

Beth had already begun to head back down the trail. Robert quickly followed, trailing a few feet behind her in silence, hands in his pockets, kicking up dust in clouds. Soon they were side by side.

Beth trudged between the cavern-like walls, watching the palpable air. As she picked up the pace, her feet slipped on loose pebbles, but she steadied herself and continued on.

# 189th" Jessica Russak

Dick pressed the buzzer for the landlord's apartment and put his hand into the pocket of his black leather jacket. About two minutes later there was the buzz, and Dick pushed open the dirty glass door and entered 189th. The apartment building was situated on the corner of 189th and Amsterdam, and was aptly nicknamed "189th" by its tenants, regular visitors, and members of the local college. Dick knocked on the door of the apartment and discerned a voice muffled by the sounds of a television. He assumed it meant to come in, so he turned the door handle and shoved the door open.

Immediately in front of him was a fat man wearing only tighty whities and argyle socks, munching on spicy ketchup fries from the package, the television blaring a rerun of Get Smart. The man was watching the TV but pointing a small handgun at Dick.

"Hey! Whoa now! I'm just here about an apartment," Dick trembled, his hands raised raucously above his head. The landlord put the gun down on the coffee table next to his feet and stuffed his mouth with another handful of ketchup fries.

"The name's Ned Slack. Which apartment, kid?" His voice came out in a slur, but it was coherent enough for a teenager of the 90s; they all talked so fast.

"3C, Mr. Slack." His voice was like a struggle between his brain and his vocal chords. He was thoroughly startled by the gun, but in truth, his voice usually did sound like a battlefield.

"3C, huh? Who moved out?"

"I dunno, Mr. Slack. Got a call from Moe. Told me it was empty and I should grab it."





"Sure, all right. Just get the name of the guy who left. Wanna know how much?"

"That'd be great."

"300 a month, plus maintenance. That gonna be okay for you, kid?"

"The name's Richard. Dick, actually."

"Fine, *Dick*," and he had a way of saying it that was border-line mocking. "But is 300 gonna be okay for you, *Dick*?"

"Yeah, yeah. It is. Thanks. Thanks a lot. I'll get it to ya. Thanks."

Dick moved in his things three weeks later. The white boys in the Heights had a way of doing things slowly. He loaded his green Mustang convertible with suitcases and boxes and moved most of his things from his home in the Bronx. His green Mustang convertible with leather interior spent its first full night in the Heights parked on the street, across from an enclosed basketball court with no lighting and up the block from the local Bodega. Come daybreak, the car was missing its stereo system, CDs, hubcaps, and several integral parts of the engine.

Dick had no choice but to call AAA to come and take his car to be fixed. Just before they drove away with his vehicle, he quickly glanced around him and then planted a kiss on the roof of the car. He watched it being dragged down the dirty pavement as he gripped tightly on to the receipt the man in the soiled blue jumpsuit had scrawled out and handed to him. Needless to say, it spent the rest of its nights in a parking lot.

The parking garage was eight blocks away, but Dick wasn't bothered. He had no girlfriend, no career, and no real responsibilities except for attending the occasional class just to show his face, so he didn't feel the need to have his car at the most convenient location.

Suddenly looking up at his new abode, he sighed, tightened the straps of his backpack, and walked with his slight gait toward the university for his third period class. He had already missed the first two. His third period class was his favorite; finance. *Good ol' finance*, he thought, *always there to brighten my day*.

Simon Nomski sat in the hallway of his new apartment, staring into a room that was loaded with boxes that he dreaded unpacking. He was tired and forlorn and coming down from a great hit of some class-act stuff. He had acquired it from a pizza delivery guy coming out of Ned's apartment a few hours earlier. He averted his eyes toward the large fish tanks on the floor next to him. One was dark and murky and was home to a piranha named Fluff who kept hitting his head against the glass. The noise was as annoying to Simon as a ticking clock. It seemed as though Fluff was stuck in a corner and didn't know how to find its way out. If he strained his eyes, Simon could see a deteriorating Ken doll and a Tonka truck in the black pebbles at the bottom of the tank. In addition, a squalid smell was rising from the water like smoke rising and spreading from a cigarette.

In the other tank, not as dark but still murky, were a bevy of goldfish. They were, of course, food for Fluff, but their owner still insisted on naming them when he bought them, despite their short life span of about a week. In the tank at that time were Ori, Tori, Decko, Ilyan Ilyssivich, and Simon. The last, named for the new tenant, had been designated as the first goldfish that would be fed





to the piranha upon the human Simon's arrival. His destiny was set; it would take placed that very night.

Simon turned to the kitchen, a dump with a burnt-out oven, two charred stoves, and a fridge that reeked of skunk for a reason he did not want to know. Closing his eyes, he smiled hesitantly and fell asleep next to Fluff's tank on the dirty carpet of apartment 4C.

"Dude. Who's this bum?" Simon awoke with a pounding headache, a dry mouth and eyelids, and an impending sense of doom. He scraped his eyes open and saw Moe looking down at him. Moe was the head lifeguard from the university, and taught gym class at the local public school. He claimed that the money was to pay his way through forensics school, but he had been claiming that for six years, so no one commented anymore. The first thing Simon saw was the immense scar under Moe's left eye.

"How'd you get the scar, Moe?" His voice came out scratchy.

"First of all, man, get a breath mint. Second of all, how the hell do you know me?" Moe was always upset about something, but he never actually acted on it. He felt his fist was far too holy to profane by hitting young, pathetic college students.

"Through Laiby. He's one of your lifeguards."

"Ex-lifeguards, despite what he says. And I got the scar kickboxing. Someone punches you in the eye hard enough during a tournament, and the skin around it splits open. You keep fighting, though. Blood n' all."

"Oh." Simon blinked his eyes, trying to put the room in



focus.

"And let me tell you something about Laiby," Moe went on. "At any given time, there are at least a hundred people who hate that bastard. Tried to wail on me with his pitiful fists when I fired him. Stupid a--hole."

"Oh." He didn't have much of a reaction. But it was funny to him, and Simon would have laughed had he not been aware that laughing would make his head hurt. Moe reached out his hand and helped Simon up. Simon got a glance at Moe's outfit. He was wearing a wife-beater and Valentine boxers.

"That your room, buddy?" He was referring to the room filled with boxes. "We used to play poker in there three nights a week until Vatik moved out. He graduated, the idiot. Lives in Jersey with a rich bitch whose father offered him a job in customer relations. Too bad he don't speak much English. We moved our poker game down to my room. Just came up to tell Benny where the game is."

Benny was the token Syrian guy in 189th. The rest of them lived in the dorms and slept with older married women from Long Island until their girlfriends graduated high school. Then they'd marry the just-graduated girls and live in a big house in Brooklyn. But for now, Benny lived in 4C and kept his bedroom door locked. Simon's door had a huge hole in it.

"Can I join the game?" He needed something relaxing. "I bet lots of money and don't play very well. Hey, what time is it?"

"Sure. And it's past 9 o'clock. If you wanna sleep in that room tonight, you'd better clean it up."

"I'd rather play poker."



"Hey, Dick, we're playing. I'm gonna get back my cash from last week." Moe burst into the apartment followed by Benny and Simon. The four of them sauntered into Moe's room and sat around the poker table that Vatik had left as a parting gift. It was a bit wobbly, but served its purpose. The room filled with smoke within five minutes. In the absence of ash trays, they ashed onto the tops of soda cans and occasionally onto their own tee-shirts. The game didn't begin until Lenny, Shmulie, and Negro got there.

Lenny was a midnight security guard at the university. He didn't do much beyond look the other way as girls crept in and out of the dorms, and kept his mouth shut as pompous rich kids paid off the other guards for physics or economics tests from professors' offices. Not surprisingly, he was one of the few guards liked by students. He could be fired for hanging with them, but that was the thing about 189<sup>th</sup> – nobody would tell.

