

THE ROAD TO NOWHERE: SKETCHES IN SEARCH OF A NOVEL

by

MATTHEW L. FORSYTHE

(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

The Road to Nowhere is a novel about David Kingman, a math teacher from the fictional town of Midfield, Ohio. The plot itself is straightforward: one Friday in October, Dave skips school. He is determined to climb Shuckstack, a mountain in the Smokies that he once hiked with his Grandpa, but his plan devolves, transformed into picaresque encounters with characters that distract, harass, and befriend him along the way. Modeled after a trail guide, the novel's structure reflects this fragmentation. The sketches are narrative prose, but they also incorporate maps, photographs, and even mathematics assignments. Many occur on the roads and trails that link Midfield to Shuckstack, while others explore the events from Dave's past that forged his peculiar character.

The novel is preceded by a critical introduction, "On Amusement Parks, Maps, and the Perils of Realism: Fragmented Thoughts on a Sketchy Creation," which examines the origin and development of the manuscript. The essay touches on places and people in the author's life that have influenced the novel's content; it also discusses the project's structure and works of literature that provided inspiration.

The title of the novel is a reference to an abandoned construction project within Great Smoky Mountains National Park, an incomplete road that suggests a metaphor for Dave's quest and his life as a whole. The subtitle is a nod to the fragmented presentation and the ongoing nature of the work.

INDEX WORDS: Novel, Fiction, Hiking, Journeys, Great Smoky Mountains, Ohio, Interstate 75, Mathematics, Christian Education, Grandfathers, Maps.

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DEDICATION

For Gretchen. Discerning reader, loving partner, patient wife.

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principles of construction are applicable to decks as well as novels. Granddad & Grandmother, Nana & Papa: watching your lives has taught me how to live.

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**ON AMUSEMENT PARKS, MAPS, AND THE PERILS OF REALISM:
FRAGMENTED THOUGHTS ON A SKETCHY CREATION**

1. A Growl in the Night: October 26, 2010

The forest was black — much darker than the sky, which carried the light of the moon. The trail reflected its pale glow. The path traced the ridgeline, cutting a luminous swath through the woods, and I picked my way down Shuckstack in the night. Dark veins of roots clung to silver boulders. I turned the outer corner of a switchback, imitating the cautious stride of a wounded hiker, and entered the next descent. My confidence increased. The truck was less than a mile away.

That afternoon, sprawled in the summit clearing, I had revamped the ending of *The Road to Nowhere*. A few hours after sunset, I was testing the new conclusion: at night, could the path be hiked without a flashlight? I had suppressed my instincts — not to mention my common sense — and buried my headlamp in the pack. I followed the Appalachian Trail in the dark, using nothing but moonlight and trekking poles to direct my careful steps. Alone in the Smokies, I was pleased at the bold maneuver. The plot would be realistic. I imagined the landscape, the backdrop for the novel's final scene.

The growl was clear and distinct. I froze in my tracks. Little more than a grunt, it carried surprise and irritation. My plan's folly was revealed. Obsessed with the story, I had forgotten the wildlife. I swore at my hubris, gripped the poles, and braced for the worst: a flurry of claw, tusk, or teeth. Leaves crunched as the animal shifted its footing,

not more than twenty yards away. I heard power in its weight. A bear, most likely. A boar would have already charged.

“Shit,” I whispered. I could picture the headline in *The Red and Black*: “Grad Student Mauled.” Back in Athens, in the dungeons of Park Hall, my friends and colleagues were slaving away on their dissertations. They fed their lives to their projects, one panic attack at a time. Not me. I was about to surrender my flesh in a single, imprudent hike.

2. Twenty-five Years Earlier: The Ohio Notebook

For the official credentials of this introduction — i.e., its pretensions as an academic document — I would love to describe a scholarly moment that triggered the novel’s design. A passage by an acclaimed author that inspired the opening. A volume of critical theory that spawned its fragmented structure. To my chagrin, the true origins are far more humble. In the Fall of 1984, at Independent Baptist Academy, Mrs. Stockdale assigned our 4th grade class the task of assembling an Ohio Notebook. The project was modest at first: mimeographed worksheets about the state’s history and photographs from a family trip to the Ohio Historical Society. Section II (Climate and Geography) featured a series of maps, and in Section III (State Symbols), the usual suspects were drawn and discussed — the flag, song and seal — but also less typical features: the official beverage (tomato juice), insect (ladybug), and gemstone (flint). Section IV (Industries) stretched for thirty-one ambitious pages, but it was Section V (Cities) that truly went berserk. I wrote to the Chamber of Commerce in towns throughout the state, and scores of brochures soon arrived in the mail. I collected them in folders with pockets and placed

them in the notebook, disrupting the presentation with artifacts and stowaways — precursors to the tangents, boxed passages, and miscellaneous debris throughout *The Road to Nowhere*.

The Ohio Notebook is a monolith. The binder is four inches thick, a testament to the perilous intersection of my obsessive-compulsive habits, my reluctance to cut & tendency to hoard, and a misguided hope that excess can substitute for quality. “Ohio Is The Greatest” boasts its laminated cover. In short — which at 135 pages, not counting the pamphlets, it certainly is not — the work is a troublesome antecedent to my current, quixotic endeavor. In T.O.N. are the same fixations that now burden T.R.N. Consider the maps and photographs, the segmented design, and the sprawling construction. Not that I noticed this correlation at once. On the contrary, it was well into the dissertation, fighting with the design, that I spotted the notebook in my office.¹ The connection was disturbing. In *The Road to Nowhere*, I had translated my 4th grade project into fiction.

Two details strike me about this revelation. It took a long time to recognize the influence, and its effect was most generative in the months that I was ignorant. After I noticed the relationship, my attempts to apply the discovery grew forced. At best, I could refine the elements already present. Unless I am paying deliberate homage, the guidance of my favorite books is most profitable when their presence is subliminal, not self-conscious. Hence Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* only surfaces once in the novel, amid a discussion of Fisher College, yet the stories have numerous parallels: George Willard’s need to escape a small Ohio town, the interconnected sketches that are not always linked to the central storyline, the perspective that drifts from the primary

¹ See “tendency to hoard.”

character, the distortions of religion in “Godliness” and “The Strength of God,” and a haunting statement by Elizabeth Willard — “I wanted to run away from everything but I wanted to run towards something too” (227) — that also applies to the quest of Dave Kingman. All of these features are present in *The Road to Nowhere*, yet I have tried to mask their importance. To forget it, even. When I start to obsess about the echoes, my focus is diverted by academic play: *How does Kate Swift, the schoolteacher, compare or contrast with Bethany? What about the debates regarding marriage in “The Untold Lie”?* The exercise can be intellectually stimulating, but it disrupts the creative process.² The authors that I will discuss in these pages have all been important to the work’s construction, yet their effect was most potent when I did not spot the guidance.

In addition, consider the nonliterary nature of The Ohio Notebook, my philistine muse. Works such as Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones*, John Gardner’s *On Becoming a Novelist*, and Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *Woman in Front of the Sun* have affected my daily approach to the craft of writing. In fact, many of them are precedents for the informal style of this (not so) critical introduction. Yet I cannot point to a specific feature within *The Road to Nowhere* and identify their influence, not the way that I can with the notebook. Another example involves the mixture of text and map in the novel’s opening. I admire Peter Turchi’s critical insights and envy the magnificent illustrations in *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*, but my design was actually inspired by AAA Trip Tiks from family vacations.³ In these flip books, boxed descriptions of the landscape accompany each

² John Gardner mentions a similar danger for writers who teach: “Dealing day in and day out with beginning writers, he finds himself forced continually to think in analytical fashion about problems he would normally solve in other ways” (*On Becoming a Novelist* 115).

³ Turchi also discusses Trip Tiks, but without the same level of affection.

map, a technique that I adapted in the novel. Numerous authors experiment with structure, but I wasn't copying a work of fiction when I dropped a fragmentation grenade into the text. Instead, I was thinking about Kenneth Wise's *Hiking Trails of the Great Smoky Mountains: A Comprehensive Guide*. In retrospect, I can also identify the King James Version of the Bible, the maps to amusement parks, and the Special Extended Edition DVD of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. I long to claim Calvino or Borges; alas, I am stuck with the national zoo.

3. World Traveler: 1975-1985.

Two of my favorite books about the writing life are Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* and Donald Hall's *Life Work*. Welty notes patterns of listening and observing that marked her childhood and later enriched her vocation. Hall describes habits of work that he learned from his Grandfather, comparing labors with language to daily routines on a farm. In this essay, I will follow their lead and venture into autobiography, because looking at where I have been sheds a peculiar light on the work that I now produce: sometimes helpful, often misleading, and always full of shadows. To that end, consider the dislocation in Dave's childhood, especially its contrast to Grandpa's attachment to the Smokies. In the opening decade of my life, our family lived in South Carolina; Great Britain; Washington (D.C.); Maryland; and Ohio (Wadsworth & Dayton). I spent eight years in Dayton: to this day, the longest I've lived in a single location — one explanation for its prominent role on Dave's drive south.

I have no recollection of South Carolina, but the isolated fragments from our time in England — including the bonfire at a Guy Fawkes Day celebration, a stream & bridge

near the village of Wendlebury, and a model train shop in Bourton-on-the-Water — all emphasize setting. Some writers recall people or incidents; I remember locations. By the time we moved to Dayton, I had established a routine when arriving in an unfamiliar neighborhood: I would bike the streets, learning their names and compiling a mental image of the landscape.⁴ Back at the kitchen table, I would transfer this vision to the page. Young Ben Franklin imitated the prose of *The Spectator*. I drew maps. My fascination with cartography also surfaced on trips to state parks, museums, battlefields — any venue that offered a map at the entrance. Before I could enjoy myself, I wanted to learn where everything was located. What’s more, I was usually compelled to share this information with my longsuffering family. The connection to the novel seems clear enough. Again and again, I force maps onto my readers, ensuring — before the story can proceed — that everyone knows exactly where they are.

In the move to Ohio, I entered the sphere of two important men: Papa and Granddad. Unlike my itinerant life, these ancestors were rooted in place. Aside from his World War II service with the 17th Airborne — the “Thunder from Heaven” — Papa lived most of his life in Cleveland. Granddad moved about eastern Ohio as a child, but he settled in Columbus and enjoyed a successful career as a newspaper editor. Each possessed an understanding of a specific, physical community that I would later associate with writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, and Wendell Berry. Indeed, there are traces of Michael Haupt and Thomas Forsythe in the life of Samuel Walker.

However, like other elements in the novel with debts to my past, the similarities were strongest in the early drafts. They disappeared as the story developed. In my work,

⁴ Thus I was already modeling myself after Annie Dillard, who roamed the streets of Pittsburgh as a child: “I walked and memorized the neighborhood. I made a mental map and located myself upon it” (*An American Childhood* 313).

experience is often a fertile ground for triggering a character or plot, but the original source becomes less and less prominent — unrecognizable, even — as the tale grows and evolves.

4. Early Reading Projects: WBE & the KJV

What else from those years in Wadsworth?

- The elaborate town of Legos that I built in our basement. I established the street grid first, a map to hold stories that developed.
- The woods in our backyard — a modest landscape, but dramatic enough for an eight-year-old boy. Although hundreds of miles from southwest Virginia, they are the streams and ravines that I always envision in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.
- The World Book Encyclopedia that my parents bought in 1983. I devoured its contents, although my most ambitious scheme — reading the entire collection from A-Z — was stymied by the mind-numbing entry on the *abacus* and the interminable list of *abbreviations*.
- My early, ongoing fascination with John Wesley Powell, who ventured into an unmapped canyon.⁵
- My speed at math drills, which caused me to be identified — throughout elementary, middle, and high school — as a future engineer or physicist. Even now, my oldest friends are skeptical of this scribbling vocation. Perhaps the Review Problems will reassure them.

At Clinton Christian Elementary and Independent Baptist Academy, I noticed that days are filled with stories. What about the eight years at Dayton Christian? The four years at Calvin that followed? Surely *they* relate to MCA and Fisher. Not really. Not that I'm willing to admit. Make no mistake, my time in Christian schools was significant to the creation of the novel. It provided an early inspiration, a stockpile of (un)believable

⁵ Create your own analogy about an author struggling with his first novel, but recall the warning of Judith Ortiz Cofer: "There are no guarantees. That is the only guarantee in a life dedicated to discovery." Writing involves "a walk into the unknown . . . without a map" (70).

details, and a cache of lore that I plundered when sculpting my fictional world. Yet there are not direct correlations, at least very few. Like my Grandfathers, the ghosts of my former schools have disappeared in each revision. The town of Midfield does not exist, and MCA is an imaginary institution. I hope that it suggests a composite of Christian education throughout the country, the triumphs as well as the follies.

The same principle applies to Reimer Road Baptist Church, where IBA classes were bussed to attend the annual missionary conferences. We gawked at the slides of African wildlife, asked speakers to sign our Bibles, and promised to serve overseas as adults. None of the churches in *The Road to Nowhere* are based on Reimer Road. Nor are they descendants of Patterson Park Church, where I was an active member of the youth group. My parents still attend PPC, and their friends are eager to read the novel. Some of the passages will delight them. Others will make them grimace. Yet I think of that verse in Philippians — “Whatsoever things are *true*” — and know that I’ve tried, even in scenes where God and Moses talk smack on the national links.

My faith is significant to the novel, a contrast (I hope) to the religious riff-raff that clutters Dave’s life. If its presence is worth anything, it will imbue the story with kindness and generosity. Regardless of their beliefs, readers should laugh, squirm, and lose themselves in the tale of this poor, misguided man. My mentors in this balance? James Kilgo, whose life is the underground current that waters the landscape in *Deep Enough for Ivorybills*. Donald Hall, who observes, “To read what I have written, you would not know that I am a Christian,” but describes his work as a form of spiritual devotion (122). And Flannery O’Connor, who claims that “the final standard” for any

artist “will have to be the demands of art, which are a good deal more exacting than the demands of the Church” (*Mystery and Manners* 183-184).⁶

Let us pause for a moment. Before we abandon the sanctuary for the trail, note the young boy in the pew at Reimer Road. He has set aside the Picture Bible, its drawings now etched in his memory, and is reading his way through the King James Version, far more intrigued by the text than the sermon. This is not his first attempt. He has often cruised through the bloodshed and drama of Genesis, only to slow in the second half of Exodus — that tedious swath in the wake of the Ten Commandments, pages of laws and nary a plague in sight. He will inevitably flounder in the wasteland of Leviticus. His entire childhood, he will be taught that the Scriptures are a single, cohesive text, not sixty-six individual works. Keep that in mind — his warped concept of textual unity — when reading the unusual novel that he constructs. From the KJV, he has learned that parts of a book will involve a chronological plot, its pace often erratic and filled with gaps. Significant passages wander away from the story. At times, they introduce new genres — the Wisdom Books, for instance — that vary in length, style, and perspective. Even after Malachi, when the anthology skips four hundred years and returns to the central narrative, the “begats” that jump-start the gospel of Matthew, the work remains avant-garde: four accounts of the same events, each slightly inconsistent; a collection of letters and “found” documents; an apocalyptic conclusion that spins wildly

⁶ “What we are is going to be visible in our art, no matter how secular (on the surface) the subject may be,” according to Madeleine L’Engle (141). “I’m like any other novelist,” says Frederick Buechner. “I’m trying to listen to what goes on in the lives of my characters” (qtd. in Brown *Of Fiction and Faith* 32).

Flannery gets the last word: “We reflect the Church in everything we do, and those who can see clearly that our judgment is false in matters of art cannot be blamed for suspecting our judgment in matters of religion” (190).

out of control. If you count the Apocrypha and other non-canonical books, it even comes with its own deleted scenes.

When this young man enters college, he will be drawn to works that experiment with structure. Think Melville's paragraphs about whales are dull? Try the inventories in Numbers. Are T.S. Eliot's allusions challenging? Take the book of Revelation for a spin — the stakes not a grade, but the fate of your soul. Trying to faze him with raw, visceral content? Nothing he'll encounter in a classroom will approach the graphic, sexual violence throughout the Old Testament. For years, he has been taught close reading: *sola scriptura*, and "scripture interprets scripture." He memorized hundreds of verses, and each week, he listened to a grown man lecture about sentences. In graduate school, he will be horrified to discover that certain writers begin their interpretations with theory, then apply that theory to the text. In his mind, such rash behavior is more than poor scholarship: it's heresy.

Have mercy on him. Is it really a surprise, when he sits down to compose a novel, that he breaks the narrative into sections, then sub-divides these sections into sketches? That he creates a story with chunks of text that drift from the central plot? A work that goes on and on and on and on? A collection filled with random documents — some relevant, others tangential? A story that requires a massive leap to finally reach The End?

5. Maps Maps Maps Maps Maps Maps Maps

In the summer of 1985, my family stayed for a week at the Officers Christian Fellowship camp in White Sulphur Springs, Pennsylvania. One day, I returned to the room and discovered a book on the bed. The cover featured three young children, a sword that

glowed with blue light, and a mysterious island fortress. On the back? A giant snake, a sorcerer, and skeletons on demonic bats, hunting two women on a Pegasus. The title was *The Tower of Geburah*, the subtitle was *A Fantasy*, and the allegory was rather heavy-handed. But none of that bothered me. The work had a single quality that redeemed everything else: it included a map of the fictional kingdom of Anthropos.

I devoured the book and its sequels, plus writing by Stephen Lawhead, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkein, no different than millions of preteen readers who have longed for adventures in other worlds. I will not elaborate on this subject, which I have discussed in the essay “Don’t Forget the Map” — an account of a story I wrote in 8th grade, an imitation of *The Tower of Geburah*. Still, it would be profitable to mention my favorite edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, which included a large, pull-out map that enabled the reader to track the precise location of every character. In addition, consider my earliest attempt to write a fantasy novel: the file only contains a handful of pages of prose, but it holds dozens and dozens of maps. Drawn on every conceivable scale, they limn my fictional world.

6. A Mind in the Making: 1989-1997

In high school, I enjoyed my English classes, especially the informal writing prompts, but I was less than enthralled with the required readings. My lack of focus was probably to blame. After all, I remember thinking that “Arthur Unknown” was a rather prolific poet. Too many activities laid claim to my attention: soccer and track, band, science fairs, church, and the spring musical. I continued with theater throughout college, and the next stage in my development as a writer was a series of one-act plays — *sANITY*,

SuperGoggleMan: Adventures of a Costumed Vigilante, and ^{*} *some assembly required* — that I wrote and saw produced. My fondness for composing dialogue, especially vignettes with circular or absurd banter, can be spotted in scenes at The Dragon’s Brew.⁷

What else is worth noting from that time at Calvin?

- Ed Ericson’s sonorous voice, reading Wordsworth and Coleridge the spring semester of my sophomore year. Tintern Abbey lured me out of Mathematics and into the field of English.
- The essay on Washington Irving that I wrote for Clarence Walhout, the beginning of my fascination with *The Sketch Book*. Like George Willard and *Winesburg, Ohio*, the influence of Geoffrey Crayon and his fragmented creation can be traced throughout *The Road to Nowhere*.
- My class on Literary Criticism with Susan Felch, when I first composed an analogy between hiking and studying literature — the centerpiece of my current teaching statement.
- New England Saints, my Interim class with Gary Schmidt and Dale Brown. In January 1997, we tramped about Concord, Massachusetts, and the northeast corner of the country. We toured the Old Manse, hiked at Walden Pond, and stayed in a B & B across the street from Bronson Alcott’s house. Those weeks deepened my urge to visit the actual setting of works.⁸

7. Shuckstack, Take I: Fall 1996

My junior year at Calvin, I travelled with friends to the Smoky Mountains for a week of backpacking during spring break.⁹ The Smokies were unfamiliar terrain, and we

⁷ This habit can also be traced to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, that staple of youth group humor. Connections between *The Holy Grail* and *The Road to Nowhere* are readily apparent: the work as a series of sketches; the liberal use of titles, interludes, and voiceovers; irreverent passages that feature a cartoonish god; absurd plots that circle back on themselves, leading to random, anticlimactic conclusions. In short, another unsophisticated muse.

⁸ As a bonus, after visiting a used book store, Dale handed me a copy of Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*. Seldom has a reading suggestion proved more beneficial: the whiskey priest and Dave Kingman have a great deal in common.

⁹ My companions included Jay, hero of the essay “Rev. Blankespoor — Or, How I Scrapped the Semicolon and Learned to Love the Dash.” He assigned me the trail name “Strapper,” inspired by numerous items I lashed to the outside of my pack. Like footnotes, in a way.

followed a recommendation about the southwest corner of the park. In many respects, the week was terrible: we were underprepared for the March weather, and the Pinnacle Creek Trail required an ungodly number of stream crossings. We were cold, wet, and tired for a significant portion of our vacation. Yet it was also amazing, one of the greatest weeks of my life: rushing creeks, isolated campsites, mountaintop meadows, thru-hikers on the AT, and the Shuckstack fire tower, where Jay and I climbed through a hole in the ceiling.¹⁰ I was instantly drawn to that section of the country, not to mention the maps that help you explore it.

The following year, in a workshop with Lionel Basney, I wrote a story called “Damascus,” an attempt to wander the Smokies in fiction. A young man named Aaron returns to the mountains and retraces his steps from a college backpacking trip. At the tale’s conclusion, this aspiring writer is granted a vision for the coming decades of his life.¹¹ The connection to *The Road to Nowhere* is obvious: the protagonist returns to Shuckstack’s tower. But there are subtle links as well. Aaron talks about the landscape with the Mariner, a grizzled backpacker. According to Basney, this older hiker was a form of Trail Confessor, a concept I’ve modified within the novel. A series of individuals and memories force Dave to acknowledge the person he has become. In other words, the most central form of confession that exists.

“Damascus” was not a success. Aaron is not a memorable character, and little about his tale would prompt readers to turn the page. The title refers to Damascus, Virginia, an objective of AT hikers traveling north. It’s less than a third of the way to Maine, but once they arrive, they have already crossed three states. If they’ve walked

¹⁰ Don’t tell Mom.

¹¹ I know, I know — I’m wincing too.

that far, they might as well hike all the way. At the time, I embraced this notion.¹² These days, I'm a lot more jaded. I've learned the challenge of those final miles. Approaching the end is no guarantee that you'll finish. Some mornings, the trail is easy: the earth rolls beneath your feet. On others, your progress is feeble: every step — or sentence — is a struggle of the will. Also, under the influence of Andy Frazee and Charles Baxter, I've grown suspicious of epiphanies.¹³ As a result, Dave does not discover much on the summit. If anything, he learns that his own heart is the greatest enemy.¹⁴

8. Shuckstack, Take II: Spring 1998

That week in the Smokies had far-reaching consequences. Applying to M.A. programs, I recalled the mountains of the south, grimaced at the thought of another Michigan winter, and noticed the (relatively) small application fee at the University of Tennessee. It was a great fit: two years of study with Allen Wier led to a significant improvement in my fiction, and I wandered the Smokies on a regular basis. In the Spring of 1998, I began work on a novel called *Damascus*. The lead character was a young woman named Tracy/Kendra (depending on the draft) who was hiking in the Smokies, avoiding the trail where her Grandpa had been injured. The project didn't go far. At the time, most of my

¹² I also enjoyed the connection to the apostle Paul — like Aaron, a hiker who encounters an epiphany.

¹³ Reading an early draft of the novel, Andy expressed his hope that the summit would not involve a clichéd revelation — a decision to marry Bethany, or Dave hurling the ring from the peak. His remarks were reinforced by Charles Baxter: “epiphanic endings . . . have become a tic, a habit,” and radiant insight has become “routine” (53).

Jim Shepard also discusses “the tyranny of the epiphany” and laments the number of works “in which the protagonists are whooshed along the little conveyor belts of their narratives to that defining moment of insight or clarification.” But “an enhanced level of self-awareness” is not a solution to a character’s problems: “we can be intricately self-aware and yet still geniuses at self-destruction” (*Bringing the Devil to His Knees* 18-19).

¹⁴ Which is related to Jeremiah 17:9, a verse that he quotes in Section II. Though it also strikes me as similar to Luke Skywalker’s experience in the cave on Dagobah, Yoda’s home planet, in *The Empire Strikes Back*. In other words, it confirms my status as an academic charlatan.

fiction was written in first person, and the protagonist's voice was insufficient for the task.

I salvaged an excerpt from *Damascus* — “The Legend of Taco Mike” — to include in *Loop Trails: Stories*, my Master's thesis.¹⁵ It contains themes that would reappear in *The Road to Nowhere*, but I hadn't found the character to hold them together. A similar issue plagues “The Tower,” my second attempt to write about Shuckstack. In October 1998, I had hiked from Fontana Dam to the tower, where I managed to jam the trap door and seal myself in the observation room. Later, after I pried the panel loose, the predicament struck me as an interesting metaphor: a man hikes to the summit, only to trap himself in the objective. The concept still intrigues me, but fiction whose central purpose is allegorical will seldom breathe with life. In early drafts, the hiker doesn't even have a name. He is simply an object lesson.¹⁶

9. Intermission: 1999-2005

I didn't write much in the next six years. Instead, I accepted a job as a Lecturer at Tennessee, teaching 8-11 courses a year. Numbers don't indicate quality, but — like

¹⁵ The title hints at movement without progress. When walking a loop trail, hikers end at the spot they began. At the same time, an interior growth can occur on the journey.

One of the epigraphs — Albert Camus's statement “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” — has implications for Dave's life as well, and he compares both hikers and teachers to this mythic figure. Another epigraph — “I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air,” Paul's claim in I Corinthians — can also be applied to his predicament. He swings at the air on multiple occasions: not only his fights with Randy and the Coldwater coach, but his dream of battling an invisible opponent.

The binding on the thesis was misprinted, and anyone looking for the manuscript in Tennessee's library will discover *Loop Trials: Stories*, an apt warning to potential readers.

¹⁶ O'Connor warns writers not to envision “some action and then [scrounge] up a character to perform it. You will usually be more successful if you start the other way around. If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen; and you don't have to know what before you begin. In fact it may be better if you don't know what before you begin. You ought to be able to discover something from your stories. If you don't, probably nobody else will” (105-106).

Hall's awe at the many times he has revised "Another Elegy" — I'm proud of the work they represent. This fall, I'll be teaching my 63rd college course. In the classroom, I deepened my grasp of basic techniques and sharpened my talents at critiquing fiction.¹⁷

In retrospect, it might have been better for my career to enter a PhD program a few years sooner. Yet I don't regret the decision.¹⁸ In addition to honing my skills as a teacher, I logged hundreds of miles on the trail. I memorized rivers and mountains and valleys. These days, I seldom need a map when hiking in the Smokies. I still carry one, of course — but for pleasure, not utility.

10. Shuckstack, Take III: 2005-2006

Fall 2005: English 6800

I never received a formal acceptance to UGA. I was about to commit to the MFA program at Hollins University when an email arrived from Dr. Moran. Addressed to the incoming PhD class, it reminded us to register for courses. In a flurry of phone calls, I determined that I had been admitted: the department had simply neglected to inform me. So I often wondered about my place, a fear that intensified in my initial workshop. The first students to submit fiction were Kirsten Kaschock and Sian Griffiths, both in their final year. Their prose had a poise and authority that my writing lacked, and I resolved to narrow this gap. Kirsten's excerpts from *Sleight* encouraged me to take risks with

¹⁷ There's a limit to this benefit, of course. You "can learn the basics of how to write a story . . . and still be unable to write a good story. . . . Acquiring a basic competency in an art or craft is a necessity but will get its practitioner almost nowhere, if we define a 'destination' as the completion of a beautiful or solid piece of work. Competency must be allied, must give way, to good judgment, energy, and creativity . . . [to] passion and vision" (Baxter and Turchi *Bringing the Devil to His Knees* 1).

¹⁸ During my time as a Lecturer, I met, dated, and married Gretchen. I'm a few years behind in the race to snatch tenure, but I came out on top in the end.

content and style, and Sian's *Borrowed Horses* demonstrated the powerful combination of experience and imagination.

The date of my first submission approached. Scrambling for ideas, I decided to rewrite the failed story about the tower. I deconstructed the original, keeping only the central framework: the man climbing Shuckstack, his thoughts alternating between past and present. The hiker became Dave, a Christian schoolteacher from Dayton, Ohio, granting me access to a vast knowledge of evangelical subculture. I've tried to be fair. My aim is a delicate balance. I poke fun at peculiar traditions, but I hope to avoid a bitter or mean-spirited presentation.

I almost made Dave an English teacher, but the role didn't fit. Besides, the world is overstocked with novels about the humanities. So Dave teaches math, which explains why he often views his surroundings as a series of equations. It also inspired the word problem that drives the story: can a teacher skip town on a Thursday night, travel to the Smokies, hike to the top of Shuckstack, and return to Ohio before he is missed?¹⁹ Eventually — as Reg noted — his journey required a stronger impetus. *What compels him toward the mountain? What's at stake? Why should readers be interested in following?* But the ticking clock provided a temporary placeholder. It structured the adventure and spurred his movement forward.

Important details were introduced: the principal as antagonist, the relationship with Bethany, and the question of marriage that surfaces throughout the work. Dave has purchased a ring, an impulsive choice that contrasts his typical indecision.²⁰ Beth was

¹⁹ In a way, isn't *every* novel a type of word problem?

²⁰ The fact that he carries a ring also provides echoes of Frodo and Middle-earth, which is appropriate, because few works of literature are co-opted more often by evangelical subculture. I've heard numerous devotionals and sermon illustrations that encourage Christians to picture themselves as characters in

not sympathetic in these early drafts. One of the novel's challenges is Dave's perspective. He poses for the camera, presenting himself as a rebel and his girlfriend as the teacher who believes in MCA with all her heart. Such a misleading bias isn't the only problem. I had always envisioned a lyrical description of the passing landscape, but I didn't trust Dave for the delivery. In fact, his struggle to connect to this once-familiar region is a noteworthy sign of his true deracination.²¹ My solution was the book's earliest form of fragmentation. At the start of each chapter, an italicized passage would pan across the setting, establishing the backdrop for scenes that followed. Later, I pulled these sections into sketches of their own, which triggered a domino effect and shattered the entire novel.

Spring 2006: English 8800

That spring, when Judith announced that her multigenre seminar was a project-completion workshop, I worried — once again — that I was in the wrong place. After all, Dave's manic adventure was just getting started. I soon learned the value of poets in our midst. Danielle Pafunda offered a careful analysis of the timing and presentation in the near-wreck with the mail truck.²² In another passage — when Dave examines the ring box — she observed my habit of overextending the descriptions of commonplace objects, among the most practical advice that I've ever received in a writing course.

Tolkein's world. Dave projects his quest against that epic landscape. Readers, of course, should spot the disjunction. If his journey is classified as *epic*, it also requires the adjective *mock*.

²¹ Baxter contends that the way "a person sees the things that surround him usually tells us more than an explicit description of his mood." The landscape is more than "just a place where action occurs. . . . Setting projects a mode of feeling that corresponds to — or contrasts with — the action (73, 81).

²² This scene interests me, given its origins in a girlfriend's fender-bender with the USPS, yet it always seems to bore readers. Sooner or later, I'll probably need to take Dillard's advice: "It will be a miracle if you can save some of the paragraphs, no matter how excellent in themselves or hard-won. You can waste a year worrying about it, or you can get it over with now" (*The Writing Life* 550).

New characters entered the story, changing its tone and direction. I included a brief reference to Mr. Pete, and Randy arrived in dramatic fashion. Dave had been spending a lot of time by himself. Because so much action took place in memory, the present was dull by comparison. Miles of trees would not captivate a reader: the trail needed excitement.²³ Randy's attitude intrigued me, especially his assault on conventional interaction. He refused to leave, pestering Dave along the trail.²⁴

11. Trail Conditions: 2006-2007

- Gordon, Tar Pits Jesus, and the Sundae Schoolteacher competition found their way into the novel.
- Kristen Iskandrian's project *The School* challenged my assumptions about narrative and encouraged me to view works of fiction as physical structures.
- I drafted a history of Samuel Walker's life — his service in World War II & courtship of Lily — employing a style that imitates the much-maligned Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*.
- Two assignments by Professor Cofer — a (failed) attempt at microfiction, and an essay about our favorite piece of punctuation — started my experiments with short, segmented forms.
- I brought a shoebox diorama to class, which has led me to imagine the entire novel as a form of Show & Tell: not only the mixture of scene (show) and summary (tell), but a collection of objects that a novelist curates.
- I aimed for the mountains, but Dave stopped at a venue I had not planned: The Dragon's Brew.²⁵ The locals claimed the story for themselves.²⁶ In early drafts, this

²³ C.J. Hribal observes "our appetite, as readers who write, for things to happen," for "drama . . . to break through a large bubble of recollection or interior reflection or explanation" (148).

²⁴ In a sense, Randy is what Kurt Vonnegut and Susan Neville refer to as the Iago — the individual who acts as a "catalyst" in the story, a "character that bounces all the other characters around" (33-34).

I've often told students that characters fall into one of two categories, each of them found in the classic 80s movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. If their character is a Ferris, they're in luck: all they have to do is follow him out the door, and he'll find the adventure on his own. If their character is a Cameron, they need a Ferris to arrive and disrupt the status quo. I offer examples from fantasy and science fiction: Gandalf arrives for Bilbo and Frodo, Luke Skywalker requires Obi-wan Kenobi, Neo has Morpheus, and Harry Potter gets Dumbledore. Dave needs Gordon, Tar Pits Jesus, and Randy to nip at his heels.

²⁵ Although The Dragon is an actual stretch of road, The Dragon's Brew is a fictional location. Every few months, I run an anxious web search, concerned that a caffeine-loving motorcycle enthusiast has claimed

scene was often groan-inducing, especially Emily's observation that Dave must be the happiest man in the world, since the one thing he wanted — coffee — was something he already held in his hand.

- Two helpful insights: Jenn Blair offered a keen observation that Grandpa's story was too lyrical to be from Dave's perspective, and Josh Hussey warned about moments when the hand of the author was too apparent.²⁷

12. Reading & Rambling

Ignore my earlier protestation that influence is best when subconscious: it smacks of an arrogance that I discourage in my students. *Teacher, heal thyself*. The truth is, I am constantly gaining technique and inspiration from works that I encounter. Some of this impact is immediate: I set down a book and pick up the pen. More often, it takes time to absorb, and the effect grows apparent in years to come. Thus it only makes sense that my coursework has lurched into the background of the novel.

Fall 2005: American Literature to 1820

In an auspicious and providential move, our class opened with *The Sketch Book*. In *The Road to Nowhere* and Washington Irving's collection, the plot is composed of sketches — some sequential, others related by theme or location. The central narrative is interrupted by stories and legends, and Geoffrey Crayon follows passages into the core of buildings, where he encounters new, unforeseen rooms and spaces. Both the doorways in

the name. I owe the venue's inspiration to Nicole Camastra and Emily Kane, two of my closest friends in the program. In a class on Hemingway, they joked that if a PhD didn't land them jobs, they would open a bakery: *The Bun Also Rises*. The proprietress — one of my favorite characters in the book — is named Emily in their joint honor.

As for Deacon, the professor who's happiest when immersed in a book, yet who keeps getting dragged into pointless and interminable debates? He owes a fraction of his existence to a certain ex-department head that frequents the ERC.

²⁶ "The characters arrive when evoked," says Forster, "but full of the spirit of mutiny" (66).

²⁷ According to Gardner, "This is perhaps the chief offense in bad fiction: we sense that characters are being manipulated, forced to do things they would not really do" (*On Becoming a Novelist* 20).

The Sketch Book and the boxes in *The Road to Nowhere* are portals that lead deeper into the text.

I grew fascinated with the fragmentation throughout early American Literature, especially in William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* — their uneven & segmented design; the exchanges, trades, and transactions that preoccupy each work; the letters and documents that infiltrate the narrative. Also, neither work actually concludes. The projects were too ambitious for Bradford and Franklin to finish. *Of Plymouth Plantation* ends with headings for the years 1647 & 1648, but the entries are void of text. At the end of his *Autobiography*, Franklin provides an outline of events that he plans to discuss in future pages — a list that closes with a simple "To France, Treaty, &c." (272). Which lessens my embarrassment at the current, summarized form of Sections VIII and IX.

Spring 2006: American Literature since 1960

A catalogue of authors I admire: Faulkner, Welty, O'Connor, Percy, Berry, Chappell, Crews, and Brown. They all emphasize place, especially the Appalachians and the south. Welty's story "The Wide Net" demonstrates the power of mapping a mythology onto a landscape, and Sam Walker would feel right at home among Wendell Berry's Port Royal Membership. Larry Brown's *Fay* reveals the havoc that a single character can initiate, a subject that Dave contemplates as well — how a random encounter can shape the course of a life. Finally, Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*, subtitled *The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*, features the narrator Thomas More, a

character with parallels to my novel's hero: nominal Christians on the run, their dilemma both a comic farce and a serious predicament.²⁸

Fall 2006: Faulkner

Traces of Faulkner's novels are visible throughout *The Road to Nowhere*. *As I Lay Dying* is a clear antecedent, a ludicrous plan that quickly unravels. Both stories involve a complex system of family rivalries, especially the tension between siblings who share a mother but not a father, and Faulkner presents the plight of the Bundrens in a fragmented manner, including perspectives that disagree. In addition, the itemized list that Cash provides about the casket is echoed in Dave's checklist before leaving the apartment, and in an interview slated for Section VIII, Rachel will offer a brutal, one-line response — "My brother is an ass" — that plays on Vardaman's celebrated "My mother is a fish."

When "The Ballad of Mr. Pete" took its massive detour from Dave's journey south, I found solace in the fact that a similar, risky move occurs within *Light in August*. Faulkner suspends the central narrative, allowing the work to circle through time and follow the life of Joe Christmas. *Go Down, Moses* also uses a complex, segmented format, and "The Bear" is divided even further: in its fourth section, the novella abandons the hunting camp to wander the labyrinth of the McCaslin ledgers. Finally, *Absalom*, *Absalom* is constantly reaching back in time, based on Quentin Compson's suspect premise that the past can be understood. When I determined that *The Road to Nowhere* would consist of nine sections — a plan that I've stubbornly maintained, even as the plot

²⁸ As Flannery O'Connor says in an Introduction to *Wise Blood*, "all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death" (8). In another essay, I have written about the extensive connections between *Love in the Ruins* and *The Power and the Glory*. It is interesting to consider *The Road to Nowhere* as part of that conversation.

veered in unexpected directions — I claimed that my choice was based on sports. A baseball game has nine divisions of unpredictable length; so would my novel. But the structure also paid homage to the nine, uneven chapters of Quentin’s struggle with Thomas Sutpen’s ghost.

Spring 2007: Hemingway

Heeding the well-worn adage, I chased Faulkner with Hemingway to flush the syntax from my system. The core appeal was a chance to examine his original manuscripts. The work that I selected, “A Natural History of the Dead,” seemed like an obvious fit, a monograph about nature writing that segued into a fictional sketch. True to form, I studied its fragmented origins and the complex narrative. Along the way, I also considered its role within *Death in the Afternoon*, where the Author gives the tale to the Old Lady. As critics have noted, the Author is a fictional construction, not Hemingway himself, and I adapted this conceit in *The Road to Nowhere*, where the character of M—F—, the Author of the novel, argues with m—f—, the critic who enters the text.²⁹

Of course, the most obvious comparison involves the Research Packet that Dr. Nagel assigned. We were required to find and document *every* reference to our story in critical articles, books, biographies, and reviews. He emphasized the thoroughness that was expected, which unleashed the same fiends that created The Ohio Notebook. My packet of notes, photocopies, quotes, and summaries was hundreds of pages long, and I have often wondered how much of that impulse — the urge to collect *everything* — has crossed from my academic work into the composition of the novel.

²⁹ m—f—, my version of the Old Lady, is a juvenile pun: my inner critic is a little m—f—.

Fall 2007: Poe

At first glance, Poe's fiction and my jumbled creation have little in common. After all, Edgar is famous for his stress on the unity of effect, and my novel is anything but unified. Yet Poe's longer works — "The Unparalleled Adventures of Hans Pfaall," "The Mystery of Marie Roget," and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* — are often imbalanced in their structure. Furthermore, he too employs riddles, puns, codes, and hoaxes, and struggling to bring a tale home, we both will attempt a giant leap.

13. Inventory: Summer 2007

After two years in Athens, Gretchen and I drove west on a tour of the mountains in Colorado and Wyoming. We hiked, camped, and recovered. Each day, I was given five minutes to complain about grad school. After that, I had to shut up and enjoy myself. They were good weeks.

14. Excuse Me, Could You Spare a Pair of Eyes?

I read and read and read and read and read — not only for Comprehensive Exams, but at *The Georgia Review* as well. I had little time to write, which was ironic, because the more novels and books about craft that I devoured, the greater the itch to get back to the page. In recent years, these texts have surfaced in my fiction. Some of the influence is obvious: on my American to 1900 list, I emphasized works with fragmentation. But a shift in priorities can also be observed: I designed my 20th Century American list with an emphasis on setting, but grew more and more interested in the elusive narrators. I have discussed such topics *ad nauseum*, so I will not belabor them here.

Less obvious parallels between *The Road to Nowhere* & works that I studied.

- The “In which” statements from each Trail Guide are a tribute to the subtitles in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, but the italicized lists are a nod to Olaudah Equiano’s *Narrative* and Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*. *Roughing It* had a significant impact on the entire novel: Twain’s eagerness to insert “set pieces” into the text; the detours and diversions; the stubborn refusal to end the work; the compulsion to include Appendices; the role of the visual in the early editions; and even the notion of “Roughing It” — sketching out an idea, without fretting the imprecision.
- The multiple versions of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* are related to my interest in providing both a short, initial version of the novel and a longer, expanded director’s cut.
- I’m not a huge fan of *The Confidence-Man*, but the sequence of forms that the title character assumes has influenced a trio — Gordon, Tar Pits Jesus, and Randy — that all stalk Dave throughout *The Road to Nowhere*.
- The scenes of Dave on the road were inspired — in part — by the long, circular drive of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom in John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*. The debates about authenticity can be traced to Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. And the novel’s structure owes part of its circular motion to the “shadow casting” in Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*, which happens to be a far more chaotic, episodic, unruly, and beautiful novella than readers tend to recall.
- The most extensive influence is David James Duncan’s *The River Why*. His comic novel contains four sections, all subdivided into chapters, and Gus takes a series of ludicrous journeys. The story involves an emphasis on place and family, especially the need to re-forge these connections; it makes extensive use of documents, quotes, and headings; and it mocks religion in an effort to contemplate truth.

15. Frustration & Fragmentation: Spring & Summer, 2009

The first half of 2009 is not a season I like to remember. The miscarriage in January, the months devoted to recovery. In Park Hall, assisting Judith with her graduate workshop, I was frustrated with the novel. I pushed it to the side and played: “Library Incident Less Violent Than Reported” (a bizarre story), and a “news report” from The PhD Combine³⁰; an essay about setting my apartment on fire while working on a poem, and a piece of

³⁰ Set in a universe where English departments follow the rules of the NFL Draft when making their hires. The lowest-ranked program picks first: spreading the wealth, as opposed to the conservative, trickle-down model we currently employ.

nonfiction about memorable classroom gaffes. In short, anything to avoid *The Road to Nowhere*.

The Prospectus revealed a troubling prospect: I wasn't that thrilled by Dave's story. I devised an escape hatch, a note about a "Shadow Project" (short stories and essays that I was collecting), and Judith called my bluff. Embarking on a dissertation was hard enough. Why sabotage the effort by hedging my bets and diluting my commitment? At first I was annoyed. Yet everything she said was true. I considered the elements that had made writing enjoyable that spring: the invention and risk, the feeling that I was at play, the experiments with form and perspective. Could I somehow import them into the novel, charging it with energy and life?

When you're lost, consult the map. So I did. I fused the italicized passages with highway maps, satellite images, and photographs.³¹ At a scenic overlook, visitors glance at the landscape and read about the view at a display. In the book, readers consider the graphics and descriptions; they turn the page, step onto the trail, and disappear into a character's life. I began to describe the work as a trail guide, divided by region and subdivided into hikes. Certain paths could be combined, forming a linear sequence, while others were self-contained units. If readers grew weary, they would always be close to something new. It was easy to insert documents and tangents. For example, I had created a backstory about Emily and The Dragon's Brew; however, because Dave was an outsider, this information had to arrive through dialogue — conversations that were stilted and forced. On the other hand, the gossip seemed natural for a chatty, small-town newspaper column. It took most of the summer to redesign the opening, but the

³¹ Due to concerns about copyright, many of these elements — including all of the satellite images — have been removed from the edition of the dissertation that is available online.

result was worth the effort — not simply the material on the page, but my newfound excitement about the project.

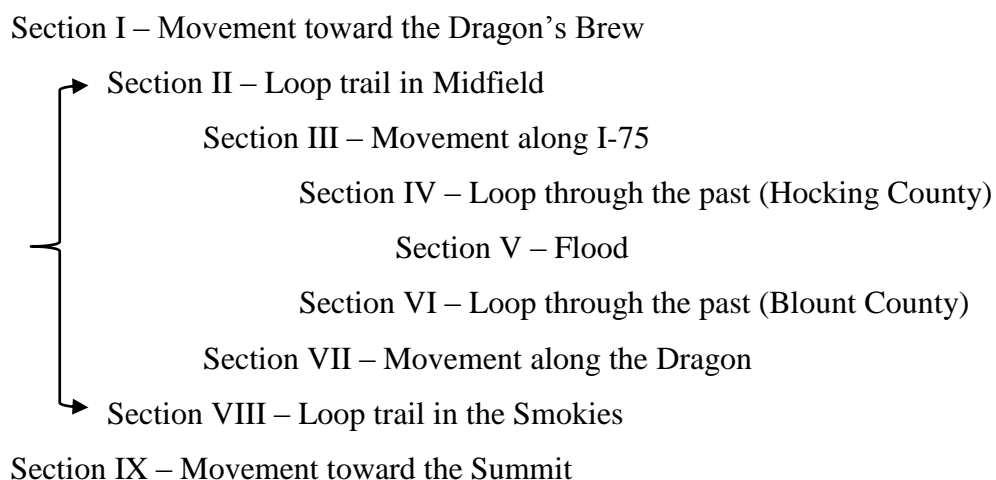
16. Narrative Design: Fall & Winter, 2009-2010

Back at Dave's apartment, I indulged in a whimsical streak: the Geology of Sweaters, the map of Cracker Barrels. Gordon arrived in the OC, bringing a new dilemma. I wanted to include a few stories about him, but the flashbacks were getting complex. What I needed was a hyperlink, access for readers who were interested. Others could bypass the material, which I placed inside a box, simulating a window that might open on a computer screen. Solid lines would imply separation, but a pattern of dots and dashes formed a permeable boundary, encouraging readers to slip through the cracks. As a bonus, they possessed a subliminal echo: a child with scissors might cut out the shapes, refashioning the text at will.

I was working with freedom, having removed the constraints of setting the novel in Dayton. I had been holding back, concerned that friends and family would search for themselves in the text. As a solution, I dropped a fictional city between Lima and Findlay. Dave could still follow I-75, retaining that image of the I-75/I-70 cross — the burden of religion, buried within his route of escape. But the greatest benefit was my relief. Now that Midfield and MCA were undeniably fictional, I could unleash myself on them both.

The closing sketches of Section II contain echoes of its opening moments, including the use of present tense. The duo has returned to Shady Grove, and Dave ends the section as he began it — alone, but with the sense of being watched. The protagonist

and the reader have travelled a loop trail. In that sense, it prefigures the movement in Section VIII, when Dave will follow the Lakeshore Trail before circling back to the AT. Considered as a whole, the entire novel involves these matched pairs; the sections descend into the flood and rise again to the summit:



I did not set out to structure the novel in this manner.³² When the pattern emerged, I welcomed its presence. The symmetry and geometry were reassuring, especially given the ever-increasing sprawl.

Each section assumed a form as well. The shapes were seldom apparent at first, and the opening sketches were often based on instinct. For example, at the start of Section III, the museum needed to earn its place, and the story about the field trip emerged.³³ Bethany revealed a playful side, the catalyst for “EagleNet,” which provides its own transition to “YourChildsASlacker.com.” The sketches in the novel are linked by one of two methods: 1) chronology (either a temporal or a spacial sequence); 2) a detail,

³² According to Calvino, “A work of literature is one of these minimal portions in which the existent crystallizes into a form, acquires a meaning — not fixed, not definitive, not hardened into a mineral immobility, but alive as an organism” (69-70).

³³ The series of astronaut jokes is a tribute to my father, renowned for his terrible puns.

line, or image that triggers the following episode. First, the conclusion of “Southern Drift” is the tale of the snowstorm, which connects to the opening of “Bored Games.” After the vision of the monster squirrel at the end of “Bored Games,” a lesser squirrel falls from a tree in “R.O.U.S.? I don’t think they exist.” The return to Armstrong in “Mission Control” completes the loop.³⁴ In addition, the title of the section — “Leaps of Flight” — provides a controlling image that runs throughout its pages, describing both form and content.³⁵ Again and again, the concept is introduced: the moon shot, the squirrels, the cars launching off snow drifts,³⁶ and Dave’s own bound away from Midfield.

17. An Evening Performance

By the Spring of 2010, the shape of the book was coming into focus. I still didn’t realize how long it would take to return to *The Dragon’s Brew*, but I knew that Dave would awake to find Randy eating his sandwich; that he’d travel with one or more kayakers to Parson Branch Road; and that Randy would surprise him at Fontana Dam. In addition, I could sketch out the route to the summit. It didn’t seem like much — a few interesting turns, but not enough to justify the multitude of pages. The payoff seemed meager for readers that endured, and the title was growing prophetic: the novel had no destination.

³⁴ I have always enjoyed the X-Y axis, its union of mathematics & cartography: I often picture Dave’s drive along the highway as travel on the vertical axis, while the lateral progress from image to image is movement on the horizontal plane. Together, they form an equation that plots the arc of the novel. According to Gretchen, such a vision is too idiosyncratic to be illuminating.

³⁵ In *Lightness*, Calvino emphasizes “the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world” (12), but these transitions between sketches also aspire to Quickness — “above all agility, mobility, and ease, all qualities that go with writing where it is natural to digress, to jump from one subject to another, to lose the thread a hundred times and to find it again after a hundred more twists and turns” (46).

³⁶ These cars recall the *Wheels of Speed* from Section I. Baxter discusses “Rhyming Action” in fiction, which “often has to do with dramatic repetition, or echo effects.” (113).

In addition to questioning the plot, I turned a critical eye on the boxed asides. I tried to consider them “Narrative Spandrels,” dramatic elements that begin as “by-products” of the fictional structure but are incorporated back into the central design, adding to its overall effect (Boswell “Narrative Spandrels”). But the explanation did not satisfy. They were far greater tangents than the architectural features that Boswell describes. I debated the worth of each distraction. After all, John Gardner presents a compelling case that fiction’s objective is a “vivid and continuous dream”: readers “must not be roughly jerked from the dream back to the words on the page” (*On Becoming a Novelist* 5-6). As he notes, “a repeatedly interrupted flow of action must necessarily have less force than an action directly carried through from its beginning to its conclusion” (*The Art of Fiction* 31).

I almost made that brutal cut. Instead, I gambled that I could hold the reader’s attention with the spectacle, as long as the diversion was entertaining. In George Garrett’s story “An Evening Performance,” an itinerant daredevil offers “a performance that defies the laws of nature and science” (9). The story acts as a metaphor for the fiction writer: “this dive is skill, skill pure and simple,” the announcer informs the small-town audience. “When Stella climbs that tower and dives into the flames she’s doing something anyone could do who has the heart and the skill and the nerve for it” (9-10). The performance is short — a single dive on a single evening — but “it remained with them, haunting, a long time afterwards” (11). The analogy is not exact, not for a work as long as *The Road to Nowhere*. Even so, the tangents were given a stay of execution.

Dave approached Dayton, and Grandpa began his tale of God & Pittsburgh. The sketch veered into a memory about Mr. Pitts. I liked the effect and labeled it “Take I.”

Dave's Mom was a stubborn character who fascinated me.³⁷ The story about Mr. Pitts led the narrative to Hocking Hills and Mr. Pete. I was playing by ear. An idea would spring to mind — deconstructing that saccharine speech to the church — and I tried to exhaust its possibilities. An image appeared in the distance — the older man rocking on the porch, a rifle across his lap — and I pushed in that direction.³⁸ It helped to have a villain on the scene. Mr. Pete was pathetic — a creep and a bully, which masked the insecurities he harbored — but his presence energized the story.³⁹ Elsewhere, Laura sat for an interview and challenged her son's version of events.⁴⁰ Once again, Grandpa tried to speak of Pittsburgh, but David's insecurities about salvation were too significant to ignore. Finally, the third attempt was a success: a hundred page loop, all in an effort to relate the anecdote.

18. The Perils of Realism

The novel had been scheduled to occur in October 2009. I checked the Ohio sports calendar and tried to determine when Dave could make his trip — hoping to catch the fall

³⁷ “Every now and then, as I tried to narrate her story, she looked me in the eye and announced, *No, you're not telling it right — here's what really happened*. They were startling moments, filled with unexpected revelations.

³⁸ According to E.L. Doctorow, “writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way” (qtd. in Lamott 18). Which sounds good, though I'd prefer to have a map.

O'Connor also notes the instinctive nature of a tale's creation: “The more stories I write, the more mysterious I find the process and the less I find myself capable of analyzing it” (87).

³⁹ Evil creates “tension and imbalance.” Without it, there is “a kind of muddiness, characters with a static sensitivity, a case of viral ennui that is never realized in dramatic action” (Neville 34-35).

⁴⁰ The dissertation's subtitle, “Sketches in Search of a Novel,” is both an acknowledgement of its patchwork nature and an allusion to Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in which characters arrive at the theater and dispute the manner in which they're portrayed.

The title *The Road to Nowhere* is a reference to an unfinished road that juts into the heart of the Smokies. Dave does not visit this abandoned project, but he and Randy discuss it. The phrase also contains any number of puns about hiking, writing, and the dissertation itself.

color, but adhering to the OHSAA soccer season. I decided to visit the trail and take photographs for the dissertation, pictures that would run along the margin of a sketch.⁴¹

A notion struck my fancy: what if the photos came from the actual date that Dave visited the tower? Readers could witness the setting at the precise moment that he arrives. But the concept arrived too late. I didn't get to the trail until the first week of November, and the JV season had already ended. So I pushed Dave's quest to 2010.

I forgot to account for divine intervention. On Wednesday, June 16, I received a text from Andy Jameson: "Did u see that tar pits jesus was struck by lightning and went up in flames? Made me think of you." A bolt of lightning had pierced the Savior's hand, starting a fire that engulfed the statue. The Catch-22 was absurd. To get the pictures I wanted, the novel had to occur in 2010; for Tar Pits Jesus to be intact, it had to take place in 2009. I might have abandoned my commitment to precision. After all, I had altered Ohio's geography to include Midfield. But I was stubborn and bemoaned my fate. Elsewhere, a rockslide had closed a portion of US 129 that Dave needed to use. I spent a few anxious weeks on the TDOT website, hoping that construction was on schedule, and I started to worry that acts of God would prevent the novel's completion. Eventually, I acknowledged the obvious truth: the story was more interesting with the effigy destroyed.⁴²

In October 2010, I returned to Shuckstack on two occasions. The weather was great, and I took hundreds of photographs. On the second visit, I was disturbed at the state of the room. At some point in the previous decade, the trap door had been removed.

⁴¹ Like the vertical line of snapshots on the cover, designed to resemble a roll of film.

⁴² I would like to believe that I'm the only student in the history of Park Hall who was forced to re-write a chapter of his dissertation because a giant statue of Jesus was struck by lightning.

In other words, it was no longer possible for Dave to seal himself in the tower. I would have to change the ending of the novel.⁴³ Back on the ground, rewriting the conclusion in my mind, I saw what needed to happen: our hero would descend the mountain in the dark. . . .

Which is how I found myself on the lower slopes of Shuckstack, facing an animal that was not pleased at the intrusion. I dug the headlamp from the pack and aimed it at the switchback. All I could see was the reflection from the eyes, a few feet off the ground. I banged my trekking poles together and sang part of a song. The bear refused to budge. I did not want to linger, and I wasn't about to turn my back. So I chose the route of least resistance — an ankle-jarring, off-trail scramble to a lower section of the path.

I still believe in fidelity to landscape. But I've learned my lesson. I now understand the perils. In certain situations, especially when predators are involved, a slight shortcut is acceptable. The writer targets an impossible task, but he keeps his wits about him, always prepared to improvise that dramatic, last-second escape.⁴⁴

⁴³ For several years, I had envisioned Randy returning — *deus ex machina* — to rescue Dave from the tower, subverting the familiar trope from fairy tales. According to Anne Lamott, a change of plans is natural: “you have a sort of temporary destination, perhaps a scene that you envision as the climax . . . but when you get there, or close, you see that because of all you’ve learned about your characters along the way, it no longer works” (85).

⁴⁴ In “Hanging from the Trestle While the Train Goes By: Some Notes on Working for a Living,” George Garrett describes an uncle who “was often caught walking the tracks by a freight train and forced to hang from a crosstie while the train rattled overhead. Garrett sees that as an apt image for an artist, literary or otherwise — the artist as comic and entertainer who is getting where he has to go the best way he knows how” (Wier xxii).

19. The Hound of Heaven & the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man

If I hadn't been so stressed, I might have found the irony amusing: I was drowning in "Flood," a section marked by burial in water. Positioned at the center of the novel, the vortex of images and fragments is a chaotic reflection of Dave's psychological state. His defenses unravel, leading to the decision to lie down on the interstate — a form of surrender, and one of his most exposed moments. The combination of linear movement and lateral imagery is still observable, along with echoes and rhyming patterns: for example, the scene of Dave prone on the highway ("Children of the Covenant") recalls details from the Shady Grove lawn ("Recluse: Reprise"). But I will not dissect Sections V-VII, not here. Many of the sketches were composed in recent months, and I have not attained the distance for a cogent analysis.

Instead, consider an image that recurs in these sections, uniting a layer of the novel. First and foremost, Gordon and Randy are autonomous characters. But they are also — taken in combination with Tar Pits Jesus — a re-imagining of the entity that Francis Thompson called the Hound of Heaven, a divine pursuit that refuses to release its victims. This idea has always troubled me, the same anxiety that I get about Reformed teachings on Predestination and Irresistible Grace. The inexorable nature of the hunter has an ominous quality. In addition, the picture of Tar Pits Jesus rising from the earth to chase Dave along the highway is a descendant of the vision that haunts Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*: "he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly

know it and drown” (16).⁴⁵ The metaphor of the hunt is even present in “Fishers of Men,” the rhythm that Dave and Randy pound on their chests in the closing scene. Wounded, caught for the final time, Dave throws himself into the song. I am not offering a specific message, and the moment is not an epiphany. If anything, it evokes what O’Connor describes as “some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies . . . that [transcends] any near allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make . . . a gesture which somehow [makes] contact with mystery” (111). I am merely stretching — in my own feeble way — for the vision that E.M. Forster describes at the conclusion of “Pattern and Rhythm”:

Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom. Cannot the novel be like that? Is not there something of it in *War and Peace*? — the book with which we began and in which we must end. Such an untidy book. Yet, as we read it, do not great chords begin to sound behind us, and when we have finished does not every item — even the catalogue of strategies — lead a larger existence than was possible at the time? (169)

20. I’m Going to Disney World: The Novel as Amusement Park

On the plane to Orlando, flying to the interview at Rollins, I lamented my hypocrisy. After all, at some point on my visit, I was bound to describe the novel as a trail guide and mention the influence of Peter Turchi. But Turchi emphasizes the “blank of the intentionally omitted,” because “virtually everything is left off of a map — and must be for a map to be useful” (“The Writer as Cartographer” 162, 164). As he notes, “we must

⁴⁵ I shouldn’t get carried away: the image also contains elements from *Terminator* and *Ghostbusters*.

not confuse authority with objectivity or dedication to ‘reality,’” for “the most accurate map, and the most detailed map, is not necessarily the best map” (165). The map I had created in *The Road to Nowhere* was a blatant affront to such aesthetics. It tried to include *everything*, and the reader was buried in an avalanche of scenes, memories, and random nonsense. I thought of the best maps to Shuckstack: basic, sparse, and useful, they highlighted the essential information. I was a fraud. If I had sketched that route, the drawing would stretch the length of a room, and no sensible hiker would add it to her pack.

I glanced out the window and down at the landscape: clusters of homes in tightly-packed subdivisions, offset by swampland with little development. I thought about the theme parks of Orlando and tried to envision their layout from the air. The revelation was sudden. *The Road to Nowhere* would *never* move from the trailhead to the summit in a swift and efficient manner. It wasn’t that kind of a map. Instead, I recalled those visits to Kings Island, the sprawling, chaotic map you received at the entrance. It wasn’t designed to usher you from point A to point B. It overwhelmed you with options — you could explore Coney Mall, Rivertown, or Hanna-Barbera™ Land, whatever section grabbed your interest. Visitors attempt to hit each attraction, but they are free to skip the occasional sideshow.⁴⁶ They can always return and catch the rides they missed.

21. Writing Like Weasels

In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard cautions against restraint:

⁴⁶ Note the distinction from John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse.” A funhouse is based on disorientation and claustrophobia, whereas I envision a continuous expansion — a novel that never stops adding new rides and attractions.

One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. The impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes. (597)

In *The Road to Nowhere*, I've listened to her advice. The work is a vast repository, a drunk tank for any number of tics, obsessions, and idiosyncrasies. I've tried to say *yes*, *yes*, *yes*, and *welcome*, cramming scene after scene into the manuscript. When ideas, characters, and images knocked at the door and asked to be included, I waved them onto the bus. I knelt in the sand and constructed the most elaborate castle that I could imagine, ignoring a growing conviction that many of my favorite turrets and porticoes would never survive the onrushing tide.

In "Living Like Weasels," Dillard advises her readers "to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. . . . Seize it and let it seize you up aloft even, till your eyes burn out and drop" (16). My fingers are cramped, my eyes bloodshot. At night I collapse into bed. I begin to comprehend Dillard's point. This morning, I actually referred to Gretchen as Dave. "After verbal sensitivity, accuracy of eye, and a measure of the special intelligence of the storyteller, what the writer probably needs most is an almost daemonic compulsiveness," according to John Gardner. "No novelist is hurt (at least as a writer) by a natural inclination to go to extremes, driving himself too hard, dissatisfied with himself and the world around him and driven to improve on both if he can" — "One has to be just a little crazy to write a great novel" (*On Becoming a Novelist* 56, 62). Compulsiveness? Check. Extremes?

Count the pages, and note the encounter with the bear. Driving himself too hard? Crazy? Gretchen has a few thoughts on those subjects.

Let's be honest. The draft is still a mess. Yet Michael Martone might approve. In "Ruining a Story," he celebrates works with a "quality of clutter . . . a littered landscape of parts of things" (198). "I would urge you to resist that impulse in yourself that urges you to get the thing perfect," he says. "Proceed comfortably knowing that things, no matter how much you handle them, will not fall exactly into place," but that "one flawed sputtering attempt after another . . . can accumulate into a whole junkyard of wrecked vehicles that attest to what it is you were driving at" (207).⁴⁷ What *was* I driving at, anyway? I wasn't. Dave was. The author is simply the hitchhiker, pleased to be invited on the ride.

I won't lie. The recent weeks have felt bittersweet. I'm proud of the pages that I've finished, and I'm excited about the novel's future. But I can't help thinking about the half-completed scenes, the miles I've yet to compose. Writing this introduction, I've tried to spot months that I could have worked faster: an additional section might be done, or that excess growth restrained. Was the design too ambitious? Did I stretch too far? At what point did I cross the line?

I'll take solace from Calvino: "Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a

⁴⁷ Calvino also celebrates works that "are unfinished or left as fragments, like the ruins of ambitious projects that nevertheless retain traces of the splendor and meticulous care with which they were conceived." In these creations, "the least thing is seen as the center of a network of relationships that the writer cannot restrain himself from following, multiplying the details so that his descriptions and digressions become infinite" (106-107).

function” (112). This claim seems too grand for my little sketches, of course. At their core — when all of the nonsense is winnowed away — they’re simply a tale about slipping out for a walk.

22. Six Memos for the Next Revision

After Calvino

Consistency (Summer 2011):

My immediate task involves polishing the current draft for submission to the Graduate School: adjusting the layout to satisfy the formatting gods, cutting images with copyright issues, & eliminating details that target the work’s initial audience — a foursome comprised of Gretchen, Reg, Judith, and Doug — but not the general population.

Multiplicity (Fall, Spring, & Summer, 2011-2012):

Over the next year, I plan to expand the summaries of Sections VII-IX into a fully realized draft, one section each season. I’ve abandoned my original design for the Bonus Features, but I still intend to pitch them as content for the novel’s web site.

Visibility (Fall 2012):

A range of themes and motifs should emerge, patterns that grow apparent in the final sections. Many of them will be curiosities, their impact ephemeral. But a few will deserve additional attention, and I will shade them in greater relief.

Quickness (Spring 2013):

My efforts will turn to carving the prose, cutting out scenes that do not belong.

According to Gardner, “If a young writer is to achieve intellectual and emotional

significance in his fiction, he must have the common sense to tell foolish ideas from interesting ones, and important emotions from trivial ones” (*On Becoming a Novelist* 55). Entire sketches may disappear, though not every discursive element. “This apologia for quickness does not presume to deny the pleasures of lingering,” says Calvino. “In literature, time is a form of wealth to be spent at leisure and with detachment. We do not have to be first past a predetermined finish line. On the contrary, saving time is a good thing because the more time we save, the more we can afford to lose” (46). To retain the essential tangents, the lesser excursions will be eliminated. To keep readers engaged on the detours, momentum is needed to carry the loop.

Lightness (Summer 2013):

Calvino claims that his “working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight,” especially “from the structure of stories and from language” (3). I shall follow his lead.

Exactitude (Fall 2013):

The final stage in revising the novel will involve Exactitude, which Calvino describes as “1) a well-defined and well-calculated plan for the work in question; 2) an evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images . . . ; 3) a language as precise as possible both in choice of words and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination” (55-56). Each of these facets involves one last return to the previous steps.

— *Noble intentions, Forsythe. How about some concrete objectives?*

Fair enough. Multiplicity & Visibility: Finish the complete draft by next summer, resulting in a manuscript of 600+ pages. Quickness: Some of the cuts will be obvious,

such as the rant about the RIAA and passages in “Flood.” Others will take discernment. A few Blount County Snapshots will probably need to go. A practical goal involves a 20% reduction to the manuscript by Summer 2013. Lightness & Exactitude: Each of these stages should trim the manuscript an additional 10%, condensing the novel to 400 pages by the end of 2013. At that point, I’ll start sending it to agents.

23. What Was It Like, Writing a Novel?

Some of the days were rough. I understood Dillard’s despair:

I was too young to be living at a desk. Many fine people were out there living, people whose consciences permitted them to sleep at night despite their not having written a decent sentence that day, or ever. (*The Writing Life* 581)

But there were good days as well, when I recalled her description of tackle football:

Best, you got to throw yourself mightily at someone’s running legs. Either you brought him down or you hit the ground flat out on your chin, with your arms empty before you. It was all or nothing. If you hesitated in fear, you would miss and get hurt: you would take a hard fall while the kid got away, or you would get kicked in the face while the kid got away. But if you flung yourself wholeheartedly at the back of his knees — if you gathered and joined body and soul and pointed them diving fearlessly — then you likely wouldn’t get hurt, and you’d stop the ball. (*An American Childhood* 317)

On the good days, I flung myself wholeheartedly at the book. As I clung to the legs of the story, it carried me places I did not expect. More often than not, I limped from Park Hall to the truck.

On the good days, I lived out her claims about focus:

There was joy in concentration, and the world afforded an inexhaustible wealth of projects to concentrate on. There was joy in effort, and the world resisted effort to just the right degree, and yielded to it at last. (382-383)

On the good days, I knew exactly how she felt, racing along that Pittsburgh street:

I was running down the Penn Avenue sidewalk, revving up for an act of faith. I was conscious and self-conscious. I knew well that people could not fly — as well as anyone knows it — but I also knew the kicker: that, as the books put it, with faith all things are possible.

Just once I wanted a task that required all the joy I had. Day after day I had noticed that if I waited long enough, my strong unexpressed joy would dwindle and dissipate inside me, over many hours, like a fire subsiding, and I would at last calm down. Just this once I wanted to let it rip. (383)

On the good days, the words stretched like a trail to a distant mountain.

All I had to do was follow.

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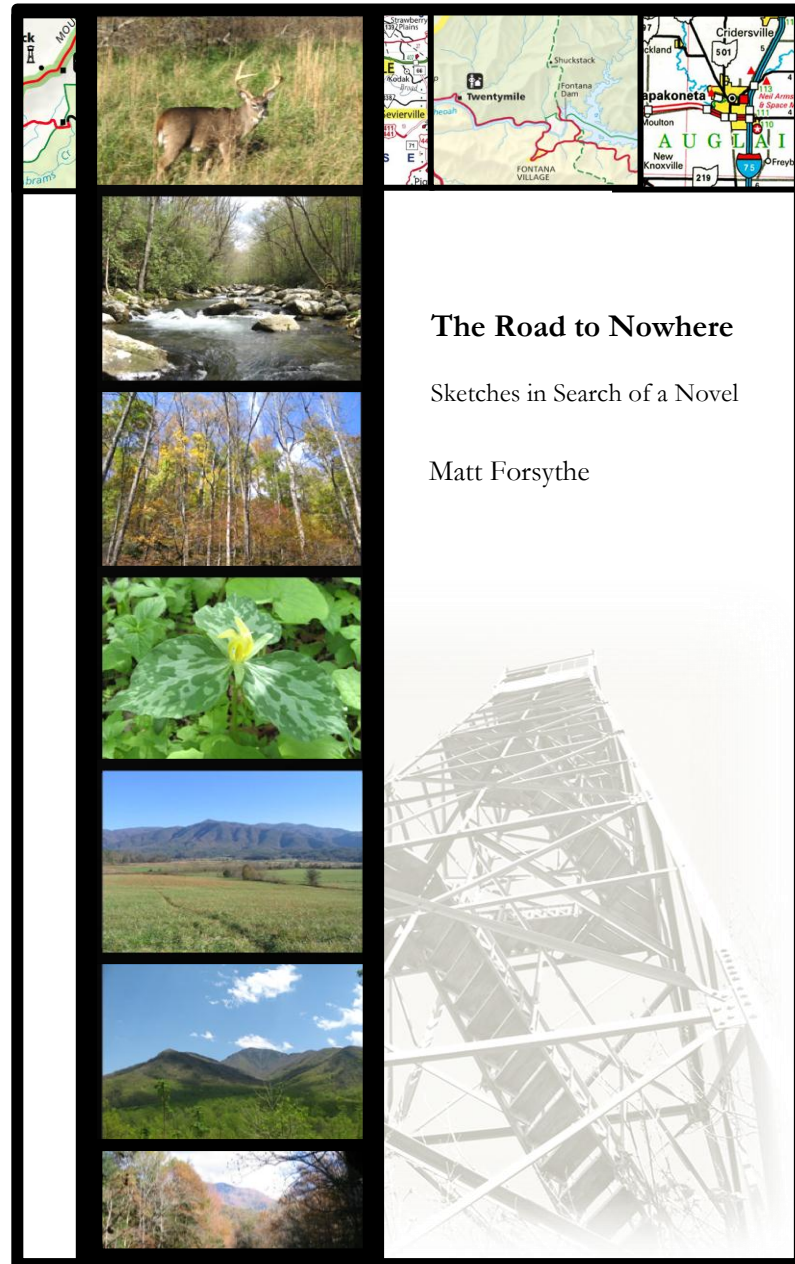
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THE ROAD TO NOWHERE: SKETCHES IN SEARCH OF A NOVEL



Trillium photograph by Gretchen Forsythe. Unless noted, all photographs in the dissertation are by Matthew Forsythe. Maps of the Smoky Mountains are from the U.S. National Park Service (www.nps.gov.grsm); maps of Tennessee are from the Tennessee Department of Transportation (www.tdot.state.tn.us.maps); maps of Ohio are from the Ohio Department of Transportation (www.dot.state.oh.us.maps); and maps of Kentucky are from the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (www.planning.kytc.ky.gov.maps.asp).

Prelude: Fontana Dam

The Spillway unrolled like a giant tongue. Its concrete shaft bore into the earth. Dave had already stopped at its tip, which emerged from the hillside to lap at the waters of the Little Tennessee. Now he gazed at its gaping maw from above. It reminded him of a missile silo, but it might also be a burrow, the colossal den of a nocturnal beast. At his back, the sounds from the flagpole sharpened this ominous note. The U.S. flag and a blue banner with the letters TVA snapped like gunshots in gusts of wind off Lake Fontana.

The sky was clear. Shuckstack loomed in the distance. Its slopes were already turning brown, but patches of foliage remained. Travelling along the The Dragon had been like driving through a watercolor, the autumn splendor on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina. Dave's stomach began to clench, just thinking about those turns. He had left most of his breakfast on Highway 129, after Karl whipped around Parsons Curve and pulled the Ranger to an unexpected stop. He wondered how Karl was doing, off on that madcap journey of his own. It struck him as odd — how a stranger could wander into your life, speak a few lines, and then disappear.

From a certain angle, Shuckstack possessed a double peak, but that wasn't actually the case. According to Grandpa, the initial summit was Little Shuckstack. It was closer to the dam, its profile sharp. The knob to its left, distant and subdued? *That* was the true summit. A small box sat over the treeline: the observation room of an

abandoned fire tower, and his ultimate destination. If the breeze was this strong at the dam, how fierce were the winds at the peak? The stairwell to the chamber was open and exposed.

The mountain was not extreme, not even for Appalachia. A touch over four thousand feet, nothing like Clingman's Dome or Mount LeConte, behemoths to the east. Yet the location was dramatic. Its slopes rose from the water to guard the southwest border of the park. The trailhead was a mile away, and the path itself was short — less than four miles to the summit. It was steep, over two thousand feet of vertical ascent, but those numbers seemed insignificant, given the miles that lay at Dave's back.

At the top of the spillway were flood gates. Dave envisioned a robotic face within their chains and gears. The barriers could be raised, unleashing a torrent. Not that any release would be needed today. The surface was well below full pool. A band of exposed dirt now bordered the lake and circumscribed each island.

He stared back at the pit and quickly pulled away. The concrete wall was only a few feet high, and a steel rail extended the protection. It didn't seem like enough, given this public location. Suppose a child wandered out of the visitor center and pulled himself onto the lip, seeking a more direct view. Dave peered across the edge, fighting the vertigo. The drop would be several stories, and the pitch of the concrete floor was steep. If you somehow survived that initial impact, you would tumble and slide, your speed constantly increasing, and be swallowed in the stomach of the dam.

A single, stupid leap. That's all it would take. Surrender to the temptation, and he wouldn't have to worry about meeting with Stratham . . . returning to Midfield before he was missed . . . what he should do with the ring in his pack. All of his choices would

be rendered moot, absolved in that final act. But he wouldn't jump. He didn't have that kind of nerve. He envisioned the arc that a diamond would follow, flung into that hole. Would you hear its faint plink as it struck the spillway and disappeared? But destroying the ring would accomplish nothing. The decision would remain. In a few weeks, he'd find himself back at the jewelry store — a thousand dollars down, and hunting for a replacement.

Dave raised his gaze to Shuckstack and greeted it like an old friend. The mountain was stoic. If it recognized him, it offered no sign in return. He tried to be happy. After all his rash choices the previous night, not to mention that morning's delay at The Dragon's Brew, he had almost managed to keep on schedule. He could still reach the peak and return home on time. Yet he sensed a growing concern. The closer he got, the harder it was to know why he had come.

The footsteps left the grass and moved across the sidewalk. By the time Dave heard them, it was far too late to react. The weight of a body slammed into his back, and strong, gangly arms locked him within their vice. A man was shouting in his ear. Dave felt himself tip forward, his chest pushed over the rail. The mouth of the spillway opened to receive him. He sucked in his breath and braced himself for the fall.

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Overture: East Tennessee

After it passes Maryville, breaking free of the Foothills Mall, US 411 enters the open country. It follows the rail lines south, past rural towns and county seats. A vanishing culture lingers. Drive-in restaurants maintain their local clientele, and roadside motels announce vacant rooms. They boast color TVs and modest, rectangular pools.

Other routes parallel the highway's course: US 11, TN 68, US 27. They pull to the southwest, deferring to the geography — the valley of the Tennessee River, which pries the Cumberland Plateau from the Southern Appalachians.



The waters have been usurped. An interstate cuts the basin in two, channeling tourists along its asphalt stream. They pause on their voyage to Orlando, halfway to their destination, and refill their tanks and cupholders — taking comfort in the familiar chains that have clustered about each exit.

Further to the east, a stream of travelers is led astray. Billboards guide them to Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge — to Dollywood, the Comedy Barn, the Dixie Stampede.

Standing atop the Pulpit, high on the Bull Head Trail to Mount LeConte, pilgrims look down into Vanity Fair. The miles of go-cart tracks, waterslides, and putt-putt golf.

The righteous scorn the spectacle. They shake their trekking poles and rant at the parking lots and roads: the trench works that besiege the national park. In their anger, they overlook the unexpected service from this vast labyrinth of outlet shopping and musical theaters. Like the Great Wall of China, it restrains the barbarian horde — ensnaring the wave of traffic, diluting its power at the last, critical instant.

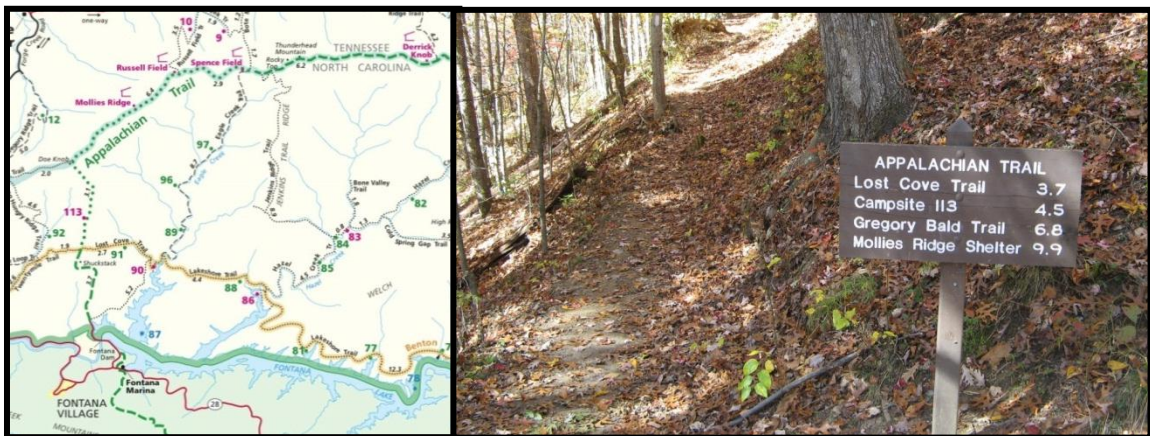
Even so, ten million visitors flood the park every year: loving the mountains to death. They queue at the trail to Laurel Falls, mass at the summit of Clingman's Dome, and crowd the route to the Chimney Tops. Even Townsend — “The Peaceful Side of the Smokies” — is overrun. Minivans idle for hours on the Cades Cove Loop, and legions of neon tubes drift along the Little River.



Yet the first hard rise can bring solitude. A resistance moves on foot, threading the paths to remote campsites, isolated peaks, and streams that flow under bowers of rhododendron.



They stride into the backcountry, the vast watersheds of Eagle, Hazel, and Forney Creeks. Fly rods in hands, their packs laden with supplies, they enter the forest and disappear.



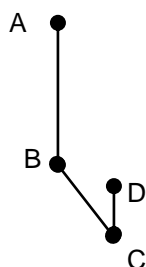
Review Problem – Overture

Algebra I – Mr. Kingman
Homework – November 10

Name: _____

Suppose Gary leaves Midfield, Ohio, at 11 PM on a Thursday night. He drives south at 70 mph. After he passes Maryville, Tennessee (410 miles from Midfield), he travels slower on the curving, mountain highways – averaging one third his original speed. At Fontana Dam (50 miles from Maryville) he begins climbing the Appalachian Trail to the summit of Shuckstack Mountain. The path is steep but short, gaining 2500 feet of elevation in $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles.

1. Assume that Gary hikes $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles per hour. What is his average speed for the trip?
2. If Gary takes twelve hours of breaks (sleep, snacks, unanticipated delays), what time will he return to Midfield? Can he arrive home by 11 AM on Saturday?



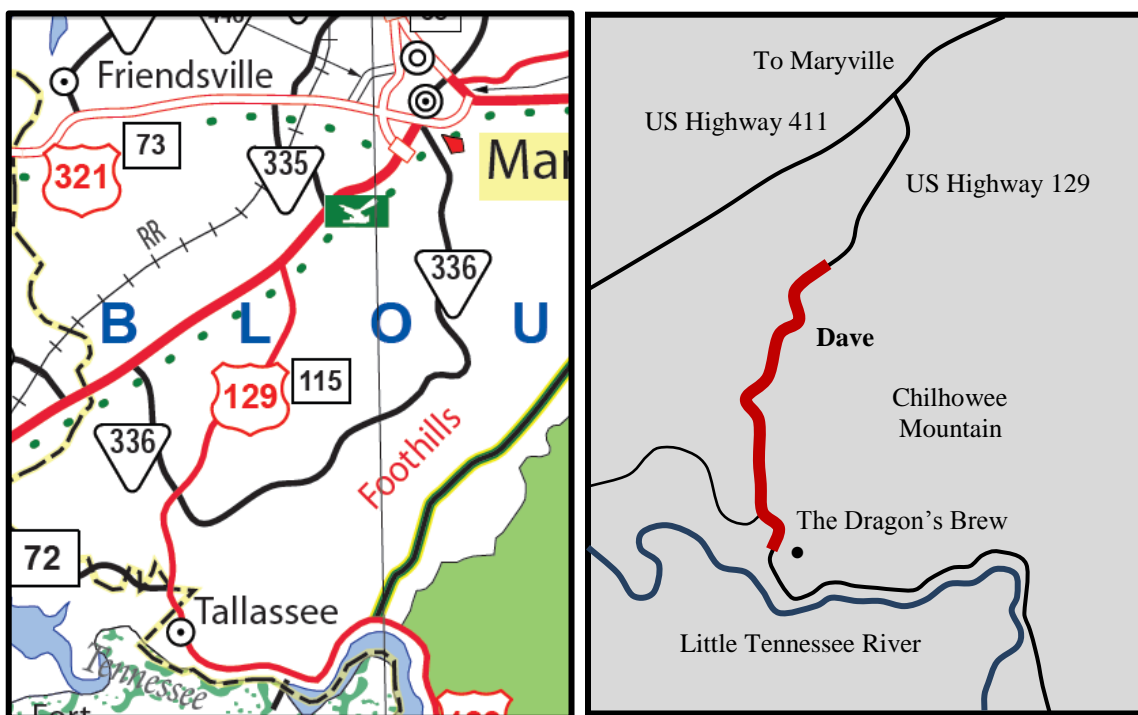
A – Midfield
B – Maryville
C – Fontana Dam
D – Shuckstack

AB = 410 Miles
BC = 50 Miles
CD = 4.5 Miles

SECTION I: THE DRAGON'S BREW

In which we encounter a teacher of mathematics.

Suspect Driving — A math teacher with a problem — The parent prayer chain — Close encounters with the USPS — Mailbox Baseball — The Coldwater incident — A want of shenanigans — On vandalism — Scenic Overlook — Piss off, Deacon — The naming of churches — Guerrilla worship — A Toast to the Roast — The French Broad — The Wheels of Speed — Review Problem, Section I



LENGTH: 5.2 miles, extending from Dave's near wreck on US 129 to his arrival at The Dragon's Brew. Side trails provide views of Chilhowee mountain. Optional loops include the "Food for Thought" column from *The Blount County Register*

HIGHLIGHTS: The locals at The Dragon's Brew.

CAUTIONS: Distracted driving, overwrought self-analysis.

TRAILHEAD: US Highway 129, 10.4 miles south of Maryville, Tennessee.

Suspect Driving

*Friday Morning, 8:35 AM
October 15, 2010*

“Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, not when you have the power to act.” Dave added the reference as a bookend — “Proverbs 3:27” — standard procedure when quoting verses at Midfield Christian. His foot eased off the gas pedal. In the distance, the far side of a sweeping turn, a vehicle had pulled off the road — parked in a shallow ditch that bordered the rural highway. Weeds hid the tires on the passenger side, and the hazard lights were blinking.

He considered his duty to stop, resisting the sense of obligation. He was a stranger in the land, not the Good Samaritan. The ram appeared in the thicket, and the life of Isaac was spared. If the motorist needed aid, God would provide the relief: a more capable helper than Dave, whose knowledge of cars stopped at AAA.

His truck coasted past the maroon SUV. The driver was crouched at the front bumper, aiming her camera at a barbed wire fence. A tan heifer had thrust its head between the strands and was foraging along the berm. In the background, the pasture rose at a sharp pitch. Boulders jutted from the earth, exposed by the soil’s erosion.

Dave resumed speed. He exhaled a prayer of thanks, relieved but ashamed. He would have stopped for a wreck, he reasoned, for a flat tire or a busted engine. Hadn’t he slowed, searching for a convenient place to stop?

A touch of guilt lingered. He recalled the lesson from yesterday’s chapel: ignoring a chance to help others was passive sin, no better than the celebrated, proactive

forms of transgression. A sin of *o*-mission, rather than *co*-mmission. It revealed your pride — that ancient curse — a selfish, callous devotion to your personal agenda. The cult of the Day Planner, according to the speaker.

The road settled into a rhythm: left, straight, right, straight. A periodic curve that entered the foothills, the southeast corner of the Smoky Mountains.

Brake, accelerate, coast, repeat. Dave yawned and shook his head. He tried to keep awake.

First period would be underway, Algebra I. The students were solving review problems. Their effort would be half-hearted, following their teacher's cue. Garbage In, Garbage Out — the programmer's maxim also fit education.

Dave phoned in the lesson at seven that morning, from a rest area at the Tennessee border — over four hundred miles from the exercise on polynomials that he'd assigned. He worried about the interstate in the background, afraid downshifting semis might rouse suspicion. But Kim, the Assistant Secretary at MCA, had noted the instructions without question, the same way she'd taken the message that he was sick. "Drink plenty of fluids," she advised. "I'll call a substitute, and Cheryl will add you to the prayer requests on the morning announcements."

The initial queries should have arrived, the red light flashing on the answering machine at his apartment. Beth would hope he was feeling better. She'd offer to bring him medicine and food. A curt message from Principal Stratham would bump their appointment to early next week. He'd want to address some business — that incident at the Coldwater game — as soon as possible.

Dave had ignored his cell phone as he passed Knoxville. When it buzzed a second time, he powered it down to preserve the battery.

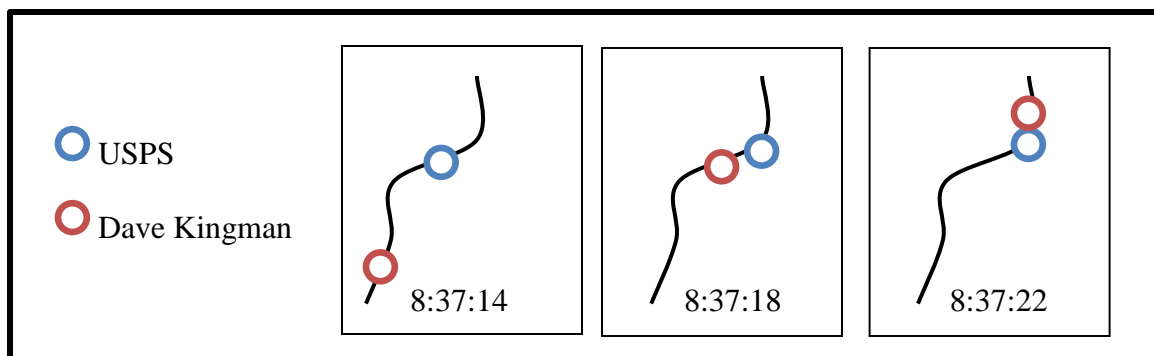
Emails would pepper his inbox: get-well wishes from colleagues and the parent prayer chain, questions about practice from his captains, and a request from a concerned Geometry scholar — Bill Holcomb, most likely — that Monday's test be postponed, "given the circumstances."

The truck crossed the centerline, and Dave corrected his drift. "Given the circumstances," he thought. Too many miles to Fontana Dam, and not enough hours to cross them. Forty-five minutes of sleep at that truck stop in northern Kentucky, another hour at the rest area.

He was exhausted, hungry, and pissed about last night's delay.

Dave emerged from the S-curve as the USPS hatchback resumed its route. He spotted the flashing lights, but the distance closed faster than he anticipated. The chance to brake vanished.

He swung the Ranger to the opposite side of the road, praying the oncoming hairpin was clear. A white blur swept past him on the right. Torque pulled on the truck's rear, threatening to whip the empty bed about the fulcrum of the engine block. Dave held the wheel firm.



The danger passed. As the postal carrier laid on the horn, Dave gunned the motor and fled the scene. Back in the proper lane, he raised an arm to acknowledge the blame. But the car had disappeared. Pulled to the side, most likely — calling the police to report the suspect driver, a menace along the rural trace.

No, Dave assured himself, the worker had simply resumed delivery — the catalogues and credit cards for the citizens of Tennessee.

Rain, snow, sleet, and douchebags: nothing stops the mail.

A racing heart belied his cool demeanor. You aren't fooling nobody, he thought. That scared the crap out of you.

At least he was awake.

Mailbox Baseball

*Friday Morning, 8:40 AM
October 15, 2010*

Dave scanned the sides of the road, on the lookout for agents of the US Postal Service. Each cluster of boxes bristled with ambush. Metal poles supported the oldest units, their dented shells perched near sylvan farms or decrepit trailers. At one driveway, next to a privet hedge that stretched the entire lawn, a wooden post had been snapped in two.

