REVERANS: THE STORY OF EVANS GEORGE
WRITTEN BY MEGAN CULLIP

by

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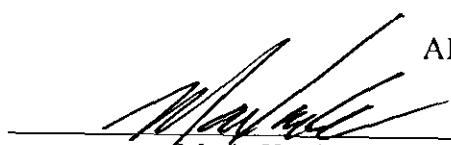
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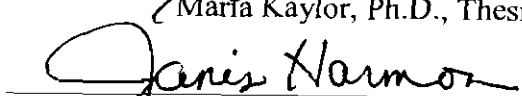


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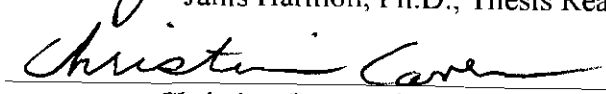
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Background, Purpose, and Plan

Literature that Illuminates without Destroying

When I first decided to write a manuscript for a young adult novel that catered to junior high and high school students, paricularily students labeled as "high risk," I read all the young adult literature I could find. However, this young adult literature could not be just any young adult literature. I could not dig out my old R.L. Stein *Goosebumps* books that let me choose my own ending and I could not rely on classics like *Where the Red Fern Grows* or *Fahrenheit 541*. In order to accomplish my goal of promoting engagement in literature for readers who are labeled "high risk," I had to focus on Young Adult novels that had the same aim. I grabbed two off the shelves in a ninth grade Language Arts classroom titled *When a Hero Dies* and *Zee's Way*. I chose them strictly from the pictures on their covers; they seemed to be targeting distinctly different types of students. On the cover of Anne Schraff's *When a Hero Die,* is a young African American teen dressed in lace-up sneakers sitting on a cinder block on the corner of an urban street setting. The cover of *Zee's Way* depicts a cropped torso of a young man wearing a plain black t-shirt splattered in Jackson Pollack type way with paint. The type on the cover of *Zee's Way* had a more modern and MySpace appeal, whereas Anne Schraff's book had a quintessential "this is a boring book" look. To my surprise, both texts were quite un-engaging.

It was not just the diction used throughout the stories and the predictable plot twists that bothered me. It was the seemingly typified characters in these books that were directed toward "high risk" students. There were a few commonalities between the texts:
The character was from a single-parent household, was an ethnic minority i.e., black or Hispanic, hated authority, disliked school, and was from a working class home. In Kristin Butcher's story, the protagonist Zee uses words like "chill, super-ticked," and "stuff" and he fills his days with

"skateboarding," going to "the arcade," or "loitering" at the nearest "fast-food joint" (Butcher, 2004, p. 7-11). In other words, our hero is steeped in slackerism.

I was not impressed with the "instructional tools" found in the classroom. These "tools" did not seem to help the situation, and instead I found them to be more of a hindrance.

I proposed in the beginning stages of my project to write a young adult novel like the books on the shelves of Special Education classrooms and in the libraries of Title 1 schools (schools where the majority of the student population is on the "free or reduced lunch program"). My hope was to produce a "classroom tool" that could help the situation of these students, if for nothing more than identifying with their situation and perhaps providing a message of hope, of a way out. I thought, "What if my own manuscript could combine that same simple compassion with a strong ambition to produce excellent literature? How many kids in the classroom could be 'saved' from destructive lifestyles then?" and I thought, "Is it possible to write a young adult novel that engages students from the dog-eat-dog street culture while encouraging healthier decisions?"

What Would That Book Look Like? : A Book that Read Like TV

Novels for adolescents have to be fast-paced and very visual in nature. Marshal McLuhan philosiphied over our current state of communication many years ago when he distinguished "hot" mediums from "cool" mediums. A "hot" medium is one that conveys one single message very loudly and clearly. For example, a radio only conveys one message to the viewer's ear. In contrast, television is a "cool" medium that conveys a number of varying messages at the same time (Mcluhan, p. 36). The youth of today's world are constantly immersed more in "cool" mediums than they are in "hot" mediums. Young people are very equipped at gathering information through interactive mediums like television and the Internet and are increasingly

aggravated with “hot” mediums like lectures and printed books. Because of this, a traditional book will need to be revamped to meet the needs of young culture. My project would have to contain high levels of “interconnectivity” and would have to draw relationships between seemingly unconnected sources, just like our “global village” does today with mediums like the Internet. McLuhan produced a book that reflected his thoughts on how to save the “hot” mediums of print, in his book *The Medium is the Massage* Mcluhan blew up and bolded some print, dropped in pictures, and laid out the words in a different fashion than a traditional book. More recently, Johnathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,* a compelling work about the grieving process of 9-year old Oskar Schell, whose father dies in the 9/11 terroist attackes, splices images together with a format that includes some blank pages, pages with one sentence, and pages with color. This type of consideration when putting together the format of my manuscript, I figured, might help in its success of reaching young people and drawing them into the story so that they can focus on the broader themes of the literature itself.

Aside from the steam-engine paced presentation and the specifics of visually appealing format, the book will need to have very specific qualities to appeal to adolescents (Donelson and Nilsen pgs. 28-38).

Like Holden Caulfield showed us, stories for young people are more engaging when told by young people. Characters will be seen as less condescending if they are speaking to persons of the same age. Furthermore like in Paul Fleischman’s book *Whirligig*, the hero Brent Bishop takes off on a cross-country trip all alone, without his parents. As adolescents make the journey from dependency to independency they want to read about characters free of parents and authority.

The question "why am I here?" has to be addressed within the body of the story. The best young adult fictions, even ones of old like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where Huck travels down the river making friends with a freed slave, have deeper stories of social justice or overarching life purposes.

Finally, as one 15 year-old girl lamented, "Why are teens said to be so interested in blood and sex," as she listed Anne Rice as one of her favorite authors. Teenagers have to be portrayed fairly and realistically, unlike Zee in *Zee's Way*; heroes of YA novels can resist slackerism and can use words with more than one syllable. As seen in Jason Riteman's popular film of 2008 *Juno*, which depicts a teenage girl struggling with her pregnancy and the issue of adoption, teenagers can talk and act like well-adjusted adults more than some YA literature likes to attend to. The world is just more complex than monosyllables and I yearned to reflect that for teenagers.

That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to offer a young adult manuscript written with real kids in mind. I wanted to write accessibly even for readers who struggle, while at the same time providing high levels of humor and satire for more mature readers. I wanted to provide a story that broke the formula but that did not shy away from legitimate adolescent issues. At the start of this project, I asked myself, "Can I engage "blood and sex" in a way that offers something new to the field?"

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"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—
the great locust and the young locust,
the other locusts and the locust swarm”
~ Joel 2:25

Reverans

The story of Evans George written by Megan Cullip

Part One

(2 years old- college graduation)

One

We all blow up in my house. Mike gets the first whipping, and I try to shut my eyes so hard I think it might push my eyeballs back into my brain, but maybe if I'm asleep Mike will be the end of it tonight. My muscles tense up and do that weird jerk thing, I'm like half shivering but it's not cold. My eyelid trick bombs and I'm ripped out of the sheets. The belt whips through the air; whistle, snap, Indian burn on the skin, and done. I fling back onto the mattress, all real fast before the door shuts, and then I'm back trying to fall asleep. I feel something like battery acid pump through my veins and I think my heart might pound so hard that it's gonna' pop my rib cage. No matter how hard I try, I can't find a way to breathe; the air doesn't make it to my lungs. Later, this feeling, this lack of breath will be known to me as a "gagger," but now it just blows. And it scares me.

While my body is still a little raw they call us out in the living room. We have these puffy eyes and our hair is matted and sweaty. There's this yelling going on and again I try to force my eyelids closed, this time tears come rolling down all over my face, and the yells between mom and dad escalate. Then I start sucking up the air too fast again, with "stop its" coming out of me, I didn't mean to say it but it happened anyway. That was the last night that dad stayed at our house.

In the church we call alcoholism “generational sin.” In AA we call it “hereditary.” It sucks either way you put it. My dad was a drinker, my mom blew up sometimes, and I am a mixture of them both.

But at the same time, looking in the mirror, I have got it. My teachers keep telling my mom that it is so hard to get and stay angry with me. It sucks to be so liked by your teachers, and if I wasn’t so undeniably cool I think it would really get on my nerves too. But come on, tell me that I can get away with anything by smiling, and what do you expect me to do with it?

I milked it, like any self-respecting charmer would. Sometimes my charm meant bad things for others involved; others like Charlie, for instance.

Charlie needed to be put down, but maybe not because of a lie. He’s this dog that ate all the other neighborhood dogs, I think. It’s a known fact. So what was I supposed to do? It was either end up in Mexico, get whipped, or Charlie dies. We chose Charlie.

We had this garage sale set up. We had moved our stuff to the driveway and all of these old ladies and trash hunters loaded their pick up truck beds with all of our worthless crap. All of us kids were hooking our arms onto the tail end of the trucks, riding them as they pulled out of the driveway. It’s

Eagle Pass, Texas and you're in grade school, riding the tail ends of pick up trucks qualify as a *great* time.

"I can go further," I said. "Right" Mike and Elizabeth responded in the cadence of unbelief that becomes commonplace among sibling rivalries. "I swear," I hooked my bare arms onto the back of the bed of the pick up truck, Gracia Ann our 200 pound next door neighbor hooked on next to me. The truck revved and pulled out slowly, and I rode it with my feet barely lifting off the ground. It started picking up speed, the gravel below us blurred into just a mess of gray and then Gracia wimped out. She let go in just enough time to bounce her butt on the asphalt back home. "Evans get off! Get off man, you're going to Mexico," Mike yelled after me. Shit, I didn't even think about that. I looked back at Gracia Ann, that hurt I bet, but still I'm so not going to Mexico. I hesitated long enough for the truck to gain speed and then I lept off, my calves and side skidded against the pavement. The blood started running and pieces of gravel were smeared with it. One thing I knew, I was not gonna' get whipped for this. But, I also knew that no matter how hard I cried and how much blood ran all over my body, mom was going to be pissed if she knew the real story. "Say Charlie did it," Mike blurted out in an effort to I think, A. avoid the belt himself (as it was natural to go through all three kids before the wrath subsided) and B. like I stated before, Charlie needed to be put

down. “Yea, you were wearing your boots, so you couldn’t run away and Charlie got you,” Mike had that glimmer in his eye the total look of “I just had a *great* idea.” We ran back home and “explained” what had happened. Mom got on the phone and ripped the next-door neighbors apart, Charlie died within the next 24 hours. It took at least 24 *years* for us to confess that it was really the Mexican pick up incident and not Charlie that left my skin like raw meat. Mom was still pissed.

~

That scar from Charlie moves around as my body stretches and elongates. I am now twelve. I am waiting for my balls to drop, rubbing my hands over the inconsistent fuzz on my face, and I can still move my index finger over the scar to remind me of the day that someone else’s dog got sacrificed for the cause of my own charming bullshit. The causalities of this curious gift of mine just keep piling up.

I didn’t hate Jimmy Gonzales, peer and causality; so much as he was so annoying. Everyone has had one of these people in their grade; I call them the “mono-achievers.” They aren’t good at much of anything except they are brilliant at just one thing, and they deliver their whole body up to this one thing. For Jimmy, that one thing was his brain. He *was* the school brain. I didn’t care about studying all that much, I didn’t have to. Chlorophyll, x+y=b, “Alexander Hamilton was the first banker,”

all of these things just flowed out of my brain, onto a page, and into a bubble when I was required to make an "A." But Jimmy, that dude *breathed* these things and he lived off of them. Yes, Jimmy Gonzales was stiff competition. He was the kid who would do a science fair project on nuclear energy to one up your potato light bulb. I'm not sure he even had the competitive balls to try to one up people though, I think he was just a *genius*; and I really wanted my picture in the yearbook a lot. I wanted to be the kid in the back who had like ten page numbers ascribed to his name. To do that, I couldn't just be a beast on the football field or a nemesis on the basketball court. I had to join the Honors Society; I had to be smart too; and now Jimmy was putting a funk in the flow of those lofty ambitions. So when word got around that Jimmy was running for student council, it was just a matter of time before "Evans George" was added to the ballot.

I wouldn't consider myself good at arts and crafts; so magic marker poster boards where not this brother's way towards political prowess. I also had no plans whatsoever of what I should say over the school PA system right after I give the "today is tuna fish, coleslaw (essentially thin strips of lettuce dosed in mayonnaise), and tater tots for lunch," because then at that point it was my single shot at finally kicking the ass of Jimmy Gonzales and his super-human brain. Had I used my

fists, I would have won, but that's not the point because this was a battle of wits, not brawn. Besides, I'm a lover not a fighter.

I just had two minutes, two minutes to secure my fate, to convince the public that I was their best representative. Scores of ideas swirled through my brain: soda machines in the cafeteria, no homework on Fridays, free basketball game tickets... with a jersey signed by me. When it came time for the principle to shove the PA microphone in front of my face,

I rapped.

"Ummm," my voice reverberated throughout the hallways over the PA. 'you dont stop □the rock it to the bang bang boogie say up jumped the boogie □to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat □□now what you hear is not a test,' cuz Evans George is the best. So don't be lame give me your vote, what this brother will do ya just don't know. But I am super f-l-y and … and I don't think there should be homework on Fridays. Again, I am the best. Vote form me."

The Grandmaster Flash LP had been a permanent resident in our record player at home for the past week and a half, so it kind of flowed out of my subconscious just like the "x+y=b" thing. I looked up to see the principle's face, I was a little worried, but he was too amused to disapprove.

The late bell rang. I was sent back to class and that day during lunch we all ate our mayonnaise and lettuce checking off our candidate boxes for student council. I voted twice. And I won too. The battle between Jimmy Gonzales and I, the one that existed merely in my own darkened soul, was now over.

~

Unlike the Gonzales kid, Jack Miller was hot shit. We were from different Junior high schools, but he played ball against me. We'd give each other the fake stink-eye when we saw each other at the skating rink. We respected one another too much to have real enmity and rivalry, so instead we just smoked weed together. When we were both at the same high school Jack had a truck that was jacked up, just like his name would assume. We'd take this thing down to the beach on the most crowded days, traffic at a stand still. We'd get one of our more nebbish friends to drive while we'd try to pick up girls from the back of the truck, showing off our bodies like we were in some parade. "Mobil Partying," that's what we'd do when we got bored of standing in a stationary truck bed. To "mobile party" we'd hop out of the back and coolly swagger down the line of cars nodding to every girl with two legs and breasts. This night was a perfect night for a "mobile party."

My feet hit the sand and a little bit of beer spilled out to the ground with impact, I didn't want to walk too far so I

just paced around the next three cars in front of us. I'm smirking at every female with two legs and breasts. All the sudden as I take the next swig the bottle juts up and smacks me in the teeth, and they cut through some of my lip as my left eye hits the sand. My whole body is being *sand*wiched, in a very literal sense, between the ground and Jack's truck. My chest and neck are rubbing along the ground, "Oh shit. I am being run over!" I think, but I can't scream because my lower lip is just dragging for what felt like twenty minutes, but was probably twenty seconds real time.

The neb in the front seat driving is completely oblivious because he is so turned on by the girls he will never get. He continues to stare their clothes off, not paying attention to the human being he is smashing into the sand. "Stop! You just ran over Evans!" Jack squealed from the back of the truck. The damn neb driver has to actually *back up* to get off of me. I feel the breeze hit my raw back skin and slowly decide if it's okay to move or not. I then decide that I probably look completely lame and like a bad candidate for a lay as I lie face down in the sand. So I get up, rub off the wet dirt, and hop back up on the truck bed next to Jack who is just starring at me with a wild face on. "Shit man, you okay?" I could feel my ears doing that thing they've started to do, getting hot and tingly. My

face all of the sudden felt real hot too. “I’m okay man…mobile party, not so mobile right?” With that, I laughed it off.