Shmulie was the son of the head of the drama department. His father also taught a few Hebrew language classes and was president of their synagogue on the Upper West Side. The kid never wore a *yarmulke* and still hadn't declared a major, despite being in his third year of school.

Then there was Negro, star of the university's basketball team. He was black.

The game began and as money began to pile on the table, Shmulie pulled a zip lock bag out of his pocket. It was practically empty, and Dick offered to make a run to the Bodega if everyone would put money in. Each pulled ten dollars from their pockets and Dick left the room with a good seventy bucks. He pulled his university sweatshirt over his head and tied the laces of his Pumas. Moe shouted after him that he would call in the order so it wouldn't take

so long to get it.

Dick shoved his hands in his pockets. With his head low and his teeth grinding, he walked with his slight gait into the Bodega across the street from the university bookstore. He approached the cashier and asked for dental floss. The cashier handed him two paper bags, one full and the other empty. Dick checked inside the full one to make sure it wasn't a bag of wood shavings and then asked what the second one was for.

"Figured you and your friends might want some Jack.

Always tastes better when you're up in the sky." Elaborate phrases always sound funnier when said with a Puerto Rican accent, Dick thought as he laughed to himself. Dick turned to the back of the store to find some Jack Daniels. A small bottle would do. He only had a couple of bucks left in his pocket anyway.

"Thanks a lot, man."

"Enjoy, now."

As he left the Bodega, Dick overheard a customer talking to the cashier; "If it weren't for those Kikes up in here, this place would be out of business. Lucky dealer, man. You a lucky dealer."

Simon sat between Negro and Shmulie. Negro and Shmulie both wore only their jeans, but the difference between the two was vast – black shiny muscles vs. a hollow white chest with a small third nipple to the left of the real left nipple that Shmulie liked to think looked like a birthmark. Upon hearing that Dick was running out to the Bodega, Simon smiled. If you can't successfully come down, he thought, then just go right back up again. Except this lime, with something lighter.

"What have you guys done before?" Simon asked.

"We don't *do* anything," Moe answered for everyone in a snide tone. "You want to *do* more than that Bodega s--t, you had better do it Laiby's room or something. But not here."

"We stay away from fungus and pills, man," Shmulie said, giving a dirty look to Simon. "I don't know what you came in here thinking."

"All right! All right! I get it. Chill, y'all. Chill." Simon shut his mouth and figured he'd just have to find out where he could find the fungus and pills later on, with some real players.

Lenny won the hand and pulled in sixty bucks. He took a one-dollar bill and rolled the last of Shmulie's stuff into it. Simon gaped at him as he took a lighter to the end of the bill.

"You ain't made of money, man," Simon said to him. "Otherwise you wouldn't be working here." Lenny took a deep puff and leaned across the table, blowing it in Simon's face.

Dick returned, and the stuff smelled like urine when smoked. Simon doubted it was clean, but he knew it did the job. He turned to Dick, "You new here, too, man?"

"Yeah, pretty much. Not as new as you, kid. But new. You know that you smell like crap, right?"

"I probably smell like the carpet and deteriorating piranha. I just woke up from sleeping on the floor."

"I heard about that. You live with Benny and that freak who looks like a rat?" He was right. The guy who owned the fish bore a striking resemblance to a rat. The greasy hair and concave chest

didn't help the matter, either. "It's always amazed me how he gets so many women, y'know?"

"I guess I'll find out," Simon said with a laugh. "What's your name?"

"Dick. You?

"Simon. Nice to meet you."

"Not nice to meet you. You smell like s--t, kid." For some reason Simon became enraged. Usually when he was buzzing, he'd take these things lightly. But he also usually only smoked stuff that he knew was safe and smelled sweet. This time he was offended. Simon threw down his cards and took a long puff of his joint. He then threw that down too and stood up quickly, his chair falling to the ground with a heavy thud.

"You wanna step to this?" He shouted at Dick, whom he could barely see through the thick gray smoke. "You wanna step, kid?"

"Why you gotta go be like that, always thinkin' you're a brother?" Negro said, his voice rising. He then tried to grab Simon by the elbow and pull him down but Simon managed to spin away. He then turned to Negro, his face bright red, and yelled, "I be the way I wanna be, Nigger," and ran out of the room.

A wave of laughter spread among the six remaining poker players. Moe let out a low whistle and made a comment about a short fuse and never trusting friends of Laiby's again. The laughter continued for a while, Dick's being a nervous sort of laughter, while shmulie and Benny rolled some more jays.

In his apartment on the first floor, underwear-clad Ned

stood in the kitchen searching for a new bag of ketchup fries. The television was blasting and Desi was shouting at Lucy for burning the very turkey he was supposed to use for his dinner with the music critic. Simon's burst through the door was drowned out by the laugh track as Lucy cried horrendously. Simon scanned the room for the handgun. He spotted it on the coffee table and lunged for it. With the gun in his hand and smoke in his brain, Simon left the apartment, closing the door behind him. He ran up the stairs to three at a time 3C where Dick was waiting at the poker table surrounded by five others. He knew they were still laughing at him.

His entrance into the apartment was no surprise. They had all expected him to either return and apologize or launch into another tirade. They assumed he meant to apologize until the look on his face materialized through the smoke. The gun in his hand then came into focus as well. It was aimed straight at Dick.

Dick tensed up briefly, then relaxed into his chair. "First my Mustang last week," he said with a laugh to the rest of the guys, "And now me. It's just as well, right?"

No one laughed. Dick stood up and gently placed his cards on the table. His hand extended out to Simon holding a newly lit joint. "Take a drag, relax a little, then you can shoot me." Simon never took his eyes off of Dick's face. "Sure," he responded. "Why not?"

So Simon took the joint out of Dick's hand, leaned his face toward it, and inhaled deeply. Moe let out a short sigh of relief, which encouraged the others to relax as well. Simon smiled serenely at Moe, Shmulie, Negro, Benny, and Lenny, and finally at Dick.

"Thanks, Dick," he said as he returned the jay to him. And then he shot Dick right between the eyes. There wasn't a thing right with the scene. The grass wasn't green but a shade of dirty yellow speckled with brown and dingy orange. Actually, this hybrid mixture covered only about a quarter of the park, the rest being covered by a carpet-like layer of cemented dirt and rocks, with a sprinkling of pebbles added in all around for good measure. The fountains, six in total, stank either of urine, compliments of some of the parks more upstanding inhabitants, or from the decay of crumbled and dirty cement, warped wood, rusted metal, and dampened moss. The swings, which had, at some time, swung merrily under the power of children's joyous and carefree screams, now sat perfectly still, some lacking their seats, others being supported by only one of their chain-linked supports, listless and lifeless in a breeze that did not come.

In all directions, as far as the park stretched, this scene repeated. The slides were caked in the mud, dirt, leaves, and of course, rust of neglect. In fact, they had been braved most recently several years before by a mother and child foolish enough to expect the park to welcome them as it had welcomed its guests in the past.

At the far right of the park were eight great seesaws, once painted in an alternating fashion of red, white, and blue, and which, during this same time, managed to hoist the smallest of children to the greatest of heights. These great seesaws now more closely resembled the planks of an old pirate ship, splintered, weathered, with streaks of their old color visible enough only to force their viewer to squint closely in order to take a guess at the original color, if he cared.

Somewhere in the middle of all of this were two large pools, Argento and Scarto, one shaped in a somewhat elliptical fashion that had been often referred to as "voluptuous," with the other shaped in the more traditional fashion of a large rectangle. Painted on the bottom of each pool was its name in giant Roman letters that stretched almost the entire length of the pools, serving as an unmistakable symbol of splendor and magnificence. No one is sure which pool had what. For one, the pools were last filled with water seven years ago, and second, the Roman numerals had been replaced with "STATE 573-419" and "STATE 573-420," which, for reasons that no one could figure out, failed to dance through the water and under the sun the way the giant letters had.