Which explained the iron gates on the newest drives — not to mention the brick armor that encased their mail. The daunting shells that protected the Mastercard bill from the young gods who roamed this landscape in their F150s and Silverados, driven by boredom and fueled with bottles of Jack.

He passed a novel construction: no post, simply a steel box mounted onto a boulder, nestled against a rock shelf. Dave grimaced. He envisioned the drunken swing, the crash of aluminum bat on stone. Not that a broken wrist would deter them, the teens who raised hell in these hollows. Not if his sister's stories had been typical, those years Rachel lived in Tennessee with Mom. You don't think about the emergency room when you're smashed-ass drunk.

The collision shot into the bone, shattering the radius and carpus. He had gathered the lingo from Ryan's parents. His own arm flared in empathy.

His keeper would be home from the hospital, provided the surgery had gone well. Kids' bodies are resilient. Dave planned to call that afternoon, to promote the now-useless goalie to junior assistant coach for Saturday's showdown with Midfield Catholic. He would touch base at Fontana, before he entered the woods and lost reception.

Dave had been banned from the sideline, given events at Tuesday's match. He could review strategy with his players — provided they gathered on the practice field. But he could not lead the team into the stadium, not until Stratham completed his inquiry.

He felt little desire to dwell on the episode: the bush league strike by the Coldwater forward, the horrific crack from his keeper's arm. Dave could recall his anger as the ambulance left the field, but not the specific events that followed. The argument with the rival coach, his mounting fury, the parents shouting in the stands, and the hapless punch that hit nothing but air. A pitiful swing that led to his ejection, the reprimand from the OHSAA, and the interview with Stratham that loomed in his future.

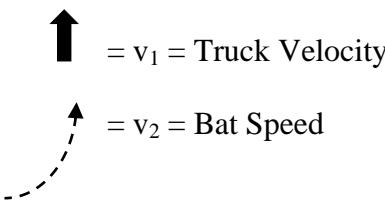
The past two days had been filled with hearsay. He ignored the rumors about his punishment: removal from coaching duties, probation and counseling, even termination. Such nonchalance troubled Bethany. She volunteered to solicit support, drafting a petition that players and parents could sign, but he vetoed the scheme.

Resolution would come. The chat with Stratham would be unpleasant, and it would narrow the range of consequences, but there would be no meeting today. Not two states to the south, the trees thickening at the sides of the road.

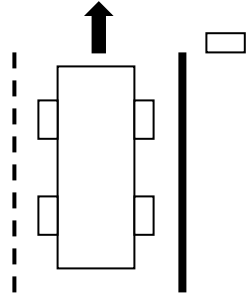
Besides, even a principal had rules to follow at Midfield Christian. Stratham could make a teacher's life miserable — a penance of committee work and extracurricular duties — but he couldn't fire them. To offer or terminate a contract, you

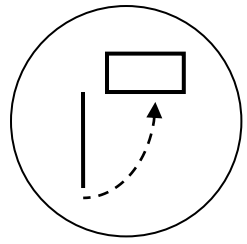
needed a quorum from the school board, and two of its members golfed with Dave's Grandfather. In addition, the Superintendent held final say on all personnel decisions. Anderson liked Dave. He knew little about his teaching abilities, but he loved it when grads returned home to join the faculty. It matched his concept of legacy.

Dave sidetracked himself with calculations: the force of a bat on a mailbox, the velocity of its head amplified by the speed of the truck. Now *that* was a math problem, a world apart from the laughable tasks he assigned. You would have to account for the structural integrity of the target, not to mention the hitter's stance and the angle of impact. You would have to show your work. You needed to follow through.



$v_{12} = v_1 + v_2 = \text{Velocity at Impact}$





Linear Momentum = Mass * Velocity ($p = mv$)

$F = dp/dt = d(mv)/dt$. Or, in a constant-mass system, $F = m (dv/dt) = ma$

*“Mutationem motus proportionalem esse vi motrici impressae,
et fieri secundum lineam rectam qua vis illa imprimitur.”*
Lex II, Sir Isaac Newton

The problem deserved an audience. The vectors were too marvelous for an assignment or a classroom example — even for an exam. They demanded a public hearing. A science fair project, with a thorough investigation into all the possible

variables: the box, the vehicle, the swing. Even the composition of the weapon: aluminum for the upstart, wood for the old school.

His students lacked the drive to complete such a task. A few possessed the intelligence — Amber Jackson or Christopher Lopez — but delinquency was beyond their grasp. A parent would halt the experiment, wary of blights on their darling's record. No, their studies would be respectable: Amber would test the coffee grounds that created the most efficient compost, while Chris flew balsa wood airplanes in a homemade wind tunnel.

Neither would fulfill his grand vision: tables in the gymnasium lined with displays that were truly practical. The perfect weight of a TP roll, adjusted for humidity, tree height and limb size. The ideal proportions of a potato gun. The optimal design for a giant slingshot — its surgical tubing adapted to the projectile, whether shaving cream balloons or G.I. Joes in space.

Dave mourned the lost talent in MCA's halls, knowing full well the Catch-22: mischief lost its value when grafted to academics. So his life would remain incomplete. He would never witness Stratham's face as Luke Kane verified the impact of a 34" aluminum bat on a classic steel box.

Rachel would be amused at this angst, at frustration with model behavior. "What about you?" his sister would taunt. "Do you remember yourself in high school? That day you scratched Mr. Newberry's Taurus with your trombone case?" The mishap distressed him for half a week. But when he finally admitted the accident, the chemistry teacher was nonplussed. Newberry delivered a spur-of-the-moment tutorial, a double-barreled lesson on the restorative powers in confession and 3000-grit sandpaper.

Bats were obsolete — Stone Age clubs in a microchip world. Surely the locals used shotguns, blasting away from the passenger seat. Not bracing themselves in the bed, timing their swing as each target raced past. It required too much diligence.

No, mailbox baseball was idyllic: Norman Rockwell mischief from a civilized age. These days, the enlightened brutes had more serious business, running meth labs in the trunks of their tricked-out imports. Why crush the hand that fed them, smashing the source of their false IDs? A set of washed checks bought a lot of weed.

And why this obsession with vandalism? Life wasn't COPS.

Most of Dave's stereotypes revealed his envy, a fascination with misbehavior that stemmed from his own naive childhood — the nagging belief that he'd missed a grand time, that slim window before pranks brought felony charges. He'd been a virtuous child, an upright young man. At the time, the behavior drew affirmation and praise from his teachers. "Shenanigans," he muttered. "I captained the MathCounts! team, but I missed the shenanigans."

If Bethany were riding next to him, she would reach over and scratch the nape of his neck. The gesture was a statement, declaring her tolerance of his grumpy moods. She might comment about his driving — the way he overcorrected, wrenching the truck away from the danger: "it's only a habit, especially when you're tired." She would offer to take the wheel, but he panicked whenever she drove the Ranger.

Yes, Beth looked at the outward appearance, but the Lord looked at the heart. That makes no sense, he thought. Perhaps she discounted appearance and imagined a heart. The fact was, she saw more in him than he saw in himself. But even that wasn't right. Each saw something different.

Sometimes Dave worried that he was an ass. Did admitting the fact excuse it? Probably not. His head drooped in a slow nod, and he snapped upright. Here was the real equation, the problem he ought to assign his students. A man leaves Midfield on a Thursday night. How far must he travel? How fast does he need to go? Can he return in time for Saturday's game?

We need more specifics, they'd whine. You gave too many variables.

But that's all they'd get: lots of variables, few specifics.

Scenic Overlook: Highway 129

South of the 411 Motel, Highway 129 breaks to the east, toward foothills of the Smoky Mountains. The transition is gradual at first: subdivisions linger, the outer bands of Maryville development. But they fade in the rearview mirror, replaced by cattle that huddle in mud-choked ponds.

Farms dot the rolling countryside. Patchwork gardens border the turns, and thickets line seasonal creeks. An oak stands alone, sentinel of the meadow. Ranch houses crown the low slopes, with lawns that stretch for acres and tan drives that snake down to the road.

A handful of barns remain intact. Lettered with white paint, they exhort families to See Rock City. The oldest structures have collapsed. Webs of splintered timber bear witness to the ravages of fire, weather, and economics.

Gas stations watch crossroads that have lost their significance. Paint flakes off the islands. Fields grow smaller, the crops now planted in narrow dales. Woods flank the highway. They cling to the pitch of encroaching hills.

Throughout the region, a well-worn notch in the Bible Belt, churches appear with increasing frequency. As buildings grow smaller, their names expand: Laurel Valley Tabernacle, Big Creek Assembly of Holiness, Skunk Mountain Missionary Baptist. Services breed and multiply: 9:30 Sunday School, 11 AM Worship; Tuesday night

Praise; AWANA Clubs Wednesday; Thursday morning Bible Study; Saturday Prayer & Potluck.

Chilhowee Mountain looms on the horizon. The ridgeline blocks the path east, forcing the road to the south — toward Lake Chilhowee and the Little Tennessee.

Piss Off, Deacon

*Friday Morning, 8:50 AM
October 15, 2010*

The driveway was steep, climbing the hill toward a modest, brick structure. The white steeple pointed straight to eternity. It promised hope, a message tempered by the small graveyard on the far side of the parking lot. Foothills Christian Fellowship, according to the sign at the entrance, which also declared that “God Answers Knee-mail.”

At least it had character. His own megachurch, Maple Park Worship Center, was an ode to focus-group mediocrity. Nothing stirred the soul like theater-style seating and Jumbotron screens. On the stage, a worship team rocked out to praise choruses: “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High,” “Days of Elijah,” and “I Could Sing Of Your Love Forever.” As if the Almighty God preferred songs with a mass-market appeal and sensible chord changes.

Packed with pilgrims, Spirit-filled and satisfied, the Fellowship Hall swarmed with rich, earthy sweaters, like a born-again catalogue from L.L.Bean. The only “Maple” near the Family Life Annex was now a grandmother — Mavis Maple, who served in Noah’s Nursery. But “Park” seemed apt, given the massive asphalt lots, with footprints that dwarfed the actual sanctuary. A respectable five minutes late on most Sundays, Dave often faced a quarter mile trek to the entrance. At least it was quiet. His church attendance was based on the principles of guerrilla warfare: arrive unseen, slip out early, and avoid the loading zone. Delay until the benediction, and you were caught in the herd of khaki pants. You guarded your shins as the children swarmed out the Narthex, playing

tag amid the landscaping. In a congregation where offspring symbolized the favor of the Lord — a man's "quiver of arrows," according to the Psalmist — three kids was merely a starter set.

The gas station coffee ate at his stomach lining. A bitter taste lingered, but it did little to wake him. Dave needed a second cup. He passed through the village of Pumpkin Center, and the forest tightened its grip. Soon he would enter the Cyclone, a series of curves that guarded the entrance to North Carolina. Grandpa had named them for a coaster in Ohio, a wooden rocket that he still recalled from a childhood vacation — long before his service in Europe and the move to Tennessee.

The house in the woods was large: a Cape Cod with two stories and a trio of gables. A handful of vehicles were parked at its wraparound porch. A flimsy sign marked a gravel entrance: "Coffee & Breakfast Served Daily." Some joker had crossed out "Daily" and written "Sometimes."

What the hell, Dave thought. He missed the entrance but pulled into the next opening, which led to a far less attractive building. Its windows were boarded, and a notice was stuck to the front door. It reeked of illicit behavior. A package store that dealt more than booze, or a backcountry strip joint with years of growth in its ill-lit corners.

The yard between the drives was well-traveled. Dave followed the ruts and parked between two large pickups. He grimaced at the size of his truck, dwarfed by the F250s that flanked it. A psychologist could have a field day with that one, he supposed.

He felt for the backpack, squeezing the front pocket for the ring box, and shoved it deep behind the passenger seat. Dave covered it with a blanket, then locked and double-checked the door. He circled the truck and tested the opposite side.

A wooden sign on the roof had been stained a dark brown. It christened the establishment The Dragon's Brew. Forest green script matched a whimsical portrait of the namesake serpent. The beast sat on its haunches, propped upright to enjoy the mug of coffee between its . . . what were they, anyway? Forearms? Paws? Hands? Dave had little grasp of dragon anatomy, a lamentable gap in his education. Harry Potter would know the answer.

A plume of steam rose from the beverage, braiding with smoke from the dragon's nostrils. Attention to detail, Dave thought with admiration. Always check your work.

A stairway bisected the house. In a room to the right of the foyer, a college student was highlighting with determination, laying waste to a thick science textbook. Heavy enough to crush dreams, to deter the faint of heart and their ill-conceived visions of pharmacy school. Two doors in the back announced "Knights" and Maidens." The student glanced in his direction, then returned to her task. She brandished the marker like a decoder ring, unlocking the secrets of covalent bonding.

Dave turned to the opposite side, where a single room stretched the length of the building. Generous windows gave views of a slender meadow. Specks of dust floated in the morning light, which exposed the nicks on mismatched tables. Organic highlighting, thought Dave.

The brick fireplace was empty, though kindling had been piled at its side. Two armchairs faced the hearth. An older man glanced over his shoulder, then called to an open door: “Customer, Emily.”

“One second, Andy,” a woman answered.

“She’ll be with you in a second,” the man informed him.

Dave sat in a chair by a window. The space was quiet, and most of the seats were vacant. Near the center of the room, a four-person table was littered with books and papers. The stacks were formidable, though their balance was suspect: five or six volumes high, buttressed by notebooks, folders and legal pads. Behind this barricade, a middle-aged patron was reading and jotting notes. He bowed head to page, revealing the gaps in his thinning hair. The selection was eclectic: library books with generic binding; older volumes, their pages yellow and spent; travel guides from Moon and Lonely Planet; maps and pamphlets, even a picture frame. Post-It notes sprouted like dandelions.

A sheet of paper had fallen, covered with drawings of wildflowers. Dave went to retrieve it. The elaborate sketches were rendered in colored pencil and bordered with annotations. The scholar glanced at him, staring over the glasses that slid down his nose. Dave handed the page without comment.

“Run,” the man whispered. “Run now, while you still have the chance.” He raised his voice and repeated the cry for Emily.

“God, Deacon,” she called. “I said I was coming.” A pan clattered to the floor, followed by an expletive.

He turned back to Dave. “I said fly, you fool.”

Emily rounded the corner, wiping her hands on a towel. “Can I sell him a coffee before you run him off? Despite what you think, I’m trying to turn a profit.”

“How can you help it?” Deacon flicked a mug atop one of the piles. “A buck-fifty a cup? That’s worse than gas.”

“Fifty cent refills — try asking for *that* at BP.” She smiled at Dave, and he tried to determine her age. She moved with grace, but the lines near her eyes showed fatigue.

Still a terrible price per gallon, muttered Deacon.

“Don’t listen to a word that man says. He’s always hounding the customers, trying to scare them away.” According to Emily, Deacon wanted the room for himself. His stacks would claim seat after seat, until the entire house became his dominion. “If he limits himself to a single table, he gets to store his clutter overnight.”

Dave was half-listening, stuck on the problem that Deacon suggested. Assume eight cups a gallon. A mug for \$1.50, fifty cents for each refill. Five dollars a gallon. He would use the question on Monday, a warm-up assignment for students in Practical Math.

“... do for you?”

“What’s that?” Dave blinked.

“I said, ‘What can I do for you?’”

“Sorry — zoned for a second. I’m pretty beat.”

“He was checking for a ring,” called Andy. “Stunned by your magnificent looks.” He raised his mug. “Take note, son: flattery gets you a free refill.”

“Leave the boy alone, Andrew. I’m old enough to be his mother.”

She *could* have passed for his mom, aside from the knot of strawberry-blonde hair. That and the UT sweatshirt. Mom had returned home to east Tennessee, but she refused to embrace its twin religions. The Southeastern Conference meant little to her: she yawned as the strapping young men knocked heads in Neyland Stadium. And church had grown wearisome. She now kept the Sabbath on her back porch, with hot tea for communion and the Sunday paper as a hymnal. “No woman can serve two masters,” she had informed her son, when he remarked on her renunciations. “So I chose neither.” Besides, after a week of nursing her mother and acting like Grandpa took care of himself, she had earned the break: “a true day of rest,” she explained.

On the blackboard behind the counter, the prices for mochas and lattes were printed in colored chalk. Specimen jars held muffins and bagels.

“What sounds good?” asked Emily.

“Get you an egg sandwich.” The voice passed behind Dave. “Your stomach can thank me later.”

“So will your cholesterol,” added Deacon.

“Piss off, Deacon.” The new arrival crossed the room and claimed the paper in the second armchair.

“Very mature, Harold. The rebuttal of champions.”

“Curb it, gentleman.”

“If you spot a gentleman here, smack him,” said Harold.

Emily ignored the comment and wiped the display. “We want to attract customers, boys, not frighten them.”

“Aren’t we customers, too?” asked Deacon.

“You’re a thorn in my flesh. I’m running a business, not senior day care.”

“Hey — I resent that remark,” said Andy

“No,” Deacon said, “you represent—”

“I know — we represent that remark. Write some new jokes before your next visit.”

“Better yet,” added Harold, “don’t come back at all. And take your books with you.”

Like a floor show, thought Dave. Had they rehearsed the banter, refining the timing in each exchange, until even the snorts of derision were second nature? How much of the act was solely for his benefit? How much for their patron? A trio of aging peacocks, still flaunting their faded plumage.

“Never mind the peanut gallery,” said Emily. “They get crotchety when they’re threatened with youth. Now what would you like, hon? Cappuccino? Scone? Dragon’s Breath?”

“Dragon’s Breath?”

“A Mocha with three shots of Espresso and a dash of Peppermint syrup. Keeps you awake for days.”

The prospect was tempting, but he selected the path of least resistance. “Just a coffee.”

“Two-fisting your Morning Joe?”

“What’s that?”

She pointed to the Styrofoam cup he was holding. The empty container was crammed with used tissues and empty Pop-Tart wrappers, the debris from his night on the road. “Looks like you’ve already got your order.”

“This? This is just trash.” He added an obvious statement: “I’ve never been here before.”

“I know that, darling. I’d remember someone as lost as you.” She gestured for the cup, and he passed it over the counter.

Dave glanced at the pastries as she poured his coffee. “I suppose I’d like a bagel as well.”

“Don’t scorn good advice,” called Harold. “You want an egg sandwich.”

“Do I?” he asked.

Emily nodded.

“Good man,” said Harold. “Two of them, Em-, with plenty of cheese and bacon. Add them to my tab.”

Dave began to protest, but Deacon stopped him. “Save your breath, son. You’re out of your league.”

Emily disappeared into the kitchen. “I’m keeping track, Harold. Your tab’s my retirement plan.”

“Grows faster than my 401K, that’s for sure,” Deacon grumbled.

“Piss off, Deacon,” called Andy — less a response than a clock striking the hour.

A Toast to the Roast

B5 Friday, February 26, 2010 | *The Blount County Register*

FOOD FOR THOUGHT
by
Janette Richardson



A Toast to the Roast

In a county like ours, word of mouth travels faster than Eric Berry on a safety blitz. (Thanks for the metaphor, Pops!) Three years ago, when I began writing this column, I relied on my anonymity. I could visit each restaurant a handful of times, sampling the various entrees, and assume that my dining experience was typical.

These days, however, I'm known throughout Maryville — no thanks to a tattle-tale Facebook post by Chef Jeffries (Little River Grille). Managers and waiters huddle in corners, keeping watch on my table, and I often suspect the portions I'm given. Does the Seafood Carbonara at The Tuscan Hearth *always* contain that many shrimp? Do sirloins at the K.C. Stockyard come with two sides *as well as* that baked potato?

So I was eager to skip town for my next assignment, to practice the subterfuge essential to my craft. I'd heard rumors about a peculiar coffee shop, this one-woman show in the hollows near Happy Valley. As I would discover, however, writing a traditional review of The Dragon's Brew would prove harder than it looked.

Being no coffee aficionado — a cup of Sanka hits the spot, thank you very much — I seldom frequent our local "breweries": The

Holy Roast, Java Junction, and Ed's Coffee Shack. But I've received enough emails from fans, encouraging me to visit this remarkable café, that I was determined to investigate the legend for myself. The doors might be locked, they explained, depending on whether Emily Aldrich — proprietor and sole barista — felt like working that morning. What's more, a few warned, her regulars are fiercely loyal — flirting with their hostess as they putter away the morning — and often heckle visitors until they flee.

The shop was hemorrhaging money, by most accounts, given the limited revenue from its core group of patrons. So I was determined to see for myself, maybe use my celebrity and its bully pulpit to rustle some much-needed business.

Not that Emily needed it, according to one conspiracy theorist, who argued that coffee sales were merely a front. The second story housed a "less reputable" business.

Guess what? The rumors are true. Well, everything but that last piece of hearsay. Though Emily winked when I put the question to her face. She appeared to relish her designated role: community menace and mistress of ill repute.

"Keeps the decent folk guessing," she told me. "Keeps them the hell away from here."

To experience this unique spin on Central Perk, head south from Maryville on US Highway 129. But take heed: unless you're riding a motorcycle, you'll soon feel out of place. This drive toward North Carolina is the approach to Deal's Gap and the stretch of road known as The Dragon, celebrated nationwide for a ten mile stretch with 318 stomach-churning curves.

The roadside assumes a medieval bent — though the armor is leather, rather than chain mail. Stores advertise Dragon-themed merchandise: maps, t-shirts, the usual bric-a-brac. Now, as some of you know, I've never been a huge fantasy buff. (Sorry, Melissa in Alcoa, but I still haven't finished *Twilight*!) I've read about hobbits and Narnia, played Legend of Zelda on my Nintendo, but I can't recite the history of the elves. So I grew anxious as I passed the hamlet of Pumpkin Center and began to look for Emily's shop.

To my surprise, I felt right at home, the moment I entered The Dragon's Brew. Perhaps it was the building, nestled into a lovely glen amid foothills of Chilhowee Mountain. I've always loved Cape Cod construction, the way light enters rooms from each gable. Perhaps it was the quirky décor: a far cry from the Dungeons & Dragons posters on my brother's wall. No, the erudite mascot of The Dragon's Brew prefers steaming milk to scorching knights. He warms his beverage with an inner fire.

The welcome was family-style. Emily greeted me from behind the counter, and the regulars laughed at my Honda Element, which seemed out-of-place in a parking lot filled with pickups. The teasing was never malicious, and they harassed one another as well. In fact, have you ever noticed how pets resemble their owners? At The Dragon's Brew, the regulars favor their mascot: crusty on the outside, with a tender spot at the underbelly.

Consider Ralph Mitchell, who you'll find weekday mornings, surrounded by stacks of reference material. He teaches history at Tallassee College, where he is known for his book *The Wellspring of Mountains: A History of the Little River Watershed*. In fact, Mitchell has been awarded a sabbatical this fall, to work on a companion volume about Abrams Creek.

The locals seem unimpressed with his accomplishments. In fact, they don't even call Mitchell by his real name. At the Brew he is known as Deacon — more often than not, a nickname that's coupled to insults from Harold Miller and Andrew Schofield, retirees of the US Forest Service who camp in their armchairs and supervise the dining room. Snug in their foxholes, they lob

verbal grenades until sleep overtakes them. Remember Staler and Waldorf from The Muppet Show, the cantankerous seniors that heckled performers from their box seats? The Dragon's Brew boasts its own crotchety duo.

"They maintain a steady barrage," Emily said. "Any time Deacon opens his mouth, they drive him back to his books." Of course, she acknowledged, their posturing increased whenever she was present.

Deacon was listening from a nearby table, eavesdropping for most of the interview. "A restaurant should protect its clientele from abuse," he said. "I deserve to work in peace."

"Piss off, Deacon," called Andy.

"And I don't retreat to my work. I opt for the high road."

Harold offered a vivid rebuttal. [Unprintable in a family paper —*Ed.*] But Emily ignored the skirmish: "Mind you," she said, "Deacon's far from innocent. He invites the ridicule, correcting their stories about the region."

"I simply observed that Abrams Creek was named for a Cherokee chief, not the family that lives in Happy Valley."

Given this abuse, why does he return every morning? Not for the coffee, because he scorned the roast throughout my visit.

"His wife makes him," Emily said. Freed from his teaching responsibilities for the semester, Deacon would roam the halls of his department — cornering junior faculty with tedious conversations as they tried to prepare for class. After a few weeks, the Head of the Department suggested he work from home this term.

"A blatant falsehood," Deacon objected. "I volunteered my office to a visiting professor."

"Only he drove his wife crazy," said Emily, "suggesting new ways to manage a house that she's tended for decades without his help. So she booted him out. I supply day care while she gets her work done."

"Slander, pure and simple."

"It's the truth," said Emily. "We're taking one for the team, allowing the students at Tallassee College to get the education they deserve."

Emily gestured at my notes. “I suppose it’s slander if she writes that in her report?” she asked Deacon.

“Not in print,” he answered. “In print, it would be libel.”

“Good Lord,” she said.

“You can’t libel the truth, Professor Numbnuts,” called Harold from his throne.

Most of the regulars have nicknames bestowed by their peers, the same way that Appalachian Trail hikers receive their trail names. Emily is Em-, Madame Emily, or Red. Within an hour of my arrival, I met Harley Mike, Marlboro Matt, Bleeding Heart Candace, and Dear John Deere.

They’re perceptive folk. None of them had read my column, but they all suspected my role within minutes, forcing me to ditch my typical format. I abandoned my plans for a review. The Dragon’s Brew deserved feature-length coverage. (Thanks for the extra space, Editor Daniels!) [You’re welcome, Jannette –*Ed.*]

Harley Mike “borrowed” my notepad and added his own observations, employing the backcountry idiom of his Grandma. He claimed it would add a true mountain feel to the story: “Emily’s coffee beats angel teat,” he scribbled. “I’d drink it with one toe in the fire.” [“Angel teat” is a high-quality moonshine –*Ed.*]

As for the product? The coffee tasted great, though I don’t know the difference between premium French Roast and the Food City brand. And the selection of pastries looked decent: muffins and bagels and scones, oh my!

Harold advised me to follow his lead and order an egg sandwich, which lived up to its promise of cheesy, cholesterific goodness. I’d prefer the addition of color — a thick Grainger County tomato — but that’s the health nut talking.

Besides, you don’t visit The Dragon’s Brew for the food. You go for the spectacle, hoping Emily opens the shop that day. We’ve seen the TV shows that portray restaurants as second homes: *Cheers*, *Friends*, *Seinfeld*. We all want to know if that’s true.

Deep down, you suspect that the regulars wish you would leave them alone. Emily

hinted as much, warning me against excess praise: “I don’t want to attract a following.”

“What about *them*?” I asked, pointing at the regulars.

“They’re not customers. They’re the lost and broken, the poor and rejected of the earth.”

“That’s right,” said Deacon. “You’re a regular Messiah.”

“They’re part of the décor, really.” She raised her voice so that Harold and Andy could hear. “And a hell of a lot cheaper than Ethan Allan.”

Harley Mike stopped at our table on his way out the door. “Board meeting on Tuesday?” he asked.

“What’s that?” Emily said.

He winked at me. “If you’re bored, let’s meet.”

But don’t bring a tour. You’ll ruin the character of the place, something that Emily’s patrons are careful to preserve. In the past, this defensive behavior has crossed the line. Consider the activities of Deacon, who — true to his nickname — teaches an adult Sunday School class at a local church. He worried that its members would follow him, pestering him with ideas about that week’s lesson. So he slipped an allusion to Dagon, the god of the Philistines, into his anecdote about Emily’s coffee house: something to do with The Dragon’s Brew and Dagon’s Brood. Gossip spread throughout Maryville, whispers about Wiccan rituals and pagan sacrifices on the days she mysteriously closed.

Emily has heard them all: “On Monday I sell meth off the porch. Tuesdays I run an illegal strip club, and Thursdays I harbor prostitutes. The first Sunday of the month, I break Blount County’s liquor laws with an underground moonshine ring.” She pauses, then grins. “Might be a grain of truth to that one.”

It’s hard to quash rumors that confirm a community’s suspicions. Questions emerge when a business stays open on a trickle of customers, especially when several of them boast ever-growing tabs.

Emily ignores her detractors. “Screw them — I don’t need their righteous dollars.” Empty tables fill the establishment. “I’ve

got an independent revenue stream, one that I can't spend fast enough."

And here's where the story gets interesting, though Emily wants to avoid using names and asked me to keep the tale brief. (Too late, I know.) In case she finds time to write that book she's been planning — or better yet, ink that movie deal.

After a childhood in Blount County, Emily moved to Knoxville in her early twenties, fell in love with a young, enterprising businessman, and settled into the Sequoyah Hills neighborhood next to Lake Loudon. You know the tale: he succeeded in his ventures, earning seats on public and private councils, while she entered the ranks of the social elite. True, her rural background excluded her from the most prestigious circles, but she danced at the country clubs, raised thousands of dollars for regional charities, and cheered with fervor — a lifelong Volunteer fan — from premium seats and luxury boxes in Neyland Stadium, the perks of a husband with close ties to UT Athletics.

"We had a good run," she said, leaning her chin on her hand. "Twenty-seven years." Her orange sweatshirt was stained with grease. It featured Smokey the blue-tick hound, beloved mascot of Tennessee. I tried to picture her in a cocktail dress.

They grew apart, spending fewer and fewer hours together. "Like roommates," she said, "less like lovers and more like roommates."

She won't give a specific reason for the final separation — whether there was an affair, either on her part or his — but she hints that both parties were involved in "extracurricular" activities. One night, they began to talk, a conversation that lasted well into morning. The next week, he moved into an apartment downtown.

She stayed in the mansion on the river for two more years, but the social functions had lost their appeal. "You know, when you no longer taste a food you once loved? Like that."

Neither sought a divorce. "We still cared for each other, and we were already living separate lives. We didn't need a judge to bless our disunion." She leaned across the

table. "I would have taken him to the cleaners. He knows that."

We sat in shadows on an overcast day. I'd scheduled a second visit to complete the interview, and she decided not to open the café. A few visitors drove through the lot, noted the darkened rooms, and continued on their way. Deacon parked, and we hid in the kitchen as he pulled on the doors and wandered about the porch.

"Besides," Emily said, "men flirt when they think you're married. It frees them to be themselves — they don't fret that you'll actually consider their advances." She paused, savoring her next revelation. "And the ones that are serious? Well, everything's better when they think they're sinning."

She grew tired of Knoxville and eager to try a new project. The idea for the coffee house struck her on a drive along the back roads of Blount County, a young devotee with a new convertible. The instant she spotted the house, falling to pieces in the woods, she envisioned her current business plan.

Her husband didn't understand this new passion, but he agreed to bankroll the venture. "I can be very persuasive when I want to be," she observed. She moved into the upstairs floor — "Don't tell the Health Inspector," she joked — while he returned to Sequoyah Hills with his current girlfriend. "The flavor of the month," Emily calls her.

The story will sound familiar to Volunteer fans. After his divorce, basketball coach Bruce Pearl moved into a new mansion with a younger partner. Meanwhile, his ex-wife Kim used the money from the settlement to open her own business: Alimony's Hair & Nail Salon.

Emily acknowledges the similarities. "I see how we're alike, two women starting a new stage in our lives." But the difference, she argues, involves a particular nuance in her business plan — her commitment to losing money, something The Dragon's Brew does very well. "To remind him I'm down here: alimony without those g—d—lawyer's fees."

Twice a year, she and her husband meet at Chesapeake's, her favorite restaurant, to discuss The Dragon's Brew. "He critiques my decisions, my cash flow, and the flaws in

my model,” she said. “I think it’s sweet, this new ‘love language’ we’ve found.” I observed that their business meetings sound a lot like dates, a concept that struck her as lovely: “Now that we’ve separated, we’re able to date again.”

“He never cared for my charities, but I’ve got his attention now. Probably because I’m wasting his money. But it’s more than that — we’ve got something to talk about. I know it sounds silly: we never had kids, so this place” — she gestured about the room — “I think of it as our child.”

Emily wants to expand the operation, gutting a decrepit building next door and adding a dinner menu. She plans to connect the entrees to her annual vacations, trips

that have taken her to Greece, Australia, and Japan in recent years. “Wherever I’ve gone the past year, that will be the inspiration. We’ll always have barbecue and fried chicken, a section of the menu devoted to East Tennessee. But the other half might be Bavarian one year, Brazilian the next.”

For now, she’s content to brew coffee for her boys. So the next time you’re driving to Fontana or Bryson City, stop for a cup of her daily roast. Enjoy your latte, and listen to the soothing cadence of Statler & Waldorf as they heckle Deacon. Join Harley Mike for a “board” meeting. And whenever you need an artery-clogging breakfast, follow the advice of Harold Walker: “Have you an egg sandwich.”

The French Broad

*Friday Morning, 9:20 AM
October 15, 2010*

A sliding door led to the side patio of The Dragon's Brew. A brook cut across the clearing, which rose toward a ridge in the east. Wisps of fog hung over the forest, the trademark accents of the Smoky Mountains. The sun hadn't topped the crest, yet the sky was a piercing blue. Dave thought about angles and warmth: the tilt of the earth, and rays striking the hemisphere at a slant.

The older development stuck to the valley floor. Trailers along the highway cut, and a knot of shops at the crossroads of Pumpkin Center. On the slopes, patches in the canopy revealed the future: second homes and vacation rentals.

It was a shame, Dave thought, the builders climbing the hillsides.

He was a hypocrite. He wasn't opposed to construction, only its rate, the land that would disappear before he could snag a prime location. He wanted a cabin, with his own back porch and hot tub and miles of mountaintop views. Just like everyone else.

How many hills would be claimed, he wondered, before he retired? Given the salary structure at MCA, it would be decades until he could purchase a starter home, let alone an investment property.

The equation had a single constant: the amount of land. The acres within sight of Mount LeConte would never increase — not until the next Ice Age, at least. At the same time, a host of factors would heighten the demand. Suppose Family X owns a home on GreatView Ridge, which Children A, B, and C learn to love. When they're older, they all

purchase cabins for their respective tribes. Even if Mom and Pop relinquish the keys, that's a 200% increase in a single generation. Meanwhile, over in Knoxville, Family Y didn't have the money to afford such a luxury, but Daughter M and Son N have better prospects. They've already talked to a realtor. Such exponential growth — working on the same principle as compound interest — would strip the terrain by the end of the century.

Perhaps the recession was the hand of God, a slow-down in construction that allowed the landscape to catch its breath. Dave liked the idea, as if the free market's ebb and flow masked a secret trapdoor — a ghost in the system that was actually the Year of Jubilee.

What if Shuckstack met the fate of these foothills, with its slopes swathed in homes? A lot could have happened in a decade.

Not yet, Dave assured himself. The mountain lay within the park. One day, the Smokies would face a perfect storm: development on the borders would reach the saturation point, while budget shortfalls forced the unthinkable. The national parks themselves would be condemned as progressive socialism, the geysers of Yellowstone sold to the highest bidder. The Washington Monument toppled — an inappropriate allotment of public funds for the creation of abstract, modern art.

But the country wasn't there yet. The forest south of the dam had probably changed, with RV campgrounds spreading like kudzu, but the mountains remained intact. Shuckstack was safe, at least for Dave's lifetime.

He recalled the view from the tower: the primary ridgeline running north, then northeast, the AT climbing and falling from one peak to the next. Slowly ascending toward Clingman's Dome, the second highest point in the East. Thunderhead would be visible, perhaps even Siler's Bald. The rest of the names were lost to him, another shame. Once upon a time, he and Grandpa would recite the entire litany.

Concrete plugs lashed the tower to the mountain. They grounded the primary supports, the steel beams that lifted the observation platform to the heavens. Flights of rickety stairs climbed the center of the structure — six or seven stories, at least. They were exposed to the elements, sheathed by a frail exoskeleton.



The gaps in the beams seemed immense, especially to a child. A single misstep, a gust of wind that knocked you off balance, and you could plummet to your doom. The winds were fierce at the top.

Had Grandpa been irresponsible, leading his grandson on a dangerous climb? Had he been lured by the unparalleled view, worried that it would soon disappear? Even a decade ago, rangers had talked about closing the tower.

Which was another risk. That the structure had been declared a safety hazard and shut to the general public. That Dave would travel five hundred miles, but not the last seventy feet.

He adopted a stoic posture: the tower might let him down, like all the works of man, but the mountain was timeless.

Horsesh—t. He could hear Grandpa's rebuttal, sense the cuff to the back of the head. *Where did you learn a fool notion like that? The mountain changes all the time. Didn't I teach you anything about weathering and erosion?*

A hawk doesn't float, son. It makes constant adjustments mid-air. It takes power — tremendous power — for that trout to hold steady in the current.

Dave tried to defend himself: he meant that the mountain would look the same. That it's still there.

Of course it's still there. But it won't look the same, not to you.

What *could* he expect, Dave wondered.

Don't expect anything. Unless you expect to be fooled: that's always on the table.

Andy and Harold were reading their papers, while the stacks around Deacon continued to grow. He propped a volume against a pile, jotting notes on his legal pad.

The image reminded Dave of breakfasts with Rachel and the forts they would fashion from cereal boxes, hiding their bowls from each other. Siblings constructing walls — foreshadowing in the Frosted Flakes.

“Looking for a book?” asked Deacon. “Some light reading to accompany your egg sandwich?”

Emily carried two plates from the kitchen. She gave one to Harold, set the other on Dave’s table, and selected a random hardback from Deacon’s stacks. “*Soils of the French Broad*. That’s your idea of light reading?”

“What’s that about a French Broad?” called Andy.

“It’s the name of a river,” Deacon informed them.

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Harold said. “Doctor Douchebag.”

“You don’t even know what that vulgarity means,” said Deacon. “You learned it from Randy.”

“We know it applies to you, Professor Numbnuts.”

Emily returned the book, feigning disgust. “Seems to me, you’d get a lot more readers if you wrote about this French chick, not the river named after her.

Steam rose off the biscuit, and the smell of bacon set his stomach in motion. “Eat it while it’s hot,” suggested Emily.

The first bite seared his palate. Dave thought about opening his mouth and letting the food cool, but Emily was smiling at him. He swallowed, and the back of his throat burned as well.

“Good, isn’t it?”

Dave grinned, repressing the urge to wince.

A knock on the window drew their attention. The porch was empty. A second thud, and a flash of brown as it bounced off the glass.

Emily moved toward the sliding door. “Idiot.”

A small, dazed bird hopped about the patio. Others watched from a rail. Emily shouted, and they retreated into a shrub. She walked to the bush and harried the branches, driving them to the nearby trees.

She returned to the dining room. “House sparrows. Tourists drop crumbs on the porch during summer, and the little devils get used to the handouts. Come autumn, they’re desperate — bold but stupid.”

Fresh customers approached the counter: two men about Dave’s age, both wearing flannel shirts and Carharts. “Hit the window if he returns,” she said.

Once it was cool enough to chew, the sandwich was first-rate: a hint of butter on the biscuit, and actual Cheddar cheese — not a processed slice. Crisp bacon offset the texture of the eggs.

The bird slammed into the window.

Deacon stomped to the door and smacked the glass. “What we need is a good farm cat.”

Dave stared out the window and thought about a toy he once owned, a plastic racetrack for his matchbox cars. The figure eight had a special feature, a device that he christened the “Wheels of Speed.” They spun at absurd rates, grabbing cars and shooting them into the next lap, loop after loop after loop. The cars raced ahead, slowed, and hit the wheels to resume the cycle.

Compared to the Wheels of Speed, the car wash was always a disappointment. No matter how fast the brushes whirled, they failed to budge the station wagon.

One afternoon, Dave broke the track into segments and fashioned them into a jump, with the Wheels at the edge of the porch. Propping one end on a lawn chair, he slipped the cars into a slow descent. They gathered momentum, hit the lip, and shot into space. For an instant they soared, twisting and flipping toward the peak of an arc. The prelude to their inevitable dive.

The sunlight was strong on the table. A weary feeling washed across his body, and he set his head on his arms, closing his eyes in the warm glare. He ran his tongue across the roof of his mouth. A fleck of burnt skin peeled away.

Emily took an order. Harold and Andy discussed a local football team. Deacon read.

A flutter from outside. The birds were back on the rail.

Review Problem – Section I

Practical Math – Mr. Kingman
November 17, 2010

Name: _____

At your favorite coffee house, The Holy Roast, a small coffee (12 oz.) sells for \$1.50, a medium (16 oz.) for \$1.75, and a large (20 oz.) for \$2.00. All refills are 50 cents.

1. What is the price per gallon of a small coffee? A medium? A large?
2. Mr. Kingman purchases a small coffee and one refill, rather than buying a large. Is he making a good business decision?

SECTION II: MILLER LIGHT

In which the teacher attempts to leave town.

Recluse — A Geology of Sweaters — The Arachnid Threat — Jeremiah 17:9 — Travel by Barrel — Checklist — The Great G- M- — The GMV & the BSG — Cords of Three — By then we'll be married — Gordon and the Fleece — Living Under Prayer — An unexpected harmony — The Peaks of Wal-Mart — Hair Metal Songs and High School Missions Trips, a practical guide — Pirates from The Church of Christ — A Masquerade — Two by Tuesday: A Triptych — 106.5 The Ark — Gordon admits a crush — Recluse: Reprise — Whistling in the Dark — Review Problems, Section II



Midfield, Ohio

... where families & companies grow!

Midfield Chamber of Commerce

LENGTH: A 10.2 mile loop, extending from Dave's apartment to the Wal-Mart on the US 33 connector, then returning through the center of town.

HIGHLIGHTS: The Great G— M—, distributor of Miller Light & the hound of God

CAUTIONS: OCD behavior; an unusual fixation with 80s Hair Metal.

TRAILHEAD: Shady Grove Apartments, Apt. D5; Midfield, Ohio
Thursday evening, 8:55 P.M. October 14, 2010

Recluse

*Thursday Evening, 8:55 PM
October 14, 2010*

Dave stands on a chair, wary of the sweaters on his closet shelf. The motley collection has followed him for years. Like strata on a canyon wall, the layers of fabric reveal the past.

Precambrian

The bedrock hasn't been worn in a decade: a silver and ruby and turquoise pattern — inspired, no doubt, by Dr. Huxtable.

Rachel once threatened to burn the garment, a Christmas present from his father's parents.

Your coat of many colors, their mother observed, appraising the gift with a cool eye. How appropriate.

Paleozoic

An olive cardigan, a nod to the memory of Kurt Cobain. It entered the wardrobe in college, years after *Nevermind* went platinum.

Mesozoic

A cotton v-neck from his first year of teaching. Paired with the mandatory collar and tie at MCA, a far cry from the hip t-shirt on that mannequin at the Gap.

The navy fabric was a magnet for chalk dust, but it led to a triumph of wit, stand-up comedy in the teacher's lounge — his remark about the “after math” of equations.

Cenozoic

A new addition caps the pile. Mustard and rust, as if the Maroon & Gold of an MCA jersey had been scoured dull. “Perfect for coaching on Autumn nights,” claimed Melissa Clark, the student who knitted the gift for Teacher Appreciation Day.

But Dave is not thinking about Melissa. He is fretting about necrotic bites, concerned that brown recluse spiders have nested within the winter clothing. Last Sunday, when he stashed the engagement ring at the rear of the closet shelf, tucking it behind the pile, he failed to weigh the arachnid threat.

But Dave is not worried about spiders. Not really.

He is wasting time.

The open blinds perturb him. Given the proper angle — perched in a sugar maple — a thief might be scouting the third-story bedroom. An admirable challenge for his Geometry students.

Correct answers gain access to his wardrobe: bounty for Horrible Sweater Day, the traditional Tuesday of Spirit Week. Known as Bad Sweater Day, or B— S— Day, until Stratham discovered its nickname.

Last fall, Bethany won the Teacher Competition with her “Christmas Tree” ensemble, featuring a red sweater vest with appliquéd ornaments. She paired the atrocity

with a green turtleneck, a long denim skirt, and a wicker angel she glued to a headband. Bells on her cuffs jingled as she taught.

Dave wore the Precambrian and carried the slacker vote.

At the window, he stares into the night. Security lights cover the parking lot, but not the trees on the front lawn — the namesake feature of the Shady Grove Apartment Complex.

Shady Grove. Which suggests a criminal element. He'll propose this idea, the next time his neighbor complains about the laundry room bandit, the scratches on her Camry, or the teens smoking pot in the nearby woods.

Dave closes the blinds and returns to the closet. He pulls the sweaters to the floor, lifts a gift bag from the back of the shelf, and removes a white box with "Kirkman's Jewelry" embossed in gold. A mahogany case hinges open, revealing a diamond ring: a modest but elegant princess cut. The black velvet draws attention to the band, and light plays off facets of the stone.

Dave touches the rock, testing its reality. Eight hundred and seventy-nine dollars. The price seems real enough, though far beneath the standards of the gemstone industry — three months, a quarter of a year's salary.

His yearly salary? Twenty-two thousand, six hundred dollars. Which includes his coaching allowance, but not the thousand dollar bonus he'll receive next May, for completing his seventh year at MCA.

Twenty-five percent? Five thousand, six hundred and thirty dollars.

The ring falls several grand short.

The light within his apartment is dim. It cannot match the brilliant display at the jewelry store. The clarity of the ring appears suspect, its color less vivid than he remembers.

Looks can deceive, he thinks.

So can the heart, he adds. Jeremiah 17:9.

He prays she finds it beautiful.

Travel by Barrel

*Thursday Evening, 9:25 PM
October 14, 2010*

Dave stares at the map, a Cracker Barrel promotion that highlights over five hundred restaurant locations. He traces I-75 south from Midfield: Lima (Store #133), Piqua (#295), and Dayton (#59), plus two on his route through Cincinnati. Five restaurants to clear Ohio.

The map hangs on the wall of the living room, next to a poster with the fall sports schedule.

Eight stores across Kentucky, then Lake City, north Knoxville, and Maryville. Sixteen locations in all.

Three hours from Midfield to the Ohio River, a handful to cover the Bluegrass State, and a couple in Tennessee. Eight hours of driving: two Cracker Barrels per hour.

Dave transfers the map from the wall to the front pocket of his backpack, next to the ring box, a snapshot of Bethany, and the book of Psalms, ripped from an NIV Bible. In the main compartment: an extra t-shirt, granola bars, windbreaker, disposable camera, a package of Strawberry Pop Tarts, and two bottles of Lemon-Lime Gatorade.

Why calculate distance in miles? Why not restaurants?

“Chicago to Des Moines? That’s nine or ten Cracker Barrels, I reckon. Should take about five hours.”

“Dayton to Columbus? Less than an hour, son. That’s a two Barrel trip.”

He keeps the flask at the foot of his bed, in the chest holding his contraband — the personal effects that would disturb his handlers at MCA: a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, the Harry Potter books, and a “Yes, We Can!” bumper sticker. The bottle of Merlot was a birthday present from his mother, who knows that it violates his contract.

The poster of Mia Hamm isn’t taboo, simply a concession. Bethany questioned its place on his living room wall. “On aesthetic grounds,” she insisted.

He fills a flask from the bottle of Maker’s Mark. The label suggests the book of Genesis. The Creator’s imprint throughout the universe — the bow in the sky, the mathematical perfection of a conch shell, and the flaming sword at the Garden of Eden. The Maker’s Mark. He wraps the flask in a bandana, then adds it to the pocket with the ring and the map.

Checklist

*Thursday Evening, 9:35 PM
October 14, 2010*

1. _____ Inspect the lock on the sliding glass door. Ensure the patio is intruder-free — a test that the shower, the hall closet, and the underside of the bed have already passed.

2. _____ Stand outside the bathroom, listening that the water has stopped

3. _____ Place the checkbook within the empty DVD case for *The Two Towers*, then hide it beneath the Healthy Choice meals in the freezer.

4. _____ Examine the kitchen: the faucet, the knobs on the stove, and the seal on the refrigerator door. Touch the oven coil, then each of the burners.
Last April, he scorched his finger on an eye that was still hot.

5. _____ Unplug the toaster and feel for latent heat.
*“What?” his sister once asked, back when the habits were starting to form. “Are you afraid that a cockroach will trip the lever, igniting a Kleenex across the room?”
The possibility has crossed his mind.*

6. _____ Drop to one knee and blurt a short prayer, asking the Lord to protect the apartment.

7. _____ Shoulder the pack and head for the stairs.

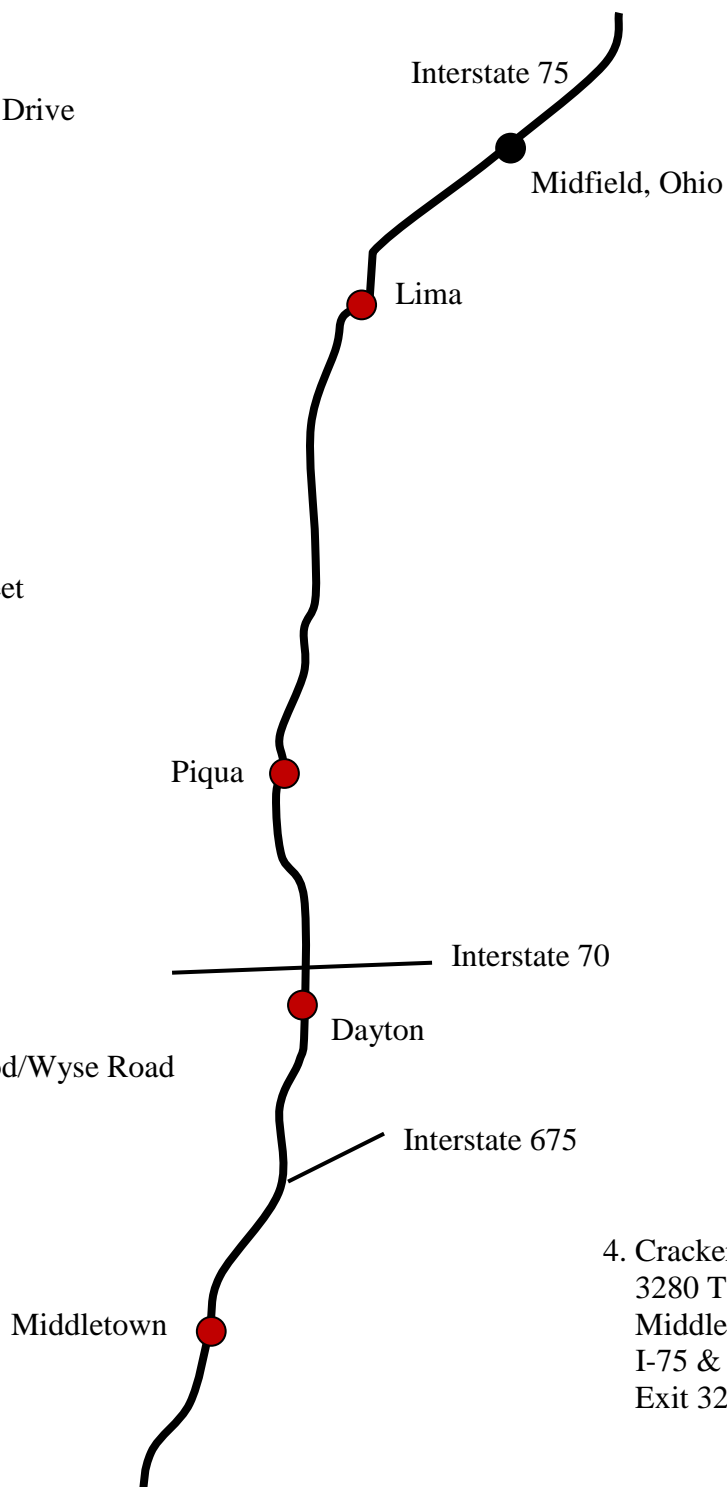
Inventory

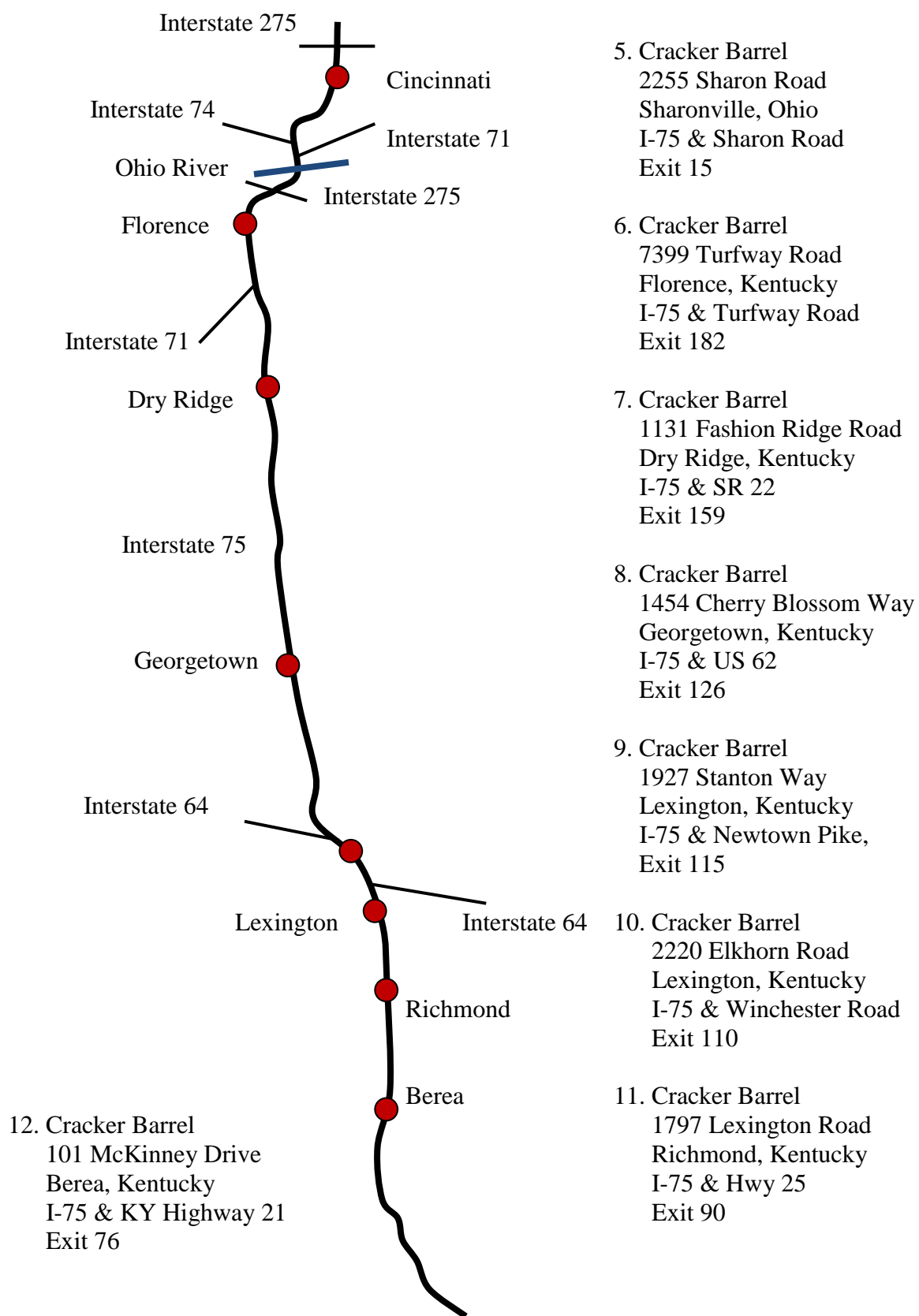
1. Cracker Barrel
1930 Roschmann Drive
Lima, Ohio
I-75 & SR 309
Exit 125

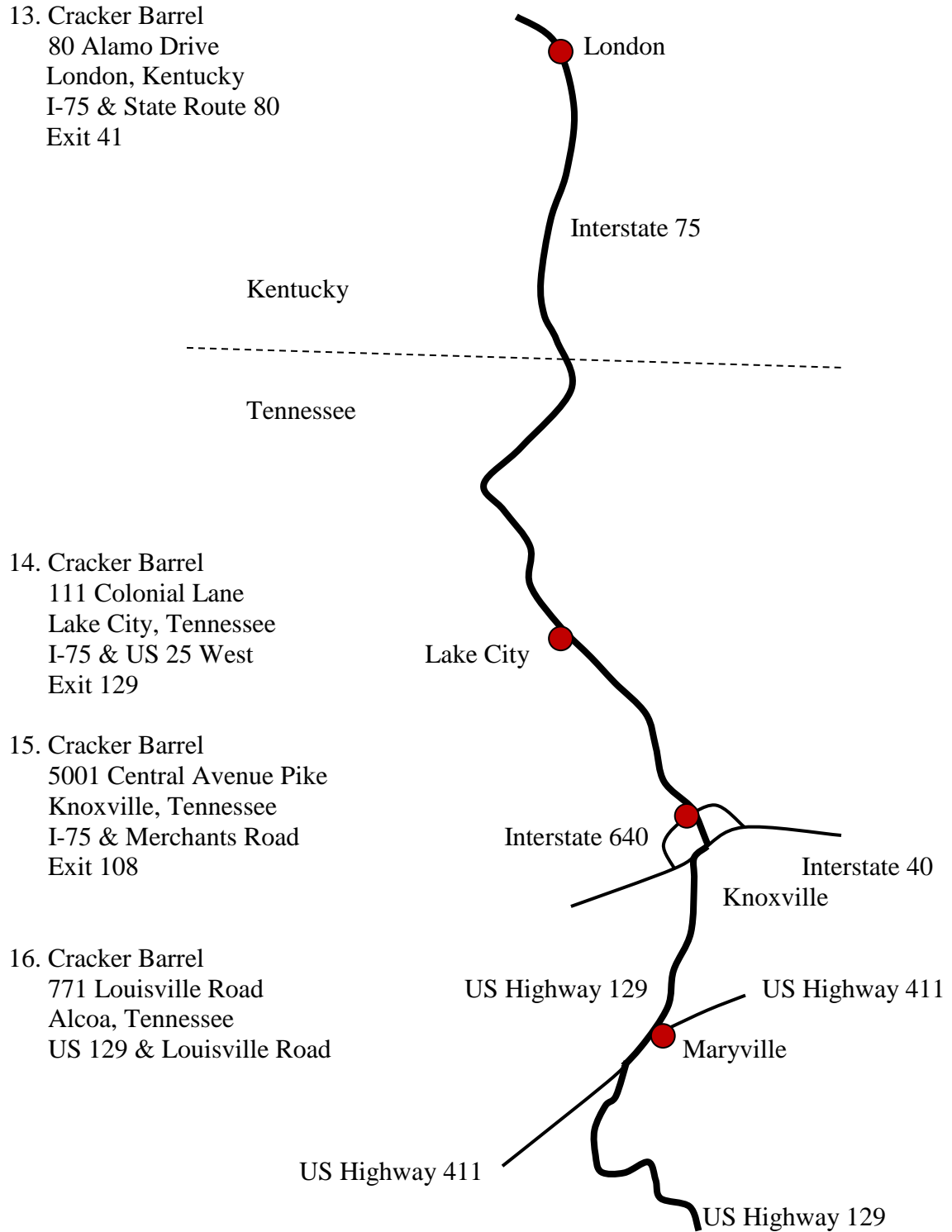
2. Cracker Barrel
980 East Ash Street
Piqua, Ohio
I-75 & US 36
Exit 82

3. Cracker Barrel
7171 Miller Lane
Dayton, Ohio
I-75 & Benchwood/Wyse Road
Exit 59

4. Cracker Barrel
3280 Towne Blvd.
Middletown, Ohio
I-75 & SR 122
Exit 32







*Store locations subject to change.
Contact Cracker Barrel for current conditions.

The Great G— M—

Thursday Evening, 9:40 PM
October 14, 2010

He had returned to the door twice, clicking the knob as he shoved against the deadbolt. He clutched the keys in his left hand and tucked them behind his back — ensuring he didn't unlock the door by mistake. Both times, he closed with a flourish: a triplet — left, right, left (Father, Son, Spirit) — and a final pull, the three united in one.

Dave forced himself to cross the parking lot. Had he fooled himself? Had he really locked the door, or was he recalling another time?

What about the bedroom window? The outlets in the living room? The thermostat?

Could you truly rely on your senses? On your memory?

The car could be heard before it appeared, straining against the slope of the drive. Dave didn't need to see the blue Skylark. He knew The OC by the sound of its engine. Gordon was almost home.

The GMV

Gordon had never watched *The OC*, the television show that shared his car's name. He admitted as much to Dave: "It doesn't meet the Philippians 4:8

standard, I suspect: ‘whatever things are true, whatever things are pure, whatever things are properly clothed—’”

“Properly clothed?” Dave said. “Is that an approved translation?” They were standing outside, supervising the afternoon dismissal.

MCA students could use the King James, NIV, or the New King James for their Bible coursework. A handful of rebels quoted the RSV or ESV — the “Extra Spiritual Version,” they defiantly claimed. Not to mention the rumors of closet anarchists — copies of *The Message* buried inside their lockers.

“Not exactly. My own paraphrase: The GMV. Gordon Miller’s Version.”

“I’m not sure Stratham would approve.”

“True that. He doesn’t understand my humor, not like you. That’s one thing I like about you, David. You *get* it.” Gordon poked his colleague on the shoulder. He was small, but could slap a back or squeeze an arm with surprising power — punctuating his lines with gestures that bruised. “Of course, if my first name was David, my version would be the DMV.” Gordon laughed at his pun. “The least efficient translation known to man. Chapters in triplicate, a paragraph just to say ‘Jesus wept.’”

“For God so loved the world, that He sent his son to take a number.”

“In the beginning, God waited in line for a permit.” Gordon mimed a rim shot. “Probably the reason it took six days to build the universe.”

“So what I don’t get, is why you named your car for a show that you’ve never seen. Explain *that* logic to me.”

“Well, technically, I didn’t name the Skylark for the show. *OC* stands for ‘Old Car,’ not ‘Ocean City.’ But it sounded cool, and the kids think I’m hip.”

Both of his statements were false.

“Wait.” Dave was confused. “I thought the show was about Orange County?”

“I don’t know,” Gordon answered. “Like I said, I’ve never seen it. But it doesn’t really matter: I haven’t been to either of them.”

They watched the parents arrive. Minivans and SUVs crawled forward to swallow their offspring. Elsewhere, juniors and seniors clustered around the parked vehicles. Holly Ward sat on a tailgate, flirting with Brian Dunn, a midfielder on the varsity.

Dave wondered about the young man’s perspective, if he spotted a difference between Coach K— and the great G— M—. Probably not.

Dave had been a senior at MCA when Gordon was a freshman. In many ways, he still treated his colleague like he remembered him: an awkward fifteen-year-old with a saxophone case. Now, they were lumped in the same pot.

Who was he kidding? He wasn’t even on Brian’s radar, which had locked firmly on Holly and little else.

Younger, grade-school students raced through the lot. Two of them darted at the line of traffic.

“Dunn!” yelled Dave. Holly screamed, and Brian caught the first child by his backpack. The third grader flew, swung through the air and away from danger.

A frantic mother rushed at the boys. Dave ceded the scolding to her. “Nice grab!” he called to Brian.

“Way to go!” yelled Gordon. “Nice grab! Well done, Dunn.” He inched closer to Dave, who answered with a step of his own.

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That OC rumble grew louder. The Skylark drew into sight.

Dave didn’t have time for Gordon’s nonsense. He’d need to recover each minute they wasted, either increasing his speed or cutting his power naps short. Now that he’d committed to the trip, he wanted to reach the trailhead at dawn. To climb the mountain with the rising sun.

But Gordon had spotted him. He couldn’t leave without a chat, not without raising suspicion. So Dave lingered in the center of the lot, hoping to limit their tête-à-tête. At the truck, Gordon might lean against the side or drop the tailgate, settling down for a deep conversation.

The G— M— approached. “What up, Daa-veed?” On his maroon MCA windbreaker, the mascot was stitched in gold: an eagle in full descent, its wings arched and talons spread.

“Not much. What about you?” He pointed at Gordon’s briefcase. “Working late?”

Gordon tapped his jeans, a dress code violation. “Out and back again. You know — Thursday night, time for BSG.”

The BSG

Borders Study Group started as a help session for Gordon’s Old Testament surveys — to assist students as they wrestled with major and minor prophets. A popular move, especially as parents connected their children’s attendance with scores on the unit tests.

Friends began to tag along, bringing work of their own. Students besieged the café on Thursday evenings. They hogged the tables and caused a ruckus.

As his flock grew, Gordon’s role evolved. No longer the Grand Inquisitor, holding court on the critical distinctions between Habakkuk and Zephaniah. These days, he was reduced to a gentle nagging. He encouraged the scholars to study, not text. To limit their noise to a dull roar. It was a shame, really. Rather than waxing eloquent about Amos and the plumb line, Ezekiel and the wheels in the sky, or Hosea’s marriage to Gomer the prostitute, he challenged his pupils to replace the magazines they had pulled from the shelves.

He called himself the General Manager: G— M— the G.M.

“GM² to you math geeks,” he informed Dave, one night he was tricked into helping with crowd control. Gordon had invited his victim out for a coffee, then brought him to the lion’s den: the very pupils he struggled to avoid. Baristas

glared at the men, holding them responsible for the chaos. Even a generous tip drew a scowl — fifty cents on a three-dollar latte, almost twenty percent.

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Dave's first BSG was also his last. Still, Gordon hoped for a return. Even now, a casual encounter was a chance to campaign: "Megan Campbell was struggling with her Algebra homework. Bryce tried to help."

"Bryce Jackson?" *Above all, do no harm* — a precept tutoring shared with medicine. Standards had fallen, if Bryce was providing the aid. The blind leading the blind.

"They both looked a little confused."

"They'll get it if they work hard enough." Which was a boldfaced lie.

"You know, you're always welcome at BSG. When it's time for a comeback, contact your local G.M."

"I'll think about it." Dave shifted his weight, trying to appear harried.

His colleague ignored the cue. "What about *you*? You never get home this late, not on weeknights." From the balcony of his own apartment — only two stairwells down from Dave's pad — Gordon often kept watch on the Shady Grove lot.

"That's not true. Game nights, I get back late."

"But there wasn't a game tonight. Which reminds me — what the heck happened the other day? When you got all berserk with the Stillwater coach."

Dave downplayed the incident. The fight had been blown out of proportion, a trivial incident that rumor had magnified to epic heights.

Gordon was skeptical. He'd watched the drama from the stands. He wasn't judging: Dave had the right to be angry, given the cheap shot to his player. "To be honest, I admired your intensity — the way you stood up for Ryan."

Still, Dave refused to discuss the incident.

"You're evasive this evening. What has *you* so defensive?" Gordon was grinning, enjoying the chance to hassle his friend. "Where were you, *buddy*? Out on a date? A little time with your feisty *senorita*?"

Bethany hailed from Muncie, Indiana. She enjoyed knitting, missions conferences, and episodes of *Dancing With The Stars* when the costumes didn't get too risqué. But Gordon ignored all that. He emphasized the subject she taught and considered her a fiery, Latina woman. "She loves the language," he claimed. "In my book, that makes her an honorary member of the culture." By the same logic, he was transformed into an Old Testament Patriarch. Dave was a nerd, eager to whip out his graphing calculator and quash the party. "Where's your slide rule, Mr. Math?" Gordon would often taunt. "How did a geek like you tame the heart of a lovely *mu-cha-cha*? There be magic in them numbers."

"You're squirming," Gordon observed. "I must be on the right track."

"No, Gordon — nothing spicy this evening. No salsa dancing, no hot tamales."

Gordon opened his mouth, but Dave launched a preemptive strike: "No Mexican jumping beans. No sombreros, tangos, or jalapeños. Not even a chalupa." For the finale, he emulated a Mexican soccer telecast: "And no, *bud-dy*, I did not . . . Scoooooore!!!"

In the silence that followed, he moved toward the truck.

“Then what are you doing out?” called Gordon, desperate for something to say.

Dave raised the backpack without turning. It felt heavier than it should.

“What’s in the bag?”

“My coaching clothes. And a Gatorade. Unless I leave them in the truck tonight, I’ll forget them tomorrow morning.”

Gordon advanced from behind. He set a hand on Dave’s arm and brought him around, his tone serious: “David, I need to ask you something — as a brother in Christ and a member of your Cord. You’re not going to see Bethany, are you?”

The male faculty met in Cords of Three: an older mentor, usually a board member or an administrator, and two younger teachers. Inspired by Ecclesiastes 4:12 — “a cord of three strands is not quickly broken” — they discussed their spiritual walks and held one another accountable. Twice a month, Dave slouched toward Cracker Barrel at 8 AM on a Saturday morning, breakfast with Gordon and Harold Fox, the Middle School Principal.

“What if I am?” It annoyed him, the way Gordon assumed his right to know.

“I want you to think about your testimony, that’s all. What’s appropriate, this time of night.”

“It’s not even ten-thirty.” Dave almost admitted the sad reality: Beth kicked him out at nine on weeknights, eleven on Fridays and Saturdays. But he wanted to set a precedent, to establish the snooping he would and would not tolerate. Besides, this line of examination was a relief. The longer he hedged, the more Gordon latched to the red herring. It was easier to conceal the truth: his plan to skip town and play hooky, the unauthorized leave. He would slip the tether, if only for a single, glorious day.

“Ten-thirty *on a school night*,” Gordon emphasized.

“Who cares? Nobody’s watching.”

“Except me.”

“That’s right, Gordon. *Except you*.”

“Maybe nobody spots you tonight. But some time, a group of students will be pulling a prank at one in the morning — forking her yard or rolling her car in Saran Wrap — and they’ll spot your truck in Beth’s driveway.”

“She doesn’t have a driveway. She lives in an apartment.”

“David, does that really matter?”

He’s been around Stratham too much, thought Dave. He’s already learned that patronizing tone. “I don’t think Clint Downs has the balls to TP an entire complex.”

Gordon flinched at the expression, as Dave had expected. But he stood his ground. “This isn’t about Clint. I’m looking out for *you*.” He put one hand on Dave’s chest and placed the other on his shoulder. From a distance, they might have been dancing. “I don’t want *you* to be tempted.” The condescending tone was gone, replaced by a touch of sadness. “Believe me, I know how hard it can be, living the single life we do, trying to keep ourselves pure.”

“Gordon—”

“Maybe tonight you’ll be safe. But maybe not, and one day, when she’s living in a house—”

“By the time she’s living in a house, we’ll be married.”

Gordon and the Fleece

“By the time she’s living in a house, we’ll be married.”

Dave Kingman, “The Great G— M—”

Dave blurted the comment before he could check himself. But there it was, out in the open: *they’d be married*. As if the plan was inevitable. Predestined. Set in motion at the foundation of the world.

Not they *might* be married. They *would* be.

The statement transformed Gordon. A grin crept across his lips, the volcano’s first plume of smoke. Then he was pounding Dave’s back and shaking his hand — concluding the deal. “Dude, that’s wonderful! Great! Excellent congratulations!”

The blitzkrieg confirmed Dave’s fears. To The G— M—, the remark was a declaration of intent.

It was his own fault, really. From the start, he kept the relationship close to the vest. The day he and Beth went public, Gordon learned the news from a student. He chastised his friend for keeping the process so private — for neglecting to pray with the Cord, partners on his spiritual walk, before taking such a momentous step.

Now, all was forgiven. Dave had revealed his master plan, the best gossip of all. He had denied Gordon the lesser boon, but slipped him the keys to the kingdom.

Gordon perched on his toes, bouncing with nervous energy. “You and Bethany, getting married. I’m . . . that’s so excellent!”

Shit, thought Dave — he’s ready to spread the news.

Bethany was already vigilant, scanning his conduct for signs of his intentions, for shadows of the question she longed to answer. Whatever they did — hiking at Van Buren Lake, eating dinner at The Sicilian Arbor — she dressed better than the setting required. In case they took pictures, he surmised. To document the occasion for posterity.

Even if Gordon kept his trap shut — an unlikely prospect at best — he would radiate with pheromones of expectation. Beth would sense a change in the air.

The situation would escalate, like a nuclear showdown. If Bethany sensed an imminent strike, her preparations would amp to DEFCON Two. Life as Dave knew it would cease to exist.

“Hold on,” he cautioned. “It’s *probably* going to happen, but nothing’s for certain.”

“But you said—”

“It’s *probably* going to happen,” he repeated. “Nothing’s official. I haven’t asked her, we’re not engaged.” He calibrated the lie to fit Gordon’s expectations: “I’m taking a spiritual retreat in a few weeks, to pray about the decision and ask the Lord’s blessing.”

A kernel of truth, at least. Still, he shot a prayer of forgiveness to the Holy Spirit, hoping his soul wasn’t fatally scarred.

Gordon accepted the bait. Yes, yes, he agreed. A night in the wilderness — you can even borrow my fleece, if you want. “To seek guidance with the decision, like Gideon in the book of Judges.” Still in “teacher mode” from the BSG, he leapt into the

familiar tale: how the young warrior set the skin out at night, testing God's will. "If the fleece was soaked but the ground was dry, the Israelites would be victorious." Except Gideon waffled, asking God to confirm the decision on the following evening, performing the miracle in reverse.

Seeking assurance a second time. Dave recognized the symptoms. Gideon didn't have a stovetop or a thermostat, but he could double-check the fleece. An Old Testament Obsessive. OT-OCD.

Gordon plowed through the rest of the story — how Gideon slashed his attack force from 22,000 men to only 300. Making that first cut by asking them who was afraid, then watching them drink at the stream to compile his final roster. "Can you imagine? How bold was that, given his plan for the ambush — torches and pitchers and trumpets in the dead of night. 'A Sword for the Lord and Gideon!'"

Did Gordon have an *actual sheepskin* in his apartment? Where did he get something like that? Did Amazon carry Biblical surplus? What else did he keep in that chamber of horrors?

"Gideon did all right," concluded Gordon. "At least he was bolder than Barak, who only agreed to lead the fight if the prophetess Deborah would accompany the army. So the honor of killing Sisera, the opposing general, went to a woman. To Jael. In the tent. With a tent-peg to the forehead." He pretended to stab Dave in the eye.

He worried that Gordon was just getting started — that he intended to cover the entire book of Judges, but his colleague brought the lesson to a close: "That's the OT, brother. You gotta love it!" He shook his head in wonder and admiration. "But what

am I thinking? You don't want to hear about warriors! You're all about Ruth & Boaz these days. Isaac and Rebekah, Rachel & Jacob . . . The Song of Solomon, dude!"

"Remember," insisted Dave, "you can't say anything yet. Not to Bethany, not to anyone."

"Your secret is safe, my friend." Gordon pretended to zip his lips.

"I don't want her thinking about it."

"You want it to be a surprise." He leaned close, the coffee lingering on his breath. "Have you bought a ring?"

The pack brushed against Dave's leg. He shifted his hold, clasping the straps with both hands.

The Imp of the Perverse

He wouldn't need to say a word.

He could toss the pack to Gordon and let fate run its course. It would be simple, removing the burden of choice. Show G— M— the ring, and his decision would be over.

The temptation of self-destruction. That pull as you cross a bridge, when the desire to leap overwhelms you. Driving a rural highway — fighting a drift toward the onrushing cars, battling that urge to ram cyclists from behind.

Sometimes, he would pause in the classroom, where a single, expletive-laced tirade could sabotage his teaching career. A decade of study and work, destroyed within twenty seconds.

What had Grandpa called it? When they sat on the scaffolding of the tower, and David admitted his secret fear: that he'd succumb to a random impulse, hurling himself into space.

"That's not an impulse," Grandpa explained. "That's an imp — the Imp of the Perverse. And you're not the first to encounter that siren song, not by long shot."

Which didn't encourage his grandson — learning he wasn't alone, that others could hear the crazy whispers as well. It didn't lessen the anxiety, knowing that people he loved walked the razor's edge, a brief lapse in judgment from doom.

But it wasn't the same thing, this urge to show Gordon the ring. To claim the initiative. To relinquish control.

He could forget the tower, the fleece, this entire ridiculous trip. Turn for the apartment and sleep in peace.

Was that so perverse? To long for rest?

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If Gordon had held his tongue, he might have learned the truth. But he was greedy and pressed the issue: "You've picked one already, haven't you?"

It broke the Imp's spell. "No, Gordon," Dave lied. "I haven't." If he was bound to destroy his life, he'd accomplish the task himself.

For an instant, The G— M— was disappointed. But he transformed the letdown into hope. "Of course you haven't. How could you, with salesmen hounding your every

step? Like you can make a decision with somebody pestering you.” He wrapped an arm around his colleague and gestured with the other.

“I should come with you,” declared Gordon. “I’ll distract the clerks and help negotiate. You know, like your Wingman.”

A slight breeze was blowing, a chill in the crisp autumn night. It would be cold, dipping into the 40s. Dave hoped it was warmer in Tennessee.

“Wings. That’s it!” Gordon announced. “We’ll go to Wild Bill’s Wings: Wingman’s treat. Grab some wings, then look at rings!”

The situation was beyond control. Dave grasped for an excuse — a yarn about heirlooms from Bethany’s grandmother, anything to avoid a play-date with Gordon. But he abandoned the idea, afraid that his colleague would demand a spontaneous visit to the octogenarian, then a detour to ask Beth’s father for his blessing. No, he thought. Allow Gordon to plan their day of shopping, something to keep him distracted.

He had to admit, his colleague would be an amusing addition to Kirkman’s Jewelry: trailing BBQ sauce on the pristine displays, chatting the ears off his captive audience — the sales clerk who followed his progress, erasing his tracks with a damp cloth and a bottle of cleanser.

It would be quite the spectacle, almost worth the price of admission: an entire day with The Great G— M—. *Almost* worth it.

“Well, buddy,” said Gordon, “ready to call it a night?”

Dave lifted his backpack.

“That’s right. Your clothes.” Gordon smiled. “I can wait.”

“You’ve had a long evening.” Dave prodded him toward the complex, masking his growing unease — a fear that this scene would never end. “Get some rest.”

“In a minute.” He returned the arm to Dave’s shoulders and led him toward the truck. “You’re on the homestretch: I’m not gonna let you fall now.”

Dave scrambled for an out. “Okay,” he said, “but I just remembered — I need to run to Wal-Mart.”

“You *just* remembered?” Gordon cast him a wary eye. “*Just* now?”

“I’m not going to Beth’s, I promise. I’m out of milk.”

“I believe you,” said Gordon. “But I’m coming along.”

“Gordon—”

“Come on, David. It’s not like you have a choice. I told you, buddy — I’ve got your back.”

The clock was ticking. If they hurried, they could return by eleven. He’d miss the sunrise, but that was a trivial matter.

He couldn’t wait. He’d already checked the calendar. The coming weeks were crammed with reservations: dinners and banquets and tournament games and potlucks. If he intended to climb Shuckstack this fall, it needed to be tomorrow.

Gordon stood at the passenger door of the truck. “Shotgun,” he announced. He formed his right hand into a pistol, aimed it at Dave, and fired.

Living Under Prayer

*Thursday Evening, 10:05 PM
October 14, 2010*

The bass line to “Livin’ on a Prayer” pulsed from the stereo. Dave cursed the oversight. He had loaded the next morning’s tunes when he left the truck, cuing the soundtrack for his AM commute. The songs he preferred were loud and raucous: composed for arenas, not the cab of a Ford Ranger. The lyrics oozed with sentiment. On the good days, they suppressed his depression and kept him on the road to campus.

Dave braced for his colleague’s reaction — a groan, a shudder, even a mild rebuke for the secular music.

But Gordon was singing along to the bass, air-drumming with Tico Torres. As Jon crooned about Tommy and Gina — their dreary lives in the docks and diners of New Jersey — Gordon matched him note-for-note.

“I didn’t know you liked Bon Jovi,” shouted Dave. They pulled out of the complex, heading east on Farmington Avenue.

“Gotta love the JBJ.” Gordon also loved to make proper names into acronyms: Initializing, he called it. “You’ve got to learn to initialize, D— K—,” he would insist. “Spare a vowel, save some time.”

To his chagrin, Dave had adopted the habit. It had brought him trouble, talking with Beth about Bob Jones University, when he referred to the school as the BJU.

Gordon was telling a riddle, something about the difference between JBJ and a PB & J. Dave didn't catch the premise, only the conclusion: "but with twice the jams!"

"You know," Gordon said, "I wanted to use this song at MCA. On a missions trip."

"What?" Dave turned down the music. "You played Bon Jovi on a school missions trip?"

"Almost," corrected Gordon. "Two years ago. I was going to use it as our theme, but Stratham shot the idea down."

"You asked *Stratham*?"

"I was going to paint it on a banner, something to hang in the sanctuary as we renovated it. Down in El Paso, at that Hispanic church."

"You asked *Stratham*?" Dave repeated.

"He said it wasn't a good idea."

"That's *all* he said? If I asked to play *Third Day* at practice, he'd rip my head off."

"Because you antagonize him. You need to learn how to ask." To get Stratham's approval, he explained, you had to appeal to his pride. To convince him that he's critical to the operation: without his support, the plan would be hopeless, and the entire scheme would unravel. "Assure him that he's vital to your mission."

Dave wondered about the extent of Gordon's charade, whether this whole persona was a similar act: performance art with a secret agenda. An entire life, devoted to a single inside joke.

“I had planned a series of devotions, stressing a new preposition each morning: Living *On* a Prayer, Living *In* Prayer, Living *By* Prayer. Living *Without* Prayer.”

Dave searched for a preposition that wouldn’t fit. “Living *under* prayer,” he suggested.

“Exactly. Their parents and friends had pledged to be prayer warriors, shielding us with a spiritual umbrella. We ministered beneath that protection the entire week. Living *Through* Prayer would stress its active nature, how it empowers our daily walk. Before you screw something heavy into the wall, you drill a hole and establish an anchor. That’s prayer: the anchor that supports the action.”

In other words, thought Dave, you should always pray before you screw.

Gordon listed prepositions: “On, Through, In, By, Without, Under. There was one more, one for each day of the week.”

In eighth grade, the Language Arts teacher had claimed that a preposition was anything a rabbit could do to a log. Which had always sounded a touch perverse.

“For.” Gordon hit the ceiling of the cab, knocking the rusty idea loose. “That’s one of the most important. We’re always praying for something *from* God, something *for* us. But that’s an incomplete picture. Our prayers should also come *from* us, *for* God.”

“The Almighty needs assistance? It’s not like He’s recovering from surgery, like He was Erin Scott’s nephew.” It was astounding, the number of relatives that students claimed. How they could recite an obscure detail about a distant cousin’s illness, then fail to recall the Pythagorean Theorem.

“That’s not what I mean. We pray *for* God when we pray for His *people*, for His *plan*, for His *Kingdom*. ‘Thy Will be done, Thy Kingdom come.’” Gordon paused, searching for an explanation. “You know ACTS, the acronym for prayer?”

Dave nodded. “Sure.” Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. They had used the mnemonic device on the Junior class retreat, during the hour of silent meditation. It helped students to structure their time as they spread along the shore of Lake Plaintree.

“Only one of the four involves asking for something — Supplication — and even then, most of our Supplication ought to be Intercession, our requests on behalf of others. You should start with your focus on God, with Adoration. Then Confess your sins. Give Thanks for the blessings in your life — which is the difference between Adoration and Thanksgiving. Adoration praises God for who He is, Thanksgiving praises Him for what He’s done.”

Gordon was riding a wave. Rehearsing for chapel, most likely. But the momentum also felt like Geometry, when the theorems and postulates locked into place, pushing you toward that single, inexorable proof.

“Rather than praying for *ourselves*, we need to be praying for the community. Think about it. How many times does the first person appear in the Lord’s Prayer? First person singular: *I, me, mine*.”

Dave ran through the prayer in his head. “None?”

“Exactly. It’s all plural. Have you ever tried to pray like that, so that every petition applies to the kingdom as a whole, equally spread across the board?”

It was ironic, Dave thought, how a staunch Republican like Gordon could become a Socialist, the instant he got on his knees.

“Now I’m not saying that’s the *only* way to pray. Consider the godly characters who pray about their own lives: Hannah asking for a child, your namesake throughout the Psalms, even Christ in Gethsemane. I’m just saying, maybe we should direct a bit more energy toward others, before we start fretting about ourselves.

“What I’ve been thinking—” Gordon shifted out of his power delivery, evoking a thoughtful mood. Drawing his audience toward personal reflection. “That it’s the primary reason we’re allowed to stay on this planet . . . to grant us enough time to pray.”

They’d slipped north of downtown on Henderson, then cut to the southwest and followed the Highway 33 connector. They rolled past grocery stores, chain restaurants, and strip centers — all migrated to the outskirts of town.

Any nostalgia was contrived. The development was actually decades old. Dave’s memories of downtown shopping were merely clichés: checkerboard barrels in a general store, window displays with artificial snow. Reconstructions of his Grandmother’s stories, stripped from her own Midfield childhood.

Not that she minded the changes. These days, she preferred driving two hours to the state capital, taking an afternoon to browse the upscale shops in the Columbus City Center. She accepted a lifetime in Midfield, but her retail standards had improved.

A lifetime sentence in Midfield. Dave shuddered at the thought.

Even after ten, the Wal-Mart lot contained dozens of vehicles. Most clumped about the two entrances, but loners were scattered throughout the concrete wasteland.

That past summer, a body was found in a car — abandoned in a remote corner of the massive lot. A parade of maintenance workers had assumed the driver was sleeping. It took a week to perceive that he never moved.

Once the gruesome discovery hit the local news, it created a minor sensation. Speculation raged: food poisoning from the Chinese buffet, a disgruntled lover's revenge, even a takedown by outer bands of the Detroit mob. When an autopsy showed the truth — the victim had suffered a massive heart attack — people lost interest. Reality was a great disappointment.

Not for Dave. It appalled him, that you might die an ordinary death, within clear view of hundreds of people, and no one would notice for days on end.

A cart drifted near the corral. Dave pulled through the space to avoid it.

“The next year,” Gordon said, “I didn’t ask permission.”

“What?”

“Last summer, when I used ‘Don’t Stop Believin’ for the trip’s theme. You know, the song by Journey?”

He stole the idea from the show *Glee*, which had featured the song on its pilot episode. “I don’t approve of the liberal politics, not to mention the sexual content. But I’m a sucker for song & dance.”

Back in high school, Gordon had clung to the theater kids. He auditioned for the musical, landing bit roles. Dave could recall The G— M— in a German uniform, guarding the stage during *The Sound of Music*.

Besides, Gordon was saying, the show takes place right down the road. In Lima. You had to support the local image, like voting for Kent and Wapakoneta on *So You Think You Can Dance*?

It wasn't fair, he argued, that Lima snagged most of the regional fame: the Dillinger Gang; that PBS documentary, *Lost In Middle America*; even a classic vaudeville slam on its lifeless theatergoers. Still, it was good to receive a little Hollywood lovin', out here in the Midwest. "West Central O-hi-o, *re-pre-sent*," Gordon declared — extending his arm for a high five.

Dave left his colleague hanging. He was eager to get in & out of Wal-Mart. As they walked toward the store, Gordon described his sanitary cuts to the lyrics: "nothing significant, just the references to alcohol and sex." It was a great theme, he contended, all about perseverance and running the Christian race.

"Not stopping believing?"

"Right. As opposed to Not Stopping *to* Believe, refusing to take the time for God." Which was the fate of most of the country, he added.

The more he thought about it, the more "Glee" seemed like another good theme to Gordon: "something about the need for joy in our Christian walk." He broke into a praise chorus: mourning that turned into dancing, and sackcloth replaced with clothes of joy. He partnered his acapella rendition with a spontaneous jig.

Dave glanced about the lot, worried that students were in the vicinity. What would they make of this odd fellowship?

“Come on, dude. Don’t force me to worship on my own. It’s by your namesake: as in David, *the Psalmist*. ‘You have turned my wailing into dancing.’ Psalm 30.” He shuffled his feet, testing if Dave, *the Loser*, would join him.

They passed the entrance, the rows of carts and vending machines filled with Sam’s Choice. Dave wondered what Sam’s options had been.

“Man, you are too uptight,” Gordon said. “Do you know that? Don’t you remember what David did, after they reclaimed the Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines?”

“Dances.”

“Dances.” Gordon mocked the dull delivery. “Dude, he throws down! He’s leaping and jumping, shouting and laughing and leading the freakin’ parade, stripped down to that clothing he wore as shepherd.”

He was probably relieved, observed Dave. They’d recovered their most potent weapon from a mortal enemy. It was the type of thing that pleased Heads of State.

“But he goes nuts!” Gordon exclaimed. “All the way into the city.” He clapped his hands, drawing a smile from the store greeter, who assumed it was zeal for discount prices. “Can you imagine the President doing that? And not for a press conference or a photo op. No ridiculous Beer Summit or ‘Mission Accomplished’ banner. Simply a genuine, stripped-down, Holy Ghost dance for the entire country to watch on YouTube. Can you imagine it? The President of the United States, crazy with happiness?”

The jewelry counter loomed on the right. Dave feared an attempt to kick-start their diamond hunt. But Gordon was fixed on his rump-shaking vision of the Executive Branch. “That’s the excitement we ought to have,” he insisted. “I just want you to know, I’m praying that one of these days, you strip down.”

A shopper passed them with a double-take.

“Excuse me?” asked Dave.

“Not your clothes,” said Gordon. “Everything weighing you down, holding you back from happiness. I’m praying that God strips you bare, peeling back layers until you go nuts, delighting in everything that He’s given you.”

“You’re praying that I go crazy?”

“If that’s what it takes. Like Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel. Remember what Christ said: if we don’t celebrate, the rocks will.” He gestured about the store.

“The mountains themselves will start to erupt.”

At a rack of sunglasses, a man with an earpiece watched them with interest. Plainclothes security, thought Dave. “We’re in Ohio,” he said. “There aren’t any mountains in Wal-Mart.”

“There are mountains everywhere,” Gordon insisted. “Even in Wal-Mart, even in Ohio.” He was serious, a slight tremor in his voice. “They’re everywhere, David. You just can’t see them.”