Jack and I have been friends ever since. He’d call me all doped up, after shooting drugs that he perpetually kept in his shaving kit. You’d unzip the black little bag and prescription pills would tumble out in a zip lock next to heroine needles and 8-balls of cocaine. Our years of sobriety, history of treatment centers, and choice drugs wove together like a tapestry. He was also my best man at my wedding, only that time he didn’t have the shaving kit.

~

Our nebbish driver that plowed my ass into the sand was named Robert Pzukie, “Zuk” for short. Robert was another unintentional causality, although I never felt as guilty about him because let’s face it we *made* him cool. I didn’t mean for Robert to get into drugs, but on Thursday nights in high school when Jack Miller and I would go to the blowing alley Robert would be there spraying down the shoes with his glasses slouching down on his nose. We’d go late because at night they’d shut the regular lights off and we’d bowl under black lights listening to loud music. It was just like we were at a club, except we’d drink lots of soda, smoke some weed, and try to hit pens down instead of hit on girls.

“Hey Robert, put the can down and come on out with us.”

Robert looked up with these insanely pitiful eyes that screamed, “Really someone is calling *my* name.”

“Yeah come on Robert,” Jack egged him on.

Looking back on it, I don’t know why we even invited Robert. I always had to have a scapegoat, someone new who would get as wrapped up in the things I loved dangerously. Just as wrapped up as Jack and I were.

Robert kept spraying the shoes for a little bit, I could see the gears in his brain rotate with every spray. A 6 ½ here and an 8 there, a “should I go” here and an “I can’t go” there. Finally, after about what felt like twenty minutes, but was probable twenty seconds real time, Robert slammed the can down with a definitive half-smirk on his face.

“What the hell right?” Robert looked to us for reassurance. I slapped my hand on his shoulder and walked him outside around the corner of the building. I got a little giddy, I did every time it was someone else’s first time, but Robert was the nib, this was a big deal. Jack took out the pipe and began to pack it; I saw Robert’s eyes widen a little, “what dude? You thought we were kidding.” I knew that look. First-timers were always a little shocked that something illegal, something they’d been indoctrinated for so long to avoid, was now being lit right in front of their faces. Jack handed it over to him.

It hung in the air.

Robert's hands didn't know where to rest on the pipe.

"Watch your fingers; put them on the bottom of the bowl."

"Okay," Robert stared and slowly took the pipe from Jack.

"3, 2, 1…GO" Jack told him with a hungry face.

Robert sucked in deep. That's going to make him choke.

"Hold it in for a bit," Jack coached from the sidelines. Robert's face contorted. He started coughing and he doubled over a bit, before he tried to stand up, a little jolted. Jack and I looked at each other almost salivating; we just got Robert Pzukie balls to the wall high. I waited for his report.

"Aw man, it's like sucking down gravel, I tasted the grits."

"Grits?" Sweet Robert doesn't know what to call the hash. "But how does it feel?" I asked with some extra emphasis on *feel.* Robert looked up, pushed his glasses onto his nose, and smirked "great."

"Zuk," Jack nodded and punched Robert on the shoulder. "Zuk is stoned out of his gorge!" Jack started dancing around in circles and giving me a high-five. "Hey Zuk you always were good in Chemistry bro!" "Zuk" stuck, Robert was now indoctrinated into our club, "Zuk" the honor roll student who loved getting stoned out of his gorge, spraying down other people's shoes and totally geeking out. From then out, Thursday nights was "Zuk" night. Jack slapped Zuk on the back, "better get back to work, and wait until you see the lights in there *now*."

~

That is Jack's role. Like all addicts, my story is filled with people who play their roles. Mike, my older brother, when we were growing up filled in for my Dad. We'd go hunting and I would always keep one eye on Mike the whole time to see how he was loading the rifle or scanning the parameters for unsuspecting deer.

Elizabeth, my younger sister, was the classic enabler. It's not her fault; she is and always has been my number one fan. She'd let me use her car, her excuses, and her patience; over and over again.

Two

I'm in college and it's Spring Break. We've just taken some X and we drive to Houston to this club called NRG…like "energy," but *much* easier to spell. They've made it so easy to drop acid too, tear and stick, tear and stick. It melts in your mouth, not in your hand.

"We've got to go to Nacadoges and see my friend," Trish had me convinced, but I'll be honest at this point I'm an easy sale. We needed the acid, we didn't have the acid, so why the hell not right?

One sneak into the girl's dorm at 4am, one conversation, one more hit and we are driving to Port A. Galveston, I would

realize later, was definitely a quicker way to get to a beach. By the time we get to Port A, five hits of acid and seven hours later we're in this line for this ferry. "Shit."

"What?" Trish on X asked.

"This isn't gonna work." I jerked out of line in an attempt to cut in front, and this guy tells me to go back to the end. Then, in what felt like twenty minutes later, but was probably more like twenty seconds real time, I pulled out again revving to the front and this same guy yells at me to go back to the end. By now the line is just unbearable, so I cut out again, and the girls in the back seat on their "I'm slightly more sober than you" high-horse are telling me that I am crazy and that I really should just settle down.

"Whatever."

I just drove right on in front of everybody and next thing I know I am on this ferry going to the other side and I look up and see three cop cars lights flashing. "Must be here for me," I thought, and I am then taken to jail. Trish gives up on this whole beach excursion, which was *her* idea by the way, and she goes down to find my sister on the beach.

Elizabeth, I can count on her for everything, everything except to bail me out when I get my ass in jail. So *she* waited for my time to be up and *I* naturally, cursed her out.

She drove me back to San Marcos the next day.

We both went to school in San Marcos, Texas. I was working on a degree in Criminal Justice, and somehow the irony of that escaped me at the time. School was a total drag. However, there were a few perks that made it easier to fulfill my life's mission of catching a buzz and sleeping with sexy strangers.

One of those perks was registering for sixteen hours and then getting sixteen hours worth of cash from my parents for books. Every semester, I'd sign up, get the cash, drop the extra 4-hours, and sell back my books before the end of the full refund date. That cash would carry me for a couple of weeks before I had to start writing checks.

"Oh God, I'm going to fail," I never found myself to be all that religious, but come finals time, my faith was always miraculously revived.

I did a few lines to try and stay awake and mixed that with some coffee, black. My ass was going numb from sitting in those lousy chairs under the stacks in the library. I stared blankly at the text in front of me but all I could see and hear was everything else around me. "I am geeking out," I thought as the hums of the air conditioner got more pronounced, and I couldn't help but notice the way dust collected on those fluorescent light bulbs above me. This type of "geek out" was much tamer than the stories I'd heard. I smiled to myself and my stomach turned a little as I remembered the story Mudd told me about the

guy with the hairless dog. Mudd said he'd heard of this guy who whenever he did coke would pet his dog in this same methodical pattern, over and over, until he would come back down and notice that the dog didn't have any hair left on that part of his back. So weird, but that's better than this other kid we knew, who couldn't keep his dick in his pants after he did a line. Don't get me wrong, like I said, I am all about sexy strangers, but this guy just took his pants off for *no reason*. He was just geeking out on coke. All the sudden I got a little nervous and I shifted around in my seat, "thank God," I thought, my pants were still on and my book was splayed open in front of me. My heart raced and pulsated so hard I heard it up inside my eardrums. "This," I thought, "must be what it's like to geek out without club music on."

Eight o'clock in the AM finally rolled around, and I packed a canister with the sticky shit then zipped up my bag. Every time I developed pictures, I'd take that little film canister and add it to my row, taking the lid off of it so it'd be ready for packing. The more the weed stuck to the sides, the better I knew the hit would be. In the morning as part of my ritual before I'd go to class, I pressed the light gray lid carefully down on top and slid the canister into my backpack. It was as routine as brushing my teeth. I dropped a one hit pipe in my bag too, just in case I got bored in between classes. Those pipes

were great, no smell or mess, just one long and deep inhale. I'd watch a cop come and wait until he'd go by me before I let out the rancid smoke.

As I walked into the lecture hall, cops were sitting up front already starting their exams as, beads of sweat gathered around my forehead. "Ah man, they know, they know, *they have to know*," I worried as I rubbed my hands on the inside of my pockets. I couldn't wait to get out of there, bubbling in answers right behind San Marcos's finest is a little bit of a buzz kill.

Three

Buzz, it's not even just something I do anymore, I have become it. Howard came up with the nickname, and it spread like a wildfire. I was Buzz George.

This "is he going to answer" game is making me go insane, then if he doesn't have any cocaine forget it. I get the call, he has some, and my stomach was turning over on itself; I had to take a dump so bad I could not stand to wait for the first line. You should see the others; it's like a group of wild dogs hearing the shake of the food. I can almost see their mouths salivating, and I just keep chopping it. This control that I have over them as I chop makes the dump sensation placate a little. The stuff is getting finer and finer, and the dogs are howling. I smirk a little as Mudd takes the first line. That

guy's nose is *always* clogged. Sure enough, the line he just took ran right back out of his nose. "Come on dude, what a waste!" I yelled at Mudd. Howard's nose on the other hand, was perfect for the gagger, just perfect. He had the Jewish hook. The rule of gravity is, what goes up, must come back down. So, a little poor judgment, someone's eyes bigger than their uvula can handle, and there is gagging to be had. The uvula is that weird dangly red thing in the back of your throat, coke numbs the uvula and the next thing you know, you are dry heaving. I hear Howard choke. My stomach doubles again; when you're sober taking a dump just does not have the same excitement behind it.

"Daddy gagger," we say in unison, we all feel alone but some how manage the same language. The coke drips down and numbs everything on the way down.

It is all about the way down: be it the Jim Beam burn or the daddy gagger.

And I fell further down.

~

I watched it fall, it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen, and this chair goes flying off the tenth floor. Mudd is nudging me hard with his elbow. We're in these tuxes, ties tied up to our necks, with bright white button downs. We were in some fancy hotel at the beach for our frat formal. The sky is all overcast and rainy and this stark white patio

furniture just cuts and I mean rips through the air toward the parking lot below. “Dude,” my lip drops as the chair drops toward the parking lot. Mudd elbows again, this time harder, “no, oh no, man maxim is going to flip,” SMACK the chair hits this brand new black Maxima. Scott Maxim, one of my frat brothers, screams up at me “you’re going to pay for it man.” My mouth started rattling off all of these lame ass excuses, and I knew they were lame as they were coming out, but this was really ruining the buzz again. I pulled out a cigarette and Mudd has already retreated inside because he is smarter than me at this point. When I get back inside I find the cooler as soon as possible to try and maintain the good feeling. I shrug and light up the cig looking down on Scott’s car, the wreckage and the white chair, wondering if the insurance would cover it.

The next day my mom is wringing me out on the phone and I am pretty happy that I can’t get slapped through a receiver, and that I only see them now around holidays anyway.

~

Let’s be honest, I gave the term X-Mas a whole new meaning. It was Christmas break and we all were ready to get back to NRG in Houston. Trisch told us we could crash at her parent’s house near Houston because they were out of town for the holidays. Trish was, like I said, always slightly more sober than me. She didn’t like to drink; she just took the occasional hit, drop, or

line. So this one night after a time at NRG, I am trying to come back down, solving the world's problems, because that's what you do on cocaine. I'm drinking cough medicine to calm me down while Trisch heads off to bed. I light up a cigarette, flop back on the couch, and at some point in between drags, I doze off.

Next thing I know, I wake up and the Fire Department is there with Trisch yelling at me. This couch that I am on is all black, charred, and stiff. I was comatose, the house was thick with smoke, and I sluggishly begin to realize something awful.

"Oh, God. God, what are you doing!?"

"Your son is a mess," Trisch was talking into the receiver.

"What the hell are you doing?" My legs seemed to smack against the floor for the first time in days and I lifted my head off the burned fabric. I flung my arm up to try and knock away the phone. "Shit," I looked back at the couch that I had just peeled myself off of. "Shit!" My brain flickered pictures real fast to try and piece together the jigsaw of last night, us hammered, us driving, NRG, cough medicine, me lighting up a cig.

"You owe me five hundred dollars," Trisch's eyes were filled with fury and fear, and for a moment I had to catch myself from asking her if when *her* parents got mad there was a belt involved.

We weren't friends after that.

I was having that feeling again, the one where I begin to think I am not normal. Every one there was looking at me with these wild faces on. Firemen were blurry through the front door glass as I looked out into the yard. Beads of sweat gathered again on my forehead and I was thinking about what the neighbors were thinking about now. Trisch could go to hell for all I care, ratting me out to my parents. I reached down towards my shoes and pulled out my pack of cigs. I packed them, took one out, and just let it hang a little out of my mouth. Everyone looked at me with those same wild faces, my ears got hot and red, and this time their faces looked like my mom's did those times when she found me taking whiskey from our liquor cabinet when I was in middle school, or like the face Billy made when he found my bag of weed the day before I left for college. Those facial expressions, the ones of total "we didn't raise a son to be like this" were burned into my memory, impressed like the hands of deliquent kids on a freshly cemented sidewalk.

I'll never forget the face Billy made at me when I bitched at him about how he insists on waking me up in the morning by pulling on each of my toes until they playfully popped. I was eating a bowl of cheerios and in between slurps I went off about how "couldn't you just turn on a light instead or *something*?" Billy never directly responded to this question he only darted a quick glance at me and told me to "quite slurping," and after a

long exasperated sigh, the kind adolescents give where it sounds like their souls are being sucked out of their very bones, I replied “whatever.” With that, Billy took the spoon out of the lump of cheerios that I had piled up in my bowl and slapped my head right on the top where that soft spot is on babies. And all of a sudden it is like old faithful the way my blood came gushing out of the new divot. The fount was kind of like how pilots when they aviate their aircraft have to steer up to go down and vis versa, I would move my head and the blood would go the opposite way like Jackson Pollack was painting the ceiling of our breakfast nook. I generally took these opportunities where Billy’s wrath drew blood to pit my mom against him. So with one hand on my wound and another wildly gesticulating across the table I’d advocate my case against the wicked step dad as Elizabeth grabbed a fist full of napkins and slid them my way.

This time however, there were no warring parties to stir up trouble with; there was no stepparent to blame. I had set Trish’s sofa on fire, and there were no diversions. I tried to smile, I thought about my school teachers when I was a kid, I thought about the girls I had screwed, I really wanted my charm trick to work again. I wanted it to work so badly, but my ears felt like they were on fire. The group just scowled at me and Trisch gave me this look that cut me hard, “you’re a drunk

Evans" she said with a mixture of resentment and something else, something soft, something I didn't get. "You've got to fix this" she said last as she walked outside to talk to the firemen.

I looked down at my shoes for what seemed like twenty minutes, but was probably twenty seconds, real time.

"What are you looking at?" I told the others as I dug my keys out of my pants and tied my shoes, the cig still hanging out, stuck to my bottom lip.

I looked back up at them and they gave one of those funny sighs, "Evans…man." I pulled out a lighter and in one brazen act of saying, "Fuck off" without any words; I lit the cigarette and walked outside to talk to the fire department.