The letters weren't the only aspects of the park that no longer danced like they did in the past. Trees that had at a time stretched, with a sense of power and purpose, lunging, it seemed, for the heights of a benevolent heaven, now sat, implanted firmly in the ground, weighed by the burden of the unnatural past they had witnessed. Even in full bloom, as it was now, the leaves looked saddened and drooped downward, following the lead of their supporting branches. And to think, it took only years to destroy that which took 10,000 years to create!

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Gregory had not been back to his hometown in years, having left at a time when things seemed pleasant enough in their innocence. He never loved it, but thought it too small and quiet for his taste, without the excitement and glamour, the promises and potential greatness offered by the larger cities. Yet the park held a special place in his heart, and for this reason alone he felt a bond with the town.

During his time away Gregory had earned, in addition to his undergraduate degrees, a Law degree from Yale Law School and was a specialist in constitutional law, and was routinely flown in

from all over the country to lecture and advise colleagues. In only four years he was able to make partner at one of the country's largest firms, and his success could be doubted by none who saw the house he lived in, the clothes he wore, the car he drove, and the women he entertained.

Shortly before this excursion to his hometown, Gregory had abruptly left his law practice, saying that his true passion lay in writing. He went on vacation somewhere in Colorado, skiing being a sport he picked up only after leaving his hometown but fell in love with immediately, and then set out to write his first novel, an autobiography about his childhood in the town and how he was able to achieve success for himself. He fancied himself a modern day Ben Franklin.

Gregory looked upon the park from inside the cabin of his deep blue Mercedes CLK, idle in front of a meter at the far Southeast corner of the park. His windows were up and his motor hummed softly, almost purred, but to him it sounded as if it was ready to spring, to lurch, to do anything to get away from the park. Joan Baez's Greatest Hits, a CD he usually hated but at this moment didn't mind at all, emanated in barely audible whisper from the car's stereo. On this Sunday morning her voice seemed somehow so true, although until he focused on the music he couldn't even hear her words. The gentle melodies, even without their accompanying lyrics, were enough to hold his attention, and they brought a sense of calm, peacefulness, and even contention to him for just enough time to allow him to escape his reality. Hearing her voice resonate with melodies made familiar to him by his first summer love, a girl whose name he could not remember but who symbolically represented what the park meant to him, led him to close his eyes and disappear into another world. Flashing

through his mind were images from his youth – his teenage years of drinking mint schnapps in the woods near his high school and smoking pot behind the old train station, imagining that he was Jack Kerouac and that his friends were Neil Cassidy, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan. How far he had come from those days.

For the next twenty minutes he sat, completely paralyzed but relaxed, eyes closed, and with both his hands crossed firmly behind his head. For those twenty minutes Gregory was far away from the park as it was now. He was listening to Joan Baez but he was hearing and seeing the longer summer of his youth; baseball bats, dirty mitts and sneakers, freshly cut grass, butterflies and people walking dogs, hotdogs and pizza, Black-cherry soda and ice water, girls in tank tops (yes, this took precedence over everything else), concerts both in the park and the city, trips to the beach, beer, ice cream, in that order, and best of all, lying on a hammock he made in his own backyard, alone, without music, without a book, without a sound other than his own slow breathing. the only entertainment being the rising and lowering of his own chest, the swatting of gnats with his hands, and a small notebook. 91/2 by 6 inches on his lap, in which he didn't really write but rather scrawled down on the paper, in a barely decipherable hand, whatever happened to amuse him. During this time he let the sun slowly drain him of energy while he watched the condensation drip off his Coors Light and form a puddle on the small table beside him. His thoughts turned to dreams, and his dreams were always of making himself great, beyond the scope of his parents, neighbors and friends, even beyond the scope of the world's most powerful people, people like senators, congressmen, diplomats, kings, even Presidents, to the point that only God could dare boast superiority over him, and even that would be debatable. All of this, in twenty minutes, came flying into Gregory's mind as he sat, completely still, in the comfortable cabin of his Mercedes.

Gregory opened his eyes just as Joan Baez was completing the final verses of "Forever Young," but he stared only straight ahead towards a rather large intersection that was desolate save a scattering of parked cars – two full-sized vans, perhaps belonging to some company although without any visible markings, a tired-looking Oldsmobile Delta, and a late model BMW 3 Series, color unknown. He stared for a few more minutes while Baez finished "In the Quiet Morning (for Janis Joplin)," and then determined to get out of his car and finally venture into the park of his childhood.

As Gregory began to get out of his car, he became increasingly agitated about the park, finally convincing himself that his feelings were normal due to the amount of time he had spent there during his childhood. It was the one aspect of his hometown that he truly loved and missed. Finally flinging the door of his Mercedes open, he hopped out powerfully and gracefully. For that moment at least, a bystander would not have been crazy to mistake Gregory for an Olympic athlete, his shoulders back, his chest thick, and his head held confident and high.

He held this pose for only a moment, glancing down at his two feet, planted firmly in the ground of his childhood, before beginning to walk, slowly but purposefully, around the tattered fence, through what was at one time the main entrance, and into the park. As he moved, right foot over left, he barely noticed that the entrance, once a tall wooden structure embroidered with carvings of artists from all over the country and adorned with oak lions on each side whose heads tilted towards the entrance, mouths open only enough to show a glimmer of their teeth, was now crumbled and decayed. In his mind, as in his memory, it was still a picturesque entrance, noble and proud, within the background of a lush and welcoming park.

Gregory took the final steps into the park without any

consciousness of them, his mind focused completely on how he would find the park, aware that the little he could see from his car looked bad but hoping that from up close it would not look as bad, as hopeless.

It did and it was. Upon seeing first-hand, up close, the state and condition of the park in which he had spent his childhood hoping and dreaming and planning for everything and anything, for the past, present, and future altogether, Gregory at first did not even feel the lump in his throat but instead felt a deep and overwhelming sense of anger and hatred, aimed at someone he did not know. Gregory wasn't an emotional person; in fact, he prided himself on being "a person of pure and uninhibited reason, without any need for the burdens and the trickery of emotion and the heart," yet at this moment, after the initial wave of reasoned anger had passed, the lump in his throat, perhaps present all along, began to throb mercilessly at him, gaining momentum by the second, until it overtook him, became him, while everything else that was him became, in significance, the size of the lump.

The only thing he could do at this point was to slowly walk over to his favorite section of the park, a section that even after all these years gone he still knew perfectly, and sit at the foot of his pillar, the source of all his childhood strength and the image of his current strength, Old Ben, a hulking mass of a tree, the tallest peak in the park and one of its greatest natural attractions. In his memory the tree was still magnificent – strong, thick, larger than life, in full bloom, swings hanging from twelve branches, none of which gave even the slightest hint of strain, instead giving the appearance of a smile, as if genuinely pleased at the happiness it gave the children on the swings. Unfortunately, his eyes quickly overtook his mind and memory, as he saw the present condition of Old Ben with only three swings remaining, none held by the pleasant ropes he remembered but instead bolted into Old Ben's now

tired arms and fastened with chain-links to an uncomfortable looking seat. Even without the weight of children upon him, Old Ben looked tired and weak, home now to more ants and spiders than branches and leaves, all the time leaning heavily to the left, with strength enough only to prevent itself from falling.

Sitting at the foot of his tree without a sound in the park or, for that matter, in the whole town, Gregory fell into something of a daze, woken only by a loud horrible sound which he found, upon listening more closely, to be coming from the direction in which he had arrived. Still not moving, Gregory heard only loud machinery, the churning and grunting of chains, and a loud and unrelenting beeping sound resembling the noise made by a truck in reverse. As he got up from his seat at the base of the tree, he saw flashing bright yellow lights. When he looked closer and began to walk in the direction of the noise and flashing lights, he saw a shiny, brand new tow truck, painted a hideous grayish color, roughly heaving his Mercedes onto its flatbed.