Hair Metal Songs That Would Make Excellent Themes for a Christian High School Missions Trip (And/Or Chapel Service)

Compiled by Gordon Miller

1. Livin' on a Prayer – Bon Jovi

— As Christians, we live on prayer. It sustains and nourishes our daily walk. But that's not the only role it should play in our lives: at times, we live *On, In, By, Under, Through,* and *For* prayer.

2. Don't Stop Believin' – Journey

— Take the title's challenge in two directions: looking inward, ensuring that our personal faith is strong, and reaching out, encouraging others as they run the Christian race.

3. Sweet Child O' Mine – Guns n' Roses

— We have been adopted as heirs, sons and daughters of God. The Father delights in his children. He dances over us with joy.

4. More than a Feeling – Boston

— Salvation is more than an emotional response to Christ. It stems from faith in his work of atonement. Once saved, we are always saved, no matter how lost we may feel.

5. Sister Christian – Night Ranger

— Brothers, we should be diligent and respectful toward our sisters in Christ: always prompting them toward a deeper relationship with their Savior. [*Might work best on a single-gender trip.*]

6. Don't Know What You Got (Till It's Gone) – Cinderella

— A look at Christ's brief span of ministry, how even the disciples had trouble grasping his true identity until after the resurrection & ascension.

6b. Don't Know What You Got (Till It's Gone) – Cinderella

— End Times theme, with a focus on the events that will follow the Rapture. The trials for those left behind, once the church has been called home.

6c. Don't Know What You Got (Till It's Gone) – Cinderella

— The parable of the virgins and the lamps. The importance of staying vigilant, careful not to weary as we look for Christ's return.

7. More Than Words – Extreme

— According to the book of James, faith and works must go hand-in-hand. How we act provides evidence of our conversion and belief.

8. Final Countdown – Europe

— End Times theme, with a focus on the Rapture's approach, the signs and events that foreshadow Christ's return.

9. Every Rose Has Its Thorn – Poison

— Jesus Christ, the Rose of Sharon, was called by His Father to wear a Crown of Thorns

10. Here I Go Again – Whitesnake

— Christians have a tendency to backslide, then approach the throne of grace for repentance. Be careful, lest you start to rely on mercy as a crutch, an excuse to continue sinning.

Alternate tune: Round and Round – RATT

11. Rock You Like a Hurricane – Scorpions

— As Christ preached in The Sermon on the Mount, the house built on the rock can withstand a mighty storm.

12. What It Takes – Aerosmith

— The Philippian jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas answered, "Confess with your mouth and believe in your heart."

12b. What It Takes – Aerosmith

— The rich young ruler wanted to follow Jesus. He had kept the law, but he balked when Christ asked him to give all he owned to the poor.

12c. What It Takes – Aerosmith

— As Christ told Nicodemus, you must be born again.

13. You Give Love A Bad Name – Bon Jovi

— A series based on the book of Hosea, the prophet that God commands to marry a prostitute.

14. Rock of Ages – Def Leppard

— Under construction. [*Too self-evident?*]

15. Paradise City – Guns n' Roses

— A lesson plan based on the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Alternate tunes: Bringin' On The Heartbreak – Def Leppard

Runaway – Bon Jovi

Headed For A Heartbreak – Winger

Runnin' With the Devil – Van Halen

Where You Goin' Now – Damn Yankees

16a. Walk this Way – Aerosmith

— Using Christ's life on Earth as an example, a model for us to follow. WWJD, anyone?

16b. Walk this Way – Aerosmith

— The Book of Proverbs & its practical advice for our daily lives.

16c. Walk this Way – Aerosmith

— The purpose of Scripture is not merely doctrine, but guidance.

16d. Walk this Way – Aerosmith

— The fruit of the Spirit, the evidence of Christ's presence in our lives.

17. Still of the Night – Whitesnake

— The parable of the virgins and the oil lamps. [*See 6c*] You never know when Christ will return.

17b. Still of the Night – Whitesnake

— God calls to Samuel in the dark. “Here I am, Lord,” he responds. “Send me.”

18. Jump – Van Halen

— The leap of faith that Christ demands.

19a. Youth Gone Wild – Skid Row

— No reason. It just sounds like a mission trip theme.

19b. Youth Gone Wild – Skid Row

— The need to pursue our relationship with Christ with a spirit of reckless abandon.

20a. Still Loving You – Scorpions

— Christ loved us before we were born, He loved us when we were still lost in sin, and He will never stop loving us, no matter what. [*Connect this to the Parable of the Shepherd who searches for the lost sheep?*]

20b. Still Loving You – Scorpions

— God’s love for his people throughout the Old Testament, and the way that Christ longs to comfort Jerusalem in the Gospels.

21. Blaze of Glory – Jon Bon Jovi

— Elijah’s chariot of fire: Best . . . Exit . . . Ever.

22. Wheel in the Sky – Journey

— Ezekiel’s vision, the wheels within wheels that float in the sky, those wild beasts with wings. [*Or find a Grateful Dead song, given E—’s hallucinatory visions and the Valley of Dry Bones.*]

23. Eye of the Tiger – Survivor

— A series based on Old Testament showdowns and courage: Daniel in the den of lions; David vs. Goliath; Moses challenging Pharaoh.

24. Animal – Def Leppard

— God humbled King Nebuchadnezzar, turning him crazy for several years. He lived in the wild, eating grass like a beast of the field. [*Too obscure? Take the easy route, perhaps, and talk about Noah? Maybe Adam in the garden, or the use of animals throughout Scripture: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard”; the birds of the air; Balaam’s ass, etc.]*

25. We’re Not Gonna Take It – Twisted Sister

— Satan, we rebuke you. You have no more power here. Get the hell out of our lives . . . or, more literally: Go to hell, Satan.

Alternate tune: To Hell With the Devil – Stryper

[A separate list for Christian metal?]

26. No One Like You – Scorpions

— A lesson plan based on the character of Christ

27. Dr. Feelgood – Motley Crue

— Satan, the master of lies and deception.

28. Panama – Van Halen

— For trips to Latin America? [*Probably too great a stretch.]*

29. Love of A Lifetime – Firehouse

— A series that describes our relationship with Christ. The Song of Solomon, and the church as the bride of Christ.

Alternate: (Can’t Live Without Your) Love and Affection – Nelson

30. Something to Believe In – Poison

— Under Construction.

31. Pour Some Sugar On Me - Def Leppard

— David hungers for the word of the Lord in the Psalms, calling it “sweeter than honey from the honeycomb.”

32. Heaven - Warrant

— Under Construction. Literally. As Christ said, “I go and prepare a place for you. . . .”

Pirates from The Church of Christ

Thursday Evening, 10:30 PM
October 14, 2010

Dave grabbed a pack of granola bars and an orange Powerade. He thought about making trail mix — heavy on the M&Ms, the way Grandpa had taught him — but settled on a Snickers bar instead.

Gordon had disappeared.

Dave wandered the grocery aisles, looking for his colleague. An MCA parent was comparing packages of ground beef, so he ducked past the soup to avoid notice. The move came second nature.

“Hey, buddy—” Gordon nudged his back with an elbow.

Dave whirled, eager to chew him out: “Where have you—” He faltered at the spectacle before him.

Gordon was holding a copy of *The Da Vinci Code* in one hand, casually skimming its contents, with a twenty-four pack of Miller High Life cradled beneath the opposite arm. He tried to act casual. “Gettin’ some brews, doin’ a little reading. You know how I roll.”

“Listen, I’m already behind—”

“Behind the times? I’ll say.” He couldn’t sustain the character. “I’m just kidding, man. You should see the look on your face. I wanted to see what you’d do if I brought this garbage to the checkout.” He held up the novel and moaned, “Heerrressy . . . Heerrressy,” in a spooky voice, like a ghost from an old Scooby Doo cartoon. “Can you

believe it? The G.M.'s secret party life." He laughed, then grew solemn. "I'm going to put them back, in case there's a student wandering the store."

"I saw Mrs. Lewis in the meat section." The news would scare Gordon, but Dave was annoyed at the delay.

His colleague stiffened, and the color drained from his face. "Kathleen?" He glanced over his shoulder, then slipped down the aisle and out of sight.

When they met at the entrance, Gordon was still pale. "She might have spotted me. And Ray Davis was looking at candy, so I detoured through the baby food. Then I saw him from another angle, and it wasn't Ray at all — just this bizarre double, like an evil twin." He took a deep breath. "By then I was freaking out. I mean, what if a parent or student had spotted me with that beer?"

"Even if Kathleen saw you — and she didn't — I doubt that she'd mind." Which might not be true. A number of parents lived more indulgent lives than they expected from their children's teachers — who followed an austere code, setting the example that wasn't provided at home. "Besides, isn't her daughter on the Honor Roll?" Dave asked. "Parents never complain when their kids earn high marks. Only when you assign a B+. Then all hell breaks loose."

Gordon offered a skeptical laugh, uncertain if Dave was joking or serious.

"Why else do you think I passed Marty Adams in Practical Math? It wasn't his test scores or homework grades, that's for sure."

Marty's father was a legend, running teachers through marathon after-school conferences and megabytes of email correspondence. Dave wasn't sure how he managed

to hold a job, given the time he spent pestering the faculty. More than a helicopter parent: an invasive force, with a permanent beachhead in your inbox.

“I hear you,” said Gordon, “but I’ve got this imagination that won’t quit, visions of Stratham pulling the security tapes, hunting for proof that I broke my contract.” He scanned the faces entering the store, as if the principal was lurking in disguise.

“You’re going to be fine. Stratham likes you.”

“I don’t think he likes anyone, not even himself.” Dave smirked at the keen observation, an insight he didn’t expect from Gordon. “But you’re right: he dislikes me less than most.”

They paused as a Chevy barreled down the row. “Listen,” Dave said, “suppose an impossible string of events transpires — something not even Dan Brown could imagine. With Catholic subterfuge and Pentecostal double-agents. Baptist snipers, Reformed assassins and nondenominational ninjas.”

“Nondenom ninjas?” laughed Gordon. “And pirates from The Church of Christ?”

“Exactly. If Stratham learns you were carrying beer through Wal-Mart . . . which you didn’t actually purchase, let alone consume. If that happens, I’ll explain the situation.”

“I mean, the contract says we can’t drink alcohol. It doesn’t say we can’t hold it.” An idea struck Gordon as funny. “I don’t have much tolerance, according to CNN. But I sure can hold my beer.”

Dave fumbled for his keys at the door to the truck.

“There’s only one problem,” Gordon said.

“What’s that?”

“Stratham.”

“What about him? I said I’d stick up for you.”

“I know,” said Gordon. “He doesn’t believe a word you say.”

Two by Tuesday: A Triptych

*Thursday Evening, 10:40 PM
October 14, 2010*

I. A Fool's Company

Gordon opened the passenger door and stepped into the truck.

Dave glanced at the keys in his hand. What the hell? The dunce hadn't bothered to lock his side. In an instant, he pictured the theft: the lowlife hunting for iPods and GPS devices, snatching the backpack as an afterthought — a bag for their loot. Never suspecting its thousand dollar prize.

He scrambled into the cab. Gordon was reaching to pop the door, and Dave pushed him back, rushing to check that the ring was secure. Relief as he felt the box in the front pocket. He stifled an impulse to open the case and touch the diamond.

"What's the matter?" asked Gordon. "You okay?"

"You didn't lock your door."

"I didn't? Huh. I'm usually good about things like that." He gasped, pointing at a crumpled wrapper from Taco Bell. "Oh no! The Nondenom Ninjas stole your nachos!"

Dave glowered. He almost wished the ring *had* been stolen, so he could *really* unleash his frustration.

"Chill out," Gordon said. "Are your coaching clothes really *that* priceless? Diamonds on the soles of your cleats?"

Dave bit his tongue, trying to calm himself down.

"Sorry, dude. I'll be more careful next time."

Trust me, Dave thought. There's not going to *be* a next time.

"Why do you worry about clothing?" quoted Gordon, attempting to lighten the mood. "Consider the lilies of the field. They do not toil or spin, yet not even Solomon was dressed like one of these. The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew Six."

A companion of fools shall be destroyed, thought Dave. Proverbs Thirteen.

Gordon tuned the radio to the local Christian station, 106.5 The Ark. "Your shelter in the storm," the DJ announced. "Worship, Contemporary, even a little Rock and Roll — everything under a single roof. Safe enough for the kids, but sane enough for their parents." He mentioned an upcoming concert by Caedmon's Call, speaking over the opening bars of a praise chorus, a classic hymn that a chart-topping band had reworked. Dave still preferred the original.

"My favorite," said Gordon, "is Two by Tuesday."

"A lot of stations have Two for Tuesday, you know."

"But not Two *by* Tuesday. Like the animals, get it?"

Dave cut through downtown Midfield, a wasteland on Thursday night, hoping to save some time. They sat at a red light near the county courthouse. Across the street, a man in a hooded sweatshirt slept on a bench. The park's fountain had been emptied for the season.

That past July, he and Beth sat on the same bench after *North by Northwest* at the downtown cinema, which screened classic films on summer evenings. The hipsters

rolled their eyes, but a sold-out weekend of *Singin' in the Rain* would bankroll a Kurosawa retrospective.

A homeless woman had approached them. Dave ignored her request, but Bethany wanted to offer a little cash — enough for a snack — and directions to the local shelter.

“Enough for a Schlitz,” Dave remarked, after his bill and the woman had disappeared. “Maybe a six-pack, if she’s lucky.”

“You don’t know that.” Beth’s response was deliberate, something she’d planned to say for a while. “You make up your mind about people. You don’t give them a chance to surprise you.”

The Ark transitioned to a new song, “This Is the Air I Breathe,” which Gordon linked back to Bon Jovi — its striking resemblance to “I’ll Be There For You.” He had written a chapel sermon about the two works, hoping to contrast the sexual lust in the power ballad with the authentic love of Christ. Gordon listed the parallels: lyrics that overlapped, similar metaphors, even a random shout that provided a connection. If Stratham nixed the idea, he would post the comparison on his blog — *The Plumblane*. It sounded like a stretch to David, a convenient excuse to blast 80s rock in the MCA auditorium.

Their senior year, his friend Patrick had written and produced a legendary chapel service. The spectacle claimed to illustrate the dangers of the New Age Movement and its antecedents in hippie culture, but the sketches were also a pretext for wearing bohemian costumes in elaborate dance numbers — “The Age of Aquarius” and other

songs from *Hair*. You could get away with most anything, as long as you tacked a lesson or “application” to the conclusion.

II. The High Life

Gordon described a future *Plumline* entry about Speaking in Tongues, thoughts that had stemmed from a heated debate in his devotional section. Spiritual Gifts were a dangerous topic at MCA, which drew students from a wide range of denominations. The Charismatic pupils were a distinct minority, but they were . . . well, charismatic. Teachers were instructed to avoid certain topics for the sake of unity: Anointing with Oil, Glossalalia, being Slain by the Spirit. It was MCA’s form of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”: you could be Pentecostal, as long as you didn’t raise a fuss. Save your energy for Sunday mornings.

The students were eager to debate the issue, since it made the teachers uncomfortable. In fact, Dave recalled, there was a well-worn exchange among boys in the locker room, sexual innuendo with a religious twist.

“What’s your Spiritual Gift?”

“Tongues.”

“Mine’s the Laying on of Hands.”

It wasn’t as funny as he remembered. Besides, now that he thought about it, the boys who told the joke were never Pentecostal themselves. It wasn’t exactly racist humor, but it worked in a similar vein.

Bethany attended a fairly Charismatic church, far less restrained than the corporate celebration at Maple Park. It wasn't an issue they had discussed, not in depth, but they needed to broach the subject — their budding TBN remake of *West Side Story* or *Romeo & Juliet*. Star-crossed lovers: citizens of the same metropolis, the City of God, but devoted to rival houses of worship.

At Maple Park, the praise band stuck to the plan. You sang the lyrics, repeated the chorus a few times — acapella at the end, with dignified clapping to hold the tempo — and sat down after a few songs. If too many folks started raising their hands, the worship leader teased, the ceiling fans might have to be lowered. He told the joke once a season, grinning beneath his wireless headset and perfectly gelled coif. At Bethany's church, on the other hand, an eight-line song could trigger a fifteen minute jam session. New verses would be improvised, guitar solos mixing with shouts of joy throughout the congregation. It was the difference between listening to Top 40 radio and dancing at a Phish concert.

When they *really* got excited, Bethany's crowd could go wild. People raced up and down the aisles, crying and laughing and even rolling on the floor. During revivals, one of the deacons brought a massive broadsword to the meetings — something straight out of medieval Scotland. He swung the weapon in circles about his head, like a sports fan waving a towel to incite the crowd.

A debate about Glossalalia? What was Gordon thinking? How did it even surface, given the limited confines of a devotional section?

Every morning, the students at MCA gathered in small groups from 8:15 until 8:30, before they scattered to first-period and began the academic day. It was an impossible task for the teacher, striving for spiritual depth in those opening minutes. Dave followed a standard procedure: he took attendance, read a verse, and wrote prayer requests on the board.

Their petitions were predictable. A handful of sick relatives, guidance about a tough college decision, and a string of “Unspoken” requests: problems too scandalous for public knowledge, but too juicy to keep to themselves. To remind the less popular students about gossip they didn’t know.

He scratched each desire in chalk, taking orders at a Spiritual Drive-Thru: “One Healing, two Unspokens & a Praise.”

“Something from the Value Menu? A side order of Prosperity? Maybe some ninety-nine cent Wisdom? Would you like to Super-Size your Blessing today?”

Gordon, on the other hand, saw the quarter hour as a challenge. Like Iron Chef, he explained. If a chapel sermon could be a novel, then his devotions were opportunities for poetry: short and direct, with little wasted space.

“Nothing extra. Nothing but the good stuff.” In fact, he said, he thought of the lessons as Miller Light. “Light, as in the Candle on a Hill; and Light, as in less filling than a complete message. But they still satisfy and go down smooth. So it’s a double meaning, like a poem.”

He got the idea from a student, one day when the section was out of control. The G— M— was struggling to win their attention, when Mark Howard shouted from the back: “Quiet, you fools: it’s Miller Time!”

Not that he let Mark know his inspiration. After all, he didn’t want to encourage a fascination with alcohol. “We’re held more accountable as teachers,” he insisted. “Like Christ said, ‘whoever leads one of these little ones astray—’”

“They’ll find their way to a six pack,” Dave assured him, “with or without your support.”

Gordon shook his head. “It would be better for a millstone to be hung from his neck and cast into the sea.”

In sermons, the preacher would pause to emphasize the size and weight of these massive stones. Historical details that provided shock value, rather than spiritual illumination. The passage always reminded Dave of gangster clichés about “cement shoes.” The disciples gathering on an ill-lit bridge, dragging a Pharisee from the trunk of their chariot — helping him to the bottom of the Jordan River.

Over time, Gordon had expanded his portfolio, like a brewery that rolled out new, innovative drafts. The Beatitudes were Christ’s Genuine Truth, the CGT. Proverbs were The High Life.

The champagne of devotions, thought Dave. “How do you keep them apart?”

The G— M— shrugged. “I don’t know. I invent the names as I go, like half the nonsense that pops from this mouth.”

“What about The Beast?”

The question brought confusion, then a muddled explanation of inexpensive beers and the nicknames for Milwaukee's Best. "About the only brand we could afford," Dave said, "if we were actually allowed to drink."

Gordon was relieved. "You had me worried for a second. I thought you were talking about the Anti-Christ."

III. Parking Lot Confessional

The G— M— scuffed his foot on the asphalt. Gathering his nerve, Dave suspected, preparing some new comment or admission.

They had already survived a minor catastrophe, when Gordon learned they forgot to buy milk. "I'll survive," Dave insisted. "I've got frozen waffles in the fridge." But the oversight had been deliberate. Everything from Wal-Mart had to travel to Tennessee. Opening the apartment would trigger a fresh round of compulsive behavior.

His colleague had been quiet, those last miles to Shady Grove. Wrestling with something hidden, probably the question that now kept him fidgeting in the lot. Like a nervous teen, trying to work up the courage to ask a girl out.

"I want you to know," he started. "I want you to know, I'm happy for you. And I'm glad that you told me. Really glad." Gordon raised his head and looked Dave in the eye, then returned his gaze to the ground.

"I probably shouldn't admit it. I mean, you're going to think I'm strange. But I've always had a small crush on Bethany. She's such a strong woman. And beautiful, inside and out. Like when she speaks about her mission trips to Guatemala, with the

slides, and the Vacation Bible School for the rural kids and the service projects. You can see her love of Christ, the heart she has for those children.”

Dave was silent. He intended to let him finish, to get the complete admission out of his system. But it wasn't a surprise. Bethany had sensed the infatuation for months. It was cute, she insisted, and Gordon had always treated her with respect.

Once she pointed it out, Dave noticed the clues. The earnest support for her proposals in teacher meetings. The way Gordon would stare at her, transfixed, as she sang with the chapel choir. Even his interest in their relationship. But she was exaggerating, he thought. He chalked it to vanity, her belief she inspired that deep a passion. Now, as his colleague fumbled the confession, he had to admit she was right.

“To be honest,” said Gordon, “I didn't think you'd make it as a couple. I figured you'd panic, that you wouldn't understand the jackpot you'd scored. Either that, or Beth would finally see through your charade.” He grinned, attempting to draw a smile in response. “Don't worry, I'm not going to try anything desperate. I'm not gonna ask her out, now that I've admitted my feelings. I just wanted you to know — since we're Cordmates and all.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“It's great that she loves you. It's great that you're getting married.” A look of panic crossed his face. “You'll still invite me to the wedding, won't you?”

Dave assured Gordon that he'd be invited. And like that, they had their first guest. The vows inched a step closer.

Gordon was growing more and more self-conscious. He had revealed more than he intended. “Dave—”

“Don’t worry about it, Gordon.”

“You won’t say anything? Not to Bethany?”

“Of course not,” Dave lied.

“You’re not offended, are you?”

“Why would I be offended? Shouldn’t I take it as a compliment?” But he didn’t.

It bothered him, Gordon acting like he’d have a shot with Bethany, if only his friend weren’t standing in the way. That the situation would be reversed if he’d acted on his feelings. That Beth would have given him a chance. Which disturbed Dave. Because the woman he married, she ought to be out of The G—M—’s league.

“You sure we’re okay?” asked Gordon. “You look like you’re upset.”

“I’m sure.”

“I enjoyed our evening.” Gordon smiled. “It was like we were friends, rather than colleagues.”

“We *are* friends.” He spotted his chance to escape, now that his colleague was embarrassed, eager to finish the awkward exchange. “Get out of here, before I change my mind.” He turned to his own stairwell, enacting his role in the charade.

“Good night, Dave,” called The G— M—. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Dave raised his hand in response, but he didn’t say a word.

Recluse: Reprise

Thursday Evening, 11:30 PM
October 14, 2010

Dave stands on the lawn, wary of the wooden swing. The fixture has seen better years. The slats have splintered, and its chains leave streaks of rust on the palms. It looks best from a distance, surrounded by elms and pines. The apartment brochures often feature the setting: snapshots of happy couples, rocking together in wool sweaters on fall afternoons. They promise companionship, an irresistible amenity — far more enticing than the musty exercise room.

Over a year ago, on a September afternoon, they rocked on the swing for the first time. Nervous and awkward, he asked Beth to the Homecoming Banquet: “If you’d be interested, I mean.”

“Of course I’d be interested,” she answered.

The Banquet was their official “coming out” to the school, the date they would use when measuring how long they’d been together. “If you’d be interested” became one of their favorite inside jokes: “I’d like to hold your hand . . . if you’d be interested.” “There’s a new movie at the Cineplex . . . if you’d be interested.” “You’ve got something hanging from your nose . . . if you’d be interested.” The catchphrase had lost its appeal — like “Don’t Have a Cow, Man” or “Where’s the Beef?” Still, he would probably feature it in his proposal.

It was the swing where he stretched his arm around her shoulders, the same spot where he leaned close — several months later — for that first, awkward smooch. The kiss had occurred that past January, during an afternoon of winter fun. Building a snow man on the lawn, then snuggling together in the frigid air.

They have spent evenings watching the dusk settle, catching fireflies and slapping at mosquitoes. He has avoided the setting for months, now that Beth finds significance in every location they visit.

It is a dangerous place: a swing rife with clichés.

But Dave is not thinking about clichés. He is fretting about privacy, trying to determine if the swing is open.

He has been skulking about the dark lawn, carrying his bags from Wal-Mart. He glances at Gordon's apartment, where the lights are still on, the drapes open. Every few minutes, a silhouette will appear at the window, keeping watch over lot by night.

Dave wants to perform a ritual, some type of prayer or gesture that can inaugurate the trip. But the park is dark, the swing hidden from view. He moves toward it, tentative, afraid that he'll spoil a midnight tryst. That he'll ruin a symbolic moment for someone else.

The leaves on the ground thicken. He steps with a crunch.

"Who's there?" The woman's voice is laced with fear. "Gary?"

"Sorry," Dave mutters. He steps backward, retreating into the darkness.

Dave lies down on the grass, staring at the constellations, and thinks about Abraham in the desert: the night sky, and a patriarch counting his descendants. A song by Rich Mullins runs through Dave's head.

Some of these stars have already died. The eruption into a supernova, the collapse upon its own center, now events of the distant past. Their light has been racing through time and space, passing the heliopause, the outer reaches of the solar system, long after the source expired.

Was Abraham fooled? He didn't have the Hubble to number his offspring. Though the air quality — it would have been better in ancient Palestine.

Five millennia was modest sum, given the lifespan of a universe. Did Abraham ever count the light of expired stars? Did he name a great-grandson that had already ceased to exist?

Is that the way of God's prophecies? By the time you discover the promise, the power behind it has gone?

Another cliché, this whole "light of a dead star" trope. Still, he pictures himself next to Abraham, two patriarchs in Western Ohio, absorbing the same lifeless rays. Both misled, both mistaken.

A couple strolls through the clearing. They stop near Dave, whispering to one another. The girl takes a shallow gasp.

"What?" her friend asks.

"There's somebody on the lawn. Over there — a body — you can barely see it."

The friend steps closer.

“Be careful, Gary,” the girl whispers. “There was a man lurking in the park.

Earlier tonight, when I waited for you at the swing.”

“You shouldn’t be out here alone, not at night.”

Dave braces himself, prepared to flee.

“Who’s there?” Gary waits for a response, then calls again. “Coward,” he mutters. “Asshole pervert.”

Their whispers fade. The grass is cool on Dave’s neck and back.

Gordon’s curtains are shut, his apartment finally dark. Dave still feels hunted.

A set of eyes in the grove. A yellow glow that fades as the creature retreats from view. A roaring lion, seeking what it may devour.

Be watchful. Be vigilant. First Peter 5:8.

Time to drive.

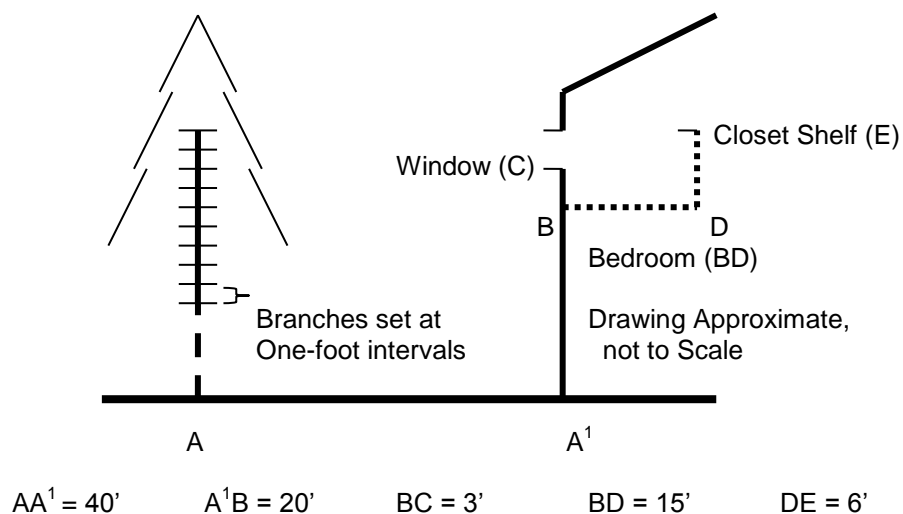
Review Problem – Section II

Geometry – Mr. Kingman
Extra Credit

Name: _____

Richard Gunn, a private investigator, has tracked a stolen necklace to an apartment in the Shady Grove complex. The only problem? He cannot spot the bedroom in the third-floor apartment he suspects—not from the ground, at least. Fortunately, there is a large evergreen on the front lawn with branches at one foot intervals — convenient for both Gunn and our calculations.

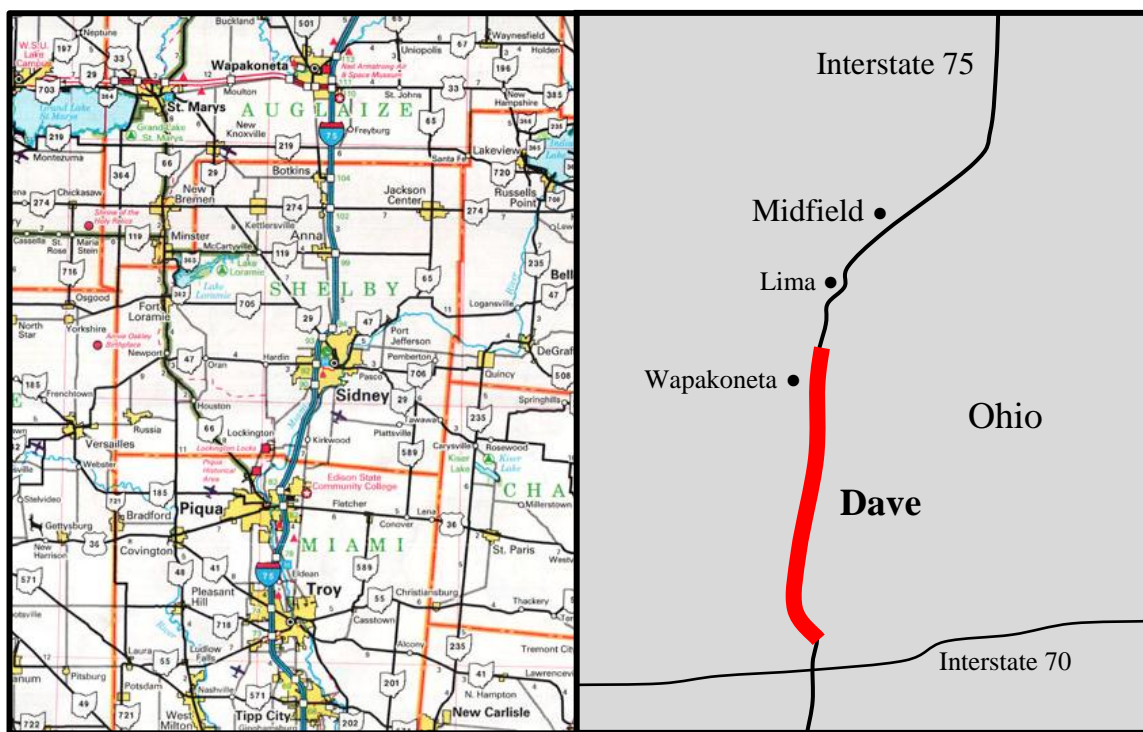
Suppose the apartment is 20 feet off the ground, the window ledge is 3 feet above the apartment floor, and the jewelry box is stored on a shelf 6 feet high at the back of a bedroom that's fifteen feet deep. (See diagram) The spruce is 40 feet away from the building. How high does Gunn need to climb to see into the apartment and survey the closet?



SECTION III: LEAPS OF FAITH

In which the teacher drifts south, obsessing on space travel and student evaluations.

One Small Step for Matt — Neil Armstrong — A Heavenly Foursome — Cut & Paste — The Age of Cold Feet — Take Me To Your Litre — Nearby Attractions — EagleNet — The Aerie — Twelve Bucks an Hour — YourChildsASlacker.com — Like A Sick Game of Dodgeball — “A” Stands for “Effort” — Rachel’s Contribution — Sisyphus in the Classroom — Southern Drift — On Silos — Bored Games — “R.O.U.S.? I don’t think they exist.” — Princess Redwood — Fischer College — The Philippians4.8 Firewall — Winesburg, Ohio — Mission Control — Review Problem, Section III



LENGTH: 43.8 miles on I-75, from Wapakoneta, Ohio, to the outskirts of Dayton.

HIGHLIGHTS: Biblical figures at play; an essay on silos.

CAUTIONS: Terrible puns; obscure facts about small Christian colleges.

TRAILHEAD: Interstate 75, a mile north of Exit 111 (Wapakoneta, Ohio).

Friday morning, 1:10 A.M. October 15, 2010

One Small Step for Matt

*Friday Morning, 12:25 AM
October 15, 2010*

Two sets of lights ran along the low ridge. Blue and symmetric, they failed to converge — rent by the black sphere rose from the earth. A glow from Wapakoneta backlit its silhouette.

A lunar eclipse, thought Dave. The dark side of the moon.

The dome was actually white, a planetarium. The Neil Armstrong Air & Space Museum. He had visited the attraction twice: as a student first, then a reluctant chaperone.

The exhibits were housed underground. Only the ceiling pierced the surface of the planet. Its concrete swell parted about the orb. Like that famous picture of a lighthouse in the North Sea, a wave breaking against its foundation.

Like wings. In a certain slant of light, the complex resembled the Golden Snitch.



The Neil Armstrong Air & Space Museum (Photo by Ron Lambert)

The hillside itself was a fake, molded by dozers and men driving trucks. A door opened into the artificial mound, a portal beneath the Earth's crust. Like a mine shaft. A barrow. A museum constructed by hobbits.

The comparisons were forced. Yet Dave persisted, fishing for symbols of his journey in the passing landscape.

None of this could be seen from the interstate, not at night. The planetarium hovered, floating in darkness. Blue lights traced the roof to each side.

Not wings, but tethers. As if the sphere was an alien craft, desperate to return home.

It was supposed to look like a moon base. During their tour, the guide had praised its design and creation. How the locals resolved to honor their hero, the young man turned national legend. How the funding was gathered by civic leaders and elementary students, doctors and farmers and girl scouts troupes. The building was a tribute to Wapakoneta itself: a merit badge for the humble town that had raised and nurtured this outstanding child.

Which contained a touch of irony, given the feat at the museum's core — that remarkable hour when *Homo sapiens* wandered on lunar terrain. Because the spectacle harbored an ancient theme: boy leaves home for newer, more exotic pastures. With one small step, Neil traveled farther from his roots, geographically speaking, than anyone else in history. The ultimate prodigal son.

Could you actually bury a moon base? Dave wondered. How would you transport the drilling equipment or bore into alien strata? What fell beasts would Bruce Willis release, that devoured his ramshackle crew?

“The Eagle has landed.” He tried to construct an allegory: himself, an MCA Eagle, in search of Tranquility Base. The effort rang hollow. “Correct that,” he said. “The Eagle has left the building.”

No matter. The landing craft always disturbed him. Its struts were too fragile and skeletal to support the lunar module. The vessel seemed aloof, wary of contact with foreign soil. We’ll stop and visit, the design implied, but not for long. We’re charting a loop trail.

The museum was a launch pad, not a base — the sphere poised to depart. Once again, the idea was forced, this attempt to mirror his flight in a roadside attraction.

The truth was dull. The planetarium looked like the moon itself, peering above the horizon. Or a massive golf ball that lodged in the earth, a wedge shot the titans had lost in the rough.

On the Eight Day, God Invented Golf

The foursome stands on a desert mesa, an elevated tee in southeast Utah.

God the Father, Moses, Jesus, Elijah. Angels as caddies, but no carts, not even flaming chariots.

They aim at the far side of the continent. Manhattan, Boston, or a pin location in Montreal. A target protected by water.

Moses hits last, after his bogey in the Sierra Madre. “Don’t strike it too hard,” the Father warns. “Remember that boulder in Sinai?”

Moses tightens his grip and addresses the ball. A sidewinder rattles. A jackrabbit flushes from the underbrush. He glares at the Creator. Gabriel stifles a laugh.

“Sorry,” God says. “I’ll stop.”

The instant Moses swings, a volcano explodes in the Tetons.

“Dagnabbit, Lord,” he shouts, and slams his club to the earth. But his shot clears the San Juans, rising over Kansas.

“That’ll carry,” Jesus notes. “You’re across the Mississippi.”

“Sure, probably lost in Appalachia.”

“No,” Gabriel says, “you’re on the fairway. Indiana, maybe Ohio.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m taking a mulligan.” Moses tees a second ball, then glares at his Lord. “We said no earthquakes.”

“Wasn’t an earthquake,” the Father responds. “Who is this that darkens my foursome with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a pro. I will question you, and you shall answer me.”

“Don’t even try that defense. Pulling leviathan by a sand wedge? Save it for Job.”

“I will,” God answers. “We’re playing next Tuesday.”

Moses ignores the Almighty and readies another shot. A few yards away, cacti burst into flame. Over Phoenix, amphibians rain from the sky.

Moses hits, and the foursome moves along, discussing the upcoming holes: a dogleg through Canada, then a par three across the Bering Strait.

As they pass Lake Erie, Gabriel scans the horizon for the lost ball. But he doesn’t linger. Christ is telling a story about Peter, something you wouldn’t want to miss.

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A golf ball. How would the curators react, faced with such blasphemy?

With resignation, Dave supposed. They probably heard a similar comment twice a week. There was nothing new under the sun, not even an imitation moon.

A zit. That’s what Zach Taylor had answered, when the guide asked the seventh graders about the building. His comment rendered her speechless.

Back on the bus, Zach closed an eye and pinched the white sphere between his fingers. He squeezed, made a noise with his lips, and popped the planetarium. Girls shrieked, and boys aped his charade.

Dave slouched in the seat and lamented his fate. How had the day gone so awry? Fridays were supposed to be easy, supervising groups as they worked on review problems. He should have been lounging at his desk, feet propped on one corner, lobbing

hints toward each cluster of students. Instead, he was stuck on a bus with a junior high class, overwhelmed by the odor of preteen boys. And it was all Bethany's fault.

Catch & Release

She had blasted into his classroom that morning, waving a clipboard of permission slips. Wearing her lucky MCA visor, so students could spot her in public locations. "A chapeau for chaperoning," she called it.

Bethany was the Field Trip Coordinator for the entire Junior High, due to her organizational prowess — her fondness for schedules, agendas, and lists. "Miss Fields runs the Field Trips," her students were fond of noting, amused by the trite coincidence.

"Want to go to the moon?" she asked.

"What?"

"The moon. If you want to get technical, The Neil Armstrong Air and Space Museum. Mr. Kraft backed out at the last minute, and I need another chaperone. A male."

This was April of 2009. They weren't dating, not yet, but they had been flirting for almost a year. "So you're after me for my sex?" he whispered, hoping to appall her. To be the rebellious half of their dysfunctional duo.

She surprised him with a wink. "Don't worry," she said. "One-day stand. Catch and release only."

The answer threw him off guard, and he gestured about the room: "What about—"

“Johnson will cover your classes.”

The Vice-Principal. Dave raised his eyebrows, curious how she’d swung *that* bargain. In the front row, a few students grumbled. Their day had taken a turn for the worse.

“But we’re—” He fumbled for an excuse.

“You’re what? Completing review problems?” She leaned closer and grinned, pleased at her inside scoop. The scent of apples carried from her hair: a favorite shampoo from Bath and Body Works, he would later learn. “You’re more predictable than you think, Mr. Kingman. Every Friday, it’s group work & review problems.”

“But how did you—”

“I hired a P.I.” She laughed at his double-take. “I looked at your calendar.

On EagleNet. A bit fond of the cut & paste, don’t you think?”

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Matt Warren knocked on the bus door. He was late, having slipped out of line to use the rest room. To use the rest room, wander the gift shop, touch the Gemini replica, and stare with longing at the Moon Machete.

Beth had warned him about Matthew.

The engine was already running. The driver shot an annoyed look at Dave. Mrs. Praeger was not impressed with his performance. He let the students sing nonreligious songs, failed to control the racket, and — in the coup de grace — allowed Rebecca Cooper to sit with Miles Wainwright, her boyfriend of the week, in direct violation of the MCA guidelines for gendered seating. Now, to add insult to fornication, a random

student was outside her bus, trying to get aboard, when Dave had assured her — not two minutes prior — that his entire list was present and accounted for.

She pulled the lever and opened the door. Matt stuck his head into the bus. “I thought you counted?” she asked.

“I must have missed one.”

Matt climbed the first step and stopped. “But you’re a math teacher,” he said, “in the high school. You should know how to count.”

“We use calculators.” Dave gestured for him to hurry. “Come on. We almost left you in Wapakoneta.” He shuddered, envisioning Stratham’s tirade. It was the core principle of field trips: No Child Left Behind.

“But Miss Fields is in the museum. She said to remind you to wait.”

“Miss Fields?” asked Praeger. “Didn’t she come on the other bus?”

“She’s taking this one back,” insisted Matt.

Dave avoided the driver’s questioning gaze in rearview mirror. Forgetting a student was bad enough, but your girlfriend? A new pinnacle of incompetence.

Beth wasn’t his girlfriend, of course. They were friends, met for dinner on occasion, and flirted in the halls. But they weren’t dating.

The technicality was irrelevant, at least to the general public, who saw the liaison they wanted to see. Flirt with a teacher, and you date the entire school. One student spots you at Chili’s, and the next day, the Art class is drawing your wedding announcements.

Not if he stranded her in Wapakoneta, at the Neil Armstrong Air & Space Museum. That could nip their relationship in the bud.

The Age of Cold Feet

Later, once they were “officially” dating, Beth labeled these months “The Age of Cold Feet.” She described them as torture, knowing that Dave was interested, but worried he might be a tease. That he was toying with her emotions, biding his time and waiting for more attractive prospects. She dreaded the new teachers: a fresh crop each August, with immaculate clothes and perky hair, arriving from Cedarville, Fisher, Mount Vernon Nazarene.

She almost took the first step. But she wavered, given MCA’s stance on gender roles. The words of Paul loomed across centuries, thrown at a broad canvas. Like an overhead projector, where a single page can be stretched and distorted, magnified onto the classroom wall. The man should initiate the relationship, just as Christ, the lover of the Church, pursued the union with His bride.

“Which sounds great in theory,” she informed Dave. “But it sucks in practice.” All too often, the woman suffers in patience, praying her man will stop waffling.

“While the women shoot down potential suitors,” he countered. Simply because they don’t match preconceived notions.

At least the students were safe. They gave dating advice the same attention as rules about chewing gum, sermon notes, and the dress code.

“You’re missing the point,” Beth said. “I don’t mind the principle or the symbolism. It’s the wait, hoping the man will grow a spine.”

“Would you prefer Ruth’s approach?” he asked. “Spot a man, flirt at the harvest, and slip onto a corner of his bed?” How long did Israel suffer, waiting for the Messiah? How long has the Church watched the skies?

“I get that,” she said. “But you’re dodging the issue.” Sometimes a metaphor reaches its limit. Or it gets misapplied, used to justify indecision. A warrant for cruel behavior.

She ceased her advance, but he knew her concluding thought, a maxim she picked up in childhood: there are times, she would argue, you just need to poop or get off the pot.

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Beth emerged from the building, moving with purpose.

“Here she comes,” Matt said. He was still on the first step.

“Come on,” Dave said. “Hurry up.”

“But I’m the Door Matt. Get it?”

Dave sighed and rolled his eyes. “I get it. Now find a seat.”

Matt placed his foot on the next level. “That’s one small step for Matt—”

“One giant leap for nerdkind.” The comment escaped before Dave could check himself. The observation was quiet, but a handful of students caught the slight. It passed down the aisle.

Praeger’s scowl deepened. Flaunting the rules was bad enough. Mocking an awkward kid, already a target for bullies? A circle of hell awaits teachers like that.

But Matt took the insult in stride. “One small step for nerdkind. That’s a good one, Mr. Kingman.” In a bold move, one that bumped Miss Fields to the back of the bus, he slid next to Dave on the seat.

Before Dave could object, Matt had removed a book from a plastic bag, a souvenir from the gift shop, and began to skim its pages. “Hey, Mr. Kingman. Why was the astronaut hungry?”

Dave grimaced at his penance. “I don’t know. Why?”

“Launch time had been delayed.” The bombardment commenced. “Why did the astronaut get a ticket? / His parking meteor expired. Why did the astronaut go to the lumber yard? / He wanted to buy some moon beams.”

Bethany passed this odd pair with a curious smile. Dave thought of a joke that Grandpa had taught him: “If athletes get athlete’s foot, what do astronauts get?”

Matthew was stumped. “Astronaut’s feet?”

“Missile toe.”

“Good one. Here’s one about math, just for you: What does a metric astronaut say? / Take me to your liter.”

“Take me to your liter. That’s all right.” Dave resisted the urge to tousle the student’s hair, Grandpa’s standard response to corny jokes. These days, affectionate gestures brought lawsuits.

In less than ten minutes, Matt had exhausted his new material. So he launched into a monologue about interstellar travel and extraterrestrial life, the space trilogy of

C.S. Lewis, whether dinosaurs could live on the moon, and how the museum got the wrong date for the solar system's origin.

Bethany watched from the back, delighted. "At first I was disappointed," she admitted, months later, "but it was actually a gift. When I saw the way you were talking with Matthew, listening to him — the way you laughed with this child who drove me insane. Well, that's when I knew."

"Knew what?" asked Dave, a knot in his stomach.

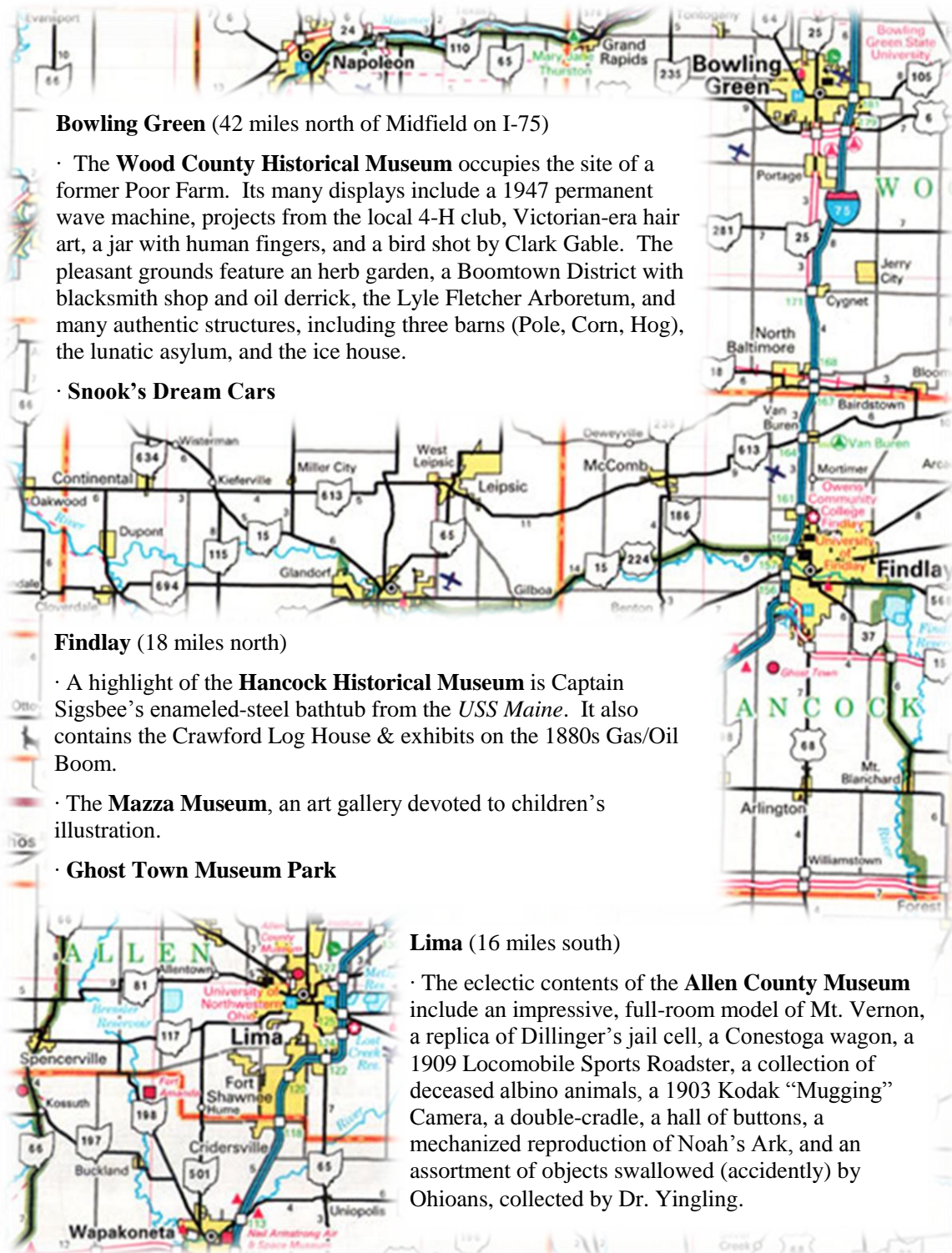
Bethany shrugged. She just smiled and squeezed his hand.

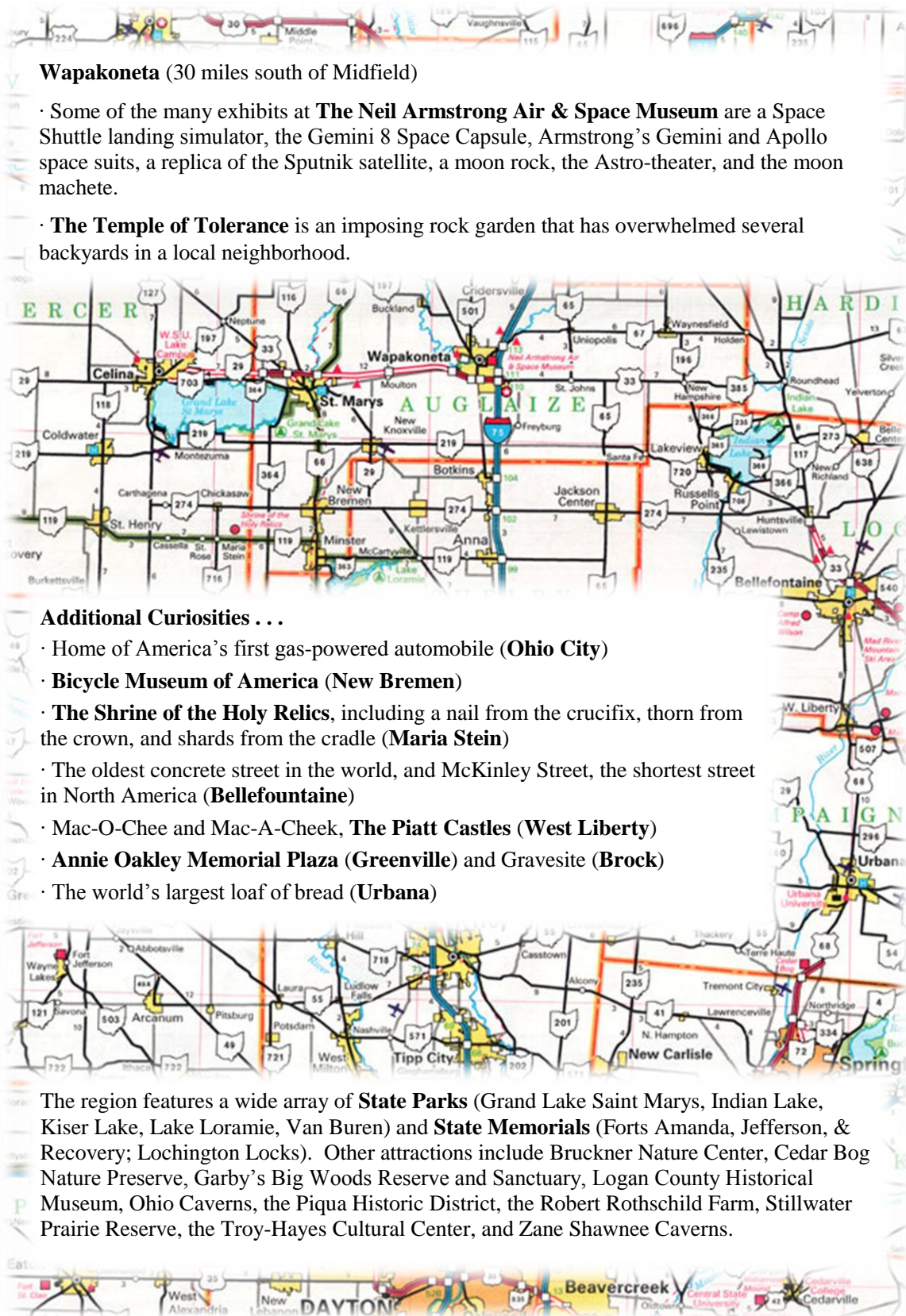
Knew what? Dave wondered. The blue lights had long disappeared. He passed signs for Botkins, then Anna and Sidney. Knew that she liked him? That she found him attractive?

How much had she determined, observing him from the rear? Did he have any say in the matter, or was he simply a pawn? Had his future been formed on a second-hand bus, amid terrible puns and Zach Taylor's farts?

He didn't buy the story. Bethany wasn't blind. He had struggled to keep awake as Matt rambled. It was simply a convenient narrative, used to justify her nefarious plans. Nothing about those yawns revealed his merit.

Nearby Attractions





Notes — EagleNet

“I looked at your Course Calendar. On EagleNet.”
Bethany Fields, “Catch & Release”

EagleNet: a course management system that enables MCA teachers to post assignments, grades, and lesson plans on the school’s website. According to the administration, the program “reduces paper use by 15%” and “increases both student *accountability* and teacher *accessibility*.”

Which was fine and well, if you wanted to be accessible. Dave preferred to remain elusive. As a matter of principle, a load-bearing pillar of his pedagogy.

Catch me if you can, he challenged his students. Run the race that is set before you, and seize this education for yourselves. But watch your grip: wisdom’s a slippery bastard. Not to mention its tendency to bite. The pearl of great price is guarded by dragons.

They hunted the knowledge he offered, chasing cosines around the greyhound track. They tripped on irrational numbers and tumbled down the rabbit hole, where the Cheshire theorem sat perched on a branch of geometry, blowing non-Euclidean rings of smoke.

Nonsense.

They weren’t hunting knowledge: they had scholarships in their sights.

And he wasn’t elusive: he was lazy.

Most teachers embraced the program. Michelle Porter created a chat room for her English classes. She posted links to the OED and facsimiles of Emily Dickinson's manuscripts. Gordon streamed webcam footage from archeological digs throughout the Holy Land, and his students could Skype with researchers in the field. They used Google Earth to map Joshua's conquest of Canaan.

Bethany's efforts were social. With the yearbook staff, she maintained a photo archive of MCA events: thousands of digital pictures, organized and tagged. Students could access these files with their EagleID, then personalize their yearbooks. Some purchased the volume designed by the staff, but many would alter the contents to fit their interests — adding pages about the basketball season, while reducing the coverage of the fall play. Did a two-timing boyfriend ruin your sophomore year? Bittersweet photos were easily removed. Students could personalize a template and display their creations in an online gallery: boasting about the track team, fawning over their no-longer-secret crush, or claiming a stake in the eternal debate — Edward v. Jacob— that raged in the MCA *Twilight* Forum.

Organizations embraced the function. The Student Senate ran spreads about its service projects. The Senior Superlatives were awarded online: Best Smile, Heart for the Nations, Cutest Couple, FRN (Future Republican Nominee), Hands of Hope, and Most Likely to Homeschool a Dozen Kids, among others. The Aerie promoted Eagle Spirit and sponsored a pretzel drive. And a number of MCA Missions trips used the site to recruit participants: Bethany's Guatemala expedition, the church-construction crews along the Mexican border, and The Normandy Invasion, four weeks of prayer,

evangelism, and sightseeing in the French countryside that doubled — for many of the seniors — as a de facto graduation present.

Most of these pages bored Dave to tears. But a handful surprised him. Jared Banks had zero interest in postulates, yet he excelled at satire, pairing text from MCA promo materials — boasts about the rigorous academics — with photos of students caught napping at their desks. It took less than a day for his link to “disappear.” In response, he uploaded a self-portrait: his mouth covered with duct tape. The picture was gone within hours. Stratham wanted to ditch the feature altogether, but the customized books were a hit with the parents. Not to mention the students, who often created one to give their family and another, more scandalous version for their friends — the same trick they pulled with their Facebook accounts. In the end, a spiritual argument tipped the scale: the longer a teen spent on EagleNet, the less time he surfed the secular web.

A subculture flourished. A way, Dave guessed, of testing the administration’s patience, but without the danger of breaking an “official” rule. The Jim Tressel Appreciation Squadron wore OSU sweater vests to chapel. Ninjas for Jesus posted blurry photos of random locations on campus (since no half-decent ninja could actually be captured on film). The Springs of Hebron Drinking Fountain of the Month Award — or SoHDFotMA — conferred “A one-of-a-kind hand-drawn certificate for the H₂O dispenser dedicated to providing a quality and quantity of water delivery that exceeds the typical standards for beverage service.” Clubs sprouted like mold in the wrestling room. Ryan Avery held the current record: founding six groups and thirteen awards in less than a year.

It wasn't her original intention, admitted Bethany, not when she first proposed the archive. But it gave more and more students a chance to get involved. Kids that once walked the halls as loners, they now attracted a following — at least in the digital world.

All of these efforts put Dave to shame. He checked EagleNet as little as possible, and his course site was skeletal: a syllabus, calendar, and gradebook. The materials stipulated by his contract, nothing more. He cut corners wherever possible, copying plans from one unit to the next.

Cyber-stewardship: his personal quest to reduce, reuse, and recycle his digital-footprint.

He endured the censure of parents, not to mention the students who trashed his performance on Ratemyteacher.com. They complained about marks posted late, study guides that didn't reveal the answers, and his failure to upload notes as Powerpoint slides.

"Powerpoint?" he told Gordon. "If I could use Powerpoint, I wouldn't be stuck at MCA." His colleague began to explain the process, but Dave stopped him. "*I know* how to use Powerpoint. I'm taking a stand, claiming the moral high ground. I make twelve bucks an hour. Any time wasted on useless tasks, it simply dilutes the rate."

Gordon frowned at the low figure.

"Trust me," said Dave. "I've done the math."

Are we doing this for the money? asked Gordon. What about treasure in heaven?

"Don't talk about jewels in the crown. Have you seen the cars that our students drive?" Not to mention that no-union clause in the contract — their legally-binding promise to focus on spiritual rewards. The ban was a fundraising boon, soothing the

conservative donors. Gifts would be spent wisely, on building projects and new facilities, not squandered on the faculty. The character of the teachers would be preserved, fortified through their monk-like renunciation — the only lifestyle they could afford.

Powerpoint wasn't the issue. It was simply a handy club, something ill-tempered students could snatch and swing. Dave could teach Calculus with a flannelgraph board, for all they cared — so long as their GPAs were unscathed.

Twelve Bucks an Hour

Calculations by Dave Kingman

Yearly Salary: \$21,400
Coaching Bonus: \$1,200

Total Income from MCA: \$22,600

Classroom Instruction & In-School Activities: 1012½ Hours
7:30 Staff Meeting – 3:00 Dismissal (- 45 minute lunch) = 6¾ Hours
150 Days * 6¾ Hours = 1012½ Hours

Teacher In-Service: 50+ Hours
10 Days * 5+ Hours = 50+ Hours

Out-of-Class Work (Grading & Course Prep): 300+ Hours
Two Hours per Day

Coaching: 260+ Hours
Preseason Two-A-Days: 10 * 6+ Hours = 60
Practices: 4/week * 10+ weeks * 2½+ Hours = 100
Games: @ 20 Games * 5+ Hours = 100
(1½ Hours Travel, 1½ Hours Pregame, 2 Hours Game & Postgame)

Miscellaneous School Events & other Mandatory Functions: 150+ Hours
Parent-Teacher Conferences
Committee Work
Cord Meetings
School Banquets & Parent Potlucks
Class Retreats
Discipleship Institute

Total Hours Worked: 1,772.5

Per-Hour Salary: \$22,600 / 1,772.5 Hours = \$12.75

YourChildsASlacker.com

“... why he chose math, he describes the subject with such disinterest. I don’t even know why he became a teacher, he treats his students with such disdain.”

Anonymous, Online Review of Mr. David Kingman (Algebra II)

Most of the complaints were banal: *the lectures are boring, or the problems are too repetitive*. Others were self-obsessed: *I deserved more partial credit, based on the work I completed*. Sometimes, they even worked in tandem: *too much of the mark comes from the homework, and homework should be a bigger percent of the overall grade*.

Many were parents who posed as their teens.

If they wanted to improve education, of course, the sites would let teachers post their rebuttals:

Of course you think it’s boring — it’s Trigonometry!

Too much emphasis on homework? Not enough? Sounds like I’ve found the mean. If you don’t know what “mean” means, you should have been doing your homework.

I can only award partial credit if you get the work partially correct.

They’d be fostering a dialogue, not hosting a bitch session. But the sites weren’t designed to improve classrooms, not in Dave’s opinion. They were forums of vengeance, where students with wounded pride could lash at their captors. Shred the teachers who clung to integrity, the few who demanded quality work, then had the audacity — the fools — to note when a pupil fell short of their expectations.

And heaven help you if you were arrogant enough to penalize cheating. Hadn’t you read Christ’s admonition? Let those without sin be the first to punish the plagiarists.



In Dave’s opinion, self-loathing drove students to post their negative reviews. Shame disguised as righteous indignation, the same potion that fueled the internet, where lonely souls masked their self-disdain by flaunting their opinions and brow-beating their opponents. They hated rivals, because they couldn’t bear to look in the mirror — at the source of their mediocre lives.

“That’s cynical,” noted Gordon, after one of these tirades. “Don’t think I’ll borrow *your* sunglasses, not if *that’s* how they tint the world.” Sure, a handful of students fit that description. But it wasn’t their *only* motive for posting comments. “Some want to help peers choose classes.”

“Doesn’t matter, not at MCA. Not with three teachers in the math department, teaching the same courses each year.” If you wanted Calculus, you didn’t get much of a choice.

“Maybe we’ll teach better, if we know the students can report us.”

“Report us? Like we’re in some kind of police state?” Were the schools better in China? Did NFL coaches work harder, when players were tweeting behind their backs? Constant evaluation hampered performance, for teachers and students alike. You lost the chance to screw up and learn from your mistakes.

Besides, he continued, it would be foolish to implement half the demands of this fractious minority. Would you consult a misanthrope for PR tips?

“You can’t ignore their perspective, just because they annoy you.”

“Watch me. You can’t yield to pressure, just because they snarl and bluster.”

“Then what do you do?”

“You play the game.” Like a canny Republican, added Dave — knowing the comment would irk his colleague. You appease the Tea Party until you’re elected, then thwart its goals from the halls of power. To protect your seat, and preserve your immortal soul.



As for Dave’s teaching? Students didn’t think much of his skill . . . in the most literal sense possible, meaning it failed to cross their minds. Most were satisfied, neither impressed nor disappointed, and had little reason to advertise their bland opinion. Hence the online snapshot was skewed. The public image of his teaching — what friends might unearth, if they Googled his name — was statistically insignificant. An election in which two percent of the population voted. An athlete whose legacy was bound to a single gaffe, not years of workmanlike production.

Rachel had snooped on his reviews, sharing the worst with Mom. The pair laid bets on how long he would last. He had already beat their initial wagers.

Dave wasn’t opposed to evaluation. In fact, he welcomed it. But when angry students could whale their instructors with impunity — it was the impotence that disturbed him. All he asked was a site of his own, where he could give honest, anonymous assessments in return. To supply employers, scholarship committees, and admissions boards with the data they needed, an alternative to inflated grades and watered-down reference letters. He had even picked a domain name:

AverageAtBest.com. It was more accurate than his original choice — YourChildsASlacker.com — though not as catchy.

The dream would never come to pass. Post anything personal about a minor, and litigation hits the fan. Like playing this sick game of dodgeball, where your opponent can hit you with everything they've got, but you're not allowed to throw back.

That's part of your problem, said Bethany. You make teaching into a competition with your students. You can't win that struggle: you'll always be outnumbered. Think of it as a partnership, where you're striving together, rather than pulling in opposite directions.

But that never worked. As soon as they thought he was helping, they quit.



In a staff meeting, the guidance counselor had used beekeeping as a metaphor. The keeper doesn't resist the swarm. Instead, she constructs an appealing habitat. The insects bring the experience they've gathered and work together as a productive society, under the watchful eye of the teacher.

The illustration failed to impress, given the self-indulgent anecdotes from her backyard hives. Not to mention the time slot: 7:00 A.M. on a Monday morning. The mandatory meetings were seldom useful — an hour of reminders, announcements, and “inspirational” stories about the classroom. Some weeks, Dave felt he was deep in the bowels of the internet, watching chain letters begin to coalesce.

The beekeeping lesson had prompted a running joke — scrambled comparisons of teaching and random hobbies: “How was class?” “Same old story, like you're building a

model ship.” “How’s that?” “Oh, you know. The pieces are assembled, stuck in the glass bottle, but you’ve lost the string that pulls them upright.”

Others critiqued the analogy. They argued that teachers weren’t “keepers” — overseers of an ignorant species. And talk-radio junkies were zealous to root out the socialist propaganda. They slammed the hive mentality, the concept of communal wealth, the property stolen from individual workers. It was a moral, they claimed: without private ownership, your hard work will be snatched by a beekeeper government.

Gordon linked teaching and coaching, which fit his title as General Manager. He had a different role than his students, yet they worked toward the same goals. He supervised drills and provided instruction, but during a game — their tests — he could only cheer from the sideline. The execution was their responsibility.

The model appealed to Dave. He might have used it himself, only The G— M— had claimed it first.

“A” Stands for “Effort”

In Gordon’s conceit, awarding grades was like designating the captains (the A students), the starters (Bs), and the reserves (Cs). Students who failed the course were cut from the team at the end of the term.

Have you actually failed a student? asked Dave. *Ever?* In *any* of your Old Testament surveys?

The G— M— thought for a second. No, I suppose not.

Not even Ted McCullers?

The previous spring, Ted's antics drove Gordon insane. On one test, he had answered a simple question — "List the five books that comprise the Major Prophets & the thirteen Minor Prophets" — by claiming it wasn't fair to label books "major" and "minor," when *all* of the content in *the Bible* was important.

"I would have accepted the answer," explained Gordon, "if he'd listed the books in a single category. But he didn't. He simply refused to learn the material."

Dave knew the technique. On word problems, his students would attack the plausibility of each scenario, rather than working the actual math.

So everybody makes the team, he observed. Only they don't want to ride the bench, because that's not very fun. "So we crowd the field with starters." Only it doesn't seem fair that a handful get singled out as captains. "They *all* want to wear the special armband — trophies and ice cream for everyone, hooray! They're *all* winners, no matter how talented or skilled. They don't even need to *try*. They simply have to *believe* they tried. Because A stands for Effort."

Did the parents complain? Not a peep. These adults who raised hell when the youth football leagues neglected to keep score. Competition taught their offspring "life-lessons" and "real-world skills," they argued. Everywhere but the classroom, at least

So the best students got As. As did the second-best. Very good earned an A-, maybe B+ in a tough class. And good was a B. But all of their students were *good*, right? So B stood for Baseline. Only a Baseline is Below the Average, and

none of their kids were below average. Which is how — last May — they had nine valedictorians among seventy-four graduates.



The reviews were like most of his obsessions. Once he latched onto them, he couldn't let go. The thing was, his overall ratings were fine. Few were superb — not like Bethany, whose students raved about her dedication. He was seldom deemed “Excellent,” averaging 3.56 out of 5 stars. Sometimes, a chili pepper would label him a cute teacher. Grade inflation of a different sort.

He got the job done. Students learned their math, advancing to college with competent skills. His classes appealed to the reserved. They didn't need inspiring lectures or robust discussions or flamboyant games that got everyone involved — the instructional hokey that made other classes so miserable. They wanted a room of their own, a quiet space for solving problems. Where correct answers were rewarded, not a chipper spirit.

They became engineers and programmers: nothing flashy, not the headliners of the alumni newsletter. Solid citizens, the bedrock of churches and neighborhood associations. A trickle returned on brief visits. They slipped through the halls, quiet and inconspicuous. Nothing like the ex-celebrities, who marched through the door like they still owned the school. Whose shoulders drooped as they realized the truth: MCA had survived their departure. A fresh crop of ingénues had snatched their former roles, and their VIP status was ignored, despite that conspicuous spot in the class portrait. Even the

faculty had changed. Their teachers seemed harried and distracted — unwilling to chat for hours at a time, the way they remembered.

Dave's pilgrims had different expectations. They had no need for conversation, for talk had little to do with that hallowed room. The space where high school made sense, which honored your patient work on intricate calculations. Your presentation could be quiet, so long as the numbers fit. A skill that companies valued, they had learned — earning wages that tripled their mentor's salary. Thus he became the variable they couldn't grasp: the remainder that didn't belong, hanging about the page, well after the problem was solved.

Their figures weren't balanced, after all. They didn't understand where he fit. They didn't know why he stayed.

Despite their gratitude, these students were no help online. Their love of accuracy was his downfall. Like heroes in a Greek tragedy, bound to their foolish vows, they were forced to rate him with 3s and 4s. Because that's exactly what he was: a good teacher, not a great one.

His detractors felt no such compulsion. They didn't consider the benefits of his course, only their *sense* of the experience. Even worse, they *thought* they were being objective. That's why they registered for the class, after all. Mathematics implied specific answers and quantitative evaluation. They could avoid a teacher's whim.

But their excuses were all subjective. When they answered the questions in style — with a full slate of extracurricular activities, not to mention their active social calendar — they expected such well-rounded lives to atone for numeric sins. Could he offer them

extra credit? How about curving that last exam: make 80 an A, just this once? They begged to tear down their treasured objective scale. Like ordering a salad to watch their figure, only to douse it with high-fat dressing.

They knew the material, they insisted. But coach ran a tough practice: they didn't have the energy to study, not that night before the test. Not with family dinner. And drama club. And the worship team. Which ought to count for something, because they could answer the questions *correctly* if they took the time to *try*.

There just wasn't enough motivation. Hence blame could be assigned: the culprit became the teacher, who was paid to promote the subject with panache. Because life was a mall, and each of your classes a lesser kiosk. Unless something caught your eye — a magnificent display, fabulous customer service, or a clearance sale, where you could snatch a result for less than full price — unless *that's* what a teacher offered, you'd take your business elsewhere.

They didn't have time to study, but they'd clear their schedule to express discontent. So they wrote of his disdain and disinterest, when the truth of the matter was, the goods he was selling could never interest them.



Not that it mattered, not in a practical sense. Few of these evaluations were permanent. Rachel took care of that. Once a year, she flooded the sites with false reviews. Her comments were outlandish, ranging from the sexually inappropriate (“his burnished, sun-kissed pectoral muscles bulge beneath his button-down shirts”) to the ludicrous (“his training as an itinerant juggler provides plenty of helpful anecdotes,

especially in Geometry, and a knowledge of circus lore is useful on exams”). She balanced fierce tirades (“don’t take this class unless you’re a sadistic fool who gets off on bullshit theorems, because this man is Satan incarnate, bent on destroying your life”) with beatific praise (“the gods of Algebra smiled on Midfield, descending in human form to teach our class”).

How many email accounts did she assemble, launching her barrage? He had no idea. But neither did the sites, which had no way to know if reviewers had actually taken the course. As with most of the internet, “Brittany” could actually be “Phil” — a forty-one year old dentist from Sacramento, not a rising sophomore from Louisville, Kentucky. The “students” who posted reviews were often friends, spouses, rivals, strangers, relatives, enemies, and even the teachers themselves. Rachel spread her assault over several weeks, camouflaging her posts amid the authentic rants. In time, her activity triggered a failsafe. The account was flagged and his profile removed. Her work disappeared — an ephemeral, online vapor — but so did ratings by disgruntled students.

In time, the posts would blossom once more. Like kudzu in the spring, or a forest after a cyclical burn. The entire process would resume — Sisyphus in the chat room.

He tried to thank Rachel for the service, for clearing his name on a regular basis, but she denied any part in the mischief. Why would she help him out, given times he’d left her to hang?

But Dave knew better. Not that his sister was a saint. Defending him was an afterthought. She was striking back at the kids who plagued her existence, those middle school years at MCA — before she skipped town for good, returning to Tennessee with

Mom. She followed Christ's injunction and shook the dust off her sandals. The middle finger was a personal touch.

So her foes had graduated? So what? She would foil their clones.

It was remarkable, he thought, how effective an ally she could be, as long as they faced a common opponent. And how devastating an assailant, whenever she targeted him.



Nothing online disappears for good. There's always a backup server or random screenshot. Rachel removed the posts, but she couldn't erase his memory, the comments burnt into his synapses. At night, he assigned students to the nastiest remarks. The next day, he glowered at them in the halls.

Stop reading that nonsense, advised Beth. You're a good teacher, whatever they say.

Dave couldn't help it. The sites were like internet porn, drawing him back against his will. Leaving viruses in their wake.

Could Sisyphus relate? Plodding toward the crest of that hill, was he stuck with regrets from his past? Did the burden increase with each trip, the weight of memory compounding that massive stone?

Or was he blessed with amnesia? Each time his task reset, was his mind renewed as well? Is that what Camus had understood, when he called the laborer happy?

Sisyphus in the Classroom

Sisyphus fascinated Dave. The patron saint of mountaineers, according to Grandpa. A man fated to climb, to ascend peak after peak. Driven by compulsions that couldn't be explained. Whether you pushed your burden or carried it on your back? That was simply a cultural distinction.

They'd been hiking uphill for an hour. "Why didn't Sisyphus quit?" asked David.

You wonder that now, answered Grandpa, here on the side of the mountain. "Wait till we get to the summit, with the breeze on your face and the views for miles in every direction. You'll be singing a different tune, asking the names of the peaks and which we'll trek next. You hate it now, but soon enough, you'll be itching to climb again."

Besides, he added, Sisyphus didn't have a choice. It's like being in the Army. When you're assigned the role of mountaineer, you don't get the option to refuse.

These days, Dave seldom viewed Sisyphus as a hiker. Instead, he pictured him in the classroom: rolling his boulder to the end of each term, when the semester reset and the labors started anew.

Sometimes he ditched the legend, opting for Hercules — the cleansing of the Augean stables. Diverting the river of knowledge, washing out sloth and Algebraic sacrilege. Like Christ in the temple, flipping the tables of the

moneychangers. He drove away the heretics, those academic Pharisees who perverted the system — measuring success in works and grades. Whitewashed sepulchers: immaculate GPAs, pristine resumes, and heads full of nothing but rotted flesh.

In the end, all metaphors stymied him. It was the MCA dress code. He could never be Hercules or Sisyphus or Jesus or anyone who wore *sandals* to work.

Why not Armstrong? Clean-cut and all-American, with a shirt that was always tucked and hair that didn't touch the collar. Bound past the skeptics, accomplish the impossible, and define your life with a single voyage.

┌.....┐

Once again, Dave compared his trip to the Apollo mission. Two flights: one across miles and miles of empty space, the other through western Ohio in the dark.

Which was essentially the same thing.

He rephrased the pun for effect. Two flights: one across miles and miles of empty space, the other from the earth to the moon.

He wouldn't even demand a museum. All he asked was a modest shrine, somewhere in the halls of MCA. Next to The Springs of Hebron Drinking Fountain of the Month, perhaps. Generations would pause, reading the commemorative plaque, and reflect on his exploits with awe. Inspired by this legend, the coach who passed south into Tennessee.

Southern Drift

*Friday Morning, 1:10 AM
October 15, 2010*

A half hour north of Dayton, I-75 South bends to the east. The turn is modest, a nudge to the wheel. The most significant curve in sixty miles.

The sharpest turn since Lima, the city whose name was pulled from a hat: pronounced like the bean, but honoring the capital of Peru. Where the route makes an abrupt turn, shifting course to avoid a cluster of silos.

So Dave pretends. Engineers had been charging ahead, sowing the ground with survey markers, when the foreman checked their advance. He furrowed his brow, confounded by a bewildering obstacle: thousands of bushels of cattle feed, stockpiled in those daunting shafts.



Dave hates silos. They bring dust explosions, swarms of rats, and snakes the size of small children. According to the book of Revelation, when the fourth seal is broken, a runaway semi will crush the towers of Lima, releasing a legion of grain-fed locust.

On Silos

The structures spawn more than vermin. They are breeding grounds for urban legends, tales that undermine their adjective.

Picture a forlorn location: acres of leached-out farmland, now covered by fathoms of muddy water.

Who caused the flood? The Army Corps of Engineers, we suspect. But don't fuss the explanation. Because a derelict silo now rises from the center of the lake, this vast lagoon beyond space and time. Probably somewhere in Warren County.

Add a handful of errant youth. The teens provide yeast, allowing the legend to rise.

They have scaled the exterior and breached the core. Dark water fills the hollow cylinder. The surface is placid, more than a story beneath the delinquents and their hazardous perch.

Never mind how they got there. Surely one of them owns a boat.

How did they climb the corrugated hull?

Use your imagination, like they did. Sketch in ladders and access panels.

But the darkness, you object. How can they see the water?

Peel away the roof. Remember that windstorm last April? Launch it across the surface, so a waterspout pummels the landscape. The breath of God, or a pressure washer gone berserk.

How will they get out?

Enough questions. You're putting more thought into this than our teens. Relax. Have a drink. Take a leap of faith, no bigger than the dive *they're* considering — taunting each other, gauging the risk of an epic plunge.

Twenty bucks says one accepts the challenge.

His name is irrelevant. Sam. Larry. Clint. He is sunburned, lanky, and shirtless. His Cabela's cap seldom leaves his head.

Suggest that he's a cliché, and he'll knock you on your ass.

Don't expect grace, a swan dive to immortality. The plummet will be anticlimactic. Lean away from the side, and gravity handles the rest.

It might be an accident. Who knows? A few beers and the summer sun, a struggle to stay awake. One nod of the head, and the belly-flop echoes against the walls.

He disappears within the cistern.

"Holy shit!"

"Did you see that?!"

"No fuckin' way!"

The witnesses are thunderstruck. They wait for their prophet to emerge, baptized and triumphant.

The water begins to churn: slowly at first, a gentle undulation, then a harder and faster roil. An arm breaks the surface. It disappears amid coils of serpents, moccasins defending their lair.

You've heard it before?

So what? Doesn't mean it won't happen again.

Water snakes don't congregate?

Save your objections for the naturalists. This pack's an exception, a secluded commune of hippie moccasins.

It doesn't have to be a silo. An abandoned quarry will suffice. A haunted mine shaft.

You don't even need snakes, though they're really the best option, more terrible than displaced gators or monster catfish. Less personified than Hickory, the ancient turtle, a snapper that's older than Job.

In the end, it doesn't really matter.

Whatever route you select, somebody's losing a hand.



Red taillights drift to the right. The route shifts again, aiming due south — the approach run to Dayton. Dave's eyes are tired, his attention less than vigilant. If the lead driver ignores a curve, blasting into the fields at eighty miles per hour, he'll probably follow.



Years ago, during an epic blizzard in rural Ohio, an entire stream of traffic missed a turn on the interstate. Drivers slammed forward in white-out conditions, launching their cars from the embankment.

His Grandfather Kingman related the tale, then added a pithy moral — something about following the crowd, looking before you leap.

Dave has forgotten the lesson. But he can envision the clouds of powder, the trucks and sedans as they're swallowed by mighty drifts.

Bored Games

The snowstorm inspired a board game, The Columbus Blizzard, that David would play with his Grandparents. It had disturbed him, as a child, that his town didn't spawn its own novelty goods. His Grandfather laughed at the notion: "Midfield's too small a market. Not enough people would buy the product." Which had bothered him even more. That their city could disappear — wiped from the surface of the planet — and the world would pay little notice.

One side of the board had a map of the town. The destinations were generic: the pharmacy, grocery store, bank, and gas station. It was an idyllic vision — a morning of errands now obsolete, replaced by one-stop shopping at the local supercenter.

Pre-blizzard travel was easy. The playing surface was bright and cheerful, printed in bold, primary colors. A clear sky and crisp winter afternoon. The sun smiled down on the town — an actual face, with sunglasses and rosy cheeks. Players raced to complete their tasks and return home.

Eventually, however, the terrible card would be drawn, and the blizzard would strike. The entire board would flip, revealing a new map. A whiskered cloud pursed its lips, unleashing a blast of frigid air. Routes were now tinted gray, and driving hazards increased. Cars wrecked. Engines failed to start. Travel reduced to a crawl.

Dave loved the blizzard. The opening rounds were mundane — chores disguised as entertainment. He would fidget, afraid that the storm would never arrive. It was inevitable. One day, the unthinkable would happen, with the blizzard card low in the deck, a series of fortunate rolls, and a game without the legendary storm. He aimed for the spots that let him draw cards, hastening the onset of the tempest. Grandfather would frown, troubled by the impractical strategy.

He often played board games in Midfield, visiting his Grandparents with Dad. Rachel considered the pastime terminally dull, the few occasions that she was invited. “Bored Games,” she called them. “Like, after the first turn, you’re bored out of your mind.”

They owned land on the outskirts of town, a long, vertical lot with an impressive front lawn. The best part of the property was out back, a four-acre stand of trees. The type of forest that once covered the entire state, according to his Grandfather. A squirrel could travel from Indiana to Pennsylvania without even touching the ground. As a young boy, these strolls were highlight of each visit. They flushed deer and wild turkey, and Grandfather talked about western Ohio. David stood on a fence rail, trying to picture the departed forest. He usually failed.

The flatlands slid past him in the night: the pool table of the Midwest. The idea seemed too incredible — that hardwoods once filled this empty space. That humans could impose such a drastic change.

He could understand a dam that rerouted a river, or a city built over a swamp.
Railroad tracks through a mountain gorge. Feats of engineering, technological wonders.

But that elemental forces laid millions of acres bare. The idea was too marvelous to believe. Nothing but simple machines: axes swung over and over again, saws drawn back and forth. Horses and cattle and ropes and pulleys.

And men. Thousands and thousands of men. Generations.

No, he could never grasp the change. Not even as a child, staring at knots of trees on the horizon, the thickets along distant streams.

He could never believe in the endless forest, millions of acres of oak and maple and buckeye. It was easier to picture a prehistoric squirrel, a mammoth rodent that leaped miles in a single bound. It picked its way across the state, soaring from one copse to the next, like a hiker that rock-hopped a challenging stream.

“R.O.U.S.? I don’t think they exist.”

I

On the campus of Fischer College, squirrels outnumber the faculty by a four-to-one margin. They nest in the trees and dig for acorns; rivals dart across the spacious lawn, a pursuit that coils about the trunks of mighty oaks and follows each branch to the outermost limit. Limbs dip beneath the weight, and the animals launch into space.

Chapel speakers yield to temptation. They reduce these magnificent vaults to an illustration: the leap of faith that Christ demands — the need to commit, to believe with your entire heart, trusting on the Divine sacrifice for your eternal salvation.

II

Once, walking from the library to his dorm, Dave had witnessed a tragic scene. Nothing that would shake a renowned evangelist to the core, but enough to derail his example.

The contest was typical at first: a squirrel racing after a comrade, their roles constantly reversing in a manic game of tag. One animal streaked along a bough, jumping from the buckling limb at the last possible moment. The other followed.

Two maples flanked a sidewalk. The first squirrel covered the distance. The second didn’t. It dropped in an arc: the product of two vectors, its forward momentum

against the pull of gravity. The creature fell twenty feet and thumped against the concrete path.

The victor turned and chattered. The rival lay on its side, motionless. Its body broken.

A young woman screamed. She had been passing under the branches, oblivious to the chase, when the doomed rodent landed at her feet. She staggered backward, witnessed its final, convulsive twitch, and started to hyperventilate. Her shoulder bag fell on its side. A thick binder snapped open, and handouts skated across the grass. Two freshmen — eager young lads — began to gather the papers. Like sharks, drawn to the traumatized student. Circling, attempting to reach her first. Armed with a kind gaze, her lost notes, and nods of sympathy.

Dave could understand their interest. She wore a form-fitting charcoal sweater, and black leather boots heightened the tartan pattern on her skirt, which enveloped her body like a sheaf.

He was transfixed. What was she thinking? That the kamikaze had flung itself at her legs, a sacrifice to her beauty? That the ten plagues had been modified, adjusted to fit the local ecosystem, with squirrels — rather than frogs — dropping from the sky? The thought struck him as ludicrous, and he laughed.

“Asshole.” The whisper passed his left ear. She moved fast: not running, but determined. Twin braids dropped from a bandana and knocked against the back of her t-shirt.

Nature Girl. He'd noticed her in the past. At chapel, the Humanities complex, the new climbing wall. But never without her ubiquitous braids — the closest style to dreadlocks on Fischer's campus.

His objection came tardy and weak: "Hey, I wasn't laughing at—"

She spun, her patchwork skirt a swirl of color. A crocheted satchel smacked against her hip.

Dave didn't know her actual name, only the handles — Nature Girl, Princess Redwood, and his personal favorite, Amazon Granola — that his roommate Adam had bestowed.

Princess Redwood cocked her head and raised her eyebrows, challenging him to continue. Her blue eyes sparkled with anger. They matched her doo-rag. She wore a hemp necklace, a choker with a pewter Jesus fish that hung from the weave. Fashion accessories for the Christian hippie.

Amazon Granola drew a fist toward her chest, against her bosom. Her t-shirt pulled tight, and he wondered if she was wearing a bra. She raised her middle finger, paused long enough to deliver the message, and turned her attention to the squirrel.

III

"The squirrel?" Mark asked. "Not the other girl?" They were strolling toward Hendricks Dining Commons.

"Sweater Girl," corrected Adam.

"Trust me," Dave said. "Sweater Girl was getting enough attention."

"But what was she going to do," Mark wanted to know, "perform CPR?"

“Beats me.” Dave had wondered the same thing. Whether she would extract a medical kit from her magic satchel, performing small-mammal triage on the campus lawn. “I didn’t stay to watch.”

“You fled the scene of an accident?”

“I wasn’t welcome.” He offered it as a joke, but the memory stung.

“Asshole.” Adam spat the insult in Dave’s ear, walked ahead, and spun with a flourish. He flipped him the bird.

“What the hell?” Dave asked.

“A reenactment. For the Lifetime Original Movie: *The Day No Squirrels Would Fly*.”

IV

“Campus art?” suggested Brian.

“What?” asked James. Their party had doubled in size, assembled at one of the large round tables in Hendricks. They were sophomores, all living on the second floor of McCather Hall. McCatheter, they called it. The Big Mac.

“Campus art,” repeated Brian. “Like a still life, but with squirrels. She probably has a freezer full of them.”

“That’s disgusting,” said Mark.

“I’m serious: she’s making them outfits and miniature protest signs.”

“Why the hell would she do that?” asked Wilson.

“How should I know? Some type of diorama for the campus lawn? A political statement? Something that only dead squirrels can make?”

Dave picked at his burrito. He had wanted the stir-fry, but Nature Girl was sitting near the Asian grill. It was a serious problem at a small college: make enemies, and you had nowhere to hide.

He left the table for a refill, taking an indirect route to the drink station. Princess Redwood hadn't moved. She was surrounded by friends: members of the Creation Club, judging by their weather-beaten faces and lithe bodies. They hiked trails, paddled rivers, and hung from boulders, all in the name of worship — celebrating the Maker of features they named and conquered. Their bodies were ripped like Samson.

She was laughing, touching a companion on the arm. More attractive than he remembered, especially when she smiled. Next to the table, her bag lay open on the floor. He looked for a bushy tail.

By the time he returned to the table, the conversation had shifted to Big Ten football: Ohio State's losses to Miami and Wisconsin, the odds that Cooper might be canned. Pretty good, if Michigan slaughtered them in The Big House once again. Only James and Mark remained stuck on the squirrels. They debated the physics, whether the lead runner had been aided by tension within the branch, latent energy that thrust him into the air, like a springboard pushing a diver forward. The limb hadn't reset, suggested Mark. Thus it couldn't support the second launch.

Others caught wind of the discussion. They taunted the scholars, raising questions about Newton's first law of Squirrel Dynamics — that a squirrel in motion remains in motion, while a squirrel at rest is fodder for hawks.

They debated the proper classification. Mark linked them to the raccoon family, a notion the others derided. “They’re rats,” said Adam, “rodents with bushy tails.”

“Rodents of Unusual Size?” asked James.

Brian accepted the cue: “The R.O.U.S.? I don’t think they exist.”

V

That night, Dave lay in his bed, fighting the onset of a sinus headache. A pulse in his forehead, striking the pavement again and again and again.

He wondered if Nature Girl had a boyfriend. Probably. With a tanned face and perfect teeth, not to mention the wrought-iron back from hours on the climbing wall.

But those pastimes were risky, the potential for accidents high. A carabiner might fail, or a falling rock could break that smug grin. A suspicious growth on his neck — the product of years in the brutal sun.

Dave would be free to strike: “Remember me? You called me an asshole and flipped me the bird. Sorry to hear about your friend. Want to go out this weekend — grab dinner at the Falafel Kingdom, and watch Animal Planet in my dorm?”

The jackhammer intensified. She was out of his league: better looks, greater cultural awareness. Earthy and sensual, a world apart in every possible way.

Who was he kidding? Even if Nature Girl was available or compatible . . . if she was remotely attracted to him . . . if the entire day could be erased, a fresh slate for their relationship . . . even then, he’d lack the courage to ask her out. During visitation hours, he would pace the hallways of her dorm. He might smile or wave as he passed her open

door, but he wouldn't gather the nerve to speak. The residents would grow wary of his laps, mistaking his nervous loop for a stalker's tread. They'd phone security, reporting the pervert on the loose.

There was a lesson in the squirrel, a moral that gave even risk-takers pause.
There was peril in too brash a leap, a terrible hazard in bounds of faith.