Five

There's this album cover that I really love. My roommate my freshman year in college turned me on to this singer, she had these lyrics that could just explain everything and she had this little body that carried this big voice, if she'd dip *and* if I was a fan of marriage then she would have been my dream wife. My roommate was weird, I hated living with him, but he did have fantastic taste in music. I remember I'd pull up and see his car in the parking lot and just dread being there. Anyway, this album cover had all of these little boys in dark pants shooting bows and arrows, like a scene from some 1930's summer camp. Sometimes during my long nights of trying to solve all of the

problems of the world, one chopped line at a time, I would pick up the album and gaze at its cover wondering what the boys were aiming at and if they were any good at archery.

I thought about that now, staring down at this application. I didn't know what to put down. I wasn't sure I even liked kids; I knew I didn't like working. I jotted down something that sounded moderately inspirational and camp-counselerish. Licking the envelope and sticking the stamp in the corner, I wondered if I would be an excellent archer or if the pre-pubescent boys would show me up. "I don't like failure," I mumbled shoving the envelope down into the mailbox with pictures of Jimmy Gonzalez flickering in my brain.

The next week I had a job. I was Evans George, camp counselor. I figured I should drop the name Buzz while I worked at the camp. "Wait," I stopped dead. I am sure that cocaine is camp contraband, the thought made my stomach clinch up. "Two weeks is no big deal," I tried to calm myself down. "That's like fourteen days. Which is like three hundred and thirty six hours, or twenty thousand one hundred and sixty minutes." When I broke it down into minutes, it overwhelmed me and I decided to drop the math altogether.

I was naturally, a *great* archer.

I didn't even think about cocaine for a whole week while I was there. The last day we got letters, and I got a ton of

letters. The words were garbled and some of them were written too big for the lines on the page. Every letter I unfolded was the best thing that'd ever happened to me.

A few nights some of the other counselors and I snuck out to grab a sip or two. I felt so *in* with them, they hadn't seen me with my pants down or me throwing a piece of patio furniture off a roof. They didn't see me set a couch on fire with my own cigarette. Buzz was just something that happened to you when you drank, and I was just Evans.

"I've seen you with Darren," Stephanie said as my lower lip smeared across the top of the bottle. Stephanie was another one of the counselors.

"Oh yea," I said after a swallow.

"It's cute you know?"

At this point, I had now idea what to do with myself. I couldn't tell if this was a come-on or a genuine question of Stephanie's. An "it's cute you know" with her hand rubbing up my thigh type of thing, or an "it's cute you know?" with a raised eyebrow and an upward inflection. If I would have been Buzz, I would have began plotting my next lay. But I wasn't Buzz that night, I was Evans and she was *Stephanie*: this twenty-something politically correct, well-read, bleeding heart democrat, who loved to volunteer.

“Do you think it’s cute?” I blurted out rubbing my sweaty palms on my jeans.

She laughed.

“I think the kids really enjoy you,” she smirked and sipped her beer.

“I like them.” I looked down at my shoes and back at Stephanie. It was one of those split-second moments, where if I could have any super power I wanted, I would be the guy who could freeze everything around me and consult God for something perfect to say. Instead, I swigged again and asked, “Hey did you get any letters?”

“Some,” She said.

“I got a lot,” I said, immediately regretting it. Is it wrong to get cocky over a few hand-written notes composed by nine year olds?

She laughed. “They like you, and you’ll get a whole new batch next week.”

“Yeah,” I looked at my watch, my ears were red hot. I pulled some cash out of my pocket, and flopped it down on the bar. A part of Lincoln’s forehead soaked up the ring left by our glasses.

Somehow, I had managed to stay off of cocaine for twenty thousand one hundred and sixty minutes. As the bills got soggier and Stephanie took another sip, I knew it was only a matter of

time before Buzz George reared his head, because without cocaine my ears grew hot and my palms got sweaty.

Stephanie and I hung out a few more times after our summer camp days, but Buzz was not as endearing to her as the guy who made friends with nine-year old Darren. She went back to her volunteerism and I chopped another line.

~

My brother Mike is on a mission to pick up the pieces of my shambled life. He already typed me up a resume and moved me into his Bryant, Texas apartment that he shares with his roommate, David Dolla. David soon became a brand new casualty in my story. It's the first Saturday I am there and I am just itching out of my skin. There is no archery in Bryant, no Darren, and no hand-written notes; so I had drove back to San Marcos to get some coke. Now I am driving with one hand on the shift stick, my elbow on the wheel, and the other hand snorting a line. I got back to Bryant a lot faster than I expected, I didn't even remember how I got there because my eyes were scanning the rear view mirror the whole time. Coke makes me do that. When I pulled up I saw in the mirror the shape my eyes were in, but I didn't see Mike's car so I figured it was okay to go inside.

Dolla called it right away.

Here was another split-second moment, except this time if I could choose any super hero power it would be to freeze time,

make my escape, and then erase people's short-term memories after I had escaped.

"Hey," I managed to get out as I made a beeline to my room.

David trailed behind me.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing, I just..." David's eyes darted all around.

A pause that felt like twenty minutes but was probably twenty seconds real time.

"Do you have anymore?"

That night we got balls to the wall high. Early Sunday morning ESPN started reviewing the upcoming afternoon games. Houston was playing Oakland, so *naturally* we got immediately into the car; there was a weird mixture of cocaine and exhaustion running through our veins, as I shifted gears and lit up another cigarette.

We made it to Houston, but the Oilers game was sold out, and so we are knocking back these drinks at Sam's Boat, a hopping joint on Richmond Avenue. This lady walks in; my head snaps toward the door so hard it's as if my pupils were magnets and her tits are metal. I'd read somewhere about women fitting their breasts out with plastic bubbles to make them bigger, but I had yet to see it. I nudged David hard with my elbow and he promptly made space.

She sat down right next to me.

"Can I get you something?" I offered.

"Sure," she sort of smiled and winked at the same time but all of that is blurry because my pupils are very much attracted to her "metal."

I ordered her a drink.

"My name is Coreene," she stuck out here hand over her breasts.

"I'm Evans," I shook her hand and one thing lead to another and before I know it I am totally mugging Coreene, or as I grew to call her, "fake tits." We have spent literally five hours at Sam's Boat. She ran a court-reporting firm and somehow in between our tongue wrestling I managed to ask her for a job.

"Sure, I'll hire you but I need a resume."

I realized my total love for my big brother as soon as the word "resume" tumbled out of Coreene's lipstick smeared mouth.

"I have one. I will mail it from Bryant tonight."

Two weeks later I was living in Houston as Evans George, court reporter, this was the only time I have ever gotten remotely close to using that Criminal Justice degree. Sides, plaintiff and defendant, needed copies of these reports. So, I made copies, checked spelling errors, counted pages, and filed. Court reporting was working out nicely for me; of course the presence of "fake tits" did help. However, after the first two weeks the beer, cigarettes, pot, and Corinne's smeared lipstick

were not doing it for me. I began looking around local joints for a dealer.

Six

It's hard to explain the hunt to those who do not know it. The first thirty days of living in a new place for an addict is like the first one hundred days of the American president's term; things are fresh, reputations have yet to be marred, but there are names to be taken and roles to be filled. There was one role that my skin itched to fill; I needed a dealer. Throughout one's whole scholastic career, the dealer is well known to those who need to have dealing done. After the diploma however, finding a dealer becomes an all-consuming manhunt. Some people I have heard, have a type of "gay-dar," they can spot a homosexual from miles. It's the same type of thing between addicts and dealers; I know who is doing a line. I mill around clubs until the radar goes off. Tonight, the radar finally went off when I caught my first glimpse of Martin.

Martin, pronounced "mar-teen," was blacker than midnight. He was from South America. The first time I met him it was three in the morning, and all I could make out were his ivory eyes that were illuminated by his own cigarette. I was expecting my first encounter with a major-American-city-drug-runner to involve semi-automatic handguns, bandanas, profanity, and gold chains. In short, I expected something out of the movie

“Scarface.” But, when my eyes adjusted to the black outside and the black of Martin himself, what I found in front of me was a thin-reed five-foot nothing man wearing an impeccably pressed dress shirt tucked into dark pants. In fact, Martin held a business degree in accounting. He used his absolute brilliance, stoic record keeping, and number computation, to run drugs in inner city Houston. The economy for black men with business degrees in Texas in the early nineties was simply not as lucrative as selling cocaine to the white men who took their jobs. Martin was smart, and he ran his business well enough to be featured in Forbes.

When I walked up to him, he stared hard at me.

It felt like he was piercing the back of my skull.

Sweat started to bead up all around my forehead and my heart started pounding in its familiar rhythm, the one that feels like it will burst my rib cage. My stomach called it. It already began to do tricks inside of my abdomen, anticipating the first line it’s had in about sixty-one days.

Martin, I think, could see all of my gears shifting. He smiled, with the full knowledge that I was to become a valued customer. “What can I do for you brother?” His accent was thick and his tone was very soft, when he said “brother” I believed that he believed it.

“I need some cocaine.”

“I have some cocaine.” He glanced back and forth then pulled a dime gingerly out of his pin-stripped pocket and my mouth melted as my nostrils burned. I tossed a waded up Alexander Hamilton, the first banker, into Martin’s hand, and took the bag immediately to my car’s consul. I chopped it finer, looking in the rear view mirror the whole time. The powder slid down my throat so fast that had it been a "slurpy" that stunt would have caused a brain freeze.

From then on, Martin was on call.

~

Fucking Kevin, I was fucking back into the life I swore my brother, my sister, and myself that I’d leave. Kevin lived in the apartment above me in college, we called him “____ Kevin” because *everything* was “____ this” and “____ that.”

“You should ____ cook it up.”

“Cook it up?”

Stop.

This is the part, one of those pregnant moments in the history of all our negative decisions where there is a clear crumbling distinction between a lesser of two evils. “Blow” was slang for cocaine, cooking it made it “free base.” On the spectrum of illicit drug use, “free-basing” was one of the worst things you could do, right before you turned to injecting the “rock star killer,” heroine.

"Yeah cook it up; it is the best ____ high."

The first time I cooked it, I didn't feel it's' effects because the blow had already took, but it wasn't long before all of my cocaine ended up in test tubes under a Bic. I'd buy cigars that came in little glass tubes, just for the tubes, so I could cook it up. Martin started calling me "Betty Rocker." I'd drive around bringing the blow to a boil, bit by bit tossing baking soda into the tube to harden it, and swirling it to cool, all while navigating the Pathfinder. I could even do it during left hand turns. "Mobil partying," just like high school, except in high school we didn't have blow.

Seven

If there was a time where I ever knew that I was in trouble it was when somehow one of the major-American-city-drug-runners became another causality in my story. The cardinal rule of dealing is that users get used by dealers. Against that maxim, Martin started using the day I showed him the test tube trick using some of his own product and one of his own cigar tubes. After that day, no one was allowed to cook up Martin's product but me, "Betty Rocker." On occasion, some other user would vie for the position. We'd boil the tubes, add baking soda, swirl to cool, and toss the rock at the nearest wall. Mine would always hit it hard and fall to the ground. Other cooks, found their rocks gooey, and when thrown the rocks would stick like putty.

You don’t want gooey, gooey sticks to tubes and pipes. My baking was always hard, and it tasted inexplicably sweet.

It only took a while before:

Martin lost track of the books, he didn’t crunch the numbers, he didn’t manage his product like Wall Street, and he started pulling guns because he was so paranoid. He lost his soft tone when he said “brother” and his eyes were never ivory anymore, they were clouded over. Martin’s charisma used to seem as deep as the ocean, but after months of smoking up profit, it became something like a filthy puddle in a parking lot. It was shallow and no one wanted to come near it. He wasn’t like Zuk. He wasn’t some unsuspecting do-gooder who was sacrificed to the cause of my own high, like Zuk was. Because of this I didn’t feel sorry leaving Martin behind. I couldn’t handle the guns anymore. I couldn’t handle the way Martin talked when he was high, his accent wasn’t as eloquent, it was choppy and slow, and I couldn’t understand him. I didn’t want to. I wanted out from under him. I decided again that I needed to grow up; I lit up a cigarette and walked out to my car with every intention of laying out a freshly ironed shirt and dosing off at a healthy hour, so that I could wake up the next morning magically finding myself to be a well-adjusted adult.

Eight

"Shit," the last number I remembered on the clock was 6:05 Am. Now my dry tongue licked the roof of my plaqued mouth and my dry starched collar from yesterday's professional attire rubbed against my face. "8:00am," I unbuttoned my shirt and grabbed a new one, no time for the shower, and I looked out my apartment window. My heart sunk, I loaned out the Pathfinder last night for another dime. I brushed my teeth as I laced up my shoes and ran my hand through my hair as a comb. The next bus was at 8:25. I called the office, "fake tits" answered.

"I'm going to be a little late."

"You know what Evans, don't worry."

I knew it before she said it.

"Don't come in, you're done," Coreene "fake tits" didn't sound sorry in the least, bitch. I lay down the receiver, and looked around for what felt like twenty minutes, but was probably twenty seconds real time. I didn't know if I should cry, curse, scream, or call back. I didn't know what to do as I kicked an empty bottle of Southern Comfort, it spun around one and one half times and my mind spun with all of the things I'd have to explain to Mike. I don't know what you're supposed to do when you loose a job. I walked over to the sink and turned on the water as I rummaged through one of my drawers for a cigarette. I haphazardly threw some water on my face and shoved

the cig into my dry mouth. I unbuttoned the new shirt and just walked outside shirtless. I didn't know if I should go into the office and pick up some form or sign some sheet or pack some damn box; I was completely alone. I plopped down hard on the front steps and shivered a little as I lit up the cigarette and the wind blew the smoke back into my eyes, of course. They stung and they watered with I think A) a mixture of tears from humiliation and B) a natural reaction to smoke. It's about nine o'clock and there aren't any cars in the parking lot because people my age are supposed to have jobs, they are supposed to be putting money into 401K's and social securities, they are supposed to be working things out with the in laws and taking care of a mutt with their wives to get ready for children. "Shit, piss, fuck." Like I said, I had no idea what to say or do so I just rambled out the worst words I could think of in the moment and took an insanely long drag. Then my heart skipped a little. A door had just slammed on a car and my neck snapped hard to where the sound was coming from, mortified that whoever it was just witnessed my filth mouth soliloquy. She was beautiful. She looked in a hurry so I scooted fast toward the edge of the step to let her pass. She was looking down at her hose mumbling something. When she looked up she looked as mortified as I think I probably did when I thought that she'd heard *me*. She coyly smiled, somewhat embarrassed I think as I

thought how dumb it would be if she was embarrassed because *I* was the one without a shirt on, cursing, smoking, with bad morning breath at a decent hour to have my teeth brushed and be dressed.

"I've got a run in my hose."

"Oh." I said not really sure what a "run" was.

"Yes, so embarrassing, I was just on my way to the office when I noticed it." She tripped a little as she hurried up the stairs.

"Its okay" I looked her way as she rattled her key in 1B.

A few minutes later, I heard 1B open.

I looked back at her, waved, and smiled.

"See you around," she said.

"Bye."

She began to get into her car and then stopped short.

"Hey what's your name?"

"Evans."

"Hi Evans."

"Hi."

"Slow morning?"

"I…" I searched my mind to think about what excuse I could give her while weighing out the worth of a lie to some stranger.

"I just lost my job."

Her face contorted a little as if to say “I really didn’t have time for such an unhappy reply on your part stranger.”

“Sorry,” told her.