"Hey!" Gregory yelled, a good distance from his car but within shouting distance. "That's my car! What do you think you're doing?" he demanded as he got closer, his eyes burning and focused narrowly at the tow truck operator, a mere kid no older than eighteen, almost young enough to be his son. "If you want to have a job tomorrow you'll put that car down!"

Expecting the kid to whimper at his feet in apology as his car was parked perfectly legally and was obviously being towed mistakenly, Gregory was taken aback, even left speechless for the first time in his life, when the kid, without even so much as an expression on his face beyond complete detachment, replied in complete monotone, "People's Equality Act for a Better Society – It's our Anthem."



Now alone in the park and without his car, Gregory reached into his pocket for his cellular phone, figuring that a few harsh words and some well placed threats aimed towards the Police Department would ensure that his car would be returned immediately with a host of apologies. As he attempted to dial, however, he realized that his phone was out of service, not surprising for anyone who has had experience with cellular phones but frustrating none-the-less. Had he only grasped his situation a little better he would have realized that his problem had nothing to do with his cellular phone.

"What the f--k is wrong with this place!" Gregory cursed, his anger rising steadily as he tried in vain to find an area in which his cellular phone would work. Everywhere he went, now jogging to all points of the park, the NO SERVICE sign remained on the display of his phone.

Finally Gregory decided to find a pay phone, something that he soon realized meant walking to the nearest establishment as there was only one archaic-looking pay phone at the entrance of the park that was without the receiver, wire, and everything else that was able to be stripped from the booth without uprooting the booth itself. His business face now pasted on forcefully and the sad state of the park far removed from his mind, Gregory strode briskly out of the park, along three side roads, finally hitting somewhat of a main road in which he saw a gas station with a sign that read TOWNSHIP GAS 71 in the distance. Upon seeing the station he picked up his already brisk place, striding into the station as though he owned it.

"You must not be from around here friend. We don't have pay phones around here anymore. In fact, we haven't had pay phones around here for years," the attendant calmly responded to Gregory's cursing.

"No pay phones!" Gregory immediately retorted, his voice gaining momentum and power. "I need to make a call now! What kind of gas station doesn't have a pay phone? Where the hell can I find a phone?"

"Oh, calm down friend, it isn't that this gas station doesn't have any phones, it's that there aren't any pay phones in this town. We don't have them. Don't need them."

"Don't need them?!? Are you f--king kidding me? How--"

"Please, calm down, you're shouting—"

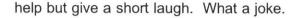
With this, Gregory, in between curses, screams, and threats they both knew to be worthless, began to explain to the attendant what had happened with his car. He was told only that the "government people" handle that and he should please leave now.

"Keep walking east, you'll find it, or they'll find you," the attendant told him, and with that disappeared into a back room.

"What—" began Gregory, but the man had long disappeared and had no intention of returning.

Taking to the streets once again, Gregory marched in the direction of the "government people," which was presumably the Police Station. Along the way he planned out exactly how he would attack, first explaining his situation calmly, then threatening lawsuits and litigation if the explaining didn't work. No problem, he thought to himself, time to get ready for a war.

"If they wanna f--k with me, think I'm going to go down quietly, they have something else coming to them. I can have ten lawyers down here in a day's time..." Gregory said aloud to himself as he walked east, looking all the while for the "government people." At the thought of the government people he could not



When Gregory was four or five blocks from the Police Station, he was already able to see the top of the building. In truth, there were three buildings in total, although Gregory was able only to see the tallest of the three from where he was walking. As he continued walking, all three buildings rapidly appeared before him, as magnificent and modern as the rest of the town was downtrodden and shabby.

The first building, located between the two others and set about one hundred feet closer to the road, was the most ornate and imposing of the three. The exterior was covered completely with heavy tinted glass, giving the building an extremely modern and sleek look. The base of the building was quite wide up to the height of the two floor lobby, at which point it began to narrow gradually for the next three or four floors, finally evening out and rising in a parallel fashion for the remaining sixty stories. At the top were giant satellite dishes, similar to what would be seen on an air traffic control tower of a major airport.

The two other buildings, located on each side of the main tower, were slightly simpler than the first but still remarkable. They were not as tall, perhaps no more than thirty floors high, but they were wider and made from the same heavy tinted glass as the tower. The buildings together, the complex, resembled a Ingres painting, an elongated neck supported by two strong shoulders.

Finally arriving at the foot of the complex, Gregory found himself stationed in front of a giant marble rectangle above which, in imposing black letters, read "1 GOVERNMENT PLAZA." Beside the giant rectangle was a plaque that read: "This monument, entitled *Planet Now*, was donated by Ellsworth M. Toohey himself, on the great day of March the 6th, 19—."



Trained by profession to take in everything around him and process it quickly, Gregory made mental notes and began to draw conclusions as he ascended the steps of the main building. Of the many thoughts flying through his head, the one that startled him most was that he had not seen another person, aside from the gas station attendant and the tow truck operator, since he had been in the town. Even more eerie, he had not heard anyone. Even now, as he was about to enter into the tower, he had yet to see or hear anyone.

As Gregory opened the large door at the top of the stairs and entered into the building he was meet by two large guards with shaven heads wearing black suits, shoes, and ties, the only color contrast supplied being heavily starched white shirts. The guards stepped directly in front of Gregory, their proximity to him causing him to step back.

"Excuse me," Gregory said softly and politely, "I'm having somewhat of a situation and would like to speak to someone in charge."

Silence.

"Hello? Excuse me, gentlemen. Is there anyone in there? Ok, I don't know what you're doing but I have absolutely no patience for this. I'm going to find some people that aren't deaf, dumb and stupid to deal with, although I'm beginning to think that there aren't any people like that in this town. Excuse... forget it—"

With his patience exhausted and his plan of being nice long discarded, Gregory made a move to walk around the two now statuesque guards and into the lobby area of the building. As he





tried to do this, however, the two guards sprang once again to life, moving quickly to block him, causing him once again to back up.

"So, now you're alive once again. I thought I'd lost the two of you," shot Gregory. "Now can I please speak to someone?"

As he was saying this, the guard to Gregory's left placed his left hand over his ear as if he was being given instructions via an earpiece. Unable to read anything from their stoic faces, Gregory waited silently, for the first time in his life feeling uneasy. The uneasiness bothered him but he remained confident in himself and in his own ability to get things done.

Suddenly the guard, his instructions apparently complete, leaned over to his partner and whispered something into his ear.

"Well?" Gregory asked, waiting to hear what had just transpired, suddenly more eager to speak to someone in charge than he had been just moments before.

"Gregory, is it?" asked the guard who had received the instructions via the earpiece. "Please, come with us."

"Hold on. First of all, how did you know my name? Second, I want to know where I'm going and with whom I'm going to be speaking before I go anywhere."

"Lets go," was the only reply given by the guards, as they reached for Gregory's arms to escort him to wherever he was to be brought.

"Hey! Get the hell off me... don't touch me!" Gregory shouted, twisting his body in an attempt to throw their hands off of him. "Don't you dare touch me. That's assault and I will press charges against you and—"

Suddenly a piercing scream filled the building, echoing from somewhere that seemed so far away yet was incredibly loud and powerful. Gregory's body immediately stiffened. His eyes darted up and to the left, trying to pick up the source of the sound.

Taking advantage of Gregory's sudden shock, the two guards once again grasped his arms, this time more forcefully, and began to escort him not into the lobby but towards the far left of the lobby where Gregory noticed an elevator.