Notes – Fischer College

“ . . . the squirrels outnumber the faculty by a four-to-one margin.”
 “R.O.U.S”

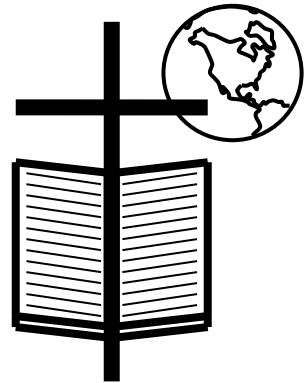
Fischer Recruitment Officers* tout this low squirrel-to-faculty ratio, stressing the advantages of an intimate, liberal arts setting over large, secular institutions.

*“Fischers of SAT scores” and “Authors of Fisch Stories,” according to rival schools.

“They nest in the trees and dig for acorns; rivals dart across the spacious lawn. . . .”
 “R.O.U.S”

Brochures highlight this scenic plot, where undergrads stroll between buildings — bathed in warm colors and deep in stimulating conversation.

They are wholesome but attractive, diverse but not extreme. They wear scarves without jackets and cradle their books to their chests. A backpack features the Fischer crest: a cross rising from an open book, connecting the text to the world.



No iPods are visible, no iPhones.

No laptop computers, though the pamphlet boasts about Fischer’s technology: the Wi-Fi umbrella that swaddles the campus, an Internet hot spot amid the soybean fields.

Counselors reassure troubled parents. They stress the Philippians 4:8 Shield, the school’s proprietary content filter.* They discuss the verse that inspired the name: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is

pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.”

They seldom mention its pornography firewall.

* Despite rumors to the contrary — not to mention the outspoken wish of prominent donors — Philippians.4.8 does not restrict access to The Huffington Post, Salon.com, *The New York Times*, or Democrats.org, the official website of the Democratic party.

“... a pursuit that coils about the trunks of mighty oaks.”
“R.O.U.S”

The billboard zooms to a solitary student, a young woman reading beneath these trees. The tranquil image highlights the agreeable weather, the safety of the campus, and the academic focus.

The pleasant sight proves fickle in the Lake Erie snow belt. On suitable weeks in mid-April — once the ground thaws, the mud dries, and a layer of grass emerges — photographers stalk the coeds. They track scholars that break from the herd, hoping they settle in charming locales.

“Chapel speakers yield to temptation.”
“R.O.U.S”

These mandatory services can stymie recruiters, who adapt their pitch to the audience. If the prospect is wary of higher education — afraid liberal professors will deconstruct cherished beliefs — they emphasize the central role of chapel in the academic schedule: how a window of time is cleared at the heart of each day, with no classes held between ten and eleven, so that scholarship yields to worship. For less conventional students, those skeptical of Fischer’s reputation as a rule-bound institution,* they stress the lenient attendance policy (one skip allowed per week), and note that the popular Friday praise service (“Thank God: It’s Friday!”) does not include a sermon.

* Such a reputation is relative, of course. Quite often, labeling a school “conservative” or “liberal” says more about the speaker than the institution. Many of the rules at Fischer — the code of conduct signed by students, for example, with vows to refrain from alcohol and intercourse — would seem legalistic at Bowling Green State University, fifty miles to the west.

But Fisher appears lenient, almost criminally lax, next to Cedarville College, three hours to the south, where the students encounter a curfew (Midnight on weekdays, 1 AM on weekends) and a ban on most R-rated movies.

Then again, Cedarville proves downright heathen — a Sodom in southern Ohio — compared to Pensacola Christian College, down on Florida’s gulf coast, where the regulations forbid all physical contact between members of the opposite sex,** restrict off-campus trips, and warn students about the subversive influence of the easy-listening station.

** Undergrads can circumvent the ban by locking eyes, using an intense gaze known as “eye kissing,” “optical intercourse,” & “making eye babies.” Such adaptation is discouraged, a form of Darwinian behavior — Evolution, even — directly at odds with the school’s Department of Biology.

The cautions about easy-listening music, on the other hand, may simply present an aesthetic verdict, a rare instance when PCC leaders and secular critics agree.

“They reduce these magnificent vaults to an illustration: the leap of faith that Christ demands”

“R.O.U.S”

As a rule, axiomatic beliefs should not rely on agile rodents. *Sciurus carolinensis* can seldom redeem the sins of the world. In fact, the squirrel’s leap of “faith” is a form of heresy: a salvation based on works, a direct contradiction to Ephesians 2:8-9.

Notes – Hendricks Dining Commons

“They were strolling toward Hendricks Dining Commons.”

“R.O.U.S”

This cafeteria was named after his Grandmother’s uncle, a Provost at Fischer during the early 1900s. “The entire school *should* have been named *Hendricks* College,” she explained, “our family was that instrumental in its founding.” They were eating steak on the patio, celebrating the start of Dave’s freshman year.

Dave was a Heritage Scholar, granted to students in a third generation to attend Fischer. His father had also received the award.

He knew the tradition. Grandfather served on the Board of Directors for sixteen years, and a plaque in the Library honored his Grandmother, the first woman to graduate with a major in Mathematics.

“But there were more Fischers,” she continued. “They pooled their resources and financed the school’s initial building. Which they never let anyone forget.”

“Also, there was already a Hendricks College,” his grandfather noted, “down in Arkansas.”

“And a Fischer College in Boston.” She gestured with her knife and launched into a monologue about the Fischer family — their pride, arrogance, and constant awareness of their legacy.

“Your Grandmother is a conspiracy theorist,” his mother had once observed.

“But only about irrelevant conspiracies.”



Now and then, a new wrinkle would emerge. His junior year, when he mentioned reading *Winesburg, Ohio* for a course in American literature, his Grandmother grew attentive.

“That’s about the Fischers,” she announced.

“Patricia,” said Grandfather.

“Don’t ‘Patricia’ me, *William*.” She claimed that the book had been based on the town of Clyde, only a county away from Fischer’s campus.

“On Clyde?” Dave’s father asked. “Not Winesburg?”

“It’s a fictional town,” she explained, “based on the city of Clyde.”

“But isn’t there a Winesburg as well? Dad? Do you know the place I’m talking about?”

“South of Canton, I think — over by New Philadelphia.”

“But that’s not the basis for the book,” insisted Grandmother, her frustration increasing. “The town was modeled after Clyde, and the main character is Gregory Fischer.”



“An urban legend,” said his professor. He gestured at the view from the office window. “A rural legend, given our location.”

Mentioning Grandmother’s theory had been a last resort, plugging an awkward silence. They had finished discussing his paper topic, but Dave lingered, hoping to offset his quiz marks with participation points.

“Your Grandmother’s half-right. Anderson based his stories on Clyde, not Winesburg. But the Fischers. . . .” He swiveled in his chair to search for a book, then abandoned the hunt. “I’ll admit, the main character in ‘Godliness’ — Jesse Bentley — he certainly resembles our distinguished founder. Both were determined men, a touch egotistical. They envisioned themselves as patriarchs.” His voice had a wry tint, possibly a touch of sadness. “The kingdom of God in central Ohio.”

A diploma from Colorado hung on the office wall, beneath a photo of the Front Range.

Thus the professor’s failure to comprehend Bentley. A transplant would never understand that type of vision. You couldn’t relate to the furious passion, inches beneath the town’s surface. To wrap your heart around that, you had to *believe* in the Midwest.

Mission Control

Ia

Neil was energetic, bounding across the moon's surface. Dave watched his partner with disgust, annoyed at the childish behavior. At his nonchalant response, given their dire predicament.

Where the hell was Aldrin and the lunar module?

They'd been working toward a ridge, aimed for Tranquility Base. But the crest receded before them, slipping farther with every step. Fresh obstacles emerged: crevices that blocked their route, craters that grew as they rounded the circumference.

Neil performed a cartwheel. He executed a perfect back flip, stood on his hands, and attempted a one-armed push-up, his legs pointed to the heavens. The stunt failed, even in low gravity, and he toppled onto his side. The bulky suit absorbed the impact.

That's one small fall for an ass, thought Dave.

He scanned the universe, searching for the Command Module. Could Mike even glimpse them from orbit? The Earth looked closer than ever, its colors brilliant. None of the photos had done the planet justice.

Armstrong was an idiot. The giant leap was yet to come. It had been easy enough to break gravity, thrown into space by the Saturn V. Driven forward by thousands of tons of propellant, not to mention the hopes of a nation. Getting home was the real challenge.

Ib

The module stood to his right, less than fifty yards away. He couldn't guess how they missed it. Neil was moving to the ladder. He turned, scanned the horizon, and signaled for Dave to hurry.

Dave returned the wave. He was moving as fast as he could, but his muscles felt stagnant — everything stuck in slow motion.

The tap on his shoulder was light but distinct.

II

How would an astronaut respond? How would *he* react — on the surface of a foreign planet, a bend on a desolate trail, an alley in a hostile city — if he thought he was alone and suddenly felt that alien touch? A chill worked along his spine.

Dave glanced in the rearview mirror. Behind him, about a hundred yards back, the pair of headlights was steady. They had appeared near Lima. Never closer, but never out of sight. His concern had grown as their miles in tandem increased.

He reduced speed, driving sixty. The pursuit slowed as well.

He hit the gas. The lights faded at first, then methodically reeled him in.

Gordon's apartment had been dark, but that wasn't a guarantee. It wasn't beyond The G— M— to sneak outside, stalking his colleague from the shadows, determined to keep him from visiting Beth.

Dave could picture his mounting confusion. The unexpected route, the surprise at the ramp to the interstate. Miles of bewilderment, not to mention the nagging doubt — the fear he was tailing the wrong truck.

Dave couldn't be certain, not that headlights belonged to Gordon. He'd spaced out for miles at a time. Each time, he returned with a start and a shudder — a quick prayer of thanks, and gratitude he was still on the road.

What could the astronauts have done, if they spotted a ship in the rearview mirror? A warning inscribed on the glass: *Alien Vessels are Closer than They Appear.*

Armstrong rode the brainchild of engineers. They strapped him to a rocket, lit the fuse, and told him to enjoy the ride. He was monitored from a control center — stocked with slide rules and crew cuts, banks of computers and thick-framed eyewear. None of it retro at the time.

What would Stratham do, given access to such a resource? A room deep in the catacombs of MCA, where he followed the teachers on massive screens? Watching their flashing blips on a detailed map of Midfield. He'd know if they skipped church on Wednesday evening. If they ventured too close to the Arts District. If they sat near the bar at Dingos & Divots — “The Sports Café from Down Under, Mate.”

Even Stratham required sleep. A watchman would cover the loneliest hours, sipping a cup of coffee and fighting boredom. The icons motionless, only the slightest twitch for insomnia or restless leg syndrome. Would he notice a single rogue light, slowly drifting to the south?

Dave could picture the double-take, the rush to sound the alarm. The coffee splattered across the floor. Stratham would arrive within minutes, blasting into the room and taking control.

Gordon would answer his phone on the second ring: "What up, chief?"

"The rabbit has flown the coop. Scramble your ministry team: Kingman's on the move."

"No worries, boss," the lieutenant would respond. His eyes narrowed to slits, tracking the fugitive in the distance. "I'm already on his tail."

Review Problem – Section III

Algebra I – Mr. Kingman
Take-Home Question – Exam #4

Name: _____

Amanda Grayson wants to market a board game based on her hometown of Midfield. She has already invested \$5000 in designing and producing an initial prototype, "Stuck in the Middle of Midfield," and spent an additional \$2000 marketing her product. She plans to sell each of the units, which cost \$4.75 (each) to make & \$25 (per 100) to distribute, for \$18.16 each (1816 being the year of the town's first permanent settlement, the Stockdale farm).

1. How many games does Amanda need to sell to recover her initial investment?
2. In 2010, the Midfield population was 136,711. Suppose 1% of the population buys her game. Was her decision to invest her money wise, given that CD rates at the Midfield Credit Union have been averaging 3.25% during the five years that she developed the game? (Assume that her \$7000 investment is made at the start of this period.)

SECTION IV: THE BALLAD OF MR. PETE

In which a discussion of Pittsburgh gets terribly far off-course.

Grandpa Speaks of Pittsburgh: Take I — Mr. Pitts — Foreign Men — Missionary Journeys — Mr. Pete to the Rescue — I.P. Longshot — Mr. Pete's Speech: A Close Reading & Deconstruction — Rocket Launchers and Disenchantment — The Trinity of Mr. Pete — Interview Transcripts — The Sad Demise of Mr. Pete — Foreign Men: Reprise — Fossil Evidence — "So Pre-Trib, I won't eat Post-Toasties" — Grandpa Speaks of Pittsburgh: Take II — Eternal Security — Grandpa Speaks of Pittsburgh: Take III — Review Problem, Section IV



LENGTH: It's not the miles, it's the years.

HIGHLIGHTS: A peculiar obsession with hair; the villainy and self-destruction of Mr. Pete.

CAUTIONS: Detours in time & space; multiple attempts to speak of Pittsburgh.

TRAILHEAD: Somewhere north of Dayton, Ohio, on Interstate 75.

Grandpa Speaks of Pittsburgh: Take I

“Son.”

“Grandson.”

“Son, have you ever been to Pittsburgh?”

The topic surfaced at random: hiking along Twentymile Creek, driving through Tuckaleechee Cove, enjoying a cone at the Townsend Wye. The stories that followed were always interesting, often ridiculous, and seldom about Pittsburgh.

The question was a mere formality, the opening line in a well-rehearsed routine.

David had visited Pittsburgh once, on a long weekend with his mother and sister. They toured the city with Mr. Pitts, who lived in a nearby suburb. Dave seldom recalled the names of Mom’s suitors, only the codes that he and Rachel assigned them.

They hit all the key attractions: the children’s museum, Fort Pitt, and the rare combination zoo & aquarium. A Zooquarium, Mr. Pitts called it. At the Monongahela Incline, they rode the steep rail to the observation deck. The view was grand from the top of the ridge, looking out on the downtown skyscrapers and the bridges connecting that urban triangle to the surrounding neighborhoods. David spotted Three Rivers Stadium, home field of the hated Steelers. Mr. Pitts explained that the Allegheny and the Monongahela met downtown, creating the Ohio: two rivers, each with its own history,

coming together to form something new. He winked at their mother, as if the geography held a secret message.

On the drive from Midfield, David had studied the city's history — hoping to impress this man he had never met. But the adults weren't listening. Mr. Pitts was singing a foolish lyric — “Manana-na-na-na . . na-na . . ga-hela!” — and trying to make Mom laugh.

Rachel was restless, kicking at the guard rail. The overlook was *boring*, she complained. She wanted to swim in the hotel pool.

Back at the Holiday Inn, Mom lectured them about gratitude. Mr. Pitts planned a wonderful day, spending a great deal of money on them. They ought to be thankful.

“But I wanted to go *swimming*,” Rachel insisted.

“You can swim in Midfield. We drove to Pennsylvania to see Pittsburgh.”

“But I don't *like* Pittsburgh.”

“Sometimes, children need to do what the adults want to do.”

“Why doesn't *Cindy* have to do what adults want to do?”

David squirmed on the edge of the bed, embarrassed by Rachel's pointed question. Cindy was Mr. Pitts's daughter, only a few years older than David. A difference that gave her an air of mystery — especially to Rachel, who wanted an older sister.

Mom didn't answer. She walked to the window and stared at the parking lot. After a few minutes, she told them to put on their suits.

Cindy had refused to join the tour, and her father submitted to her demands. The decision upset Mom, a tension that grew throughout the weekend.

The pressure broke at the children's museum. David had been watching a presentation about electricity — a teen with her hand on a Van de Graaff generator. He wanted to volunteer for the experiment himself, but he couldn't gather the nerve. The electrical charge made her shoulder-length hair stand on end, creating a radical style. The transformation was captivating. He couldn't stop staring, afraid to miss a single instant of her electric makeover. After the demonstration, his attraction waned as the haircut drooped back to normal: slightly unkempt, a hint of its recent splendor.

The crowd dispersed. He spotted his mother near the display on centrifugal force, engaged in a solemn conversation with Mr. Pitts. He walked close enough to snag fragments — “get to *know* her,” “soon,” “family differences” — before they noticed him listening.

He never met Cindy that weekend, his lone visit to the Keystone State. The next morning, they checked out of the hotel early. Rachel had complained: she wanted to swim in the pool again. But Mom had been resolute. They needed to get on the road.

Foreign Men

David never knew where she found them — these men like Mr. Pitts, who surfaced in their lives for a season, then disappeared. They were seldom local. In those days, Mom insisted on dating believers, yet the singles at church showed her little interest. They might overlook a divorce, given her youth and good looks. Two children presented a greater hurdle.

Date Laura, and brace yourself for awkward encounters with David's father and grandparents — prominent members at Central Presbyterian, active supporters of MCA, and names you'd spot in the local paper.

Rachel was a different problem altogether: her lineage a mystery, a constant reminder of seven years that Laura had disappeared.

Few residents knew the details of her flight: her retreat into Tennessee for Rachel's birth, the year with her parents that followed. Her return north — not to Midfield, but to the Hocking Hills, where they lived with her father's kin. She completed her studies at Ohio University, a degree in nursing that David's arrival had once postponed.

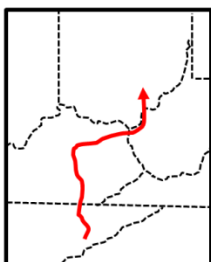
They didn't know about her second marriage. She refused to open that turbulent chapter. One of the rare times that a friend asked, trying to fill in the gaps, she said that the past belonged in the past.

Missionary Journeys

1. August 1978

Laurel Walker

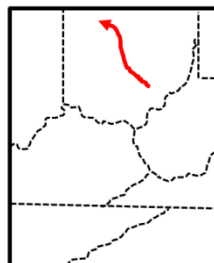
Maryville (TN) to Hocking County (OH)



2. June 1982

Laura Kingman

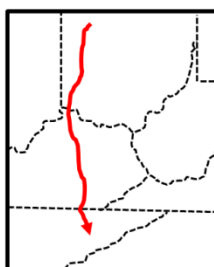
w. Charles & David Kingman
Hocking County to Midfield



3. April 1987

Laura Walker

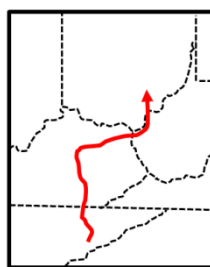
w. David Kingman
Midfield to Maryville



4. July 1988

Laura Walker

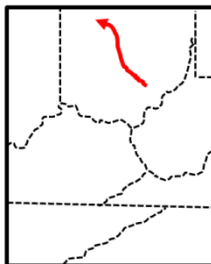
w. David Kingman & Rachel Walker
Maryville to Hocking County



5. May 1993

Laura Coates

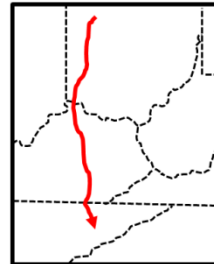
w. David Kingman & Rachel Walker
Hocking County to Midfield



6. August 1999

Laura Walker

w. Rachel Walker
Midfield to Maryville



Mr. Pete to the Rescue

Dave recalled plenty of scenes and details, more than enough to reconstruct the plot. But he didn't know how they met. In that sense, Pete was a mystery — like all the rest. After her graduation from nursing school, Mom kept the family in the region and worked at a local hospital. Perhaps she met Pete on a lunch break, eating chicken salad at the local diner. Her hour of repose, a window of peace amid patients and children that clamored for her attention. Whatever the story, the relationship started with promise. Mom smiled more often — never at rest, but with glints of hope in her tired eyes.

The wedding itself was unremarkable: a civil ceremony, six months after they started dating, followed by dinner at a local restaurant. The real highlight came earlier in the relationship, the Sunday that Mr. Pete had first presented them to his church. The brash move scandalized the oldest members at Hayden Valley Tabernacle, who were fond of their order and tradition. Pastor Harrison would greet the assembly, inviting visitors to raise their hands, while a deacon patrolled the aisle with manila envelopes.

The ritual was redundant. Given the small congregation — ninety, one hundred members at most — new faces were easy to identify. Deacons could spot the guests without all the pageantry. What's more, newcomers were extremely rare. In the two years they attended Hayden Valley Tabernacle with Mr. Pete, a trio of certainties emerged: 1) the sermon would contain three points, each beginning with the same letter of the alphabet; 2) as the opening chords of the synthesized track were cued, the soloist

would challenge the audience to “listen to the words”; and 3) the deacon’s mission would be futile — he’d leave with the packets he brought to the front.

These parcels acquired a mythic status. The longer they went unclaimed, the greater their appeal, like a Powerball jackpot that ballooned each week. Guesses about their content preoccupied David’s mind. They contained secrets, he was all but certain. The healing rites that elders performed; passwords and secret handshakes and a map of the tunnels beneath the fellowship hall. A charter of unspoken rules, bylaws that governed the assembly, which everyone knew but never discussed.

Mr. Pete interfered. Hence the packet was never delivered: in David’s mythology, the principal reason he often felt strange at that church.

I.P. Longshot

Such fears were unfounded, he discovered a year later. He had been crawling beneath the pews, racing to gather the used communion shots. Plastic cups were scattered like confetti — their grape juice emptied, the metaphor consumed. Kids stacked them as scepters and swords. Within minutes of the benediction, the rows would be clear of debris.

Adults overlooked the chaos at their feet: it saved them time and spared their backs. A symbiotic relationship, Mom observed, like those African birds that perch on a rhino, picking the insects off its skin.

Near the back of the sanctuary, a packet had been left unguarded on the final pew. David scattered his cups like chaff — decoys that would divert any bogeys on his tail — and closed the gap with due speed.

He stashed the bounty in his Picture Bible: like Aachen, concealing the plunder of Ai. Then he endured the wait. The ride home was endless. He tore through a thigh and drumstick from a KFC bucket, ate enough green beans to satisfy Mom, and shot Rachel the evil eye — waiting to be excused, stuck at the table as she sipped her milk.

Such haste seemed foolish, after he learned of its meager yield. One handout described the congregation's history; another outlined their doctrinal beliefs. A sheet with clip art explained programs for children. A crude, hand-drawn map held promise, and David's spirit rose. He searched for the route to the vault — that barrow where offerings were squirreled away — but the sketch proved mundane: restaurants, hospitals, and government offices throughout the county. The information was out of date, encouraging folks who hankered for homestyle cooking to visit the Kountry Kitchen. The buffet had been closed for months — health code violations — much to the outrage of Mr. Pete, who railed against the government's interference in his daily life.

Even the information card was a sham. The same postcard appeared in each pew, near the golf pencils and offering envelopes. Boys filled the blanks with false information and juvenile humor: ludicrous sums and cryptic names and jokes about farting. At the apex of this mischief, Ryan Glass achieved lasting infamy by identifying himself as "I.P. Longshot, author of Yellow Moon." He checked a box to request a pastoral visit, then took the bold, irrevocable step of actually slipping the card in the offering plate: a feat so daring, it drew the

attention of the adults. The pastime was banned and suppressed. Ryan paid for his stunt that afternoon, his dad's leather belt on his naked butt.

David knew none of this, not that first time he witnessed the deacon's lonely walk. He was already nervous. They had entered the sanctuary to stares and whispers. When the pastor asked guests to raise their hands, he spoke directly to Laura. The congregation shifted in their direction, eager to mark them as strangers — drawn to the public humiliation. David shrunk in the pew. He remembered this TV movie from the afternoon before, something that caught Mr. Pete's attention. A convict was entering jail, and all of the prisoners were shouting, yelling and banging the bars on their cells — trying to frighten the new inmate. "That's right," Mr. Pete muttered. "They all want a piece of that." On Sunday, however, he rose to the occasion. He deflected the crowd's attention, standing to his feet and stepping into the aisle. He waved off the deacon's packet.

It wasn't their usual practice, he acknowledged, but the Spirit was leading him to speak. The Lord had brought this wonderful trio into his life, and he wanted to testify to the blessings of the past month. It was good manners. The families ought to be introduced: Laura and her children — this earthly household that had shown him such kindness — and his spiritual family, the body of Christ.

He mentioned them each by name. They had moved to the county a few years back, so Laura could finish her degree: "but they liked us so much, they decided to stick around." Pete described her work at the hospital, "ministering to the sick . . . with that real New Testament spirit." She provided for David and Rachel, cooking and cleaning,

tending their needs with the fruit of her labor, “a real-life, flesh-and-blood, Proverbs 31 woman.” The ladies of the church nodded their approval, while the men appraised Mom in a new light — a respect that satisfied Mr. Pete. He mentioned her good looks: “Midfield’s loss, but Hocking County’s gain.” Her children were well-behaved and respectful: a credit to their mother, considering “the disruptions of their youth.” When he finished his address and sat down, Mom grabbed his hand and squeezed.

Mr. Pete's Speech: A Close Reading & Deconstruction

Years later — after they'd stolen away from southwest Ohio, miles from Mr. Pete's grip on their lives — Dave would replay this speech in his mind, searching for clues that he missed at the time. In hindsight, the ominous tint was clear. Pete's obsessions, the expectations that would strangle the relationship: they were present from the very beginning.

It was a lesson Dave always remembered. The qualities that others praise will tempt them to destroy you.

1. Pete described her work at the hospital, "ministering to the sick . . . with that real New Testament spirit."

Pete Coates was employed with the Public Works Department, and Laura's paycheck doubled his standard of living. He bought himself a parade of new toys: a 27" television and a VHS player; a riding lawn mower; a big charcoal grill (for the deck he intended to build, now that he was "a family man").

"I'm not a control freak," he liked to boast, "one of those closed-minded husbands that chains his woman to the kitchen. If Laura enjoys her work, I won't discourage her calling." Even so, he couldn't resist a parting shot: "as long as her pork chops stay tender, if you comprehend my drift."

Not that he watched her in action. Hospitals unnerved him, and he declined to visit her at work. At the same time, he refused to let her quit. Not long after the marriage, she mentioned a desire to reduce her hours and spend more time with the kids. Pete opposed the idea. They weren't settled, he argued. They needed to develop a routine, not muddle the schedule with irregular, part-time work. In a few years — “once Little P—’s on the way” — they’d be stable enough for her to cut back.

2. She provided for David and Rachel, cooking and cleaning, tending their needs with the fruit of her labor, “a real-life, flesh-and-blood, Proverbs 31 woman.”

Pete’s quality of life improved as well. Laura scoured his house, its first real cleaning in years, and weaned him off Stouffer’s and Shoney’s. He took such labors in stride: after all, she’d performed these tasks as a single mother; it’s not like she cooked him an extra meal. She simply increased the portions, on account of his healthy appetite. If her pile of laundry grew faster — well, the pit stains were proof of his own hard work.

He stressed his efforts with the lawn and grounds. “I maintain the exterior of the house,” he informed his stepson, “and your Mom takes care of indoors.” He was tinkering with the mower as David swept the carport. According to Mr. Pete, women were emotional: drawn to the interior, to the hearts of people as well as places. Men were attracted by the surface, in houses as well as women. “Look at the way we cook,” he explained. “A man throws a steak on the grill, where he watches it sear. But your mom — she puts her lasagna in a pan, then bakes it within the oven.” Which segued to one of his favorite lessons: the physical traits of each gender, and their testimony about the proper roles of men and women. Mr. Pete could read genitalia like they were tea leaves.

A penis faced outward, leading the charge — it drew the man into the world. But a woman's body was designed to receive: "your mother and sister have private parts inside their bodies, near their hearts." Hence a promiscuous woman spread far greater evil than a husband who slept around. A profligate man wasted his seed — a serious transgression, no doubt. But a woman drew the sin close, deep within her body. It was worse than adultery or fornication: "an abomination."

When discord surfaced in the marriage, anatomy could account for Laura's shortcomings. After the proposal to cut her hours, he railed against her "slothful" and "indolent" spirit. "Look at our bodies," he moaned to his stepson, gesturing toward his crotch. "It's the curse of Adam: men give and give and give and give; women do nothing but take."

3a. He mentioned her good looks. . . .

When they first started dating, Laura tripped into compliments with every step. Pete stressed her attractive appearance — no great surprise, given his stance on exteriors. Each time she met a group of his friends, he demanded their feedback: wasn't she "easy on the eyes," just the way he had promised?

David wasn't sure how to react. He seldom thought about his mother as a woman. He knew she was pretty — cuter than other moms, especially those with two kids. Which was the only way he knew to calculate a mother's age: by the grades that her children attended. But he'd never thought about her figure, that touchstone of Mr. Pete's flattery. He wanted to be angry, appalled at the liberties this stranger assumed. Yet he watched the man's face when Mom entered the room, the way that she captured

his attention. It made David proud, this power she held — proud and possessive. Was a similar strength harbored in Rachel's body? He longed for a force of his own.

After the wedding, the stream of compliments lessened. Their tenor altered. Pete continued to praise her appearance — how nice she looked when they left for church, jeans that flattered the hips — but without that initial sense of urgency.

He grafted advice to the compliments, tempering their impact. At first, the suggestions were subtle and masked as praise: she ought to purchase another cute dress, like that number she wore to the Labor Day cookout. Sometimes, he disguised them as interest: had she ever lightened her hair as a teen, or thought about going blonde or golden or even platinum, just for a change of pace? He employed misdirection, opening with a self-effacing observation, then expanding the judgment to Laura: how *her* excellent cooking had caused *him* to gain weight, and *they* ought to think about cutting back. Especially *her*, since *she* spent most of *her* time indoors. The remarks evolved into requests, then demands. The desire transformed into expectation.

Rocket Launchers and Disenchantment

“The desire transformed into expectation.”

“Mr. Pete’s Speech: A Close Reading & Deconstruction”

David recognized the evolution. He had experienced a similar process, standing in the aisles of Children’s Palace and making a wish list for his birthday. At first he was awestruck, amazed at his good fortune. Stunned by aisle after aisle of seductive displays. Then he was overwhelmed and paralyzed: afraid of making the wrong decision, a choice that he’d later regret. Worried he’d squander his birthright. Fear begat anger. It was unfair, limiting his choices in such a constricting manner. He deserved it *all* — everything he wanted — and shouldn’t be forced to restrict his options.

So it could prove bittersweet, playing with new toys. He enjoyed the gifts, but his mind would drift to the presents he didn’t receive.

Mr. Pete was drawn to this melancholy. David had assembled an army of G.I. Joes on the patio. The packaging to his attack jeep lay on the picnic table. The choice had been especially tough — whether to ask for the rocket launcher or the machine gun on the back. Missiles were potent, more bang for the buck. They looked so imposing on the box, erupting from the jeep with a burst of flame.

Now, he regretted the decision. The plastic rockets didn’t spring toward their target. You flew them by hand, which disrupted the illusion. Not to mention the letdown at impact, the lack of a mighty fireball. Which was the beauty of the machine gun. You *imagined* the trace of the bullets. You *envisioned* the destruction. There came a point — he was slowly learning — when striving to be realistic merely showcased the charade.

Besides, the rockets were a logistical nightmare. Once you fired all four that came with the jeep, you were out of ammunition: a sitting duck. Restricted to transporting soldiers, unless you retrieved your earlier shots — highlighting the childish game.

Mr. Pete sensed this frustration. He'd stepped onto the patio for a smoke, sitting at the picnic table and watching his stepson at play. He examined the box, then took a discarded trooper, a flamethrower soldier caught by a surprise COBRA ambush. The plastic features were lifeless, especially compared to the vivid expressions on the package, the striking eyebrows and furious battle cries. David felt childish, embarrassed at his immature play.

After a while, Mr. Pete spoke. "It's always a disappointment, isn't it? The actual contents of the package."

David didn't know what to say.

Mr. Pete tossed the box on the table and stubbed out his cigarette. "Get used to it, son. Save yourself some heartache in the future."

Years later, Dave shared these memories with Rachel, expecting sympathy or gratitude. He had endured the lectures of Mr. Pete, taking a pedantic bullet for the team. Her reaction astonished him. She was disgusted — not at Mr. Pete, because she expected the worst from that bastard. She was angry at *David*. For not telling Mom about the critical remarks. For loyalty to his gender, not his family. "If you told her half the shit then, the stuff that you're now telling me, we'd have left months before we did — simply to keep those moronic ideas out of your head."

What did she care? he answered. She was five or six when they left. “It’s not like you’re burdened with memories, like some of us.”

Her look was withering. “If you’d taken a chance and opened your mouth, I might not be stuck with *any*.”

The Trinity of Mr. Pete

David's toys were ruled by a clear triumvirate: G.I. Joe, Transformers, and Star Wars.

Mr. Pete had a triad of his own: Laura's calves, clothing, and hair.

I. Calves

Pete had noticed her legs from the very beginning. He paired the crass statement with a platitude — *they carried her into his life* — trying to mask the poor taste, the same way he strung cheap air fresheners from his rear view mirror.

He admired their feminine cut: neither the twigs of a preteen waif, nor the trunks on most women from East Logan — those mothers with toddlers on their hips, driving their flesh into thighs and ankles. Whose bodies had succumbed to gravity. It was amazing, the thought he devoted to the subject — the comments he shared with his stepson.

The shift in his tone was gradual, the opening salvos innocuous. Nevertheless, over time, Pete was converted from aficionado to critic. On a drive home from church, they passed a billboard for the new fitness club. Would Laura be interested in a membership? he asked. After all, it could be hard to get enough exercise in the winter.

A week or two later, Mom described some changes at work: new responsibilities at the end of each week. A few more hours behind a desk, a little less time on her feet. Pete said nothing at the time. The following evening, however, he glanced up from his plate and remarked — out of nowhere — that Laura should think about parking in the middle of the lot. For a touch of exercise, given her new position.

“It’s not *that* big a change,” she answered.

Neither was the suggestion, he mumbled.

“Last month, you were all concerned about my safety in that lot. Now, you want me to park in a remote corner, simply to burn more calories?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Am I getting lazy? Is that what you’re trying to tell me? *Exercise, exercise, exercise.* Who are you, anyway? Arnold Schwarzenegger?”

“You’re not lazy. But maybe a little bit—” He paused, searching for the precise word. “A little bit *soft*.”

Mom set down her fork. She stared at this new husband, sucking on her teeth. “*Soft*? You’re saying I’m getting fat?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.” Pete gestured with his knife. “I was talking about your routine, not your flesh.” It’s wasn’t as rigorous on the body, being married — when you weren’t doing everything on your own. He returned to his catfish and hush puppies, adding a casual comment — *Now that you mention it* — that closed the trap. “Now that you mention it, you ought to consider jogging — not much, just one or twice a week. Maybe lifting some easy weights.”

“Don’t I work hard enough, going from room to room at the hospital?”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“No. You wouldn’t.”

David squirmed. He felt like an intruder, trapped near a discussion he shouldn’t be hearing. Pete lowered his voice. “All I know, you’re not as toned as you used to be — back when we were first dating.”

“I’m getting older.”

“Not *that* fast, I hope. Besides, all the more reason to change your habits now — you won’t have to worry about arthritis or brittle bones.”

He let the matter drop. But a stack of VHS tapes appeared in the living room: Kathy Ireland and Olivia Newton-John and women with ponytails, spandex bodysuits, and sparkling teeth. A few nights a week — if Pete worked late or slipped out for a drink — after she cleared the table and helped David and Rachel to bed, Mom selected a routine and pushed herself through a half-hour workout.

David would lie in the darkness, listening, trying to follow her movements. Unable to pick out the specific instructions — only the rise and fall of a perky voice, the beat of the music and the cadence of the routine. If he held his body still, he could feel his mother lunge. The floor would vibrate as she ran in place. The house was a body, with a heartbeat that rattled into his spine, and his mother’s footsteps provided the pulse.

II. Clothing

When it came to clothing, Pete’s opinions were strong but tangled. On one hand, he ached to showcase his bride. But the church stressed modesty: collared shirts on the men, skirts that covered the knees on women. Shorts were acceptable for picnics, hikes,

or softball games, as long as the inseams were six inches long. Culottes were the preferred option for girls, and Rachel soon owned an entire pastel drawer. Pete was positioning himself for deacon, and he wanted his family to dress the part.

He was known for his rants against liberal culture: Jane Fonda, Kim Basinger and the other Hollywood harlots, the prelude to that great whore of Babylon in the book of Revelation. So his options were limited. He couldn't prod Laura into low-cut tops, then claim the moral high ground. In the end, he relegated the dilemma to her: critiquing *her* choices, forcing *her* to unravel the puzzle — how to dress sexy enough to make him happy, but proper enough to dodge his scorn.

He disparaged her preference for casual clothing. She didn't need to be sloppy at home, just because she wore scrubs at the hospital.

"I'm not sloppy," she countered. "When I'm home, I want to relax."

They managed to compromise. Most days, she wore whatever she wanted. But she bought a rotation of newer outfits: classic dresses for church, more provocative fashions for weekend nights — those times that her husband slackened his Sunday standards, hitting the town with his friends.

III. Hair

In the end, Pete's fixation with hair would produce the most drastic results. Changes that lasted — in the case of that final, severe cut — long after they'd slipped his reach. A vivid reminder of all she had left behind.

Dave wanted to talk with his mother about this fetish. He worried a sliver had rubbed off on him. Which made him afraid, concerned about the other habits and beliefs

that he'd absorbed from Mr. Pete. The demons that lurked from that short but formative spell, waiting to rise to the surface.

He knew what she'd say. Hair wasn't the issue. The problem was Pete's insecurity. His low self-esteem forged a need for control, to emphasize his authority. Too weak to lead on essential issues, he pressed his command over trivial matters.

Plus he was inconsistent. He couldn't decide what he actually wanted — a most damnable trait in a bully.

Mom wore her hair long throughout college, based on photos still gracing his father's mantel. Then — as new mothers often do — she cut it much shorter, adopting a Carol Brady shag, not long after David's birth. When she returned to nursing school, she trimmed the back to a practical, boyish style: easy to manage when rushing about the hospital. Like Mary Lou Retton, the gymnastics hero from the LA Olympics. Once, David found her a Mother's Day card that honored the resemblance. "As mothers go . . ." said the front, which featured a lady who balanced a baby and a tub of laundry; she was about to trip on a roller skate. On the inside, the dotted lines showed her perfect flip, landing on both feet with child and housework intact: ". . . you're a perfect 10!"

When they met, Pete spoke highly of her look. Like Princess Di, he claimed. "But a brunette. With a Tennessee accent, not a British one."

But the style lost its allure. One night, a few months after the wedding, eating dinner at a local steakhouse, Pete was especially polite to their waitress — a college

student whose feathered mane had been glazed with Aquanet. It bobbed as a single, frosted mass, keeping time with her hips as she crossed the room.

He raised the topic on the drive home. “Have you thought about letting your hair grow?” he asked. “I’ve never seen it beyond your shoulders.”

Laura demurred. She wasn’t nineteen anymore. She didn’t have time for that mess.

David recognized the tone. She had often used it on him — most recently, when he suggested they throw her a birthday party at Chuck-E-Cheese.

Pete wasn’t deterred. “Maybe when you were single, looking after the boogers on your own.” He glanced at the kids and grinned. “Now that you’ve got me to help, you can spend some more time on yourself.”

She patted him on the arm. “That’s sweet of you.”

Rachel poked her brother on the arm and pretended to vomit.

“What? You’ll deprive me of your glory, just because I arrived too late?”

“I thought I was beautiful — Princess Di from Tennessee.”

“You *are* beautiful,” he said. “I thought you’d enjoy the change, trying a new style — a new look for a new season in life. What do you think, Davy? Wouldn’t your mother look smokin’ hot with some longer hair?”

“Pete!” The smack on the arm was light.

“I’m serious. Grow it out, add some highlights — you’d look just like Farah Fawcett.”

Mom softened to the flattery. “You’re sweet. But growing my hair would take too long. Besides, it won’t turn back time.”

“Come on — give yourself some credit. You’re not even thirty.”

“It’s not the age. It’s the mileage.” Her gaze seemed to drift from David to Rachel. “Not to mention the carry-ons.”

Pete was persistent. He seasoned the fall with hints and proposals. That Christmas, when they travelled south to Tennessee, Mom’s hair touched her collar. The next summer, it brushed her shoulder blades. Her bangs hung into her eyes, then she pinned them back or tucked them behind her ear. She replaced the blow dryer with a newer model and emerged for church with a windswept look, facing an onrushing storm. The transformation was slow, constrained by the rate of growth: a year, the time it took to gain half a foot. But the last stages came sudden.

David arrived home from school, eager to claim his afternoon rations — a Capri-Sun and five Oreos, one for each grade. In the kitchen, he skidded to a halt. At the counter, cutting chicken with her back to the room, was a woman he’d never met. Her hair was a rich golden blonde, like a sunrise over her shoulders. When Mom turned, her smile was also a question. A bid for reassurance, because even she — the most fearless person he’d ever met, at least until Rachel became a teen — even *she* was uncertain about the new look.

He failed her. He ought to have raced her direction with a hug, insisting that she was more beautiful than he remembered. But he didn’t. Something about her pose — a raw chicken thigh in one hand, a membrane-coated knife in the other. Part of it was her outfit, the large, plastic apron — a gift from Mr. Pete’s cousin with a picture of a child on the front, standing on a stool and making a mess of the kitchen, pans and mixers and

batter everywhere. “Have Patience!” the caption insisted. “God’s Not Finished With Me Yet!”

The style was striking, no doubt about it. A mane of blonde waves that feathered out, gaining volume with each new layer. She didn’t look like his mother. She looked like a woman trying to look like a model. She looked like the woman Mr. Pete wanted.

He dropped his bookbag and ran to his room. By the time she washed her hands and followed, he had buried his face in a pillow, crying lightly.

Mom sat next to him on the bed, rubbing his shoulders. “I don’t look *that* hideous, do I?”

He shook his head. It was something else, something he couldn’t explain. Because it wasn’t disgust or horror that forced him to hide his face. It was attraction — not to his mother, but this parody she’d become. He refused to look her in the eye, afraid that the feeling would return.

“A bit ridiculous, I’ll give you that. Certainly more like a bimbo.” Mom tried to get him to laugh, telling this story about the cashier at the grocery store, the way home from the beauty shop. How the clerk had explained the new scanner at the checkout, telling her all about the lasers and UPC codes. “Like I’d never shopped there before, as if Sally had bleached the IQ right out of my head.”

Mom tousled David’s hair. “What about you? You used to be a blonde. Should I take you with me, when it’s time to touch up my roots? Ask Sally to bust out the peroxide and bring me back my little boy?”

Pete seemed to be satisfied. The compliments returned, and he was eager to parade his “knockout hottie” throughout the town.

That fall was pleasant, the most peaceful season that David had ever known. Far better than his earliest memories — living in Midfield, his parents divorced and disappointed in themselves, shuttling him between the two apartments. Better than Tennessee, that year they stayed with Mom’s parents. As great as it was, with the birth of his sister and hikes with Grandpa, the time was marred by disagreement. Mom had a peculiar relationship with her father. She loved him, but she’d never admit it to his face. They got along fine, as long as they weren’t in the same room.

Christmas brought the high water mark. A week before Christmas, to be precise, with the hospital’s annual banquet. Mom had received yet another promotion, and the doctors were giving her more and more responsibilities. One even suggested — she informed her son with pride — that he’d recommend her for medical school, if she wasn’t so fine a nurse.

No one from church would be at the party, so she could pull out the stops for her husband. Reaction had been mixed at Hayden Valley Tabernacle. The men raved about her new look, but the women’s remarks could be barbed. The older ladies told Laura how “modern” and “fashionable” she looked. Which sounded fine, unless you knew what they thought of those qualities. Young mothers would bemoan their own limp hair, telling Laura they didn’t have time for much styling these days — a backhanded way, she informed her son, of hinting that she was neglecting her own responsibilities at home, if she had the time to look the way she did. Then there was the Food Chain, the women who cooked for ill or grieving families. Laura was seldom asked to participate: “as if I

couldn't possibly know how to bake a casserole, simply because their husbands think I'm cute."

The Christmas banquet would offer a chance to relax. To dance and laugh, without worries that someone would think you were having *too* good a time. She decided to dress the part: a black leather skirt that landed above her knees, paired with a silk blouse that David had watched her select. He'd suggested the ruby fabric, because he was tired of shopping and wanted to get home, but he wasn't prepared for her entrance — how magnificent she looked, once the entire outfit was put together. Her hair was bigger than he could ever remember. It exploded out of her head, but with grace — the way fireworks could be grand but elegant.

"What do you think?" She asked David and Rachel first, before turning to her husband. Not that he noticed the slight, standing slack-jawed at the front door with her nice winter coat. Awestruck by his good fortune, married to such an exquisite creature.

Their babysitter for the evening was a cousin — one of Grandpa's relatives, scattered on farms throughout Hocking County. The preteen found the words that David was struggling to form. "Aunt Laura," she said, "you look stunning."

Relations

They had welcomed Laura with open arms, inviting her family to dinners and picnics and seasonal reunions. David made friends with the boys, who led him to caves and waterfalls, gorges and amphitheaters that didn't belong in Ohio. That God meant for Utah or Wyoming but set down in the Hocking Hills —

pausing to tie His sandals or chat with Elijah — and neglected to carry the rest of the way.

The cousins all attended the same Baptist church, and David joined the E†B Clubs on Wednesday night. Mr. Pete was skeptical of Cantwell Creek Baptist. He disapproved of the pastor's theology. Plus, they were too program-based — more concerned with fun and games than the kingdom of heaven. But the two were compatible, in David's opinion. Besides, any church that annoyed Mr. Pete had to be doing *something* right.

Later, after they returned to Midfield, his mother revealed that Pete had attended Cantwell Creek in his early twenties. He had criticized a sermon by the assistant pastor, issues he raised in a public forum — a Sunday School class — rather than following the Matthew 18 guidelines for a confrontation. When an elder suggested it wasn't the time or the place, Pete took the rebuke as an insult. He wrote a nasty letter, questioning the spiritual integrity of the elders, and warned that the church had been fettered with demonic blinders. When they answered that *he* was the one who needed counseling, Peter resigned his membership. After pit stops at two other churches in the county, he landed at Hayden Valley.

Thus it was no surprise that Dave's uncles treated Pete with reserve. An aunt had warned Laura about his past, back when they were dating. But Mom wanted to give him a chance. After all, *she* wouldn't want people to judge *her*, based on choices from years ago.

Grandpa's relatives held their tongues, listening with patience as Pete sniped at their church. An example, Dave felt, of the clear abundance of common sense in that rural congregation.

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"I'm serious, Aunt Laura. You look amazing."

"Thanks, Rebecca. That's sweet."

"You'll be the hit of the party."

The statement roused Mr. Pete. Dave imagined a sparkle in his stepfather's eye: a glimmer of pride, and an impish shadow that crossed his face. "Think so?" He stepped their direction, helping Mom with her coat. "All the men — they won't be able to keep their eyes off her?"

Rebecca blushed. She didn't know what to say.

"Those doctors can look all they want, as long as they keep their hands to themselves."

"Peter, you promised to be pleasant."

"I'm *always* pleasant. Right, Davy?" He winked at his stepson. "All I'm saying is, look but don't touch. Otherwise—" He pounded a fist into the opposite palm. "It's hard to do surgery with broken fingers."

"Peter!" Mom kissed David on the cheek and Rachel on the forehead. Her perfume was rich and strong. She told them to listen to Rebecca and behave themselves.

"Come on," Pete said. "Let's go make some rich bastards jealous."

They returned late, long after the kids had gone to bed. The next morning, a tense silence had settled over the house. Mr. Pete worked in the carport all day, ignoring a front that dropped temperatures into the twenties. Their mother was stoic and inscrutable. Rachel peppered her with questions and received general, evasive answers. The first half of the party had been pleasant, Mom said. Everyone had a good time.

What about the second half? Rachel asked.

The second half dragged for too long. People were tired. They had too many drinks and opened their mouths without thinking.

In the cold war that followed, David pieced together the bitter remarks. The holidays lacked any semblance of joy: the presents wired with explosives — triggered to blow, the second you pulled on the ribbons.

He filled the gaps with guesswork and imagination. Mom had been the hit of the party. Doctors praised her outfit, while nurses laughed at her wit. Pete surfed in her wake. He basked in the margins of the spotlight, an important man in this educated crowd.

Something broke the illusion. A surgeon had leaned too close, touching Laura's arm as she smiled at an inside joke. A nurse told a story about a complex procedure, grinning with sympathy at clueless Pete: the Emperor with No Scrubs. The slight may have been subtle. A manager broke into a conversation and ruined his anecdote about coons in the chimney. Perhaps he simply felt ignored. They weren't even mocking him, because to taunt a person, you had to acknowledge them first. That nurse wasn't smiling at the happy couple — she was confused by the mismatched pair, curious how a talented

colleague had been saddled with such a loser. That anesthetist, the man with the bolo tie who returned to her side throughout the evening, he was more than a friend. A suitor — a lover, even — flirting beneath Pete's nose. It wasn't enough to cuckold him. No, they were determined to humiliate the outsider, a Christmas pageant for the staff's amusement.

Sometimes, David pictured a confrontation. Pete setting his jaw and throwing a wild punch. Dressing-down Mom in public, a venomous stream that revealed his own black heart.

But, in the end, the fate David assigned was far worse: Pete's dawning awareness that Mom was *not* cheating on him, that she would *never* cheat on him, but that she *could* cheat on him, if that happened to be her inclination. Her coworkers thought her a martyr, attached by fate to this dreadful man. Which would torture a man like him. If Laura had been unfaithful, he could tap his reservoir of righteous indignation. Her loyalty rendered him impotent. She stayed with him out of pity, and others pitied her choice.

Mr. Pete brooded for weeks. His jealousy grew. In late January, Mom dressed for church in a navy outfit. It was formal and conservative — military, almost — with a row of gold buttons that split the dress in half. On each shoulder, an additional button was fastened to an epaulet that stood ramrod-straight, supported by padding along the collarbone. But it wasn't the top that Mr. Pete condemned. The hemline grazed the top of her knees, that no-man's land between modesty and moral turpitude. So that's what it's come to, he sneered. Even at church.

"You pushed me to get this dress," she replied. "I asked you point blank, *when will I ever wear it*, because I wasn't going to wear it out dancing, not dressed for a

parade.” She adjusted the shoulder pads. “And *you* said *church*. That it would look stately and dignified, the way a deacon’s wife ought to present herself.”

“Apparently, I was mistaken.”

“Next time, make up your mind before I clip the tags.” She refused to change. They were already late, and sneaking into the back was less dignified than looking like a tramp. She promised to stand with discretion, lest she tempt the young men with her kneecaps.

The snide remarks became more frequent. They evolved into accusations, claims that Mom had lost interest in him. That she kept him around for the paycheck, bankrolling the wardrobe that flaunted her body to other men. Her denials were vehement: furious some days, tearful on others. Every so often, they broke down in tandem, pledging their passion anew. The shadow would lift. A week later, Pete would be outside the bedroom door, timing how long she spent on her hair — his rage growing with every second.

Then came his newest revelation. These would arrive on a regular basis. He would repent, stumbling down the aisle, and confess any minor sins that had entered his life. Petty issues, in David’s opinion — never the problems that needed to be addressed.

Sometimes, amid these confessions, Pete would receive a “vision” — an elaborate scheme for the family or church to follow. Thus a three-week stretch with an hour of Family Devotions each night, which started with balanced participation and ended as monologues by Mr. Pete. Still, they were lucky. Pastor Harrison had to assure his flock that Pete didn’t speak for the church leadership. They had no intentions of planting a

sister congregation in Logan, less than five miles up the road. That they weren't about to build an expensive addition to the fellowship hall, with a bowling alley and Christian arcade, so the teens had somewhere to go on Saturday nights. That despite Pete's conviction about the Holy Spirit's call, they wouldn't construct an altar on the floor of Ash Cave — for monthly reenactments of Abraham and Isaac.

So David was skeptical when Pete walked the aisle that February, his eyes welling with tears. He was guilty of hoarding, he declared — craving the things of this world and teaching his family to lust for possessions and worldly beauty. He was repenting, renouncing his misguided state. He would cleanse their house of false idols, the way Othniel and Ehud had purged the land of the Canaanites.

Pastor Harrison applauded his resolve: thankful, David guessed, that the vision concerned Pete's home and not the church. But David himself was wary, an instinct that proved correct.

The campaign opened in Mom's closet, starting with the gold button dress and the outfit from the Christmas party. Pete sacrificed a few possessions — a threadbare Nazareth t-shirt that he used for moving the yard, a leisure suit that he never wore — but the bulk of the contributions belonged to his wife. The altar of clothing grew on the living room floor, set aside for destruction.

She was all for scaling back, she said. Perhaps he might be going a step too far?

"Too far?" he answered. "Not to ensure the integrity of this family. I'll burn down the walls of this house, if that's what it's going to take."

“I just wish you’d thought of it sooner, before throwing out clothes that I only wore once or twice.”

“What does it profit a man, if he gains the whole world but loses his soul?” Besides, he argued, he could donate the pile to Goodwill and deduct the contribution from their taxes.

Why offer the garments to the poor, if the garments were such a dangerous influence? Why not burn them to ashes? Like his ceremonial bonfire at the Harvest Festival, when he’d collected the relics from his personal Axis of Evil — Madonna, Michael Jackson, and Pee-Wee Herman — and doused them with gasoline.

“What about *that*?” Mom stood at the window and pointed at the new satellite dish. “Will that be leaving as well?” Pete had installed the eyesore against her wishes.

Pete launched into a defense of cable TV, the religious programs that couldn’t be found on the secular channels. Besides, he argued, it’s not what *goes into* the body that corrupts a man. What *comes out* is what makes you unclean.

Mom fought a defensive campaign, working to slow his advance. She submitted to his demands and spent less time on her hair, which seemed to deflate, hanging limp at the sides of her head. The roots began to show: a dark line emerged down her center part.

“I need to do something about it,” she told him.

“You need to focus on what’s important.”

“I hardly even comb it. Do you want me to cut it short, like Mia Farrow? Is that what you’re trying to achieve?”

“You’d like that too much, wouldn’t you?” Mr. Pete leaned an elbow on the table. He cupped chin in palm and gauged his wife with a critical eye, a sculptor examining granite. “We need to tame that lust for attention. Something plain — a look that broadcasts your role as a wife and a mother.”

“What’s this for?” Mom raised her left hand and wiggled the ring finger. She gestured at her kids. “Not to mention Batman and Robin.”

“True, true. But you’re mixing the message. That ring implies contentment; your style claims something else, like you’re working the market for an upgrade.”

“*A knockout hottie*. Isn’t that what you wanted to flaunt on your arm?” She pushed back her chair, frustrated. “Wait, don’t tell me — *you were mistaken*.”

Mr. Pete shrugged.

She let out a breath, resigned to some new humiliation. “Great. Why do I already know, you’ve got something *wonderful* in mind?”

The next week, they spent the afternoon at Hair Apparent — a trailer on the outskirts of town. A friend of Pete’s aunt had converted it to a salon. Her specialty was traditional styles and cuts, he explained. The narrow space was crowded, and a thick, chemical smell seemed to hover in the air. Rachel pinched her nose and said P.U. There was a barbershop chair and a sink with a notch cut into the front — like a guillotine, thought David. Backed against a wall, two chairs sat beneath large plastic domes. They looked like something from a space movie, brainwashing machines or mind-control devices. He mentioned the idea. Pretty accurate, said Mom. But they could also be used to dry hair.

Mary Jo wore a black smock with pockets. Her light gray hair was short and parted on the side. It suited her demeanor: polite and businesslike. She welcomed the foursome, guiding Laura to the chair and wrapping her in a cape. “We’ll start with your mother,” she told the kids. “Since *her* new look’s going to take the longest.” She spoke to Mom’s reflection in the mirror, brushing the mane and gathering a thick ponytail. “Like we discussed on the phone?”

Mom nodded. She started to open her mouth, then closed it.

Mary Jo chopped with the scissors: it took multiple tries to break all the way through. The locks that remained swung loose at Mom’s chin, the ends jagged and uneven. Mary Jo held out the ponytail. “Want to keep this? A souvenir?”

“Ask Pete — it’s *his* trophy.”

“Toss it.” He was standing a few yards away, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He looked like he needed to pee.

Mary Jo shrugged and dropped the hair in a small wastebasket. The sound of it hitting the pile was awful, a yearlong effort tossed out with the daily rubbish. Now the scissors moved fast, attacking the locks that remained. Long, blonde strands fell to the floor. Then shorter, much darker pieces were falling as well. They slid down the cape and piled in Mom’s lap.

Her face was grim. Like a lamb led to slaughter, or a sheep to its shearing. Christ before His accusers, refusing to open His mouth.

David couldn’t stop watching. As the mane disappeared, an old friend returned. Mary Lou was back and eager to hit the tumbling mat — not groomed for a fashion shoot.

The sound of the clippers surprised him. For a second, the buzz made him think of the shop where he and Mr. Pete usually went for cuts. Mary Jo held Mom's head with one hand, pushing her chin toward her chest. She asked something about the hairline and gestured with the electric shears. When Mr. Pete nodded, she clipped the back of Mom's neck. A ribbon of pale, white skin extended from ear to ear.

A tray with rollers emerged, and his mother appeared to relax — resigned to her fate. She chatted with Mary Jo. The beautician worked with amazing speed, wrapping the hair on the small, colored rods. It astonished David, the way she could laugh and joke as her finger explored Mom's scalp — moving with a will of their own, twisting the locks into barrels. When you played with Transformers, it became second-nature to change the robots into machines. You didn't have to think about each step as you raced to imitate the Autobots and the Decepticons in the cartoon. Mary Jo's hands possessed that kind of quickness.

She squirted Mom's head with liquid from a plastic bottle. She seemed to be dousing them good, the way Mr. Pete soaked charcoal briquettes with lighter fluid. Mom contorted her face at the pungent odor, this aroma that seemed to permeate the shop. The solution was strong, explained Mary Jo. It was Laura's first perm, and they wanted the curls to hold.

Then Mom was under the blow dryer. Mary Jo called for David. Soon, his sides and back had been clipped short. He couldn't stop rubbing his head when she finished. Mary Jo laughed at the reaction. "Don't *you* look nice? Come summer, when it's time for your Mom's next appointment, I'll give you a proper buzz." She pretended to run the

clippers down the center of his head. “Maybe a flat top, if you’d like something really sharp.”

His sister was defiant. She refused to sit in the chair. “Please, Rachel,” called Mom. She talked louder than needed, speaking above the roar of the dryer in her ears. Her daughter marched to the chair, grinning at Mr. Pete — making it clear whose rule she followed. “Like hers.” She pointed at Mom.

“What’s that?” asked Mary Jo. “You want to become a Curly Sue, too?” David’s breath caught in his throat. He was afraid of being the odd man out — left behind in his old body, while the girls were transformed.

“Nothing *too* short,” called Mom.

In a few minutes, Rachel was sporting a tomboy cut. She scowled at the mirror — annoyed at the change. Then a grin broke across her face. She was finally equipped for some *real* trouble.

Mary Jo helped her from the chair. “In a few years, we’ll try your first perm and turn you into a cute little poodle.”

David lost track of the process. Mom would be out from the dryer, then back. A new solution was applied. Pete stepped outside for a smoke. David flipped through the magazines, hoping in vain for a *Sports Illustrated* or a *Reader’s Digest*.

Then Mom was in the chair, her hair covered with a towel. “Ready?” asked Mary Jo.

“As I’ll ever be, I suppose.”

“You’ll get used to it. I remember the shock, my first bubble cut. Lost a lot more hair than you, love.” She laughed. “You’ll save time in the morning. The curls will fall into place — no choice about that, no need to fret about styling.”

“Pete should be pleased.”

“I want *you* to be pleased, not Pete.”

Mary Jo removed the towel. Rachel sucked in her breath. Mom’s hair had shrunk into a dense mass of tiny curls. The beautician allowed a quick glance, then turned the chair from the mirror. “Let me finish, and I’ll give you a closer look.” She picked at the locks, adding volume and evening out the style.

Mom had already seen enough. She wiped something from her eye. “I look ridiculous,” she said. “I look like a Chia Pet.”

“You look feminine.” Mary Jo trimmed a few strays, making sure that the sphere was smooth and uniform. “They’ll be tight for a few weeks, because of the strong solution. But they’ll loosen in a month or two.”

The knot in David’s stomach moved deep inside his body. He wanted to touch them, to push on the sponge of hair and feel how soft it actually was.

Mary Jo gave Mom a hand mirror and showed her the back — the style was short on the neck, high enough to stay above her collar. Mr. Pete returned from the outside. “Oh my God,” he said. “It’s so curly.” He circled the chair and examined the style. “You look so . . . different.”

“Isn’t she darling?” asked Mary Jo, proud of her work. “A traditional bubble cut. The style she ordered, if not what she wanted.”

“It’s perfect.” He asked about the sides and back, whether they might go even shorter.

“Maybe next time. Give her a chance to get used to the poodle first.”

Pete accepted the verdict and stepped back, admiring the new, conservative look — his masterpiece. “It’s perfect.”

“Glad you think so,” said Mom. “Because it’s not going anywhere, even if you change your mind.”

No, said Mr. Pete. He pressed on the curls with a hand. When he let go, the style sprung back into shape. “You’ll be keeping this look for a long, long time.”

The rest of that day, David followed his mother around the house. Every time she turned around, he was staring at her curls. Finally, she had enough. This game he was playing was driving her nuts. She told him to get outside and stop acting like a creep.

A half hour later, he snuck back inside. Mom was standing at the bathroom mirror, turning her head from side to side. She felt the bristles on her neck and sighed. “Let’s see if this makes him happy.” The line was so quiet, David could never recall if she actually said it out loud.

Pete was pleased with the cut. He praised the look’s modesty and the values it suggested. She looked like a proper housewife, he said. But he never called her beautiful.

The women at church were delighted. The ladies adored her new style, as if she’d finally set aside her pride and accepted her role and place. The men were less

enthusiastic, their comments neutral and polite. One by one, they turned away with a hint of sadness. Something wonderful had vanished from their lives.

Did the doctors like the new style? Pete asked. Did they still wallow at her feet, now that she was a plain Jane? Had they turned their flirtations to younger nurses, now that she looked her age?

David found her at the nightstand, staring into the mirror. He squeezed her from behind, then buried his face in her curls. They still smelled like the beauty shop. It repulsed him at first, but after a while, he'd started to long for that vivid scent.

She pulled a few ringlets straight, two or three inches at most. On release, they sprung back to a coil. "David, David," she said. "What have I done?"

She treated the look too harshly, in his opinion. The cut was anything but plain. She was less elegant than before, true. But she also seemed kinder. In a strange way, the style even felt rebellious, as dramatic a step as a Mohawk or purple hair. She'd sacrificed her looks for a greater cause, a disguise for invading the enemy's camp. He didn't want to see her any other way.

Later, he understood the truth: she wasn't talking about the perm; she was talking about her marriage.

Mr. Pete's Speech: A Close Reading & Deconstruction (Continued)

They never returned to Hair Apparent. By late March, Dave's father had appeared with an unfamiliar station wagon, and they left for Midfield in the middle of the night. To Dad's credit, he said nothing about the makeover. Though given the double-take when he arrived, it must have been quite a shock.

The perm wasn't the tipping point. Mom wore the new look with poise. She endured the dismay from her colleagues — "What have you *done* to your beautiful hair!?" — that gave way to indignation, as rumors began to circulate. Not because Laura revealed the story, but because she was steadfast in her denials. *Too* steadfast, her friends believed. The style was easy to maintain, she insisted; she could wash it and leave the house on errands, unconcerned about how it would dry. They ignored the charade.

But Mom was stubborn, determined to ride out the storm. It would take more than butchered locks to drive her away for good.

3b. *"Midfield's loss, but Hocking County's gain."*

In the gospel according to Peter Coates, East Logan was the best town in the best state in the greatest country in the history of the world. It was *his* hometown, after all. It would *have* to be the best, because *he* was the best. Indeed, in Pete's thinking, the greatest asset of Hocking County was the outstanding men the land produced.

He knew how to run a government — unlike those clowns in Columbus and Washington. He possessed common sense — which made him smarter than the liberals and hippie freakniks down at Ohio University, the cancer that spread throughout Athens. He was even a genius at sports: he knew more about coaching a football team than any man in Ohio, with the possible exception of Woody Hayes. Yes, sir. When he looked in the mirror, he faced the strongest, fastest, smartest, luckiest, most upright man that he'd meet that day. The rest of the country would know his name, once a chance or two broke his way. If that's what he wanted, of course. Because the life he lived in East Logan? He wouldn't have it any other way.

When a new business moved to town, the region was ripe for economic development. If companies left, the district was guarding its natural beauty. The locals were rural enough to be tough, urban enough to be sophisticated, and the perfect balance of insight, wisdom and integrity. Their children were more athletic and better-looking. They lived too far north to be Rednecks, but far enough south to curse at Yankees. Too far east to be Midwest hicks, yet hundreds of miles from New York City. Even further from LA, San Francisco, or the Kennedy family. They enjoyed Appalachian-style wildlife, without all the strip mines and banjo music that haunted West Virginia.

Thus it was only natural, that shift from praise of East Logan to trash-talk about Midfield. If folks wanted to settle elsewhere — someplace as boring as northeast Ohio — they had to be pretty dumb. If Pete despised a new trend — hip-hop music or acid-washed jeans — “they probably liked it in Midfield.” When David dropped a football, he

was “Midfield Clumsy.” If he didn’t know something — how a 6-cylinder engine worked, or the correct way to hold a rifle — he was simply “Midfield Dumb.”

David saw his father on a regular basis: a weekend each month, and a longer stay during the summer and winter breaks. When he returned, the hostility was intense. All Midfield residents drew Pete’s contempt, but Charles Kingman was the Chief Fool. For some reason — to justify his wife’s first marriage, most likely — Pete believed that the Kingmans were filthy rich. But they hadn’t earned this wealth — they weren’t smart enough or tough enough for that. They hoarded their treasure, passing an ancient inheritance from one generation to the next, and kept the fortune from the hard-working, blue-collar Americans who truly deserved it.

Financial Disclosure

- Pete Coates was mistaken. The Kingmans were comfortable — especially Dave’s Grandparents — but they were also generous. They fed their resources into the community, into church, school, and local charities. Citing the parable of the talents, which rebukes the servant who buries the Master’s assets. They received benefits from this generosity, to be sure — influence with the ministries they supported, input on major decisions. Still, there wasn’t a Kingman mint, as Pete surmised.
- Charles paid child support for his son. When Rachel was born, he tried to double the amount. She might not be *his* child, but she was certainly *a child*. He wanted to offer support. Laura refused to accept the money. When he sent the

funds anyway, she simply cashed every other check. She tore the rest in half and mailed them back to Charles, until he resigned himself to his ex-wife's will.

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Of course, Pete's central grudge against Charles Kingman was the fate that united their lives: they both had the (mis)fortune to fall in love with Laura Walker. And the root of Pete's scorn was that Charles had reached her first, then proved too weak a man to hold her in check. It must have driven Pete wild, knowing this lesser man had shared her bed. It ate at his pride, living with proof of her sexual fecundity.

Pete badgered his stepson for intelligence: the kind of man his father was, the relationship his parents had shared, and — more and more often — if Charles left Laura or she left him. He sprinkled their talks with leading statements: “Your Dad probably regrets his decision, walking away from your Mom like he did,” or “I really admire your mother, the courage to ditch that worthless man.” David tried to be noncommittal. He knew Grandmother's take on her son's divorce, and Dad had alluded to the subject — noting his own mother's bias. But David hadn't learned Mom's account, not then. Besides, even if he *had* known, he wouldn't have told. It pleased him, these pieces of life that were hidden from Mr. Pete.

The more Pete failed to learn, the nastier he became. He disparaged the manhood of Charles Kingman; he questioned his sexuality. What kind of man loses that much control, he asked, that his wife hauls away and leaves him behind? Not *him*. When a man marries a woman, he *cleaves* to her. Mr. Pete would dissect the word *cleave*, how it meant wrapping yourself around a person's body: “like a bear, climbing the trunk of a

tree.” You had to be stubborn. You refused to release your grip. “Now that I’ve cleaved myself to your mother,” he said, “I won’t let her go.”

Which made Charles an even more vexing problem. Suppose he was the partner that chose to leave: it meant that Laura had been faithful. But it *also* meant that she fell short of her husband’s desires. Discarded goods held little appeal to Mr. Pete. On the other hand, if *she* ditched Charles, what did that reveal about her attitude toward marriage? Pete grew more and more obsessed with the question. If Laura had left her first love, the father of her children, what kept her from leaving *him*?

They were driving home, talking about the holiday. It was the first Christmas they had been married, Pete’s only visit to Maryville. Laura was concerned about her mother. More than ever, Lily was distant: living in the past — the childhood farm that had disappeared, claimed for the state and flooded by the TVA. As they talked, Grandpa would pilot her into the conversation — like a miner in a tunnel, calling out directions to a partner with a fading lamp. He guided her back to the surface with the sound of his voice.

Grandma’s Country

Grandma had always been quiet, as long as David could remember. Her manners were impeccable: sweet tea in the afternoon and Mayfield Ice Cream for dessert. The grandkids adored her accent. On summer nights, they would imitate her pitch from the twin beds in the spare room. They opened the window, regardless of the heat, and the insect drone thickened their mock-Southern twang.

If he altered the way he talked, would it change the way he saw the world?
Were the colors a different hue in Grandma's eyes?

She would sit on the porch, smiling at the conversation, but she seldom added her own two cents. The longer she was quiet, the more distant she grew. Grandpa would speak to her in a gentle voice, calling her back to the present. Sometimes he'd tease her — "Travelling again, my love?" or "Visiting home, sweetheart?" — and she would smile in response. His tone could mesh fondness and sorrow, like the old-time country songs — the stations Mom played on the drive to Tennessee.

Grandma managed their house with ease. The daily tasks had become second nature, now that she'd practiced them thousands of times. Which only encouraged her mind to wander. As a child, David had already sensed this divide. Lily lived with Grandpa in Maryville, but her true country was somewhere else, someplace far away — distant in space and time.

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Her father overlooked some of the changes, Mom felt. "They happen so gradually, you can only see them when you've been away."

"Plus his own memory," said Pete. "It's not what it used to be."

"He seemed pretty sharp to me."

"He called you Laurel the entire visit."

Mom laughed. "That's not Alzheimer's — that's good old-fashioned stubbornness. Laurel's the name he gave me."

Pete wanted to know what she meant. “Did your mother have other plans? She refused to name her only child for a bush?”

“She didn’t have much to say. She was shocked from the labor — not to mention I wasn’t that boy she expected.”

Her name had been Laurel from birth, she explained. All throughout her childhood. She changed it herself, the year she turned eighteen and moved to Ohio University. “You know, a new name for a new start in life. *Laurel* had too much Tennessee in it.” Now, looking back, it was just an attempt to wound her father. “It worked.”

David was starting to feel carsick. They seemed to be crossing unstable ground.

“I can’t believe it,” Pete said. “Your name . . . it’s not actually Laura?”

“Well, it is *now*. But I’ve thought about changing it back. Maybe even selecting something new .” She turned to her kids. “Any suggestions, there in the peanut gallery?”

Rachel proposed her own name, so they could be twins. Mom said that was too confusing, and David’s sister tried the name Cherries Jubilee — her favorite My Little Pony.

“Cherries Jubilee? People would think I’m a stripper.”

“A stripper?”

Mom thought for a second. “Someone who loses things for money.” She glanced at Mr. Pete, who was still upset — distressed at this serious revelation. “Come on,” she said. “It’s not a big deal. *You’re* the one who’s always pushing me to try something new.”

He shook his head: a name was a big deal. It was different than a haircut or a new outfit.

“If you doubt me, check my birth certificate.”

“I believe you — that’s the problem. What I can’t believe, is that you never bothered to mention it before.”

“I’m telling you now. Like I said, it didn’t seem that important.”

They’d been married for half a year, he observed. “All that time, I didn’t even know my wife’s name.”

Mom tried to drop the subject, but Pete couldn’t let it go. He was embarrassed by his ignorance, terrified of his new wife’s secrets.

David was shaken as well, struck by the fact that Mom had a life of her own. She was more than a character in his own story. Which startled him, that she saw the world through her own set of eyes. That her tale had preceded his arrival. That as hard as he stared at the back of her head, he could never read her mind.

4. Her children were well-behaved and respectful: a credit to their mother, considering “the disruptions of their youth.”

Now and then, after a moving sermon or a sentimental movie, Pete would soften his treatment of David and Rachel. His eyes would be opened — as if he finally grasped his calling as a stepfather. Yet this kindness was laced with condescension: they’d been poorly trained, and it fell to him to educate their souls.

One week — an especially good week for David, with a goal in his soccer game and a perfect score on a math test — Mr. Pete had treated him to ice cream at the DQ. He

praised his stepson's "God-given talents." If David got faster and stronger, he might even switch from soccer to football in junior high. He'd transcended the weak Kingman blood. With enough hard work, said Mr. Pete, he had a real chance to make something of himself.

Pete didn't know what to think about Rachel. Most times, he treated her like a caricature of a little girl — dolls and dresses, the things he felt she ought to like. She refused to play along. She could out-spit, out-run, and out-slug most boys her age. Rachel talked back to authority, and her punishments had little effect — whether a week without TV or a smack with the wooden spoon. Mom's patience grew thin. "If you're this much trouble in Kindergarten," she would ask, what will I do when you've grown?"

One thing about Rachel pleased Mr. Pete: she had nothing but contempt for Midfield, a child after his own heart. Most of the time, when David visited his father, Rachel stayed behind. Pete called it a wise decision, a sign of her judgment and taste, favoring East Logan as she did — an indication she might outgrow the foolishness of her youth.

He raised the subject in the carport. "What's so special about Midfield, that you always look forward to visits?"

His stepson shrugged, in a foul mood, called away from a dramatic showdown between Optimus Prime and the Rancor Monster. Plus, he was mad at Rachel, who threw a fit at the video store that afternoon. Mom had succumbed to the pressure, renting *The Black Stallion*, not *Herbie Goes Bananas*. It was a side effect of her new, curly look — she gave in more easily than she used to.

“I mean, your sister doesn’t seem to like it.”

Mr. Pete could be dumber than Jabba the Hutt. “She’s not invited,” David said.

“Grandmother doesn’t like her.”

Pete stopped fiddling with the new leaf blower. “Your Grandmother *doesn’t like* her? What kind of grandmothers do you have in Midfield, who don’t let their granddaughters visit?”

Dave and his mother would debate the incident for years. He would admit to dropping the spark, igniting the firestorm that followed. But he refused to accept further blame. She cited a secret agreement, an unwritten pact that Mr. Pete didn’t have to know everything about their lives before Hocking County. Which was a good policy, Dave answered. Except for one thing: she failed to inform her son.

“Rachel’s not her granddaughter.”

“Not her granddaughter?” asked Mr. Pete. “What’s that supposed to mean? Who’s Rachel’s father?”

David shrugged. “Nobody knows.”

“*Somebody* knows. Your *mother* knows.”

The interrogation lasted for less than a minute. Soon, Mr. Pete had disappeared, and voices in the house grew loud. David lingered on the carport, knowing he said too much. He thought about trundling: tossing a stone down a steep incline and listening to it fall. Grandpa frowned on the practice. It could be fun, he said, watching it carom down

the slope. But the rock could injure a hiker they didn't see. A single boulder could start an avalanche.

When he finally slunk inside, loathe to witness his creation, Mom and Pete had covered the primary themes. They were poised for a second lap, each circling for a fresh strafing run — a course they'd repeat in the coming weeks, over and over and over again.

Pete called her a loose woman, a cheater who destroyed her first marriage. Now, she was hacking away at her second. Mom refuted the claim with vigor. She and Charles had been divorced for two years before Rachel was conceived. In fact, they were close to reconciling. Then Mom learned she was pregnant: “*which sort of derailed the plans.*”

“He dodged a bullet on that one, don't you think?”

“He was heartbroken, if you want to know the truth.”

Pete snorted. The truth was the last thing he wanted — the last thing he expected from *her* mouth, at least.

“And I was heartbroken, breaking it.”

“You should have considered that, before crawling in bed with another man.”

“You're right. I was young and lonely and I ruined our chance to get back together. Trust me — you don't want to know how many nights I lose sleep, thinking about that. But I didn't cheat. I would *never* cheat on my husband, *whoever* he was.”

You won't have to worry about that temptation, he said. Not now. Not with that mini-Afro on your head.

My hair will grow back. You're stuck with that heart for the rest of your life.

The argument had a number of variations, but it always returned to the same basic chord: Pete demanded to know Rachel's father, and Laura refused to identify the name.

It was a secret, she said — protected by her, the father, and God. If Rachel wanted to know, Mom would tell her on her 18th birthday. Then, her daughter could choose a name for herself.

So far, Rachel had shown little interest. She didn't *have* a father. She didn't *need* one.

Charles had wanted to know the name. In the end, it was the secrecy that kept them from reuniting — not the illegitimate daughter. Which was a mistake to tell Pete. He grew far more determined — resolved on having his way — once he learned that the name had eluded his rival.

She wouldn't budge. Her brilliant generalship was revealed at last. She had ceded the battles that didn't count — sacrificing pride, her looks, appearing to surrender. All the while, she was biding her time and securing the final defense. Which, in the end, was the greatest blow to Mr. Pete. All those months, he thought he had seized control. In reality, he was driving the spike in his kingdom's heart — impaling himself on his wife's resolve.

Interview Transcript: Laura Walker

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT - Laura Walker
Maryville, Tennessee
January 19, 2011

EXCERPTS ONLY. COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT AVAILABLE.

M.F. - *(Summarizes the chapter on Mr. Pete -- the account that her son provided. Offers to send her the chapter, for confirmation of dates and events, once he's finished with the draft.)*

L.W. - That's how David describes what happened? That's what he told you? *(Shakes her head)* Well, you know my son -- he'll take a silly, four-minute speech and explain two years away. *(Snaps her fingers.)* Like that. Should have been a science teacher, the way he likes to dissect things.
. . . .

That's the thing about hash. Grind the pieces small enough, no one can tell the original cut. . . .

M.F. - *(Asks about Pete and the carport monologues)*

L.W. - Rachel mentioned those to me. Says David claims that Pete forced him to listen -- filling his head with those crazy beliefs. *(Laughs.)* And some of Pete's beliefs? Believe me, they were pretty loony. . . .

That first summer we were married, Peter couldn't step outside without David on his trail, asking him what he was doing. Poor Pete couldn't shake him. Like a stray puppy - - feed it once, game over, it's following you for life. . . .

This continued for weeks, mind you, until one day, Peter shoved a broom in my son's hand. Said he could hang about the carport. But he might as well make himself useful. . . .

M.F. - *(Hesitates, then mentions the perm.)*

L.W. - The perm. *(Pretends to scream in frustration, then throws her hands in the air.)* Everybody wants to talk

about the perm. Even Rachel still teases me. I don't see why. It wasn't that big a deal, not in the grand scheme of things. . . .

Let me guess. In my son's account, Pete straps me to the chair and rolls the rods himself. It wouldn't cross David's mind, I suppose, that the look was originally my idea. I wanted a change, tired of all the coloring and blow-drying and styling. I had better uses for my time. I wanted something simple. . . . All that attention I was getting? Mind you, I was getting plenty of attention. That part's pretty accurate. But it was exhausting. Every now and then, it's nice to look plain -- like the girl next door that you pass without a second thought. People leave you alone. You can mind your own business and enjoy life. . . .

You've got to remember -- this was the eighties. Everyone had perms in the eighties. Glenn Close, Barbara Streisand, Jennifer Grey. Even Madonna. Of course, once Pete caught wind of my scheme, he insisted on grabbing control of the makeover -- he wanted to turn me into this proper, conservative girl. . . . I looked less like Cher, more like a poodle.

Still, you need to adjust your expectations. You should have seen the women in our church, back in Hayden Valley. Half of them wore these tight, super-curly dos that clung to their heads like army helmets. Storm Troopers, David liked to call them. . . . If anything, my new look stamped my membership card. . . .

M.F. - (Comments, with a touch of chagrin, that her version of events seems so different, he might need to rewrite the chapter. He tried to include multiple perspectives, but . . . for the most part, admits his reliance on interviews with her son. Hours and hours of interviews, he hints - not without a slight grimace.)

L.W. - (Laughs, says that M.F. is a saint - that even she couldn't listen to her son's nonsense for that long. Says to use David's account, not hers. Says not to worry so much about being accurate: David's version would be more interesting . . . even if it wasn't entirely the truth.)

L.W. - Don't get me wrong. I'm not excusing Pete. Peter could be an ass, and the first time he swung, I knew we were through. But he wasn't always an ass. I loved him enough to marry him, remember? . . .

What you need to understand about my son, when he tells you these stories and you write them in your book, is that he treats people like they were characters. Like caricatures, really. He settles on one or two traits, then treats them like the Rosetta Stone -- the key to that person's life. Everything about them, he interprets with that single lens. . . . And when a detail won't fit his vision, he simply ignores it. . . .

Like this doctor I knew. Legendary for his accuracy, for making the correct diagnosis in less than a minute. Insurance companies loved him. But he lost a few patients, a handful of random cases. When the obvious disease was merely a decoy. When it masked the real problem, the far more dangerous culprit. . . .

Interview Transcript: Patricia Kingman

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT - Patricia Kingman
Midfield, Ohio
December 12, 2010

EXCERPTS ONLY. COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT AVAILABLE

P.K. - He had a bright future, my son. She claimed it with that Southern accent and wild spirit. Then, once she had him, she crushed his heart. . . .

He should have gone to Ohio State for his Master's degree. That way, they never would have met. Charles was smart enough, top five in his class at Fischer -- no small feat, let me tell you. But he liked this professor at Ohio University, something about his original take on the global economy. There is nothing new under the sun, I told him, not even at Ohio University. Besides, he would need a traditional background, with a firm grasp on the fundamentals. After all, that's what he'd be teaching at Fischer.

It's where he was destined, of course -- after he earned his doctorate. Where the Lord had called him to be. (*Shakes her head.*) He would have been brilliant, a student favorite. Department Head, Provost like my Uncle Jacob. That was his calling, but that girl flung herself in his path. . . .

M.F. - (*Questions her depiction of Laura's actions.*)

P.K. - (*Laughs*) Of course she did. He was a graduate student; he knew the risks of dating a co-ed. Mind you, I can understand her attraction. Charles was older and wise, an attractive man with a financially stable future. And Laura -- well, I'll say this about her: she was like nothing he'd ever met. . . .

I was disappointed by his choice. I won't lie. . . . He dated so many nice girls at Fischer. Surely one of them . . . one of them would have made a suitable match: Reformed in doctrine and manners. . . .

Still, I was willing to give her a chance, since Charles was set on the marriage. I danced at their

wedding, down in Tennessee. A pleasant affair, if modest. Her father seemed wise -- he was skeptical too, like I was. Her mother, I can't quite recall. . . .

I threw them a handsome party in Midfield, once they'd returned from the honeymoon, for the relatives and friends who couldn't attend the wedding. Some of them hadn't received invitations, given the size of the venue. . . .

I should have been more enthusiastic, when they told us that Laura was pregnant. It's not that I wasn't excited. I wanted to be a Grandmother, but I wasn't ready. When you become a grandparent, you realize how much time has passed. You think about all that you might have done, and all that you didn't do. You think. . . . Well, whatever it is you think, I wasn't prepared to think about it.

M.F. - *(Asks whether Charles was ready to be a father.)*

P.K. - Of course he wasn't. *(A look of scorn.)* They'd only been married, what? -- five, six months when they broke the news. *(Pauses, seems to reconsider.)* If you mean, was he ready to handle the responsibility? Then yes, of course Charles was prepared. He was always a responsible boy. Still, I worried how he would react, given the added pressure. . . .

So I wasn't surprised when he said he was quitting school. That he'd stop with the Master's and enter the business world. We said it was a bad idea, sacrificing his dreams. William and I were able to help them out. We've been fortunate and blessed. But Charles is stubborn. He wanted to care for his own family, he said. . . .

They returned to Midfield. . . . He said he was happy, but I knew better. You'll never be happy, settling for less than your best. . . .

I wasn't that surprised, the day he told us about their separation. Marriage is hard. William and I, we've had our share of troubles. Years ago, for the most part. We're a stronger couple because of it. Plus, we're a far better match than they were, and we both knew the value of compromise.

. . . the final obstacle, in my opinion -- the ultimate reason they couldn't work through their differences. So they settled on a divorce, at such a young age, and with a young child to consider.

M.F. - *(Notes his surprise, the way she seems to frown on the divorce, when she wasn't that keen on the marriage.)*

P.K. - That's right. I was not happy with their decision. Which surprised a few of my friends, who all seemed to think that divorce was the best option. Better now than later, they said. Both of them with the chance to be happy, paired with somebody else. But that's not what the Lord intended. What God has joined. . . . It's a mistake, mind you -- thinking that you have this God-given right to be happy. . . . That God *wants* you to be happy. . . . That's a misquotation of the Constitution. Not to mention, it's bad theology. . . .

It was her fault, sleeping around. Not the initial divorce -- let me be clear on that. Charles and Laura shared blame for that selfish decision. Their ridiculous belief that love and infatuation can sustain a marriage. . . . No, it was her fault they failed to reconcile -- sleeping around like a two-bit whore, when Charles was making his overtures. Getting herself knocked up, and breaking my only son's heart.

The Sad Demise of Mr. Pete

The first time Dave heard of bipolar disorder, he instantly thought about Mr. Pete. How he could switch from generous to vengeful to apathetic, all in a single afternoon. How he worked for a year, transforming their mother into a bombshell, then tried equally hard to ruin the achievement. After building the life he had always wanted, he devoted a spring to its methodical destruction.

The rampage was more than domestic. He accused his long-time boss of financial deceit — even reporting him to a county agent, a ridiculous claim that cost Pete his job and almost landed him a jail sentence. They sold Mom's car to make ends meet, and he drove her back and forth to work. At church, in a colorful rant that left several jaws unhinged, he broke into the sermon and declared that the congregation had grown lukewarm. Christ would vomit them all from His holy mouth. He forced a showdown, demanding the pastor's resignation, and became a pariah to the flock.

The violence peaked at home, where he chastised his wife for a haughty, unsubmitive spirit. He blamed the character of her children — “a crybaby and a bastard” — on a long chain of inherited, generational sin.

David never forgot that last argument. The accusations so intense, he actually flung himself at Mr. Pete, who absorbed the charge and tossed his stepson into the couch. Too gentle for criminal charges, but rough enough that David could taste blood. The next day, Mom packed their bags. She called Aunt Linda and told her to bring the truck.

The week that followed was full of adventure. They stayed home from school, shuttled from one relative to the next — never the same house on consecutive nights. The precautions seemed prudent, given Pete's bluster, but they were probably an overreaction. Mom had resisted the psychological barrage for more than a year, but she finally succumbed to a breakdown. The way that a teacher holds illness at bay for an entire semester, then comes down with the flu over Christmas break. She was seldom present that week, preoccupied with phone calls and appointments — meetings with lawyers, talks with connections in Midfield, and arguments with Mr. Pete. He must have been fierce, his remarks harsh and menacing. Mom took them serious enough, at least.

Dad arrived in the early evening, driving an unfamiliar station wagon. Two broad-shouldered uncles slid into the car. Mom urged them to hurry. They could only count on a two-hour window, even less if the house was being watched.

The men were gone ninety minutes. David and Rachel waited in the parlor: their shoes velcroed, their coats in their laps. Mom picked at a hole in the cushion. An older man — Grandpa's cousin — sat in a rocker on the porch, a hunting rifle across his lap. They watched his silhouette through the lace curtains, like a grainy movie without any sound. When headlights appeared at the edge of the property, he stood and walked to the front steps. For years, when Dave heard of a person confronting danger, he thought of that moment — that solemn move and the cool, collected resolve. A man standing his ground, facing the gravel drive.

The lights belonged to the wagon, now stuffed with their clothes and toys and a few kitchen goods. David and Rachel were hustled into their seats. Mom was crying,

apologizing to their aunt, sorry about all the trouble she'd brought. They'd be fine, an uncle insisted. He told Dave's father to avoid speeding, at least until Lancaster. Peter had friends in the sheriff's department.

That night, on the drive to Midfield, David fell asleep as his mother softly wept. He stirred, somewhere north of Columbus, and asked to use the bathroom. At the rest area, his father surveyed the deserted grounds — the eerie glow from the vending machines, the dark picnic shelter, a lone tractor-trailer in the back lot — then escorted him to the facility. Back on the road, the adults resumed a quiet conversation, so different — Dave later reflected — than their laughter a decade earlier, on happier drives between Athens and Midfield. The next thing he knew, Dad was lifting Rachel out of the station wagon. He followed them into a foreign house, and Dad left for his own apartment. For the next five years, the three of them would call the duplex home.

She lost most of her possessions. The furniture, including an old pie chest — an heirloom from Grandmother Kingman, one that she always meant to return. Her best dishes — once again, wedding gifts from her first marriage. Charles had followed her packing instructions, focusing on the children's bedrooms. Her own things were left behind.

Pete kept them — sold them, most likely — except for a box that he dropped at her feet: months later, when they met for the final hearing. "Shit that even the Thrift Store won't take," he explained. Still, Mom was grateful for the photo albums and random keepsakes, the closest she'd ever get to an apology.

She might have pressed her case and sued, fought for a more equitable split. But she chose not to struggle with Pete in court. His connections were like vines, woven throughout the county. Who knows? Perhaps they even touched the justice system. She might have been trying to calm his temper: worried about her relatives, only a township away, who had risked their peace to stand by her side. Perhaps she had other, more secret reasons for letting the bastard walk free. She asked for his signature, nothing more.

Laura shook off the dust of southeast Ohio. Like her father, she set her back to Hocking County and turned her face to the road ahead.

Foreign Men: Reprise

No, the men at Midfield Bible Fellowship knew little about Laurel Walker. She had entered their lives in 1982: the mother of a two-year old son, her divorce from Charles Kingman all but final. She immersed herself in the life of the church, then — three years later — vanished without an explanation, rumors of pregnancy in her wake.