“No, God, no don’t apologize to me.” She had this very weird thing about her, some sort of warm compassion. Which is dumb because after all, I am a stranger and she is beautiful so why does she need to be so warm in this situation because she is also late for work.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know what to do in these situations,” I confessed.

“Look for another job,” she offered with one leg in the car and her keys clutched by her fist. Then I could see her eyes roll back a little like she was scheming something.

“Hey you know those guys who mow the lawns around here?” she finally said.

“Yea what about them?”

“They need a guy to oversee the labor, a foreman.”

My face stared blankly at her because I still didn’t know how to react in this situation because she wasn’t like “fake tits” because she was more like Stephanie, except that Stephanie never offered me a job.

“I’m offering you a job,” she said with a slight “you’re kind of thick” exasperation.

“I should take it.” I said not even believing that this mess could be fixed in less than twenty-five minutes.

“Good,” she said with a resolved smile as she pulled a pen and a business card out from her purse. “This is the guy you need to call,” she scribbled something on the back of her own card.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Of course, it’s not too glamorous but it will give you something to do before you find something else.”

“Yeah, sure, that’s great I will call him.”

“He’ll need a resume.”

“I have one,” I shoved the card in my pants and waved “bye,”

“See you around,” she quickly jetted.

I walked back inside and pulled out my singular file folder with the single copy of the resume, the only professional looking thing in my habitat, and it was Mike’s folder anyway. I scrawled “court reporter 1989-1990” under my other “previous work experiences,” and flipped the card over as I reached for the receiver. I was going to be Evans George, lawn care foreman. The ice hit the glass and the first drank warmed my stomach and my mind up to the thought of taking care of my “team.”

~

I've always liked to think of good leaders as Jesusy. The kind of guys that would wash feet in between orders and who wouldn't mind getting their hands dirty. I desperately wanted to be a Jesusy lawn care foreman. I think Jesus would have edged and picked up wet grass to throw in a trash bag just as any other guy would have, in between giving a deaf man hearing ears. It's not that I particularly cared about becoming like Jesus or that I particularly believed it even possible, or that I particularly believed him to be God incarnate. I had just had a particular amount of blow-hard bosses who always ordered us around and never lifted a finger themselves. Yes, I was going to be a Jesusy lawn care foreman, and to make matters easier we could drink beer on our lunch breaks.

I got a little dizzy as I yanked on the chord of the weed eater. The sweat ran down my beat red face and ran into my eyes. My ears felt on fire, except this time I wasn't just nervous, the sun's ultra violet rays were I think burning right through the rims of my ears. The lunch I had, started lurching up my esophagus and my breath was hot with beer stench. I tried to lift the vibrating weed eater up over the curbs but instead the machine just shook my bones, which felt like mush. I started slowly falling forward a bit and my feet all of the sudden seemed a little cumbersome. I hadn't slept in five full days. That's 120 hours, which is 7,200 minutes, which is… I couldn't

finish calculating the seconds because I felt like I was going to puke and the lawn and trees started angrily closing in on me as my eyes gave in and got the black fuzzy effect that I had known before. The black fuzzy effect always happened right before the morning when I woke up with my pants half way around my ankles. I had to get out of there before my face slammed into concrete. I let go of the weed eater and staggered ungracefully towards the nearest patch of shade, the bushes. The next thing I knew the trees had closed in on my pupils, my mind faded to black, and I felt my hands hit soft dirt. I was out cold.

From that moment on, I was also out of a job, because every Jesusy leader has a Judas.

My Judas ratted me out for sleeping in the bushes. Maybe that doesn't really qualify as a Judas move because I was in fact sleeping in the bushes, but I still felt like shit afterwards as I am sure Jesus felt right? When I got the call, the one that informed me I had lost another job, I looked in the mirror at my sun scorched face and grass residued hands. I cursed again then I fell asleep in my own bed at my own apartment. I didn't own much shortly after that.

Part Two

(Post-College-last night before treatment)

Nine

In my high school economics class we learned about a guy, "the entrepreneur," who sold "widgets." There is no such thing as a "widget" it was just something that economists called any product that a producer sold. We learned that to be successful, you couldn't just spend a bunch of money to make a widget and then sell it for exactly what it cost to make the widget because then you would just keep yourself out of a hole, you wouldn't make any cash, any real profit. You couldn't just aspire to stay out of the hole.

I think I got an "A" in that class, but all the knowledge on widgets and profit seemed to fail me when I was selling sheets of acid and free based blow instead of widgets. All I wanted to do was take hits and smoke up my own product. It could have been great marketing if I would have worked the angle a little more. Colonel Sanders should eat his own chicken after all, but he shouldn't hoard the bucket. I should have timed the hits a little better, rationed them out; instead I landed myself smack into the hole with my own smack.

And now, I am convinced that the walls are staring at me and if they start talking I don't know what I will do. Shit, I am going to be like this forever. What if I have permanently

rewired something? The pathfinder is swerving and veering in and out of traffic. I want to come back down because I can't see anything but headlights from this angel. Every headlight in the rearview mirror makes me squint a little, and I am convinced that they all know. Every car I pass I think it might be some cop, even if it has a tent strapped to the top, an ice chest, a four year old in a car seat, and a middle-aged dad; it's a minivan packed for the beach. I am convinced that *they know* and they have the power to take me to jail. Eventually the witching hour hits, and everyone else is in bed and I am going out of my mind still. I am just balled up after trying to offset the acid hit with something to bring me back down. I desperately want this to end now.

I estimate about another hour but I start to believe that it'll never stop but that my synapses will just keep firing in the wrong directions.

Finally, I felt it stop and I got back in the car and started to drive around free-basing and looking for buyers so I could look for sellers.

I've always thought that geeking out went really well with driving. As my pathfinder swerved around East Texas, I remembered a job I had back in high school.

~

"Uncle Mutt's BBQ" the 32 oz. Styrofoam cup of what was supposed to be sweet tea, but was really liquor sat in the consul of the "Uncle Mutt's" delivery truck with a load of coleslaw and beans in the back, this was my high school gig, BBQ delivery. I was pissed every Friday night because my shift didn't end until 10pm, by that time I would have some major catching up to do if I was going to get anywhere near the other's level of inebriation. I've never really been an over-achiever, but I did *naturally* feel the need to catch up, so the whole time on my delivery route I drank and smoked weed in a mad dash toward intoxication. I heard the chopped beef shift in the back and I threw my hand over the backseat smacking the plastic bag and Styrofoam box with little attention to the road. I saw the woman driver pull out in front of my truck, but the chopped beef had my attention just long enough for me to slam into the back of her. The 32 oz. cup flew up and drenched the dash as my hand and wrist smacked the window shield. The blood started flowing from my head, which I had heard in matters of head wounds that it always looks bloodier and worse than it is. So, I got out to mop up the mess on the dash with my cut hand, and then the damn ambulance arrives and the paramedic is so convinced that I need to be strapped down to this bored to "immobilize" my neck. I start doing that thing I do when I get upset, and my arms start flailing around "listen man I have got

to make the delivery… it is just right across the street man, there are people waiting for that coleslaw!" I shuffled over to it and started shoveling it back into the bag. I nailed that last line like Mel Gibson. The people need the coleslaw, what injustice to strap me down in a time like this. I am adamant, thirty minutes or less *was* really our motto, but the whole time I had one nervous eye on the dash. I think I cleaned it up enough so finally, there was no arguing and I lay down. The "Uncle" in "Uncle Mutt's BBQ" was crumpled and it just said "Unc," I thought as they placed the brace around my neck that "Unc" would be a cool name someday if I ever got to be an uncle. My manager was just happy that the truck was totaled. After all, it was her liquor in the first place.

~

Now ten years later I am in another type of delivery service. We'd get calls at 2am, like we where running some emergency room triage unit. And I guess in some way we were, except that instead of iodine and morphine, we gave people free base to heal their pain.

So in between glancing in the review mirror and checking the consistency of the blow, my eyes catch the clock and it's like three thirty in the morning. My stomach was doing flips, except this time it wasn't about waiting for a line, I was legitimately fucking hungry. I started scanning street corners

in between rear view glances for a corner store. I figured a Diet Coke and fifty cent hotdog would do. Finally, in what seemed like twenty minutes but was probable twenty seconds, I found a Stop-N-Go and pulled in. They had cigarettes on special up front at the register right above the bananas and apples. I figured I could grab a quick pack easy. The cashier looked out at the pumps and I quickly nabbed some Reds, it was then that I realized I had two rocks in my hand the whole time. This realization spiked my heartbeat so much that when the cashier turned away again I replaced the Reds, as a make-up call.

"Keep the change." (That was another make-up call)

"Thanks have a good night."

"Yea," I made a b-line to the car.

As soon as I start to drive off, some nigga starts throwing his right hand up trying to get me to roll my window down. By the way, I can say nigga because they let me. When I am on it, I am fearless with my tongue and all sorts of racial stuff tumbles out. The first few times I was real scared when a "nigga" accidentally slipped out, and I would kind of mumble some apology under my breath or quickly chase the comment with something else. But now its just part of my M.O.

"What's up nigga?"

` His face kind of jerked back like he was shocked, but then I guess he figured that I might be his only potential customer

tonight and he pulled a chain out of his pocket and held it right close to the window.

"24 carrot gold right here" he said with his pudgy fingers clutching the clasp, shoving it in my face.

"That's a hook," I said to him with my eyebrows furrowing.

"Damn, how'd you know what a hook is white boy?"

I thought about it for two second and then decided that all I really wanted to do was drink my 32 oz. of Diet soda and shove a hot dog down my throat and then crash somewhere, so instead of explaining anything to him I just opened up my hand and the rocks unrolled themselves from the sweat of my knuckles.

"Oh let me in on that."

I shrugged and pulled the lock on the other side of the Pathfinder and he climbed in.

"My name's Sonny."

"Evans," I said already swirling the stuff in the glass tube I had bought with a cigar at another corner store previously.

"Fucking yes man," he said with very hungry eyes that reminded me of chopping lines back in San Marcos. I lit it and took it down into my lungs hard then I passed it to Sonny.

"Hey come back to my place, I'll make it up to you."

Okay.

When we pulled up to the hotel on Old Spanish Trail that Sonny paid forty bucks a night to live in. The witching hour was approaching; this was the hour when I always felt most alone. Something about the sun rising reminded me that I had sucked down twenty-four hours of life right into my lungs. I swerved in and Sonny got out of the car to lead the way.

I shuffled behind him looking at my feet so much that I was surprised when I saw carpet beneath me instead of asphalt.

There was a slice of pizza on the floor, just the crust was showing, and I took this to be a sign that Sonny was in the same shit hole as I was. I glanced at a pair of high heels next to a bed sheet; the tired face of the girl I assumed who owned the shoe was looking back at me.

Sonny rubbed up against her and touched her in all sorts of places; he was whispering something to her. She pulled some money out and slipped it into his back pocket.

He counted it while her face contorted. Then his fist flew up and caught the left side of her lip. She screamed and fell back on the bed and all of the sudden those same “stop its” that I never wanted to come out of me, but they always did, started coming out of me.

His fist gave her a break and hit me in the gut.

I stumbled back and my shoulder kind of nudged up against the peephole on the door.

"That isn't right," I said trying to catch my run away breath. He just kind of stood there, and in silence I slide back up the door, turned, and walked outside.

In a few minutes I felt something pelt the back of my skull. I whirled around and my heel grinded a gold chain into the dirt.

"White boy, we could use you."

My foot kicked the chain back and forth as I thought about how I had no place to go so why the hell not.

"Ok," I picked up the chain and patted the keys to the pathfinder that where in my pocket.

No more triage unit for crack heads, no more 2am house calls, an unsuspected smile made its way to my face and I climbed back in the car as Sonny loaded me up with more hooks.

Ten

We'd hit up strip centers with a zeal that only comes to Jehovah Witnesses in their dreams. I *naturally* was the driver. Sonny climbed out of the car with a rack of hooks and I drove around the center nursing my gin and juice in a recycled fast food cup.

This cop comes up to my window. Some song by NWA (not the airlines) was vibrating the doors of the Pathfinder and I am at this moment hammered.

"Can I see your driver's license"?

He knows, he knows, he fucking *knows* the rational brain part was lighting up big time as I dug around for my wallet. I pulled it out in the most "I am not drunk" way I could think to handle the situation. He walked back to his car for what felt like twenty minutes, but was probably twenty seconds real time.

"Step out of the car."

Shit.

"You have two warrants out for your arrest."

I suddenly remembered the speeding ticket I got my first week in Houston, when "fake tits" was commandeering all of my attention. I also never carried insurance. Let's be honest, I am not one to think ahead. The handcuffs sort of Indian rubbed my wrist leaving an indention and I felt a hand push my head down as I slide into the seats that are behind the mesh wiring.

This jail is the lamest jail you have ever seen. It was the jail of a micro-community. This micro-community was a snobbish upper middle class portion of the greater area of Houston; you know the type of places that have names like "whispering oak" and "running waters." You know, these communities that feel the need to separate themselves and thus get their own police department, and with a department a jail too.

I wondered if this jail would have ceilings and toilet paper and concrete floors.

~

I wondered these things because I've been in jail before.

Elizabeth was dating this guy who had much more than a pot to piss in, in fact, he had a ski boat. He was kind of finicky and a little goofy. Elizabeth always had a heart for the goofies. In college we decided to stay in this guy's time-share that his dad owned in Cancun. We'd hit the bars every night and because Scott's, one of my pledge brothers, dad gave him a credit card we figured this is the time to totally do it up and order some top shelf drinks. We didn't order the top shelf drinks to merely get sloshed because any bottle of Mad Dog would fill that purpose. We bought high dollar liquor because that is what attracted girls to us. It's like those bug zappers people used to put on their front porches. The Don Pirie was a fluorescent light and the girls were these bugs totally enamored by this light, they couldn't resist getting close and then we'd end up having sex by the end of the night, "zapping" them so to speak. I remember Mike and I used to catch dragon flies and stick them in the zapper's cage just to see what would happen. Our bar tab was up to three digits by the end of the first night, and the next day after we had slept off our Don Pirie and woke up feeling new we decided to hit up the same bar. The bug zapper affect continued the more drinks we bought. Everything

was going well until about the sixth hour when we sent the card off with the cabana boy and it came back bearing very poor news.

"Your card is not going through."

"Run it again," Scott said with confidence.

"Nothing."

This is another one of those moments where if I were a super hero I would fly my ass back to San Marcos and pretend this never happened.

"You're going to jail."

"What?"

"I don't know what else to do; you have to pay the bill son."

"What?" I just kept repeating this four-letter question over and over again until it was joined with tears.

Two Mexican policemen with their semi-automatic rifles in plain view preceded to hand cuff me as I cried and thought about all of the things you hear about jails in foreign countries.

"Let me go back to the hotel and see if someone can give me a card that works, please."

The cops swapped glances and started speaking in Spanish as they guided me to their cars.

"Please take me back to my hotel; it's only a few blocks away. Let me fix this!" I pleaded remembering how Trish over Christmas break had advised me to "fix this" then. Now with my

head being lowered into a Mexican cop car I realized that that would have been the time to fix it.

"Okay." One of the cops spoke up.

"Thank you," I somehow managed to give them directions back to the hotel.

When I got to the room the air conditioner was blasting and Scott was passed out on his bed with his clothes still on.

"Scott get the hell up, you have to fix this man, and it was your tab too man." I shook him violently but he didn't open his eyes.

"Scott, it was your card!" I shook him and my tears started coming out again.

The cops sighed and exchanged glances again as one dug in his belt to retrieve the cuffs again.