"What--"

Bam! Before Gregory could say another word he was lying flat on his back. He immediately moved to feel his jaw, which was now dripping with blood and throbbing mercilessly, but the two guards quickly seized his arms, pulling him at the same time to his feet and towards the elevator.

"I want my phone call!!" shouted Gregory. "Are you crazy-"

Bam! Again Gregory dropped, only this time going limp as he hit the ground. He tried to shout for help, to draw attention to himself, but after a few moments was unsure if he was even conscious.

Am I awake or is this just one long and horrible dream, Gregory asked himself. Ah, in my comfortable car, that's where I am. Maybe I won't check out the park. Maybe I'll just turn around and go home... Yeah, that's what I'll do... I don't like the feeling of this place anymore...

Gregory was snapped out of his little daydream excursion by a tactful kick to the ribs. Looking up he saw the two guards, or maybe they were different guards? He couldn't be certain. He was certain only that he wasn't in his Mercedes and that at this



point he couldn't simply turn around and drive away.

Still lying on the floor, where he did not know, he put his head down and for a moment his thoughts turned to the town. He tried to piece together what was going on, starting with the state of the park which at one time was so magnificent, but his train of thought was interrupted by another sharp kick, this one finding him just below his right shoulder. The pain that immediately shot through his body shattered any remaining wishful thinking that this was just a dream.

"Get up," one of the guards barked.

Gregory obeyed. He did not know why, but he obeyed none-the-less, finding himself without any options and in a corridor that looked completely deserted.

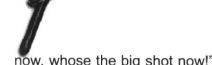
Should I start screaming, shouting, yelling for help, thought Gregory. Maybe I can overpower the guards... no, they are both twice my size, and besides, even if I could, where would I run? I don't even know where I am.

Suddenly there was another loud and piercing scream, like the one he had heard in the lobby, only louder.

Sensing that Gregory was about to try something, the guard who previously had been given instructions via his earpiece turned to Gregory and said, with a sly smile forming at his lips, "it isn't worth it."

"What isn't? What are you doing to me? Where am-"

"So... I see there aren't anymore threats coming from you, big shot," said the second guard, speaking for the first time. "Now you don't feel so important, thinking you're better than me. Now who's important, tell me? I wanna hear you tell me who's important



now, whose the big shot now!"

Following this was another punch, this one into his stomach. Gregory doubled over gasping for some air. At this point he realized that even had he wanted to fight back or even to shout, he probably wouldn't be able to. His jaw felt heavy and numb, his collarbone was probably broken or at the very least severely bruised, and now he had just had the wind knock out of him and he could barely breathe.

Before he was able to react, he was roughly pushed into a medium sized room decorated lavishly with heavy dark oak furniture, two overstuffed leather chairs, a crystal chandelier, several candelabras, an ornate glass coffee table set in front of a small satin couch, paintings adorning every wall, and finally, a large leather armchair set behind the desk with a back that stretched just to the top of the head of the man whom it seated.

"Wait outside the door," the man ordered the two guards, not even glancing up from something he was reading. "Put this on," he said, throwing a black jump suit in the direction of Gregory, who was still on the floor of the room after being thrown in by the two guards moments before.

"What the hell is going on? What is this place? I have my rights you a--hole! I'm an attorney... I want to make my call, give me a phone! This is criminal! Answer me! Who the hell are you anyway! I said—"

"Silence! - Listen to me; let me speak! You don't know where you are or what has happened - that's natural, as I haven't yet told you. You made bad decision coming here but there isn't anything you can do about it. You now have a major decision to make-"



"No. Stop right there. I'm not interested in hearing any of this. All I want is my phone call and my lawyer," interrupted Gregory, holding the jump suit and standing in the middle of the room, his confidence and strength slowly returning.

"Perhaps I began to... First, change into the clothes I gave you *now*, if you don't want to, I'll have the guards change you. Second, sit down, you can choose any of these two chairs. Third, you *will* listen to me, either of your own or via force, and as you have seen, I can use force. Forth, about that decision I had mentioned before you cut me off, you have until only 10:00 PM tonight, after which I'll make the decision for you. Now, may I begin?"

"First, I want my phone call. I'm not saying another word until then. Who the hell do you think you are? Stalin? You can't do this. Let me the hell out of here now!"

"Guards!"

Before the word was even completely out of his mouth, the two guards stormed into the room, leveling Gregory with another round of punches and kicks, this time with even more ferocity than they had before, landing kicks into his ribs, chest, face, and groin. The final punch, landing just above his right eye, felt like a rock being smashed into his face. All he could now see was red. It seemed as if his entire world had just turned red until he saw the glimmer of brass knuckles just above him. He then saw only dots, mostly black but with red sprinkled evenly within them. Shutting his eyes, Gregory began to cry, for the first time in his life feeling helpless and defeated. He begged them to stop. He was answered only by another kick.

Now lying on the floor in one of the corners of the room, Gregory, completely still, heard the man in the room speaking to the two guards. The man was telling the guards to "give it to him now, while he's on the floor," to which they replied that they already had. "Well, then give it to him again! Now! I don't have patience for this!" the man shot back, also telling the guards to wake Gregory up. "Yes, Sir," was the only response given by the guards. Gregory then heard movement, people coming towards him, hands on his body, and then nothing.

"Are you awake? Can you hear me?" said the man to Gregory as the guards were dragging him to one of the chairs.

"Yes, I'm-"

"Good. First, put the clothes on, then sit down like I just said. I'm beginning to run out of patience with you. Do it!"

Gregory hesitantly took his shirt off, then his pants, and began to put on the black overalls given him by the man who had yet to give his name or, for that matter, any other information. It appeared that there was no other option. He wanted, needed, to find out what was going on, to somehow get in contact with someone, one of his former partners at the firm, a colleague of his, but at this point he didn't see many other options in front of him beyond obeying what he was told. Maybe it was the manner in which the man spoke, or his calm confidence, or the ornate office, or the two guards outside the door; which one or which combination Gregory did not know, but the man seemed so powerful, so in control, though he was not an imposing figure, no larger than Gregory himself, an expensive toupee resting upon his bald head.

"Ok, I've put on your clothes, now what?" Gregory said, trying to muster up strength in his voice to hide his nervousness, as he sat down on one of the chairs indicated by the man.

"Good. Now I can begin. Years ago, an engineering com-



pany came into this town, you may remember them, you were still here—"

"Yes, Crown Associates, they came a few years before I left."

"Correct, but don't interrupt me. Now, Crown Associates began to construct everything in the town and in the surrounding areas. They had developed some inexpensive way to erect bridges, roadways, and even towers such as the one we are in right now. Over a period of fifteen years they built everything in the area, in the process changing the character of the town. The company's brass drove around in Cadillacs, Mercedes, and even Rolls Royces, while the rest of the townspeople were left driving Buicks, Fords, and Chevrolets. The town was no longer pleasant. The rich were greedy and happy while the masses suffered."

"Hold on, I remember the company. Didn't they employ about half the town? Didn't the town invite them in, that's what I remember people saying, that the town invited them in to help the economy when things were going poorly—"

"No! That isn't true," the man shouted, slamming both fists on his desk, a look of outrage upon his face.

"That's-"

"That isn't how it happened, but that's not up for discussion now. Anyway, the town needed something, to get it back on the right track. That something came in the form of the Peoples Equality Act for a Better Society. Basically, it restored all people to their proper positions, getting rid of the social unrest prevalent in the town for so long. It was only a matter of time before a revolution took place, we should be thankful that it was a peaceful one rather than a bloody and violent one."

"The people voted for it?"

"Absolutely. Now, where was I? Yes. You are wondering why you saw virtually no one in the town. That is because we no longer live in houses. The town now lives in the three buildings right here. The women occupy the first forty floors of the building, the men the top forty. In the middle there are five floors, used for recreation. You would be surprised how many people can live comfortably in this building. You would also be surprised at its actual size—right now we are seventeen floors beneath ground. The boys and girls, up until the age of sixteen, live in the building off to the right."