She reappeared on a Sunday morning in 1989. The curly hair was new, but her confident stride was unforgettable. Without one word of explanation, she stepped to her favorite seat on the far left aisle. As if seven years had been seven days — the old week finished, the morning of worship returned. She was followed by David, the son they vaguely remembered, and Rachel, the daughter they'd never met. Wives greeted her with suspicion, the husbands with formality. She resumed her former roles, singing in the choir and — once their mistrust had faded, replaced by a biting sympathy — teaching their children in Sunday School.

The minister's welcome was unreserved. Pastor Mitchell would come to their duplex for Sunday dinner, the only person who spoke with their mother about the past: "the Old Testament," he called it, their years "in the wilderness." Most of his stories were happy. Still, they were limned with a shadow of regret, a countercurrent within the laughter. He never came unless David or Rachel was present. He never asked Laura where she'd been.

Rachel was distant with Pastor Mitchell, but David liked him. They both rooted for the Browns and cheered against Michigan. They both read fantasy novels, and Pastor Mitchell bought David a copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. David idolized Strider, but Pastor's favorite was Samwise Gamgee. "Seeds, not swords," he explained.

David held firm. He preferred battlefields to gardens.

"You won't convince him, Greg," his mother said. "He's a Kingman."

"I'm not a Kingman," declared Rachel. "I'm a Walker."

"That's right," Pastor said. He smiled, hoping to make a connection. But Rachel was already back on the defensive. "You certainly are."

No, he never knew where she met them — the random men like Mr. Pitts who seasoned those years in Midfield. Who invited them to Pittsburgh, to Sandusky, to Lansing.

The internet hadn't arrived, bringing Faithbook and ChristianCupid and the search engines of the "believers-only" dating services. Those algorithms that usurp the guidance of the Holy Spirit, refining the hunt for a suitable mate. Enter the right variables, translating your likes and dislikes into binary code, and a model spouse will emerge: the ideal blend of physical beauty, personal charm, and sound theological doctrine.

No more awkward nights at the singles ministry. No more weekend retreats in the West Virginia mountains, skiing in the afternoon and listening to fireside chats about "Christ, your True Soulmate." No more praying that your Discussion Group will contain an eligible partner — that sharing your Spiritual Journeys™ can pave the way to dinner and a movie.

Fossil Evidence

SWF, 31. Loves hiking, Disney movies, and signing for the deaf ministry at her church. Searching for a Joshua or a Caleb — a man willing to claim the Promised Land, to declare “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 1:6). Must be physically and spiritually fit, eager to laugh and love, and dedicated to an evangelical worldview. Pentecostals welcome (the family of God contains many branches). No fundamentalists.

How far do you refine the search? Do you bust out a contract on the second date, notarizing her faith in the Pre-Tribulation Rapture? What if his interpretation shifts? If she changes her mind?

Pop quiz. Which come first? The Beast with Seven Heads, or The Millennial Reign? The Great White Throne Judgment, or The Judgment Seat of Christ? The Battle of Armageddon, or The Marriage Feast of the Lamb? If he answers wrong, does he miss the cut?

In the nuptials, do you account for eschatology? Voiding the union if a spouse admits doubt? What if the love of your life proves flawed, at least in her End of Timeline?

Don’t neglect the opposite pole. The grand finale to the Holy Scriptures is a doctrinal minefield, but the preamble brings quandaries of its own. Do you insist on seven *literal* days, twenty-four hours each? If she’s attractive enough, would you accept

a poetic reading — a divine process that stretched for millennia? Evolution as an epic symphony: the masterpiece of the Creator, not a cheap bit of sideshow magic.

Is there a gap between the initial verses? One account? Or two?

What about family vacations? Do you stick to the party line, the Creation Museum and right-wing zoos: animals with monogamous, heterosexual behavior and modest genitalia?

Do you visit the Smithsonian? Can you admire those skeletons in the Museum of Natural History? Do the horns of the Triceratops prick your conscience?

You're happiest in the center of the book: the Shepherd and the Sheep, the Sower and the Seed, the Vine and Branches. Pleasant metaphors, clear dualities.

You *love* the thought of a mountaintop sermon: picnic blankets and Jesus and Vanilla Wafers, puffy clouds in the bluest sky. The colors go well with that azure sash and his spotless robe — never mind where Mary found the bleach. You try not to think of Christ's greasy hair. You refuse to imagine the smell: in an age without showers, handling fish and sawing boards beneath Galilee's sun, even the Lord gets a bit rank.

The Beatitudes give you goosebumps: all those lovely *blesseds*. Yes, yes, we agree. Seek the kingdom first, the pearl of great price. Consider the birds of the air.

We hear something about poor, but the sun is warm and our bellies stuffed. By the time He starts rambling about persecution, we've long been fast asleep.

What's that? You'll agree to disagree? That's fine and well when you're all lovey-dovey, caught in the romance of the moment. Go ahead: sidestep those tedious arguments about carbon dating.

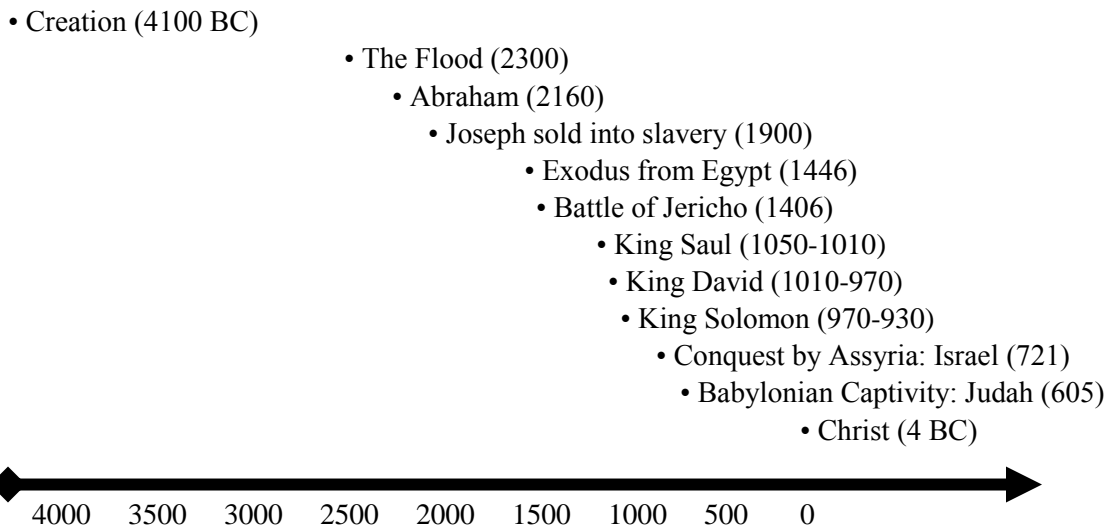
But once you have a family, and young Cody brings that plastic Stegosaurus to the breakfast table, asking how dinosaurs fit in the Ark. . . . I mean, don't take it for granted he'll swallow that bunk about baby reptiles and eggs, as if Noah was also a master thief — sneaking into a T-Rex nest, lucky enough to grab one of each gender.

I'm not trying to be difficult, I promise.

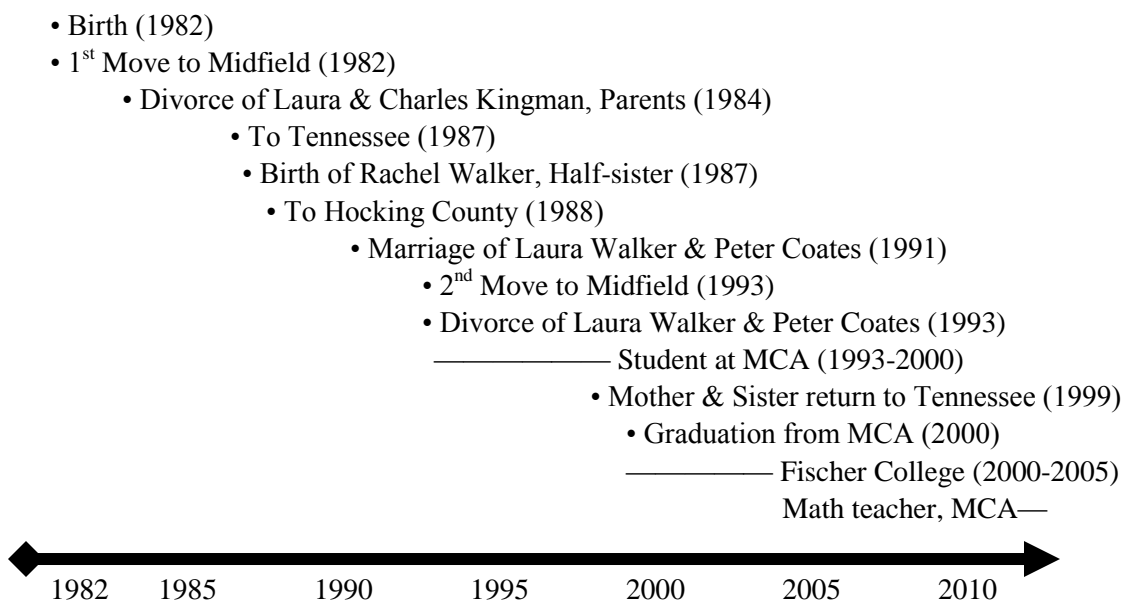
I'm just saying — don't pretend I didn't warn you.

Timelines

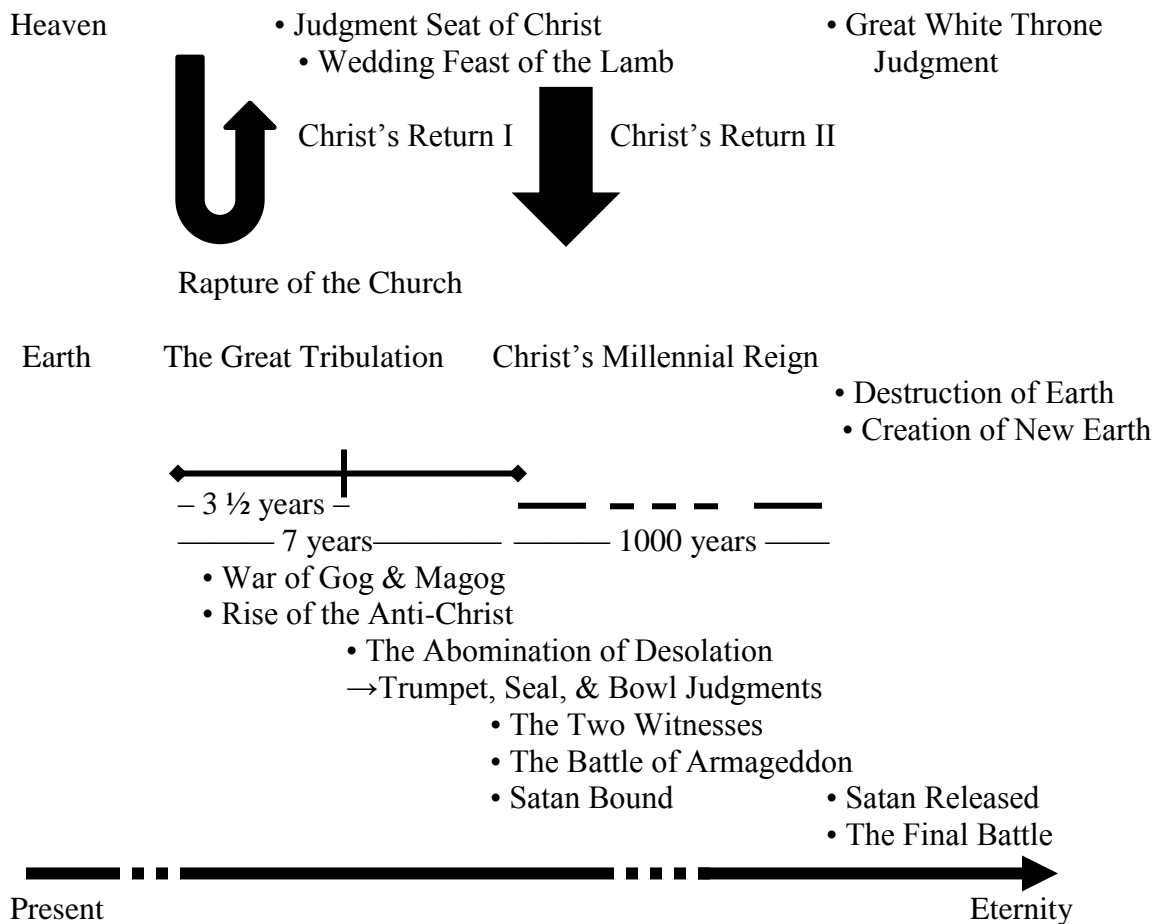
1. Four Millennia of the Old Testament



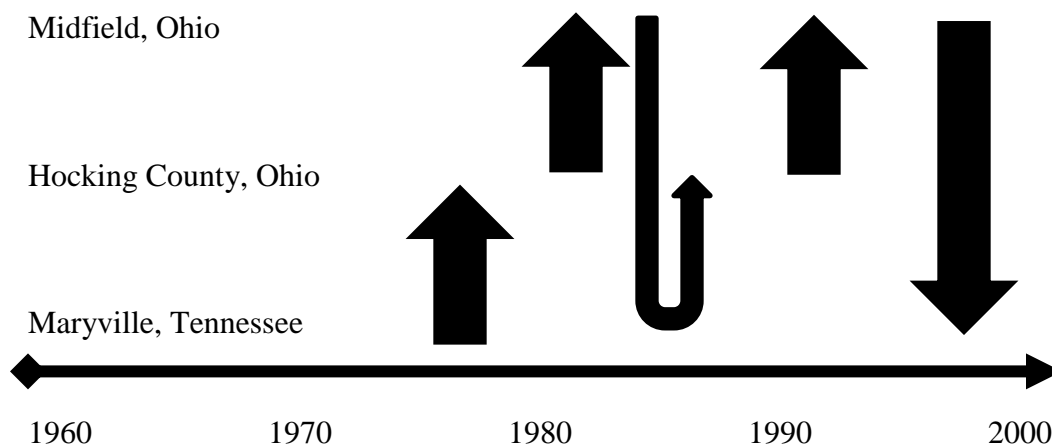
2. Twenty-Eight Years of Dave Kingman's Life



3. The End Times, According to Mr. Pete



4. The Life of Laura Walker



“So Pre-Trib, I won’t eat Post-Toasties”

I

A lot of folks were “Post-Toasties,” according to Mr. Pete: nonbelievers, Communists, Mormons, the French, Democrats, hippies, Catholics, and every Californian but Ronald Reagan. At the Rapture, the faithful would be snatched to heaven . . . “in a moment, the twinkling of an eye.” Anyone left behind would face the Tribulation. In short, they’d be toast. Burnt toast.

II

“Are you a Pre-Trib or a Post-Toasty?” The trail beside the Lynn Camp Prong was narrow. David followed his Grandpa upstream, a vein to the heart of the Smokies

“Speak English, son. But not too well — you’re in America.”

“Are you Pre-Trib or Post-Toasty?”

“Remind me: which side is Luke Skywalker?”

“I’m not talking about *Star Wars*.” Grandpa was kidding, but David played along. “I’m talking about *the Bible*.”

“Remind me: how do you tell the difference, over at Mr. Pete’s church?”

III

The Walkers followed their daughter's request and did not attend her second wedding. She'd had her big day, back when she married Charles. She didn't need another celebration.

A few months after the ceremony, they traveled from Tennessee to see their grandchildren and pay their respects. It was Grandpa's first trip to Hocking County since his mother's funeral. Mr. Pete kept his distance, and Mom acted strange the entire week. She treated her parents with cool reserve, like they were company rather than family. The entire visit, David caught hints of an ongoing fight — an argument that would smolder in his presence, then flare to life once he left the room.

Grandpa was already melancholy. The Walkers had flourished in his absence, multiplied by two generations, their roots fixed deep in the Buckeye soil. His own line was modest by comparison. He had chosen the route of exile and planted himself in Tennessee. Over four decades had passed, he informed his grandson. He hadn't lived in the north since February of 1943, the month he answered his draft notice.

He relaxed on the twisted, backcountry roads of Hocking County. Stories began to emerge: the night they snuck past a Park Ranger's nose, daring his cousin to spend a night in Old Man's Cave. Hidden among the boulders near the alcove, Grandpa practiced his catamount screams.

"Catamount screams?"

"Mountain Lion. Eastern Cougar. Panther — *Painter*, if you talk like your Grandma." Grandpa shook his head. "Same animal, different names. Screams like a woman being murdered. What do they teach you in schools these days?"

David shrugged. “Last week, we talked about adjectives and Benjamin Franklin.”

The combination earned a grunt. “Adjectives are good. Nouns are better. Names. They ought to take an entire year, just teach you the names of things.”

David said nothing. A year like that sounded boring, like the chapters in the Bible with the genealogies, the verses that listed *begats*.

“Old Ben would approve. That’s how he spent his life, you know: making up nouns. Fire Department. Library. Electricity. Nouns that Americans could use.”

They had pulled onto a one-lane track that cut across a field to a small parking lot. At a picnic table, a family was eating lunch. A sign with a map marked the start of a path. “Conkle’s Hollow.” Grandpa pointed to the trail, which crossed a creek on a wooden bridge and disappeared into the forest. “You can’t see it from here, but a canyon opens between those hills. Steep walls, almost two hundred feet high, and a secret tier — halfway up the side — that humans seldom visit. You stand on the rim, looking down on that valley, and you know what God meant, when he said that His world was very good.”

David tried to imagine a view like that. “The word *good* can be an adjective.”

“That’s right. So can *smart*. As in, you’re too *smart* for your own *good*. But that’s the way adjectives work. God worked an entire week, creating nothing but nouns. He’d earned the right to use an adjective.”

David played with the lock, tired of sitting in the car. He wanted to explore the hollow. But Grandpa didn’t move. His hands were draped on the steering wheel, the engine of the car vibrating through the floorboards. “One trail follows the ledge, another the stream — right down the middle of the valley. It starts normal enough, the woods

you'd expect in Ohio, but the canyon walls begin to tighten. The forest gets thick and primeval, like you'll turn a corner and spot a dinosaur at any moment. The canopy opens for this small pool with rock walls and a waterfall that drops from the hidden level."

Grandpa let out his breath and clucked his tongue. "Some places in this world . . . they are so beautiful, my boy — your bones cry out for mercy, just thinking of them."

David could almost picture the secret fall. Almost. The way that he *almost* saw Aslan, even though he was only reading. He would step beneath the icy shower, and it would be just like Lucy, climbing into that wardrobe and walking on Narnia's snow.

Grandpa put the car in reverse. "Sorry, David. I don't think I'm ready." The Cantwell Cliffs were also impressive, he said. Especially where the trail cut between boulders, so you had to inch sideways or risk getting stuck. Still, David was disappointed. The cliffs sounded fun, but the world had lots of *fun* places to hike. The magical spots had grown harder and harder to find.

The county was altered. Grandpa noted the changes as they drove: Ted Erickson's barn was now a store, LuAnn's Candles & Crafts; the Sheffey pasture had become an RV campground; and rental cabins lined Tucker Creek, down in the glen where he shot his first rabbit. Even so, the changes were less than he feared. Next to nothing, compared to the growth around Townsend and Pigeon Forge, the borders of the Smokies. For the most part, the land by the Hockhocking River seemed pretty much the same.

But Grandpa was different, thought David. In Tennessee, drives like this turned him into a chatterbox. Each valley would trigger a legend from the past: Native

American scouts, loggers with fists that could whip Paul Bunyan, and moonshine runners who memorized their shortcuts and sped down the moonlit roads without lights, praying to whiskey gods that no bear or hogs had taken a similar path. Sometimes, the anecdote stemmed from his time as a cub reporter. His interview with a woman who lived her entire life in the notch between Curry He and Curry She Mountains: seventy-six years in the Smokies, all within a mile of Meigs Creek. On the gravel road past Tremont, every turn brought a new tall tale. Like crossing a field in the summer, when the grasshoppers burst from the weeds. Except the insects were stories, and they smacked you in the face with every step.

Not in Ohio. Grandpa told a few yarns, sketched a memory or two about Hocking County into words. But most of his thoughts seemed to burrow deeper, rather than rise to the surface.

Now and then, one of them worked its way to his lips. They had parked in a gravel lot off US 33. The site looked forgotten, far less developed than Cedar Falls or Lake Logan. Which pleased Grandpa. He was all for visitor centers and guardrails and ice cream, but a few places, they needed to stay overlooked.

For the first mile, the trail was anything but promising. Some ranger must have driven his mower across a pasture, then called it a path. Then, without warning, it arced into the forest, made a few turns, and they walked — before David knew what had happened — out onto the arch of a natural bridge. The ravine it spanned was narrow and lined with mud. A seasonal creek, Grandpa said. The drop wasn't far: twenty feet, maybe less. Still, their perch was no wider than David was tall. It terrified him — this

way you could be striding along the surface of the planet, only to lose the ground on either side.

David was cautious, but Grandpa sat on the edge of the arch. Don't worry, he said. If your momma scolds you about dirty britches, I'll take the fall. But he misunderstood. A more literal drop was on David's mind.

They shared an apple. Grandpa relaxed. Touching the rock seemed to draw the stories out. "Once, back in high school, I came to this arch with a girl that I loved."

"A girl that you *loved*?"

"That's right. I stole a kiss, not far from this very spot. Less than two yards from where you're sitting — two yards and five decades."

"I thought you loved Grandma."

The old man seemed taken aback, as if he'd forgotten — just for a second — that he'd been married for almost forty years. Then he recovered. "Of course I love your Grandma. Since the very first time I spotted her on that Maryville street." He set a hand on his grandson's thigh. His knuckles were like knots in a branch. "David, my boy. Let me tell you something. You'll love a lot of things in your life — places, songs, food. You'll probably love a lot of women. Sometimes, you'll even be fool enough to love two at once." David raised his eyebrows. "I'm serious. You don't believe me, but you will. Now, if you're lucky, you'll be half as wise as you're foolish, and you'll spot the love that's meant to stick."

They stopped at a relative's farm. Grandpa strolled the property with a cousin, an old hunting partner from his youth, and David played with family members his own age.

After the visit, Grandpa revealed his disappointment. Their conversation had centered on loss — loved ones who had passed, the years that would never return. “Everything changes,” he said. “Their world hasn’t stopped, just because I wandered south.” You can’t go home again, he claimed, not when the people who made it home have disappeared. He shouldn’t have returned: down in Tennessee, he’d forgotten how much he missed.

You wouldn’t have fallen in love with Grandma, said David. “Not if you never went to Tennessee.”

That’s true, admitted Grandpa. “And I might have missed the Smokies. In the end, I cut a good bargain: I gained more than I lost.” They listed a few of their favorite hikes: the Little River Trail and the loop through Cucumber Gap, past those deserted cabins from the 1920s, back when Elkmont was a popular resort; Cades Cove, where they walked across the fields and looked for deer in the copses; the Middle Prong, the trail that seemed to last forever — in fact, David still hadn’t seen the end, a string of hidden waterfalls that were buried in rhododendron thickets.

“Maybe this summer,” said Grandpa, “now that your legs have grown. But all those trails are valleys. Haven’t we gone to any peaks?”

The Chimneys, said David. Though it was a short hike, only two miles, the second half was steep — almost like climbing stairs. The most dangerous walk in the park, according to Grandpa. Not just the rock scrambling and the cliffs at the top. Tourists from Gatlinburg packed the trail, drawn to its brief length and the promise of commanding views. Their bodies weren’t ready for the slope; their hearts couldn’t handle the strain.

Only the Chimneys? asked Grandpa. They'd need to rectify that situation.

"Come summer, we'll hit Charlie's Bunion or Siler's Bald. The trailheads are high — fifty-five hundred feet or more — so the car tackles most of the climb. I'll teach you to walk a ridgeline: how not to trip, when you're gawking at that view. After that, we'll try something big — Thunderhead or Gregory Bald, maybe even Le Conte. We'll follow the Cyclone into North Carolina, and I'll take you to Shuckstack or Stratton Bald."

IV

That Sunday, Grandpa and Grandma joined them at Hayden Valley Tabernacle. Grandpa had talked about going to Cantwell Creek, to see what faces he recognized. As the week had progressed, he grew more and more relaxed, tracing the paths of his youth. The countryside was a long-lost friend. They just needed some time to get reacquainted.

But Pete was insistent: Grandpa ought to attend Hayden Valley. He mentioned it several times, how they'd preserved the traditional religion of the country — the true remnant, faithful to the last, whereas most of the area churches had fallen away. He wanted to see if Grandpa agreed. Not — David guessed — to assess the health of the church, but to measure his father-in-law's true character.

Grandpa's standards for churches were high. Not rigid — he had friends in many denominations — but potent. If you committed yourself to a creed, he said, the evidence of your life had to prove its worth. Thus he seldom attended services himself. Not because he frowned on the pastor or the congregation, but from shame: he fell short of his own expectations.

That Sunday, the sermon came from the book of Daniel. Pastor Harrison connected its prophecies to the trumpet judgments in Revelation, a topic that suited Mr. Pete. In fact, he exclaimed at dinner, it was probably the best teaching that he'd heard all year.

Grandpa listened in silence, less enthusiastic than his son-in-law. Still, in Pete's eyes, the civil reaction was tacit approval.

The next day, after Pete left for work, Grandpa revealed his true opinion. "If you're gonna preach from a book about Daniel, why not talk about Daniel?"

"What did you expect?" Mom asked. "The Den of Lions?"

"Why not? What about that crazy trio — Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?"

"We already know those stories." Mom's answer surprised David. She often asked similar questions of Mr. Pete. "He's telling us something we haven't learned."

"I haven't *learned* the other stories. I *know* them, but I don't live by them. Trust me: I'd chicken out if I had to face a fiery furnace." Better to remind him of something important, he argued — something that he'd forgotten — rather than playing darts with Scripture, throwing verses at current events and hoping they stuck. "The End Times? I've got enough trouble, watching my steps in the Present Tense."

"That's just your preference," Mom said. "You're not used to the style."

"Are you?"

She matched his gaze with her own hard look. "I'm getting there. Besides, it's the only church Pete will attend."

"Says more about Pete than his church, don't you think?"

“Pete’s not your concern.”

“I’m not concerned about Pete.” Rachel had wandered into the kitchen and climbed onto Grandpa’s lap. She bounced on his knee. “I’m concerned about my grandchildren. I’m worried about *you*.”

Dartboard Prophecy

According to Grandpa, true prophets never played darts. They lived in the wilderness, not TV studios. Not like those “Infomercial Preachers,” who ripped Scripture out of context: spitting references, flashing headlines, and trusting in volume — both the number of claims and how loud they shouted. They overwhelmed their more thoughtful critics.

“No one cares how often you miss, so long as you hit with a few blind stabs. But that’s like playing the lottery — you make a sacrifice each day, hoping you’ll hit the jackpot. In the end, you lose more than you gain.” The worst thing? It didn’t hurt the fool tossing predictions, only those gullible enough to listen. Some of these “prophets” — he made quote marks with his fingers — they didn’t even bother to aim. They threw at the crowd, not the board. “They don’t hit the mark, but they sure put out plenty of eyes.

“Let me tell you something,” he said. “Remember the Puritans? The Pilgrims? They were convinced — looking at scripture and current events — they were certain they lived in the last days. Same with Christians in the next century, and the century after that. They *all* thought the end of the world was

imminent, citing the same verses and evidence that you hear today. *Better* evidence, in some cases.”

David thought of a book that Mr. Pete owned. It explained the last days, how the Soviet Union and liberal European nations would attack Israel with a dramatic pincer movement. How the Euphrates River would dry, allowing the Chinese armies to march from the East. It illustrated the future campaigns with detailed maps: invasion routes and battle plans that drew closer each day.

“Right now,” said Grandpa, “we’re all stuck on the Soviet Union, convinced that Gorbachev is the Anti-Christ. But listen to me: sixty years from now, you’ll be talking with your own grandson. You’ll be watching TV — whatever it is that replaces TV — and seeing them rip down the Berlin Wall. The whole Communist system will collapse, the way all empires collapse in time: China first, because they’re too smart to tolerate all that nonsense. Then Korea, Eastern Europe, Cuba, and finally Russia itself. And the talking heads will need to adjust their schemes.

“They’ll claim they knew it all along. They’ll find a new scapegoat, some Democrat in high office — our first woman president, most likely. She’ll sign a peace treaty with Iran, and they’ll call her the whore of Babylon. The Abomination of Desolation is drawing nigh.”

They ought to return to the Old Testament standards, he said — at least when it came to prophecy. “One miss, and you’re stoned.” The stations would close overnight, freeing the airwaves for something practical. Back in the day, if

he'd reported the news with the same accuracy as these "late-night jabber-wonkies," his editor would have kicked him to the curb.

Even Christ didn't know all the details. "Only the Father knows the exact time and date. Let me tell you something: if Christ didn't know, these fools on TV, they don't know either."

.....

V

"Pre-Trib or Post-Toasty?" repeated Grandpa. They had stopped to watch a fisherman. He stood in the center of the stream, working a pool at the base of a rapid. "Where'd you learn language like that?"

"Sunday School."

Grandpa snorted. Possibly at the comment. More likely, at the fisherman's tentative cast.

"If you're Pre-Trib, the Rapture comes before the Tribulation."

"Does it now? The Christians depart so the heathen can toast?" He didn't let David answer. "Don't listen to me: I'm just giving you a hard time."

They resumed their walk, following the unofficial trail. David was skeptical of the path, suspicious of unmarked routes: anything not on the NPS map.

Grandpa claimed it was fine. The best hikes weren't always anthologized. He pointed to his grandson's guidebook. "You don't need to carry a permission slip."

David didn't know what that meant. But their trek felt dishonest, even a touch reckless. They had crossed the boulder-filled stream on a steel girder: a beam without a rail, less than a yard wide. Almost a story above the water.

They broke for lunch at the halfway point, another rapid and pool combination. Better for trout than the earlier hole, Grandpa claimed.

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"Tell who?"

"The man in the creek." David was not in a pleasant mood, learning they'd have to retrace their steps. He wanted the trail to loop, like Cucumber Gap, not go out & back again. It was the surprise that irked him most, another pitfall of hiking off-map.

"Some things, you have to figure out for yourself," Grandpa said. They finished their ham sandwiches and traded a thermos of tea. "See that stream. A lot of folks claim these mountains never change — the single constant in their fast-paced lives. But that's sentiment. Sentiment about sediment. They don't want to pay attention; they see the mountains they want to see.

"I've been hiking this trail for forty years," Grandpa said, "long before your mother was born." David raised his eyebrows. "That's right — we had creeks back then. I'll tell you something, it's never the same river. Forget the obvious: the extra water after the snowmelt, the bare rocks in the autumn drought. I'm not talking fallen timber or stones that shift during springtime floods. Look at that rapid." Beneath the short drop, only a yard high, the water was churning with foam. "That fall looks the same as the first time I ever saw it."

“But—”

“But it’s not — that’s my point. The flotsam caught in that hydraulic? The branches and shards of wood, the insects attracting the brookies? That debris looks trapped, but it’s constantly renewed. Even the water has changed. Right now, about a mile upstream, on the slopes of Defeat Ridge, the current is gathering speed. You’ll watch it arrive in half an hour. That shale? Each year, it erodes a few millimeters — even more if there’s been a major flood. In a few months, the underbrush will be different. Anyone knows that. But the trees, even the trees will have grown.”

“Except for the pines.”

“The pines?” Grandpa was confused, a man wrenched from his pleasant dream.

“Because of the beetles.” Earlier in the hike, Grandpa had described how the pine trees were dying throughout the park — an insect invasion that couldn’t be stopped.

“That’s right. The trees killed by beetles wouldn’t be growing.” He found his bearings and touched his grandson’s back. “You know what you are?”

“Too smart for my own good?”

“Exactly.” Grandpa stood to his feet. He bent over and tried to touch his toes, then looked at the creek and sighed. “When I’m gone, return me to these hills.”

“Sir?”

“My ashes. Scatter them someplace good — along this valley, the backside of Sugarland, the cascades on Twentymile Creek.” He grinned. “Somewhere off-trail and out-of-bounds. Somewhere I’m not supposed to be.”

VI

Hiking downstream, they moved faster than before. “It’s like life,” observed Grandpa. “Once you’re over the hill, everything passes too quickly. Before you know it, you’re back at the trailhead.”

They crossed the girder a second time. “I guess that’s my answer. I’m not really worried about the end of the world, my boy — not with my own finish line so near.”

At Grandpa’s truck, they had Cokes from the cooler and split a Twix. “The world changes, David. But it also endures. The Creator knows what He’s doing. So I guess you could say I’m a Pan-Tribulationist. . . .” After a pause, a punch line clarified his statement. “All things will pan out in the end.”

Grandpa Speaks of Pittsburgh: Take II

“Son.”

“Grandson.”

“Son, have you ever been to Pittsburgh?”

David shook his head.

“Probably for the best,” Grandpa said. “It’s the city God dropped.”

“The city God dropped?”

“Whole town, utilities and all. Slipped out of His hands and crash-landed in Pennsylvania.”

“Slipped out of His hands.” The idea bothered David, though the story wasn’t true.

Truth has nothing to do with it, Grandpa said. A good yarn slides across the face of reality, like butter on a hot griddle.

Still, the image disturbed him. It challenged his favorite verses, John 10:27-29, a passage he’d learned in E†B Clubs. The sheep in the Father’s hands, and the strength of His mighty grasp.

He attended the clubs with his cousins at Cantwell Creek Baptist. Like Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, you earned badges to wear on a uniform — learning verses

instead of knots; bringing visitors to church, not selling cookies. They met Wednesday nights in the Fellowship Hall, where each team earned points throughout the evening: competing in races and events during Game Time; reciting their scripture verses during Group Time; and responding to questions about the message in Gospel Time. The winners earned candy and bragging rights for a week.

David loved E†B. The night was filled with activity, and everything you did was translated into math: Balloon Basketball, memorizing the books of the Bible, the Root Beer Relay, even the verses you found during Sword Drills. As a third-grade boy, David belonged to the Braves. Their handbook design featured arrows and teepees.

Hayden Valley was too small to sustain a club. They had child care for kids five and under. After that, said the elders, the children should learn to attend the adult service. Which seemed ridiculous to Mom. Sitting through sermons was counterproductive, she argued. It trained a child that church was boring. Dave couldn't recall Pete's answer, only its lack of sense. They compromised: Hayden Valley for David on Sunday mornings, Cantwell Creek and E†B on Wednesday nights.

E†B: A Brief History

E†B was founded by Chuck Noland in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1958.

Patterned after the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, it was designed to provide an enjoyable & edifying Christian alternative to secular institutions for young men and women (Grades 3-6). The acronym E.T.B. stands for Example to the Believers (the letter T was replaced by a graphic resembling a cross during a late-70s marketing update). It was inspired by I Timothy 4:12, in which Paul

challenges his young apprentice: “Let no man despise thy youth: but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”

Noland divided his two-hour program into thirds, each segment focused on two of the six qualities that Paul mentions. In Group Time, the participants gather in groups of 7-10 children, an adult leader, and an assistant (often a high school student). They emphasize Word and Conversation, reciting their memory verses and completing detailed worksheets based on the weekly Bible lessons.* Game Time emphasizes Charity and Spirit through teamwork and sportsmanship, and Gospel Time uses songs and teaching to inspire the youth toward Faith and Purity.

Noland passed away in 1972, but not before seeing his creation take root in a number of churches throughout southern Ohio. Today, though not as widespread as more popular programs such as Royal Ambassadors and AWANA clubs, E†B materials are present in churches and schools across twenty-four states and seven countries.

* During the initial years of the club, Noland created these worksheets on a weekly basis — mining his personal quiet time as a source. As time passed, he revised these materials and grouped them into four primary workbooks: Patriarchs & Prophets; Songs & Wisdom; the Gospels; and the Epistles. The club director would select one of these themes and emphasize it for the school year. Thus, by rotating the topics, a four-year participant could devote a year of study to each of

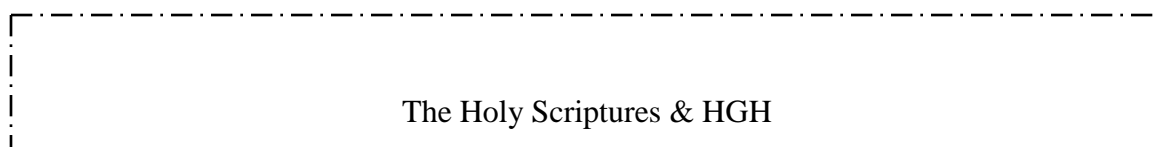
these subjects. Today, E†B offers nineteen distinct workbook themes (more specialized and focused than Noland’s original topics). Most of the newest additions have extensive online content for clubbers to access. In fact, this material has grown so popular that parents who homeschool their children will often adopt E†B resources for their Bible curriculum.

— *Summarized from the E†B website.*



Rachel was fascinated with E†B. When David came to the dinner table in his uniform, she quizzed him about the Ohio Games and the National Quiz, the competitions with groups from other churches. She knew what the acronym meant — “Example to the Believers” — but not the verses in Timothy that inspired the slogan. She asked him to recite the E†B Pledge, joining him for the battle cry at the conclusion, shouting “Word — Faith — Deed” at the top of her lungs.

Her favorite were Sword Drills. In these contests, you held your Bible aloft, high in the air, and grasped your sword by its spine. The leader called out a verse, and you raced to locate the passage, leaping to your feet to read it out loud. Most rounds, the contest was over in seconds — even for verses among the minor prophets.



The Holy Scriptures & HGH

Cheating annoyed David, especially in Sword Drills. Clubbers who refused to hold their arms completely straight. Who slipped their thumb between pages, hoping for an extra millisecond.

The most disturbing were Bibles with tabs, which marked the location of every book. They were legal but unsportsmanlike — the evangelical equivalent of anabolic steroids.

They didn't even help, in David's opinion. Whether plastic flaps or indentations, they slowed the owners down — breaking the rhythm as pages flew under your thumb. They became a crutch. Instead of relying on memory, confident that Haggai followed Zephaniah, you took the time to read the labels. It was the difference between two infielders: the beginner who recited the rules of base running as he trapped a grounder; the professional who threw to the right bag on instinct.

No, David argued. He could beat posers with tabs any day of the week. He spun his Bible on a finger, a gunslinger from the Wild West. If Sword drills were duels, his trigger-finger ruled Hocking County.

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“Why can't I go to E†B too?” asked Rachel.

In a few years, said Mom. “When you're old enough. Right now, you get to come to Hayden Valley with me.”

More and more, the arrangement disturbed Mr. Pete. It divided their family and sent the wrong message — specifically, that he didn't have full control. It set a poor example for the congregation.

According to Mr. Pete, the doctrine at E†B was too inclusive. It was designed to appeal to multiple churches, not all of them counted among the Redeemed. Not all

Baptists were baptized, he liked to claim — not in the blood of the Lamb. As for Nondenominational? Well, the Bible had another word for that nonsense. Lukewarm.

He had noticed bad habits in David: a lack of respect for authority, an insolent tongue. The sinful traits were especially prominent on Thursday mornings. E†Bs were too permissive, he argued. They encouraged the clubbers to speak, not listen. “Train up a child in the way he should go,” he quoted, “and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

David ignored most of these comments. But one thing — a minor detail — never failed to irritate him. Mr. Pete called them E†Bs, not E†B clubs. As in: “What heretical crap did they teach you at E†Bs *this time*?” But adding an “s” didn’t make sense.

“It can’t be plural,” Dave told him.

“Who died and made *you* professor? *Doctor* Kingman.”

“E†B is singular.”

Mr. Pete didn’t answer.

“There’s only one,” said Mom.

“I know what *singular* means,” snapped Mr. Pete. “Aren’t there clubs at different churches? Sounds *plural* to me.” He spat the word *plural*, and David felt something land on his cheek.

He ached to respond — to explain that, even with hundreds of clubs, E†B itself would always be singular. But he’d learned his lesson. Once, he’d corrected his stepfather’s tip at a restaurant. Another time, on the drive to Marietta, he warned that

they'd run out of gas — calculating their miles per gallon and the amount of fuel left in the tank. Both times, he'd been correct. Both times, the following week had been hell.

So David swallowed his frustration. He took the advice that he often received from Mr. Pete: he kept his trap shut.

Eternal Security

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.

John 10:27-29

The compulsion arrived in waves: a still, small urge that grew to an irresistible tow. It was subtle at first. A pang of anxiety, the exact sensation that Dave would feel — years later — as he locked the front door, then worried about the stove. The remedy was even similar: a calm review of the basic facts. He had checked the burners and removed any flammable trash. He accepted Christ to be his Savior in the fourth grade — on February 6, 1990 — responding to an altar call at the end of E†B.

That night, when he shared the good news, his mother was pleased but surprised. Hadn't he already asked Jesus into his heart, back in Midfield? After church one Sunday afternoon, in kindergarten or the first grade? Pastor Mitchell had been visiting for lunch, she was all but certain. He had reviewed the decision with her son, checking that the young man understood, and led him through the sinner's prayer.

David had fragments of an early memory — kneeling in prayer at their brown couch. But he didn't know what he was saying. He had a picture but no sound.

You were baptized, Mom said. Full immersion, dipped backwards and raised again three times: in the name of the Father . . . the Son . . . and the Holy Ghost. You

professed your faith to the congregation. “Your father was there. The next time you visit Midfield, ask him to show you the pictures.”

Pictures?

“He took some photos to show your Grandparents.”

Didn’t they come?

No, Mom answered, a trace of bitterness in her voice. “Your Grandmother was upset with me that weekend. Not that we’re buddies now.”

A panel opened in the wall behind the stage, directly beneath the backlit cross. Pastor Mitchell and the convert would stand in the waist-deep water, looking down on the congregation. David could see the handrail in his mind, descending along the steps and beneath the surface. But he roamed that church with impunity. Once, he snuck into the baptistery with the older boys. They dared each other to touch the water and joked about throwing him into the pool. They designed elaborate schemes: building a waterslide, or leaving a school of goldfish in the font.

He could recall all that. But not the baptism itself.

Mom’s description was convincing. She saw details that he couldn’t remember. But that was the problem. The memory belonged to *her* history — not *his* — and he wasn’t about to risk his eternal future, not on the word of another person. Not even his mother.

So when the speaker gave the invitation, bidding the clubbers to receive Christ, he raised his hand. He inched out of the row, stepping on several feet. A cousin shot him

a curious glance, a skeptical look that his group leader shared as well. They walked to a quiet room, sitting on folding metal chairs, and reviewed the Four Spiritual Laws. David confessed his sins and asked Jesus to forgive them. He wrote the date on the inside cover of his Bible and signed his name. Mr. Thompson signed it as well, adding an inscription: “Nothing can take you away from the Father, David. He will never let you go. John 10:27-29.”

In the years that followed, whenever the worry returned, he would picture the Bible on his bookcase. Sometimes, when the panic grew fierce, he would run his finger across the indentations from Mr. Thompson’s pen.

He could sympathize with Thomas, that Obsessive-Compulsive Disciple. He understood the need to touch Christ’s wounds.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39

Sometimes, he nipped the worry in the bud. Other days, it settled deep and refused to leave. He would stand outside the apartment door — paralyzed — afraid that a burglar might ransack his personal files. He’d listen to the sermon with alarm, convinced he was rocky soil . . . a field choked with weeds. That the sower had come, but salvation hadn’t taken root.

He felt bound for a double curse: identity theft on this earth, the Lake of Fire in the world to come.

“What must I do to be saved?” the Philippian jailer had cried to Paul and Silas.

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,” they answered. The man believed, as had Dave — he truly had, he told himself.

But elsewhere, the instructions got more specific. “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus,” Paul wrote to the Romans, “and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” An additional clause or two, the process a bit more complex.

David had confessed with his mouth, back on that evening with Mr. Thompson. But his heart had been burdened with fear, not bursting with faith. According to TV movies on Saturday afternoons, during the launch protocol for nuclear missiles, the officers turned their keys at exactly the same moment. Did salvation work in a similar manner? If the belief and confession weren’t synchronized — formally stamped with the same date and time, right there in the Book of Life — would the booster engines fail to ignite? And without the celestial rockets, how would you get to heaven?

Such questions could overwhelm him, especially at Hayden Valley Tabernacle, where Pastor Harrison’s face could burn with passion — a visual reminder of hell and the torment of the unredeemed. David would squirm in the pew, anxious about his soul. Had he been sealed with the Spirit for eternity? Was he washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Some weeks, the pressure became too great. As the organist cycled through the hymn — four, five, even six verses of “I Surrender All” or “Just As I Am” — the evangelist would extend his plea. He could wait, enough time for one final sinner to cling to the old rugged cross. David inched past his family, ignoring his mother’s scowl and his sister’s mouthed question: “Where are you going?” Visiting preachers would shout in celebration. Not Pastor Harrison, who was concerned by the young man’s routine.

He trod the center aisle, his gaze locked on the communion table, “In Remembrance of Me” inscribed on the polished wood. He knelt at the steps to the stage and closed his eyes, clasping his hands until they hurt. Making the pain real, convincing himself he was truly present. He tried to amplify his senses and catalogue each detail. He would never, ever, ever forget the moment.

Once, after the service was over, Pastor sat with him in the front pew. He talked about eternal security: “Once you are saved, David, you are always saved.” They looked at a tract called “The Train of Salvation.” On the cover, an engine was pulling a coal car and a caboose. The engine was Fact, which was fueled by Faith and pulled the caboose of Feeling. The train could run without that final car.

Does that make sense? Pastor asked. No matter how you feel, your salvation won’t disappear. Nothing, not even your death, can separate you from the love of Christ. Romans 8:38-39. Once Jesus starts his good work in your heart, He’ll never stop — not till He returns or He calls you home. Philippians 1:6.

David nodded. He felt childish, now that the music had stopped and the church had emptied. He wanted to leave. He couldn't explain how it felt, listening to that call. When the panic hit. When the altar pulled you to the front. When your chest grew so tight, your heart was about to explode.

Back in the car, his mother reminded him of the verses that Mr. Thompson had written: "No matter how lost you feel, she said, Jesus has you firmly in his hands."

Mr. Pete was less encouraging. "Sometimes," he explained, catching his stepson's eye in the rearview mirror, "that fear is the work of the Holy Spirit, warning you that it's time to get your business straight with God."

Later that night, David worried about the coal — the faith that fueled the train. What happened, he wondered, when a believer's supply was tapped out?

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1:6

He almost suffocated, the first time he heard the song at Midfield Bible Fellowship. He was five or six, paying scant attention to the service. But the lilt in the melody caught his attention — like a sea chanty, something the Lost Boys might sing in Peter Pan. The opening lyrics broke this pleasant spell:

I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore.

Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more;

The image struck home — not the concept of *sin* or *stain*, but the feeling of drowning. He could see through the eyes of the doomed man: the water that rose and fell, obscuring his vision. The waves entered his mouth, and his throat began to close. The resolution to this crisis came early in the song — the second half of that opening verse:

But the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me, now safe am I.

David missed the dramatic rescue. He was choking and gasping for air. By the time the chorus arrived — the bass voices offering their counterpoint to the women of the church — Mom was rushing him from the sanctuary.

An allergic reaction, she determined. Something he ate for breakfast. For years, nectarines were off-limits.

He never told her the truth — not even that night, when a nightmare based on the song had left him screaming in the dark. It was all too easy, slipping beneath those waves. The arms of the Savior were harder to feel.

Love lifted me! (even me)
Love lifted me! (even me)
When nothing else could help,
Love . . . lif-ted . . . me!

He became a junkie, he explained to Bethany. She'd popped the question on their first date: When was he saved? She traced her own conversion to church camp, the summer between seventh and eighth grade.

“Which time?” he said.

“What do you mean, *which time*?” His answer confounded her. To Dave, it was the most natural explanation in the world. Far easier to grasp than certainty, the ability to pinpoint a specific time and date — as if CNN, the Celestial News Network, had captured the moment for its archives.

He described that earliest memory — praying at the couch — and the years in Hocking County, when he couldn’t last more than two months without marching to the altar for his fix. The urge would become too great, and he’d ask Christ to be his Savior once again.

Back at Midfield Bible Fellowship, where the sermons were encouraging, not confrontational — Mr. Pete would have labeled them “compromised” — the need to double-check his salvation lessened. Still, whenever a chapel speaker at MCA would shake him to the core, he inwardly answered the call to “rededicate” his life. “That way,” he explained to Bethany, “you weren’t denying the previous commitment. You didn’t have to admit your fears to your friends and family, the people who thought you were already saved.” It was like renewing your health insurance, making sure that your coverage was continuous. No . . . more like an umbrella policy. Your house was already protected with fire insurance — your body preserved from hell, your mansion in heaven secure. But there might be loopholes. It was good to obtain that extra layer of coverage, just in case. Because you never knew—

“But you *do* know!” cried Bethany. “That’s the whole point of Eternal Security, those verses from Romans you cited.”

“I do *now*. I was an emotional child, easy to sway.”

The truth was, he still walked the aisle in his heart. On Spiritual Emphasis Day, he passed out wooden stakes to his devotional class — encouraging students to inscribe their commitments in permanent marker, along with the date, and drive the memento into their yard. He always kept one for himself. The collection was growing in his closet, one stake a year. When the vampires attacked, he'd be ready. When the last trumpet sounded . . . well, that was his greater fear.

Grandpa Speaks of Pittsburgh, Take III

“Son.”

“Grandson.”

“Son, have you ever been to Pittsburgh?”

David shook his head.

“Probably for the best,” said Grandpa. “It’s the city God dropped.”

“The city God dropped?”

“The whole town, utilities and all. Slipped out of his hands and crashed-landed in Pennsylvania.”

God had been hard at work, hauling cities across the Keystone State. He’d snap off a chunk of New York, then thread His way past the Appalachian ridgelines — taking Denver to the Rockies or Memphis to the Mississippi. Like the loaves and the fishes, Grandpa explained. When Jesus broke the bread in two, those biscuits kept multiplying — like the servers at Cracker Barrel who refilled the tea until you floated off to Chattanooga. Five thousand people were fed — not to mention those baskets of leftovers, one for each of the disciples. Well, the cities on the coast, God used them like he used the bread: source material for settlements farther inland.

“The smaller pieces, He chunked like Frisbees.” Mansfield. Chillicothe. Peoria. “He skipped Ann Arbor across Lake Erie.” Hiking next to a stream, Grandpa would find a smooth stone and furnish a visual aid: “one, two, three hops into Michigan.”

Sometimes, the town might get snagged in a valley. Which explained Harper’s Ferry and Johnson City, in Grandpa’s opinion. Not to mention Charleston, West Virginia.

He carried the largest sections, the primary reason that *so many* cities landed in Ohio. After hoisting a thick slice of Baltimore across the Alleghenies, God would be eager to set down the burden — Cleveland, Akron, Columbus — and turn back for the next load.

“Every now and then, He’d get a big idea — like throwing Omaha on His back and trekking all the way out to Nebraska.” One epic stroll, He lifted St. Louis with one hand, Kansas City with the other — like a waiter balancing two trays of dishes — and pinned Missouri to the earth. The Show Me state had developed this bad habit of wandering, slipping off to scout the country for itself. The bookends imposed a semblance of order.

Not everything went according to plan. As he carried Minneapolis past the Great Lakes, God slipped on the bank of Lake Michigan. Soon, the gouge filled with water. He named it Green Bay, some inside joke with Jeremiah, and wiped his muddy sandal on Wisconsin. “A few of those northern lakes?” Grandpa said. “Heel prints.” The others were divots from angels — the hackers of the heavenly host, who golfed on their day of rest. The Dairy State made an excellent tee when chipping into Canada.

“Anyway, annoyed at the mishap, God dropped Minneapolis harder than He had intended.” The Minnesota ground was frozen, the metropolitan area brittle from the frigid air. “The city just snapped in two. But God being God, He divined a pretty good solution.” He named the smaller chunk St. Paul — after His wacky friend from the Epistles — and told the cities to play nice. “‘It is not good for towns to be alone,’ God explained. ‘Especially out where it’s so darn cold.’”

He let the disciples handle the Southwest, giving them lots of room to muck about and make little mistakes. Things went wrong from the start. The Mormons blocked access into Utah. Then, when Levi tried setting a town near Pike’s Peak, the locals drove him away. They’d have nothing to do with a government official, especially a former tax collector. So Judas stepped in with Colorado Springs instead.

Even worse, they started this competition, seeing who could found the most cities, and everything got out of hand. They established Tuscon and Los Angeles, Flagstaff and Phoenix and Santa Fe, all before the Lord could stop them — explaining that annual rainfall in that arid country would never sustain these civic dreams. “No more,” He said, a second before Peter dropped Las Vegas with a thud. The Creator looked at the Western rivers, sorrow and foresight within His eyes. “I’m terribly sorry,” He told the rushing waters. “This wasn’t exactly my plan.”

Pittsburgh was also an accident, according to Grandpa. The Lord and Enoch had been talking by the Chesapeake Bay, reminiscing about the Fertile Crescent. “Walk with me,” God said. “There’s a valley in Montana I want you to see.” So they headed west,

stopping in Philly to grab cheesesteak sandwiches and an armload of Scotch-Irish neighborhoods, not certain where they would fit.

“Somewhere in Ohio,” God said.

“You put *everything* in Ohio,” said Enoch. “What about Indiana?”

“What about it?”

“You could drop it on the border — half in one state, half in the other. Like you did with Bristol, down in Virginia and Tennessee.”

God considered the proposal. “Maybe with Toledo. But don’t blame me for Bristol — that was Peter’s idea, not Mine. He wanted to set it further east, touching North Carolina as well. A third of the city in each state: one for my Son, one for Moses, and another for Elijah.”

Enoch laughed.

“I know,” said God. “Peter. You gotta love him. Well — *I* do, at least. *You* get to make up your own mind. *Two states*, I told him. *Not three*. He grumbled, but accepted My Will in the end.” They were following the banks of the Youghiogeny, and God adjusted His grip on the cargo. “Still, I’m worried about that town. In the future, they’re going to construct this massive stadium — something akin to that Ziggurat at Babel. People will gather from miles around, watching men race in circles for hours on end.” He shrugged. “I’m concerned it’s Pete’s fault.”

“Remember his plan for South Dakota?”

“The corn tabernacle?”

“No, out in the Black Hills — sculpting each prophet’s face on a different mountain, so tourists could literally walk through the Old Testament.”

“That’s right.” God laughed. “*If I wanted Noah’s mug on a mountain, I told him, I’d carve it on Ararat.*”

“Well,” Grandpa said, “at that moment, laughing about Peter, God stubbed his toe near the Monongahela River.”

“God stubbed His toe?”

“Is there an echo in here? You don’t think God has toes?” He didn’t wait for David’s answer. “You can imagine what happened.”

“What?”

“I told you to imagine it.” Grandpa was silent for a moment, pretending the tale was finished.

“What happened?”

“You know when you slip on a rug, how it scrunches into folds?”

David nodded.

“The same thing happens to land. As His toe plowed through the crust of the earth, God kicked up this series of ridges — right there, next to the river.”

“Really?”

“Why do you think they’re called *foothills*?”

David groaned. “What about Pittsburgh?”

Grandpa was solemn. “Now that was the real tragedy. The city slipped out of His hands and splattered all over the place. Some of the neighborhoods were fine, landing down in the valley. But the rest dropped on hillsides, crowded together on steep inclines.

The houses look ready to slide down the mountain. But they won't. They landed with just enough force to stay put."

God knocked a few tunnels for roads and trains, then left the residents to sort things out.

"Well, that's the pits," said Enoch, looking at the disheveled city. "No offense, Lord."

"None taken," answered God.

"So they named the city Pittsburgh," said Grandpa. It was the third or fourth time he'd told David the tale. "You don't believe me? Go to Pennsylvania. Take a look for yourself. Tell me it doesn't look like God dropped a city on the mountains."

When David finally saw Pittsburgh, the yarn lost a portion of its luster. Grandpa was right: the neighborhoods were scattered all over the place. That part of the story rang true. But the downtown, positioned so carefully — wedged between the converging rivers — it seemed too planned to be an accident. The city was too well . . . *aimed*.

On the brochure from E†B's national camp, where clubbers from across the country gathered for two weeks in July, there was a picture of a giant water-balloon slingshot. Surely, Dave reasoned, this man-made contraption was modeled after a celestial catapult, a device God used for launching cities across the continent. Pittsburgh had been a direct hit.

On Dayton, Ohio. Because if Pittsburgh resembles a direct hit, a shot that God made Himself with the Celestial City Catapult, then Dayton was fired by the disciples. After all, you can't find a better target than the crosshairs formed by Interstates Seventy and Seventy-Five, not when aiming a device whose sole purpose is slinging mid-sized metropolitan areas from the coast to the heartland of the continent. Yet they missed, and Dayton had landed several miles to the south.

Being Dave's thoughts as he draws near the city of flight.

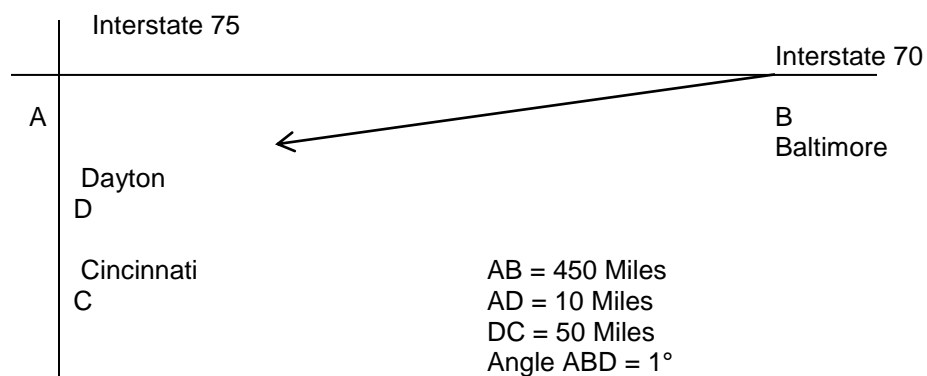
Review Problem – Section IV

Geometry – Mr. Kingman

Name: _____

You've come into possession of a glorious toy: a water balloon slingshot with a massive range, capable of firing projectiles hundreds of miles. Positioning yourself in Baltimore, you aim along Interstate 70 (which, for the sake of this assignment, defies real-world geography and runs due east). Your target? Dayton, Ohio, only ten miles south of the I-70/I-75 interchange, which is 450 miles to the west of your location. To compensate for the southern drift, you aim 1° to your left.

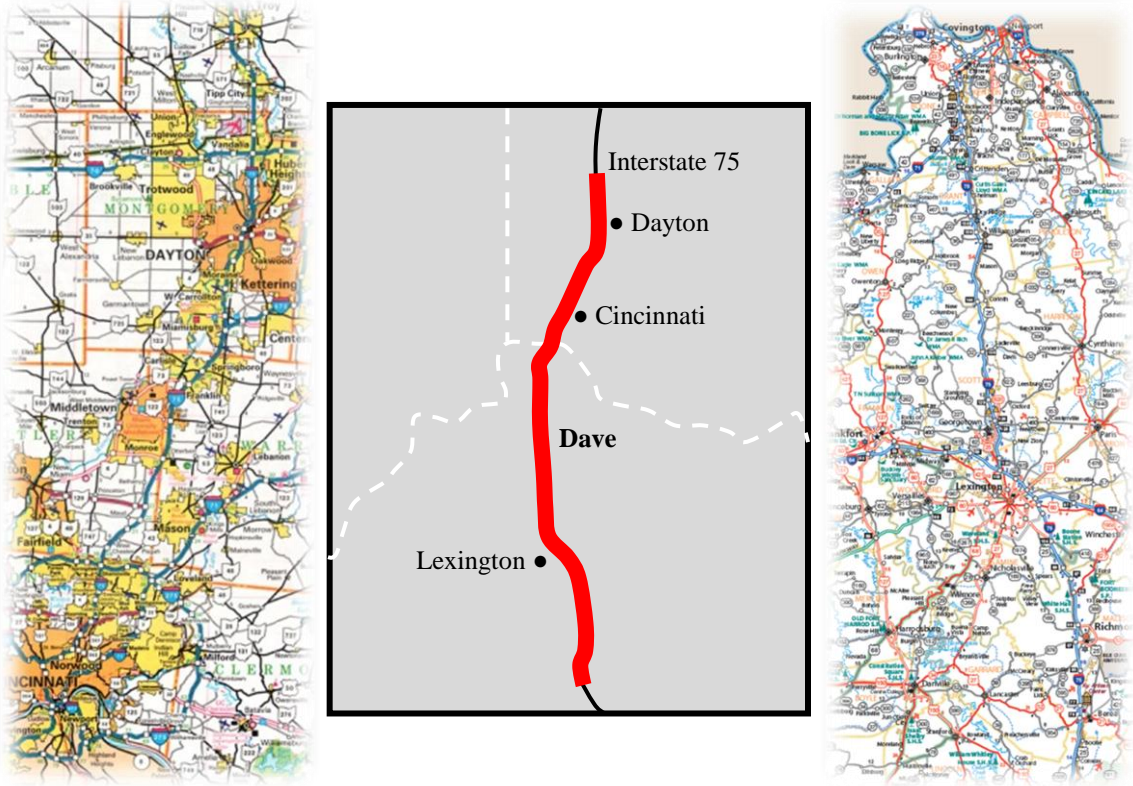
1. If your aim is steady, how many feet from the target will your shot land?
2. Suppose you wanted to hit Cincinnati, 50 miles south of Dayton. How many degrees to the left should you aim?



SECTION V: TERMINAL HYDRAULIC

In which the teacher cannot escape his thoughts. Also, a statue of Christ gives chase.

Crossroads and Crosshairs — The Gem City, a mile at a time — Ohio: Where Else? — Dialogues on Election — Flood Control & Earthen Dams — An Art Museum — Eagles, Crusaders, and Knights — An Evangelical Douche — Engagement, Ohio — Tar Pits Jesus — XXX — Pete Rose & Ezra Pound — First Beer Proves Disappointing — Satan's Sin Pit — Irresistible Grace — Bill Clinton, Noah, & the Monks of Gethsemane — Prophets in Pantsuits — Stunts on the Interstate — Review Problem, Section V



LENGTH: 197 miles on I-75, from the outskirts of Dayton to the hills south of Berea, KY.

HIGHLIGHTS: Historic floods; a giant statue of Christ; facts about driving across Kentucky.

CAUTIONS: See HIGHLIGHTS

TRAILHEAD: The Crossroads of America, the intersection of I-75 and I-70.
Friday morning, 1:45 A.M. October 15, 2010

The Passion of the Miami Valley

A giant cross floats above the Midwest. It drifts east, past Kansas and Missouri, a slow-moving front that shadows the plains. The land tilts, sloping to drink at the Mississippi River, and the speed begins to increase. The apparition clears the broad channel and climbs the bank into Illinois. Its velocity lessens, and it coasts to a halt, hovering above western Ohio — “The Heart of It All” — directly over the Miami Valley.

Gravity seizes control, wrenching the cross to the earth. Mighty beams slam into the ground, which shudders at the impact. They crush forest and settlement, courthouse and oak. They sink into the fields, tattooed against the land.

Asphalt lava spreads along each gash. It cools like balm, forming a permanent scar.

Open the wound to the public.

Travelers pour from state to state, dashing from the Rockies to the Chesapeake, slicing the country from Sault Ste. Marie to the Florida Keys.

Destinations don't matter — not really — as long as they maintain a reasonable speed.

The Crossroads of America

Interstate 70 nears.

The golden junction: where a North-South route meets its East-West twin.

Dave pictures the crossroads as a cross.

Asphalt itself will cry out, says the Gospel of Luke.

Dave pictures the cross as crosshairs: a ray gun's target on Spaceship Earth.



The intersection has transformed since Dave was a child. The former exchange was a death trap, a cloverleaf whose dual-purpose merge lanes required high-speed weaving. A relic from the Eisenhower era, ill-equipped to handle the 21st century traffic.

The new construction is a knot of flyovers. Jets adorn the concrete walls, a tribute to the region's heritage of aviation. Such images taunt motorists and their futile attempts at haste. Imagine a scale from dead calm to Chuck Yeager: the drivers are closer to the grave than they are to the speed of sound.

Curiosity at the Crossroads

1. How many cars use this junction each week?
2. Out of 300 million Americans, how many will visit the intersection in a given year?
3. What fragment of the US population has passed within 10 miles of Dayton, Ohio?
4. How many reside along these two routes? What fraction of the nation as a whole?

The Gem City

INTERSTATE 75, MILEPOST 61:

Dave contemplates the Electoral College. Could a candidate work *exclusively* along I-75 and I-70, a Greyhound update to the whistle stop campaign, and assemble the votes to win a national election?

MILE 60:

He thinks about politics — red states and blue states, old states and new states — and composes rhymes, plagiarizing lines from Dr. Seuss:

One State, Two States.

Red State, Blue State.

This one has a couple stars.

That one has a lot of bars.

Do you like the Glenn Beck's ham?

I do not like it, Sam-I-Am.



Is there really much difference, he wonders, between the good people who live along I-75 and the folks along I-15? How were the citizens more homogenous: by state, or by interstate?

Perhaps we should scrap the very notion of states — a quaint, outdated paradigm, a horse-and-cart model in the age of internal combustion — and realign ourselves by highway instead?

MILE 59:

Dave laughs at the sign for Needmore Road.

Why don't you build some? he asks.

MILE 58:

Dave attempts to compose a pun, *asking a brother to paradigm*.

MILE 57:

He spots a sign for Wright State University.

Wright State, wrong school, his Grandfather likes to joke.

Nicknames for Dayton that Dave can recall:

1. The Crossroads of America
2. The Birthplace of Aviation
3. The Gem City.

None of the names seem to fit. 1. The crossroads are north of the city limits. What's more, I-70 ends in Utah, not the shores of the Pacific, leaving millions of West Coast citizens without the proper access. 2. The Wright Brothers were born here, but they didn't stay. They left for the East Coast, where they took flight. 3. He tries to envision the region as gem-like, but it just doesn't strike him as precious.



MILE 56:

The skyline emerges. The first of the rivers appears.

Three streams converge on the city: the Stillwater, the Great Miami, the Mad. This knowledge — added to his grasp of the city's nicknames — places Dave within an elite class of American citizens.



— *Not so brilliant as one might suppose. He has forgotten Wolf Creek.*

MILE 54:

The road turns to avoid the downtown: a modest collection of buildings, but nothing that scrapes the clouds. Still, they contain more stories than one might expect, out here in western Ohio.

The city's population is shrinking, down from 240,000 in the 1970s to 160,000 in these harsh economic times. On the other hand, its greater metropolitan area is going strong: almost a million people.

— *A million people. In Dayton, Ohio?*

It is the mystery of the entire state.

Why — given such a grand nation — have so many citizens settled *here*?

They aren't massive, these cities. Nothing like Chicago or Houston, Phoenix or Denver or San Francisco. But they're incessant. They rise from the fields, one right after the next: seventy thousand, forty thousand, sixty thousand, until you get to eleven million.

But that's Ohio for you: round on the ends and high in the middle, with plenty of room for one more. Like the old couple down the block, those neighbors so humble and modest, you never suspect their secret: decades of diligent saving and compound interest have left them a fortune in the bank.



Where does the country live?

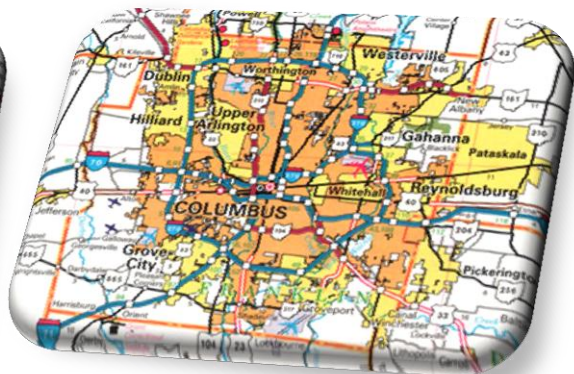
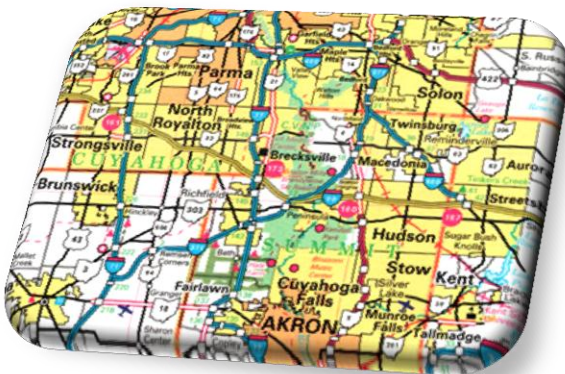
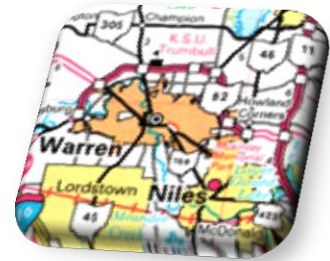
— *California. Texas. New York.*

Obvious enough. Florida.

— *Sure, given our southern drift. Illinois. Pennsylvania.*

Which makes sense, right? Long states — one north-south, the other east-west — both with a major city.

But *then*, in seventh place?



Tourism slogan, a recommendation: OHIO. WHERE ELSE?

Oral Examination: U.S. History, the Executive Branch

Where are Presidents born?

— *That's easy. Virginia.*

Names, please. All eight.

— *Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe . . . Wilson Hint, please —*

HT² . . .

— *Harrison, Tyler . . . Taylor.*

Very good. Try a harder question: where's the second-best factory?

— *New York? Van Buren and Fillmore, Roosevelt times two.*

Sorry. Not the Empire State.

— *Massachusetts?*

Adams & Son. Kennedy. Bush the First. Third time's the charm.

Try the Buckeye state, where forgotten presidents sprout like corn:

Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Harrison, McKinley, Taft, Harding.

[Seven in all, thinks Dave. None born in Dayton.]

Oral Examination: the Electoral College

You're a Presidential candidate. Which would you rather win? Ohio, or Kentucky . . .

— *Ohio.*

Let me finish. Ohio, or Kentucky *and* Tennessee?

— *Ohio.*

No contest, right? Try Ohio . . . or Washington-Oregon?

— *Ohio.*

Alabama-Mississippi?

— *You can't be serious.*

Let's up the ante. Suppose you're a covert political operative, holding the Buckeye state in your pocket. A member of the opposition corners you in a dark alley behind the Capital, proposing a collegial swap: Ohio for Colorado, Utah, *and* Nevada, one for three. Remember, hotshot: that's Denver, Salt Lake City, *and* Las Vegas.

— *Really? That's all you've got?*

What about the center of the nation: Nebraska-Kansas-Oklahoma? The New England coast: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine? A larger package, with plenty of acreage and miles of riverfront views? Montana, Wyoming, both Dakotas, Idaho . . . hell, throw in Alaska as well.

— *No, No, and No again.*

[Smart politician, thinks Dave. Stick with the nuts, every time.]

The Art of the Deal

Once, in a heated game of Monopoly, Grandfather taught him the art of the deal. The art of the swindle, to be precise. He tempted David with a portfolio of lesser properties — Mediterranean, Vermont, the Short Line Railroad — and a stack of bills an inch thick. All his grandson had to exchange was Park Place.

Grandfather sweetened the bargain with a “Get Out of Jail Free” card, and David succumbed to the pressure — ignoring the fact that turns in prison were rent-free, a bonus in the latter stages of the game. Their stalemate had lasted an hour. After the swap, the game was over in twenty minutes. The pile of money was nothing but filler: tens and fives, crinkled and folded to give them additional volume. Petty cash, easily drained by opposing hotels.

You had to be careful, explained Grandfather. Weigh the variables, count the money, and beware the hustle. Make sure that you’re getting fair value.

The next day, in a re-match, David attempted to turn the table. He offered Kentucky, Marvin Gardens, and the Electric Company, all in exchange for Boardwalk. Grandfather took the bait, then slipped past the trap on seven consecutive turns. Meanwhile, his grandson kept landing on lesser squares. They bled his account dry.

“You sacrificed too much,” Grandfather claimed. “Trying to land the big kill.”

“But last time—”

“Last time doesn’t matter. Past performance does not guarantee future results.”

Classifieds

Take-Home Question

Imagine a game of political monopoly — the squares assigned to states, not the streets of Atlantic City, and their values based on the electoral college. California replaces Boardwalk. Park Place becomes Texas. New York, Florida, and Illinois are the green properties. What would you trade for Ohio?

From the State Transportation Map, 2007-2009 (Ohio DOT)



- Note the compulsion to snatch William Henry Harrison from Virginia. Compare this impulse to the state's *Birthplace of Aviation* license plates, designed to infuriate the chamber of commerce in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Complete the picture: call a sports talk program in Columbus and claim that the speed of SEC football is superior to Big 10 smashmouth.

(Advertisement)

OHIO ON THE ROPES.

After seven Commanders-in-chief between 1869 and 1923, Ohio's Presidential drought has lasted for almost eight decades. After five national championships in football (1942, 1954, 1957, 1968, 2002), the Ohio State Buckeyes were overwhelmed in the BCS Championship games in 2007 and 2008. Is there a connection between the two declines?

What matters more when electing a President? The state's electoral votes, or its success in college football? See the Bonus Features for a statistical argument in favor of using the BCS standings to predict the home states of future U.S. Presidents.

Deluge

In March 1913, Dayton was swamped with an epic flood.

Heavy rains fell on frozen ground, and ten feet of water swept through the downtown.

Rainfall, March 21-25: 9-11" Estimated Runoff: 90%

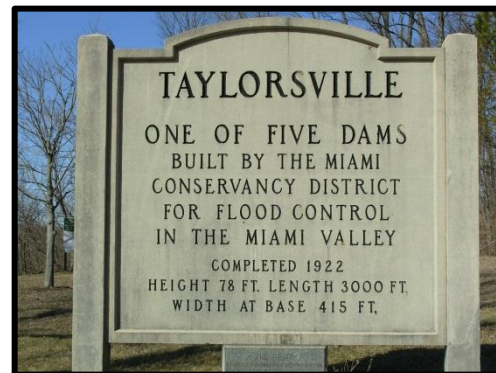
River Flow on March 25: 100,000 Cubic Feet per Second
Comparable to . . . Niagara Falls

Property Damage in 1913 dollars: \$100,000,000
Casualties: 360

A series of dramatic measures was devised: at the time, “the largest public works project in the world,” according to the Miami Conservancy District. River channels were altered and lined with steep levees, but the gems of the flood prevention system were its five earthen dams. They are dry dams: concrete conduits allow the river to pass at its usual pace. Buttressed by thousands of tons of earth, they are static, not mechanical. Independent of their creators, they function without human supervision.

[Indeed, thinks Dave, the valleys will be dammed for millennia.

The concrete will shepherd the waters, long after the humans have disappeared.]



Photos by Lawrence Forsythe

Years later, at the request of local residents, a series of low dams was also constructed, forming a string of reservoirs that expanded the options for fishing and boating.

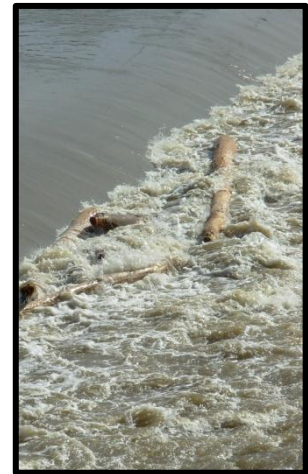
From a distance, the short drops look inviting, a play spot for teens and their inner tubes. But the smooth arc is deceptive, masking a violent roil at the base.



Photos by Lawrence Forsythe

Once, on a visit to the city, Dave explored the bike path that runs along the river. He stopped at a low dam, transfixed by the trunk of a fallen tree. It had been carried downstream from the northern counties and was trapped in the surf. The wood submerged, flew vertical, submerged, popped horizontal, submerged . . . again and again and again.

It was a big piece of timber, over a foot thick, but the heft didn't matter. The river toyed with it like a Lincoln log.



A Helpful Explanation

There is a technical name for the danger: a terminal hydraulic.

— *Can you use that in a sentence, please?*

1. Sisyphus ignored the warning signs when paddling on the Great Miami River. He found himself caught in a terminal hydraulic.
2. Some days, Dave’s life feels like a terminal hydraulic. He has not yet found himself.
3. When a crocodile seizes its prey, it swims to the bottom and turns over and over in circles: a death roll. There is a strong resemblance between the death roll of a crocodile and the terminal hydraulics on the Great Miami River.
4. The Miami Conservancy District includes no fewer than six low dams. The number of crocodiles at large in the valley is currently unknown.
5. The city has considered removing these hazards and replacing them with artificial rapids — features that would appeal to whitewater enthusiasts and the canoe lobby.
6. Dave knows nothing of these schemes. A shame, really, because the information would abet his conversation in several hours — a natural topic in his discussion with the kayakers from Section VI.

— *Good to know. Also, in sentence five, does the word “hazards” refer to dams or crocodiles?*

7. The low dams. Dayton has no clear strategy for dealing with its crocodile problem.

Beauty is Relative

MILE 54:

At night, a low dam and its terminal hydraulic is difficult to spot. Especially from the interstate, passing the city at sixty miles an hour. The rivers are dark, filled to the brink with shadows and carp.

Few things in this world are more terrifying than violent water in the dark. Those things that are, they should not be named.

The Masons know things that should not be named. A low dam flows within sight of their imposing temple. Its rigid geometry hearkens back to the founding fathers and Washington, D.C.

At night, flood lights illuminate the building. Its daunting façade is easy to spot. Flood lights are seldom restrained by earthen dams.



Photos by Lawrence Forsythe

Near the Masonic temple is the Dayton Art Institute, a world-renowned museum. A citadel on the bluff, guarding a bend in the river. A bluff that a fort might have claimed, when forts were still claiming bluffs.

Picture a fort low on ammunition.

Its commanding officer refuses to surrender. He bluffs.

A museum is also a fort, Dave thinks. It protects the art from the savage citizens.

A museum is also a prison: it protects the citizen from the savage art.

A museum is also a fort. It protects the art from the average citizens.

A museum is also a prison: it protects the citizen from the average art.

Dave wishes he had an uncle named Art, a second cousin once removed.

Art would be a kind and gentle man. There are few of them left in the world.

— *Clarification, please. Few what? Kind and gentle men, or men named Art?*

Both, really. What's more, to encounter them in a single individual? Well, the statistics are rather stunning. It would be good and proper to gather the remnant and preserve their spirit. To offer them food and lodging: shelter from this cruel, harsh world.

— *Ah, yes. I see. An Art Museum.*

Stillwater Christian

I

Somewhere, among the oak-lined streets behind the museum, a large Christian school was squirreled away. *Had been* squirreled away, to be precise. Stillwater Christian had moved, following its patrons and a real estate deal to the outer bands of the city. But for years, a high school and elementary stood on a ridge in the Salem Park neighborhood, a fortress on a hill.

The original buildings were hand-me-downs, sold to the Protestants by the Catholic church. The grade school had once been a convent. Its rooms and halls formed an intricate maze that spiraled about a secret, interior courtyard — a labyrinth so dense and confounding, lost students still wandered its turns. They prayed the last trumpet could pierce those thick walls. Attached by a breezeway, the high school was housed in a former academy for girls. No matter how hard you looked, you couldn't find a urinal in the entire building.

The ghosts of the nuns roamed the hallways at night. If you sat in the auditorium in the dark, you could hear their footsteps on the second and third floors. When the night custodian paused in his duties, he listened to the peculiar sounds from deserted, pitch-black corridors: the metallic rhythm as locker doors opened and closed.

Dave didn't believe half these tales. Most of them came from Brian Youngman, who transferred to MCA during Dave's junior year. That spring, they ran on the track

team together. Brian railed against Midfield at practice — a no-count hick town, he called it. Yet he seemed to idolize the makeshift facilities at his former school. According to Brian, they had it soft at MCA: practice fields, stadium, and their own cinder track, all in a modest complex that adjoined the campus. Not at SCS. Their practices had been epic. The team ran the streets of the city, sliding across car hoods and dodging buses, searching for roads with light traffic patterns and parks with imposing hills. The hurdlers learned not to fall — not with their marks set on sidewalks.

Stillwater owned a decrepit track to the east, out with the soccer fields at the junior high. Every time Brian described his former school, he mentioned a new campus. The franchise was scattered throughout the city.

Why not drive over to the track for practice? asked Dave.

Didn't have a bus, Brian answered. He sneered at the thought of such luxury.

Didn't the students have cars?

Sure they did. But driving cross-town with the upperclassmen? A bigger gamble than interval workouts in the hood.

Brian could wax poetic on that perilous commute, which he'd risked every fall with the soccer team. Over the years, he claimed, the drive had evolved into a madcap race: Van Halen on the stereo, and rubber on the asphalt. If Coach beat you to the field, you ran laps for each minute you were late. So the juniors and seniors risked daring shortcuts. They tempted fate at lights. The players on the JV squad were never so spiritual, praying they'd find a ride, then — after snagging that coveted seat — committing themselves to a lifetime of missions work if God would safely deliver them to practice.

Away games were even worse. If mothers knew half the risks their sons took, they would have thrown a marathon bake sale and raised enough cash for a bus. Not to mention the school's lawyers, whose arteries would have popped, just considering the liability.

Dave was skeptical of these legends. Brian had been angry about his family's move. In fact, watching him struggle had been a major factor — that following summer — in Dave's own decision to remain behind in Midfield. To live with his father and complete his final year at MCA, rather than leaving for Tennessee with Mom and Rachel.

These days, he couldn't help question his choice. If he hadn't stayed in Midfield, would he still have applied to Fisher? Would he now be teaching at MCA?

If he'd gone to Tennessee, he might have been hiking with Grandpa and Rachel on the Middle Prong, that day when the old man ruined his leg. When she pushed him past his limits, simply to outdo her brother.

All of those choices — his college and career, his relationship with his family . . . even Bethany — all of them offshoots of Youngman's bitter tongue. It was horrific, really, how one troubled man could cross your path and alter the course of your life.

II

MCA was scarcely a blip on the SCS radar, but Stratham and the other Midfield administrators had a strong, incurable case of Stillwater envy. They wouldn't admit it, but they kept a near-constant eye to the south — trying to guess the next great breakthrough in Christian education.

Like Isengard and Barad-dûr, thought Dave. The Two Towers. Saruman hoping to rival Mordor, but never exceeding a feeble imitation.

Other strongholds were scattered throughout the country: the fertile, evangelical ground near Colorado Springs; the suburbs of Nashville; even the eastern shores of Lake Michigan, where the Dutch Reformed had yoked themselves to John Calvin and the spirit of Geneva, sowing Christian high schools like their ancestors once planted tulip bulbs. In western Ohio, however, Stillwater Christian was top of the regional chain. Stratham even admired its name, both a nod to the local geography — the nearby Stillwater River — and a reference to Psalm 23, whose safe, quiet pastures were a model for the classroom.

MCA's board had considered a name change as well, something with similar layers of meaning. But the only stream in town was Folley Creek.

If MCA teachers attended a regional convention for Christian schools, Stratham encouraged corporate espionage. Invite an SCS teacher to dinner at the Cracker Barrel, he suggested, and learn what their school was planning next. After SCS changed its mascot from the Knights to the Patriots — abandoning the medieval icon for a more American symbol — he commissioned Gordon to research the best options for Christian high schools. To ensure that Eagles were the ideal brand for MCA.

The task was a waste of time, in David's opinion. Everyone knew that a Christian school had two choices for a mascot: 1. Eagles; or 2. Men with weapons — Knights, Warriors, and Crusaders.

III

Dave had befriended a teacher from Stillwater Christian, back in the year of cold feet, when Bethany thought he was waffling. He never dated Susan — not technically, at least. Even so, he kept the relationship a secret. He didn't want to sabotage his budding connection with Beth.

They met at an ACSI leadership conference and struck up a friendship. When Dave visited Susan in Dayton, he slept on the couch in her living room — an innocent arrangement, but one that both schools would have criticized. Which made it all the more appealing, in Dave's opinion. One night, he carried a pillow into her room and lay on the floor near her bed. They talked long past midnight. When she finally fell asleep, her breathing deep and peaceful, he slipped back to the couch and tried to keep listening.

The next day, Susan felt guilty about the lapse in discretion, and she raised the dread question as punishment: whether or not they were actually a couple. It was the same story as the other Christian girls that he'd known. Any time they were convicted about crossing an unspoken threshold of physical intimacy — falling asleep on the same couch, or kissing with too vigorous a tongue — they paused to dissect the relationship. To ensure they were making the right decision, but also — Dave was convinced — to restrain the male's libido. Because few things were worse than discussing how serious you were. How close to marriage, that final plunge. The very thought could paralyze: intercourse with your first and only partner, the woman you'd sleep with the rest of your life.

So Dave would confound them. He'd discourage their hopes and warn them not to expect anything, then snuggle close as they watched a romantic movie. The virgin's version of a one-night stand. The calling card of an evangelical douche.

When a youth pastor from Xenia showed interest in Susan, she asked Dave to cease his visits. A year later, her marriage caught him by surprise: when he ran into her at a convention for Christian coaches, she was already a Mrs. She looked happy and content. Meanwhile, he was stuck at MCA, his relationship with Beth in its nascent stages. As the chapel speakers talked about Christ's return, he would echo the prayer of every student in the auditorium: *Come quickly, Lord . . . but, if you don't mind, please wait until after I'm married.* In other words, they all longed for the Rapture to arrive . . . just not until they had sex.

IV

Dave watches the cars on the opposite side of the interstate. He envisions a teacher from Stillwater Christian, a man whose flight mirrors his own — racing north, bound for the upper peninsula of Michigan, where he'll seek out the wisdom of moose and wolves. Unsatisfied at SCS, convinced that the secrets to life are guarded by northern pine. He will probe the wisdom of the Canucks, follow the tracks of a grizzled trapper, and sit at the feet of an ancient Tahquamenon sage.

At night, the roads of the nation are crowded with Christian schoolteachers. Hundreds, each of them running away. Thousands. They converge on the mountains from every direction: Jeremy from Atlanta, Tracy from Nashville, and Morgan from

Indianapolis. Charlotte from Charlotte, who taught physical science to junior high students, whose heart beat with a passion she couldn't explain.

Perhaps she raced across the Piedmont at this very moment. What would Dave say, when she appeared at the base of Shuckstack's tower? Like Ruth crawling into the bed of Boaz. Like Rebekah drawing water at the well. Like Bathsheba on the rooftop, the woman whose heirs would include the Son of God.

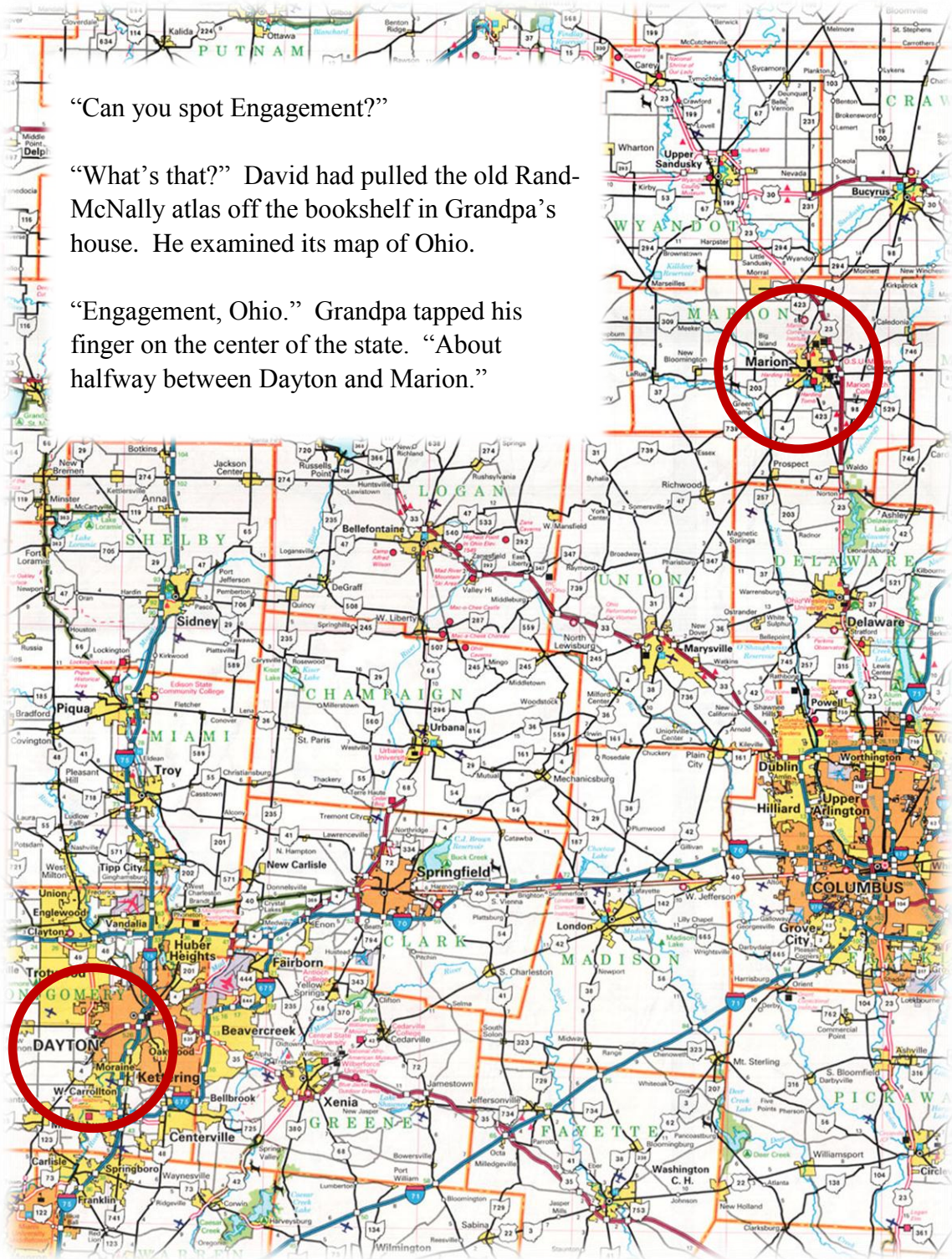
Would he open the pack and offer her Bethany's ring? If she smiled — shy but sensual — and accepted it from his hand, would *that* be the sign of Gideon's fleece?