"Scott, come on!"

My hands where being pulled back behind my back and my heart hit the pit of my stomach so hard that I just let out this strange yelp. This "I can not believe this," sound that words can't fully capture but the desperation is real.

This prison in Mexico didn't have any floors, just a bunch of dirt that in spots you could see people's damp urine mixed with their cigarette buds. It didn't have a ceiling either.

My back just slid up against a wall and I was so lost and so scared that I tried to shut my eyes so hard that I thought

they would pop through the back of my skull. I performed the same eyelid trick that I used to do when I was a kid and my mom was dragging us out to receive our punishment for her own broken emotions.

I fell asleep.

I woke up to the Mexican sun beating down hard on me and my pants were wet from where I had apparently urinated on them the night before.

I started to cry again.

The door unlocked and a cop came walking towards me and I had images of some archaic middle evil torture that was about to be inflicted on me. I didn't receive any Miranda rights or Habius Corpus; I did manage to remember those terms from all of those days in criminal justice classes.

"You can go?"

"Huh?"

"You're going back to your hotel, it's been paid for."

Like I said, Elizabeth loved the goofies, but if there is a God he blessed her with some amazing gift to see past their quirkiness right to the heart that was somewhere below. Her latest goof had the heart to bail my ass out of jail, and I loved her for dating him and I loved him for bailing me out.

"You want to call someone?"

The cop of this American suburban jail with ceilings and floors and indoor plumbing snapped me back into the current.

“I’ve got no one to call,” I said sitting down on the hard cold slab.

“Okay,” they locked the door.

The next morning I wake up to a microwave beep and the smell of warm processed cheese.

“Breakfast,” the officer slid a tiny burger into the cell on a tiny blue tray.

I blew on it and took a bite. About fifteen minutes after chewing down the burger I feel back asleep. This cycle continued for lunch and dinner and breakfast the next morning. Microwavable cheeseburgers for all three meals, in between each one they’d ask me if I wanted to call anyone.

“Like I said man, I don’t know anybody.”

Finally, after five days and after one of my mid-morning cheeseburgers I hear,

“You can go.”

“Where’s my car?”

“Impounded.”

“Shit.”

“Watch it.”

“Okay how do I get it out?”

"Call the tow company," the officer pushed a phone across the desk toward me.

Three hundred and fifty dollars, I didn't have three dollars ascribed to my name.

I walked out of the jail and started walking with no direction except to a place where I thought I might be able to get some dope. I don't know what to do in this situation except keep walking, and so that's what I do.

Then something brilliant enters my mind and I remember Zuk. I can call Zuk.

Eleven

Robert Pazuki was fucking brilliant. Jack and I could never get over ourselves for getting him high that night at the bowling alley. We couldn't believe the transformation that took hold of this nerd in his horizontal striped shirt. Who spent his Friday nights spraying down other people's athlete's footed shoes as he pushed his spectacles back to their resting place on the brim of his nose. This total worm that probably converted measurements to the metric system in his head at night instead of counting sheep. But after that first hit, Jack's hungry eyes conveyed a new identity, Robert was "Zuk" and he was one of us.

Like I said, Zuk was brilliant. He was eager to get out from under his parents' thumbs, one of those guys that as soon as he turned eighteen he packed his bag and started working hard

as if he had some family to support. Zuk drove cabs as he saved up for law school. He was such a total entrepreneur, one of those guys we learned about in high school economics, but instead of selling "widgets" he would rent out his cabs to the longest calls. He would bribe his way into getting all of the calls that took people from the airport to the suburbs.

Zuk's longest cab drive however, would only yield him a depleted mason jar of quarters, laundry money that I never was able to use.

~

I have been a groomsman a notable amount of times in my life. I never had a problem with this role; it always involved a lot of free alcohol and free company. So I am taking this road trip to Dallas for this wedding, and I am driving a "piece" as I'd say in my effort towards self-censorship. The check engine light, after glowing red for six days, now has a petrified piece of spearmint gum covering it because as my pledge brother Scott (whose car the "piece" was, the "piece" preceded the brand new Maxima that the patio chair I threw off the roof demolished) would say "that light is taunting me." Now the light is not visible below the tiny white minty fresh hard mound. I knew however that in reality the light shined under the gum, and if I didn't know the back story, the truth under the gum, I am sure that I wouldn't need a mechanic to tell me that the slow death

rattles the car seemed to be making every incline we inched up indicated a poor prognosis.

Somewhere along the stretch of scorching seventy mile an hour Texas-asphalt the car sputtered and struggled, then breathed its last. I kind of slapped the dash in an odd "I knew this was coming but still it sucks" kind of way and then shot a glance at Scott. Scott, as the owner of this car, had one of those looks that the survivors of people who struggle for years with cancer have on their faces the night the doctors finally call the time of death. The car and the cancer ridden have been slowly declining for some time. Scott had managed to get most of the vehicle off of the high way with just its left tail hanging on the shoulder as the rest of the body found its grave in the grass. We both sat there for a little bit in our loafers, Dockers, and polo shirts as other healthier cars swished by us, shaking the frame of our deceased. Finally, after about what felt like twenty minutes but was probably twenty seconds real time, Scott put his hand on the handle, checked his blind spots and motioned for me to exit as well. We popped the trunk and took out our hanging suits and duffel bags and I grabbed the mason jar of quarters that was to tide us over through this weekend.

"Should we push?" I asked holding my suit above the wet grass and placing my duffel bag on the hood.

Scott as he playfully kicked the driver side tire quipped, “Nah let’s mercy kill her.” He was laughing which I couldn’t quite understand given that we were quite a ways from Dallas and my skin was already beginning to soak my clothes with Texas-sweat and I had no idea what to do.

Scott gave me this freaky glance, a glimmer of some idea, some great idea. I had seen that glimmer before when we decided to in a sense “mercy kill” Charlie. Scott took out his pocketknife, unflipped the blade, and in one fluid motion with a slight of hand and twist of wrist slashed his own driver’s side tire.

“What in the hell?” I said not believing what my eyes just witnessed.

“Screw this car man, it’s been taunting me the last four years.”

Scott’s vendetta was now complete. I got the sense that he was feeling accomplished, feeling like he somehow got the last word, but really we were still the ones with our overnight bags in hand stuck on the side of a free way a mere twelve hours before we were supposed to be at a chapel handing over a ring. Scott smirked and swung the blade back into its Swiss Army frame, tucked the knife away, untucked his shirt, lit up a cigarette and threw out his thumb.

I put the mason jar of quarters delicately on the hood of the car, untucked my own shirt, shrugged, and put my thumb out. It took about forty-five minutes until finally a middle-aged woman with a sexy passenger pulled over. I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the palm of my hand and briefly touched my cheeks long enough to feel the feverish sensation of a sunburn.

"Broke down?" The woman said in that typical broken sentence that people give when they are cautiously trying to be a Good Samaritan when really in their head they have all sorts of images that are telling them that we are sociopaths and that there are not clothes in those duffel bags but human body parts.

"Yes, I think it was probably the transmission."

She nodded in that way women do when any breathing male homosapien offers a diagnosis for any type of machinery. It didn't matter that Scott didn't know a transmission from a lizard and probably didn't even care. He was a man.

The woman had a little uhaul trailer attached to her tailgate, "Where are you going?"

"Dallas for a wedding."

"You can get in, but you have to sit in the back."

"Okay." Scott glanced at me, grabbed his duffel bag, and made a quick move to the back of the uhaul.

I moved a lot slower as I was not completely sure this was the best deal for us.

"Evans, come on." Scott yelled back at me.

With one really long sigh I put my index finger through my suit hanger, grabbed the duffel bag with the five other fingers, and heaved the jar up with my other hand.

"Oh by the way," the woman said looking at me, "what happened to the tire?"

After thinking about what I was going to say for apparently not nearly as long as I should have I told her, "mercy kill." Her face contorted a little as if her mind was currently confirming all of those images of body parts in duffel bags and she quickly responded, "Well then you boys get in the back, sorry I am afraid that there will not be much light. Try not to step on the boxes."

"Okay," we said in unison as we climbed into what would be our cave for the next three hours. Scott threw his suit and bag down on top of my own and I set the quarters down gingerly next to a box labeled "dishes." Scott turned around and winked. He gave the woman a thumbs up and she briskly shut the door and latched it loudly. Thirty seconds later the trailer jerked out and we heard the sound of our jar tipping over followed by a cascade of copper hitting the floor. I winced as I heard the coins roll all around and I heard Scott get up.

"Shit, help me get these quarters back in that jar."

We ran around the back of the uhaul like blind men, feeling around and shoving quarters into our shirts then wobbly taking them back to our jar. After we solved that crisis, we both sat down in silence and for lack of a better idea we drifted off into a nap.

We woke up when the sun cut at our pupils forcing them to expand and then deflate quickly adjusting to daylight.

"What time is it?" Scott wearily asked.

"About six thirty in the evening, this is where I am dropping you off," the woman said in an authoritative voice.

"Okay," Scott gathered his things and I followed suit.

"Where are we?"

"The stadium."

"We are in Dallas right?"

"Yes, I have to go now," The woman waved.

"Okay, thank you tons."

"Yeah thanks," I added kind of sad that I never got to talk to her daughter in the passenger seat.

We looked around to find utter chaos. After absorbing the sights and smells into our system we finally noticed that we were probably the only white people within walking distance either way you turned.

"What are you white boys doin' here?" a voice flanked us from the side.

"We were hitch hiking and just got dropped off here."

"Figures, I knew you guys musta had no clue where you at."

"Yes we have no clue," I said emphasizing that if a crime was committed it was on behalf of ignorance.

"Where are you headed?" the man with the voice inquired.

"A wedding, St. Joseph's cathedral, we are kind of late what is the quickest way there?" Scott butted into our conversation.

"Hop the A train light rail, it will drop you off on third and sixteenth which is a block away from the church."

"Okay."

"Thanks," I said.

We turned and quickly jetted off, my feet felt heavier and slower and I kept expecting something hard to pelt the back of my head or some heavier footsteps of a large man behind me. It was clear that we did not belong.

Finally, we came up on a light rail stop and took the next "A" we saw.

When we shuffled into the Cathedral, our steps echoed throughout the halls like the steps of every visitor who is not quit ready to enter such a place from the loudness and chaos of the streets right outside the door.

"Where is the Men's room?" I whispered to a girl in an evening dress. She pointed us down the hall. We quickly washed

our faces and changed. We managed to walk in an hour before the ceremony. “Where have you guys *been*?” Fucking Kevin whispered.

“We broke down on the side of the road,” Scott replied to the interrogation.

“With that fucking piece you drive Scott?” Kevin quipped, living up to his name.

“Yea, I slashed her tires too,” Scott relished in the phrase.

Kevin looked at me quizzically and I shot those same “what in the hell?” eyes back his way as if to say that the tire ordeal was not a joint effort and that I was as confused by Scott’s impulsion as he was.

“Well fuck…sorry that happened, but we are glad you’re here,” Kevin nodded to both of us as he directed us toward our places. We looked out over the pews to see the faces of people bathed in stained glass light, the contented face of Jesus looking down upon us sinners, who are doomed at birth to feel the urge to curse in church like Kevin did, or to mac on a bridesmaid in a car in the parking lot right before the reception as Scott did. We are born sinners, doomed to feel the urge to chop a line and invite others to do so, as I did after they stopped serving wine and everyone who was there just for the wedding had long gone home.

I came down from the dope, beer, and cocaine as the sun came up and I was violently shaken awake by Scott who was sputtering out something about getting back before class on Monday.

"What?"

"Evans we forgot something real important in this equation man?" Scott looked at me with wild eyes and an "oh shit" face.

"What?" I said again really pissed that he would A) wake me up in the first place B) tarry so long in telling me why he had woke me up.

"How are we going to get back man?"

My eyelids flashed to the scene of Scott's car with its gashed tire barely touching the pavement as the rest of the wheels rested in the grass.

He grabbed my hand and tried to lift me up as to give me a not so subtle hint that I am to shower and get ready to scheme a way back to San Marcos before we both had to sit in class Monday morning.

"I'm up," I said grabbing a towel and heading toward the shower. In the shower I went through all of my ideas one at a time, which didn't take very long because I was all out of good ideas at this point.

"I got nothing man," I told Scott's eager face which promptly fell once I confessed.

He began to pace and then I had a great idea, “Zuk.” I said audibly and Scott stopped his frenetic pace, “What?” he responded.

“Robert Zuk, I knew him back in high school. The kid drives cabs now.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Scott grabbed the phone.

I called up Zuk and after offering him a jar three quarters of the way full with nickels, he agreed.

Zuk drove up wearing those same black-rimmed glasses, he parked the car with precision that I would expect from Robert Pazukie. At first, I was afraid that he’d be real annoyed at me for even proposing that he drive from San Antonio to Dallas to pick me up for a bunch of nickels and quarters. But after a slight uncomfortable silence he unrolled the window, grinned and waved. Scott and I gathered our things and piled into the back of Zuk’s cab. Zuk clicked off the mile odometer in a gesture of quiet kindness.

We never learned how much that cab ride cost us really, but we gladly handed our jar over to Zuk and shook his hand gratefully as we unloaded our things in front of our apartment complex.

“Thanks man,” I told Zuk and I meant it.

“No problem Evans.”

I looked at him with big smiles because I realized that the bowling alley had not messed up Zuk for good. He was still Robert Pazukie, the kid in the back of Algebra class who was quiet and wanted nothing more but to find a way out of his parent's house and into a job he loved, with a woman he loved, living a life he wanted. I realized then that he never really did fit the "Zuk" mold because the Zuk that Jack and I thought we had created, like our own Frankenstein, would have been stuck on the side of the road high and out of luck, like I had been. But instead, Robert had become a good man, and none of our nights at the bowling alley could have stopped him from that path.

"Thanks again," I yelled back at him as I retreated back into my own apartment.

"Sure thing," Zuk smiled and got back into his cab. He drove off with his hand in a freeze frame wave as he pulled out of the parking lot and headed back toward his dreams of law school.

He is a lawyer today, in Houston.

~

I can call Zuk I thought, now about a block and a half from the jail. I found a pay phone and inserted the quarters. Zuk answered right away.

"Zuk?"

"Hello," he responded.

"Hey it's Evans George," I said slurring a little more than I wanted to.

"Hey Evans."

"I've got a favor," before I could get the rest out Zuk cut me off.

"Listen Evans, I haven't seen you in years."

"I know but I need a ride."

Zuk kind of laughed on the other side of the phone, "Evans I don't drive cabs anymore man."

"Huh?"

"I'm a lawyer, and I've got to go." He hung up before I had a chance to keep soliciting.

My eyes started to unload and I quickly put my hand over my face squeezing my eyes in an effort to sop up the tears. I sucked in some snot and hung back up the receiver. Then some sort of deep anger swelled up from my gut and I yelled a little bit as I kicked the nearest rock on the street. Up ahead, about two blocks or so I spotted a Stop-N-Go, I figured I could at least score some wine and cigarettes.

The wine at the store was in an aisle form, which made it convenient for me to casually slip four bottles down my basketball shorts. I stuck two bottles in the back and two in the front then paid for a pack of cigarettes before leaving. I

didn’t make it very far before I felt like collapsing against the nearest wall, and so that’s what I did. I uncorked the Mad Dog wine and looked around for the best place to sleep. The dumpster just happened to be the structure that blocked the searing fluorescent street lights out. It was also behind the store so it would hide me long enough to get some good sleep. I decided I would not try and smell and that I would focus on getting through the four bottles. I focused hard.