"And you? Where do you live? I'm certain not with the rest of the men on the top thirty floors."

"No, I live, with several of the other organizers, in the building to the left of here."

"And people are happy with this? You have to be kidding me? You know what, this is bulls--t, I don't even know why I'm discussing this with you. Give me a phone, I'm calling my lawyer this second. Let me the f--k out of here and you can keep your messed up little world to yourself, I couldn't care less—"

"Guards!"

Immediately the two guards sprang into the room, moving quickly over to Gregory, grabbing him by his head, and slamming it onto the floor. Muffling the sound of his screams and then his cries, they held his head to the ground while the man behind the desk slowly walked around until his feet were directly in front of Gregory's eyes.

Smiling at the two guards, he first made some comment

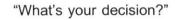
about giving something to Gregory a third time. He then turned to Gregory, saying, "remember in the beginning I told you that you'd have a decision to make? Well now you must make it – you may choose to stay here, to live amongst us, to adopt our rules and laws, and to contribute to our society; to sing our Anthem. Or, you may choose not to, in which case you will not be permitted to leave. You see, we require a degree of secrecy. You heard the screams, you now have two hours. Guards, you may let him up."

Gregory sat in the room, for how long he did not know. His head was pounding, he was sure his shoulder was now broken, as were at least some of his ribs, his jaw ached and it pained him even to swallow, his eyes were still unable to focus clearly, and the blood dripping from his head continued to run unassuaged. Gregory had never before felt the way he now did.

He was still sitting in the chair when the man finally moved. The movement startled Gregory, and his eyes attempted to follow the man's movements as he walked calmly over to a cabinet from which he poured himself a drink. Suddenly Gregory became cognizant of the fact that he had not had a thing to drink all day. He wanted to ask for a glass of water, anything, but he was afraid of another visit from the guards. The man had told him not to speak.

"Macallan's 66, they don't even make it anymore," the man announced, walking back to his desk. "You have fifteen minutes remaining to make your decision if you have not done so already."

"I think I've made it," Gregory replied hesitantly, his voice quiet and weak. "But first, how do you fit into all of this?"



"I don't know..."

"You are out of time. Guards! —"

"Wait! You win... I... fine... I give up. I'll live with you, I'll do whatever you want. I'll even sing some stupid anthem."

Gregory didn't have an ounce of strength left. Had he any, he would have tried to grab the words right out of the air and burn them. As they came out he felt himself break. He was no longer the man who drove hours to this town to visit a park from his childhood. He was now a weak man, a man who was unable to protect himself, a man who was helpless to the whims of a man he did not know, a man he did not trust. He didn't even understand the place, yet he gave up to it so quickly.

"I ran the engineering company," was the last thing Gregory heard before he was hauled off by the guards to another room, this one all white and without any furniture save one large chair, a list of some sort, and a hard metal bed. He did not know what this room was, nor did he care ask.





#### "His Walk of Life" Rami Berner

"Rami, you won't believe what I just bought!" he told me on the phone. It was summertime and to Ari that meant one thing — flea markets. With that in mind it was hard to really say what he might have bought this time. I didn't think it was one of his regular record finds (his first and foremost hobby); he sounded more elated than that. "I dunno, what?" I asked. "I have just purchased," he said very slowly, "for a mere eight hundred dollars," he paused again, "one hundred and fifty tuxedos!" I wasn't expecting that, but I think that if he had said, "an elephant," I would have believed him. It was just his way.

Last summer Ari came home with a small collection of videodiscs – videodiscs were massive floppy disks for movies, made in the eighties (they never quite caught on, but for Ari that only made them better) – a traffic light, and a large wooden buffalo. He craved "junk" of all kinds. When we drove around, his neck would crane out at the sight of a heap on the curb. His excuse was always, "this has got to be worth a ton. Imagine how many records I can buy when I sell this." Of course, Ari never sold a thing.

Collecting oddities wasn't all there was to Ari. He was quite popular but not at all a jock. He stood 5'8" and had a big nose. He wasn't very good at sports and never tucked in his shirt but there was something, a sort of charm, that drew everyone that he knew to him. His mind worked at a speed that was matched only by his mouth. Ari was also a comedian of sorts. He spoke his mind equally to those who cared to listen and to those who did not. He despised stupid people, rich people, and people who drink all the water and don't refill the pitcher when they're done.

He always needed to be different. He only listened to the most obscure bands, and when he was finally successful at getting



me interested in them, he would suddenly and predictably lose interest. He loved to make himself known. Sometimes, he would run after complete strangers, flapping his hands wildly while honking like a goose. One Sunday, he spent his whole day on the mall in D.C. asking everyone that passed to help him solve a math problem. I think his yearbook quote summed him up nicely — "I'm just an advertisement for a version of myself."

I was roped into Ari's odd lifestyle back in the tenth grade. One Sunday we took a trip to a local second-hand sale to buy records. To me, records were two Beatles albums and the *Joseph and His Technicolor Dreamcoat* soundtrack. His idea was to get a record for twenty-five cents and to put it on a tape. Sure enough, in little over a year I had amassed over three hundred records, none of which I dared listen to even once for fear of a devaluing scratch.

Ari was a boarder and hence free to do as he wished. My parents, on the other hand, imprisoned me. I therefore spent every possible second in his room. I sat through hours of lectures on music. I began to learn that "everyone is stupid," and that "there is nothing in this world like freshly baked sunflower seeds." Our relationship, to me at least, seemed reminiscent of that between Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, the mischievous children straight out of Twain's classics. There were countless times when, like Tom, I would sneak out in the middle of the night to go on some wild adventure. Adventures were our chief occupation back then and sometimes consisted of no more than breaking into my parents car that I had just locked the keys in (it took three hours in the dead of the night and we reveled in our success for days).

The end of high school marked our end too. We chose separate roads that have taken us to very different places but I



remember those days very well. In my yearbook he wrote the chorus to a song by Mark Knoplfer of Dire Straits: "And after all the violence and double talk, there's just a song in the trouble and the strife. You do the walk, you do the walk of life." I had learned to really enjoy life's little things, to really live. I think my time with Ari had taught me the "walk of life."

I hadn't seen Ari in a very long time until just recently. I bumped into him in the city. He was on his way to a play — *Urine Town.* "It's *got* to be good," he told me, " it has 'urine' in the title!" I laughed.



He always loved coming home to see his wife, family, and children. He cherished the sweet feeling of his wife's long awaited kiss. She was the only woman he had ever loved. The gleaming grin of his young boy's face; the high pitch of his six year-old daughter's welcoming, after a hard day's work.

He lived in Long Island and would take the train everyday to work. Every morning he would wake up at 5:45. He would stare in the mirror straightening his tie, peering at the reflection of his beloved wife. Every morning he would tip-toe quietly into his childrens' small dark room to get a glimpse of Jonathan and Rachel. He would stare at the old drawings they had made in preschool of dinosaurs, waterfalls, and snowmen. He missed the simple pleasures. He used to sit at the round kitchen table with his children every Friday morning and tell them stories. He would use everyday kitchen utensils to act out plays of the Far East and of King Arthur's time. But those days were gone. He had no time for his children. He had to work, and work harder than ever. He needed to give them the life he never had.

His home needed to grow – big, bright, and elaborate. In order to get all of this, he needed to take that job in Manhattan. Every other person would feel grateful to get a job working for one of the biggest trade organizations in the world, yet why did his life feel lacking? What in life was irritating his inner conscience?