Pun with Grandpa

“Can you spot Engagement?”

“What’s that?” David had pulled the old Rand-McNally atlas off the bookshelf in Grandpa’s house. He examined its map of Ohio.

“Engagement, Ohio.” Grandpa tapped his finger on the center of the state. “About halfway between Dayton and Marion.”



Tar Pits Jesus

The remnants of Christ were drawing near. Dave braced himself for disappointment. That summer, fire from a lightning strike had destroyed a shrine of Biblical proportions. The greatest spectacle along Interstate 75, at least in his humble opinion.

The exit had always been a highlight, a reprieve from the tedious landscape between Dayton and Cincinnati. On both sides of the road, flea markets stretched for hundreds of yards: row after row of deserted shelters, awaiting the weekend caravans of pop-top campers, the hordes of hoarders and Antiques Roadshow junkies. Each direction held promise, but Dave always preferred the view to the east: the bold red stallion that reared on the sign — flaunting its gender to the passing world — and bright yellow giraffes on the roof of each building. Flamboyant animals, as if Noah crash-landed the ark in a crayon factory.

He didn't recall when the church first appeared. One trip, the fields were empty; the next, they were dominated by an elaborate new compound, raised on a low mound of earth that rose above the landscape — like the house built on the rock, the prudent structure that Christ admired in the Sermon on the Mount. Flood the entire state, and the buildings would survive. Down the road, the menagerie would burst from the latex shells and migrate toward the sanctuary, fleeing this second deluge. Animals could be sheltered

amid the acres of parking, lined two by two: make and model, foreign and domestic, stick shift and automatic, cloven and uncloven hoof.

The complex itself was impressive — aesthetically pleasing, with red-tiled roofs and crisp, white walls. Sometimes, on trips from Midfield to Maryville, Dave would pretend an Italian billionaire had constructed a Tuscan manor in southwest Ohio, its walkways lined with arches, sculptures, and vine-encrusted latticework.

He didn't know if the church and the flea markets were connected, but he thought they might be symbiotic: the temple of God, and the moneychangers that hovered outside its gates.

The biggest, the grandest addition had been more recent. Dave missed the sign of its coming: a rectangular pool at the base of a small amphitheater. Simply a retaining pond, he assumed at first — wetlands compliance for the EPA. He didn't connect its flat sheen to the nearby stockpile, the ingredients for the Lord of Hosts.

He didn't see Jesus rise from the earth. The next time he traveled that way, the alabaster head and torso were already looming above the pond, the arms raised even higher in supplication. But the waist and the legs remained hidden, concealed within the Ohio strata. Christ appeared to be stuck, asking the Father for a boost. The hands seemed too large, but Dave knew they were



probably right: a rural carpenter would have meaty paws, not to mention a few smashed digits. Still, he liked to imagine an alternate cause, linked to Ohio's weather. The Son of Man was suffering from exposure. His fingers had swollen with frostbite.

The spectacle captured the public's imagination. Tourists made detours and posed their kids to spell Y-M-C-A, the Lord of Creation furnishing the Y, and posted the photos online. The highway patrol filled its coffers, ticketing pilgrims who parked on the berm of the interstate to gawk. For graphic designers and Photoshop experts, the temptation proved irresistible. They gave the statue sunglasses and a volleyball: Christ at the beach. They added a flaming guitar and a tie-dyed headband: Jesus Hendrix. A referee's shirt and cap: Touchdown Jesus, like Notre Dame's famous icon, but in three dimensions, one more than the Catholics could boast. Dave's personal favorite was *Say Anything* Jesus: Christ holding a boom box over his head, blasting tunes by Gabriel in a last-ditch effort to woo his children.



The most widespread nickname was Big Butter Jesus, based on the color and texture of the statue. A musician had popularized the name and scored a hit with a novelty song. But Dave had composed his own tag for the sight: Tar Pits Jesus. Because the entire scene reminded him of the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles. He'd never seen them in person, only a bad disaster movie about volcanoes and Southern California. To Dave, Christ wasn't calling the Father from Gethsemane. He was sinking into the earth, right alongside the Ice Age mammals, the woolly mammoths and saber-toothed cats. A faith that had stalled but refused to disappear, never quite taking that final plunge and vanishing into the deep. Jesus was sliding into the reflection pool, the way Peter slipped into Galilee. Striding on water was easy, a cakewalk, a walk in the park, what with the surface tension and buoyancy and all of Newtonian physics at your disposal. Breaking free of Ohio, where the landscape dulled you to sleep — like that bed of poppies in Oz — now *that* was the harder task. By the time you were trapped, it was far too late to escape.

Welcome home, Lord, thought Dave. Once the Buckeye State grabs hold, you're stuck here for good, caught in The Heart of It All.

But Jesus had left Ohio. Tragedy struck that past summer . . . struck literally, as in a lightning strike to the Savior's hand, a conflagration that spread down the arm and consumed the entire statue. Dave had followed the story online, this sensational news that Christ was ablaze. The photographs were astounding: a flaming effigy, a vision straight out of Revelation. The transcripts of the 911 calls were inspired: drivers on the interstate, stressing the earnest nature of their calls — uncertain if flames were *supposed*

to be leaping from the Savior's hand. Jesus was on fire, and they wanted to spread the word.

The reactions of the church members revealed their struggle. Most of the bereaved congregation was saddened at the loss of the beloved statue. A few voiced concerns that the strike was a heavenly sign, worried that God frowned on king-size monuments to His only begotten Son, the same way He'd chastised Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration. Were there better investments for thousands and thousands of dollars? Or were they simply following the example of Mary Magdalene — that bottle of costly perfume and the lavish, glorious waste in the Savior's honor?

The sculptor planned to rebuild the statue. Dave supported the idea, but was disturbed by rumors of changing the original design — plans to create a full-figured Jesus instead, like Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro. It felt like a defeat, an implicit agreement that the original statue . . . well, it might have been rather silly. No, Dave wanted the artist to damn the critics, plowing full speed ahead with an exact replica. Christ the Phoenix — rising once again from the ashes of His destruction.

Not that anyone would request Dave's input. Not that it mattered. At the moment, all that was left was a skeleton of blackened steel: Christ stick-figured, not transfigured.

Not that the beams would be visible, not at night. Security lights enveloped the compound, but the pool and the ashes were dark.



Christ the Redeemer

Cincinnati inched north every year, advancing one exit at a time. The orange barrels came first, the official state flower. Was there a state in the union without its version of that joke? Then a new lane, a widened off-ramp, and the restaurants and malls that supported the local ecosystem, the neighborhoods and office parks that relied on Chipotle and Earthfare and Panera Bread for their food supply.

At the same time, the suburbs were creeping south from Dayton. The farmland was consumed from two directions. The cities converged on Middletown and its prescient name. They would fuse by mid-century. On satellite photos taken at night, their lights had already merged. Cinton? Daynati? Dincinnati? Dave ran through the names that columnists had proposed for the new metropolis.

To the northeast, Springfield would soon be absorbed as well. In time, the sprawl might even join forces with Columbus, a vast, metropolitan arc that could rival the Cleveland-Akron-Canton corridor in the opposite corner of the state.



Not that such combinations would be unique, not by the end of the 21st century. Dave thought about cities along his route. Lexington would be joined to Louisville, that much was certain. The only debate would be the billing: which would play Dallas, and who would be Forth Worth. Frankfurt, of course, would be Arlington. Further south, Knoxville and Chattanooga would unite. Atlanta's tendrils would mingle with the outer bands of Charlotte, like two massive weather systems — a front sweeping east, and a hurricane swirling on the coastal plain. A perfect storm, swallowing land until nothing but concrete remained. Once again, squirrels and other rodents could travel from the Mississippi to the Atlantic without ever touching the ground, simply by leaping from roof to roof: Target to Best Buy to PetsMart, Walgreens to Rite-Aid to CVS. The fruition of Joni Mitchell's apocalyptic nightmare.

Dave mocked his own skeptical vision. Who the hell was he trying to fool? Land wasn't the problem. Everybody knew that. The nation would run out of water, decades before it ran out of land.

Perhaps Jesus could save them. Christ the Redeemer would prove His worth. Position the outstretched arms of the statue to the north and the south — one to Dayton, the other to Cincinnati — commanding the barbarians to halt. Like the Great Wall of China, or those massive statues on the river Anduin. The encroaching sprawl would be forced to stop. Christ would raise his hands, and the concrete would simply roll back, like the waters of the Red Sea.

If it worked in Ohio, the message could be spread. Like the early church on its missionary journeys, or the resistance fighters from *Independence Day*, using old Morse Code to pass along the solution — the secret to stopping this alien menace. Soon enough, statues of Jesus would ring the outskirts of every major city, thwarting town councils that wanted to annex the countryside. The Savior would foil their business plans, like He ransacked those merchants who sullied the temple grounds. Because, really, wasn't the whole earth the temple of God? Hadn't he set that flaming sword at the entrance to His personal garden? Forcing contractors to halt at the gates of Eden, suggesting they try hell instead. The building codes were lax in Sodom.

The National Forest Service could adopt a similar tactic. This far you may build, each monument would proclaim, but no farther. The Lion of Judah: the ultimate Secretary of the Interior.

Perhaps *that's* what the zealots were trying to accomplish, erecting those crosses in Tennessee. Imposing structures, visible for miles — so large, they weren't even wood, but corrugated siding on a steel frame. The type of materials that Solomon would have used, given the access to modern technology. Who needs cedar from Lebanon? We've got everlasting plastic.

They were a warning to developers, a shield against the earthmover crews and survey teams that were looking to wreck the landscape. Be gone, you bulldozers of Satan, the crosses declared. This landscape has been claimed for Christ and preserved for the wilderness.

Only they'd failed. At least one of the crosses was prominent in Loudon County, a beacon for malls that spread west along I-40, drawing Knoxville's center of population miles away from its downtown. Another stood watch over Pigeon Forge and its acres of outlet shopping, go-cart tracks, and musical tribute theaters. An abomination of desolation, the opening stop on Dave's agenda when Christ passed out swords at the Judgment.

Roman Numerals

Dave knew about three crosses, though he guessed there were more. Pigeon Forge, Loudon County, and his favorite, an old friend from those drives between Ohio and Tennessee. He would pass it in four, maybe five hours. On the Cumberland Plateau, not long after Jellico Mountain. Jellybean Mountain, Rachel used to say. The exit featured a fireworks store with dinosaurs and a Ferris wheel and a rocket ship and a large, inflatable gorilla. The cross towered above the opposite side of the interstate, both the primary monument and its sidekick: a wooden crucifix that looked miniature by comparison. Dave had always respected this lesser edition. It seemed about right — small but potent, kin to Golgotha's beams of death.

On the next-door property was a long, single-story building. Cars would be scattered out front at all hours of the day and night, the semis in a lot at one side. On the windowless exterior, a line-up of neon dancers kicked their can-can legs, and a red XXX marked the front entrance. Which explained the smaller cross. It witnessed to souls who passed through those doors: whatever they were

about to see or buy or touch, Christ already knew. He'd forgiven it all, hanging limp on that tree.

"What's XXX?" Tracy asked, one of their many trips.

"Thirty," said Mom.

"Thirty? Like three-zero?"

"Yes. Those are Roman numerals, honey."

"Is that a Roman building?"

"Not really. People use Roman numerals to make something look nicer than it really is."

Rachel accepted the answer. "Like David's Grandmother," she decided.

"What's that?"

"Like you told me. She spends an hour each morning, trying to erase the years."

"Something like that." Mom caught her son's eye in the rearview mirror.

"Don't mention that to your father, okay?"

"Are there really thirty dancers in that building?" asked Rachel.

"I don't know, honey. Probably not."

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If Jesus couldn't save them, this recession might. Southwest Ohio had been walloped good, and construction had slowed to a crawl. Could an economic downturn be the work of the Holy Spirit, a sign from Heaven that maybe — just maybe — they were taking this building obsession a step too far?

When the ancients had proved too enterprising — the contractors at Babel a step too ambitious — the Lord had seen fit to disrupt their progress. The earliest example of government interference in a free-market economy.

How would He stem the 21st century? Dave could only hypothesize, but he guessed that the internet would be involved. The Lord had used language to hinder the Mesopotamian builders. Now He'd invented the digital babel of the World Wide Web, a brand new spin on an Old Testament curse.

Secretary of the Interior

On the drive through Cincinnati, Dave thinks about . . .

1. . . . the billboard with a digital tally of cars that a local dealership has sold. He envies those numbers — not merely the financial profit that they reveal, but the way that they quantify the passage of time. Rather, because hours and days are themselves quantifiable, how the numbers track achievement amid time's passing. What had *he* accomplished in the past decade that created a similar level of contentment, prosperity or happiness — for buyer and seller alike — as the men who paired cars with hundreds of satisfied buyers?
2. . . . the hills that increase as the Ohio River nears. The city reminds him of Pittsburgh.
3. . . . a billboard for the Creation Museum — a tourist attraction across the river in Newport, Kentucky. It makes him ill, just a little bit.
- 3b. . . . whether he's a poor excuse for a Christian, given this sour reaction.
- 3c. . . . his prayer that angels react the same way.
- 3d. . . . whether angels that answer vindictive prayers are actually angels at all.

Something he does not consider:

the regrettable but striking connections between Pete Rose & Ezra Pound.

On the drive through Cincinnati

Graffiti on an overpass, *Chris Sabo died for your sins.*

4. . . . the Great American Ball Park and Paul Brown Stadium — homes of the Reds and the Bengals. They are visible near the merge with Interstate Seventy-One. The road begins to climb, preparing to cross the Ohio River.
5. . . . the dark water, hundreds of feet beneath the double-decker bridge.
- 5b. . . . cranking the wheel to the right, and aiming the truck between massive supports. Gunning the engine for that final, stomach-wrenching plunge.
- 5c. . . . whether the bridge was designed to prevent such a suicidal crash.
6. . . . if the rental truck to his left is packed with explosives, a plot by eco-terrorists to knock out this artery of commerce: a ruined bridge and instant gridlock, a logistical nightmare for the center of the country. Such a scheme would be scheduled for a deserted hour, such as 2:30 AM on a Friday morning, in order to limit civilian casualties.

Northern Kentucky, y'all

Dave ascends the long grade from the south bank of the Ohio River to the tablelands of Kentucky. As he begins his drive across the Bluegrass State, he dwells on the following subjects. . . .

INTERSTATE 75, MILEPOST 191:

. . . a Reds game that he once attended with his father. Over a decade earlier, down at Riverfront Stadium, when the team was still sharing Cinergy Field with the Bengals. They traveled to Cincinnati on a tour bus, a morale-building trip for the company employees, and sat in green seats that bordered the outfield. A message on the scoreboard welcomed their group to the park. The Reds lost, but one of Dad's assistants bought him a soft pretzel. A consolation treat, she said.

By the time they returned to the bus, his thirst was intense, and the Cokes in the cooler were gone. Most of the ice had melted, but a handful of pieces remained, floating next to a few cans of beer. David winced. The anti-drinking rhetoric at MCA was fierce. Sucking on ice that had shared a cooler with alcohol? It felt improper, like that classic New Testament dilemma — eating meat that had been offered to idols. Yet desire won out in the end. David scooped out the ice, careful not to brush against the pop-tops, and tossed the chips in his mouth.

He regretted the choice at once: something peculiar about the taste. He spit the melting fragments into his hand and wiped them on his pants. The water was tainted. One of the beers must have sprung a leak, or some joker had tossed an empty can into the cooler, allowing the dregs to seep out.

Such alarm was absurd: his imagination at work, nothing more. He'd smelled beer on someone's breath, and wasn't the sense of smell linked to your sense of taste?

The entire drive home, he couldn't shake a feeling of shame and disappointment — this vivid sense of personal defeat. That past spring, he'd signed a commitment to never drink. Mr. Hamilton had shown them a disturbing video — car wrecks and coma patients and parents in mourning — then passed around pledge sheets that everyone could volunteer to sign. Now, less than a year later, David had already broken his word.

Not that he thought he would actually *keep* the vow. But he wanted to *enjoy* the moment he shattered his promise, savoring that initial drink: an ice cold beer at the end of an epic hike, or a glass of wine in a real Italian vineyard. Not this accidental fall, undermined by his own thirst — like Esau, who traded away a birthright because of his tired flesh. Dave wanted a real taste of sin, not this inadvertent sip.

Even the sin let him down. It wasn't half as fun as it promised to be. Which bothered him: it proved that bombastic parade of visiting preachers correct.

That was his real question about the apple Eve tasted. Not whether it was a literal apple or a peach or a cantaloupe or a passion fruit or a mango or simply a metaphor. Was it any good? *That's* what he wanted to know. Did she savor that bite and relish the sweet, sweet juices that dripped from the sides of her mouth, convinced her new knowledge was worth its terrible cost? Or was the taste bland? Rancid, even? Was the flavor dull, the texture offensive? A great letdown, even before the pain of childbirth — which God tacked to the bill as he tossed them from the restaurant, an exorbitant surcharge hidden within the fine print.

You had to think hard before you answered. Because your response said a great deal about your vision of the human condition. Not to mention, it told you an awful lot about your God.

First Beer

Later, amid his fifth and final year at Fisher — his “victory lap,” he called it — Dave finally tasted his first “official” beer. He was twenty-two years old, visiting the Pro Football Hall of Fame on an impromptu road trip with a friend. The occasion warranted a drink. After touring the shrine, they decided to raise a cold one in honor of the gridiron legends. It would violate the Community Covenant, but the campus vice squad was hours to the west. So they slipped into a Canton sports bar and ordered two beers.

The Cleveland Cavaliers were on the television. They must have pissed off that bartender, claiming such prime real estate — two stools in the center of the bar — as they sat there the entire game, each nursing that single bottle. Dave couldn’t even finish the drink. Ilglauskas and the Cavs lost. On the whole, another disappointment.

Dave’s “Victory Lap”

Grandmother was not amused. Not by his lame attempt at humor, and not by the news that he needed another semester to graduate. She didn’t understand how

it took five years to earn a degree, especially in a “soft” field like Secondary Education. No one else in the family . . . all of them finished in four years, earning stellar marks and accolades along the way. “I can’t imagine they’ve changed the curriculum,” she said. “If anything, they’ve scaled *back* the requirements — making it *easier* to graduate on time.” One of her favorite subjects was the tragic, near-criminal dismantling of Fisher’s once-rigorous core.

She promised to make a few calls and double-check his advisor’s plan. Dave insisted that wasn’t necessary. Dr. Manning was more than competent. If anything, the hiring standards had *risen* since she was a student. He ignored her snort — the same way he overlooked her asides about the watered-down academics, the feeble loyalty to alma mater, or the paltry *esprit de corps* in the current student body.

It was nobody’s fault but his own, he argued. It wasn’t even a fault. He was late to declare a major, switching from engineering to mathematics to business, until finally deciding he wanted to teach. By the time he entered the track for Secondary Education, he was already behind. Now, he was almost caught up, but he needed to finish his student teaching.

The explanation didn’t satisfy her. Grandmother wasn’t happy with his career choice, so learning that it wasn’t a “calling” — simply the last stop on an uncertain path, the only chair open when the music ceased — well, such waffling was a sign of his immaturity.

Truth be told — and Dave didn't intend to let the truth get within a half mile of Grandmother — truth be told, he was happy to take an extra year. It delayed the decision he'd already made. Deep down, he knew he belonged in the classroom. But until he signed that contract . . . until he stepped in front of a desk and brought the students to attention . . . until then, he imagined he still had a choice.

Those Who Can't, Preach

Not that Grandmother's attitude was unique. Parents lauded MCA and its strong, Biblical approach to education, but they were horrified if their children decided to teach there. Such a poor-paying position? That wasn't the return they'd been promised on their investment.

The same applied to campus ministries. Students were encouraged to attend InterVarsity or RUF or the Navigators, especially if they ventured onto the heathen landscape of a secular university. But heaven forbid they actually join the staff. They were smart and intelligent: they should be doctors and bankers and engineers. They ought to support a missionary, not become one.

One time, Dave had offended a father in a parent-teacher conference. A local music pastor, the man had been frustrated that his son — who showed promise in Biology and Chemistry — was determined to pursue a degree in elementary education.

“Oh well,” the dad said. “I suppose it’s true what they say. Those who can, do. Those who can’t . . .”

Dave broke the thought before he could check himself. “Preach,” he said.

MILE 180:

. . . the Florence Y’all water tower. Its profile looms to the west. In the daylight, the red and white stripes would be clear and distinct, its message in crisp black print: **FLORENCE Y’ALL**. According to legend, the message was going to advertise the Florence Mall, luring travellers into Sears and the food court.

With the paint job partially complete, however, a watchdog raised troublesome questions about public funding and private ventures. In particular, the odds that the ad was illegal. So a local official had a brilliant idea: the painters could salvage their work by exchanging a Y’ for the M — Florence Y’all rather than Florence Mall — like students who tampered with their report cards, transforming each D to a B-.



They created a cultural landmark. Whether it celebrated ingenuity or carelessness — the Eiffel Tower, or the Leaning Tower of Pisa — Dave could never decide. In either case, he hoped that its message held true: no matter how bad you screwed up this life, your lone shot at being a human, a touch of improvisation could salvage the effort. You

didn't have to start over from scratch. Because you couldn't. No matter how much you wanted to try again . . . well, you could never rewind. No one got a second chance — not a true one, at least.

MILE 175:

. . . the sign for Big Bone Lick State Park. The name amuses him, drawing a juvenile chuckle with the innuendo.

He knows about salt licks, of course. A settler must have unearthed an impressive skeleton at the site, unaware that two centuries later, the thought of a mighty bone would cause an immature teacher to snicker like an eighth grade boy.

Not that Dave knew about fellatio in junior high — even in high school, as far as he could recall. It was embarrassing, to be honest — the number of years it took him to understand that oral sex wasn't the same thing as French kissing. The topic certainly wasn't part of the MCA curriculum. In Health Class, the sexual education unit was restricted to sterile discussions of procreation and cautionary tales about venereal disease. There were special performances by AC/MC, the Abstinence Club at Midfield Christian. The bravest students in the entire school, in Dave's opinion. They marched their cheesy skits and song parodies into the heart of Gomorrah: the auditoriums of the local public schools, where they endured ridicule that would have made Stephen wince.

Satan's Sin Pit

Health wasn't the only course that cautioned students about sex. The subject was also covered in shop class: Home Maintenance, a required elective for

all male students. They learned about drop-forged tools and plumbing fixtures and built a wall unit with studs, insulation, and functional wiring. On the opposite side of campus, the girls studied Home Economics. They practiced ironing, cooking, and budgeting for groceries on the post-tithe income from a husband's job.

Every Wednesday, when class periods were shortened to accommodate chapel, the power drills and sewing machines were silent. Teachers lectured the students about gender roles in a Christian home. The boys were taught about spiritual authority; the girls were provided a positive spin on submission.

Sex surfaced in Bible class as well. Not only when reading the Old Testament, which had enough bedroom scenes to warrant an R-rating, even before the violence was taken into account. Not to mention the profanity and graphic language that most translations scrubbed clean.

In the New Testament survey, Mr. Crompton always warned his classes about Satan's Sin Pit, which sounded like a peculiar formation in the Hocking Hills. It was a legendary lecture, one that he'd given to MCA students for over three decades. He diagrammed the pit on the board like a jungle trap that natives used to snare wild beasts, a deep hole with vertical walls. Brush camouflaged the drop. Once you were caught in a sin, he explained — whether drug use, premarital sex, or pornography — it was impossible to escape, not on your own strength. What's more, certain activities fell into that infamous gray region: not quite sin, but far too close for comfort. Things such as social drinking, light

petting, and secular rock music. Tempting yourself with them, even cautiously, was like playing with matches. A single misstep on that slippery slope, and you found yourself drowning in the Lake of Fire. In the dim light, inching closer and closer to the edge of the pit, it was hard to tell where solid ground ended and the fall began. A prudent Christian made the only safe choice: stay clear of the danger.

Never Give Roses to 7th Grade Boys

One day, the junior high boys were ushered into the auditorium. Whenever this happened, it usually meant one of two things: 1) someone had urinated on the radiators in the bathroom again, creating a nasty stench; or 2) they were going to learn about sin. Both options held promise.

But the presentation was a disappointment. The school counselor rambled about the beauty of women — their God-ordained role as helper and partner — and the need to show them the proper respect. Nothing explicit, only suggestion and allusion. The boys yawned and struggled to stay awake. They tried to distract their friends in the front row, flicking their earlobes and blowing on their necks.

For the grand finale, she described a young woman as a precious flower and held up a rose as an illustration. She handed it to Robert Gilbert and asked the boys to pass it throughout the room, instructing them to treat it as carefully as

possible. She should have known better. She was talking to junior high boys, for Christ's sake. By the time it returned to the front, the rose had been stripped of its petals and snapped in two. The counselor was furious. She threatened them all with detention, completely missing her own vivid lesson: the more a woman was passed around, the less valuable she became, until nothing was left but thorns.

Looking back on the incident, Dave also spotted a second moral. When trying to maintain his social status and impress peers, a boy would treat a girl in a horrible manner. In the future, how many of them would chart sexual conquests like they once tracked athletic stats, keeping a running tally beneath the bill of a favorite cap? How many would court a naïve undergraduate with hollow promises — taking her to bed, then launching a cruel campaign of cool disinterest and verbal abuse — and reduce her self-esteem to rubble? Were their actions prophetic, that day they manhandled the rose?

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MILE 173:

... Interstate Seventy-one, which breaks to the east, destined for Louisville. Cincinnati, Louisville, Lexington. Dave imagines a geometry problem based on the triangle they form. Something in conjunction with the northern triad — Cincinnati, Dayton, Columbus — that mirrors the shape across the X-axis of the Ohio River and the Y-axis of I-75.

Dave always felt bad for I-71. It was prominent in Ohio, cutting a diagonal that linked the three largest cities in the state. Across the border, however, it was far less significant.

I-76 linked the Rocky Mountains to the East Coast. I-77 probed the heartland of the South. I-71 trickled along the Ohio River for a hundred miles.

Dave could relate. Well-known and respected at MCA — a mid-sized fish in a tiny pond — he was anonymous in this ocean of night, the world beyond the school's walls.

After the split, the number of lanes decreases, and the traffic thins even more. It strikes him as significant, this marked effect of a partner's absence.

Another union is down the road: two of them, in fact. Near Lexington, I-64 will approach from the west and share lanes with I-75 for several minutes. Down in Knoxville, an even greater coupling will transpire: I-75 spliced to I-40, the north-south power joined to the east-west monolith. For a few holy miles, the mighty highways ride in tandem down the valley of the Tennessee. How many acres would the parking lot cover, their concrete and asphalt devoted to a single square?

It reminds him of marriage: the two lives merging together, moving through life on a similar path. Traffic and possessions intermingled, at least for the stretch of time that the partners shared. But they were destined to drift apart — each searching for something that the other didn't want. I-71 headed for Louisville, while I-75 held steady, Lexington in its sights. Dad had remained in Midfield, unable to reconcile with Mom, who finally broke for Tennessee.

It is a cynical view of the institution. The highways were seldom united. Their moment together was brief, a rare deviation from miles they spent alone. An accurate metaphor for his mother's life, but not the vision he wants for himself.

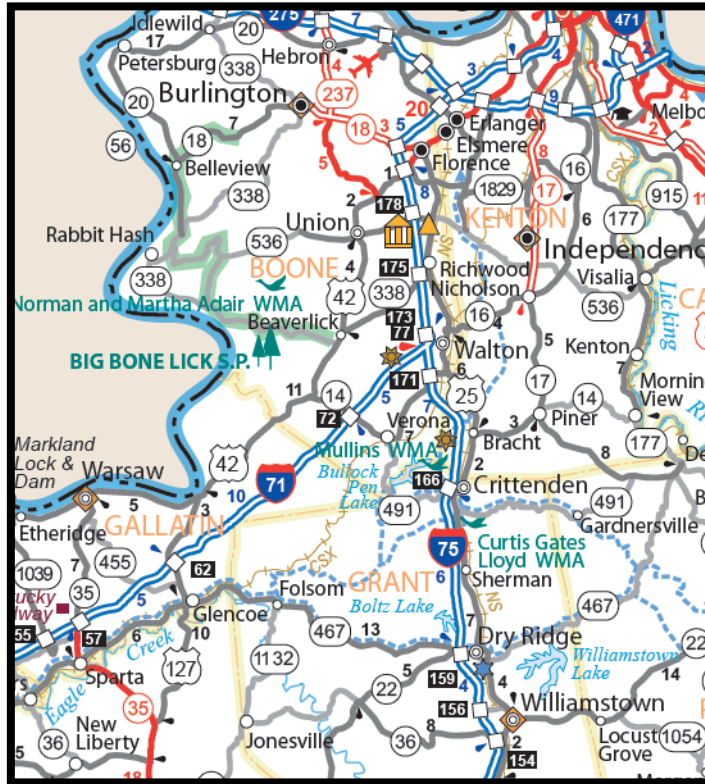
The Marriage (stream)Bed

One time, hiking in the woods, Grandpa paused at the intersection of two creeks. “See that?” he said to David. “The way that two streams become one. That’s how marriage is supposed to work.” It didn’t matter which possessed more water or whose channel proved dominant, he claimed — whether one kept its title or they took a new name to celebrate the union. The power derived from their unified surge. Once the two had combined, you didn’t pull them apart. Sure, the waters might break for an island, but they would always reunite. “Travel a mile or two downstream, and draw a glass of water from the creek,” he suggested. “Try telling which spring was its source.”

Which revealed a problem with his analogy. A clever scientist could probably design an array of tests and make an educated guess. An indication of the modern dilemma, in Dave’s opinion. We’ve gotten so good at dissecting things, we forget how much it destroys.

MILE 166:

. . . Northern invasions of the South. Dave enters Grant County, which contains the small town of Sherman. Columns of troops have preceded him. Ranks of minivans, armed with their portable DVD players and an arsenal of Silly Bandz — a new campaign to splinter the Confederacy.



MILE 156:

. . . Bill Clinton. The connection seems natural to Dave — the sign for Williamstown, so soon after Big Bone Lick. During the Lewinsky scandal, he learned more about “sexual relations” from the nightly news than he ever gleaned from school. Which angers him. Even now, he knows more about sex from a President’s infidelity than from actual, first-hand experience.

The First Tuesday in November

1991. The night Clinton was first elected. Dave was allowed to stay up past his bedtime and watch the initial returns: states flashing red, matching the shade of Mr. Pete's face. His stepfather swore at the bias of the network coverage and cursed the ignorance of the American public. People shouldn't be allowed to vote, he declared, not unless they've passed a test on American history and proved they can speak the English language. The *real* American history, he clarified, not the liberal bullshit they force-fed students in public schools. Make voters sign a loyalty oath and prove their knowledge of the Constitution? Those left-wing, commie-loving, reefer-smokers would be out of office in a snap.

Governor Clinton hated the American Dream. He would use his newfound power to strangle the wallets of decent, hard-working citizens. "Mark my words," said Mr. Pete. "That man" — he pointed at the screen, his voice filled with hatred and derision — "*that* man is going to be the Anti-Christ."

That night, tossing in bed, David lamented this cruel twist of fate, convinced that the nation was poised for disaster. The future was darker than ever before. His entire life, a Republican had been leading the country. Were the End Times here at last? He wanted to get out his Bible and re-read Revelation, to learn the next sign and event.

Suppose these weren't the last days. The country would suffer, a downward spiral — economic as well as moral — that would dominate his prime decades. Wasn't that always the case with a left-wing President? According to Mr. Pete's version of history, at least.

Could America survive with a Democrat in charge? David couldn't shake the ominous conviction: his future was ruined. His potential for greatness had disappeared, now that the liberals were in control. America was supposed to be the land of opportunity. Anything was possible for a young man with talent and determination. But an exemption clause had been hidden within the fine print of Manifest Destiny: electing a socialist leader would terminate the warranty and void God's blessing on national growth.

1999. Things seemed to work with Clinton in charge. Even so, Dave was among the Fisher freshmen who cheered when Florida got taken off the board — too close to call — and Dan Rather slipped into a backwoods idiom. The student body was over 90% Republican. Crowds gathered in the student commons to mock Al Gore and jeer at each hanging chad.

In the years to come, Dave's stance began to weaken. The reverse of that old cliché: the liberal and passionate youth who matured with conservative wisdom. He still landed right of the center, but he wasn't rabid. Take Gordon, for example, who once joked that watching NASCAR bothered him — all of those drivers, constantly turning left.

2003. When W won a second term, at the start of Dave's victory lap, he felt a curious sense of déjà vu. The same depression as Clinton's election. No matter which party held the reins, he was saddled with a sense of doom.

Which was odd, because he didn't believe that a government held much real power. Not in the long run, the grand scheme of things. It could make plenty of short-term misery, that much was certain. But large-scale revolution would inevitably come, regardless of the individuals in charge.

Take China and the United States, their opposing beliefs about government. If aliens orbited the stratosphere — if they looked at our cities and roads and general behavior, watching us eat and work and fight and make love — could they *really* distinguish between the two nations?

Consider another angle. Whose lives would have more in common? Russians and Americans from the same decade? Or Americans that lived two centuries apart? Take the daily minutiae of John Boehner's life. The telephone, refrigeration, the automobile, computers: it had far more in common with Vladimir Putin's reality than it did with the world of Thomas Paine.

Technology brought the most meaningful changes, not Congress. Democracy kept the balance unstable, holding each party in check — ensuring that neither side could entrench itself and *really* cause trouble. Dave prayed for gridlock in the capitol, for myopic leaders who focused on Washington and got too distracted to meddle elsewhere.

Cultural shifts in morality? Changing attitudes toward religion? They had little to do with activist judges. People would come to know Christ, with or without prayer in public schools. The Father didn't need elections to gather the elect.

Jesus shrugged at both FoxNews and CNN. When Hannity baited the Son of Man, asking a loaded question about government taxation, Christ didn't bite. Let Washington have all the cash that it wants, He said. The Trinity was not Executive, Legislative, and Judicial. The Kingdom of Heaven was built with the Spirit. It had nothing to do with a GDP.

America was a land of contradiction, thought Dave. We preach that a determined and talented man can pull himself up by the bootstraps, regardless of his situation or starting point. Then we turn on the news and fret about the politicians, convinced they're destroying our lives.

We declare our belief in personal independence. In the next breath, we fuss about the President, this Commander-in-Chief with the godlike ability to thwart our desires and control our happiness. Which simply wasn't the case. Contentment stems from within.

The equation held true, regardless of the team in office. Godliness with contentment is great gain. Did Paul say that? The apostle? McCartney? One of the Pauls, at least. One of the Founding Fathers.

Irresistible Grace

The interstate was almost empty. Once in a while, the lights of a car would appear in Dave's rearview mirror. They drew closer and closer. *Reel him in.* He could still hear the shouts of Coach Davis, his challenge to runners on the backstretch. A few minutes later, the taillights would disappear.

No one seemed to be following him. If that *had* been Gordon, back in Ohio, he'd long since abandoned the hunt. Even so, Dave couldn't shake off the ominous sensation: he was being pursued.

The vision was straight out of Hollywood. Tar Pits Jesus lowered its arms and lifted itself from the earth. Like that colossal, fire-spewing beetle that burst from the alien planet in *Starship Troopers*. Like the creature from the Black Lagoon. A 21st century God-zilla.

The statue would be awkward at first: the limbs stiff, the movement unnatural. The Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. But once it got loose and conquered inertia, its momentum on the rise, the specter would move with deceptive speed. Like an ent, crossing chunks of ground with a single step. What's more, once Tar Pits Jesus was on your trail, it refused to stop. Christ the Terminator. He didn't rest. Nothing distracted Him. He was relentless, this shepherd of doom that hunted His wayward sheep.

Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, according to Paul. The statue waded across the Ohio River — too heavy to use the bridge. Even now, it was scaling the bluffs on Kentucky's shore. As long as Dave kept driving, the distance between them increased. Whenever he paused, Christ narrowed the gap with each mighty stride.

Hidden Valleys

I

Dave could sense a valley to his right. The darkness was more intense — the shadows thick, unbroken by silhouette or starlight. He recalled prior trips across this stretch of land. It pleased him, assembling the memories like a puzzle. A river would line the floor of the gorge, a road wedged against its bank. In the distance, they slipped around a bend and beckoned travelers to leave the interstate. Whatever you sought, you weren't going to find it at seventy miles an hour.

The slopes rose steeply at first, climbing away from the water. But the pitch diminished at the top and leveled out to a grassy knoll. The peak had been sanded down. Erosion was constantly at work: the scouring wind, the burrowing creek, the bulldozer glaciers. Here, the shapes left behind were parabolas. Dave thought about first and second derivatives, the change in slope near the top of a curve.

One time, he had used the difference between a sine curve and a cosine curve as a metaphor to describe his relationship with Bethany: they were headed in the same direction, charting similar paths, but they could never get in sync. Her reaction merely proved his point.

The inclines were inviting: occasional trees, but plenty of open space. An abundance of grass, perfect for rolling downhill. Pull your arms tight against the body,

and allow gravity to draw it forward. Open your eyes, if you can stomach it. Watch the blue sky blur with the bluegrass. Beware the cows. Herds grazed on these hillside pastures, leaving minefields in their wake.

The countryside was deceptive. From the interstate, you marveled at the bucolic landscape. With enough velocity, you overlooked the shit.

II

Down one of those valleys — somewhere in northern Kentucky, at least — a man was building an ark. Well . . . raising the funding to build an ark, lobbying for tax credits. Arguing that an attraction based on a religious text wasn't actually religious in nature.

Dave hadn't read the news himself. Gordon discovered the story on the internet, an ambitious scheme to bring Noah's adventure to life.

Why would anyone want to experience that ordeal? asked Dave. The claustrophobia and cacophony of those quarters? Not to mention the smell.

Exactly, said Gordon. You'll get a small glimpse of Noah's trial — the depth of faith it demanded from him. He gave an impassioned account of the potential exhibit on waste management, a natural problem on a ship that was crowded with animals. That was sealed for forty days and nights of rain, then rode the waters for another five months. Even after they landed on Ararat, Noah waited an additional forty days before opening the single window on the vessel, and another two weeks before the land was completely dry and they left the ship for good.

Those two details had always amused Dave. First, that Noah waited so long after landing to open a window — like a stereotypical father, concerned about letting the heat escape. And second, that they remained on board until the ground had dried out — as if soggy turf was an unbearable nuisance at that point in their adventure.

The duration of the flood bothered him. Aside from the mass destruction and human carnage, of course. Why didn't God act faster? Surely everyone who needed to die was dead. Demolition should be easier than creation. Why didn't He pull the plug and drain the earth a bit sooner, relieving his servant from all those days in the dark? No wonder that Noah had problems with wine, dealing with his posttraumatic stress.

To his surprise, the park was growing on Dave. He brainstormed ideas for new attractions. An interactive kiosk that examined the long-term ramifications of limiting the gene pool. How Noah's grandkids had been forced to marry their cousins. How we're all a touch crazy as a result. The animals had it worse. In most cases, for the second generation to preserve the species, the siblings were forced to mate.

A multitude of genetic mutations had perished in the flood. Think of the diversity that might now exist — an exponential increase in variations — if the animal families had developed as nature intended.

There would be information about dinosaurs, Dave was all but certain of that. How Noah found room on board for the massive animals. Think eggs or babies, and try hard to swallow. Belief in a young earth meant that humans and dinosaurs needed to coexist, and God told his servant to save *all* the animals. Unless you maintained — as

one of Dave's professors had once proposed — that the dinosaur skeletons weren't animal remains at all, but evidence of a world that existed prior to our own, the infamous “gap” between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2.

Mr. Pete said that dinosaurs were probably the Nephilim: the monstrous offspring of humans who mated with fallen angels, the giants in the earth that Genesis 6 describes. Other days, he argued that fossils were an elaborate government hoax — second cousins to the moon landing and the benefits of fluoride in the water.

Would the park ask that vexing question — what kind of omniscient God went out of His way to preserve the dinosaurs if He knew they were destined for a quick extinction in the post-flood environment, an ecosystem transformed by the firmament's collapse?

Would it address the problem of species loss? How pissed God must be, taking all that care to save the passenger pigeon, only to watch the American settlers blast it out of the sky.

Suppose you were a human father, away on a long trip. You instructed the children to feed the family dog. By the time you got home, Rover had starved to death.

If God's favorite cat was the snow leopard, we were all in some serious shit

Would the park include water features? Dave wondered. A log ride. Paddleboats. A wave pool. He thought about Noah's vineyard. Would the attractions include a winery?

An amusement park was already devoted to the world of Harry Potter. Why not the Bible as well? Not one of those Holy Land recreations, presenting the ancient world with the same underpaid but enthusiastic theater majors who taught candle-making at Colonial Williamsburg. No, Dave wasn't interested in simulations. A park *inspired* by the book, not mapping it line for line.

The rides came easily enough. You'd need a coaster, and Elijah's flaming chariot was an obvious choice. Meanwhile, Jonah's whale could replace the ubiquitous pirate ship as a giant swing. The walls of Jericho? An earthquake simulator. David's sling and Samson's jawbone? The basis for sideshow games. The Egyptian plagues made a true house of horrors, and the Sinai maze promised hours of wandering in the wilderness. The conquest of Canaan? Paintball galore. The Den of Lions and the Fiery Furnace would roar to life in a 3-D extravaganza.

That was only the Old Testament. The New Testament could be a whole new experience — like EPCOT, the addendum to Walt Disney World. The book of Revelation? Clearly a park all its own, the MGM studios of the Bible.

III

Down another valley — in a world all *their* own — the Trappist monks of Gethsemane lived out their regimented days. Dave thought about the brothers and their Abbey, that devotion to a calling. How many souls owed their lives — both physical and spiritual — to the prayers and intercession of those men? Guardian angels were real, walking the Kentucky glens in flesh and blood.

He was romanticizing them. Deep down, he knew they were human — not all that different from him, in many respects. Wasn't that always the case with prophets and disciples? Abraham. Deborah. Isaiah. John. They had body odor and bowel movements, days they were grumpy and times they were sad. But it was easier to cope with your own feeble deeds — how little you'd done, compared to their feats — if you imagined their wiring was somehow different than your own.

Same with the monks. He felt shallow, complaining about his life in Midfield, whenever he thought of their sacrifice. Their rigid schedule and lack of possessions. Their celebrated abstinence.

On virginity, at least, he could match them stride for stride. Which hadn't been his original plan. It just sort of happened, like most great streaks. Cal Ripken didn't set out to play hundreds of baseball games in a row. He showed up to the park, day after day after day. Same with Dave. He awoke in the morning and went about his business. He went to bed. By the time he fell asleep, another day without sex had passed. It was the accumulation that impressed, a total that dwarfed both Ripken and Gehrig combined: over 28 years on this planet, almost 10,000 days without getting past second base.

How the RIAA killed the Realistic Novel

An Explanatory Note and/or Rant

Dave has read about Thomas Merton and the monks of Gethsemane, but the immediate trigger for his thoughts is *Love and Thunder*, an album by singer-songwriter Andrew Peterson. Dave is fond of Peterson's music and chose the CD for this specific stretch of Kentucky. The track "The Silence of God" raises goose-bumps on his flesh and draws a handful of cathartic tears. Midway through the number, as Peterson sings about struggling with faith, the lyrics vault to the Kentucky abbey and a namesake feature of its grounds: the statue of Christ in the Garden. Even Jesus wrestled with loneliness.

Other songs on the album are significant as well, applicable to Dave's journey. Lyrics about Abraham's travels to Canaan & the pillar of fire that Israel once followed in the desert.

After listening to *Love and Thunder*, Dave will shuffle through *Songs* by Rich Mullins, especially the tracks about Joshua and Elijah. "Sometimes by Step" will be playing when he halts on the hills south of Berea and lies down on the interstate, thinking about God's promises to Abraham and the scene of Isaac on the altar.

He doesn't limit himself to Christian music, of course. The entire drive has involved a carefully constructed playlist: an opening disk of songs with a quest motif, such as Springsteen's "Born to Run" and U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For"; then melancholy numbers for the middle of the trip, "What a Good Boy" by the Barenaked Ladies and "Nightswimming" by R.E.M. Two of his most inspired choices? "Learning to Fly" as he passed Wapakoneta, and "Trying to Throw Your Arms Around the World" near Tar Pits Jesus.

Sometimes he has the original disk, which he plays for a song or two, then tosses like confetti to the passenger side of the truck. Others are personal mixes. A few were created for driving to games, raising his energy level before coaching. One is from Bethany: her favorite worship songs, which he intends to play on the journey home — in praise and celebration, gratitude for a successful hike. A disk from Susan had been timed to match the Midfield-Dayton drive.

If he owned an MP3 player, it would simplify things a great deal. But he doesn't. He's poor.

He has reserved songs for specific moments: “Calling Out Your Name” for crossing Tellico Mountain and the Cumberland Plateau; “Sweet Child o’ Mine” for the drive into Knoxville, getting that opening guitar riff to coincide with the first glimpse of the Sunsphere that towers above World’s Fair Park. If the rays of the rising sun could be striking that golden ball . . . well, some things are too much to ask. The Guns ‘n Roses comes from an actual mix tape — one of the few remaining in Dave’s collection. A copy of a gift that he mailed to his sister, back when he was in college. He was trying to shock Rachel with the secular rock, but her response was indifferent. She thanked him, mentioned a few of her favorite tracks, and laughed at his penchant for 80s music. He wasn’t *that* old, she remarked.

Certain numbers have elaborate backstories or daydreams connected to them: Def Leppard’s “Animal” always plays when his truck — now equipped with rocket launchers and heavy machine guns — bursts through the gates of the drug lord’s compound and Dave cracks open a can of Old Testament whoop-ass on the bastards who kidnapped Bethany. . . .

— *May I interrupt? Only for a second, I promise. This is all fine and well. A touch self-indulgent, but lovely, really. It’s just . . . it’s not exactly a rant. To be honest, I’m not sure what you’re upset about.*

— I can mention the songs, but I can’t quote their lyrics. So I can’t emphasize the degree that they permeate his drive. Not to the extent that I describe his thoughts and memories. Not with the detail that I cover the passing sights.

— *Which might not be such a bad thing. Less can be more, so I’ve heard.*

— Not without shelling out serious cash for royalties. I’d be chin-deep in legal paperwork, paying hundreds of dollars to cite each line. And he listens to thousands of lines.

— *You’re supposed to be a writer. Write your own songs for the book.*

— But they wouldn’t be the songs Dave listens to.

— *I hate to break it to you, but “Dave” is a figment of your imagination. Imagine him listening to your songs.*

— You're missing the point. I want the experience to be replicable. Think about the sights between Midfield and The Dragon's Brew. They're real-life places, visible from the road. Drive I-75 for yourself, and laugh at the Florence Y'all water tower or the sign for Big Bone Lick State Park. If I'm insisting on that kind of realism for the visuals, then I'd like to . . .

— *Wait a second. Midfield, Ohio? The Dragon's Brew? I don't see either of them on a map.*

— True enough. Some locations are inventions, like a transparency that I've set atop the actual map. My personal additions to the landscape.

— *Why not try the same thing with music? Mention the titles of a few "real" songs. Then, when you want to include lyrics, create fictional artists to cite.*

— Because I'm stubborn.

— *Because you're lazy. Which probably means there's a bigger problem: you're not picking songs he would actually listen to, because you haven't considered his personal tastes in music. You're merely choosing the songs that you might select on a road trip. That's shoddy craftsmanship, Forsythe.*

You've got to remember, music is such a peculiar thing. You can't assume that a reader will understand its emotional resonance, simply from reading a line or two.

— But it's the principle that counts. Think about it: most road trips in recent decades have featured a near-constant stream of music in the background. If you're not allowed to describe that backdrop . . . well, couldn't you argue that no one has written a truly realistic novel about road trips in the same time period?

— *You could, if you wanted to be an idiot.*

— What's more, given the hours that people are plugged to their Ipods, strutting around with a personal soundtrack . . . well, it's nearly impossible to reflect their daily experience without breaking copyright laws. It's the death of the realistic novel.

— *Overdramatic, don't you think? You might want to scale back the rhetoric.*

— Fair enough. It's the death of the realistic novel for lazy writers.

— *Better. Closer to the truth. What you need to do, you take advantage of this technology that you're whining about. Provide your audience with a playlist: the songs that Dave listens to, graphed against a map of his route. Include it with the Bonus Features. That way, when readers open the novel on their Ipads, they can download its soundtrack and listen as they read. For the audiobook, the music can simply play in the background.*

Take it a step further: fans who want the complete "Road to Nowhere" experience can sync the audiobook & soundtrack with a GPS program, then follow Dave's story and listen to the music he plays as they drive along his route. Ink yourself a deal with Google Maps, and people can use the Street View function to examine his progress from their home computers.

— Is that all? Anything else, while you're re-writing the entire book? Should I turn it into a novel-slash-video game, a first-person shooter that allows the audience to see through Dave's eyes as they read?

— *Interesting. New literary ground: first-person perspective without first-person narration. Economically sound, too. Video games earn far more money than books. Could you add an assassin to the plot? A helicopter chase, or vampires? Some zombies that David can frag while fighting his way to the tower?*

— I'll see what I can do. Anything else?

— *You're not going to be a smart-ass and include this conversation, are you?*

— I wouldn't dream of it.

Prophets in Pantsuits

I-64 arrives from the west, bringing traffic from Frankfurt and thoughts about marriage. The Interstate drifts to the east, sliding past Lexington's core. The hazardous particles from the solar wind are deflected by the planet's electromagnetic field. Dave is proud of his metaphor, but hundreds of drivers have probably shared the thought.



In addition, he contemplates . . .

MILE 120:

. . . Bill and Hillary Clinton. Dave prays for the health of their union. For Chelsea's recent nuptials as well. Was there a stronger example of family values in the country? Imagine the outcry at such a statement: vomit rose in the pundits' throats. But he is serious. How often did marriages fail for petty or selfish reasons? Boredom, the desire to try something new, as if changing a spouse was like getting a haircut. The right to pursue happiness, the great American myth. We don't have the right to anything, thinks Dave. Not even to death.

The Clintons had weathered the storm. How much easier — for both of them, really — if Hillary had cut Bill loose? Instead, they showed that a love between husband and wife could smash through a grievous betrayal. The late-night comics joked about the cold, political nature of the union. That depth of forgiveness was not believable.

What an opportunity the church had lost. Viewing the reconciliation with a skeptical eye, casting doubts on the sly, calculated motives for staying together. What an example for struggling families. Hillary was a modern-day Hosea, faithful to her unfaithful lover, a walking reminder of Christ's fidelity to His own adulterous bride. But you'd never hear *that* from a pulpit. We dismiss the minor prophets who wear pantsuits.

The family values crowd rolled their eyes as the Clintons beamed in publicity photos from their daughter's wedding. They ignored the parable, the sermon illustration that was slapping them in the face. Simply because they disliked a political view. The same way they refused to believe that Obama could actually be a Christian. If there was anything more important than politics — and in Dave's opinion, *most* things were more important than politics — then marriage was certainly among them. Love your enemies, Christ said. Pray for their happiness, that the God of Heaven smiles on their families and allows their unions to prosper. Even if you hate their tax proposals. *Especially* if you hate their tax proposals.

MILE 112:

. . . loneliness. I-64 departs for West Virginia, leaving I-75 single once again. Dave wonders about Monica. Perhaps her life could be salvaged, like the Florence Y'all water tower. The decades would pass, making her less and less recognizable. New scandals

would come and go. Still, she'd carry that stigma the rest of her days, like an unfortunate tattoo in an obvious location. When her grandkids would Google her name, guess what they'd find?

The same went for Chelsea's offspring, of course. But their discoveries about Grandpa would be diluted, offset by a lifetime of public accomplishment.

It was David and Bathsheba once again. The man gets a multitude of press to draw the focus off his misbehavior: the slingshot and Goliath, the conquest of Jerusalem, the Psalms. The woman gets a single tale.

You reap what you sow, thinks Dave. But deep down, he hopes that isn't the case. His own life could never survive such a standard.

At the height of her infamy, did Monica ever pretend to be a Lewinsky impersonator — simply to move in public without harassment?

Could you live a lifetime that way? An impersonation of yourself. If enough time passed, would you forget your original form? Would you start to believe your own self-parody?

MILE 104:

. . . how Lexington slips past without much fanfare. A few more lanes and exits, but nothing dramatic. Not like Dayton and Cincinnati, where the road plowed next to downtown and showcased the skyline.

It disturbs him, the ease of this bypass. How many soulmates has he missed, only a few miles east or west of their course through this life? On a cosmological scale, astronomically close in both space and time. In a practical sense, exponentially far apart.

MILE 97:

. . .the Kentucky River. On the bridge across its impressive gorge, a sign forbids stopping. The span is under surveillance, it claims.

MILE 95:

. . . the exit for Fort Boonesborough State Park. Old Daniel once passed this way, heading north from the Cumberland Gap. He eventually left, searching for land where he couldn't spot smoke from a neighbor's chimney.

What would Boone make of Lexington and the sea of rooftops in its suburbs? So much had changed in the past two centuries. How would the years to come transform the landscape? Would they double-stack houses, the same way they double-stacked freeways in major cities?

Of course they would, thinks Dave. Such futuristic buildings had already arrived. We call them apartments.

He is loopy, getting sleepier by the mile. He contemplates parking and closing his eyes, but worries about cops and strangers. Besides, he needs to keep moving in order to stay on schedule. Half of the state still remains.

It disturbs his notions of symmetry, how Lexington is close to the center of Kentucky, but not quite. A touch too far to the north.

MILE 83:

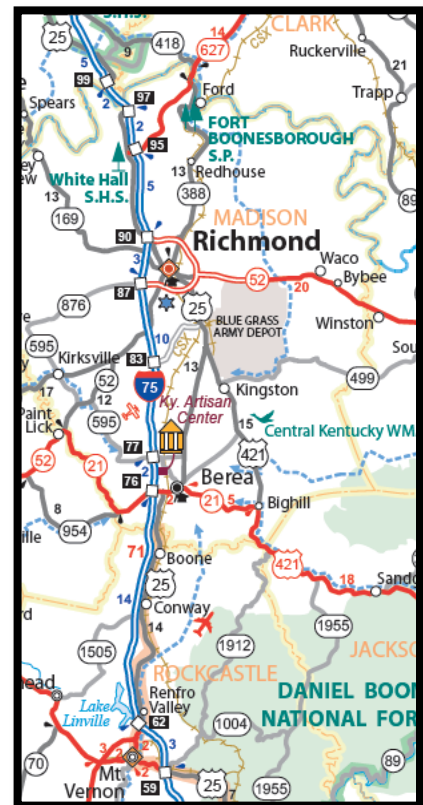
... the empty Gatorade bottle in the cupholder. He needs to pee, but he isn't *that* desperate. Not with an empty road. In the dark, a bush is as good as a urinal.

He last stopped before Cincinnati, almost two hours back. Here, south of Lexington, an Artisan Center has replaced the rest area. According to the sign, this showcase for Kentucky arts and crafts is open from 8-8.

Last summer, Bethany had insisted on touring the facility. She admired the woodworking and the quilts. Dave claimed to prefer the conceptual pieces — the metalwork that graced the lobby — simply to get a reaction.

They had been travelling to Tennessee. Beth was eager to meet Mom and Grandpa. For months, she'd been pestering him to take her south. He refused at Christmas. They hadn't been dating long enough, he argued. When June arrived, their relationship still going strong, he couldn't devise an excuse. Nothing to last until August, at least.

She already knew the Kingmans. Now she wanted to meet the Walkers, the opposite side of his family tree. To examine his roots, she teased. To learn if they were solid.



Children of the Covenant

South of Berea, the road met a line of hills — an outer band of Appalachia. Dave removed his foot from the gas. He turned off the headlights, held the wheel firm, and relished the thrill of coasting in total darkness. After a moment, he switched them back on. It was a brief adventure, three or four seconds at most. Even so, the surge of adrenaline set his heart pounding.

He'd acted without thinking, and the objections arrived too late to make any difference. What if the alignment had been warped, his sense of direction skewed? What if a deer had wandered onto the interstate, or a trooper was watching atop the rise? None of the questions mattered. He had burst through the darkness and survived.

The truck was still coasting, traveling slower and slower. Gravity and friction ate at its velocity. Near the apex of the hill, Dave eased to the side of the road. Vertical walls revealed the exposed strata, the aftermath of the dynamite that blasted this route through the gap. He stepped from the cab and left the door open. The interior bulb cast a dim glow on weeds near the berm.

It was four in the morning. The night air was crisp, colder than Midfield had been, even though he was further south. He thought about latent heat and latitude.

Dave unzipped his jeans, taking aim at a can of Bud Light that some asshole had thrown out the window. He shuddered with relief. The stream hit the aluminum target, and he backed away to avoid the splatter.

He should have gathered the can and recycled it. Too late now. He felt ashamed. He ought to be spreading good, blessing the land that he crossed. Instead, he was making things worse.

Who was he kidding? He wouldn't have touched the can, even before it was soaked in urine. He would fret about germs, or rural cops and local container laws, and imagine worst-case scenarios for miles at a time. And these worries wouldn't be fears, not really — simply excuses.

He ought to have pissed on the interstate, signing the view from the gap. Brandon Parker came to mind. Now *that* was a blast from the past. Back in high school, Brandon accepted a bet and peed his first name on the wall of the MCA concession stand. He added a smiley face, a nice touch, but ran dry before the grand finale, a palm tree and monkey.

Why did boys have such a peculiar fascination with their ability to urinate? In college, some of his friends would step outside to use the restroom against the neighbor's fence, rather than waiting for a bathroom to open. When Fisher erected a brand-new athletic center, a gang from his dorm had "dedicated" the building on the night before the official ceremony. Was the response animalistic, a link to the mammals that sprayed and marked their territory? Other men had evolved, cultured by capitalism. Because washing

your Z71 quad cab at the end of your driveway on a Saturday afternoon . . . wasn't that simply a modern form of pissing your dominance along the property line?

Did the ancients behave in this manner? Had a handful of Israelite soldiers relieved themselves on the ruins of Jericho, a less formal Ebenezer than Joshua raised at the Jordan River? What about crossing the Red Sea? Six hundred thousand Israelite men had left Egypt, not counting the women and children and all of the livestock, as if the residents of Cleveland uprooted themselves and all took a long group hike. There must have been one hell of a bottleneck at the entrance to that miraculous path — a shortcut without any convenient rest areas or artisan centers. You had to believe that a fraction of the refugees had small bladders and needed to stop for a potty break. Surely, at least one teenage boy tried peeing into the wall of water, just to see what would happen.

Dave was disgusted at himself. Who *thought* about things like that? Who stopped at the top of a gap, this view over central Kentucky, and devoted his mind to urination?

He glanced to the north, at terrain he had already crossed. One of Grandpa's favorite moments in American history involved Lewis and Clark: the two explorers at the headwaters of the Missouri River, looking back at the miles of ground they had already covered — their pride tempered by mountains to the west. The continent refused to match their preconceptions, said Grandpa. The difficult travel was yet to come.

A few lights were now visible. Not many, and miles between them. Dave tried to spot Lexington's distant haze. At his back, in the northbound lanes, an eighteen wheeler topped the rise and started to descend. A blast of wind followed its wake.

The stars were out in force, far more than Dave could remember seeing, at least in a very long time. He leaned against the tailgate and laughed, struck by the absurdity of his situation. In a few short hours, the teachers would arrive at MCA. For all they knew, Mr. Kingman would appear on schedule as well. Instead, he was parked at the side of a highway in the wrong state, admiring the night sky. What's more, out of seven billion people on this entire planet, he was the *only* human who knew where he actually was.

He watched a dot of light approach, then split in two. Dave moved to the side of the truck. He didn't want to attract notice. As the car passed, he ducked low. Its brake lights flashed, and Dave's heart skipped a beat. But the driver hit the gas and disappeared into the night. Dave laughed at himself once again. At this instinct to hide, as if caught in the act. As if crouching by your truck at 4 AM was somehow less suspicious than standing next to it.

Another car passed. Then a semi. Then silence. Dave walked into the center of the road. It was deserted, the next set of lights a handful of miles away. He thought of the lawn back at Shady Grove. He was so much younger then, five or six hours back.

He lay himself down on the interstate. The asphalt was hard and cold. It felt rough on the back of his skull. Suppose he slammed his head backward as hard as he could — could he knock himself out?

He tried not to think of the oil and fluids on the dirty road. About trucks that blew tires, or cars that were driving the wrong way.

How fast could he get to the side? Less than three seconds, most likely. How much ground could a semi cover in that span of time? One – one thousand. Two – one thousand. Three . . .

Dave considered the speed of Olympic sprinters. In the hundred-meter dash, a world-class athlete could travel thirty percent of his route in three seconds. Which was incredible, the more that you thought about it. A lifetime of work, the legacy of your athletic career, all settled in less than ten seconds — faster than most people cross a broad street.

The view was incredible, well worth the risk: an unhampered shot of the sky. Countless stars, and that luminescent brushstroke, the Milky Way.

It was the type of view that made you feel small. That inspired faith. The promises of God felt rich and deep. Back in Midfield, where light pollution tainted the night, Abraham's descendants had numbered in the thousands — the tens of thousands on a clear evening. Out here, the patriarch was father to millions.

Dave thought about Isaac on the altar. He held himself rigid, imagining cords that held the boy tight. God had decided to interrupt, calling his servant to stop. Change of plans, said the angel. Abraham didn't need to sacrifice his child, after all. The Father would kill His own Son instead.

Dave closed his eyes, trying to hear God's voice. He listened for traffic in either direction. Like those scouts in the old time Westerns, who predicted the size of the outlaw's gang by placing their ear on a rock.

The engine he heard was far too close for comfort. He scrambled to his feet and dashed off the road. The horn of the onrushing car was loud and relentless. It resounded against the rock walls.

A minute later, a semi passed. It downshifted on the opposite slope.

Dave decided to get in the cab. His hands were shaking. Partly from the cold, but more from reliving his reckless stunt.

He thought about turning around. If he didn't waste time, he could make it to campus by 8:30. If he claimed that he overslept, everyone but Gordon would probably believe the story. The day would be awful, teaching on zero hours sleep, but not an impossible task. He'd grab a power nap in his planning period, enough to sustain him till evening.

Didn't that make the most sense? He was already making bad decisions. Wasn't the best choice to bail? To abort before entering the mountains, where the risks would only increase? Before he took a chance he couldn't overcome?

If he knew *why* he was heading for Shuckstack, it might be a different story. But he didn't, not really. He was miles from home on a pointless journey. He wasn't Lewis or Clark, looking for the Northwest Passage. He wasn't Frodo. They both carried rings, but the hobbit accepted a mission. Shuckstack was not Mount Doom, and Dave had little intention of tossing away a thousand dollar purchase. And he certainly wasn't Abraham, whose marching orders came straight from the top. No, Dave was his own travel agent — a role he now wished to resign.

Something was out there. Not an animal, though Dave could imagine a wildcat's eyes in the dark. Not a person, though he feared that a cruiser would soon arrive, responding to calls about a lunatic on the road. Not an alien or an angel or a demon,

though it wouldn't surprise him that locals had met all three. He was entering snake-handling country, after all.

No, what he sensed — this thing in the earth — he could only think of puerile comparisons: that classic scene in *Jurassic Park*, when the ground shakes and the water trembles, signs that a T-Rex is coming; or *Ghostbusters*, when the streets of Manhattan quake from the steps of that giant demon, the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man.

But this wasn't a poltergeist or a dinosaur or even a fifty-foot version of Darryl Hannah. It was Tar Pits Jesus, still on his tail. No breaks, no calling off the hunt. It never stopped tracking its prey.

Dave could sense its footsteps on the road: walking to Emmaus once again, and determined to find company. The statue was travelling the highways and byways, the back alleys and mountain trails. It called the homeless from their dumpsters and impoverished from the night shift, the strippers from their clubs and meth addicts from singlewides. It bypassed the churches and Christian schools. It was gathering the rabble for a feast.

Review Problem – Section V

Practical Mathematics – Mr. Kingman
Take-Home Question

Name: _____

Suppose you are the campaign manager for a presidential candidate. You intend to design a “whistle-stop” tour, barnstorming the country by bus. You want to conserve your resources and – if possible -- restrict your travels to two interstates. Find an interstate map of the United States and a copy of the Electoral College, then answer the following questions:

1. How many electoral votes are available in the states along I-75?
2. How many electoral votes are available in the states along I-70?
3. Could a candidate win the election using only the states along these two highways?
How many votes would he receive? What percentage of the Electoral College?

Bonus: Identify an additional north-south & east-west combination (such as I-75 and I-70) that includes enough electoral votes to ensure a win for a presidential candidate.

SECTION VI: SUNDAES & SNAPSHOTS

In which the teacher is covered in chocolate syrup.

Bethany in Tennessee — Samuel's Dilemma — What About the Steps? — The Basement Museum — FDR & Appalachian Spinsters — You Make Your Life Out of What You Are Given — The Edible Olympics — Dave and Dave' — Eggs in the Pants — Beth's Letter — A Disturbing Revelation — Captain Jack Sparrow & MCA — When Berries are not Berries — The Synchronous Fireflies of East Tennessee — The Border — The Plateau — The City of Giant Balls



LENGTH: Fourscore miles in southern Kentucky and eastern Tennessee. Over a decade through the past.

HIGHLIGHTS: The Sundae Schoolteacher competition; trivia about ~~vegetables~~ fruits & fireflies.

CAUTIONS: Wear clothes that can get messy.

TRAILHEAD: Blount County, Tennessee. Summer 2010.

Blount County Snapshots

Summer 2010

§ The visit went better than Dave had expected. His mother was pleasant, a gracious host. She didn't *like* Bethany. At the same time, she didn't appear to *dislike* her. That's all he wanted: a friendly façade, a suspended sentence.

Grandpa was charming. His stories made people laugh, breaking the tension. For Dave, who knew most of the tales by heart, the punch lines grew fresh as he watched Beth react. She returned the favor to Samuel: sitting with his wife, talking to her like a real person, acting like nothing was wrong.

Even Rachel was decent. Her presence had been a surprise, because Dave had timed their visit to guarantee her absence. His strategy? Acclimate Mom and Grandpa first — them to Beth, Bethany to them. Rachel was Phase Two, a complex study in pressure and dynamics.

Last he heard, she had been planning a summer in Wyoming: the Wind River Range or the Absarokas. But there she was, sitting cross-legged on the couch as Mom led the visitors into the living room. “Hey, bro.” The smile was friendly. The eyes sized him up. These days, he felt judged whenever they met. Her presence was a spotlight that swept across his life. She gathered his choices and splayed them on the dissection table, eager to wield the knife.

§ Grandpa and Grandma lived downstairs in the in-law suite. Like hobbits, Dave thought, they had buried themselves in the earth.

The bedroom and bath were underground, but the yard sloped down to the back, so their living space got plenty of sun. The entrance to the garage was step-free, and a sliding-glass door opened onto the lower patio. Grandma's patio, they called it. Her birdfeeders lined the rails.

Spring 1998

§ Laura agreed to return to Maryville. She would live with her parents and help Dad with Mom. Her one condition? They would look for a new house. The old place in town was too crowded, the rooms packed with furniture, keepsakes, and memories.

Grandpa resisted the change. He had lived on Redburn for forty-nine years. *We'll scale back*, he insisted. *We managed to fit before.*

Rachel wasn't born yet, Mom said, *and David was only a little boy*. These days, they required a lot more space.

§ Dave had already made his decision. He would stay in Ohio and live with his dad. They hadn't told Grandpa. *Not until we finalize the details*, said Mom. *If he thinks that we're inconvenienced — that he's breaking the family apart — he's going to balk at the plan. There's plenty of fight in those bones.*

Like father, like daughter, Dave thought.

Two Years Earlier

§ Grandpa skirted the issue. He could not accept the official diagnosis, which confirmed what his daughter had told him for years.

She's always been a quiet woman, he argued. You know that. She lives in a world all her own.

Laura had to concede the point. As long as she could remember, her mother had been mired in the past: the departed brothers, the fathoms of water that buried their land.

Lily's rituals didn't help. They complicated the picture, rather than offering clarity. She lived as a creature of habit: watch the feeders in the morning; tidy the house until lunch (crackers, cheese, and a piece of fruit, the twelve o'clock news for company). Afternoons, she ran errands or went to the hairdresser. Once a month, she volunteered at the library. TV dinners on Tuesday nights, pot roast on Thursdays. On Saturday, she and Grandpa ate at the Maryville Seafood House, where she chose one of three dishes: the baked catfish, the Carolina crab cakes, or the nightly special.

Her predictable orders grew into a family joke, but the laughter didn't faze her. When David was young, Grandma's tongue was a match for anyone at the table. Her response could be quick and deft: *I prefer two or three quality options to a pedestrian buffet.*

Later — when her orders were stabs in the dark, not true decisions — they ought to have paid more attention. They thought she was stubborn, clinging to rigid tastes, and they failed to consider the alternative: the burden of choice, a world of selections she no longer understood.

§ *Don't beat yourselves up*, said the doctor. *Hindsight is twenty-twenty*. Looking back, families would lament the clues they had missed, the symptoms that first began to manifest.

Focus on the present, he advised. The rate of the disease might vary, but it would only progress in a single direction. *Talk to your wife while you can*, he told Grandpa. *Cherish the next year or two. She will never know more than she does right now*.

§ Lily was drowning. Samuel vowed to swim at her side, treading that bitter water. He seldom left her alone — not after the day that she wandered their street, searching in vain for their house. She had stepped out to get the mail and turned herself around. A neighbor discovered her on their front porch, trying to open the door. So Grandpa stayed close. He set down his hiking stick and lifted the trowel. Grandma watched him at work in the soil, and the gardens and flowerbeds prospered under his care. She followed him like a shadow. If he stepped inside to use the toilet, she waited outside the bathroom door.

In the evening, he helped her down the back steps, and they made a grand tour of the yard. They recited names: trees and plants, relatives and friends, places they'd been and places they'd never see.

§ Samuel tried not to think of his own fading limbs. Every year, another hike slipped beyond his power. The thirty-milers had long been pipe dreams, marathon loops that he trekked in his youth. Even twenty-mile routes were now out of reach. The major summits would soon join the list — LeConte, Sterling, Thunderhead — old friends that

he'd never visit, not even a final farewell. One day, even Cucumber Gap would prove too much. He tried not to dwell on the miles he lost, but each lap in the yard meant a sacrifice, a hike that he'd never complete.

On good days, he took Grandma to a nearby deli for chicken salad sandwiches. On bad days, they stayed home, and she fell asleep to movies: Bette Davis in *All About Eve* and Katharine Hepburn in *The African Queen*, the idols of her youth. They watched each film dozens of times. Sam wanted Lily to select, and she always picked the same titles. When she began to snore, he muted the volume and read in the glow from the screen. He thought about the silent images and compared them to his wife's mind. Was that how she saw the world? Streams of pictures, coherent at times, but without the language that held them together.

How long would she last? Two years? Twelve? Twenty? The uncertainty was dreadful, second only to memory when ranking the trials. They moved deeper into the labyrinth. When the end finally came and he laid her to rest, would the maze be too snarled to unravel? Was he doomed to slip under as well?

Spring 1998

§ He finally broke down and admitted the truth: a visit each week would snap the monotony. It could make a huge difference. If Laura joined them for dinner, he wouldn't need to supply both ends of the conversation. Once a month, if she sat with Lily for the afternoon, he could wander a bookstore or meet an old colleague for a drink or even drive out to the Foothills Parkway, where a paved trail climbed to the observation deck on Look Rock.

You'll see us more often than that, said Mom. *If I move back to Tennessee, we're all going to live together.*

That isn't necessary, he said. *It's too big a sacrifice to ask.*

For which of them? Dave wondered. Father? Daughter? Both?

§ *It was bound to happen,* Mom told her son. *It might as well be now.* Who else could look after the pair?

Her mother wasn't the problem. Grandma had slipped beyond help. All they could do now was simplify her life. The real worry was Grandpa. As his wife became ill, he added routines to her day: a permanent schedule; the backyard tours; a fixed décor, the furniture practically nailed in place. He adopted these habits for Lily, keeping her days predictable. *But they're really for him,* Mom claimed. *The ritual hides the symptoms.* Grandma followed the patterns, and it masked how sick she actually was.

Each routine became part of Samuel's life as well. *Right now, at the age he needs to keep mind and body alert — to avoid getting stagnant.* His daughter's presence would disrupt the routine and force these habits to vary. *I need him to stay strong. Mom first, then Dad. I can't take care of them both, not at the same time.*

§ Dave considered his mother's health: a full-time job at the hospital, a slate of responsibilities at home. Back in Hocking County, a similar strain had worn Laura down to a nub. Now she was two decades older. Knots of arthritis were growing in her knuckles. Her migraines were more and more frequent.

Rachel could help, but Mom would limit her duties. She felt guilt about forcing her daughter to move. Not that Dave's sister complained. If anything, she was relieved to break free of Midfield's grasp. Besides, this opening stage was not the concern. Even at seventy, Grandpa could handle most physical tasks. The problem would come in the future — a decade down the road — when *his* body started to fail. Rachel would be gone, and Mom would be left to care for her parents alone.

Turnabout was fair play. Samuel had nurtured a helpless infant, chased after the reckless tomboy, and argued with a defiant teen. His own decline would reverse the sequence: Mom would fight with her dad about what he could no longer do; she would fret when he grabbed the keys; and she'd tend to his basic needs as he lost that last ability to function. When Mom finished her task, would her own life be spent? As she finally relaxed, would years of exhaustion wash over her like a flood? Dave already knew his charge: step forward, open his arms, and envelop her weakness with strength.

§ Samuel was divided. He welcomed his daughter's arrival, but he resisted the move that she demanded. She tried to convince him on practical grounds. *From the new house, my daily commute will be shorter.*

Not in miles, he said.

In minutes. She mentioned the lights in town, the traffic near the college.

Grandma will be closer to the hospital.

§ Mom tried to lure him with aesthetics: *On clear days, you can see Chilhowee Mountain from the deck.*

Pure torture, he said. Staring at mountains he couldn't visit.

But you could. That's one of the reasons I'm moving.

§ She tried to appeal to love: *Do it for Mom. She'll be happier in the new place.*

Her father disagreed. Lily was used to the house. A change would only upset her.

She'll have to be moved, sooner or later. Why not now, when she still has the chance to adjust?

When he spoke, the answer was soft: *I'm afraid it's too late for that.*

§ Laura switched to a negative campaign. She critiqued the old house on Redburn, which needed both upgrades and repairs. Wouldn't *that* disturb Lily? All of those workers, the chaos of construction?

Grandpa challenged her analysis. She was exaggerating, trying to make a point, and he bristled at the critique. It suggested he didn't take care of his property. Sam Walker believed in stewardship. It was a central tenet of his life: whatever you were entrusted with — a house, land, a job, marriage, a title or position, a friendship — you were called to preserve its quality. If possible, you should leave it in better condition than you found it. Which led to his central complaint about aging: he tried to stay healthy, but the body sabotaged his efforts, growing weaker by the year.

There is nothing wrong with that house, Grandpa said. I've taken good care of it.

In addition to the regular maintenance, he did plenty of work that increased its value — especially the gardens and flowers, the features that grew after Grandma got sick. A

local paper had focused on his efforts, and a tour of homes had asked to visit their yard. But visitors upset Lily. She would request to go home, even though she was already there. To her, being *home* meant being left alone.

§ *What about the steps?* Laura asked.

What about them? Her father's voice was hesitant, and she knew that she'd touched on the fulcrum, the key to prying him off Redburn. The old house had too many steps and stairwells. You climbed the front entrance and descended out back. The washer and dryer were in the basement, and the bedrooms were all on the second floor. Lily could manage each flight, but the going was slow. She would hesitate, unsure about placing each foot, and Grandpa would steady her balance.

Mom drove the point home: pretty soon, they'd have trouble getting Grandma down from the bedroom, let alone to the gardens and the car. She avoided the harder questions. What if her mother awoke in the night, confused where she was, and reached the stairwell before Samuel noticed? What if the house caught on fire?

§ Dave respected her restraint. Grandpa was destined to lose, but Mom needed her father to fight — to wage an honorable retreat and know that he tried to resist, that he didn't abandon their house. He had struggled with impotence, watching his wife in the throes of disease. A body he loved was being attacked, yet he could not protect it. The least he could do was defend their home.

Their marriage had never been easy. If the columns were totaled, the devotion he offered would eclipse the love in her response. But that would be missing the point, he'd

claim. In the joint checking account of marriage, your contributions would seldom balance. Like the widow and her mite, you gave what you had to offer. You could never withhold. If you did, you lost the entire investment.

Besides, none of that mattered anymore. Everything changed once Lily got sick. Those days that they fought, waging their silent battles? The months that each gazed at the other's heart, failing to understand? All of those years grew better and brighter, remembered in light of events to come. In time, he only held on to the joy. Their marriage provided the arc of his life. Everything else became subplot.

The burden of memory fell on his shoulders: he carried the past for them both. It was all for her, the fight and the surrender. He bore them both in Lily's honor.

§ Mom watched her father and knew that his spirit endured. The two of them had always sparred. It was the foundation of their relationship: part dance, part duel, all Walker.

She wanted a neutral field. Living with her parents would be difficult enough. In an unfamiliar space, she could try to establish new rules. On Redburn, in the house she was raised, she would always be a child.

Summer 1998

§ The actual move went smoothly enough. As Mom had predicted, Grandpa threatened to bail when he learned that David wasn't coming. But they had already committed to the purchase. He would sacrifice a down payment, but he refused to go back on his word.

The new house wasn't actually new. The split-level structure was decades old, the subdivision built when Laura was still in high school. Grandpa scoffed at its poor construction. The houses on Redburn would still be standing, long after this upstart had been condemned.

Walk around it seven times, his daughter proposed. At the end of your parade, blow the trumpet as loud as you can. If the walls start to crumble, we'll move back to town.

The walls would certainly crumble, he said. From moisture and wood rot, not Israel's shout.

§ Samuel sketched plans for the yard: flowerbeds near the patio, and a raised garden out back, where veggies would thrive in the sunlight. He grumbled about the uneven ground and its lack of mature trees. The old woods had been raped by bulldozers and bush hogs.

Mom claimed he was secretly excited, this landscape to bend to his will.

Like Prospero, Dave observed.

I don't care who he's like, as long as he's happy.

§ The top floor had bedrooms for Mom and Rachel, plus a guest room for David's visits. The central level contained the main kitchen, dining room, and the primary living space. It offered a buffer zone, a no-man's land between generations.

They treated the basement apartment as a separate residence, knocking as they entered on "visits" downstairs. Grandpa's décor reinforced this effect. He plastered the

walls with photographs, maps, and newspaper articles about East Tennessee. His name graced the byline on several of the yellowed clippings. Hiking photos were pieced together in clusters, like pictures and evidence on a detective's wall, as if Samuel were solving the mystery of his life. David appeared in more than a few: standing on a rock at Charlie's Bunion; covered in mist from Hen Wallow Falls; wading across Abrams Creek.

Each week brought a new display, another square foot of coverage. For years, Sam had refused to alter the house on Redburn. Now, he was making up for lost time. His new habitat was in constant flux.

It's like walking into a museum, Mom said. You spend hours down there, just reading the walls.

She complained to her father's face, accusing him of sabotage. He was trying to ruin the paint and prove his argument about the house. But everyone knew she was pleased. He was claiming the space for himself.

Grandpa was defiant. When he and Lily were finally gone, his daughter could gut the rooms and purge them from memory. If she studied his latest installation, he claimed she was simply looking for damage — this pesky landlord who never stopped hunting for violations. In other words, she was acting like his parent.

§ *Do you remember the Walker sisters?* Grandpa pointed to a photo on the wall. In the picture, a young boy was standing near the stone chimney of a wooden cabin.

Beneath the shot was a printed caption: "David / Walker Sisters Cabin / Summer 1989."

The Walker sisters were not related to Samuel's Walkers. They were simply his heroes. Their grandparents had crossed Little Briar Gap from Tuckaleechee Cove in the

middle of the 19th century. The land they obtained would remain in the clan for over a hundred years. They covered its acres with orchards and gardens and flowers and buildings and livestock. The family's address stayed constant; their lives most certainly did not. Years before the sisters were born, their father had almost perished in a Confederate prison; only the pumpkins of a local farmer kept him from salvation. Later, they witnessed the watersheds ravished by the Little River Lumber Company. The ground would shake as the massive chestnuts fell — those giants that five sisters would attempt to circle, all holding hands, and still not complete the ring. Two of them lost fiancés in accidents. One never recovered from the shock.

Eleven siblings in all, and each one survived to become an adult. A sign of their mother's remarkable skill, according to Grandpa. But the spinsters' story charmed him the most. In the 1930s, the government started to purchase land for a national park. Other households accepted the federal offer and moved away, but the sisters refused to sell out. They were determined to live out their days on the property.

The stalemate lasted until 1940. *Just imagine it*, Grandpa said. *Within five years, our nation would harness the power of the atom. Meanwhile, down in the hills of Tennessee, five aging women resisted its might.* According to credible rumors, President Roosevelt had slipped away from the park's dedication to offer his personal appeal. *Stalin was outmatched at Yalta*, joked Grandpa. *FDR learned to barter from Appalachian spinsters.*

In the end, they got what they wanted most: a lifetime lease. They sold the land but remained on the property. They even became a park attraction. Tourists would hike along Little Briar Creek and travel back in time. In 1946, a story in *The Saturday*

Evening Post made them national celebrities. Grandpa had found a copy of the article and hung it on the wall, along with his own pictures of the cabin. He first toured the homestead in the early 1950s, hoping to write a follow-up story. Only Margaret and Louisa were still alive, 83 and 71 years old. They were slowing down, and he decided against the piece. *They didn't need a fresh stream of visitors*, he explained. *They needed to rest.* Their descriptions and memories were vivid: the range of produce, the varieties of roses. The gardens had lost their splendor, but hints still remained. They spoke with love about the ancestors who built their home, the family that had preceded them to glory. He was enchanted. *They were queens*, he said. *Queens of the Little Briar.* He returned once a year and always brought fresh flowers. Louisa died in the 1960s, the last of the sisters, but he continued to make the pilgrimage. The Park Service maintained the buildings, and he once took David to explore them. *Their walls are a constant reminder*, he explained, laying his hand on a beam. *You make your life out of what you are given.*

§ *I was thinking of them, you know*, Grandpa said.

Pardon? It was Dave's first trip to the downstairs museum; he was feeling a touch overwhelmed. Mom's descriptions had been accurate, but they failed to convey the scope: the sheer number of exhibits, the course of the life that they mapped.

The Walker sisters. I was thinking about their cabin walls, how newspapers and pictures had covered the boards, both decoration and insulation, and decided to follow their lead.

Dave nodded. He recalled those empty, shadow-filled rooms: the streaks of light between planks, and scraps of paper that stuck to the wood.

Their quarters had been rustic, void of modern luxury, but cozy enough for the sisters. *I think about them crowded together*, said Grandpa. *About fireplace ash and winter drafts, muddy shoes and hard spring rain. It shuts my trap, whenever I start to grumble.*

Dave believed the explanation. But something hid within Grandpa's tribute, a vein of regret. The Walker sisters had clung to their land, while Redburn had slipped from his grasp. He had compared their lives and knew that his was lacking. If the crowded walls were a memorial, they also conceded defeat.

§ Grandpa longed for his former house. When it sold, he claimed to understand his wife: all those decades, pining for land she could never visit. There were differences, of course. He had agreed to the move, and he could still drive through the old neighborhood. According to Mom, his "errands" took suspiciously long. Such an option was impossible for Lily. She had no say in her displacement. In the early 1940s, the MacAllen farm had been claimed by the US Army Corps of Engineers. There was no great showdown with FDR, no article in *The Saturday Evening Post*. The fields she walked as a child had disappeared, their contours now silent and dark, deep beneath Watts Bar Lake.

§ Grandpa wanted to interview the potential owners. *What do you expect?* Mom asked. *That you'll give them a tour of the yard, explaining the best way to garden?*

Why not? Why would they purchase the land if they didn't expect to tend it? They must have approved of his work.

§ A month or two after the sale, a plastic bag was blowing across the old yard. Grandpa parked the car and stepped outside to grab it, but it slid out of reach and lodged beneath a bush. He returned home with mud on his hands and knees.

They're going to call the police, Mom said. They'll charge you with stalking.

I'm not stalking anyone. I was picking up litter.

On another person's property, she said. Beneath their bushes. That's trespassing.

I worked that land for years. I can never trespass there.

§ The new owner was trimming the hedges wrong. Grandpa wanted to write him a letter and offer some advice.

Enough is enough, Mom said. You have to stop torturing yourself. They were bound to make changes he didn't like. They've got the same freedom that you enjoy, out back in the garden and downstairs in your apartment.

Down in my cell, you mean?

Mom ignored the remark. *What if they buy a new mailbox? What if they paint the shutters, or plant marigolds but not hydrangeas? What if they prune the trees?* Grandpa sucked in his breath, and she risked a final blasphemy: *What if they cut down the maple?*

I'll have them arrested, he said.

§ Laura had troubles as well. Rachel provided updates on the phone. *Mom's lonely, she said.*

Their mother seldom made intimate friends. Even so, she left more acquaintances in Midfield than she gained in Tennessee. Her new colleagues were pleasant, but they didn't step out of their way to include her, not the way she'd been welcomed in the past.

Back then, I was young and fresh. Most of the doctors had a crush on me. Not anymore. No one gets roused by a middle-aged nurse.

Rachel didn't believe such claims. Their mother was growing older, but she still held her own on the hospital catwalk. There was something else, something deeper than friendship or flirtation. *I think that she misses your dad.*

§ The longer he considered it, the more sense the observation made. After their midnight run from Mr. Pete, David's parents constructed a patchwork friendship. They talked to each other on weekends, handing their son back and forth. MCA brought them together as well. They attended his soccer games, award banquets, and science fairs. If Mom was accompanied by friends, Dad usually kept his distance. When she was alone, he dared to sit beside her. It was often surreal for David, looking into the stands at a track meet: the two of them cheering his name, this glimpse of an alternate life.

There wasn't romance, simply decency and respect. At first, their son hoped that something might develop. After all, Dad had proved so generous and loyal. He rose to the occasion, helping this woman who once broke his heart. After they returned to Midfield, Mom couldn't find work for six months. Dave never learned how they paid the bills, but he could guess.

Nothing happened. Charles gave them the space to recover and adjust. In time, they all settled down to a civil routine.

The arrangement was odd. Mom dated other men — Mr. Pitts, for example — but she and Dad would parent as a team. They even fooled teachers on occasion. After a parent-teacher conference, Mrs. Cross had apologized to David. For some reason, she thought that his parents were divorced; but that clearly wasn't the case.

§ Dad went on dates of his own: a dinner here, a movie there. Nothing serious. One time, Mom asked if he was seeing anyone — a casual inquiry, the way she might ask where a friend had bought shoes.

Dad's response was quiet. He didn't blush, but his son could sense pain in his tone. *You know better than that*, he said.

Mom didn't speak. Sorrow lapped at the brim of her sad, sad smile. She touched Charles on the arm, squeezed once, and quickly let go.

§ Thus it made sense — in a strange, unconventional way — that Laura missed seeing Dave's father. Their encounters were brief, but long enough to touch his scars and know that he survived. She hadn't ruined his life, after all. Not completely, at least. He was damaged but alive: still solid, still beautiful, at least to the few who glanced at his heart.

Their meetings were causal. Yet in those fleeting moments, making small talk with her former husband, she stood in the presence of love.

§ Her own father loved her, of course. But he had been starved of attention for years, and his appetite was voracious. Such affection did not nourish: it consumed.

She arrived home from work, exhausted, and he sought out her company — another patient with his finger on the call button. She needed a circle of quiet, a space to be left alone, but he overlooked her weary frame. He was ready to give his report: the minutiae of Grandma's day. Signs that he dismissed for years, now recounted in excruciating detail.

§ Rachel was in her room. The stereo pulsed through the door, and the telephone crackled with life. Laura failed to spot her own reflection.

Mom longed to knock and enter that den, to nest on the bed and unburden her heart. But she didn't. Her daughter had suffered enough. Rachel's years at MCA had not been pleasant. She deserved a fresh start: a new school, new friends, and no one to ask why her brother had a father but she didn't. David was not around, making things worse, cutting her heart with answers he gave to his friends.

Laura offered her child space. Not that anything would have changed, had she cracked the door and listened to Rachel laugh, the pitch rising and falling and dancing into the phone. We seldom hear ourselves speak. A woman's voice is recorded in time. When it gets played back a generation later, on the instrument of her daughter's tongue, she does not recognize the song.

§ Patients, parents, daughter. She carried the weight of them all. Even her son and his father, the lives beyond her reach.

Had the sacrifice been worth it? Leading Rachel to this strange land, leaving David and Charles behind. Dragging Samuel to a house where he did not want to be.

Had it really been necessary? Most of the help that she offered, her father refused to take. The rest he accepted with shame.

Doubt circled like a vulture. When they talked on the phone, Dave could sense it within her voice. Mom would pretend to be enthused, describing a trivial feature in her new life. They both understood the façade. Had it been worth it? She tried to convince her son. She longed to believe it herself.

§ In the end, the question was irrelevant. Two years after the move, Grandpa slipped and fell on the upper reaches of the Middle Prong. The damage to his leg was severe. The next month, a rogue infection tore through the weakened flesh and finished the ruin. He lost everything below the right knee, and the entire debate was rendered moot.

Summer 2010

§ Grandma sat on the couch, picking at a stain on her sweater sleeve. Grandpa was resting in the easy chair. His eyes were closed. Reading glasses sat on a tray table, near an empty plate and a book by Wilma Dykeman.