“Is he breathing?”

I heard someone say and I thought maybe I should open my eyelids but it was too tempting to keep them closed at this point.

I heard someone sigh, and then I was startled as my wrist was lifted up in the air.

I opened my eyes a little and the sun made them hurt. I think some sort of sound came out and in my head it had words attached to it but instead it was more of a long grunt.

“What are you doing here?”

I didn’t like his tone. I was after all the patient, and just because I was lying against a dumpster behind a Stop-N-Go doesn’t mean that he could treat me otherwise.

“What?” I said to him with some intentional lip.

“We found some guy dead here just last week.”

“Well it wasn’t me,” I said and then laughed at my own joke after it because I genuinely thought that was funny.

“You need to move. It’s not safe here.” He finished the last line as he heaved my arm around his neck. My feet shuffled around in the cigarettes buds and dirt. Finally, they got some grip and I stood there on my own.

We both looked at each other. I shrugged because I could think of nothing better to do.

He sighed because I think he had better things to do.

“Just trust me all right.” He looked at me briefly then headed back to his ambulance.

“Okay,” I mumbled.

As they began to pull away, the window of the passenger side of the ambulance rolled down.

“I am serious,” the EMS guy gave me a stern look.

“Okay,” I said, now with more passion and in that old familiar tone that I used to give Billy when he told me to be home by a reasonable hour.

The EMS guy sighed and then rolled up his window, as I kicked around the dirt.

Twelve

I did move, but I didn’t get very far. There was a community of us here, stretched out in four corners, like a modern-day Hoover Ville.

Our grid looked like this:

There was a Kroger's on one corner, an Exxon on one corner, and a Stop-N-Go on the other. Everyday we would panhandle or steal from one of these places, although, ever since that EMS guy told me about the dead man behind the dumpster of the Stop-N-Go it became known to me as "dead man's corner store" and I didn't spend the night anywhere near there after that.

Most of us chose to bunk behind the movie theater. Our boxes were greasy from their previous contents of buttered popcorn. People would go in there and buy thirty-two ounces of soda and just about a gallon of popcorn, and then they'd find themselves unable to finish it all. We didn't mind their gluttony and waste because every evening we got their popcorn and hotdogs.

My first night there, check in, I watched as this dark and crow-magnum-like black man, in-between taking a handful of popcorn into his own mouth, threw up a fistful of popcorn into the air causing flocks of birds to circle around and dive in for their free meals.

I guess he noticed me watching him because he paused for a little bit and then with a couple bites left he said,

"If you feed the birds you will be blessed."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"If you feed the birds you will be blessed," he said again, this time more stern and with urgency. He scared me a little so in

response I grabbed a handful of popcorn from a nearby box and pitched a fastball up into the air.

A couple of birds caught it and then landed, squawking for more. And with that he was done, he took a couple more bites of popcorn and then walked off to his own box.

I walked over to the dumpster and rummaged around looking for the best box I could find. Some of them where wet with soda and bits of the filth of the street stuck to their bottoms or crinkled down their corners. I would pick one up only to have it collapse in my hands, getting them all sticky with who the hell knows what. I rummaged around cursing and wiping my grimy hands on my jeans. Finally, I found one, just one stain on the bottom but it hadn't soaked far enough in to the cardboard to jeopardize its sweet stiff structure.

I gingerly pulled it loose from the pile and walked it over near, but not too close, to "feed the birds" man's box. I laid it on its side figuring that I guess the object was to cover your face and as much of your body as possible, difficult for my string bean frame.

"Hey!" someone yelled and I jumped wondering if this was going to be the end of me, if "feed the birds man" had snapped completely.

"Hey," a now more out-of-breath sounding voice came jogging toward me but I couldn't make out its face.

Its foot tapped the box.

“I’m sorry,” I said assuming that I had mistakenly taken someone else’s residence from the pile.

“Who are you?” It said now, with a more curious than threatening tone.

“Evans”

“I’m Rick,” It now had a name.

“Hi Rick.”

“You checking in?”

“I guess.”

“You guess? Shit, you just get thrown out of somewhere?”

“I lost my car.”

“Lost it?”

“Well, I know where it is, it got impounded.”

“Oh yea?”

“Yes,” I said half-way pissed off that he kept asking me these stupid questions that made that stupid lump creep up into my throat and my stupid eyes burn with what I guess was sadness and anger and everything in-between.

“You got any skills?” Rick asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Look man, no free rides here, we hook each other up.”

“I see. I don’t like asking for money.”

“Shit,” he laughed really hard for what seemed like twenty minutes but was probably twenty seconds real time.

“Look,” I said in this real “I’m serious” voice that even shocked myself and made him stop laughing, “I can steal whatever you want okay. Stick it in the shorts, pull my shirt down over it, it’s easy.”

“Well alright, you’ve met Dallas?”

“The guy that feeds the birds?” I wondered out loud.

“You’ll be blessed,” he said with what I imagined must have been a smirk but it was too dark to see.

~

I woke up to the sound of a boot kicking the side of my box.

“Hey!” I yelled out of it, “You’ll dint it, what the hell?” I was enraged by the thought of rummaging in that wet filth muck dollar dumpster again for a new stiff box.

“Time for work,” Rick’s voice came from outside of the box, all I could see was boots with tattered jeans hanging over them and the too bright glare of the sun creeping in.

I scooted out to find Dallas and Ricks’ faces staring down at me with funny smirks. I picked myself up and followed them.

We were heading down Gestner St.

“Rick tells me you don’t ask for money,” Dallas spoke his first words besides his previous prophetic utterance the night before.

He didn’t say this like a question but rather as more of a threat, chilling in its even tone. “You need to get over that if you’re going to stay.” Dallas said this as we neared the parking lot of Denny’s.

“Watch,” Rick whispered to me.

Rick was a squirrelly looking guy, young, average height, and skinny. He looked like the teenage boy that you would hire to cut your lawn for you, even though he was in his twenties and a crack addict. He had a type of credibility in his appearance that Dallas, with his wild eyes and misbegotten street corner prophet ways, could never achieve.

“Ma’m do you have any cash for a meal maybe?”

The woman he asked pulled her purse real close to her chest and scurried hurriedly into her car, not even offering a “no.”

“It’s not hard, give it two hours and you have enough for a couple of dimes,” Rick said, once other potential customers were out of earshot.

“Look around and pick someone,” Dallas said throwing his hands up and his urgency made me nervous so, as soon as I spotted the next human being I hurried up to them.

They happened to be a young family, the dad was holding his little girl in one hand, with a boy in the stroller. Poor choice.

As soon as I approached them the mom quickened her step with the stroller and the dad put up his other hand covering the face of his daughter.

“Hey…”

“What do you want?” the dad cut me short and he had a real bad glare in his eye when he said it.

I didn’t know what to say. I knew what I wanted. I wanted cash. I wanted cocaine. I wanted to geek out, to sit with my legs hanging open, my mouth drooped, and my eyes glossed over. I wanted to feel it all course through my veins. I wanted it so bad that I couldn’t stand it. I wanted it to erase these past few days: losing my car, the image of the hooker’s bloody lip, the phone call to Zuk.

“I just…” I started to say but that stupid lump crept up and I looked at my shoes, “never mind” I mumbled.

After looking at me for a little bit, the dad walked off. The mom had already retreated, and was now standing right behind the glass in the restaurant, the yellow and red Denny’s emblem on the front door hiding half her face and torso, with just her disapproving and worried stare looking out our way. The dad opened the door and they disappeared.

Dallas came up behind me.

“I know,” I stopped him short.

I looked over my right shoulder and in Dallas's fist were crumpled up waded newspapers, "come on," he said gruffly and I had no choice but to follow after him.

~

We seemed to be heading toward the Exxon, but at about the one mile marker there was a Kroger's to my left. I stopped for a little bit.

"Come on," Dallas urged with total impatience.

"No man, I need to go in there."

"Why?" He questioned with those wild man eyes.

"What do you want?" I responded coolly.

At this, he smiled with complete understanding, and for a second there I thought I spotted some sanity. I jaunted off toward the entrance to the Kroger's.

I loosened up my shorts and found someone to bum cents off of for day-old bread.

"Hey man do you have eighty nine cents left on you?"

His face contorted a little and I could almost see him calculate in his brain as he shoved a hand in his pocket and rummaged around a bit.

"I got ten cents," he said.

"Hey thanks," I took it.

"Mam do you have seventy nine cents I could borrow?"

“Well sure!” She plopped her purse down on that part of baskets where you are supposed to plop your children and pulled out her overstuffed wallet.

She handed me a fistful of quarters.

“That’s a dollar, take it,” she smiled and this for some unfair reason gave me the same feeling that the stare of the mom at Denny’s did, total shame, like I was standing in the middle of Kroger’s without any pants on.

“Thanks,” I forced a smile.

I yanked a day-old loaf off the shelf and held onto it with the plastic wrapped around three fingers and the bread wagging back and forth occasionally hitting my knee.

The Mad Dog was chilled under some white lights, I turned to the left and to the right, saw no one, and with the bread wrapped in one hand and my other hand grabbing the wine I shoved two in the front and two in the back, quickly pulling my shirt back over them. There was no one at the ten items or less counter. I paid for the bread and walked out to find Rick and Dallas.

Thirteen

“Hot dog,” Rick said as I walked up to him at the Exxon. Dallas was busy at the opposite end of the parking lot cleaning someone’s windows, giving them a good scrub for a dollar.

I had already opened up one bottle.

“No kidding huh?” Rick looked at me and started to grab the bottle.

“No way man,” I said clutching it close to my chest like that dad at Denny’s clutched his daughter.

“What?”

“Look man, four bottles, that’s for me. What do you want? I will hook you up next time.”

“Go in there and get me some cigs,” he said pointing toward the Exxon door.

“Fine,” I handed him the bottle and pulled the other three out of my shorts as I threw the bread away in the nearest can, we never ate the bread, I bought it to throw off the people at Kroger’s. It always ended up in the trash, or we gave it to the birds.

~

Finally, at a rate of about ten to twenty bucks an hour between the three of us, we had enough for a rock. We went under the overpass and smoked it, sweating through our clothes, our eyes hungry, and our bodies weightless, like for once all the pain and all of the gravity that comes with being human faded away. Paradise lasted for just thirty minutes. That shitty pathetic ratio escaped us, two hours of work; of washing windows, panhandling, or stealing electric razors for black barbershops. Electric razors were big, every black kid wanted

some lightening bolt or Denis Rodman design shaved into their stubble. I'd grab a thirty-dollar razor off the shelf, turn around and sell it for fifteen bucks, and buy a quick rock. Two hours of work for thirty minutes of geeking, the ratio didn't make sense. And once the geeking started, we ran around the four-cornered grid like madmen to keep it from ending.

~

I took orders twice a week for BBQ and clothing.

What kind of jeans and shirts do you want, tenderloin or chicken?

I've always had strong teeth. This benefited me as I gnawed through beige and off-white magnets. A couple of years later the authorities would catch on to this and instead of magnets you would bite through and end up with black ink running down your face and all over the little man on a horse logo that was on the front right chest of pricey pastel collared shirts. But I took orders before the ink came on the scene.

I walked in, my palms sweating and every five seconds pulling up my size thirty-eight baggy jeans. I slipped on size 32, 34, 36, and then stuffed a few shirts in the front. With every pair I checked the retail price. A sixty-dollar pair of jeans yielded me thirty dollars in dough, a perfect half for every product.

“Yo Evans be back here at seven thirty tomorrow morning, Jimmy Dean and eggs.” Dealers were the ones who placed the big orders.

“Okay.”

“And a family four pack of chicken.”

“What?”

“For dinner man.”

In response to this, I just sighed real deep. Eggs were going to be hard. How do you steal eggs? “Carefully,” I mumbled out loud. I placed one hand right below my neck and the other right above my Johnson measuring the length and wagering if a family four pack worth of raw chicken would fit.

Fourteen

We call them “licks,” because really they are not *real* jobs although performing a “lick” does score you some real dough. On the street, once you have a lick that works, you don’t let anyone know about. Because as soon as they find out about it, all of the sudden they want to take it as their own, and then before you know it the checkout boys and security guards are on to your lick and it doesn’t work anymore.

I used to hit up malls to steal shirts with little men on horses on the breast pockets. I once went to the biggest mall in Houston, real big with gigantic glass mirrors on the outside and a collection of brand named stores adorning the inside. After the first time, I never went back there again. I think I

probably look worse than I thought I did at the time. I had these thick sideburns and a little goatee. I had those sideburns way before Jason Priestly on 90210 made them cool and everyone had them. I say all of this because A.) You should know that I am always on top of the trends and B.) You should know that even though I never really thought about it, I looked very much and acted very much like I was homeless, because I was in fact living in a box, whether I remembered it at the particular time of performing a lick or not. I lived in a box with nice clean edges and sides, with only one minor stain on the bottom, probably popcorn grease or soda water, and I searched hard for this box and when this box got worn out, I found others like it. The cops at this gigantic mirrored mall were on to my thick sideburns, and shower-less body. In every store I walked into, I would look over the rack and find one staring at me. After that, I kept my licks restricted to Randall's grocery stores, corner stores, and large department stores that I could bite the magnets off of clothes in.

The best lick was finding a receipt in the parking lot and then returning all of the goods on that receipt, like reverse grocery list shopping.

I've been walking down Gestner for about seven miles now, and the sun is angry with me. It is piss hot outside, a real Texas summer, not just hot but piss hot. I don't really know

what “piss hot” is supposed to mean, all I know is that it seems like the most appropriate description for how it feels outside. So I am walking around this parking lot scouring it for a receipt with more than bread and eggs, and I find a receipt with a schload of cleaning supplies: Windex, Mr. Clean, Pine sol. “Must own a cleaning business,” I thought to myself, and then I saw the most beautiful thing on the bottom of the receipt, “Blue Bell Ice Cream $6.32.” That was a high-roller item at a grocery store, screw your two-dollar tomato paste and eighty-nine cent taco shells, a six-dollar item was just that much closer to a rock of crack.

There were a lot of things on that list.

The Windex was already slipping as the rest of the items tumbled out of my hands onto the conveyor belt, just the gallon of Vanilla, rock solid, in my arm like a football.

The checker looked at me with half confused, half amused eyes.

“I own a cleaning business.”

“I see,” he said as he slid things over the red laser-thing.

“You can’t return that.” He said pointing at my beloved gallon of Blue Bell.

“What?”

“It’s against the law for us to take back dairy products.”

"That's bull shit, I want to see your manager."

"Okay," he said in such a nonchalant way that I thought about taking it back.

"What's the matter, sir?" This guy with a dark blue polo tucked into khakis questioned.

"Why can't I return this?" I said with agitation.

"Because it's against the law to take back dairy products onto our shelves."

"Oh," I said shooting a glance at the checker boy who seemed to be silently reveling on the inside.

"Here you go sir," the boy said handing me the change for the bleach, glass cleaner, and Northwestern- forest- smelling floor cleaner.

"Thanks," I mumbled, and on the way out the sliding doors I snagged a red spoon from the concession area.

Ten dollars in my fist, a seven-mile journey back in front of me, and a gallon of Vanilla opened and melting down my knuckles; I walked back to Gestner for another hit.

~

Once a month was the big day, a party for us in our own right at the Chicano Family Center. I'm not Chicano, but I am eligible for food stamps. The Chicano Family Center would copy down our digits, our SS, and according to the last two digits you were either the first, second, or third day of the month.