He left his children's room and went down to the kitchen. A small beam of light pierced through the barely opened window giving the framed photographs on the counter an eerie look. He looked at the picture of himself in a childhood baseball uniform. Memories streamed though his head of a simpler time. Maybe a little coffee would make him feel better. He sat down at the kitchen







table looking around his house. Ornamental chandeliers hung from the ceilings of his kitchen, den, and living room. This is my home, he thought with pride. I accomplished all of this with my own two hands. After sipping his last drop of coffee and returning his old photo to the counter, he went into the living room to get his briefcase. His children's toys were thrown around the colorful Persian carpet. The sun was now brightly shining through the twenty-foot windows; the small glass statuettes of French ballerinas shimmered with light. Shadows from the jagged glass modern art sculpture in the garden painted delicious rainbows on the white walls. What beauty, he suddenly thought, what utter beauty. He realized, instantaneously, that he was late for work.

He collected all of his work hurriedly and jumped into his new Lexus. On the way to work, he kept seeing the picture of his home, his beloved home, in a white light. He saw the huge white columns in front of his house. He saw his children playing in the sprinkler, with his wife watching them, sitting at the porch, smiling with those beautiful dimples.

"I need to concentrate." He forced himself to believe. The faster to work, the more money made, the more he could acquire in the future. He needed to hurry. It was already 8:25.

Tuesdays always brought lots of traffic, but he had forgotten to give himself extra time. As he sat anxiously waiting for the endless lines of smoke-blowing cars to move, he pictured his beautiful wife. So peaceful, so graceful. Just lying there quietly in bed, dreaming of whatever she wanted to. She never had a hard time sleeping; she had a clear conscience. She would be waking up soon to get the children out of bed and off to school. The light-soaked kitchen would be saturated with the sweet smell of Belgian waffles and hot cocoa. The kitchen would be lively with the chil-



dren running around, brushing their teeth, getting breakfast and lunch ready for the school day. Soon his wife would be hurrying the kids outside the house so they could make the bus. The cool fresh scent of dew and morning air revolving in circles around her smiling face and waiving arm. The house would be gleaming with reflection of the cool howling morning wind. This is my home, he thought. He smiled.

The sign came up on the highway. This was his exit. He weaved down through the exit with the feeling of anxiety, as his children would feel when they rode their tiny bicycles around the interior of the house. He entered the parking garage and, like always, he first kissed the picture of his family, which he kept on his dashboard. He whispered softly, "I work for you." He needed to say this constantly throughout the day, to help with the guilty feelings which boiled within him.

It was 8:37. He entered the elevator. "I'm going up", he thought, "as I have done all my life. I have everything that I wanted, the houses, the neighborhood, the family, what else can anyone ask for? I have accomplished so much through my own work, yet what do I still lack? What is my life and home missing which causes me guilt? What is wrong with me?"

He finally got to the floor where his office was. The eighty-third floor. He quickly got out of the elevator and ran to his office. He looked out into the huge window and was confused. Should I call my wife and tell her how much I love her? Is that what makes me feel so bad inside? No. Is it that I haven't told my parents how much I appreciate all that they did for me? No.

Is it that I haven't thanked G-d for all that I have been blessed with?





I don't know.

He thought of his home.

He saw the light.

He understood.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_

World Trade Center-Tower 1

September 11, 2001

8:43 A.M.

### "Room" Hesh Lewis

I took a step into the doorway and enter an apartment unlike most I've seen. It's a mixture of Dr. Suess and a comic book. The velvet drapes in the entranceway to the living room give an air of a burlesque house, pleasures waiting behind them. I can feel the soft texture brush against my cheek. Looking below me I notice a pair of kindergarten chairs, reminding me of nap and snack time. I flip the light on to illuminate the room and the graffiti art on the wall takes me into its world. I plead with the woman on the wall, her belly button peaking out from under her tank top, to put down the gun. The galaxy around her is chaotic, mirroring her state of mind. But it is too late, she has pulled the trigger and I can see the blast exploding through the galaxy. I pull myself out of that world only to be lost in a storm on another wall. The lightning bolt is striking the peak of the waves, threatening to destroy a Galleon. I can hear the captain screaming to tie down the sails and I see one of the sailors get thrown overboard. The waves swallow him whole. The ship is lost and I focus on another wall. An angel, wings spread, hovers over a bed protecting all who may slumber beneath her. All explanations fall short of her truth; I know my dreams will be of her. Beneath the storm there is a computer, where stories are told, time is wasted. An ashtray sits beside a speaker, three butts lying on the sullied drawing of a 1950's-style playboy model. In her hand she grasps a key, only the lucky will ever use it.

I turn my attention to the wall opposite the woman. It is covered in shelves that hold treasures collected over the years. Two lions protect the shelves holding the shot glasses. They appear used, traces of alcohol settled in the bottom of a few. Dinosaurs and Tonka trucks sit waiting to be taken down and played with. I finally turn to the couch. I had been warned about looking at it. It entices one to sit and once in its grasp, escape is





just a thought in the back of your mind. I manage to look away and I pass through the hanging beads and enter the bathroom. There is a room before the actual bathroom, the walls covered in posters and memories. A rug is strewn across the floor and I step through the curtain into the bathroom. Holiday lights are taped across the walls and some tapestries hang across from a mural of God passing the golden light to man. I open my zipper and ahhh... sometimes a good piss is the second best thing in the world.

# For the Peace of your Captivities" Ami Steinberger

A generation comes, and another goes away, but the land remains forever.

On a summer evening a few years ago, after dark, praying at the Wall, I looked around and saw the city ablaze.

In a moment a Jewish home was debris hailing upon panicking bystanders. A flash of CNN – hundreds dead, including the bomber. Raining fire. Snowing death.

And I stand alone amidst it all.

Atop the height of an ancient staircase now crumbling, a man was embracing his shrieking wife as the baby carriage fell beyond arm's length, into the abyss.

'Over these I weep,' says the somber Jerusalem.

But... I do not understand! Who has given you the ability to speak? You are but a lonely township...

'Over these I weep,' She repeats, and I begin to understand...

The stone pavement of the street cracked and fell through. When the white, brown, and gold conceded to the ubiquitous blackness, one Rock, the first of its kind, remained...

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgot.

Says She, 'Here Abraham bound Isaac, and Jacob dreamed of his destiny; here his children built houses for God. Over this Rock wars were fought, both futile and fruitful. Domed now with gold and now by the ever-deepening starry blackness,







this Rock endureth forever.'

Faithful township, why are you so lonely? I do not understand.

She says, 'A generation cometh, just as its parentage goeth away, but the Rock endureth for all eternity.'

And so, until her gatekeepers return once again, and her marketplace teems with jovial banter, and the songs fill her streets for eternal moments of sweetness, Jerusalem waits like a widow for the inconceivable.

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, I have led my life for naught.

Jerusalem remains forever.

# "The Suicide King" Eli Feldblum

Thursday he tried again. Even upstairs I could tell; the sounds uncovered hastily hidden secrets. The muffled clatter of an empty bleach bottle meeting the lightly carpeted basement floor, the sharp staccato of sneakers bouncing off tiled basement stairs, the staying culmination of a tightly slammed door. I ran outside without my coat and met my mother, already in the car, trying to convince our stubborn Civic that it wasn't that cold. "Danny," she whispered, but didn't have to. I knew it was him; I knew the drill.

She parked in the handicap spot outside McDonalds, the tail end of the car angled and hiding the forbidding blue line that tiers parking spots. I stared through the still-icy windshield as a voiceless mother silently berated a miming janitor whose gaze froze on the mop by his feet. Attracted by the storm, patrons' attentions magnetically turned to my screaming mother, a violently gesturing madwoman poking through a sea of gasping heads. Through twists of clinging frost, a dripping janitor shuffled behind the counter and the disfigured mosaic of a woman exited a swirlingly bright restaurant, both broken.