David and Beth were quiet, watching their elder at rest. As a child, he would try to catch Grandpa off-guard. He'd sneak into a room, inching closer and closer. At the last possible moment — sometimes, without even turning to look — his target would break the silence: "Hunting for trouble, soldier?" Not today. He stirred for a moment, and his breathing fell back into rhythm.

Dave's gaze wandered down the right leg, where the trouser lay unnaturally flat. "Hey, Grandpa," he whispered.

The man woke with a start. His eyes shot straight to Grandma and the couch. When he saw she was fine, he relaxed and smiled at the visitors. "They'll let anyone into the state these days." He pulled a lever on the recliner and reached for his cane.

"You don't have to get up, Mr. Walker," said Bethany.

"Call me Samuel. It makes me feel old, young gals like you saying Mr. Walker." He tried to straighten his back. "Besides, I owe this guy something." Grandpa had shrunk in recent years, but the bear hug was solid. "Good to see you, my boy," he whispered.

His attention turned to Beth, a gaze steady and kind. His verdict was prefaced by a low, approving whistle. "She's a Buckeye, all right. I danced with *her* kind, back in the day." The language was neutral. The praise derived from the tone.

Its impact was striking. Bethany blossomed in response. Her traveling outfit was nothing special, a lime MCA polo and a knee-length, denim skirt (more sanitary than jeans in a public toilet, she claimed). Her hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail, all but a straight line of bangs that dropped to her eyebrows. She was trying to grow them out. Dave had seen her that way before, probably dozens of times. Yet, in that moment, she was almost beautiful. She beamed with gratitude, which softened her features and further heightened the effect.

The gardener's touch, thought Dave. It worked on both flowers and women.

Grandpa sat next to Grandma on the couch. He gathered his wife's hands and covered them with his own. "We have company, my dear." He nodded at Dave. "You recognize this one, of course."

"Hello, Grandma." Dave waved but didn't approach. "It's me, David — your grandson."

She stared at him for a moment, as if waiting for a cue. "Hello," she answered.

"Your Grandma says *Hello*."

Dave wasn't upset. He couldn't remember the last time she recognized him.

"And this charming young lady — who drove all the way down from Ohio to meet you — this is his special friend Bethany."

Beth knelt by the couch, trying to catch Grandma's stare. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Walker."

"Lily," said Grandpa.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lily. You have such a lovely name."

"Doesn't she?" He kissed his wife on the cheek, but she didn't respond.

Grandpa braced himself and rose from the couch with a grunt. Beth reached out to steady him, but he waved off the help. "I'm not as frail as I look. Not yet, at least." He stood tall, grinned, and struck his right shin with the cane. The fabric muffled the blow, but the knock on the prosthetic rod was harsh and unmistakable. "Didn't my grandson tell you? I'm bionic."

§ That evening, the six of them ate on Grandma's patio: barbeque chicken sandwiches and sliced tomatoes from Grandpa's garden. Beth added sugar to her tea,

unaware of how sweet it already was. Nobody warned her, and they laughed at her shocked expression when she took a sip. “Appalachian hazing,” said Grandpa. “SOP, East Tennessee.”

The evening was warm, but the upper deck provided shade. A breeze from a fan kept the insects at bay.

Beth was explaining how she and David met. According to her version of the tale, they got together as ice cream sundaes. “Not *over* sundaes,” she emphasized. “As sundaes. Isn’t that like him, trying to do things his own way?”

“Trying to do things the hard way, if you ask me,” said Grandpa. A movement caught their attention. Grandma’s hand was shaking, pointing at her grandson’s glass. “What do you want, darling?” her husband asked.

“What . . . does . . . he have?”

“Sweet tea, same as you. Almost as sweet as you, but not quite.” He winked at the rest of the group. Lily’s own drink was still half-full, and Grandpa handed her the cup. She refused to take it. “Not thirsty?” he said.

“No.” The frustration in her voice was clear. The anger, even.

The prospect would always astonish Dave. It horrified him, actually. The remote chance that deep in a recess of her mind, the Alamo of the cerebellum, a band of synapses had refused to surrender. They continued to fire, making their final stand.

The moment passed. Grandma looked down at her sweater and fussed at the buttons.

“Are you hot?” Grandpa asked. “Would you like us to take off your sweater?”

“That’s a lovely twin set you’re wearing,” Beth said.

Neither received a response.

Meeting as Sundaes

They met as sundaes. It was Bethany's standard line when asked about their relationship. It happened to be a lie.

She was referring to the Edible Olympics, back in the spring of 2007, when she and Dave had both been participants — victims, really — in the Sundae Schoolteacher competition. They were seated in kiddie pools in the center of the MCA gymnasium, covered in melting ice cream and a potpourri of sticky toppings. Each spotted the other's predicament: they grinned together and laughed. That laughter led to friendship, the friendship to flirtation — the infamous Year of Cold Feet. In the fall of 2009, Dave stammered out his invitation to the Homecoming banquet.

But they had *met* even earlier, in August 2005, when Bethany first moved to Midfield. Dave was only beginning his second full year at MCA, though he strode the halls like a veteran, given the years that he paced them as student. The two of them seldom talked. Beth worked in the Language Arts Department, and they didn't cross paths on a daily basis.

At the time, Dave had his eye fixed on a different first-year teacher: Stephanie Baker, a Cedarville grad who taught Freshman English. He spent that entire fall in strategic flirtations, building the nerve to ask her on a date. Then she returned from Christmas break with a diamond on her finger. Her college sweetheart had finally proposed. Dave was the first male teacher she told the good news. After all, he had been

such an encouragement that first semester, making sure she felt welcome at MCA. He went to her room less often in the spring. When invitations were mailed, he didn't survive the final cut.

Dave didn't think much of Bethany at first — this earnest and enthusiastic teacher, a year or two older than him, who had transferred to MCA from a Christian school near Cleveland. She didn't capture his imagination. So her story contained a grain of truth: they didn't *meet* as sundaes, yet that laugh was a turning point, the first time they actually *noticed* one another.

The moment was surrounded by mayhem. Spiritual enlightenment in the guise of sloppy, sticky anarchy. Theater of the Biblically absurd. It was sponsored by the sophomore class, and Dave happened to be their advisor. So he was *technically* responsible for the event, not to mention the havoc in its wake, and the debacle led to his opening stint on Stratham's list of mischief-makers. But Dave blamed the principal for actually *approving* the outrageous proposal. When the officers asked him to endorse their application, Dave signed with the firm conviction that his boss would soundly reject it.

In other words, Bethany's central premise was incorrect. The spectacle was never an elaborate scheme to draw the two of them together. According to her tale, Dave had arranged the entire fête to gawk at her slathered in chocolate syrup, whipped cream, and gallons of marshmallow goo. That simply wasn't the case.

Dave never recalled accepting the role. His second year, when the staff directory was circulated, he was simply listed as the sophomore class advisor. At MCA, whether

you sought them or not, your extracurricular duties could multiply like Jacob's children. Did you mention a hobby in a casual conversation? Listen politely to a student's crazy scheme? The next time you passed the bulletin board, a crowd would be huddled around a sign-up sheet — your name printed in bold at the top.

It wasn't just MCA. Things happened like that in Dave's life. He would be strolling along, whistling to himself — a bit melancholy, but fine, really — when all of a sudden: *Wham!* He was studying education . . . teaching at MCA . . . waging a Cold War against his sister . . . dating Bethany . . . driving through Kentucky in the middle of the night. Nothing that involved an emphatic choice, simply hundreds of tiny decisions, most of them unnoticed at the time — one step after another. *Like a hiker*, he thought. *Like Bunyan's Pilgrim*. Every so often, he straightened his back and glanced up from his shuffling feet. He examined the place where he stood: the Palace Beautiful or Doubting Castle, the Evangelist's House or the Slough of Despond. Wherever it was, he was usually surprised.

At least he got the right class. The other grades could be major headaches. The Freshman officers needed plenty of hand-holding, not to mention a chauffeur. Seniors wanted to leave with a major statement. But the Juniors had it the worst: the task of planning and hosting the Spring Banquet, MCA's version of prom. Their advisor retired the year that Bethany arrived. When no one stepped forward to claim the position, she volunteered . . . naturally. Now, when she returned from her summer missions trip, she spent the remainder of her break on tours of the banquet rooms and fellowship halls in a tri-county region. In the future, Dave would begin to suspect her motives. After all,

these sites could double as reception venues. Why else would she visit so many, if not making a preemptive strike on her wedding preparations? Surely not for the awkward teens in their gaudy corsages and ill-fitting cummerbunds, the students who picked at their Chicken Kiev. *They* didn't notice the hours of effort, the elaborate centerpieces and keepsakes. No, they would focus on complaints: the rules about hemlines, the dancing ban, and the last-minute edict about bare shoulders — the chaperones posted near the entrance, armed with shawls and eager to swaddle the teenage flesh.

The Sophomores were all right. The best draw, if you had to be saddled with a class. He “supervised” their plans for Spirit Week: in other words, he checked the float for deathtraps and sanitized the class skit, cutting the scenes with cross-dressing and beer. He might surface at fundraisers for an hour or two, enough time to wash a few cars and commandeer the hose. Two afternoons a month, he worked late in his room as the officers held their formal meetings. At first he tried to participate, but nobody talked when he got involved. They listened politely to his suggestions, yet they never responded, as if their feedback might be graded. So he took to his desk and eavesdropped while checking homework. Their conversation topics were anything but risqué: Monty Python, the Cartoon Network, MCA athletics, and stale, outdated gossip. Natalie Stewart recorded the official minutes. One week, they only contained four lines:

Battlestar Galactica?
Inspector Gadget Moses.
Gangsta Church Throwdown.
The Jesus mobile.

That night, he tried to unravel the mystery. Was the Jesus mobile a high-tech car for sin-busting vigilantes? Or was it an ornament for your baby's room, suspended above the

devout child's crib — Christ in the center and the twelve disciples hanging from wires, slowly turning in concentric circles?

Given each meeting's scattered focus, Dave wasn't concerned that January afternoon. Not as he listened to their ridiculous plans, the nonsense that would alter the course of his life. Seth Collins, the class president, was describing a game with raw eggs in a flexible plastic tube. For some foolhardy reason — Dave didn't catch why — two volunteers would blow on each end. The first to breathe would get egg in the face. Seth waved to the front. "Mr. Kingman, we've got a great idea for a special assembly!"

"Sounds like it. Sounds special, that's for sure."

"Wait," said Natalie. "What happens if they breathe at the same time?"

"Whoever starts blowing again wins, and the other guy—" Seth tossed a Capri-Sun at Ryan Oswald's chest. "Splat!"

"Hey! That still had juice in it!" Ryan yelled. "You got crap all over my shirt!"

A moment of silence followed. Dave kept his head low, but he sensed the hesitant glance. Ryan was braced for his teacher's censure, a rebuke for the borderline profanity. Dave suppressed an impish response — "Shit happens" — and chose to ignore the exchange.

Ryan dabbed at his shirt. "That's gonna stain," he whispered.

"Be glad it's not egg," Seth answered.

"Egg doesn't stain, you jerkface."

At least their messes were washable. Their mischief was innocent enough: forking a teacher's yard or sealing a locker with saran wrap. A scavenger hunt at the Dollar General or TJ Maxx. Most of the kids were a few grades behind when it came down to real, ball-busting sin. In a few years, they'd fill that tubing with beer, not eggs. Why rush them now?

Who was he kidding? Dave had never chugged a beer in his life — not in college, and certainly not in high school. He had never run naked down a campus lawn, never slurped Jell-O shots from a bartender's abs. As for carnal behavior? A few of his students had far more experience than him. At least he suspected they did. It was hard to know for certain. The AP sinners were careful. A Friday night bonfire with cases of Natty Light? Cover your tracks with a Saturday morning service project. And Dave? His teenage years had been spent in living rooms and dorms, watching movies and playing video games. Laughing with friends, planning stunts they would never attempt.

The longing swept over him like a wave, a desire to relive those awkward years. To nudge his life by a single degree — a choice here or there — and see how its course might shift. Would there be additional photos in his albums? Memories of nights when cameras weren't allowed? After the new adventures, would he continue to settle for a chalkboard? No matter which road he travelled, was he destined to land in the classroom, surrounded by inspirational posters of rock climbers and professional athletes? A running back was blasting through the defensive line. The caption challenged the students: "Push Hard! The Best Gains Are Often The Toughest!" Dave grimaced. His pupils knew far more algebra than the millionaire featured in the photo.

Was destiny inevitable?

What a stupid question, he thought. If it wasn't inevitable, it wouldn't be destiny. He smiled. Now *that* was an asinine slogan. Slap *that* puppy on a photo of skydiving Granny? A skydiving puppy, even? You'd have a best-selling poster in a heartbeat.

If he had accepted Kevin's offer, that Spring Break trip to the Ozarks. . . . If he'd blown off class to attend that Barenaked Ladies concert. . . . If he'd asked the girl in Religion 1102 on a study date. . . . If he auditioned for that play, registered for the advanced Chemistry course, or read that brochure on semesters abroad. . . . If any of that, what then?

He and his friends had lived epic lives. At least they believed they did, rocking out to the Counting Crows at 2 AM in bold defiance of the RD's solemn warning. They dared one another to bouts of Stupid, a barefoot contest in which you and an opponent stood several yards apart and tossed golf balls at one another's toes. If he flinched, you got to throw overhand. The name fit, both the game and a person who played more than once.

Was that all? When he tried to recall the best years of his life, why was there little but crowded cars and dollar movies, late-night Slurpee runs and study breaks at Denny's? Was that all he had? Key lime pie, bottomless pots of coffee, and Moons Over My Hammy? There must have been more excitement. Why else did he long to turn back the clock? Did he simply want a second chance, a shot at gathering some *real* stories? Legends that could entertain his grandchildren at a campfire, when they begged him to say the craziest thing that he'd ever done. You needed two or three tales to skip, things that you swear you'll never tell the kids. A father maintains a strategic reserve,

ammunition for moments that children are frantic, convinced that they've ruined their lives. A bank of memories for easy withdrawal. You look them in the eye: "That's pretty bad, son. Still, it could be worse. Let me tell you about the time. . . ."

But he'd never burned a barn to the ground. Never spent a night running from campus police. Never stranded himself on a water tower or a highway billboard, uncertain how to get down. Not one single time had he come to his senses on the wrong side of the Maumee River, wondering what he had done or how he got there, soaked and confused and wearing a single bowling shoe. There was no local site he could pass with his daughter and casually remark, "See that place? One time, I about broke my neck, landing a back-flip in my boxers. Stupid."

"So we've got five events for sure."

Dave was impressed. They had focused on the Edible Olympics for over a month. A full slate of games was complete, but they hadn't addressed the harder challenge: a compelling reason for Stratham to schedule a special assembly, especially when its most likely outcome was a giant, sugary mess.

"What about the Tug-of-War?"

"Where could we hold it? We can't dig a pit in the gym."

If Seth was the idea man, then Natalie's gift involved challenging his plans. They made an effective team. She forced him to examine the logistics and nudged the dream toward reality. Ryan and John were simply their minions.

"What about the practice fields?"

"Coach Norris would never allow it."

“They won’t let us go outside — not in March. The audience would be too cold to pay attention, and the ground might still be frozen.”

“We’re filling the pit with Jell-O, right?”

“How can we make enough Jell-O to fill a pit? Don’t you have to refrigerate it?”

“Not if we’re outside in March.”

“Only if you want to eat it.”

“If you fall in the pit, can you open your mouth? How are people going to breathe?”

“It’s not going to be *deep*.”

“But you can drown in a bathtub, I thought.”

“Only if you’re a baby.”

“Grandmas can drown.”

“Ok. Babies and Grandmas are disqualified.”

“What if someone gets food poisoning? We have to be careful, especially with the eggs. We don’t need anyone to vomit.”

Seth pretended to throw up on Natalie.

“That’s gross,” she said. “I’m serious. Principal Stratham would *not* call that EDIFYING.”

The boys laughed at her joke. Scientists might divide the world into animal, vegetable, and mineral. Stratham only required two categories: edifying & non-edifying.

“Hey, Mr. Kingman,” Seth yelled. “You can’t get food poisoning from Jell-O, can you?”

Natalie checked her notes from a previous meeting. “I thought we decided on chocolate pudding?”

“What about the swimming pool at the Carsons’ house?”

“That would be *awesome!*”

“How’s that gonna work? You can’t get hundreds of people in Carl’s backyard.”

Not to mention the greater obstacle, thought Dave. Convincing Mr. and Mrs. Carson to fill their in-ground pool with chocolate pudding.

“How could we get everyone there? We’re not allowed to use the buses.”

“Why not?”

“Insurance reasons,” Dave said. It wasn’t exactly true, but it saved a more detailed explanation.

“What if we called it a class retreat, only for sophomores? You know, for bonding?”

“Bonding,” said Seth. “James Bonding.”

“My uncle has a farm we could probably use. He might let us dig a pit.”

“How would we transport the pudding?”

“What if we used mud?”

“What?”

“What if the tug-of-war pit was filled with mud, not pudding?”

“That would be easier.”

“But we’d lose the theme, and Jason’s already making posters.”

Dave felt a trace of alarm. Loose talk of pudding was one thing. Plans to hang flyers? The officers were serious.

“We need food to make our spiritual application,” said Natalie. “Remember what Principal Stratham said? We can’t make a mess without an edifying point.”

They had already talked to Stratham. Dave’s heart began to sink. Surely the principal was humoring them. The odds that he’d let this happen were zero to none. They simply didn’t compute.

“Tell me again — what’s our point?”

“To make the biggest mess in the history of MCA.”

“Something about spiritual food.”

“Like Manna from heaven? Or the loaves and the fishes?”

“Loaves and Fishes. We should name a game that — you know, like Sharks and Minnows.”

“Fish are gross. Anyway, we can’t use meat.”

“Manna-manna-bo-bana . . .

“Why not?”

. . . Fe-fi-fo-fana . . .”

“It’s not sanitary, and it’s too expensive.”

. . . Man-na.”

“What’s our point, if it’s not manna or fish?”

“That verse in Paul,” said Natalie. “You know, spiritual food for mature Christians.”

“Whatever works,” said Seth. “As long as you get chocolate syrup in your hair.” She punched him on the arm, a light hit. It encouraged the tease, rather than shutting it down. Dave could hear bells ringing at their wedding.

Natalie moved from pleasure to business with ease, a consummate professional. “We’ve already got more than enough events. The tug-of-war has to go.” She ignored their groans. “We have to be practical. We have to draw a line.”

Was that it? Had he crossed some line that he didn’t notice? Was there an obstacle he missed, a turn he forgot to make? Suppose he took that chance — a new major, a new college, even a different hairstyle? His junior year, the starting defenders on the soccer team had gone to the barber for matching flat tops. They challenged Dave to adopt the look as well: it would demonstrate unity and intimidate the opposition. He wimped out, afraid to draw notice to himself. His mom wouldn’t approve of the style, he claimed. He saw the pity in his teammates’ eyes, and he felt the shame of cowardice.

That night, he gelled and spiked his short hair. He examined himself in the mirror, flattened the top with a ruler, and tried to envision a landing strip. If he screwed up the courage and asked for that high and tight, would his path have still led him to the classroom? Would he be earning twenty-two grand per year to eavesdrop on kids talking Jell-O? Did all trails end at this point, no matter how different they looked at the crossroads?

Was he Jonah? Was Ohio just another name for Nineveh? When the great fish opened its mouth, would he always be spit out at MCA?

He pictured his life as a dark road, that old cliché for confusion. It twisted and wound, soaked with both rain and oil. His Ford LTD was fishtailing on the wet asphalt. It was senior year, and he was searching for a party at Bill Potter’s house. He was lost.

The Potters lived north of the city, but a crude map led Dave in the opposite direction. He passed the industrial parks along Folley Creek, the blocks of warehouses and machine shops. Strands of barbed wire ran along tall, chain-link fences that bordered each lot. He debated the virtues of turning for home. He'd claim he felt sick, mix himself a chocolate chip milkshake, and play one-man RISK until two in the morning.

He was already late, and parties made him nervous. He would bounce from one conversation to the next, hands in his pockets or holding a Coke. Always smiling, so that everyone knew he was having a good time. They would keep inviting him to parties. He invented things to say — jokes and stories to make his friends laugh — but never opened his mouth. Instead, he squirmed like an intruder: afraid that he wasn't really wanted, merely tolerated. He was a nice guy, a good guy, the type of person that you invited to parties because . . . well, *somebody* had to be invited to parties, and he always seemed to have fun. So he drank his soda and ate his chips and provided a backdrop, this two-dimensional cut-out that focused the spotlight on three-dimensional souls.

Friends had encouraged him: step out from this cardboard façade. Even Bill claimed he should talk a bit more, because he had good things to say. "What things?" Dave wanted to ask. Because he was terrified of saying the wrong things. So he said nothing, hovering on the perimeter of each snapshot, and told himself that appearing in the background was almost as pleasant as standing in the center.

He would go to the party and nod to the music, but he would seldom dance. After all, when you stopped accepting invitations, you soon stopped receiving them. Yet that night, on the deserted roads south of town, the directions weren't making any sense. Dave was lost, out of the industrial parks and entering farmland, and he worried that Bill

didn't actually want him to come. The map was drawn wrong on purpose. He skidded on a wet, oil-slicked curve and came to a halt in the center of the pavement. Enough was enough. He decided to U-turn for home.

Later that night, sipping his milkshake, Dave examined a city map and saw that Bill's drawing was actually correct. Nervous and anxious, he had turned it upside down and misread the instructions. So he worked on his excuse, which was better than considering the alternative — that no one would ask where he'd been, because they hadn't noticed he was missing.

Was that it? At that point, had he parted ways with the man he should have been? Dave and Dave'. Dave had gone home, but Dave' had corrected the mistake, hitting the party at its craziest point. He opened his mouth for a change and had himself a damned good time. People admitted they liked him — they *really* liked him. The girls touched his arm, and guys slapped him on the back, saying what a great teammate he was. Really, he ought to get more playing time. Why didn't he hang out more often? The next weekend, they were going to the lake. He needed to come; in fact, they *insisted* on it. It wouldn't be the same without him.

Terri said *Yes* to Dave': she would *love* to go to Homecoming with him. She could not imagine what she had been thinking the first time he asked. The second time as well. And he was not silent but full, full of life and energy that he poured as a blessing into his friends. And his friends blessed him in return. They challenged this new, unexpected man to make something great of his life: to study medicine or law, to attend

seminary and pastor a megachurch . . . anything but that small Christian school in nowhere, Ohio.

Dave' went on to greatness, while Dave was lured back into MCA. Talking with the older teachers, the ones who knew him as a student, he joked about his return. He enjoyed it so much the first time, he wanted a second helping. They all laughed, but he worried what they *really* thought. The truth was, he returned because he'd been miserable in high school, and a new tour might somehow negate that attempt. He could wipe his slate clean and recover the life that he'd lost, somewhere along the way.

"What do you think?" asked Seth.

"What's that?" In that moment, he knew what he thought. This grand return had accomplished nothing. It hadn't even been grand. He had been teaching for three years: the freshmen of his first semester were taking their SATs and thinking about college. Dave' seemed more distant than ever. The experiment had failed.

It would be his last year at MCA. He would look for a position elsewhere. In fact, he wasn't convinced he still wanted to teach, and admitting this fact made him happy and relieved — the lightest he'd felt in months. A parasite had been working its way from the inside out. Now he had finally spotted the disease.

"What do you think about our idea, Mr. Kingman?"

"Well. . . ." And — in *that* moment — his newfound resolve disappeared, even faster than it had arrived. He saw the full depth of his predicament, and the shade that had lifted began to descend once more. He was no longer David or even Dave. He was

Mr. Kingman. And Mr. Kingman would not start looking for jobs, because he'd be teaching at MCA that coming fall. And the next fall. And the fall after that, until it was no longer Seth Collins asking him, "What do you think?" but Seth's son. And the question would always be a lie, because Seth didn't want to know what Mr. Kingman *actually* thought, because what he was really asking was "Am I a good student?" And it wasn't *really* a question at all, but a demand for approval, the same approval that Mr. Kingman still longed to receive himself. So he would answer *Yes, Yes*, the eternal *Yes. Because you, Seth, are good and deserving of my praise. Advance. Advance, I say: onward and upward, to your next project and course and grade.* Regardless of whether or not the student deserved his commendation. Because all Dave really meant to say was *Take me with You.*

The officers described their plans for a series of food-based challenges, this competition between the grades with the primary goal — as far as Dave could actually tell — of smearing chocolate syrup on their friends and teachers. His attention faltered amid their many explanations, and his role in the Sundae Schoolteacher slipped past his guard. He promised to sign their application.

He didn't remember them leaving. He grew more and more focused on the setting sun, until darkness had filled the room. Dave had forgotten the title, but he once read a long, boring book where the heroine's fate had been doomed by a swinging door. A safe had accidentally shut, and she locked herself out before she could replace an item that she had removed. He still felt the panic of that moment: the slow, interminable arc when the future had not yet arrived but the outcome was already determined. Now, he

watched from the inside of that safe. The door closed, the line of light shrinking smaller and smaller. He could have plotted the regression equation, this formula passing before his eyes. For an instant, he spotted the girl on the outside. She was startled, turning a beat too late, and beautiful in her distress.

In the years that followed, he would sit in the dark and wonder about his predicament. He could never decide: did the door keep the two of them apart, or had she trapped him in a cage?

Application to Host a Special Event / Assembly

Application to Host a Special Event / Assembly MCA High School

Name of Proposed Event: _____
 Date of Proposed Event: _____
 Sponsoring Organization: _____
 Advisor's Signature: _____

Hosting a Special Event / Assembly is a privilege and a responsibility. To demonstrate that your organization has carefully considered the logistics involved, please attach a sheet(s) with answers to the following questions. This form must be submitted at least **three weeks prior** to the date of the event, and it must be approved **before** any publicity or promotional announcements are made on school grounds or at school activities.

- 1) **What** is the event?
- 2) **Who** will be involved? (The entire school, or a subset of the student body?)
- 3) **When** will the event occur?
- 4) **Where** will the event take place? (If school property is involved, please describe plans for set-up and clean-up. Be responsible stewards of MCA resources.)
- 5) **Why** should the event be held? (Include its **Spiritual Application / Relevance** as well as any ancillary benefits. If requesting to host an event during the school day, taking away from class or chapel time, the standards for acceptance are much more stringent. The Spiritual Application / Relevance must be especially compelling.)
- 6) Supply a tentative **Schedule / Itinerary**. (Proposals that include an excessive amount of unallocated time are unlikely to be approved.)

Significant changes to these plans must be given to the Principal's office in writing, no later than one week prior to the event. Altering plans without prior approval may result in disciplinary action against the sponsoring organization.

 Approved: _____

Date: _____

Edible Olympics Proposal

Sophomore Class Officers

Natalie Stewart, Class Secretary

1) What?

The Edible Olympics. The freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior classes will all compete in a series of five competitions (listed in the Schedule / Itinerary). All of the events involve food.

2) Who?

The entire student body (as the audience). Eight students will participate in each event, one guy and one girl from each class (forty participants in all). The sophomore class officers will be responsible for set-up, clean-up, and running the event.

3) When?

A Friday afternoon in March or April, during the last hour of the school day. Classes will follow the afternoon Assembly Schedule, shortening each period and lunch by ten minutes.

4) Where?

The MCA High School gymnasium. (The events could also be held in the auditorium, but the audience would not be as close, making it less exciting. Also, the gym would be easier to clean. The events could be held outside, but the weather might be unpredictable, and it would be hard to hear the Spiritual Application.) The events will take place in the center of the gym floor. Portable bleachers will be used to form a square, along with the regular bleachers on the two longer sides. Each class will sit on one side of the square.

5) Why?

To promote school spirit and strengthen class unity.

Spiritual Application / Relevance: Each event will be preceded by a short devotional (one officer will deliver these thoughts as the others prepare the event). A lesson about spiritual food will close the competition. (Specific ideas have been listed in the tentative Schedule/ Itinerary on the following pages.)

6) Schedule / Itinerary

1 PM Gather all Participants and Materials in the Gym for Final Set-up.

1:50 Seventh Period dismissed.
Students head to the gym, where they are seated by class.

(If the cheerleaders are interested, they can open with typical pep rally activities.)

2:00 **Welcome and Prayer**
1st Event: Egg in the Face
(Spiritual Application, followed by the Competition)

Spiritual Application: In the following event, the contestants will need to be resolute. The first one to yield will get an unpleasant surprise. In the same way, Christians must be steadfast, vigilant and always on guard. The Devil prowls like a roaring lion. (Scripture Reading – I Peter 5:8-9)

Event #1 Egg in the Face

A clear piece of tubing (1" diameter) has an egg in its center. The contestants hold opposite ends of the tube. At the whistle, they each blow into their end. The game proceeds until one person gets "Egg in the Face." Eight Contestants (1 Guy and 1 Girl from each class). Winners of the first round compete in the Finals. (Winner – 2 pts. / 2nd place – 1 pt.)

2:10 **2nd Event: Tootsie Roll Hunt**

Spiritual Application: Contestants in the next event will sacrifice their pride in a daunting search. Admire their determination, and compare their efforts to our own pursuit of holiness. Remember what Christ said about the Kingdom of Heaven, comparing it to the Pearl of Great Price. (Scripture Reading – Matthew 13:45-46)

Event #2 Tootsie Roll Hunt

A pie plate is filled with instant oatmeal. Hidden in the oatmeal is a tootsie roll. With their hands grasped behind their backs, contestants may only use their mouths to find and eat the piece of candy. The first contestant to eat the tootsie roll and recite John 3:16 is the winner. Eight Contestants (1 Guy and 1 Girl from each grade). Winner – 2 pts. / 2nd place – 1 pt.

2:20 **3rd Event: Eggs in the Pants**

Spiritual Application: Participants in the next event are ill-equipped for the task that faces them. Don't be like them. Follow Paul's advice, and put on the armor of God. (Scripture Reading – Ephesians 6:11-19)

Event #3 Eggs in the Pants

A contestant wears oversized sweat pants (XXL or larger) on top of his/her normal clothes. The ankles are duct-taped tight. Ten yards away, their partner has a skillet of scrambled eggs and a large spatula. The first contestant pulls out the waistband of the pants, forming a circular target, and the partner uses the spatula to toss the eggs into the hole. The team that gets the most scrambled eggs into the pants wins. The duct tape can be removed from the cuffs and the eggs shaken out to determine the winner.

2:30 4th Event: The Sundae Schoolteacher

Spiritual Application: We have four brave teachers in the next competition, all class advisors who have volunteered to sacrifice their outward appearance. Because it's not the surface that matters: it's the heart. (Scripture Reading – I Samuel 16:7)

Event #4 The Sundae Schoolteacher Competition

The four class advisors each sit in their own kiddie pool. Two participants from each grade have five minutes to "decorate" their Schoolteacher Sundae using ice cream and a variety of toppings (such as whipped cream, chocolate syrup, canned cherries, marshmallow fluff, and sprinkles). The audience will cheer for their favorite Sundae, and the volume of applause will determine the winner. Winner – 2 pts. / 2nd place – 1 pt.

2:40 5th Event: Caramel Apple Eating Contest

Spiritual Application: The final competition extends the previous lesson. In this event, the participants will taste something that look like candy on the outside, but proves to be fruit within. (Alternate Lesson: True Beauty. All of our Righteousness as Filthy Rags) (Alternate Lesson #2: The Fruit of the Spirit)

Event #5 Caramel Apple Eating Contest

At the whistle, the participants will race to eat a Caramel Apple. The first contestant to eat the apple and recite the fruits of the Spirit is the winner. Eight Contestants (1 Guy and 1 Girl from each grade). Winner – 2 pts. / 2nd place – 1 pt.

2:50 Closing Remarks on Spiritual Food (MCA Teacher)

In the closing remarks, a teacher can discuss the difference between spiritual milk — for new Christians and immature believers — and spiritual food. Possible emphasis on the need to mature in our faith. I Corinthians 3:2 / Hebrews 5:12

3:00 Dismissal

The class with the most points wins the Edible Olympics & bragging rights. (Until next year's competition, that is.)

The Sundae Schoolteacher

Acting on some unfathomable whim, Stratham approved the proposal. Dave was astonished, yet the officers took the good news in stride. They hadn't considered the odds stacked against their request. In fact, rather than celebrate their preternatural fortune, they were irked by his single demand: the principal refused to allow the Eggs-in-the-Pants competition. It required too much pre-cooked food, and the method of determining a winner was awkward and confusing. But those weren't his central objections. He had spotted a layer of subtle, sexual imagery within the event's description. In his mind, the game provided a subversive metaphor for intercourse: eggs flying off the spatula of one gender, landing in the pants of the other. Dave tried to envision what Stratham saw — the convoluted biology — but he couldn't quite grasp the concept. Not unless his boss was thinking about seahorses, the male animals giving birth. Even that didn't fit.

The topic spurred vigorous debate in the officer meetings: conducted in whispers, to keep the discussion from Mr. Kingman's ears. Based on the scraps that Dave gleaned, Stratham's move was an utter failure. Rather than shield their minds from sex, it energized the students and focused their attention on the questionable imagery. They worked as a team to unravel his secret interpretation — for the boys, with far greater diligence than they ever applied to their schoolwork. The peculiar readings they devised? Graphic twists that men like Stratham would never dream.

It was a common theme at MCA: the attempt to keep students from evil just gave it more publicity. Take the school library, where the books had all been cleansed with a black magic marker. Every offensive word was hunted down and crossed out, a Herculean accomplishment that required a full-time librarian and two parent volunteers. Even C.S. Lewis was censored: the seasoning of *ass* and *damn* that graces his take on Narnia. But the editing did not hide the troublesome passages. On the contrary, it drew attention to their location. In an unmarked copy, the offensive words were camouflaged amid pages of mild diction. Such works floundered in obscurity, collecting dust on the shelves of more secular institutions. Not the MCA editions. To find the best parts, you simply flipped through the book. The more dark streaks you encountered, the better the novel was likely to be. Library visits turned into competitions. The challenge? Discover the volumes with the heaviest editing. Students held pages to the light and deciphered the hidden words. They studied the nuance within each sentence, learning to wield these lexicographical weapons, and paid far more attention than they usually devoted to reading. They memorized the unfamiliar phrases and recited them like verses.

Visual censorship had a similar effect. In a way, it reminded Dave of the government officials who made a big show out of clothing a topless statue. The farce simply emphasized the sexual nature of the sculpture. Back when he was an MCA student, his English class had watched an old film version of *Romeo and Juliet*. The technology was woefully obsolete, a decrepit projector still being used to screen the black and white print. Most of the students were bored. They yawned at the poetic language and the artistic cinematography. Then, midway through a scene in Juliet's bedroom, the teacher switched off the projector light, and the room turned to shadows. In an instant,

their eyes were riveted to the empty screen. As the reels continued to turn, they tried to envision the images passing that unlit bulb. Only nudity or sex could warrant that level of editing. The audio track was still playing, more distinct and sensual than ever: the lovers reciting their lines of verse, the moments of silence as they kissed. The pictures that flashed through David's mind were far more erotic than any contained in the film.

In time, the officers abandoned their search for Stratham's hidden symbols. They returned to planning the Edible Olympics. Thus it came to pass, in the spring of 2007, that the student body filed into the MCA gymnasium, the teachers and students abuzz with speculation. They had read the flyers and heard rumors about the assembly, but they didn't know what to expect. No one had told them the purpose of the gathering. Most didn't care. An excuse to miss class was an excuse to miss class: they weren't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, even if it happened to be a Trojan. A handful of teachers grumbled about the shortened schedule — this imprudent waste of an hour — but others were as thankful as their pupils. Some upperclassmen rolled their eyes at how lame it all seemed. The officers in the Senior class were concerned that a pack of upstarts had stolen their thunder. Whatever chaos they intended to host themselves, their grand finale at MCA, it would now be compared to this afternoon's spectacle. The sophomores had broken ranks and forgotten their place in the Great Chain of Being.

The crowd was easy enough to excite, but far more difficult to calm — slow to settle for Natalie's opening remarks. The schedule demanded quick shifts of energy: thoughtful attention to the devotionals, frenzy for the events. The students had trouble keeping pace. The reflective moments were underscored by a constant murmur, whispers

that intensified as food and props began to emerge, the preparation for the next competition. As the outmatched speaker tried to explain the Spiritual Relevance, the spectators turned to the visual show. Stratham grew impatient. He was standing near the temporary bleachers, clearly annoyed. He wanted to assume control. Another decibel or two, and he would stride to the microphone and offer the masses a *real* point to chew on.

The events were going well. Plenty of students got egg in the face. One or two managed to dodge the yolk: destined to lose, they shoved the tube to the side. The egg shot past their head and onto the floor, often beyond the plastic tarps that officers placed to contain the mess. The Tootsie roll hunt was a crowd-pleaser, the oatmeal masks that contestants wore as they tried to chew the candy. The fervor increased with the Sundae Schoolteacher competition. The audience cheered as each new topping was dumped on the class advisors. Even Stratham seemed to enjoy himself, a sadistic pleasure in the misery of his subordinates.

Not that these victims saw much of the action. They were blind for most of the contest. Each teacher was given a pair of swimming goggles, but these were soon streaked and smeared. The top of the skull was a natural target, and ingredients ran down their noses and cheeks. Dave had questioned the scoops of ice cream. Wouldn't they simply fall off the teacher and land in the bottom of the tub? But Natalie was prepared. She had allowed the frozen containers to melt, and their contents were almost as viscous as the chocolate syrup. The sophomores abandoned their scoop altogether and poured the gallon on David's head, anointing him with cream. The seniors went for aesthetics with their culinary masterpiece: when they were finished, Roger Weatherford looked like a cross between Bozo the Clown and Batman's nemesis The Joker. Bethany's juniors got

second place. She was the only female advisor, and her sticky makeover was far more exciting to the students than watching the men get slimed.

Dave could understand their interest. Beth had not captured his fancy as she stood in the pool and waved to the crowd at the start of the competition. She was wearing an oversized T-shirt and a modest pair of Umbro soccer shorts. Her legs were solid, not slender. But everything changed once the toppings were introduced. Dave could not specify the effect. It was probably a combination of factors. Saturated with syrup and cream, her outfit clung to the skin: MCA's version of a wet T-shirt contest, or a misogynistic video by a second-tier rock band. Her arms and legs were streaked with color. It gave the flesh a wild aspect — a raw, unhinged sexuality — as if the gym had become a rain forest and Beth was an Amazon princess-warrior.

So part of the attraction was this erotic cliché, the stock footage from a teenage boy's wet dream. But there was something else, a counterpoint latent in the scene. A touch of the hermaphrodite. The previous month, Beth had donated a chunk of her hair to Locks of Love, leaving a short, chin-length bob that she pulled back tight for the contest, making a tiny bun at her nape. When the toppings had dampened and darkened the style, the severe effect was almost masculine. Combined with the swimming goggles, which added a futuristic, robotic element, the slicked-back look could even be called androgynous. Whatever it was, Dave was transfixed. Beth glanced his way, and they shared a short, sweet laugh: seen but not heard, given the pandemonium in the gym. She turned back to her cheering students, but Dave's gaze lingered, hidden behind the goggles. He couldn't explain this strange fascination. When he noticed his growing

attraction, he averted his eyes — concerned that he'd find himself aroused, right there in the kiddie pool, in front of Bethany, Stratham, and the entire MCA family.

Once the Sundae Schoolteacher was over, the officers should have improvised a close. The events had gone longer than scheduled. It was 2:50, ten minutes to dismissal. They ought to have cued the speaker to offer his final thoughts. The Caramel Apples could wait for another day. But Seth was determined to push ahead. Dave felt a suspicion growing, the sensation that teachers develop, deep in their gut, as mischief begins to draw near. Seth arranged the contestants at the tables, meticulous, as if matching the participants with specific fruit.

What Happened to the Apples

Dave was a helpless observer. If he had tried to leave the tub, still dripping with ice cream and toppings, he would have simply added to the chaos. Most likely, he would have slipped on the tarp and cracked open his head. The contestants stood at long tables: the four guys at one, the girls at another. Seth finished explaining the rules, and Natalie gestured to hurry.

Seth whistled for them to begin. The students tore into the apples. After a few bites, Chris Bowers gagged. At first, Dave thought that the senior was choking, and he wondered if Seth could perform the Heimlich. If he couldn't, Natalie probably could. But Chris wasn't in danger. He spit out a mouthful of chunks. Seth had not specified that the apple must be swallowed, only that the wooden stick at its core must be visible. But Chris wasn't trying a shortcut. He was finished, with absolutely no intention of taking another bite. He sniffed at the fruit, made a disgusted face, and threw down the apple, which ricocheted off the table and rolled to the bleachers. He yelled something at Seth that might have earned him a suspension, had the noise of the crowd not drowned out his comment.

All of the juniors and seniors were having similar reactions. The younger contestants continued to chew, though the freshmen looked absolutely miserable. A few yards away, Seth and Ryan were doubled over in laughter. Natalie stood near them, horrified, as if she couldn't believe what her class president had done.

What Seth had done — as the contestants already knew, and the rest of the gym learned through word-of-mouth — was prepare caramel-coated onions and offer them to the unwitting participants. Only the sophomores were provided apples. The sweet coating masked the smell — the initial bite, even. The need to rush offset the curious weight: it registered as an unusual detail, but nothing worth stopping to examine. When the tasty surface gave way to a raw, bitter interior, the victims realized the trick. The upperclassmen ceased eating at once. The freshmen knew that something was horribly amiss, but they were far too scared to stop.

Few in the crowd understood what was happening. As their representatives quit, the audience screamed for them to continue. In the center of the gym, the anger began to mount, the seniors and juniors now shouting at the sophomore officers. Chris looked about ready to clobber Seth, who was laughing even harder. The closest teachers were trapped in the kiddie pools, and the crowd was getting restless. It was time to go home.

The caramel onion that rolled to the bleachers had been thoroughly examined. It came sailing through the air and landed at Natalie's feet. She let out a shriek of surprise. Dave envisioned a worst-case scenario: an all-out food fight, a riot in the gym. Stratham was thinking the same thing; he grabbed the microphone, ordering students to take their seats. The principal was clearly torn. On one hand, he longed to redeem the chaos. If he closed the day with an edifying reflection, he might salvage this travesty. But he was also furious. The mayhem occurred on his watch, and he was itching to unleash a tirade, a rebuke of the ranks for this lack of decorum.

In the end, he made a far wiser choice. Because Stratham wasn't an idiot. He knew when to cut his losses. The man could be cunning and strategic, the times that his

power was slipping away. He dismissed the seniors, pushing them out of the gym and away from the edible projectiles. One at a time, the other classes were also released. As the students cleared the bleachers, Dave signaled the officers to begin picking up. He wanted to lend a hand, but stepping out of his plastic enclosure would simply increase the mess. He avoided Stratham's glare and braced for the outburst that seemed destined to erupt.

They were saved by a ruckus in the hall. It diverted the principal's attention, and he followed the noise, barking commands as he left the gym. Meanwhile, the officers were congratulating themselves: they considered the day a rousing success. Even Natalie was pleased. She had been angry about the caramel onions — a stunt she had vetoed in a meeting — but only because the others had acted behind her back. The result, she had to admit, was a comic masterpiece. Dave failed to grasp the depth of the humor. He stressed the need to get moving and return the gym to its original state. Before Stratham returned, if humanly possible. Yet it was soon apparent that their plans for cleaning were far less developed than their other schemes. Which only made sense. It is far more interesting to create a mess than to deal with it afterwards.

Bethany came to the rescue. She observed that the kiddie pools could serve as temporary trash containers. So they folded and rolled the tarps, loading them into the plastic tubs, and carried the mess out to Dave's truck. Still dripping with ice cream, he left to go change his clothes. By the time he emerged from the locker room, most of the work had been finished. Even the temporary bleachers had been removed. He looked around for Bethany, but she had excused herself as well. The image of her in the pool

was still potent and vivid. The officers were mopping the court, the dribbles of caramel and yolk that ran with the grain on the hardwood floor.

What Stratham Said

The weekend passed. On Monday, the officers reported that feedback had been positive: students liked the event, and even the seniors were laughing at the prank. Natalie feared payback, but Seth insisted that everything would be fine. The crowd had a short attention span. Spring Break was imminent, and the countdown to graduation had begun. If anything, he was distressed at how quickly their triumph began to fade. He had envisioned the Edible Olympics on a grandiose scale, a catalyst for school-wide reform and revolution. That clearly wouldn't be the case.

The teachers gave Dave a mixed response. The veterans said they couldn't recall anything "quite like" that assembly. Some offered this comment as a positive remark. The others? Not so much. The younger faculty were far more enthusiastic, especially Bethany and Gordon, then in his first year at MCA. The students needed more spirit and life, and events like this were just the ticket. Dave concealed his own opinion: the assembly had been manic and disordered. He was bracing for Stratham's reprisal. If next year's officers talked about a sequel, he would try to resist their plans.

The reprimand came a week later. A letter to the officers, and a personal addendum on Dave's copy. At first, the principal's critique was veiled in praise. He admired their initiative, planning such a bold assembly. He was pleased by the enthusiasm of the audience, at least till that last, regrettable turn of events. The officers

latched to these comments, evidence of the day's success. But Dave knew better. The preamble was hollow. Stratham was drawing back, gathering strength, and preparing to drop the hammer.

The principal noted that even the best intentions could lead to confusion, a central reason that planning was so essential. Spirit and energy were commendable, but chaos was seldom edifying. He wanted to offer a few suggestions — constructive criticism, to be precise — that would benefit future events they might plan. First, he was concerned that spreading the spiritual application throughout the program had diluted its impact. Because the devotionals were brief, they came across as trite. Nothing significant, nothing lasting. Even worse, because the schedule had proved too ambitious, the concluding thoughts were never delivered. They should have been the last detail to be cut, not the first.

He guessed at their mistake: creating the event, then scrambling to define its Spiritual Relevance. In his opinion, a better approach was to start with the spiritual truth you wished to convey. You worked backwards, designing the program that best achieved this effect. Such a method led to unified, coherent and profitable assemblies.

Stratham then focused on specific issues. It had not been clear, reading the proposal, that students would risk the ingestion of raw eggs. The salmonella threat should have been covered in greater depth. Had the participants signed a waiver, a release that absolved the school of liability? Because stewardship of MCA resources also involved protecting the school against damaging lawsuits. He approved of the Sundae Schoolteacher Competition, although the waste of ingredients was a bit extreme, given this troubled economy, when food banks struggled to stock their shelves. If a can

collection had preceded the event, it might have offset this lavish waste. Nevertheless, these shortcomings were both minor and present in the schedule that he had approved. He blamed himself, almost as much as he faulted them.

The same could not be said for the final competition. The Caramel Apple eating contest had not adhered to its description. He would never have sanctioned the competition they actually held, which achieved its effect through trickery and deceit. MCA events were vetted for a reason. It prevented disorder, the chaos that occurred in those final minutes. The approval form had clearly stated the importance of notifying his office about changes to the itinerary. It also explained that a failure to observe these guidelines would result in consequences. His hands were tied. Circumstances being what they were, he was forced to present them each with an official warning. They would continue in their current roles, but a second lapse in judgment would lead to more serious repercussions.

Seth and the boys took this warning in stride. They were familiar with Stratham's threats. But Natalie was devastated. She had written the proposal, so she read the critique as a personal attack. She was accustomed to praise from authority figures, not censure, and held back tears as she talked to Dave, asking him what she should do. Did she need to write the principal a personal apology? Should the officers provide a formal statement to the entire school? She felt terrible. She wanted to make things right.

Dave assured Natalie that she was overreacting. He lied, claiming that Stratham wasn't displeased, simply trying to make them better leaders. Wasn't that what being at MCA was all about? Otherwise, a principal would not take the time to offer them suggestions. He had provided the warning to be consistent with the rules, nothing more.

Natalie sniffled and nodded. She too valued consistency. In the end, she accepted Dave's promise that the incident would pass: her permanent record would not be indelibly marred. He hoped he was speaking the truth.

He didn't say what he really wanted to say — that Stratham was a bully who got off on wielding power. His methods were failures: the overt critiques, the deconstructive criticism, the passive-aggressive moves. The students who needed the guidance ignored it. But the student whose conscience was already tender? Who was already on the right path? It broke his spirit and reduced her to tears.

Dave's copy of the letter had an additional, handwritten note at the bottom. It reminded him that being a class advisor was a privilege. The implication was clear: if he didn't exert more control, the role would be taken away. His first impulse was a snarky rebuttal. He would be glad to relinquish the duties, since he never asked for the headache in the first place. But the more he considered his reaction, the more he began to value the position. To his great surprise, he now desperately wanted to keep it. The chord would strike often in his life: he seldom knew what he wanted, until he was threatened with loss.

On the Schoolteacher Sundae

Being An Early Draft of an Email from Bethany to M— F—

M—

Thanks ~~again~~ you for sending me ~~these~~ the opening pages of 'Meeting As Sundaes' ~~for me~~ to review. ~~It didn't~~ ~~±~~ I appreciate the chance to offer a few corrections, a second perspective on ~~all of~~ these events. I don't know ~~anything~~ much about writing ^a novel, and I can't imagine how hard it must be, ~~trying to take~~ taking all of our feelings and perspectives into account. Perhaps that's why the N.T. includes four gospels from four viewpoints: ~~make sure that everyone's~~ to show ~~the four different ways that~~ how four different people ^{all} saw Jesus. [Cut?]

To be honest, I was a bit surprised that the Edible Olympics are ~~part of~~ included in the book. ~~Dave told me that Dave explained that its the primary~~ Dave keeps describing it as a tale about all the crazy ~~stuff~~ events that happened to him on that weekend ~~last~~ last October ^{when} he disappeared - ~~the things that~~ what happened ^{to him} down in Tennessee and the mountains. ~~± haven't been able to get him to~~ He doesn't talk much about ~~these~~ it, and ~~I thought for a while that~~ - for a long time - I thought that it must have been pretty traumatic or exciting. Now, I'm starting to wonder if anything really happened at all. (I guess I'll have to wait for the book, huh?)

Sorry that it's ~~taken~~ taking me so long to get to the point. I've never written an author to offer advice [author/offer . . . never noticed how similar they sound]. Especially when I'm the character ~~they~~ that I'm giving the advice about. ^I wonder if all characters feel this way. If Harry Potter wants to talk to JK Rowling about the way she portrayed him. (Of course, I know that I'm a very different type of character than Harry.) [NOTE TO SELF: probably need to cut or trim most of that opening.]

~~I'm going to~~

~~First of all,~~ I find it ~~odd~~ surprising that Dave is critiquing the way that I tell ~~the~~ our story. After all, he tells it that way too, almost as much as me. We both know it's not completely true. ~~±~~ As he says (~~an~~ I know it's not him speaking, but the story belongs to him) As he says, we ^{each} learned ~~each oth~~ the other's name ~~a semest a yea a yea~~ 1½ years before the Edible Olympics. But the story gives listeners a decent chuckle, and it contains a ~~tern~~ grain of truth. Like he

said, we noticed one another, and we laughed together. Isn't that what it means to meet somebody? To actually pay attention to them? To notice who they are - ~~not aim~~ to understand what makes them laugh, which is far more important than shaking their hand and pretending to memorize their name. So I stand by my story, after all. I knew who Dave was before I got covered in chocolate syrup, but we met as sundaes.

S. Baker. Ah, Stephanie. She strung him along like a two-dollar banjo. [mehhh] I thought about saying something - either to him or to her - but I didn't. I suppose ~~that~~ that I was annoyed at ~~them~~ them both - him for gravitating ~~straight~~ to Little Miss Highlights, and her for accepting and encouraging his ~~advances~~ ^{awkward} hovering. I figured that they were both getting about what they deserved.

That isn't to say ~~wh~~ that I was envious of her. ~~Or that~~ ^{On} the contrary. ~~To hear Dave~~ I'm sure Dave's given you his version of my opening years at MCA - how I was infatuated with him from the get-go, and spent the next three years in ~~the design and implementation of~~ some diabolical plan that trapped him in my ~~clutches~~. grasp. He always pretends that things happen to him through forces beyond his control. That simply isn't true. ~~None of it.~~ He makes far more decisions than he's ~~ever~~ willing to admit. ~~And~~

±

Also, you ~~should keep~~ need to remember my mindset when I first arrived at MCA. I was coming out of a bad relationship at my previous Christian school (thank you - by the way - for your promise to keep its name secret. I've got a lot of good friends there, and I don't want to cause trouble, simply b/c one of their ~~teachers~~ coworkers ~~there~~ is a jerk) I don't want to go into the story, but suffice it to say that ~~he~~ a man pushed me farther and faster than I was comfortable, made promises ~~that~~ he didn't mean, and hung me out to dry when he ~~was~~ grew bored. When I write all that down, it stares at me like the ~~bad clichés of~~ clichéd plot of a ~~bad~~ ^{TV} ~~Lifetime~~ movie. But that's not how it felt at the time. I ~~fe~~ thought I would be safe, dating a Christian schoolteacher - a man on the fast track for Principal, ± everyone said. Still on the fast track, as far as I know. But all of that, that's a story for another time. The point that I'm ~~tried~~ trying to make is this: when I first ~~saw~~ heard David's name in the teacher meeting that day, ~~the~~ I was at a point in my life when the last person on earth that I'd want to date would be a Xian schoolteacher. Even if I was, I'm not sure that I'd find ~~him~~ Dave all that appealing. To be honest, he seemed like a bit of a ~~fool~~ show-off - walking into the room like he was a seasoned pro, a 10-yr veteran, ~~or~~ God's gift to MCA. He was cute, but not that cute. ~~To be I thou~~ Mr. [REDACTED], who taught History and

coached Wrestling, was ~~a little~~ more my style - ~~a little bit more~~ not fat, but a little more weight than my current man. I'm not fat or overweight - I'm fit, ~~and directly in the center of my age height/weight~~ but I'm not the smallest, most petite thing you'll ever meet. I don't need a man who can carry me across the threshold, but I'd like to be able to sit on his lap.

~~Dave grew on me~~

I'm not sure why I'm telling you all of this. ~~Most of it,~~ ^{At least not everything.} ~~I haven't~~ Most of it, Dave doesn't even know. Maybe that's it - I keep thinking about all the secrets that he's been telling you - that I assume he's been telling you, based on the ^{few} pages I've read. ~~And~~ Things that he hasn't been willing to share w/ me. It ~~just~~ makes me a little ~~on-jealous~~ envious, that's all. Isn't that silly? I'm jealous of ~~this~~ a writer ~~this fictional that~~ that I've never even met in person. You might even be a fictional character, for all I know. ~~Wouldn't it~~ A figment of David's imagination. That would be like him - invent an author and use him to tell ~~a~~ our story ~~that Dave~~

Anyway, ~~I was~~ you're probably real enough. I've seen your pages, after all. And I'm envious of your connection to my boyfriend. Perhaps I thought that telling you a few secrets of my own, it might be a way to get even w/ him.

Good luck w/ the rest of the book, and let me know if you ~~need~~ would like my feedback on any other sections.

In Christ,
Bethany

P.S. I don't mean to be so critical, but reading those first few pages of Meeting As Sundaes - even though they were short - it really hurt my feelings. I know that you're ~~only~~ simply interpreting the things that he told you, so I need to keep that in mind. It's not your fault. But I'm not sure that I'll be able to read this when you finish. Of course, I'm not sure that David would want me to.

P.S. (2) You asked ~~if~~ how David and I were doing as a couple. As you know, the weeks after he returned were rough. We weren't talking much, and ~~Stratham~~ he got in deep trouble w/ Stratham. He received a formal reprimand for misusing a sick day, another for the fight, and they even blamed him for missing that Saturday's game (which is crazy, because he wasn't allowed to actually attend the game) Dave thinks that he's going to be demoted, either to 8th grade coach or JV assistant. I worry that he underestimates his predicament. I don't think that Stratham intends to re-hire him.

Christmas was rough. I didn't go w/ him to TN, and he didn't come to Ft. Wayne. I felt so much closer to him last year, back when we just started dating. We're still together, but it ~~just~~ doesn't much feel that way.

Gordon says that I need to be patient - that ~~if~~ things ~~we~~ will work out if Dave and I are really meant to be. I just wish that I had G's faith.

Once again, I'm not sure why I'm telling you all this. And I'll probably cut most of it before I send ~~you~~ the email. It's just easy writing these things to you - easier than telling them to Dave. Maybe, I'm hoping ~~that~~ you'll tell me a secret or two in return - something that happened to David in the mountains. Like what made him go hiking in the first place, or how he injured his ankle. What he discovered, that lets him take all these problems in stride. Some days, he's nonchalant and happy and acts like he's found the secret to life. Others, he's quiet and thoughtful. Not in a good way - but a way that terrifies me, as if nothing at MCA can be half as disturbing as things that he's already seen or done. ~~As if he's looked at the face of evil and spotted his own reflection.~~

I don't know. Perhaps I'm imagining things. Maybe it's something else. When I'm writing to you, it's almost like I'm talking to myself, ~~or praying to God. I guess~~. Maybe that's one reason that Catholics talk to priests. Or people see therapists. We all need Authors to confess.

M— F—'s response, after being shown the draft:

This note is fascinating, much more interesting than the letter she actually sent me. How the hell did you get a copy of it? The email that I received was short and professional. It discussed the major differences between her perspective on the Sundae Schoolteacher and the account that Dave provided. To be honest, it wasn't very useful — mostly things that I'd already guessed. I wish that I'd had access to this draft instead: it provides a better picture of who Beth actually is — her hopes and her fears — much less guarded and composed than the vision I was granted, back when I wrote and published the novel.

Blount County Snapshots: Roll II

Summer 2010

§ After dinner, they sat outside and talked. Bethany offered to clear the table. “The food was wonderful, Mrs. Kingman.” She started to gather dishes, oblivious to her faux pas.

Laura chose to ignore the mistake. “Thanks, Bethany.”

Something in the tone caught Beth’s attention. She stiffened. “Did I call you the wrong name? I’m so sorry, Ms. Walker.” Patches of red shot into her neck. The entire drive south, she had quizzed Dave about his complicated family history, determined to make her visit a success. Now, she had slipped on one of the easiest details.

“Don’t fret yourself. Call me Laura: it’s simpler.”

“No simpler than Laurel.”

Mom rolled her eyes at Grandpa’s remark. “You know, I still get junk mail addressed to Mrs. Kingman — that’s what, how many years after the divorce? Twenty-five. No. Twenty-six.” She seemed taken aback, amazed at the sum. “Twenty-six years. Jesus.” She looked at Dave for confirmation. “Is that right? How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Can’t be,” said Grandpa. “Twenty-eight? You’re over the hill, son.”

“He’s a young twenty-eight.” Beth was older than Dave, and she often downplayed his age. The comments were partly affection, encouragement when he

grumbled about his feeble accomplishments. But they also soothed her own fears. She would turn thirty in October: unmarried, childless, the plot for her life behind schedule.

“Twenty-six years,” Mom repeated. “I’ll be.” She moved to the patio door, her expression hard to decipher.

“Where are you going?” asked Rachel.

“To open a bottle of wine. I want to offer a toast. To Charles, who spared this family years of frustration — who humbled himself and admitted the truth.”

“The truth?” said Dave.

“That he couldn’t spit-polish an Appalachian woman. Not to Kingman standards, at least.” She entered the house and closed the door.

§ Grandpa leaned toward Beth. “No man can tame a catamount. You can lead a girl from the mountains, but she won’t stop baking cornbread.” The comment was meant to be funny, yet its delivery fell flat. His heart wasn’t in it. Samuel had welcomed his daughter’s second divorce, the split from Mr. Pete, but he rarely spoke ill of Dave’s father. Perhaps he sympathized. He had encouraged that vibrant spirit, the charm that men felt in her eyes and laugh, and he knew how stubborn she could be. Her will was a powerful force: at times, more powerful than her discernment.

Charles and Grandpa might have been friends. Nothing close — Dad’s reserve kept others at bay — but a quiet respect. Besides, how much of his father’s demeanor had stemmed from the divorce? Once upon a time, Charles won the great prize and captured Mom’s heart. He must have possessed a charisma, a power that now lay dormant. In the wake of her exit, stunned by the turn of events, had his pensive side

emerged? Was his calm, collected persona a strategy, honed over years in banking and finance, designed to minimize future risk?

§ Beth tried to get Dave's attention. "Our contract," she mouthed. Her brow furrowed, and she bit at her lip.

"I'll take care of it." He had guessed that the issue might surface.

If offered a drink, Beth would refuse in the sweetest, most courteous manner possible. But that wouldn't sit well with Mom. She responded to civility with grace. Sweetness? Sweetness was an entirely different matter.

Rachel watched the exchange with amusement. "Twenty-eight years." She spoke low, as if talking to herself. Dave knew that wasn't the case. "Twenty-eight years and never been. . . ." Her voice faded to silence before she completed the thought.

§ A corkscrew and a bottle of Shiraz were on the table, but Mom wasn't in the kitchen. She emerged from the bathroom in the foyer, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

"Are you okay?" her son asked.

She froze, caught off guard. Then her gaze became tender, a touch condescending. Dave felt like a child again. *My son*, she seemed to imply, *how little you know about mothers and women*. "I'm fine. Once or twice a year, I remember your father at his best. I consider what might have been." She removed the seal from the bottle. "I get nostalgic. I indulge in a nice, healthy cry for a minute or two." The silence that followed was awkward. "Make yourself useful, and get out the wine glasses," she

said. “We’ll be fancy for a change. You’re making me all self-conscious, standing there with your mouth agape, like you’ve never seen a woman cry.”

She gestured at him with the corkscrew. He imagined her driving the point in his chest, twisting deeper and deeper, until she secured his heart. “It’s not regret,” she said. “I’ve never regretted our choice, not the way your father did. I’ve had days that I second-guessed, others I mourned my pride. But there’s a chasm between doubt and regret. I’ve always known that we made the right call.”

§ “Why didn’t you get back together?” he asked. “Why didn’t you try, at least?” The questions escaped before he could check himself. They had been on his mind since that afternoon, when Beth asked if his parents had ever tried to reconcile. Had they fought to preserve the union? He spotted the question beneath her question: What did *he* think? Was a troubled marriage worth the effort?

Statistics were not in his favor. Sometimes, the children of divorce would argue that the trauma had strengthened their resolve. Having lived through the turmoil once, they were determined to marry for life. But the numbers didn’t support these boasts. If your parents split, you were far more likely to get a divorce yourself.

Once, discussing the issue in a teacher’s meeting, Stratham had blamed generational sin. What a father sowed, the son and the grandson would reap. Parents were not always punished. The judgment could be delayed, passed down the family tree. Like a furniture sale, the no-interest payments broadcast on TV, their true cost postponed for years. Such a proposition was simple to grasp in theory, but hard to apply in the real world. When your best friend collapsed on your living room couch — sobbing and

broken, devastated by her husband's infidelity — how could you offer comfort? Would you look her in the eye and suggest that her great-great-grandmother was probably a whore?

Hadn't Christ refuted such nonsense? The notion that prenatal blindness might stem from a parent's sin. Mutation happened. The world was a fallen place, and genomes are tainted with Adam's curse. Not everything has a scapegoat. Jesus was talking about illness and deformity, but wasn't divorce a form of disfigurement? Two bodies, once joined, now violently ripped asunder.

Dave preferred terms of nature and nurture. Perhaps the impulse to divorce was an inherited trait, carried deep within the genes, the same type of risk that children of alcoholics faced. More likely, the issue was model and imitation. If you watched parents work through their problems, you learned how to deal with conflict. Marriage required both talent and skill — some inherent, some learned — no different than woodworking or playing quarterback or marching in a high school band. Part of the ability was innate, but elements could be practiced and developed. If you never studied a successful marriage, it became harder to construct your own. Imagine learning to drive in a family that had never owned a car. You had to examine the workings from within, all the dirt and grime that accumulate in real life. Otherwise, you were a man who attempted to build a truck without looking at an engine.

§ Mom threw a half-pour in two of the glasses. She pushed one drink his direction and lifted the other to her nose. She inhaled, reading the aroma, and allowed herself a sip. Her eyes closed with pleasure, and contentment passed across her face.

Her answers came slow, as if speaking from a dream. “Your father tried. Two times, he took the first step.” Dave had guessed as much, based on comments that Grandmother made. But he wanted to know the *real* story: not simply *what* happened, but *why*. “The first time, you were still a toddler.” The divorce was still fresh. Dad brought a peace offering to her apartment: a sausage and onion pizza from Cecil’s Italian Oven. “He said that we gave up too soon. He apologized: he had been stubborn, determined to have his own way, and wasted our passion on fighting.”

Mom sipped at her wine. “He was sweet. He took more of the blame than he actually deserved. All of the faults he confessed, they belonged to me as well. *Both* of us were responsible. If I was a sensible girl, I might have accepted him back.” Mom shook her head. “But I’m not.” She had plenty of common sense, but she wasn’t sensible. Not then, at least. She knew what ought to be done, but she could seldom bring herself to do it.

“I thought I’d be a natural at marriage. I was determined to prove my father wrong.” He had warned her to slow the engagement. Marriage was harder than it looked, he said. But that merely strengthened her resolve. “Besides, he waited too long to speak. By the time he opened his mouth, the wedding was only a few weeks away.”

The things that Dave longed to know, he could not bring himself to say. He settled for the mundane: “I thought that your wedding was small,” he said. “Couldn’t you have pushed it back?”

“You’ve been listening to your Grandmother again. She was *not* impressed with the reception, which was far less elegant than her only son deserved.” Mom shrugged. “But that’s what she thinks about most things: Midfield, your father’s job, the woman he

chose to marry . . . probably *your* job as well.” Dave nodded and affirmed her guess, which pleased her even more.

Laura fixed her son with a peculiar look, as if something was written across his face. He had seen that gaze before — not on Mom, but her father, directed at the waters of a stream. Hiking in the backcountry, about to cross a hazardous ford, Grandpa would study the current. He examined its depth, the power within the flow. He gauged the risk of those initial steps.

Mom plunged ahead. “The reception wasn’t the issue. By the time Grandpa spoke, your father and I had larger concerns. You were already on the way.”

§ In the months to come, reliving the scene, Dave was often amused by his quiet reaction: “Excuse me?” His inner response to Mom’s bombshell was far less subdued.

“You were already on the way,” she repeated. “Don’t act surprised. I know that you’ve known for years. You’ve done the math: start with your birthday, and subtract nine months.”

“But—”

“Oh . . . my . . . God.” Mom covered her mouth, her eyes wide. “You really didn’t know? All these years, and you didn’t know?” She clapped her hands in delight.

Her pleasure disturbed him. “How would I know a thing like that?”

“You didn’t know, and — *Bam!* — I just blurted it out. You’re so like your father, it scares me at times. Solving your theories and calculations, but the question in front of your nose. . . . Your birthday’s the second week of April. Nine months back is the start of July.”

“I know all that.” He snapped at her attempt to tutor. “Weren’t you married that summer? I assumed that meant June.”

Mom pretended to be appalled. “You don’t know your own parents’ anniversary?”

“When they divorce before you can talk, you don’t bother to learn the date. I’ve seen pictures on Dad’s dresser.” She stiffened, as he guessed that she might. “But I didn’t examine your marriage license.”

“August 18.”

“What’s that?”

“August 18.”

“But that—” He stopped. He didn’t want to think about it anymore: not his parents and sex, his father and mother in bed in Athens, Ohio, that hot Midwestern summer.

“You were conceived in late June or early July. Long after your father proposed, if that’s what has you so flustered. We were already planning to marry, but you . . . well, you lent an urgency to the fiesta.”

“Wait.” Dave tried to count weeks in his head. “I was born earlier than you expected, right? So it would actually be possible—”

“Sorry, kid.” Mom shook her head. “Two weeks late, like you weren’t that eager to face the world. The doctors were preparing to induce.”

“Grandmother always told me—” He paused. The picture began to grow clear.

“Exactly. We *told* them you were a few weeks early, and they agreed not to visit, giving you time to gain weight. We blurred the timeline. Not that we were embarrassed. Your father, maybe — not me. I’ve always been secretly proud.

“They had their suspicions, I’m sure. Especially Grandmother. But the numbers were close enough to be respectable — about thirty-six weeks after the wedding — that nobody bothered to ask.”

“Ask what?”

“Ask what?” She laughed. “Do you really need me to spell it out? If you were legitimate, of course — a bona fide Kingman.”

“Why wouldn’t I be legitimate? You were married before I was born.”

“Sure, by *one* way of reckoning.” She leaned forward. “But some people . . . well, they might contend otherwise.” At the words *some people*, visions of Stratham and Mr. Pete sprang instantly to mind. “To them, you’re just as great a bastard as your sister.”

§ “What was I talking about?” Mom asked. “A minute ago, before I ruined the story of your birth? How Grandpa asked us to move slow, but I thought that he simply objected to Charles. That wasn’t true. Our fathers are more alike than you probably suspect — one of the reasons I’m so good at pushing their buttons.” She didn’t know that at the time. If she did, she would never have said yes.

In those days, she was angry with her father. “I saw him as weak, always deferring to Mom. He didn’t deserve my respect.” On the other hand, when Grandpa laid down the law, she called him a tyrant and challenged his inconsistencies. “Which is

humorous, looking back. He's about the most steadfast person I know. It was really a matter of perspective: he only *seemed* inconsistent, because I was unstable myself."

She described her decision to attend Ohio University and change her name from Laurel to Laura. The girls in Blount County scared her to death: they married early, dropped out of college to raise a family, and never left the state. The major events in the story, all finished before they were thirty. "The same pitfalls waited for me in Ohio. I just didn't know that at the time."

She was trying to spite her dad. "He left southwest Ohio and settled in east Tennessee. I would reverse the course, demonstrating exactly how dissimilar we were." Looking back, she offered a different reading: she was nervous about leaving, and Ohio was filled with Dad's family. She would be running away from home, but living near blood. Thus she affirmed his life through the move, the opposite of her intent.

The same thing with Charles. They fell in love, and she encouraged his talk of marriage. "I believed it would irritate Dad, wedding myself to this Ohio boy." She laughed. "Can you think of a stupider reason for getting hitched?" Once again, the choice revealed a subconscious love. She returned to his homeland, selecting a mate in her father's mold.

The story came straight out of Genesis. Grandpa was Abraham, drawn south to a strange and foreign land. When Isaac needed a bride, the patriarch turned to the land of his relatives. On the mission to find a wife for his son, the trusted servant met Rebekah at the well. The comparisons broke down. Mom required no proxy: she handpicked her man. Even so, her son found the parallels striking.

§ Marriage required concession, but she and Charles were loath to yield. She refused to admit that her father was right. “I was too embarrassed,” she said. “Embarrassed and angry and hurt and proud.” She blamed marriage itself, denying the institution’s value. “I couldn’t accept that the problem might be me.” She looked at her parents, their own dysfunctional union. Dave started to ask what she meant, but Mom interrupted. “Let’s not kid ourselves. Grandma loved Grandpa, but I doubt she was actually *in love* with him — not the way that he loved her, at least. Same with her attitude toward me. She treated me well and looked after my needs. It’s just . . . every now and then, she stared at me with this curious gaze, unsure how I fit in her life. Sometimes, she looked at Dad the same way — like she wasn’t quite sure how they ended up married.” In the end, she was able to love him. “Not as much as she longed for her family, and certainly not with the depth that my father loved her. But he didn’t have much of a choice. Her love was a spigot. His was a dam that had burst.”

§ At the time, she thought love like that was a weakness. “Marriage was stupid, if I was so terrible at it — if it turned men like my dad into fools. The whole institution had to be a sham.” When Charles approached her and asked to reconcile, she told him no. She’d given up on marriage. But she wasn’t telling *him*. She was saying it to her father. She attempted to ease the disappointment. She praised his potential as a partner: Charles would have made the best husband in the world, had she actually wanted to be a wife.

“I regret telling him that, by the way. It offered him hope, a chance that I’d change my mind.” If she had been fierce, she might have severed his affection. He could salvage his heart and preserve it for someone else. “But I couldn’t let him do that. I felt

so much power that evening, those beautiful things that he spoke. That affection and passion and desire, all of it focused on me. I accepted it all, and I sacrificed nothing in return.”

§ “We should get back outside,” Mom said. “Beth probably wonders where you disappeared.”

Dave nodded. Who knew what stories she learned, sitting with Rachel and Grandpa? The answer struck him in a flash: nothing more shocking than Mom had revealed. He was hesitant to face his sister, now that he knew the truth.

Mom pointed to his wine. “Don’t you like the Shiraz? It hardly looks like you touched it at all.”

“I didn’t. Beth and I will toast you with sweet tea.”

“What’s that?” Her tone was innocent but deceptive, the blade hidden beneath the surface. He knew where Rachel had learned to dissect.

§ Mom was not asking him to sin. She saw nothing wrong with drinking, and she knew that he felt the same way. She simply wanted to see if he’d disregard his contract. From her perspective, that would merely be civil disobedience.

They had debated the subject on multiple occasions. Mom argued that MCA’s contract was unethical. It complicated the lives of teachers, hampering their effectiveness. Not simply the drinking, but the laundry list of guidelines. The classroom was already tough enough. Why make it more treacherous, sowing the aisles with childish mines?

In theory, Dave agreed with what she said. To be contrary, he challenged her critique. *When I was a kid, you claimed that resistance led to better effort.*

Resistance, she would answer. *Not leg irons and shackles.* But she never suggested he quit his job. She saw him as a spiritual commando, infiltrating the stronghold of religious rulers — weakening the regime from within. *A little yeast leavens the loaf*, she liked to say. *Jesus would break that contract, the same way He broke the rules of the Pharisees. He always busted conservative chops.*

Christ wouldn't get trapped, Dave answered. The Son of Man would never sign. *Give to Stratham the things that are Stratham's, and to God the things that are God's.*

Mom grunted her approval. She often wavered on MCA's value. Some days, she argued that its leaders were misguided, but the school itself was all right. The students took home a solid education, despite the best efforts of men at the top. Those times she grew bitter, she railed that Christ Himself would not step inside those walls.

Dave would attempt to humor her mood. Christ wouldn't have a choice, he said. Stratham would halt the Savior at the door: too many dress code violations.

§ "Sure you don't want a drink? A swallow for the toast?"

What a messed-up family, he thought. "It doesn't matter what I want. We've signed a contract."

"That con-tract." She blew air through her lips, dismissing his objection. "It didn't stop you last summer."

Her claim was true enough. He had enjoyed a six-pack with Grandpa on the patio, looking at maps and reliving hikes. "Last summer was different."

“What’s so different about it? Not much changes down here.”

The only thing different was the company he kept. She had raised the bar. In the presence of a co-worker — his girlfriend — would he break MCA rules to make his mother happy?

“I don’t want Beth feeling awkward, being the only one to turn you down.”

“Won’t she drink?”

“Not when she’s promised not to.” In his mind, he drove the point home: *she has far more integrity than me.*

“Not even to celebrate the twenty-sixth anniversary of your mother’s first divorce?” Mom laughed, pretending it was a joke. When Dave shook his head, she modified her goal. “What about here? A quick toast, just you and me?”

He almost surrendered. Beth wouldn’t have to know. He could join in the family mischief, no longer the prodigal, self-righteous son. But Mom had annoyed him, trying to push his buttons, and he stood his ground.

She stared at him for a second, waiting to see if he’d cave. Her patience expired. “Your loss, my son.”

§ “The second time.”

“The second what?” Mom asked.

“The second time Dad asked to reconcile.” He wanted to know the timing: before or after her marriage to Mr. Pete?

“Let’s go rescue your girlfriend.” Her manner was crisp and abrupt. She would say nothing more that night.

§ The rest of the evening passed without much incident. Beth slept in the extra bedroom, and Dave claimed a spot on the couch. As he waited to fall asleep, he replayed the exchange with Mom.

Everything was clearer in the dark. Alcohol wasn't the issue. Neither was the contract. She was testing his allegiance. She wanted to know how serious they were, her son and this rival from the north. Whose side would he take? Mother or ingénue? Laura had challenged her son's relationship. The result had surprised them both: she had lost.

Contract Negotiations

Dave imagined himself as Captain Jack Sparrow. Like the Pirate Code, The MCA Lifestyle Covenant was filled with guidelines, not rules. He followed most of the advice, but he didn't consider it binding. Legally, perhaps. Not morally or spiritually.

He wasn't alone. That's what he thought, at least. It was hard to know for certain, because showing your hand was a risky move. You might be speaking with a kindred spirit. Then again, your colleague might report on your misbehavior. It was a terrible aspect of the contract, this specter of McCarthyism. The precepts were supposed to make you a role model. Instead, they nurtured solitary vice. Teachers primped and postured in front of their peers, hiding their secret lives. Good men became Pharisees and liars.

After half a year of dating Beth, Dave braced himself and revealed his feelings about the covenant. He approached the subject on theoretical grounds, never suggesting he'd broken the rules on purpose. Which was true, in a sense. The times that he broke them, he did it on principle, claiming the moral high ground. When a contract is unjust, the just man breaks the contract. He tried to pretend that he didn't sound like Mom.

No, Bethany said. If you think that a contract is wrong, you refuse to sign it. You find yourself a different job.

It was the response he expected. She saw the world in black and white, while he preferred a grayscale version. It featured more nuance, the wonderful texture of God's creation.

Rachel went a step further, of course. His sister reveled in high-definition color.

It was almost the end of their relationship. Beth couldn't grasp his reasons for signing a document that he opposed. Thinking the rules are silly is one thing, she said. You put up with them, rolling your eyes, because the benefits outweigh the costs. But claiming they're unjust?

He knew the answer he wanted to give: the spiritual life demands paradox. It entails contradiction. Which wasn't an answer at all, simply a new debate. He would open with doctrine, ignoring the awkward transition. How they clung to sovereignty as well as free will, accepting them both at once. Even the Christians who championed one or the other, they *really* believed in both.

The uncertainty was critical. Essential, even. How could there be faith without it? Take Christ. Why didn't He write His own story, ensuring a standard account? Instead, he left the task to His followers, knowing — in His omniscience — that the multiple reports would never quite mesh. Why allow that to happen, unless He wanted the enterprise fluid? To give His words space to play?

Dave understood the danger. If he started down this path with Beth, he would soon be over his head. You swim at the beach, in shallows along the shore, not the miles of ocean beyond the horizon. She would declare her belief in Scripture, the inspired

Word of God. He would agree, but he couldn't resist a caveat: *in the original manuscripts*. Which became a problem, since none of the originals were available for consultation. Scholars had ancient manuscripts, to be certain. But even the oldest were copies of copies of copies, transcribed over centuries, after the earliest versions had been written, read, and lost. Many of these documents were fragments, and none were completely in agreement. God had chiseled the Old Covenant in stone. With the New Covenant, He went out of His way to map a different course.

All of these problems could turn your stomach, thinking about them too much. You began to question everything. When you read the letters of Paul, were you really getting the authentic product? The designer label, not some imitation knock-off? Those verses that didn't seem to fit? Could they actually be marginalia, annotations by some crotchety, medieval scribe? Over the centuries, were they slowly absorbed by the text? The dilemma made his head spin. He couldn't imagine its effect on Beth, who liked her world stable.

He kept his mouth shut. He buried the issues deep, and the storm passed overhead. In the end, Bethany made an uneasy peace. She dismissed his claims regarding the contract. He was simply being antagonistic, she said. He was posturing, bristling at rules that he actually followed. She had watched him in action: she knew how he lived.

At the time, he let her believe what she believed. The truth? The truth was slightly more complex, but they'd cross that bridge when it arrived.

Blount County Snapshots: Roll III

Summer 2010

§ The subject was beans. Bethany fired her questions at Grandpa: Why pole beans, not bush beans? Had he thought about double-planting them with the corn, the vines climbing stalks for support? Why not?

She reminded Dave of a bobblehead doll — listening to Grandpa's answers with a series of intent nods, absorbing the information. She previewed the topics she wanted to discuss. After they finished with beans, she needed to talk eggplant.

It was ten in the morning, but the sun was already hot. Sweat spread beneath Dave's arms and the collar of his shirt. Beth had requested a tour of the garden, and Grandpa was more than happy to oblige. His grandson tagged along, proud of his elder's work. Yet the moment was bittersweet. If Beth raved about the current plot, the gardens on Redburn would have blown her away.

That tall, wooden fence had focused your attention. The enclosed lot fought its restraints, exploding with life. Much of its beauty came from the tension between chaos and control. Climbing vines ruled the perimeter, wild and unrestrained, but they also provided structure, wrapping the package like twine. The lines of the lawn were crisp and well defined, yet the blossoms exploded in random clusters. The oasis pulsed. Bees flew from stamen to stamen, deliverymen in an organic factory. Their routes appeared random at first. Later, they formed patterns that became a dance.

Dave would have loved to observe Beth's face. The space would mesh with her imagination, some garden from such-and-such childhood book, a magical portal to strange and wonderful worlds, where children fought dragons and wizards, evil queens and enchanted knights. Where they found love and beauty and valor and faith. Dave might have been embarrassed, Beth gushing like that, especially if Mom or Rachel were present. He would also be pleased.

So the inspection of Grandpa's new garden was enjoyable and sad. Not because it wasn't impressive. Indeed, Beth was sufficiently enthralled. But it paled in comparison to the mythical tour, the circuit that might have been. Reactions that never took place.

§ On Redburn, the sense of crowding had added to the mystery: the vines on the walls, the flowers and leaves competing for sunlight. It could get downright claustrophobic: the air rich with fragrance, the drone from the insects. The space was in constant rebellion. It defied the respectable atmosphere, the gentrified streets of the neighborhood.

At the new house, the lawn was more spacious. The suburban lots were seldom fenced, and the horizon was broad. The scale was larger. The foothills of the Smokies drew your gaze to the east, and the rectangle of Samuel's husbandry was swallowed by the overall view.

His efforts were laudable, given his age and physical limitations. They just weren't as magical as before. Not that it mattered to Bethany, who celebrated the variety of vegetables that Grandpa had planted. She praised their advanced state of growth, this early in the season.

“Simply a product of latitude,” Grandpa said. “Not skill. Your beans would be equally strong, if Midfield started when we did.”

§ Because the new lawn sloped, he had built a raised garden. The exact height shifted to keep the plot level, somewhere between six and eighteen inches off the ground. He claimed it was more about convenience than anything else. The structure had been simple to build, easier than breaking and tilling the actual ground. These days, he purchased his soil from Lowe’s.

Dave didn’t believe this lazy posture. Grandpa had designed it as a challenge: to show what he could still do, and to distinguish this new endeavor from earlier projects. The walls were basic in their construction, but they were also elegant. Each corner was dark, treated lumber, and the longer sidewalls were made of brick. “I wanted to go all-wood,” Grandpa said. “But the pieces were too big to lift.” He reached out and squeezed his grandson’s arm. “If I had this guy’s muscles, I might have done it.” The grip pinched, and Dave tried not to react.

The rectangle was long and thin: at least twenty feet from end to end, but less than five feet wide. In other words, kneeling outside the wall, you could still reach most of the plants. On the perimeter, chicken wire deterred the local rabbits.

“What about deer?” asked Beth.

Grandpa hadn’t quite solved that problem. “One of these days, I’ll run a strand of electric fence.” At the moment, he kept them at bay with commercial repellant. He couldn’t recall the actual name, some type of predator piss. He was also experimenting with a homemade concoction, a mixture of water and crushed jalapeños. He sprayed it as

a mist, coating the leaves. Most deer weren't too keen on taco salad. But the cocktail washed away when it rained, and you had to rinse your harvest good, removing the hint of peppers — unless you wanted your vegetables spicy, that is.

“What I ought to try planting is alums,” he said. “Hit the deer with some flower power.”

“Would lavender work?” asked Beth.

Grandpa smiled. “You know your plants.” She had already won his favor, showing interest in the garden. The fact that she was well-informed? That she understood his latest success, better than anyone else in the house? Extra credit for the girl.

§ The asparagus had come and gone. The carrots were months away. Everything else was in full effect: cucumbers, corn and summer squash; bell peppers and Swiss Chard; four varieties of tomatoes, their plantings in staggered batches. “That way, all summer long, we get a steady supply of fruit.” Grandpa watched Beth for a reaction. “You know that tomatoes are a fruit, don't you?”

She claimed that she did, but he provided the lesson anyway. “Anything with seeds,” he said. “Tomatoes, oranges, avocados.”

The last one surprised her. “Avocados?”

“Even almonds.”

“Now you're just pulling my leg, trying to see what nonsense I'll swallow.”

Grandpa insisted that he was serious. We can look it up, he said. An almond tree produces fruit, but we only eat the seeds.

“Did you know all this?” Beth asked Dave.

He pointed at Grandpa. “Only what I’ve learned from him. Ask him about berries. He’s got an entire routine on the subject.”

“I’ll give you a hint,” said Grandpa. “Don’t believe the names. When it comes to berries, a strawberry isn’t one.”

“A strawberry isn’t a berry?”

“Neither are blackberries. Raspberries too. Not technically, at least. If you want to be a berry, you need a single ovary — no more, no less.”

Dave wondered if Beth would blush. She didn’t. The subject fascinated her. Now Dave was the one embarrassed, chagrined at his juvenile mind. Like a junior high student, listening to adults converse.

“So what has a single ovary?” Beth asked. “Besides a tomato, I mean.”

“Bananas,” Grandpa said. “Pumpkins. Watermelons.”

“You’re saying that bananas, pumpkins, and watermelons are berries, but blackberries and raspberries aren’t?”

“That’s correct.”

“Grandpa, you’re rocking my world.”

§ Dave charted the progression in his mind. In less than twenty-four hours, Beth had graduated from Mr. Walker to Samuel to Grandpa, all by the old man’s invitation. Dave was annoyed and pleased at this license. On one hand, he was glad that her visit was going well. But the plan was to acclimate her and the family, not weld their connection. He wasn’t quite ready for that type of bond.

Sunflowers towered at one end of the garden. It bothered Dave's sense of order, the flowers so close to the fruits and vegetables — even those flowers with edible seeds.

Grandpa's lecture on berries continued. Dave stifled a yawn. He'd seen this performance before. Now, it simply reminded him of arguments at MCA, the verse-parsing and the endless quibbling over minutiae.

He walked back to the porch, where Mom sat with her own mother in the shade. She asked him to fill Grandma's feeders. They were called that out of habit, in deference to the years at the house on Redburn, where she had managed them for decades, watching her avian confidants land and depart. *Lily dreams about flying away*, Grandpa claimed. It was hard to know if he was kidding.

But she hadn't touched birdseed in years, not since two of her earliest symptoms. One morning, Samuel had spotted an overburdened feeder: it was brimming with instant oats. The next week, suspicious-looking kernels began to appear in her homemade peppercorn dressing.

These days, Grandma watched birds that she could not identify. They ate seed at the feeders she no longer filled.

Roll III, Continued: Undeveloped Snapshots

§* They observe the duo in the garden. Mom speaks well of Bethany, describing her as kind and respectable. At first, Dave assumes she is making peace. In time, the question she's asking grows clear: before things progress any further, is he certain that's what he wants?

§* Dave comments on how well that Grandpa is walking. They discuss his ongoing recovery, which is remarkable for his age. Even so, the leg is a constant frustration: eight years after the amputation, he's still uncomfortable with the prosthetic.

He doesn't hike much, Mom says. He's scared what might happen. Dave finds that hard to believe: he can't remember his grandpa being scared of anything. You're thinking of the man you remember, she says.

§* Grandpa and Beth return, and Mom brings out tea. Beth is still praising the garden. She can't believe that Dave didn't tell her. Why doesn't he doesn't brag about Grandpa's green thumb?

The old man downplays his skills, but he's clearly proud. David always liked maps and overlooks, Samuel claims. The big picture: where the trails led, the mountains and rivers. The boy wanted to swallow the valley whole. He was much less concerned with the individual plants.

§* Beth examines Grandpa's cane. It is actually a branch, a souvenir from Redburn that Grandpa has sanded smooth. Over the years, he has carved ranks of salamanders into the wood. Its entire length is crawling with amphibians.

He explains their significance: the Smokies are known as The Salamander Capital of the World. Dozens of varieties make the park their home, including the Hellbender, which can grow up to two feet long. Beth is appalled at such a beast.

There's also a second reason, Grandpa claims. "A salamander that loses its tail can often sprout a new one." He strikes his prosthetic. "Reminds me of someone I know."

§* Rachel joins them on the porch. Dave can't help comparing her to Beth. Their outfits have similar themes: hiking sandals, khaki bottoms, white tops, hats, and their hair pulled back. It's the details that matter. Beth's sandals look new and fresh, while Rachel's are faded and falling apart, mauled by rocks and riverbeds. Beth's white peasant blouse has a floral pattern about its open neck, and her Capri pants are cute but demure. A single, thick French braid drops between her shoulder blades, and a sunhat shields her face and neck. Rachel's shorts are not immodest, but they display plenty of leg. Her tank top arrived in a three-pack from the men's department, either that or she swiped it from Grandpa's dresser. Her ponytail is threaded out the back of a dirty, camouflaged baseball cap — claimed from the wardrobe of a former boyfriend, most likely, and retained as spoil of war.

He can spot the tattoo on the back of her shoulder: a web of blue lines and dotted black trails. The symbols are familiar, the creeks and paths of the upper Middle Prong. Near Indian Flat Falls, where Grandpa went down. A Cherokee phrase is woven throughout the design, but he does not comprehend its words.

Rachel had planned to cover her entire back: a far more intricate map, and elaborate depictions of the waterfalls, rhododendron, and a troublesome bear that delayed her race to find help. Grandpa was forced to carry a permanent reminder; she wanted to be scarred as well. Not as punishment, but in memorial.

Horseshit, said Grandpa. He wasn't dead yet. Besides, she had plenty of scars from that day. You just couldn't see them.

He convinced her to limit the design. His own wounds were bad enough. There was no need to ruin a second body. Still, she refused to abandon the entire plan. She was stubborn — her mother's daughter, after all.