You'd have to take this bus downtown; it was really an all day excursion. Lucky for us, Dallas, Rick, and I all had different digits so we were guaranteed a big load of dough every first three days of the month.

We were brilliant. Each time we took our one hundred and eleven bucks worth of stamps and take them directly to some nearby gas station to sell them for seventy-five cents on the dollar. Then, these gas station guys would redeem the stamps through the state and get the full one hundred eleven dollars back, twenty-five dollar profit, easy money.

Seventy-five bucks gets you a lot of rocks.

The Chicano Family Center looks exactly like it sounds it would. In the heart of down town, a grimy building that they rent from the city for a dollar a month.

I walked in the Family Center one day. It was the middle of another piss hot Houston day, so I walked past the stamp line to the room with the rest rooms and free coffee, just to get out of the heat. I sat down on this yellow plastic chair, probably almost as old as me, with the floor having that orange rust color around the chair's legs, like the thing hadn't moved from its place in years. This was the first time I ever gave myself time to scope out the joint.

There was this little boy sitting there, two seats down. He was kind of curled up in his seat with his head lying on the

metal of the neighboring chair. He seemed bored, and tired, running his hand along the plastic of the chair in a slow rhythmic motion. His mom wasn't anywhere near. The boy seemed skinny, a little skinnier than I think most boys his age would be. He would blink those slow blinks that toddlers do when they are near falling asleep, after the tantrum and before the deep breathes. I started to wring my hands; they were kind of sweaty and definitely grimy. I got up and stuck my neck out the doorframe, looking at the winding-snake-line of the food stamp counter and then I glanced back at the boy. I don't know why I had this thought, because the boy would get his food stamps regardless of whether I received mine or not, but for some reason, I felt like I shouldn't be there. I had that sinking sick feeling in my stomach, like shame was a monster that wrapped its tentacles around my shoulders and neck, making them heavy and pushing my head down towards the floor. I stared at the white and yellow stained linoleum for a good enough time to watch the snake-line cut in half at the food stamp counter. Then, I got up and left.

There was a Walgreen's near the Chicano Family Center. A big two story one, but they had all sorts of cameras because down here, people steal all the time. My deal is this, if you act normal people don't think twice. I grabbed a strawberry soda

off the shelf and a Butterfinger, chugged one and chomped on the other and then I am out of there.

On my way out the door a pair of heavy hands landed on my shoulders and tightened their grips.

"You're going to jail." A voice from behind my head thundered.

"For what?"

"Let's look at the tapes," the voice said and he walked me to the back room.

Sure enough, there I was. I knew I had stolen, but what surprised the hell out of me was how awful I looked. My chunky side burns had hair sticking out all over and I definitely looked like I hadn't showered in a while. My hair looked like a seven-year old boy's hair cut, like a little chicken fresh out of the egg, un groomed and sticking straight up.

I went to jail for three days.

I missed my food stamps for that whole month, Dallas and Rick were pissed and I missed the geek-out party.

Fifteen

It's weird, you know? The ruts we find ourselves in. It's strange how even a shallow-muddy-puddle-in-the-middle-of-a parking-lot-kind of lifestyle can all of a sudden become comfortable. It' like when I was in high school I had this truck with a stick shift that lost the thing that makes it click into

drive, so every morning I had to wad up a tiny piece of notebook paper and lodge it in between the shifter and the panel with the gears. Just so it would stick and remain in drive. I never cared to get it fixed, broken ness was just the way it was. Homelessness was like that for me now. Nights and days and nights and days, countless Randall's receipts and fifty-cent window washing jobs. And before I knew it the piss-hot Texas summer had faded, kids had gone back to school, and now it's cold outside and people are off for the holidays. When it gets this cold in Houston, where you can see your breath like you just took a drag of a cigarette, no one is prepared. We don't buy heavy coats and wool, long underwear for a cumulative total of three weeks of freezing weather.

Because of the weather, I would find myself back at "dead man's corner store," the Stop-N-Go, the place that I vowed I would never return to ever sense the EMS guy told me that they'd find dead bodies by the dumpster there. It was the only corner store however, that only had one key to their bathroom. So one of us would take the key, and then all three of us would sneak in and lie parallel on the floor that was sometimes wet with what we hoped was not urine. We'd take the key into the bathroom and lock the door, locking ourselves in, and locking regular travelers who needed to empty their bladders out. We'd rotate between who'd sleep under the hand dryer, so that periodically

one of us could wake up and hit the big chrome button that would blow enough hot air on us to let us sleep for thirty minutes. Sure enough, they'd call the cops on us. The cops would break in, take the key, and scold us. A few times, we actually went to jail for sleeping in a Stop-N-Go bathroom.

Winter sucked because the walk back to our boxes seemed dreadfully cold and unbearable. I wore these thick black combat boots that I found at the Salvation Army, no exactly the best boots for making the trek back to the boxes at the dollar movie theater. So we pass this country club, the kind of place where a round of golf costs a whole two weeks wages of the people who run the place, the teenagers who wash towels and drive around to pick up wayward golf balls. Through the thicket and shade of the oak tree, in the increasingly darkening night we could see a dark wood log cabin looking thing. "Must be the restrooms," Dallas whispered. We figured it was worth looking into and we hopped the fence and sprinted over to the building. It was a total funk-fest. We took off our shoes and hit the dryer off and on until we finally passed out.

I've always loved golf, Pain Stewart was my favorite, and I guess I just wanted to be back at the course. The first tee times are around 7am. I don't think the men who golf at prominent Jewish country clubs are expecting to walk in on three homeless guys with their shoes off passed out on the bathroom

floor, maybe at some shitty par three but not the country club. It felt like we had only taken some fifteen minute power nap, but we awoke to a few guys in Polo shirts calling the country club as we tried to haphazardly lace up our combat boots and hoof it out of there. We ran, jumped the fence again to get back to the street, and jaunted back towards our familiar grid, leaving the pro shop scratching their heads wondering what was the stuff of this myth about homeless men in the bathroom on hole three.

Winter was filled with stories of hand dryers, because we hated the bridge and would never have slept there. With the bridge, every car that passes, every minor sag in the concrete, makes you wonder if it's a cop coming to get you for geeking-out under the bridge. We didn't sleep under the bridge, we hopped around to different public restrooms, and even though it sucked to have to walk around the grid bumming money when even your own breath causes your esophagus to burn because it is so cold outside, winter was also filled with the holidays.

~

Dallas loved Thanksgiving, feeding the birds stuffing with their popcorn, getting three days worth of fill around the local churches. So we go to this church. It was a real classic American looking congregation, with red brick, and a giant steeple. They had hymnals lying around and a giant hall named

“fellowship.” When we walked in, Rick and Dallas immediately played the part, grimy, dark circles around their eyes with bloodshot veins and tired wrinkles. They didn’t care how they looked; there were whole tables dedicated to pies alone. I was embarrassed as I looked around at all of these kids running in circles around tables of turkey and mashed potatoes. I remembered the little boy in a ball on the yellow plastic chairs at the Family Center, I wondered if he had enough to eat today, if he had somewhere to go or if they just bought microwavable Stove Top with their one hundred and fifty dollars worth of Food Stamps. I hated this.

I grabbed a handful of plastic spoons and knives; this congregation must have tithed well because they got the Chinet. Chinet was like card stock with little pools and sections cut into it so that you could separate your beats from your meats. Chinet was good news for Dallas because he liked to pile mounds of food onto his plate, so that it kind of sagged heavy as he took his place amongst the long banquet table of people who were just trying to be good this day.

Sixteen

Jesus, or the idea of Jesus at least, does something funky to people. I’ve seen it go both ways. The Jesus freaks who stand on those street corners yelling at people, calling them fornicators and warning them about Satan’s envoy and the

impending doom of the Apocalypse. Other times, I've looked into people's eyes that say they love God and seen what seemed to me to be this undiscernibly deep pool of a soul. I remember Christmas at Denny's, a whole family of black people in their Sunday best stepped out of their cars after celebrating that story that most of us have heard, the oxen, wise men, angels, Hallelujah, a bright star, and a virgin. One man, simply dressed but put together nicely, he must have been a middle-aged father of the teenage girls and son that walked in front of him. This man pulled out a twenty from his wallet and calmly, casually, and subtly as to not draw attention to himself, placed the bill in my hand and squeezed tightly as he came up uncomfortably close to my ear and whispered "In Jesus name." That stupid lump started to creep up my throat as his gaze met mine and I thought for a second I might cry, but luckily he hurried off to catch his family I think more out of a desire for subtly than because he was uncomfortable by my eminent tears. After he left, I couldn't shake that phrase, "in Jesus name."

~

My first memory of God as a kid wasn't like most kids. God wasn't Santa Claus to me, and I didn't spend my nightly prayers asking for an endless glass of chocolate milk or a chance to ride in a jet plane or something. And Jesus, he wasn't the dude that got you off like he was for most kids, I just didn't think

about him all that much. We did however go to church on occasion. My parents went to a real old-school type of church, pews, robes, stained glass with fat-Flemish-baby angels, the whole deal. Communion was the coolest; they passed around these tiny-half-n-half-like cups and unsalted stale wafers. The "elements" as they called them were scattered on the tray and passed down throughout the rows. You'd take a cup, a shot of Jesus blood, then chase it with a wafer. After church that morning, in my parent's hometown, we piled back in the station wagon for our commute back home. So the three of us kids where sardined in the backseat, after about hour two we did the usual slapping each other just because the proximity pissed us off thing. We always seemed to blow it on that last forty-five minutes when everyone is tired, someone's bladder is in code blue, and it is still piss-hot outside. So Billy slams on the breaks at some point down the road and these tiny little communion cups roll forward under our feet. Naturally, they made that clinking plastic sound, and all of us kids looked at each other. Our mom heard the noise and cranked her neck back in time to spot three little communion cups rolling around the floor.

"You stole from the church?" She said not directing her words at any one of us in particular, but still really disappointed in all of us nonetheless. "Who did that?" the natural Spanish Inquisition began.

“I didn’t,” I pleaded my cause.

“I didn’t do it,” Mike protested because as usual he knew he was the first recipient of the belt.

“I didn’t do it,” Elizabeth squealed from the middle seat.

Obviously, someone was lying. But the thing is that the appearance of the cups did in fact seem to be a mystery to all three of us, like Jesus was playing a sick joke on us and hanging around long after service had ended.

“No one’s going to fess up?” Mom questioned.

We all shrugged, when there is a belt involved that whole taking a hit for the team doesn’t really enter your mind. When we got home, we all were pulled out of the backseat and lined up, like some sort of eerie American-family-firing squad. One by one, the belt cut us, and one by one we all claimed our innocence.

A few swats later, Mom gave up on finding the culprit and just sent us to our rooms, a typical George family road trip ending.

We found out later that Elizabeth just really wanted the cups for her dollhouse. She thought it’d be a great idea if Barbie had a glass to drink out of.

I thought, that if what you got with the blood of Jesus was more blood on your behind, then I am not interested in Jesus.

Seventeen

It was a slow morning. I think I slept all the way through the day before, coming down off what must have been a six-day binge. I slithered out of my box, slowly stood up, and rubbed my hands across my jeans trying to knock some of the dust and ash off of them.

Dallas and Rick seemed to have already trekked down to the grid to begin our usual shtick. My box was looking pretty ratty, wet, it smelled a bit, "I'll need to look for another one tonight," I thought to myself. I felt like taking a sick day 'I got a good buzz real quick and the natural thing after that was to get high. The day already felt real strange, some guy on the corner gave me a doobie and that looped me up real good. I had a real chill buzz and like I said, I really wanted to take a day off, didn't feel like starting the crack cycle just yet. I hadn't taken a hit of marijuana since college, and the mixture between the swag and wine was real mellow, it felt good, and I didn't feel like started the madman run around the grid for the next four days after that first rock. I turn into a real asshole when I buzz like that. I start talking that same trash that generally ends up laying me out with the EMS standing over me asking if I am breathing. I was bullshitting with these bothers on one of the corners of the grid and they were real impressed that I wasn't asking them for a rock. I was kicking it, real cool and

all, a total dope fiend but really felt tommy-tough-nuts on that particular morning. This beat up piece, an old Volkswagen bug, pulls up right beside the curb, something from 1970. These two white boys were sitting in the front; they were looking for a rock.

The brothers immediately dismissed them; they lied and told them that they didn't have a rock on them.

"Why didn't you tell them?" I asked one of the brothers.

"No way man, white boys, that's the 50 no doubt."

I tried to block out the theme song from Hawaii 50 that began to run through my brain.

"No way, come on why don't we give them some?" I made my case for my white kin.

"No way man, I am telling you they're with the 50."

"Whatever, here give me a rock, I'll hook them up." I said nonchalantly and took a rock from one of the brother's hands.

I sauntered up to the piece, checking around both ways, and I bent my head down real low in the window.

"What do you want?"

"A twenty," the guy in the passenger seat ordered up.

They slipped two Hamiltons in my hand and I gave them the rock.

"You're going to have to give me some," I beckoned with an outstretched palm.

"I can't give you some," the guy on the passenger side protested.

"You guys aren't leaving here without giving me something man, none of these other guys would even walk out here to you, come on that's bullshit!" my signature line always works, "that's bullshit."

The guy sighed and handed me a couple of one-sizers just to get the monkey off his back.

They pull out and I swear five minutes later about seven cop cars pull up, surrounding me, the 50. They frisk me down in the parking lot; I get busted for "delivery of a control substance." The sentence back then was 10-99 years, that's real time. Back then crack was just hitting street corners, a cheap high that was hard to kick when you got on it, and that spurred on a lot of murder and violence, a whole economy underground. It was an epidemic, the black death of the streets. The police didn't know how to handle this new wave of substance abuse, so in response they delivered a hefty sentence. I thought about 10 years of cheeseburgers and almost pissed my pants in fear.

~

I've never met a neo-Nazi, but in those days I really think I looked like one. My frame is real tall and lanky and when you don't eat for six days because of a geek fest, you're dangerously close to showing some rib and when they shave your

head in jail it just doesn't help the appearance much. Even though I was tall, I was not a fighter. They stuck me in an eight-man cell with thirty-two other guys, that's a lame ratio. There were only eight beds, you had to fight to get one of them, and I slept on the floor. This nineteen year-old kid, "Skateboard," ran the cell. He didn't run the cell because he was smart or particularly talented at government, he ran it because he kicked the ass of the guy whom ran it before him. I wasn't in the mood to fight; I just wished I could poop without everybody seeing me, that's a luxury you don't get in prison. "Three hots and a cot" was what you were supposed to get, I got the "hots" and put on some lbs. because of it, but a cot was a dream that was never realized at Harris County.

We liked to play spades but cards were jail contraband. So, everyday the guards would slide a tray through the hole of the cell and we'd scarf down food that reminded me a lot of a cross between airplane food and elementary school cafeteria food. They gave us those same half-pints of milk that you'd get in public school too. Real ironic seeing those same anti-drug campaigns you used to stare at in grade school, now staring up at you in a jail cell for your delivery of a controlled substance charge. We'd take our cartons, wash them out, and carefully tear the corners until we had four "cards." Then we'd permanent marker the faces on the white sides, they worked for only about a day

of spades before they became flimsy and you could tell what card was what by how jacked up it was. That was our entertainment; we got exercise only once a week, and my whole time there I played basketball only twice.