It was a ritual. My brother would be fired and my mother would cry. My mother slammed the car door shut and punched the steering wheel, who let a pained, whimpering honk escape, inviting more looks by the people inside. "We're freaks," she mouthed, not intending the words to escape the mouth that had unconsciously uttered them. I heard her say it before and knew that it was just the end of a sentence, that she meant "They think we're freaks." We had done nothing but react.

Angry that she had spoken what she meant to keep inside, my mother fiercely twisted the key in the ignition. The Civic sputtered once, admitting it's age, and then started. Her hand re-



mained on the keys. She stared at it, perhaps wondering why her hand would not complete the ritual of driving the car, and then turned back the key. The car went silent. She leaned over and hugged me. "He didn't drink it," she whispered, choking on the stuttered alliteration, "he only sipped it and spilled out the rest." But she already knew he hadn't. He was Danny, the king of unsuccessful suicides.

August dripped by slowly this year. It was wet and bloated, overfilled with falling rain and lives. While we collected bloodied knives in a small Brooklyn apartment we had never visited, it stormed outside, the hard rain shaking windows that showed only ground, trapping us between walls of peeling plaster and weeping water. From inside, the landlord stared at us with a look of forced innocence as we carried triple-bagged packages to the curb. When we dropped them on the grass between the sidewalk and the street, a knife slit the bag and peeked his shameful head out, releasing something we had wordlessly caught. My mother cried and I drove home.

The breakfast crowd began to empty out. Devoid of people, the restaurant looked strange, still and frozen. I waited to see my brother reappear. He returned from behind the counter; but now, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt and sliding through the industrially-spaced vinyl booths that seemed cold and uninviting when bare, like a row of gaping, hungry mouths, he looked foreign, neither a customer or employee, but like something left-over, something that didn't belong. He slid silently into the car and immediately looked out the window, waiting for the quickly passing homes and people that told him we were going home. Questions blew through the car, swirling through vents and getting caught in the loose lining that hung only inches over our heads, but no one said anything, and the questions, unanswered for months now,

-66-



escaped through cracks in the back window, which didn't close all the way.

September came unannounced and stayed warm, and without the carpet of leaves that silenced our steps, we couldn't tell it was fall. My brother stayed with Gods and suicidals and my mother was there every night. I would eat dinner by friends, though sometimes I went to the hospital, but stayed quiet, always scared of saying the wrong thing. I swallowed my greetings and mumbled my pride and compassion, both of which felt forced and unbecoming in our surroundings. School began and the veneer of work kept me home, silent always, not having retorts to the accusations I glimpsed in every eye. Word finally got out, as no bonds can shield rumor from the ambitious reach of human curiosity and I knew the stagnate silence I walked into around each corner was the interruption of a conversation about me.

At the house, in the driveway, we split. My mother and I walked in through the front door while Danny quickly walked to the back of the house, to the door that led straight to his basement room, where a bleach bottle still laid empty on the ground and windows still showed only earth. My mother sat down on the sofa, exhausted by how much she had said and how much more she had thought. "Check on him, Eric," she said to me, "I don't think he's OK." I walked away and slammed the kitchen door behind me. "Of course he's not OK," I mumbled as I slowly rounded the same stairs my mother had bound up earlier that day.

By October, the doctors agreed to send Danny to a hospital in Fort Lee, right near our house. My mother would go there for the weekend and I would stay home with friends, drinking stolen beers in a house that seemed so much happier when it was empty. It got colder and I moved my room upstairs, which was smaller but





with better heating. My mom bought a new bed and put it in the basement, where mine once was. Slowly, an Ikea desk and bookcase sprung up around the bed, as if the basement believed it were spring. A TV table grew and sprouted a TV and VCR, bought cheap at a neighbor's garage sale. But every time my mother asked when Danny was coming home, the doctors always said it would be two more weeks.

I treaded lightly down the stairs, hoping to catch my brother asleep or watching TV without him catching me, so I could escape without speaking forced sentiment that weighed so heavily in my throat that I could never choke them up without them sounding queer and hoarse. I glanced to my right and saw that Danny had cleaned the evidence of his crime; the basement floor looked especially bare because I had expected, and almost wanted, to see the empty bottle. I had noticed things like it before, small blood spots on the tiled floor of his room, an empty razor wrapper in the basement garbage, but never said anything because Danny never did anything.

Danny sat at the corner of his full-size bed, bent over with most of his legs off of the mattress, like a fisherman sitting a pier. In a bag on the floor, I noticed his McDonald's uniform, something I hadn't seen him carry with him to the car. Either he had bought the uniform, or he hadn't gotten fired. But he was suicidal; his mother had caused a scene that practically had emptied out the restaurant. "Of course he was fired," I mumbled and though it was so silent I had barely realized what I said, Danny looked up at me, standing foolishly in his doorway. His eyes were red and shaded by the bags of the sleepless, though Danny slept all the time. He pulled his body up, straightening his back, and something like the smile one gets when he realizes that the surprise party is for him, or that he's the person receiving the award, fled across his face. In his right hand I could see a green, retractable box cutter and the



other hand curiously caressed the empty plastic wrapper, as if looking for some sort of instruction as to how to proceed.

In January, the two weeks were finally over. Danny came to live in the basement. My mother put a large throw rug over the tiled floor so that it wouldn't get so cold and talked about getting industrial carpet, like we had in the laundry room, for the rest of the basement. She put shades on the windows, but Danny kept them open, telling me once that the plants in the window looked like little trees. I also liked the windows; when I laid on the bed and looked up at them, all I saw was sky. When Danny's TV broke, she gave him the one from upstairs and we got a small thirteen inch one from a friend of mine. Our fancy antenna didn't fit right in the TV, which was a little old, and so we only really got channel seven and four. I would go downstairs, when Danny was at work or therapy to watch other shows.

"Don't Danny!" I yelled to him and ran over. I grabbed his right hand and pushed it back behind him. I tackled him back onto the bed, with me on top of him, holding his hand against the mattress, like one playfully jumping his lover. He had worked for a construction company in Brooklyn and was stronger than me, but he didn't struggle. He went limp, but it didn't seem chosen; I had surprised the strength from him; he laid still and waited for me to act, something I had never done.

I got up quickly from him, confused, and stumbled away from the bed. Danny sat up and turned around, picking the knife up from the edge of the bed, where it had fallen out of his hand. He slid the blade out farther and stared at me, his eyes flipping between me and the box cutter. I stared back.

"What, Eric? What?"
"Don't do it, Danny. Not now."





"Not now? What do you mean not now?"

"Don't kill yourself. Give me, give me the knife."

I wiped the sweat off my brow with my hand and continued the motion through my hair, making it all stick up when my hand released it.

"What do you even care if I kill myself?"

"Of course I care, Danny. I'm your brother."

"It'd be no difference. You don't say anything to me anyways" My hands clenched into fists and I hid them behind me, concealing my frustration.

"I love you Danny. Of course there's a difference. I don't want you to kill yourself."

"You don't care." He shook his head "You don't care."

"Of course I f--king care, Danny. Just give me the knife."

"No, nobody cares. Nobody cares. Go away."

"Fine." My fists suddenly unclenched and my fingers spread out wide, as if searching for something. "Do it. You're the f--king suicide king anyways. You never do anything."

"F--k you Eric. I knew you didn't care."

"Like you even care. Do you even know how much you screwed up my life already?"

Months later, my mother offered me the room. I couldn't take it. I could remember exactly what it looked like when I came down. Icicles of blood almost frozen between the stained mattress and the unmoving pool of red on the tiled floor, small rivers racing out to the large throw rug. My mother threw everything out and finally carpeted the room, but to me it remained unchanged.

I slowly began to forget and the months became lighter and emptier. February still depressed me but summer cheered me up. Two years after everything, I hired a mason to ask my forgiveness for me. On the gravestone, under his name and lifespan, we carved.

Danny Roth

1977 - 2002

A King of a Brother

And a Prince of a Son