§* Dave tries to make small talk with his sister. He asks about Wyoming. The trip's in a few weeks, she says. It was supposed to start earlier, but a financial crunch had forced her to condense the schedule. Last month, she had to boot Captain Asshat out of her apartment. For now, she was paying the bills herself.

How's school? he asks. I'll graduate soon, she says. Soon could mean anywhere from two months to two years.

Dave can't think of anything else. They're alone at the moment, their first conversation in half a year. He comments on her hair, which seems longer than before. That's probably true, she says. She wants to do something funky — like dreadlocks, or dying it blue and shaving the sides and back — something before her trip out West. He can't tell if she's serious or not. It's a common occurrence when they talk. Sometimes, she's telling the truth; others, she's simply trying to make him react. On many occasions, it's both.

Dave floats a remark about Captain Asshat, an invitation to elaborate. She doesn't bite. He jokes that her standards are too high, spoiled from those years with Grandpa.

“I don’t need him to be Grandpa,” she says. “But I sure as hell don’t want him to be you.”

§* “She admires you, you know.”

Funny way of showing it, Dave says.

“I know,” Mom says. “But couldn’t we say the same about you? She’s afraid. You’ve hurt her before. She won’t let it happen again.”

§* Rachel lived among binaries, after all. Midfield on one side, Maryville on the other. Same with the Kingmans and the Walkers. The evil empire, and a band of freedom fighters.

She never had a choice. She was never anything but a Walker. Her brother, however, could move between camps. He would have to declare his allegiance. Twice now — his senior year, and the return to teach at MCA — twice, he had sided with the villains.

§* That night, Dave renews his siege. Mom doesn’t want to talk, but he presses her on the subject — Dad’s second attempt to reconcile.

“You already know most of the story,” she says. “You were four or five, getting ready to start kindergarten. We saw each other on a fairly regular basis, but your dad wasn’t making a move.” She dated other men. One of them grew close. Not as intimate as Charles, given the history they shared, but passionate nonetheless.

“Rachel’s father.”

Mom nods.

“Why didn’t he ask you to marry him? Once Rachel is on the way, he disappears from the story. Sounds like a winner to me.”

“Don’t judge things you can’t understand.” Her tone was surprisingly firm. “He would have asked, but I refused to let him.”

“Why not?”

“In order to claim the two of us — the three of us, including you — he would have had to sacrifice more than I wanted him to offer.” He was willing, but she said no. “That man has a special purpose in this world.”

“I shouldn’t be telling you things like this,” she says. “You’ll start guessing names, just like every other man I’ve known. But I don’t want you to keep fooling yourself. Rachel’s father is a good man. So’s yours. Both of you ought to be proud.”

§* “Does Rachel know?” Dave asks.

“What? Who her father is?”

Dave nods.

“She does. I told her on her eighteenth birthday.”

What a present, he thinks. “Will you ever tell me?”

Doubtful, Mom says. She certainly doesn’t plan on it. Why would she tell him? Why would he need to know? It wasn’t part of his story.

§* “Has Rachel ever contacted him?”

“They write back and forth on occasion. In time, they might even be friends.”

“Is she mad?”

“Is she mad?” Mom fails to grasp his question, almost as much as he fails to understand her answers. “Why would she be mad?”

§* The rumors of her pregnancy spread fast. Charles came to the apartment and asked if they were true. He was already half-drunk, and he carried a bottle of wine in support. He laid all of his cards on the table: he loved her, had always loved her, and wanted to get back together. He would care for the child like it was his own.

Something black and evil rises from David’s heart. He imagines choking on venom.

Charles couldn’t get over one hurdle: he wanted to know who the father was. Learning a name wouldn’t change anything, but the ignorance tortured him. Laura informed him that she’d never tell. In the end, that proved to be the deal-breaker. “He’s never forgiven himself for that weakness, his inability to let it go.” Everyone was a wreck: Mom, Charles, Rachel’s father. She decided to move back to Tennessee, to give birth away from that mess. The baby would get a fresh crack at life.

“You know the story from there.” Maryville was even harder than Midfield had been; she decided to try Athens once again. The cycle resumed. “God.” She laughs at herself. “All my life, I’ve done nothing but run in circles.”

§* Dave admits his surprise that Dad had offered to adopt Rachel. “You always underestimate your father,” Mom says. “He was ready to make her a Kingman.”

The real obstacles were David and his Grandmother. “Both of you kept her out of the club.”

§* What about later? After Dad brought them back to Midfield and she had divorced Mr. Pete? Why didn’t they get together then?

Mom isn’t sure. He gave them plenty of space, more than she wanted. “At that point, I would have said yes in a heartbeat.” She would have told him whatever he needed to know.

But he didn’t ask. “Eventually, a woman can exhaust a man’s love. No, not his love — his love’s still there — but the power and will to express it.” She had betrayed him on two occasions. She slept with a faceless rival and married a bigot from Hocking County. “Both of those had to smart.”

Charles had asked twice, and she turned him down both times. “We both understood he would never ask again.”

§* “I’m worried about Mom,” Dave says.

“Of course you are,” Rachel answers. “She’s starting to age.” What else did he expect?

“I expected it, just not this fast.”

“It only seems fast when you’re watching in half-year leaps. If you saw her like I did, you’d be arguing the opposite: how great she looks, given all of the weight on her shoulders.”

“Should we try to help? Is there anything we can do? I mean, I think that we ought to do something.”

She raises a hand and forces him to stop. “You can’t keep doing this, David.”

“Doing what?”

“You sweep into town, taking a survey and checking that everyone’s fine. Then you disappear for six months. You can’t pretend you’re a regular part of our lives. You chose your world. Give us the freedom to make our own.”

§* “Are you sure you have to leave tomorrow?” Mom asks. It is now Friday morning. They arrived on a Wednesday afternoon.

“We can stay until lunch. Beth needs to get home by Saturday night. She’s helping with Children’s Church on Sunday.”

“Of course.” They would be sad to see him depart. “Your Grandpa, especially. Are you all still planning to go see the fireflies tonight?”

§* Synchronous fireflies are found in two locations on the planet: Thailand, and a few hundred acres in east Tennessee. Unlike their more independent-minded relatives, which flash their tails to a solitary beat, the lightning bugs near Elkmont perform in unison. They glow in clusters: sometimes a handful, sometimes dozens at a time. Their adult lives are short, less than a month long, but in June, they make the most of that window and put on a display.

Beth enjoys the drive past Chilhowee Mountain and Tuckaleechee Cove. They follow the scenic route through Wear’s Valley, and Grandpa points at landmarks, telling

stories about people and places he used to know. Beth clings to the door handle on the climb to Little Briar Gap, and she gasps once or twice on the Little River Road, where the edge has no railing, simply a drop to the water below. Rachel notes rapids that she and her friends run in kayaks.

Rangers are blocking the road to Elkmont, restricting access to the trails. The crowds are too large, the roadside parking hazardous. The Park Service has arranged for trolleys from Gatlinburg. Dave complains about this change in plans, but Grandpa is pleased. It is the first step to shuttle service throughout the park, an idea that he once proposed in his newspaper column — a critical step in reducing the air pollution, especially in Cades Cove, and relieving congestion. Bethany is also excited. She was hoping to see Gatlinburg or Pigeon Forge. Perhaps a quick glimpse will whet her appetite, and they can return on a future trip. When they reach the tourist mecca, he hurries them onto a trolley . . . but not before Beth laughs in delight at block after block of air-brushed T-shirts, novelty license plates, and pancake houses.

It is dusk when the trolley drops them at Elkmont. A significant crowd has already arrived. Dave is amazed at its size. When Grandpa brought him as a little boy, the lightning bugs were still a local secret. Only a few dozen hikers were in the audience. Now, packs of families are streaming toward the Little River Trail. They tote lawn chairs, backpacks of food, and picnic blankets — as if they are going to see fireworks, not fireflies.

Grandpa leads them on a detour, out and away from the logjam on the Little River Trail. They follow a line of abandoned cabins: vacation homes built in the early decades of the previous century, when Elkmont served as a popular spa and resort. Their tin roofs

are rusted, their floorboards rotted and collapsed. Warning signs keep visitors at bay. There are plans to restore a few of them. The rest will be destroyed. For now, the structures are left to the raccoons and rodents, to nesting wasps and coiled serpents.

Grandpa explains all this to Bethany. David and Rachel trail behind. Dave keeps an eye on Grandpa's leg. His stride is slow but steady; his cane picks at the crumbling potholes on the road. Dave worries about the return trip. It will be dark, and Grandpa might be hesitant to use their flashlights, despite the red cellophane filters, lest they ruin night vision for others.

Samuel is leading them to the Jakes Creek Trail, where the crowds are less intense. It is also the spot where he first encountered the fireflies himself, long before they had grown world-renowned. He had spent a day in the Little River valley, wandering down to a campsite at its very end, near the foot of Mount Buckley, a magical spot where four or five streams all converge. He returned through Cucumber Gap, but it was later than he realized, well after sunset when he reached the watershed of Jakes Creek and turned for the car.

"I didn't have a flashlight, but I knew I would be fine." The trail was wide and predictable. His only concerns were bear, which might skulk on the outskirts of the campground. Then, without warning, the entire hillside seemed to glow: hundreds of fireflies blazed in unison. Then it was dark. They relit a few seconds later, and he could follow the contours of the ridgeline and valley, as if Christmas lights had been lavished upon the landscape. Then darkness once again. He had never heard of this peculiar behavior. "I thought that it might be the end of the world. If it was, what a beautiful way to go."

Later, he wrote an article on the subject, one of the first to get widespread attention. “A fraction of this mob, I guess you can blame it on me.” He owed the bugs an apology, he says. The synchronous display had a specific role in their mating rituals, and crowds of voyeurs weren’t likely to set the best mood.

They pass a gate, and the road turns into a trail. The slope begins to increase. Dave wonders when Grandpa will stop. They have already entered the fireflies’ territory. Small clusters are lighting on either side of the path.

The first time he saw them was actually a disappointment. Grandpa’s story had sounded so magical; it simply couldn’t match the hype. They didn’t all light at once, every rear end in a ten mile radius. They ignited in groups. A pack would appear to your right, another in front of you. Each cluster flashed a few times and took a short break. Another band assumed its place. The distribution was uneven, yet it wasn’t a visual trick, the mind seeing patterns in random events. There was definite coordination. Even so, it was not as spectacular as Grandpa led him to believe. The problem was expectation. He would have found the performance marvelous, had his hopes not started so high.

They reach the juncture with the Cucumber Gap Trail. Dave’s heart is beating strong. Each year, he feels more and more out of shape. He wonders how Grandpa is doing.

Grandpa turns on a flashlight for a second, and the ground at their feet glows red. He moves off-trail to the right, following a low ridge, and stops a few yards into the brush. We’ll need to check ourselves for ticks, thinks Dave.

The lightning bugs are putting on a show. Beth whispers a sentence or two in amazement, and they all settle down to a comfortable silence. The flashes are hypnotic.

The sound of a creek moves along the ravine, and insects are crying throughout the woods. Dave's eyes adjust to the dark, but he cannot see far. Bethany holds his hand for several minutes. Then she drifts away, slipping into the night. He doesn't remember her letting go.

He assumes they are near him — Bethany, Grandpa, and Rachel — but he cannot tell for sure. For all he knows, he is utterly alone. On the hillside, the fireflies join together to burn their bodies in the night.

The Valley of the Vols

★, \$, ♥

MILE 16: A horn startles Dave awake, and he corrects his truck's drift out of lane. A semi is passing him on the left. It is 4:20 A.M.

He spots the sign for Williamsburg. The Tennessee border is close. At the Welcome Center, he will close his eyes and take a short rest. For now, he tries to keep awake by reciting the colonial names he has passed: Williamsburg, Lexington, Georgetown. Possibly a Mount Vernon as well, though he can't remember for sure. Kentucky is certainly patriotic. Yet it also favors Europe: London, Florence, Frankfort, Louisville.

A billboard for a regional university catches his eye. The slogan has something to do with careers. A graduate offers a satisfied grin, raising a diploma in triumph — her weapon



against hunger and poverty. Dave smirks at this feeble protection from a cold, cruel world.

Careers. Another board game from his childhood. You set goals for yourself in three categories — fame (★), money (\$), and love (♥) — with sixty points to distribute as best you saw fit, whatever you longed to collect in this life. You could try for balance: 20 ♥s, \$20,000, and 20 ★s. You could be a heartless bastard, all dollars and star power — 30 ★s and \$30,000 cash — or a naïve and penniless romantic. The combination you designed was your objective for the game, and you gathered these “points” on career tracks that branched out from the main path. Big business and science were excellent routes for raising cash. Testing your luck as a movie star or an astronaut could be risky: great potential for fame and fortune, but dangerous squares that busted you down to nothing. A traditional choice was teaching: little cash, little fame, but lots and lots of ♥s. It strikes him as humorous, this absurd belief that teachers are showered with affection.

When he arrives at the rest area, Dave parks in a deserted section of the lot. He tilts back the seat and falls asleep within minutes.

Urine Trouble

MILE 161 (TN): Dave wakes, uncomfortable and stiff. The sun hasn’t risen, and the rest area is gray in the predawn light. To the east, the silhouettes of the Cumberland mountains are dark, yet the sky above them is glowing with yellow and pink and orange. He turns the key and checks the clock. 6:50 AM. He wonders if there’s a rule against parking overnight and worries that he looks suspicious.

Shivering, he pulls a ragged blanket from behind the seat and runs the engine to warm the cab. He needs to use the bathroom, but doesn't want to leave the truck. The empty Gatorade bottle is a tempting option: if he covers himself with the blanket, no one will know, and he won't have to face the cold. He's done it before — a month back, en route to the game with Fortstown, when he was running late, desperate, and didn't have time to stop. On a long straightaway, he braced his left leg against the floor, held the wheel tight, and lifted himself off the seat. It was dangerous, driving that distracted and contorted, but it was possible. He dumped the bottle out the window. It bothered him for a day or two — all of his DNA, just blowing in the wind. He wanted to leave his mark on the world, but that wasn't exactly what he had in mind.

In the end, he decides to stop being stupid and hurries to the welcome center. He lingers in the building's warmth and examines the tourist brochures, appalled at the range of attractions that now envelop the Smokies. He steps outside to call the MCA office and report that he's sick.

Interested in hearing an odd dream that Dave has while sleeping in the truck?

— *Not really.*

Come on. It's about Appalachian hit men who collect other men's urine to plant as misleading DNA evidence at crime scenes.

— *Really? That's what you're offering me? No thanks.*

I'll put it in the Bonus Features, just in case you change your mind.

— *Fine. Now can we please keep moving, please?*

The Plateau

MILE 160: After the rest area, the road enters a steady rise that lasts for several miles.

The incline is tough on the struggling eighteen-wheelers, and Dave presses the Ranger hard. He thinks about hills and momentum and life. By the time that he reaches the summit, his ears are starting to pop.

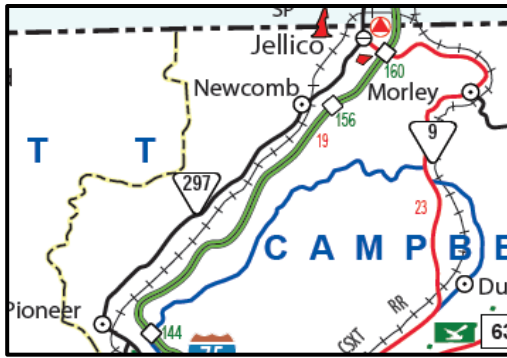
Gracing the apex is a new exit, built not for an established community, but to call forth a town from the dust of the earth. It preceded — and enabled — the subdivisions and vacation homes that are growing like mold on the sides of Jellico Mountain.

Due to legal concerns, the following scene has been deleted:

Dave starts to criticize this reckless construction, but M— F— swoops into the text, hoping to avoid lawsuits, and explains that they are lovely homes with glorious views of the Cumberlands. He praises the development, [REDACTED], and thinks about ways to raise cash with his book. If he includes a screen capture of one of their ads, would they thank him with a modest stipend?

Might it be possible to subsidize the novel through product placement? If Dave gets thirsty on the trail, he can whip out a bottle of Gatorade, and the energy from its electrolytes will power him to the peak. In addition to these written descriptions, the ads hidden within the prose, marketing space could be sold in the header and footer. In an e-book, the promotions might appear as a crawler, hyperlinks, or even pop-ups. Dave reclaims control and contemplates the families in the valley. Because of [REDACTED], their porches now look out on mountain neighborhoods, not on the mountains themselves. He isn't a tree-hugger. He'd prefer that the hilltops were undeveloped, but if someone is destined to own a mountain home, it might as well be him.

The exit is soon far behind, and his troubled thoughts fade. The interstate rides the crest of the plateau. On either side are remote valleys and distant ridgelines. It is not true wilderness: the forest isn't protected, and roads and houses are scattered throughout each watershed. Still, the landscape is full of possibility. The future has not been written



in concrete. The sun is rising. If Dave stares to the east, it blinds him. He puts a Rich Mullins CD into the stereo and thanks God for the views and the land, for the clear weather and safety throughout the night. To this point, it is the highlight of his trip.

Descent

MILE 141: Unlike the climb — a single, dramatic haul — the drop from the plateau occurs in stages. Dave passes the fireworks market and the giant cross, the site of Rachel's XXX. He intends to focus on the spiritual; instead, he thinks about sex. In particular, a recent, absurd dream in which he and Beth were encased in a mattress. Separate mattresses, to be precise. Their legs stuck out from the bottom, so they could waddle around, and their hands extended straight to either side. They could grasp an object but do little else. The rest of their bodies remained trapped — hidden inside each mattress, even their faces. The stuffing was thin, admitting a hazy view of the world. It reminded Dave of the story in which Christ makes two attempts to cure a man's blindness. After the first try, the vision that returns is only partial. The patient sees men that look like walking trees, and a second procedure takes him to 20/20. The Savior as eye doctor, Dave thinks. No, the Savior as I-Doctor. He imagines the pun as a sermon title.

In the dream, you could see shadows and shapes, but they were elusive, like ghosts in the fog. One of these shapes was a woman. In fact, he somehow knew that she

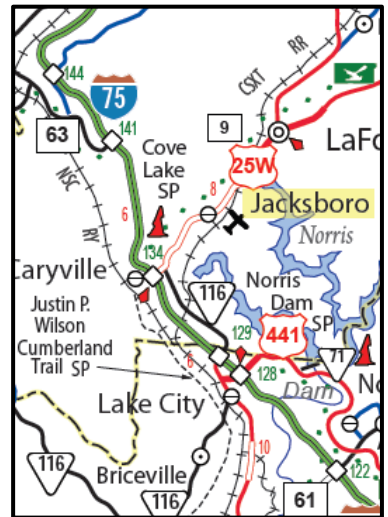
was Bethany, stuck in a mattress of her own. They brought their bodies next to one another, like a bed set standing on end, and tried to align. They attempted to kiss, but their lips could never touch. They slammed together, and the futile effort merely aroused their passions.

In the truck, Dave fights the urge to touch himself. He has struggled to break this habit for years, and it causes him plenty of guilt. He worries that his physical reactions have been warped and that his marriage bed will suffer as a consequence. He fears that God will punish him, like the man in Genesis who was killed for spilling his seed on the ground. The more he frets, the stronger his desire grows.

The Devil's Racetrack

MILE 136: The curves on the next descent are tight.

Dave spots a peculiar rock formation to the east. Two parallel columns descend the hillside like stairs. They are large but thin — several stories high, yet only a few feet across — as if the mountain had a twin backbone, and the tips of the vertebrae had broken through its skin. Dave prefers an alternate explanation. The rocks are the armor of a Stegosaurus, the massive plates that protect its back, and a Jurassic beast is buried within the hill.



According to Grandpa, the formation is known as The Devil's Racetrack. They would pass the formation on trips to the Big South Fork. The rocks were a lesson in geography, he claimed. If you understood The DR, you could learn a whole lot about

east Tennessee. You would comprehend the earth beneath your feet. He never explained the reason for the name. Perhaps it was self-evident. You'd have to be a maniac — driven by some type of demon — to hazard a race down that dangerous spine.

Want to know what Dave thinks about next?

— *Not really.*

Come on. It's about Tar Pits Jesus, who calls the Stegosaurus from its grave. He rides north on the prehistoric steed, stopping to pull His cross from the earth, grip it upside down, and brandish it like a sword. They target Noah's (theme p)Ark, bent on destruction.

— *Isn't that going a step too far?*

I suppose. Some things are too hard to believe, even when they happen to be true.

Dave stops at Lake City for gas and a coffee. He spots neither lake nor city. Grandpa said that its name was once Coal Creek. At the beginning of the previous century, a massive explosion had ripped through a local mine. Over two hundred workers died in the tragedy. In a nearby town, only a handful of men had survived. In an instant, it was changed to a village of widows.

Cain and Rachel

MILE 117: Dave approaches the outskirts of Knoxville. The valley is foreign to him, which is odd, given the family so near. This city belongs to Rachel. After high school, she began taking classes at Pellissippi State. Dave had encouraged her to try Maryville College or the University of Tennessee. He thought about mentioning Carson-Newman, but knew her opinion of Christian schools. His sister ignored the advice. She didn't want

to attend a small, local college — not Maryville or Tallassee — and she wasn't prepared for the Big Orange Kool-Aid. She still wasn't used to the Volunteer spirit. The fans in Midfield had been divided: large numbers of Buckeyes, but Ann Arbor was only two hours north, so the Michigan faction was also strong. Others stood by the Bowling Green Falcons. Same with the pros. The loyalty was splintered: Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Detroit.

Not in Blount County. Babies were swaddled in Volunteer Orange. Trucks were adorned with the power T. Rachel was skeptical of blind allegiance in any guise, a natural byproduct of early exposure to Mr. Pete and MCA. She attended Pellissippi on a part-time basis, commuting to Knoxville from Maryville. In the summers, she drove east to Townsend and worked seasonal jobs that followed the tourists, like mushrooms that sprout after rain. She had waitressed in restaurants, cleaned rental properties, and ran a shuttle for inner tube trips on the Little River.

In time, she moved to Knoxville and transferred to Tennessee. Based on the stories she told, she even attended a football game. The tailgates were impressive, she said, the quantity of beer that could swamp a dry campus. She made friends in the Outdoor Recreation Program. They taught her to kayak, and she caught on fast. She talked about learning to guide on the Nantahala or the Ocoee. She went rock climbing and backpacking, frequenting many of Grandpa's favorite sights, and looked into taking a course at the NOLS, the National Outdoor Leadership School. She bounced among majors: Nursing, Forestry, Geology, and Criminal Forensics, examining the decomposing corpses on UT's famous body farm. In the end, however, she was drawn to the woods and decided to study Outdoors Education.

“I thought that you hated Education,” said Dave. “When I became a teacher, you claimed it was one thing you’d never do.”

Don’t be certain about anything, she said. Besides, Outdoors Education wasn’t like Education Education. You weren’t stuck in a classroom, almost as bored as your students. “It’s more like Grandpa — you know, wading in creeks and learning about crawdads and salamanders, how the ecosystem works.”

Dave disagreed. She’d teach plenty of slackers who yawned at her lessons. Kids were interested in game systems, not ecosystems. The forest was too muggy. They preferred the crisp resolution of high-definition monitors.

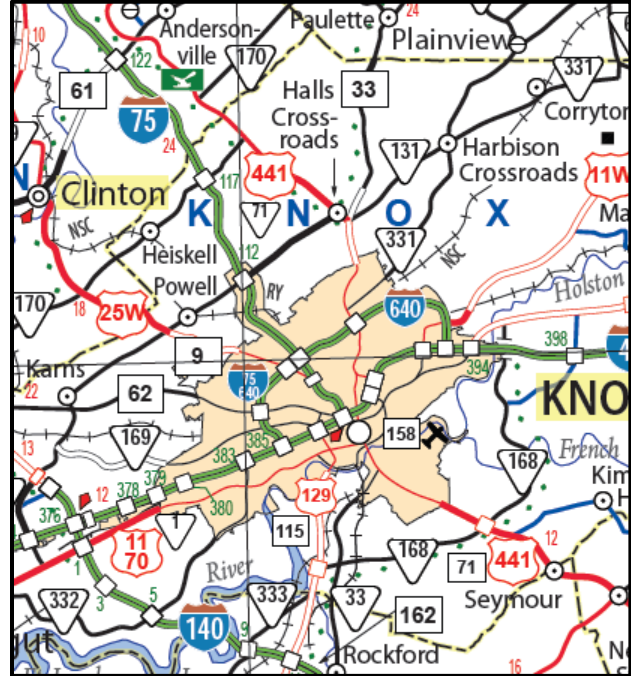
In secret, he agreed with her choice. Like Cain, like the Prodigal’s brother, like Judah and Reuben and Simeon and all of Joseph’s rivals — in short, like older brothers throughout history — his envy increased as his sister grew into her life.

She lived on trails, rivers, and cliffs. When she wasn’t in the woods, she worked as a bartender in the Old City. The music was loud, the wallets open, and the heads of the patrons turned as she passed. She had probably graduated and not told anyone. That would be like her, claiming the diploma in secret, satisfied in her own accomplishment.

He doesn’t know much about her life, not anymore. He doubts that she still attends church. Like Mom, she probably retains a belief in a God — she just doesn’t think that churches are places you’ll find Him. She has talked about moving, but always seems drawn to Knoxville. She likes the location, and Mom and Grandpa are close. Her brother suspects a deeper reason: she still feels guilt about the Middle Prong, and she doesn’t intend to leave Grandpa again.

The City of Giant Balls

MILE 108: I-75 exits for the west, but Dave heads straight ahead on I-275. Grandpa often bemoaned the poor layout of Knoxville's interstates: how the outer belt, I-640, was only a few miles north of the congestion it tried to skirt, how it re-entered too soon to be useful. Now a second bypass would be needed in the future. *Do something right the first time*, he said. *Otherwise, don't do it at all.*



A few curves later, Dave spots the Sunsphere. The massive, gold-plated dome rests on a pedestal that rises above World's Fair Park, the symbol of that international extravaganza. Three things strike him as odd: 1) that as recent as 1982, there was still a demand for such massive structures; 2) that World's Fairs continue to be held, given the neverending spectacle on the television and internet; and 3) that such an extravaganza had decided to grace Knoxville, Tennessee.

He cannot see it, but on the other side of downtown is the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame. It also features a sphere on a pedestal: the largest basketball in the world,

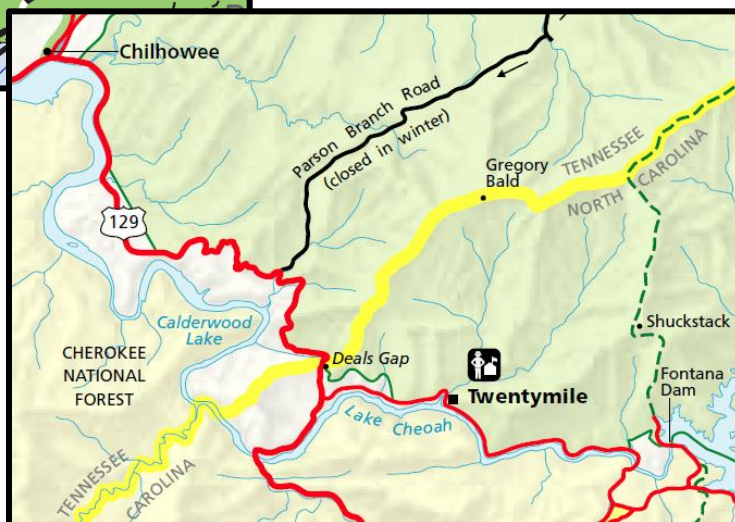
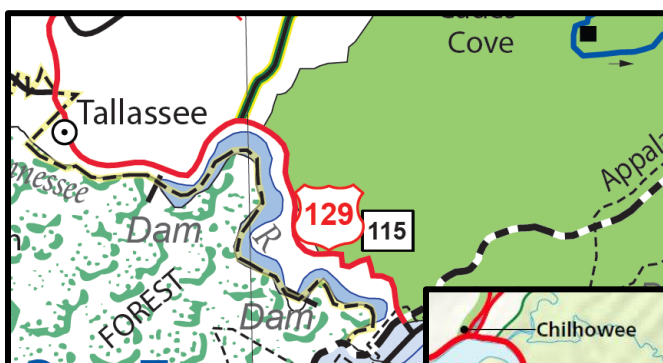
weighing more than ten tons. Along with the Sunsphere, it has inspired Rachel's nickname for her chosen town: The City of Giant Balls.

Dave makes a short jog east on I-40, hits the exit for US 129 south, and slips past the massive apartment towers at the University of Tennessee. Neyland Stadium is visible in the distance, and the road crosses Lake Loudon and the Tennessee River. In a few more miles, he will enter Blount County. Chilhowee Mountain will be visible in the distance. He'll pass Maryville and begin the last leg of his journey south.

SECTION VII: ENTER THE DRAGON

In which we finally return to The Dragon's Brew

What . . . the . . . hell? — Randy — S- N- L- — Trail Names — Journeyman Hitters — Namesakes — The Wellspring of Mountains — Advice — Double Suck — A Flatwater Roll — Panther Creek — A Complicated Plan — Randy's Solution — To Be Continued



LENGTH: It's not the miles, it's the curves.

HIGHLIGHTS: Randy & the Dragon

CAUTIONS: See HIGHLIGHTS

TRAILHEAD: The Dragon's Brew

A Rude Awakening

The sunlight was hot on Dave's neck. He cradled his head in his arms and inhaled through his nostrils, catching scent of his body, the reek from a night in the truck. He wondered how long he'd been sleeping — arched his back, stretched, yawned. The smell of coffee and bacon filled the room. In the kitchen, Emily was running water and moving dishes.

“Morning, partner.”

Dave paused: one arm crooked, the other locked straight. A strange man in aviator sunglasses was sitting at his table: a paperback in one hand, the remnants of an egg sandwich in the other. “Welcome back to the land of the living.”

Dave's own food had disappeared. He guessed that it hadn't gone far. The stranger savored one last bite. He licked grease from his fingers.

“What the hell?” Dave asked.

“Amen.” The man lifted a mug in salute. “What . . . the . . . hell.”

“No. *What the hell?* As in, *that's my sandwich you just ate.*”

“And I agreed with you: What . . . the . . . hell!?” He pounded the table with the book, stressing each word with his fist. A thumb marked his page in the volume. Coffee sloshed from Dave's cup, and he snatched at the rocking beverage.

In a single, smooth motion, the man ripped a knit cap off his head and wiped it across the table. The fabric was hunter orange. Water-resistant, apparently, because it spread the liquid rather than absorbing it. He swore once and left to gather napkins.

Dave glanced around The Dragon's Brew, hoping that someone had noticed his predicament. But Harold and Andy were sleeping; Deacon's nose was buried in his work. The stranger returned to mop the spill. His dark hair was greasy and disheveled, sticking in three or four directions. He sniffed at the hat and crammed it down a pocket on his canvas jacket.

"What—" Too many questions sprung to Dave's mind. He couldn't pick which one to ask.

"Precisely." The man sat down, cleaned the table, and stacked the dirty napkins in a small pyramid. "Couldn't have worded it better myself. *What* kind of land have you opened your eyes to discover? *What* kind of world run amok?" He bent forward and whispered, sharing an intimate secret. "What kind of God lets one man snatch food off his brother's plate?" He crossed his arms and leaned back, struck by a new dilemma. "Then again, how do you know I was eating *your* sandwich?"

"What?"

"It's a quandary, my friend. You might have misread our little scene." He removed his sunglasses and pointed them at Dave, stressing his observations. Something inside his brown eyes glistened. "Suppose that was *my* sandwich, not yours. A half hour back, Emily tossed *your* remnants to the birds, offended you hadn't finished."

"I fell asleep." His anxiety began to rise, and he scanned the walls for a clock.

“Exactly. You’re the least reliable witness in the room, moving through life with your eyes closed like that.” At the next table, Deacon’s shoulders had started to quiver. “Thus I beseech you: consider the situation as I arrived, eager to savor the java and mind my own business. But lo! At a far table, an unfamiliar patron had fallen asleep, far too tuckered to enjoy his breakfast sandwich. Now — and please, follow my logic here — now that in itself would be tragic, a humanitarian crisis that screamed for intervention.”

Deacon’s laughter had grown more distinct, and the stranger took offense. “I fail to grasp the humor, Doctor Mitchell. Take your standard-issue, B & E biscuit. It suffers a rapid decline in quality as its temperature begins to drop. By yielding to his siesta, our young hombre created a moral predicament. He forced me to make an unpleasant but necessary choice: disrupt his tranquil nap, or take matters into my own hands.”

“Into your hands. Literally, in this case,” observed Deacon.

“Correct. Occam’s razor.” He turned back to Dave. “Now, just for the sake of argument, let us imagine an alternate scenario. Suppose I wasn’t the first to spot your helpless state. Suppose — by the time I entered this precious room — a local roughneck had already weaseled his way to your table and consumed your sandwich. Not to preserve its quality, but to persecute a stranger. In fact, he was reaching for your coffee when I stepped to your defense. A sandwich can be replaced, but a coffee.” He shook his head at the dreadful thought. “Later, famished from the confrontation, I ordered a sandwich of my own. What if I’m your savior, mate? Have you stopped to think about that? Even heroes need to eat.”

“But I *saw* you,” Dave said. “When I woke, you were eating my sandwich.”

“We’re stuck at an ontological impasse. Because I repeat . . . how do you know I was eating *your* sandwich?”

He must have wrecked. On the interstate, perhaps. The scrape with the USPS. The Dragon’s Brew was a level of Purgatory, where day after day, the cast rehearsed its eternal monologue. Each time a fresh victim entered its doors, the cycle resumed. It was the only plausible explanation. Because places like this, they simply didn’t exist.

The stranger smiled, revealing a sliver of teeth, and Dave pictured a Venus Fly-Trap and other carnivorous plants. His options were limited. He could endure this charade, or he could escalate the confrontation. He didn’t know much about fighting. That swing at the Coldwater coach was the first punch he’d thrown in a decade.

The stranger was wiry — about Dave’s weight, but taller. He carried himself without fear. He might even be a touch insane, the last person you’d want to battle.

Dave could snitch, of course — call Emily over and whine. But the man carried himself like a regular. A complaint might provoke the entire room. Besides, why was he even taking this trip, if he ran from every challenge? He rationalized the problem, his traditional mode of escape. It wasn’t *that* big a deal, because he didn’t really *need* the entire sandwich. It would be slow to digest, a lump in his stomach the entire hike.

“Why not restore the lost property?” asked Deacon. “That’s what I don’t understand.”

“Excuse me?” asked the stranger.

“Isn’t that the difference between heroes and vigilantes? A vigilante simply punishes the criminal. The victim gets nothing but revenge. A hero defeats the villain, of course. Yet he also assists the powerless and helps them begin to recover.”

The man dismissed Deacon with a wave. “I said I might be his savior. I never claimed to be a saint.”

The dark glasses lay on the table. Without them, the man lost a fraction of his edge. He was probably in his early thirties — like Bethany, a few years older than Dave. Shave the stubble and comb the hair, swap his camouflaged shirt for a collar and tie? He could pass for a teacher at MCA.

“Like what you see?” the man asked.

“You look like someone I know.”

“I doubt that.” The man turned his face from side to side, flaunting a sharp and angular profile. “Not many folks in Tennessee look this fine, let alone in *O-hi-o*. Y’all lack our mountain air that braces the sinews on a manly man.” He set down the book and thumped on his chest. He sang the state’s name as a chant, the low tune of the witch’s soldiers in *The Wizard of Oz*: “O-hi-O, O-hiiii-O. O-hi-O, O-hiiii-O.”

“Jesus Christ.” Emily had stolen close.

“I know,” said Deacon. “He’s in rare form today.”

“Not simply today, my friends.” The man leaned back and stretched his arms, welcoming their gaze. The wingspan emphasized his gangly frame. “This form is always rare.”

“Wait,” said Dave. “Why did you say *Ohio*?”

The man raised his eyebrows. He feigned alarm and gasped. “Why? Is the Buckeye state a *verboten* topic?”

“No, I just wondered—”

“Ohio! Ohio! Ohio!” the man cried. He adopted a fake Southern accent and raised his hands in the air, a Pentecostal minister in the throes of the Spirit. “I rebuke the demons of the north, who carry their retirement funds to our impoverished land. Who steal the mountaintop views that belong to our children and their children’s children and the children of their children’s children, God bless their innocent souls.”

“Amen,” muttered Deacon. “Yankee bastards.”

“But . . . how do you know I’m from *Ohio*?”

The man paused and examined Dave for a second. “Your lack of distinguishing characteristics.”

“Randall,” said Emily. “Play nice.”

“Your license plate, man. *Ohio* . . .” — he drew a hand through the air, recounting a marquee — “*The Birthplace of Aviation!* No matter what Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, claims. You know, on that cute little Ranger in the parking lot, between the F250s, those weapons of global warming that Harold and Andy drive?”

A cry emerged from the depths of an armchair: “Move back to Asheville, you hippie.”

Emily gathered Dave’s plate. “I see you enjoyed the sandwich.”

“You’re asking the wrong person,” said Deacon.

“What’s that?”

“Our unfortunate guest made a poor decision and fell asleep.”

“Randall.” Emily looked at the stranger, clearly annoyed. She waved the empty plate near his face. “Not with the customers, I said.”

He shrugged. “S- N- L-”

“Only with Harold.” She told Dave that she’d fix him a new sandwich. He tried to protest, but to no avail. “Randall’s treat.” She turned for the kitchen before either could object.

“Hey, Em—,” called Randall.

She paused at the door. “What now, dear?” There was weariness in her voice.

“Could we get a pair of egg sandwiches out here? Some bastard’s been stealing our food.”

Q— & A— at The D— B—

1. “What’s S- N- L-?” asked Dave.

Randall set down his paperback. They were waiting on Emily and their replacement sandwiches. “Saturday Night Live. It’s pretty well known, even in Ohio.”

“No, you said—”

“Snooze and Lose,” explained Deacon. “Randall here—”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait.” Randall shook a hand and forced Deacon to stop.

“*Emily* is permitted to call me Randall, nobody else.” He spoke toward the kitchen.

“Even *she*’s on thin ice.”

Deacon grunted. “Fine. Any time Harold falls asleep, *Randy* swipes the leftovers.”

“I don’t swipe them. I *glean* them.”

“What’s the difference?” Dave asked.

“Precedent. *Biblical* precedent.”

Deacon’s response was crisp. “The same could be said about stoning, you know.”

2. The book’s title was embossed in gold: *Track of the Cat*. The cover featured a desert landscape and a rock pinnacle. “The Guadalupe Mountains,” said Randy.
“Murder and mountain lions.”

3. “What’s your name, stranger?”

“Dave.”

Randy wiped a hand on his jacket and reached across the table. They shook.

“Dave what?”

“Kingman.”

“Pleased to meet you, Dave Kingman.”

Dave returned the question, but Randy refused. “Not today, Kingman. Not until you’ve earned it.” He always held tight to his name, he said. When you scatter that type of information, you dilute its power. Recognition limits your independence, and fame brings captivity. “The more strangers learn about you, the more control they possess.” Only your closest friends should know your actual name: “two or three people at the most.”

“Like copies of your house key,” suggested Deacon.

“Exactly. But one of them . . . one should be given a decoy.”

“You asked *my* name,” said Dave.

“Isn’t it obvious? I wanted the control.”

4. Customers trickled through the doors. A local touched his cap and nodded at Harold and Andy. A lost father asked directions to the Foothills Parkway. Bikers in leather jackets paused at a table of merchandise in the corner. They strode onto the porch, drinks steaming in the morning air. Dave wondered if Harleys had cup holders. One of them rummaged in a saddlebag. He poured his coffee into a thermos, while his partner took one last sip before tossing the dregs.

Emily waved as they straddled their Hogs. The engines fired, shaking the windows, and the roar lingered, long after the bikers had disappeared. They were headed for Lake Chilhowee and Deals Gap, according to Deacon.

“Enter the Dragon,” whispered Randy.

5. Randy pushed back his chair. “Time to drain the main vein,” he announced.

6. “It’s not even his real name,” said Deacon.

“What? Randy?”

“It’s his trail name. You know, from the Appalachian Trail. Every thru-hiker gets one.”

Dave knew about trail names from Grandpa. Hikers could abandon their identities at the trailhead, dropping their past as they lifted their packs. When they laced their boots, they tied on a disguise as well.

“So what’s his real name?”

Deacon shrugged.

“You don’t know, or you won’t tell?”

7. Most of the thru-hikers travelled north. They followed the thaw to New England, passing through Tennessee in March or April. A smaller contingent made southbound attempts. In the fall, they finally reached the Smokies.

“Randy’s hiking the trail?” Dave asked.

“A few years back,” said Deacon. “But you’re named for life. Like being a Marine, I suppose. You’ve heard that old saying: *Once a Marine, Always a Marine.*”

Dave shook his head. “Grandpa was Army.”

“You’ll never meet an ex-Marine. Same with thru-hikers. Those that finish, at least.”

8. You don’t get to pick your name, explained Randy. You receive it. “Blister. Bootstrap. The Loco Locomotive.” He was listing the hikers he met on the trail. “Marathon Man. The Beltway Boys. Dorothy, Scarecrow, and Tin Cup.”

“No Cowardly Lion?” asked Deacon.

“Quit in Georgia — busted out near Hiawassee, less than a hundred miles from Springer Mountain.” This other dude, annoying as hell, he caught up with their pack and tried calling himself The Wizard. “Whenever he reached the top of a climb — even a small, insignificant rise — this asshole would shout, *I am the great and powerful Oz!*” But naming yourself was a serious No-No. “We christened him Toto.” Randy shook his head and laughed. “Which pissed him off fierce, knowing he’d carry that name the entire trail.” It would be passed along from hiker to hiker, inscribed for posterity in logbooks at each shelter. In the end, poor old Toto had dropped behind and disappeared.

“Mousetrap. Pop-Tart and Little Debbie. Apple Dumpling. Sweet Cheeks — not the cheeks on your face, mind you.” The names were exotic, a world apart from Midfield: the host of Matthews and Jennifers to the North. The mountains were swarming with characters.

“What about Randy?” asked Dave. “Who named you?”

Randy leaned across the table. “Let’s just say . . . that I *earned* it.”

9. “Kingman, you said? Dave Kingman?” asked Randy. “Wasn’t he a baseball player, back in the 70s or 80s?”

For the Cubs, Dave said. The Mets. Bunch of teams.

“Right, right, right — journeyman hitter.”

“I didn’t know that you cared about sports,” said Deacon.

“Not anymore, I don’t. But I owned baseball cards as a kid. You know, back in the dark ages, B.V.G. — Before Video Games.”

10. Dave’s own collection had been modest, a single shoebox of Topps and Donruss, yet he devoured each back like a sacred text. It was something about the statistics: a season compressed to a single line of figures, an entire career to a pocket-sized matrix. The numbers and abbreviations were like hieroglyphs, an obscure code that recorded the feats of modern gods.

Sixty-two steals and eighteen triples? The player had speed. He was aggressive, stretching bunts into runs and singles into victories. He spooked the defense into errors.

A strong average with an impressive OBP? Abundant walks and rare strikeouts? The batter was patient, fouling off junk as he looked for the pitch he wanted. The man was steady. He possessed a clear eye.

As a boy, Dave had dreamed of a life on the diamond, usually as the centerfielder for the Cincinnati Reds. He had filled a notebook with fictional stats and calculated his lifetime averages. Each career he devised had a similar arc: 1. Early success and

recognition. 2. Arrogance that led to mediocrity. 3. A bittersweet comeback. A solid player, yet a touch disappointing, given that initial promise. A respectable career, but never enough for the Hall of Fame. Even in daydreams, he achieved less than his full potential.

A few years back, Dave had designed a card for his actual life — an unusual attempt at a New Year’s Resolution, the statistics based on his daily activities: books read, hours slept, miles hiked, tests graded. By the end of January, he had abandoned the project. First of all, selecting the categories had been overwhelming. Consider the possible options — women kissed, calories eaten, bills paid, lonely nights, dollars earned — not to mention the colossal task of keeping an accurate tally. Recording the results was a giant time suck: you could accomplish your goals, or you could chart them, but you couldn’t do both. Also, no matter the divisions he selected, the results were certain to depress.

11. “Was he any good?” asked Deacon. “He must have been good, to play in the major leagues. Compared to his peers, I mean?”

“He was a power hitter. He could smack that ball a country mile.” Dave could still recall the trivia from his stockpile of Kingman cards, which made easy presents for friends and relatives who thought they were being original. “At one time, he had a record for the longest home run at Wrigley Field.”

“That’s right,” said Randy. “The Sky King.”

“He knocked a pop fly so high, it actually hit the ceiling of the Metrodome — a once-in-a-lifetime ground-rule double.”

“Long arms, like a gorilla.” Randy emphasized the point with his own gangly limbs. “When he made contact, that ball was *gone*.”

“When he made contact.” It was the problem with Kingman. If he connected, kiss that sucker good-bye. But he also knew how to swing and miss. He sometimes led the league in strikeouts.

Deacon wasn’t impressed. He preferred a steady bat, a player who worked the percentages and reached base on a consistent basis. Dave tended to agree.

Not Randy. “No guts, no glory.” When he stepped to the plate, he wanted the entire stadium to pay attention.

“Even if you miss?” asked Dave.

“Even when I miss.”

12. Emily slid the plates onto the table. “I’m adding these to your tab,” she told Randy.

“Along with my many sins.”

Dave glanced at the food with a wary eye. He would eat enough to be polite, but not much more.

“I see you’ve made nice,” said Emily.

“Our new friend is named after a ballplayer,” Deacon said. “Dave Kingman.”

“Never heard of him. I know Peyton Manning, that’s about it.”

“That’s not even the right sport.”

“I wasn’t actually named for him.” Mom had disliked organized sports. In fact, when she learned about the overlap, she was extremely vexed. She even talked about

changing it. Later, that thought disturbed him, the notion of travelling through life with a name that didn't fit you.

13. Randy lifted his sandwich. "To Second Breakfast. And to our new friend, Dave Kingman, who — despite popular opinion — was not *actually* named for his namesake."

"Second Breakfast," Dave repeated.

"A toast with toast," said Deacon.

"With biscuits, you mean," said Emily. "A toast with bacon."

14. "So who *were* you named for?" Emily asked. "A father? An uncle?"

"What is this?" Deacon said. "Twenty Questions?"

"Polite conversation. It's something we do in the South."

"We're not in the South. We're in Appalachia."

"Then call it a customer survey."

"So what do you do in Appalachia?" asked Dave.

Randy formed his right hand into a pistol. He closed an eye and aimed at Dave, who experienced a sense of déjà vu. Randy fired once and blew smoke from the barrel.

"We raise hell."

15. In the end, they decided that Dave had been named for the Israelite ruler: for David, the shepherd who was king.

Randy warned him about chasing married women. Deacon said to avoid sons named Absalom. Emily lamented the double standard for the sexes: how it was socially

Deacon eased back in his chair. “Why the hell would that matter?” he asked.
 “What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

17. The warrior had a prodigious bosom. Bands of iron rimmed her wooden shield and reinforced its center, where a formidable spike dared opponents to risk a charge. She raised a spear above her head, stressing her muscular bicep. Her leather armor was skintight, and a mane of black hair billowed out from her face. In short, she appeared to be a cross between a Norse goddess and a lonely artist’s wet dream.

She straddled the dragon bareback. Her powerful thighs clenched its withers in their vice, and the beast reared, its head pointed to the sky. Flames were erupting from its nostrils. They formed a fiery script — “*Ride the Dragon*” — that arced across the top of the poster. Its whiplash tail became the road itself. The map identified turns on the legendary route: The Pearly Gates, Copperhead Corner, Gravity Cavity, Brake or Bust Bend.

Randy appeared at his shoulder. “What do you think?” He traced the erratic line of Highway 129 with a finger.

“That the surveyors were schizophrenic. Either that, or some joker stole the construction plans and swapped them with an EKG.”

Randy laughed. “Your heart will be racing, that’s for sure. Heart racing, body shaking.” He pointed to the warrior goddess. “What about her?”

Dave shrugged.

“I know. This poster’s a cheap imitation. After you pass through Deal’s Gap, stop at the Tail of the Dragon and check out *their* version.” A low whistle signaled his

awe. “The demon on *their* poster doesn’t ride a dragon: she becomes one. Woman on top, but after her waist, she turns into a monster. Compared to *her*, Amazon here is a Disney Princess.”

18. Half of the souvenir table was devoted to all things cycle. The knick-knacks ranged from key chains to whips, but they all shared a common theme: the road as a dragon, the bikers as knights riding steel horses. Guidebooks described the best routes in the region, and bumper stickers — DRAGON RIDER; HOG WILD; MY OTHER CAR IS A CHOPPER — let middle-class riders slap proof of their wild side on Honda Accords back home.

For some reason — probably the medieval drift in the merchandise — Dave began thinking about the Crusades and soldiers who paused to loot towns, hauling relics and treasures through Europe. The price they had paid was almost as large as Emily’s mark-up. A knight stuck a bumper sticker on his mount. Next to him, a squire’s boon worn atop his chain mail: “My Lord sacked Jerusalem, and all I got was this lousy t-shirt.” Well, a t-shirt and a venereal disease.

19. The rest of the table featured the Smokies. The silkscreens were gaudy and dramatic: a buck in a forest glen, a bear with a sunset in the backdrop, a ridgeline bursting with autumn colors, a doe with her fawn. Trail guides spoke of waterfalls, historic buildings, and wildflower hikes.

One of the volumes appeared out-of-place. An academic tome, it chronicled the history of a local watershed. The author was listed as Ralph Mitchell, but “Deacon” had been added with a marker.

“Our resident celebrity,” said Randy.

“Deacon?” Dave glanced across the room, where the scholar was tackling his next stack of work. It was actually a touch disappointing, watching the process behind the product. Dave wanted a book about mountains to be written on site — deep in the forest, dictated from muses in a babbling stream — not researched near seniors who snored away the morning.

Perhaps writing a book was like hiking an Appalachian mountain. It didn’t take daring risks or technical prowess, nothing but dull determination: the stubborn ability to put one foot in front of the other, again and again and again and again.

You didn’t rope yourself onto some rocky crag and look down on the clouds in triumph. You took a long walk uphill — surrounded by foliage that hid your objective — and you stopped for lunch when you reached the top.

Dave picked up a trail guide and flipped to the table of contents. Randy took the book and replaced it with *Hiking Trails of the Smokies*, a tan volume the size of an index card. It was thick: hundreds of onion-skin pages. “The little brown turd,” Randy said. “Most every trail in the park.” What’s more, since you probably wouldn’t hike *every* trail, if you were stuck in the woods and desperate for TP, you always had a convenient source: simply choose a path that you didn’t intend to hike.

Dave scanned the index for Shuckstack. “What are you looking for?” asked Randy. “Waterfalls? Elk? Chicks?”

“Shuckstack.” Dave hadn’t planned to reveal his destination, but it seemed to slip out of its own volition.

“Appalachian Trail.” Randy flipped the pages. “The section from Fontana Dam to Doe Knob, I think.”

Dave winced at the elevation profile. A modest but steady climb at the start, growing steeper and steeper as the summit neared. Randy pointed to the last, near-vertical stretch. It wasn’t actually *that* ridiculous, he claimed. The slope had been modified in newer editions of the guidebook. “Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “Your thighs will still be burning. You just won’t need climbing rope.”

20. “Samuel Walker,” said Emily. “Isn’t that some kind of beer?”

“You’re thinking of Sam Adams,” Deacon said.

In less than five minutes, they had unraveled most of Dave’s story. Randy had questioned his interest in Shuckstack. It was a decent peak, but nothing like Thunderhead or LeConte — nothing to draw a pilgrim from Ohio, given its inconvenient location.

Dave tried to invent a reason — a fascination with fire towers, curiosity about the name — but nothing sounded right. So he admitted the personal connection. He tried to downplay its significance: a long time ago, he had hiked to the tower with his grandfather. Now, he wanted to see it again.

The plan would have been better, said Randy, if the tower was in North Carolina, the actual Grandfather Mountain. More symbolic. Or King’s Mountain: King’s Mountain for a Kingman.

Wrong side of the family, said Dave. “Grandpa was a Walker. Samuel Walker.”

“Grandpa was a Walker?” Randy gave him a skeptical look. “You really expect me to believe *that*? That your grandfather who loves to hike, his last name happens to be Walker?”

The conversation snagged Deacon’s attention. “I knew a Sam Walker in Maryville. A newspaperman, back when the local papers had honest-to-God writers on their staffs, not interns who troll the web, looking for stories to plagiarize.”

“You know everyone in Maryville,” said Emily. “You’re the most social misanthrope I know.”

Deacon ignored the comment. Sam had helped with the book on the Little River. “He had visited some of the oldest inhabitants in the park, the settlers with lifetime leases.” Most of them passed away before Deacon started to write, and Sam had been gracious enough to loan him the transcripts. “Good man,” said Deacon. “Not that I know him very well.”

For once on the trip, Dave managed to hold his tongue. He didn’t want to justify himself: why he was travelling to Tennessee to hike a mountain, yet skipping an easy detour to see the person who first led him to that summit. The logic involved — the strict timetable, the need to challenge the tower on his own — he doubted this gang would approve.

The moment was dangerous, and Deacon was close to a connection. On one of their hikes, Sam had brought along his grandson: “little squirt, always trying to match us stride for stride.” He paused, watching if Dave would respond.

“How about it?” asked Emily. “Any long-lost roots in Tennessee?” She was excited. One false move, and she’d hit the phone in an instant — calling Grandpa and Mom and half of Blount County to get themselves to The Dragon’s Brew.

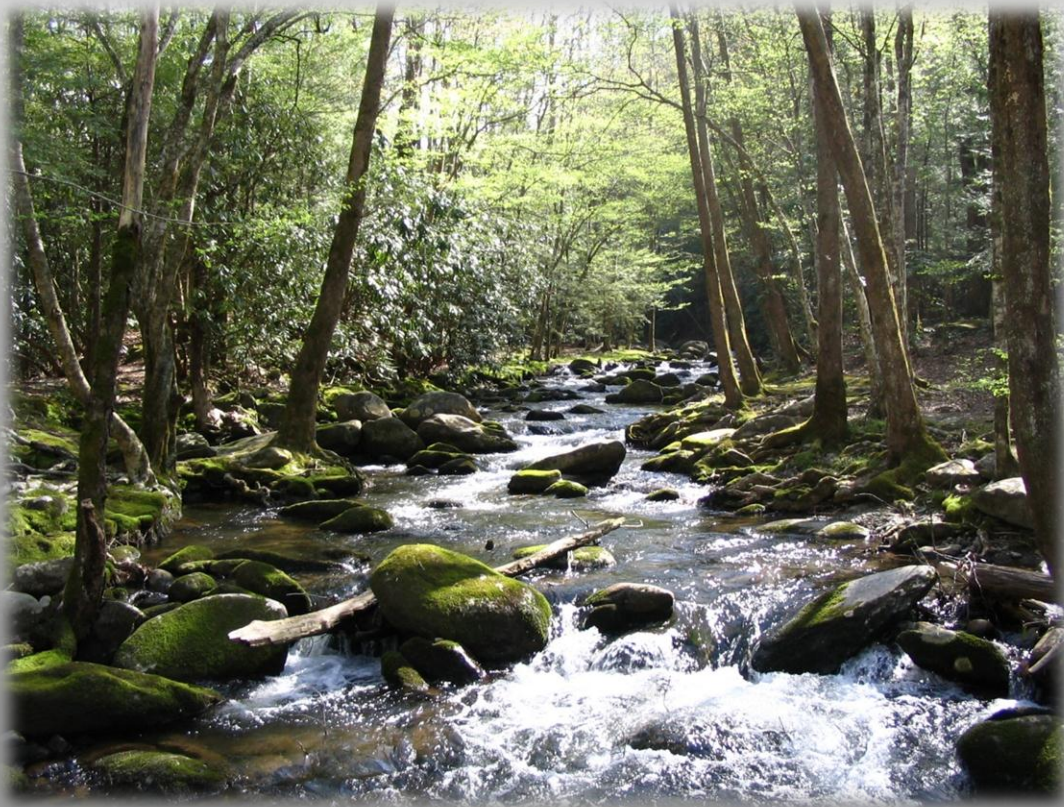
Dave held a poker face. Grandpa was from Hocking County, he said. Back in Ohio. They had visited Shuckstack during school vacations. Both of the statements were true — technically, at least.

Emily was disappointed. “Ah well. That would have been nice, a reunion of old hiking partners. Think of the odds.” The idea tickled her fancy. “It would have been something — a story you’d read in a book, like the prodigal son coming home. The type of thing that was so improbable, you weren’t allowed to make it up.”

The Wellspring of Mountains:

A History of the Little River Watershed

Ralph Mitchell





The Little River draws its strength from the mountains, gathering creeks that drop from the north slope of Thunderhead, Siler's Bald, and Clingman's Dome. It descends past the Sinks, joins forces with Laurel Creek at the Townsend Wye, and exits the Smokies through Tuckaleechee Cove. Its length is modest, only fifty-one miles from its headwaters to the Tennessee River, but abundant with natural beauty and historic landmarks.

The river moves across the land, but time flows past the river. The first inhabitants arrived in the valley as early as 10,000 BC, granting the nearby mountains a significant distinction: the region of our planet with the longest continuous human habitation. Millennia later, around 1000 AD, the Cherokee began hunting in Cades Cove. In the eighteenth century, Scotch-Irish immigrants drifted south, following the valleys of the Alleghenies to a new set of highlands. Each wave of settlers brought change, but the greatest impact came from the Little River Lumber Company, whose logging operations stripped the hillsides at the turn of the century. In 1934, after years of vigorous debate, President Roosevelt dedicated Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

In *The Wellspring of Mountains: A History of the Little River Watershed*, Ralph Mitchell narrates the fascinating history of this region by telling the story of a river. Opening with the geology and geography that define the area, dictating the pace and style of its development, Mitchell describes the earliest residents, the turmoil of recent centuries, and current issues that will shape the river's future. Relying on primary sources whenever possible — letters, photographs, and archeological ruins — Mitchell has composed an intricate portrait of this complex and captivating watershed.

"Mitchell knows more about the Little River than anyone you're likely to meet. At times he's a scientist, waxing eloquent on the geological distinction between the upper and lower watersheds. Then he becomes an economist, describing the importance of the band saw to revolutions in the lumber industry. Throughout this fine history, Mitchell is preacher and prophet, reminding the nation of its natural heritage, its ecological sins, and the possibility — as the second growth throughout the Smokies demonstrates — that it's not too late to change our course."

— William Meyers, President of the Smoky Mountain Heritage Foundation

"The product of countless hours of research, both in the stacks of the library and the hollows of the mountains. Detective story and adventure tale, elegy and celebration, this fascinating book is a labor of love, born of a passion for this region and a desire to preserve its future."

— Betty Donaldson, author of *Tuckaleechee Childhood* and *Cades Cove: Then and Now*

Ralph Mitchell was born in South Knoxville, where he attended Doyle High School. He graduated from Carson-Newman College and received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee. He now teaches at Talassee College, the Horace Kephart Chair in the Department of History.



Catamount Press
Maryville, Tennessee

Advice

“Take your time,” said Emily. “Don’t let anyone rush you.”

Pull to the side for the faster vehicles, Deacon advised. “You don’t want to slow traffic for miles.”

Randy disagreed. “You can’t stop for every bike that rides your tail. You’ll never get to Shuckstack if you do.”

“But stop if the traffic makes you nervous,” Emily said. “Don’t get distracted by the rearview mirror.”

“Forget the mirror,” insisted Randy. Watch the mirrors, and you’ll drive straight off the road. “Crack the window, and listen for bikes as they approach. You’ll hear them before you see them.”

Dave was prepared for a handful of tips, not this avalanche of information. He wanted to talk about the trail, but the conversation was stalled on US 129, a few miles down the road, the stretch of highway known as The Dragon. They quoted its statistics: 318 curves in a 10-mile stretch, winding along finger ridges in a narrow stretch of land between the park boundary and the Little Tennessee. They warned about its dangers: the number of wrecks each week, the fatalities per year.

Deacon and Randy argued about times — the fastest that anyone had ever covered that route. Randy claimed it was under eight minutes, which Deacon

considered impossible. “You’d have to average eighty miles an hour,” he said. “If you took each hairpin at forty, you’d need to accelerate to 120 on the straightaways.”

“That’s precisely what I’m saying. Some of these boys, they ride their crotch rockets at speeds that would blow your mind.”

According to Randy, some bikers had raced it hundreds of times. Thousands, even. They memorized each curve, each dip in the pavement. They checked websites for current conditions. They could follow the road in their sleep.

“Wave and be polite,” said Emily. “Especially to passengers. You know what I love? The sidecars with the senior citizens. Granny riding on the side, raising hell on the mountain roads.”

“Stop at the overlook for Calderwood Dam,” suggested Deacon. “Catch your breath, and collect your nerves.”

Some of their stories were extreme: a biker who lost his grip on a turn, thrown into trees at fifty miles an hour; a deer that stepped out of the woods, straight through the windshield of an Aston-Martin. Randy talked about Eastern Diamondbacks — massive snakes, thicker than your arm, that crossed the pavement in the sun, making one hell of a bump. They talked about broken limbs and road rash, the searing friction of a terminal skid. How the non-leather clothing would melt to a rider’s skin. How the asphalt could tear apart flesh.

The stories had to be exaggerations, Dave thought. Like fairy tales, they were designed to frighten him into paying attention. If so, they had achieved their goal.

Deacon described a trio of Mini-Coopers — Red, White, and Blue — that drove the route as a synchronized unit. “Like the Blue Angels or something.”

Emily talked about legions of riders that thundered past on Memorial Day, veterans of Vietnam and Afghanistan and Iraq. “Wave after wave. Their echo lasted for hours.” One of them died on a wicked curve. He had been a captain in Fallujah and lost several men to an IED. According to local rumors, he didn’t attempt to brake.

Randy described a Swiss playboy, the heir to a banking fortune, who had shipped his Lamborghini Murciélago to the States and was hoping to break the speed records on The Dragon and the Cherochala Skyway. “He came close — that V-12 and its five hundred horses — but a car can’t match a bike’s agility, not on those turns.” The European’s arrogance had pissed off a few locals, and whispers about the attempt had trickled to state troopers. They assembled a roadblock at the end of a straightaway — hoping to confiscate the car, a swank new addition to the fleet.

“Bikers are people too,” said Emily. “Don’t let them intimidate you.” Most were decent, honest, hard-working citizens. They were out to enjoy the day, same as him. “They love their country, the feel of the wind on their face, and the freedom of the open road.”

“God, it’s worse than a beer commercial,” said Deacon.

“What about the rest?” asked Randy. “The minority, with more tattoos than teeth.”

“Assholes,” she said. “But that’s still a low percentage, a much better fraction than the general population.”

The Hia-Wussy

A young woman broke into their huddle. The regulars brightened at her approach. She blew Harold a kiss and punched Randy on the shoulder. Her hiking pants were lightweight and technical. A salmon t-shirt featured a pair of boots and the statement that “Life is Good.”

Emily offered a hug from the side. “Morning, sweetheart. Is your partner-in-crime with you?”

She gestured toward the door. “Nose in a map. He probably doesn’t even know we’ve stopped.” A strand had worked loose from her ponytail. She removed the band and clenched it between her teeth, re-fashioning the style. “Karl’s planning . . . well, he can explain.” Whatever it was, she didn’t sound thrilled at the prospect.

“That bad?”

“You don’t even want to know.” She twirled a chair and sat in it backwards. “He’s been staring at topos for a week, muttering about gradients and gauges.” She touched Deacon on the wrist. “He wants to ask you about a trail.”

“A trail? Not a creek?”

“Nothing’s running. The entire Southeast is skunked.” Bekah introduced herself and shook Dave’s hand. The grip was strong, her arms cut and well-defined.

“Admire those guns,” said Randy.

Dave blushed, and Bekah smacked Randy a second time. “They’ll punch out of that hole at Double Suck, a hell of a lot more than yours can boast.”

“Low blow,” said Randy. “Misleading. Another second or two, I could have worked free.”

“That’s right — if not for those meddling clarinets.” A raft filled with college students, she explained. Members of The Pride of the Southland, the marching band at Tennessee.

The Ocoee River had big waves and strong rapids. It was a popular route for commercial outfitters, just a few miles downstream of the whitewater venue for the 1996 Olympics. Randy’s skills as a paddler were questionable, but he talked his way onto their kayaking trip. As he objected to this description, Bekah’s hand clamped on his mouth and stifled the comment. He had been caught in the hydraulic at Double Suck — exhausted but stubborn, refusing to bail — when a raft slammed his kayak from behind. The stern pinned, and the bow shot skyward. Randy’s boat cartwheeled in reverse.

“They weren’t paying attention,” he said. “They didn’t wait for the rapid to clear.”

“Those poor girls, they didn’t know an eddy from a wave train,” said Bekah. “Once that current grabbed them, they didn’t have a choice.”

“They had a guide. He should have been scouting the line.”

“Probably thought you were pissing around — surfing and playing in the hole.”

Was everyone okay? asked Dave.

“Randy’s paddle knocked one of the girls from the boat. The hole took care of the rest. Bus stop: everybody off the raft.” A few bruises, but they were fine, more terrified than anything. Bekah was nonchalant, as if swimming a Class IV rapid was no big deal. She emphasized the humor: the panicked woodwinds bobbing in the current,

facing downstream and raising their legs to avoid a foot entrapment — an impromptu, aquatic parade. They were all wearing PFDs, and the river was crammed with experienced boaters. “Safety ropes hit the water as soon as they surfaced, like some sort of carnival game — hit the band geek with the throw line.”

“It was *too* crowded,” said Randy. “And none of those lines came *my* way.”

“We thought you were trying to roll, carping for air like that. We didn’t know that you’d already popped the skirt.” Randy tried to explain, but she cut him off. “You *know* how to roll, don’t you? Because you shouldn’t go begging to run the Ocoee, not without a solid Eskimo.”

“I’ve got a roll.”

“A flatwater roll,” she told Dave. He nodded at the derisive tone, pretending to understand, and she finished the story with vigor. The guide had been furious, convinced that Randy was showboating, taunting the oncoming rafts. He chased the kayak for several minutes. “Worst case of river rage I’ve seen in months. Shocked his passengers worse than their swim — probably got his ass fired.” Randy found eddies to peel out and screened himself behind boulders, so intent on escape that he missed their take-out by half a mile.

Randy attempted to change the topic. He complained about the horde of boaters that choked the Ocoee in summer months. What happened to the spirit of paddling? he asked. A handful of kayaks or rafts in a lonely canyon, not this conveyor belt of shuttle busses. Like it’s a ride at a water park, not a scenic river.

“What do you propose?” asked Bekah. “Limit the access, like the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, with a ten-year wait for a permit?” They argued about

solitude. She championed public awareness, teaching a love of rivers to the next generation.

“What’s so great about education?” he countered. “So the public overlooks a pristine stream, some gem like Little Clear Creek?”

“Fine and lovely, until the TVA drops a micro-generator on some pristine stream that nobody knows or cares about — no one but paddlers.” She dismissed his point with a wave. “Besides, what do you know about Little Clear Creek? You read the trip report on Karl’s blog. Now you act like you’ve been there.”

Wasn’t that part of the problem? asked Deacon. They posted their photos online, bragging about epic trips down virgin watersheds, and the crowds followed their tracks. “The next thing you know, the government’s charging admission.”

The conversation fell from one topic to the next, a stream dropping off the Plateau. They argued about public and private lands, about gated communities that owned entire mountains.

Emily slipped next to Dave. “Look at Randy,” she said, “talking like he’s a paddler.”

“I’ve run my fair share of rivers,” he claimed.

“A fair share?” challenged Bekah.

“The Ocoee. The Hiawassee. The Nantahala.”

The syllable count was striking, yet she wasn’t impressed. “The Hia-wussy.”

“The Tellico.”

“The Tellico? I watched you run the Tellico.” She turned to Dave. “Launched his boat, said a prayer, and held on for dear life.”

“I only swam twice.”

“You survived the trip,” Bekah said. “That doesn’t make you a paddler.”

Randy Volunteers

“What do you know about Panther Creek?” Karl pushed Deacon’s stacks to one side, clearing space for a map of the Smoky Mountains.

“Do you mind?” Deacon asked. “Some of us are trying to work.”

“In this crowd? I doubt it.” Karl’s t-shirt was black, his hiking shorts grey. He leaned across the table. “Panther Creek.”

Deacon sighed, bent to the young man’s resolve. “You won’t find any panthers. Not anymore, at least.” He touched the center of the park. “Panther Creek Trail. Steep but short. Two, maybe 2½ miles from the Middle Prong to Jakes Gap.”

“Not *that* Panther Creek.” Karl pointed to a less developed section. “Down here.” Dave tried to glimpse Shuckstack on the map.

Two streams with the same name? said Emily. Wasn’t that unusual?

Not really, said Deacon. The names got established early, long before the maps. Chances were, the people who named each creek didn’t know about the others. There were Panther Creeks in Georgia and North Carolina as well.

“Damn plagiarists,” said Randy.

“Trust me,” said Deacon. “If you encountered a mountain lion in the backcountry, it seemed plenty original to you.”

They examined the stream. Karl emphasized its length: greater than Twentymile, than Lynn Camp Prong.

It's got legs, agreed Deacon, but look at the narrow ravine. Insignificant feeders, a modest watershed. "You might be able to kayak this last mile." He slid his finger over the contours. "Not much else, even at flood stage." Besides, he added, the streambed was probably choked with wood, especially at the higher elevations.

"I'm not scouting a run."

A snort exposed Bekah's opinion. "So you've said."

"You still don't believe me?"

"Of course not." She described his plan to the others. Karl intended to bushwhack the entire length of Panther Creek, from its headwaters on Gregory Bald to its juncture with Abrams Creek.

"Why in God's name would you want to do that?" asked Emily.

It's only ten miles, he said.

"For a hawk," said Deacon. "Twice as long, if you're following that winding creek."

"Not *twice* as long."

"Say fifteen," said Bekah. "Fifteen miles of loose scree, copperhead dens, rhododendron hells and yellowjacket nests."

"Nothing we haven't seen before."

But he would be out in the backcountry, miles from a marked trail. What if he snapped his ankle? "It's not like Thunderhead Prong, where the anglers show up like clockwork."

Accidents could happen anywhere, thought Dave, including the places you ought to be safe. How many times had Grandpa hiked the Middle Prong?

“At least be honest with yourself,” said Bekah. “You’re scouting the creek, hoping to bag a first descent that Alex hasn’t claimed. If you insist on dragging yourself through this misery — because make no mistake, it’s going to be miserable — then for God’s sake, try to admit why.”

Dave sensed her deeper concern, the fear for her boyfriend’s safety, and squirmed at this couple’s debate in such a public forum. No one else seemed to mind. Emily moderated the argument from the espresso machine. Which might be the key. Checked by older and wiser souls, the couple could spar in safety. They were kept from statements they’d later regret — boxing with gloves and adhering to rules, not fighting a bare-knuckled cage match.

Karl insisted that Panther Creek was safe. It wasn’t *completely* isolated. Fishermen used Parson Branch Road to access the headwaters, drawn to the springs that regulated its temperature. Down at its mouth, hikers searched for the overgrown path to an old slate quarry, and paddlers like Alex had scouted and run those final miles. Only the middle section was truly remote.

Deacon confirmed this information. He knew about an unmaintained trail and a derelict rail car, somewhere along those final miles.

“This one?” Karl unfolded two sheets of paper. One of them was crowded with photos, the other with maps. He pointed to a rusting machine, then a series of rapids.

“Logjam. Downtime. Back Seat Driver.” From Raymer’s website, he told Bekah.

“What does Alex say?”

“Narrow stream. Mostly Class III action. A few Class IVs.”

She examined the pictures. “Which means there’s a Class V drop you’re not telling me about.”

“Nothing too gnarly, as long as you scout the line and know how to boof.”

One of the photographs was older than the rest, a black and white print that had started to fade. A party was perched on a boulder, the women all dressed in skirts and blouses. Grandpa had talked about settlers like them. They trekked the mountains in high-button shoes.

“Garner Falls, a mile upstream from Abrams.” Karl pointed to a color shot of a similar rock. The water level was higher, and a rapid was visible to the right. “Alex calls it Back Seat Driver.”

“How old is that picture?” asked Dave.

Karl shrugged. Turn of the century, said Deacon, sometime before the TVA flooded the valley. He listed the names of creeks, evidence of the long-abandoned settlements: Blacksmith Branch, Shop Creek, Tarkiln Branch.

Randy pointed to a stream that crashed down a boulder garden. “What’s that?”

“Panther Creek Falls. It’s a twenty-footer that nobody visits, since it’s hard as hell to reach.”

Deacon was skeptical. “Every time you describe a new stream, you mention this mysterious, twenty-foot waterfall that no one has ever run.” He looked at Dave. “It’s the perfect height for a tale: large enough to grab your attention, but not unbelievable.”

Karl tapped the photo. “Visual confirmation.”

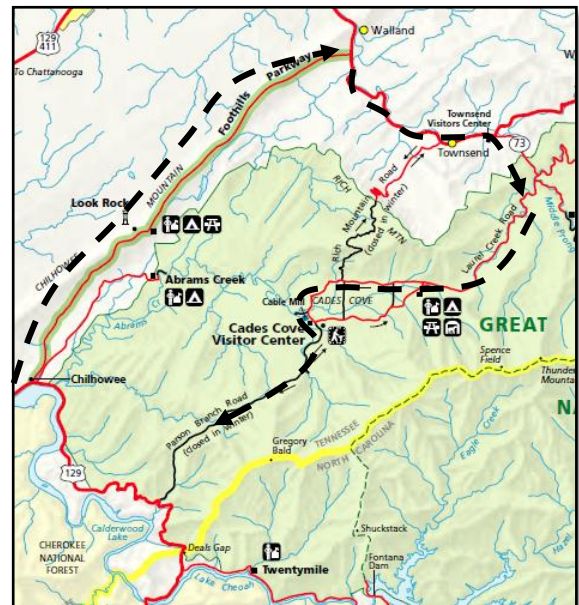
“Wouldn’t you break your hull on those rocks?” asked Bekah.

“No, there’s a line—” Karl paused, checking himself, but her grin was already a mile wide. Even Dave saw him blunder into the trap.

“A line? I thought you weren’t scouting a run.”

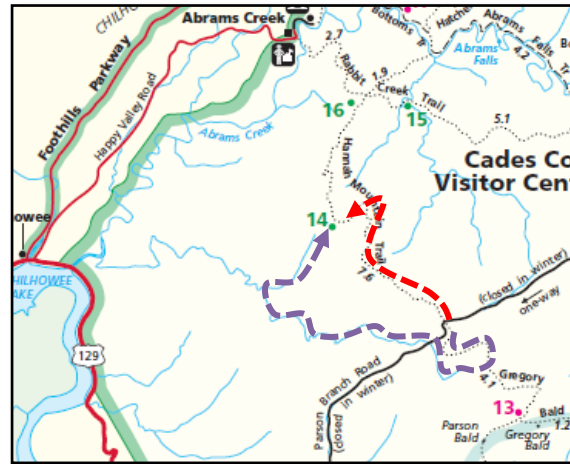
Her objection had little to do with the rapids. If Karl intended to break his neck, he could do it like a rational human being. Her problem involved his numbskull scheme — in particular, the way that he’d suckered her into the plan.

1. Karl had retained an ounce of sense. He knew that he couldn’t bushwhack the entire creek in a single day, especially with such a late start. Because Parson Branch Road was one-way only, they needed to circle the park and enter through Cades Cove. The loop would be crowded, even on a weekday. The leaves were starting to turn, and tourists were out in force.

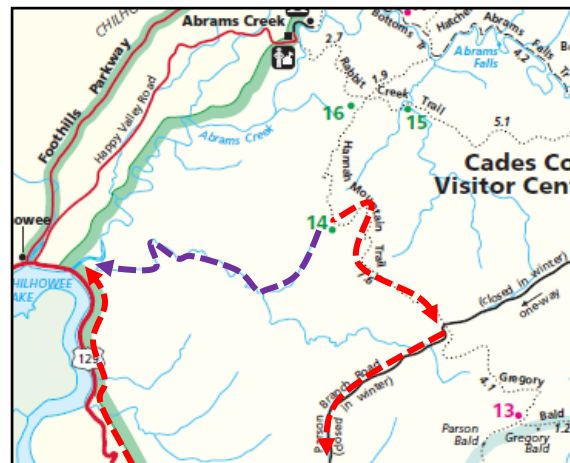


2. Given the thick undergrowth, travelling with a pack would be challenging. At the same time, it was boar territory, and he didn’t relish sleeping in the open. The night was supposed to get cold, close to freezing at the higher elevations. For some unknown reason, Bekah had agreed to hike a parallel course on the Hannah Mountain Trail. She would carry a tent, sleeping bags, and enough food for them both. At Flint Gap, she would pitch their tent and relax at Campsite 14. Karl would ascend the Gregory Ridge

Trail, almost to Panther Gap, and cut into the backcountry to find the creek's source. He would follow the stream down the western slope of Gregory Bald, re-cross Parson Branch Road, and continue until the creek's junction with Bear Den Branch. Then ascend the ravine and join Bekah for the night. She'd feed him, dump iodine on his cuts, and remove the inevitable ticks.



3. The next morning, Karl would re-trace his steps and continue downstream to Abrams Creek. Bekah would pack up camp, return to the car, and meet Karl when he emerged from the woods. Thus he avoided a second problem: getting someone — Bekah, most likely — to shuttle him back to retrieve a car.



Deacon ridiculed the plan. It was convoluted, inconvenient, and pointless — the trifecta of stupidity.

What foolish bet had Bekah lost? Emily wanted to know. Whatever it was, the payment exceeded the wager.

Randy was actually supportive, a fan of impossible schemes. “Anything Quioxtic.” He drew his arm around Dave. “Like the quest of our newfound friend.” His only objection was the ill-conceived design. They’d waste hours on the drive through Cades Cove, and if Karl pursued his search for the springs, he wouldn’t re-cross the road until late in the afternoon. Autumn shadows would be filling the ravine: he’d spend half the night looking for Bear Den Branch. Better to abandon that initial step and focus on the wild, untamed section.

Dave found himself drifting, staring out windows and looking for birds. He was fond of maps, but this . . . well, *this* was ludicrous. Was this how his lectures sounded to students who weren’t interested in mathematics? He had newfound compassion for their weary eyes.

Karl agreed to the suggestion, but Randy hadn’t finished. In that case, why not swap two hours in the car for two hours on the trail?

How’s that? Bekah asked.

Randy tapped Parson Branch Road. “A shortcut.”

Karl threw up his hands in disgust. “*That’s* your grand idea? Driving the wrong way on a one-lane gravel road with sharp corners, no shoulders, and RVs?”

Randy smacked Karl on the head. “Doofus. I’m not an idiot. You’ll be hiking the road, not driving it. Bekah’s heading to the Abrams Creek Ranger Station, cutting her drive down to fifteen minutes.” She let out a cheer. “She’ll hike” — he counted the mileage — “about 5½ miles to the campsite.” He showed her the trails: a mile longer, a brief climb at the start, but better than Cades Cove traffic.

“What about me?” asked Karl.

“It wasn’t the scratch. That washed-out mule track tore up my suspension.”

“Don’t care. If you’re not offering to drive me, you’re wasting our time.” Karl turned to Bekah. “He’s dicking around with us. Let’s stick to the plan and get moving.”

“Wait a second,” Randy said. “I won’t drive you to Parson Branch. But David will.”

To Be Continued . . .

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Photographs

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The photographs of sights along the Miami River Valley on pages 327, 328, and 330 were provided by Lawrence Forsythe.

Maps

The 2007-2009 Ohio Official Transportation Map — the source for maps and graphics on pages 44, 147, 148, 160, 161, 181, 184, 207, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 326, 339, and 345 — comes from the Ohio Department of Transportation (www.dot.state.oh.us/maps).

The 2010 Official Highway Map of Kentucky — the source for maps on pages 317, 365, 382, 386, and 495 — comes from the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (www.planning.kytc.ky.gov/maps.asp).

The 2010 Official Transportation Map of Tennessee — the source for the maps on pages 44, 48, 52, 395, 499, 500, 504, and 506 — comes from the Tennessee Department of Transportation (www.tdot.state.tn.us/maps).

The Park Map of Great Smoky Mountains National Park — the source for maps on pages 44, 49, 506, and 543 — comes from the U.S. National Park Service (www.nps.gov/grsm).

The Trail Map of Great Smoky Mountains National Park — the source for maps on pages 50, 544, and 546 — comes from the U.S. National Park Service (www.nps.gov/grsm).

APPENDIX

Family Histories: Samuel & Lily, Part I

Dave's Grandpa (Samuel Walker) –

Who, as a young man hiking the ravines of the Hockhocking valley, never believed he would live outside southeast Ohio. But Samuel, born amid the low hills and slow-moving rivers near Logan, was doomed to find love in Tennessee, first in the creeks and ridges of the Appalachian Mountains, which he traced during training marches with the 13th Airborne Division — the Eagle's Claw, Thunder from Heaven — and later in the person of Lily, his wife, who he knew in the imagination long before meeting her in the flesh.

When he left for the war, he had every intention of returning to Cantwell Cliffs and Old Man's Cave with his sweetheart, Evelyn, to finish the proposal he never had nerve to begin. During his tour of Europe, whether lost in the Ardennes or clinging to a bridgehead on the Rhine, he would envision the campaign sweeping past Berlin, turning back to England and New York, then on toward Conkle's Hollow and the bonfires of home. Victory arrived, the pincer movement of two unstoppable armies crushing the Reich, a victory stemming from overwhelming force but predicated on the resolve of the common Grunt, the ability of men like Samuel to suffer and endure more than they had believed possible.

So when his unit commander began to talk of the Pacific theater, Samuel refused to accept that anything else could be asked — that would be too much, because he'd fought his share, lost his share, and stockpiled nightmares for a lifetime. The atomic blasts sated the war's demand for sacrifice, but Samuel never knew the moment the clouds lifted and cleared. By then he'd slipped into a haze of transport ships and distant, cheering crowds, a bed in the psychiatric ward of an Army hospital in Oklahoma City, where he woke one April morning in 1946, a thousand miles from home, to discover the country well ahead of him in its recovery. A half year was missing from his life that he never quite remembered, at least that he'd admit. Next to his bed was a note from his mother, already opened — by him or a nurse, he never recalled. It told him that Evelyn had died of influenza.

As his night terrors lessened, Samuel began to relive those drills in the southern mountains, the long treks under a clear, brilliant sky, the fall days that stayed pleasant, long after the first frost north of the Ohio River. And he longed to walk those paths again, listening for warbler and nuthatch rather than incoming shells — eyes open for copperheads, not concealed snipers. He remembered one fine day in particular, when he had slipped away on a day pass and hitched a three hour ride with a buddy to some mountain town in the North Carolina foothills, a nameless destination that he later determined must have been Bryson City. It was a trip without purpose, no motivation other than elemental needs: to race fast and hard, to press forward until they ran out of time, longing for a sight memorable enough to recall during the months, coming soon, when all heaven and earth would conspire to make them forget.

They dropped the overheated car at a mechanic's shop and grabbed a sandwich, so his mouth was full as she passed in front of the diner window. He missed her face, saw only the cascade of golden brown hair on a soft purple dress, and forever after the taste of a club sandwich would trigger the smell of lilacs.

"Now that's a wildflower if I ever saw one," he said. "That's something worth fighting a war over."

"Chase her down," his buddy said. "Ask her name."

"I don't need to know her name. A name could only detract."

"How are you going to face the Krauts if you can't even face a woman?"

"I'll know what to do when I need to do it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You tell me." Samuel returned to his sandwich.

His mother's letters grew more and more grim. His brothers survived the war, though Jason had walked with a limp since Anzio. His cousin Rebecca was healthy, as was her daughter, but her husband had died in a B-24 near the Solomon Islands. Her brother had enlisted earlier than the others. When he disappeared in the fall of Manila, they had grieved his loss, none harder than Samuel, who had hunted with his cousin on November mornings, their bodies steaming in cold Ohio fields as they tracked wild turkeys with their sights. But Martin was alive, they now learned, having escaped into the Philippine jungles and fought among the guerilla resistance until MacArthur returned. Martin refused to describe his adventures, sitting on the porch and staring into the fields behind their house. Samuel understood. The time to talk would come, but not soon.

Samuel returned to Tennessee after his discharge, studying journalism at the university in Knoxville and hiking the trails of the Smokies in his spare time, driving on occasion across Newfound Gap and into Bryson City, but never recovering the memory he chased. A few years passed, and his love for the mountains deepened, despite the contrary voices that claimed he'd always be an outsider by birth, that a Yankee could never grasp the Appalachian landscape. He might learn its contours and ecology, but he could never touch its soul. He never countered — as he could have — that Southeast Ohio was more Appalachian in spirit than Midwest, because he bristled at the very notion that a man had to be born in a place to understand it. No, he answered, sometimes you're born in your homeland, and sometimes you spend a lifetime hunting for it. Like the woman you marry, he'd add. Sometimes you grow up next to her, and sometimes you have to cross a mountain range and an ocean and back again (through a mental ward in Oklahoma, he'd think but never say) until you reach her doorstep. But you're not married, they'd say. After all that, you still haven't found her. But I will, he'd answer. I've discovered the land I love. The woman I love cannot be far away.

Then one day, passing through Maryville on his way to the mountains, he stopped downtown for lunch, another club sandwich that smelled of lilacs, and thought about that afternoon seven years earlier, and soon he was no longer remembering the scene but re-living it, as the girl he had once seen and then lost was walking down the opposite side of the street, and this time the sandwich was left behind, because he was running after her, and she turning as he called, "Excuse me, Miss. Have you ever been to Bryson City?"

Dave's Grandma (Lily MacAllen) –

Who answered No, that she'd never been to Bryson City, and continued to answer No for six months as Samuel insisted that she was the girl in his dreams. She had lived in the Tennessee River valley north of Dayton, on a farm now flooded beneath the handiwork of the TVA, and had moved to Maryville to teach second grade in the Blount County schools. So she suffered Samuel's postulations about the Tennessee landscape, though she knew that one's home was something to be lost, not found, with each rainbow in the sky a bitter sign, a reminder that God, in his love and mercy, would never again destroy the earth by flood, since man's lust for power — the miles and miles of high-voltage wires that marched away from the turbines and dams — could finish the job on its own. But she hid this knowledge deep. She continued to deny that she'd been to Bryson City, although she began to wish that she'd hailed from a mountain town, not the submerged valley she once considered home.

And she continued to answer No until he decided, finally, to settle the deal and coerce her into his automobile and drive her the three hours into North Carolina, intent on jogging her recollection once and for all. They walked all over that town and along the trails that surrounded it until she confirmed, though he still denied her denial, that she couldn't possibly be the woman of his dreams. They ran out of daylight, and because the spinster who rented Lily a room had already glared at Samuel for planning to take her out of Tennessee — as if the state line represented a boundary between questionable morality and outright sin — he proposed a solution: that they stay the night, honeymoon in the mountains and spend the rest of their lives recovering her memory. And Lily answered Yes.

To Samuel—

Who found a semblance of peace, and his nightmares lessened, nearly a decade after the night he'd spent in hell — running a guide rope across the Rhine and listening helplessly with the crew of the lead raft as the boats in their wake were upturned, flipped by the current, and he could not see the other members of the company, though he could hear their cries, the screams of men swept into eternal night. But now, with Lily sleeping beside him, their shouts began to fade and life was good, with a wife he loved and a respectable job at the local paper, where his diligence had impressed the editors who'd been skeptical of this Yankee's ability to cover both the dark hollows of Blount County and the restless streets of Knoxville. He'd continued to hike, and he started to contribute articles about his time in the forest to regional magazines. The two of them moved into a small house near Maryville College, and as they worked in the garden and yard, he'd watch her move within her sundress and dream about ways to impress her, to make her life as happy as she deserved.

But Lily—

Who loved her husband, truly, could not pour out her spirit the way he invited. Because she mourned, wept for her lost home as she worked the tiny plot of land that made Samuel so happy but only reminded her of the acres buried beneath the inland sea, darkened forever and crossed by barges and fishing boats, unaware that they trespassed on a young girl's playground. Though she tried to believe that her new house could be her home as well, she found the deception impossible. She could never release her devotion to the former, and no woman can serve two masters: the heart may be easily

swayed, but the body's loyalty to a physical place, her fealty to that one swath of earth she cherishes above all else, can only be given once. And she loved her husband because he could never know this, that she had withheld herself from him as she tithed the firstfruits of her love to the ruined land.

For a year she worked in their garden, noticing more and more girls among the Maryville College students and wondering if she, too, might return as a scholar. New possibilities startled her, who had always considered herself a farmer in a schoolteacher's guise. She could study writing, telling of the place she'd lost . . . or politics, to ensure the rights of the vulnerable — the men and women betrothed to a parcel of land . . . or Engineering, even, she mused one hot summer afternoon, to learn ways to dynamite that concrete abomination to hell, blasting away the desecration damning the flow of a holy river. But she never became that renegade demolitions expert she so briefly envisioned, because that evening, as she lay in bed, she sensed that her body had somehow changed, and within a month their physician had confirmed the pregnancy.

Samuel—

Who was delighted at the news of the coming birth, for he had always regretted the distance between him and his Ohio kin, but could now found a new, Southern branch of the Walker family tree. After a long hike along the slopes of Gregory Bald, he returned home and announced that — if the child was a girl — she would be named Laurel.

Lily—

Whose family tree had died almost a decade earlier, as one brother sought death in the rafters of their condemned barn and the other secured it on the beaches of Normandy, where men proved the sacrifice they would make to possess a sliver of sand and rock. After scanning the two centuries of names recorded in the MacAllen family Bible, she informed her husband that Laurel would be acceptable for a daughter, but that if the child was a son, he would be named Fear.