Like I said, I wasn't much into fighting, I'd been laid out enough, but when someone steals your green beans when you don't have any crack to calm your stomach, you've gotta throw some fists.

Skateboard took his fork and made his rounds around the cell, taking people's pineapples, chicken fingers, and green beans with one swift swoop of a Spork. When he got to me, he scooped up some green beans and the rage welled up inside of my stomach, "that's bullshit!" I yelled back at him. "Give them back now man," I told him sternly and Skateboard took his right fist and sunk it right into my gut. That's about all I needed to shut up. Some of the guards came running in, too much commotion, there must have been a fight.

"What's going on here?"

"Nothing," Skateboard spoke up.

The guard rolled his eys and I am assuming figured it'd be too much trouble to go through this again. "This," was the protocol that came after a fight. The guards would come in, find out who hit who and take both cellmates and stick each of them into a new cell, shaking up the totem poll yet again. Because

once you shifted cells, you were not the Alpha dog anymore and you were going to have to throw some fists to reclaim your stake.

"Evans George," another guard called out.

"Yes," I spoke up.

"Come with me,," and with that two guards came on either side of me and locked the door behind me. They took me to the Sheriff's office, which I thought was weird and it reminded me of the principle's office so much that my hands started to automatically sweat. We just sat there for a while looking at each other, I really had no clue why I was there.

"Listen," the sheriff finally broke the eerie silence, "your parents just called, they're worried about you. Do you want to talk to them?"

That stupid lump began to creep up in my throat again. At Thanksgiving I had walked over to the pay phone at Stop-N-Go and stuck some quarters in there, but as soon as the first ring I put the phone back on the hook because I didn't know what to say. I did the same thing at Christmas, but I had the balls to let it ring twice, then I hung up. I did it one last time on my birthday, but again I couldn't wait for any voice on the other side. I started to cry a little and I quickly moved my shoulder up to catch the water because my stupid hands were behind my back.

“What do I say?” I looked to the sheriff for guidance.

He sighed and gave me sympathetic eyes, those same eyes that Trish gave me when I set her couch on fire, then he told me.

“Son they know the charge, they’ve heard what it’s been like these past months. You don’t have to say much to explain, just talk to them, give it a try.”

“Okay,” I agreed and he slid the ringing phone across the table.

“Evans?” my Mom’s voice came from the other side of the receiver.

“Yea mom.”

“Do you want us to bail you out?”

I was a little shocked that that was the first thing she could get out. I didn’t really know what to expect, but for some reason that proposition seemed strange.

“There’s not much reason to, my court date is in two weeks anyway,” I finally answered.

“What’s the sentence?” she questioned and I could tell that she was already cringing a little.

I looked up at the sheriff, “10-99 years,” I said and my voice cracked and wavered a little.

They walk you in on this chain gang type of set up, everyone has their little slip and their court appointed attorney. I had a family friend representing me, a call to somebody who knew somebody type of thing. My hands were more

than the usual sweaty, practically dripping, like after you have played seven innings or run seven miles.

It was a first offense. I got two years probation.

Probation is a cakewalk. There are only three rules: no drugs, you have to get a job, and you periodically have to pee in a cup.

We all walked back to our cells, and those of us who got probation were told that within the next few hours we'd be let go. Elizabeth, my sister, was driving up from Austin to come and get me, only to immediately drop me off at a treatment center in Hunt, Texas.

"When should I get there?" Elizabeth asked me through the receiver, it was the first time that I'd heard her voice in over a year.

"Don't know, they didn't give me a time."

"If you get out before I come promise me that you won't do anything."

"Ok."

"Evans, promise me... please."

"Ok." I said kind of annoyed, with the same tone I used when Billy told me to be home at a reasonable hour and when the EMS guy told me to stop sleeping at "dead man's corner store."

"I'll be there soon." She said it and it dripped with loving care.

"Ok." She began to say bye, and I remembered to cut her off. "Hey," I said fast trying to beat that stupid lump that began to creep up in my throat, "thanks Elizabeth," I finished getting it out before the lump would have made my voice crack and waver.

"I love you," she finished, unashamedly teary sounding, because to her the lump is no big thing.

Eighteen

I got out a couple of hours early.

They give you back your stuff, but I was broke when I went in, so I slipped on my basketball shorts and laced up my shoes with absolutely no direction, just happy to be free. I'm aimlessly walking around downtown Houston. It felt like the last time, the time I was let go from the microwavable cheeseburger jail. I hook up with a couple of black guys, telling them that I just got out, and they immediately ask me if I want to get high. I didn't have even eight bucks to me name and between the three of them they only had a couple of dollars. We passed a corner store; I gave them a big-eye-glance and slipped in. I shoved a bottle of Mad Dog down my shorts, and as soon as I got out the door I was swigging off the top. Naturally, after gulping down enough Mad Dog, I wanted to smoke a rock. We start panhandeling, we get a rock, and we smoke it, the drive of the craving is so strong that all of this seems to happen in one grand chaotic

flash. Then my heart does this thing where it sinks to the pit of my stomach like a rock in a wish washy stream, its pound is fast and erratic and loud and my stomach continues to slosh with wine, jostling my heart it seems, even more. This happened because I suddenly remember that my sister is supposed to be here right about now, as this thought occurs to me, the pipe with our second rock is passed in front of my face. I inhale and then I begin to look in between alleys and street corners to see if I can spot my sister's Pathfinder. This reminds me of when I used to lose my mom in the grocery store because I'd get distracted by something and she'd keep walking, and before I knew it, I was weaving in and out of aisles trying to spot her figure, scared with my heart pounding.

I spot Elizabeth's car, she was driving around downtown frantically trying to find me. I get in and she knows as soon as I hit the seat. She's crying, telling me that I promised her I wouldn't do this. I felt bad but I had nothing in me that wasn't so bathed in dopamine, nothing in me that was sober enough to express any sort of remorse, my tongue was lazy and so she looked at me, wiped her eyes on her shoulder shirt sleeve, and drove us to a hotel so I could sleep off the drug before I checked into treatment. The whole time she is driving us, there is a word spoken and we are both sort of blankly staring out one of the windows, she out the front and me the passenger. I'm sure

this is not what she wanted. I am sure that she wanted to give me something good to hold onto, something encouraging and heart felt to remember when I checked into treatment. I am sure she had imagined and wanted to pick me up from the jail, share in a hug, and talk about how things are going to be okay as we drove through Texas country toward treatment, but instead all she got was my glossy eyes and lazy tongue. Instead, all Elizabeth got was the me that had been, every year since my commencement ceremony in San Marcos.

We checked in at a hotel with run by this guy I knew from high school who got his management degree from the University of Houston, I can't seem to help that pieces of my past keep cropping up everywhere I turn. He is stoked to see us, and when he gets off of his shift we decide that it'd be a great idea to head over to Sam's Boat, the bar that I first met Coreene "fake tits" at. This whole time Elizabeth has gone into broken record mode and just keeps repeating things and alternating between, "why are you doing this?" and "what's the point?" with really sad eyes. She could not keep me from going to the bar, but she was going with us, determined to not let me leave her sight until I checked into La Hacienda in Hunt, Texas.

Part Three

(Treatment and God)

Nineteen

Dr. Mehendale, he was Indian, the Southeast Asian kind of Indian and he knew addiction like his own lungs. He was a medical doctor and he could tell you everything you needed to know about why you wanted to geek-out, he could explain things, and he could take away the mystery of why smoking little crystallized balls made you feel like you were God and like the weight of the world was nothing. He told me about Dopamine pathways and the way my brain lights up.

I ended up loving him and admiring his brilliance.

But in the beginning, on that first day when he was sitting across from me, when I was supposed to spill my medical history. That day, in those plastic chairs, I just found him really fucking annoying.

So I am sitting in this chair and I'm feeling really stripped down and bare at this point. Mehendale was looking at me, as if he could diagram and map out my whole life better than I could myself. Real piercing eyes, gentle but totally piercing, like Ben Kingsley in the movie *Ghandi*.

"So, Evans have you ever blacked out?"

"Sure, but you know just once."

"Okay, have you ever gotten a DWI?"

"I got one about five years ago."

"What did you blow?"

"A 2.3."

Saying that is kind of like a computer programmer talking in binary code. 2.3 is an addict's jargon, it's like three times the limit for driving legally under the influence, but according to Mehendale normal people wouldn't know such things.

"You don't think you have a problem with alcohol?"

"No."

This I found to be a particularly shitty question; I had already admitted to having a crack problem, wasn't that enough?

"I'm just going to say a couple of things about this." Mehendale was used to this, it felt like he had given this same old speech to many other people. It felt like he had sermonized to others who did not want to agree with their parents or their spouses or their kids who were telling them what deep down inside they already knew, that they were not normal but that they were addicts.

"Normal people, Evans, they don't black out, not even once, and they usually do not get DWIs. It is a substantial problem to drink you to the point of shutting down. And you saying that anyone could have gotten a DWI, statistically that just doesn't match up either."

Three hundred and sixty five times five is what… 1825. I hadn't drank only maybe twenty days out of all 1825 days of the five years before Mehendale and I sat down across from each other.

"Here's the fact. You have to drive 1500 times drunk before you are pulled over. That's the odds of most people who get a DWI."

I started to do some math in my head, convinced that I was just unlucky. Then I realized that I had probably driven 800 times drunk and that this little conversation was beginning to feel like I was living inside a public service announcement.

"I want you to think about that."

"Fine, I mean whatever."

Again, that same tone that I used to give Billy when he asked me to be home at a reasonable hour creeped out and Mehendale just let it roll off of him because that's most likely the tone that everyone else gives too.

"Chemicals are chemicals Evans. If you are addicted to one, the other usually follows. Eventually, you are going to drink again and then you will want something else too."

"Okay." That's really all I could think of replying with.

Mehendale shook my hand after that and I went back to my room.

You hear all of these stories about how people hate treatment and how they usually can not wait to just bust out of there and go light something up, but people really liked me in treatment so I naturally really liked treatment. I was okay there, I was okay is Buzz died and it was just Evans. And "just Evans" happened to be really popular at treatment, hot shit even. I always got elected president of something, like student council but instead of a group of pubescent kids, it was a group of junkies.

After awhile, I even expected people to start walking around with La Hacienda letter jackets.

"Just Evans" had thirty days to be for the first time since Darren and summer camp, okay. Kurt was my group leader, I was in with the young adults, Kurt was a real cool guy, but Pete was the first guy that made me cry. We had these weekly meetings. Dr. Mehendale would explain the inner workings of our fucked up habits and then we'd break off into smaller groups and explain how these habits were destroying us and how ashamedly we loved that enough to let it destroy us a little more each time.

Pete made me cry on a night that had a lot of stars out. Mehendale has just finished this spiel on why everyone who uses walks around like zombies when they're not using because we've all seriously rewired our dopamine receptors and now everything that used to excite us just totally blows in comparison to

crack. Then we break off and Kurt starts talking about how we will all never make it without believing in something greater than ourselves. He uses the all-encompassing god term and tells us that it's okay if we use lower case letter "g" and don't really define him as Krishna, or Allah, or Jesus, just as long as we admit and believe that transformation lies outside of ourselves in some other realm where there is a soul and some sort of creator, organizer, or maestro of souls. When it cam time for me to talk, I got antsy and frustrated.

"I want to but I just can't. I mean how do you believe, really how do you do that?" This is a valid question. I mean how does a created thing really acknowledge it's creator when the creator seemed to have stepped away as soon as he finished his final draft, leaving all of us saints here on earth wandering around, trying to make something of nothing and all the time wondering why it isn't any easier and why it doesn't ever seem to be right. How does a painting really have a relationship with a painter? And if that's a valid question then this must be too, how does a soul relate to the keeper and creator of souls? All of this philosophical crap spilled out of me and the whole time my leg was bouncing up and down and my arms were flailing and I felt kind of bad because I didn't want to kill the god thing for anyone who believed in it, I just couldn't figure out how to believe in it myself. I did want to be someone who believed and

I guess Pete picked up on this when after the meeting he tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to join him outside. I liked Pete, but I had never really talked with him and I was worried that maybe I had offended him with my how could you believe in God talk, little g or not. Pete didn't seem angry though; he smiled and motioned with his hands toward the sky. "Look up man, do you feel anything?"

I felt a lot of things. I was two weeks into treatment and "just Evans" was working well for me, and then Kurt had to go and in some ways spoil it by letting me know that "just Evans" won't make it once my thirty days was up, that I needed some sort of god if I had any hope in not reverting back to the shit hole I came from. But Kurt could offer no direct route to what he was talking about, he couldn't offer me any words about how to believe in it, he couldn't make me believe and I thought I needed something to make me believe if believing was possible.

"Like what?" I finally responded.

"Like God."

"I want to but I can't Pete, I just… I don't know."

"But you want to?"

"Well, yeah."

"So quit fighting it man," Pete looked at me with intense eyes and then looked back up at the glittering blackness above our heads. "Isn't it enough proof?"

“What?” I replied.

“This,” he said pointing up toward the black, “and the fact you’re not dead yet, I mean how are you here Evans, really?”

I shrugged. Pete had a point, I could have been paralyzed back in high school when Jack Miller ran me over with a pickup truck, I could have been set on fire when I slept through Trish’s couch fire with my cigarette still hanging out of my mouth, I could have died when I collided with that truck when Allison Miller and I were driving around naked and high, I could have overdosed, or even choked on my own vomit on any numerous occasion when I blacked out. The list was endless, somehow I had made it this far, some how the sky in all of it’s blackness was lit by little balls of fire, somehow Pete cared and he was telling me know about how somehow there was someone orchestrating all of this, and Pete wanted me to meet him.

And that’s when I started to cry a little bit.

“Don’t fight it anymore, just let it happen.” That was Pete’s version of what people like to call the “sinners prayer.” We had already admitted that we were sinners in every other meeting with Dr. Mehendale; all that was next was our grabbing hold of our redemption.

I started to sob.

I covered my face and let my hands fill with snot and salt water, and I just sobbed. Whenever I looked up at Pete he was just smiling and nodding in agreement.

That's my beautiful conversion story.

I don't keep up with Pete Lopez these days.

I woke up the next morning and I didn't see anything different. At first this was a bummer to me, but then I figured this must happen to lots of people after they are converted. So, I just sighed and rolled out of bed. I didn't feel weightless or tingly, but I did believe in God. I was now Evans George, who believed in something.

Twenty

Graduating from treatment is unlike any other graduation that I had experienced. In kindergarten all you really do is slop your primary-color-painted hand on some manila paper, sign it with backwards letters, and then sing some song while your mom takes a picture. In high school, I just couldn't wait to get out of those hard plastic chairs and spend the last night getting balls to the wall high. Billy kind of ruined that night for me when he found the dime bag the next morning. Graduating from college was a blur, but I know it happened because I have that nice gold-rimmed piece of paper in a regal looking frame to prove it.

At the end of my thirty days in treatment there weren't any songs, or finger-paints, or signatures in cursive by the dean. We sat around in a circle, like we always did as the "young adult" group, addicted and learning how to live again, this time without chemicals. Like I said, I liked La Hacienda because it felt like I was captain of the football team all over again, fucking popular and loving every minute of it.

"Evans you can't just go back home," said the voice of Kurt, the voice of reason. Kurt knew everyone's history, how their dads beat them, how they were hugged too little or too much, how they were allowed to watch too much adult T.V., and all the other pathogenic crap that parents put their kids through. Kurt knew my history too.

"Something will get said, something will happen and you will blow up, your mom will blow up too, and then you're back out."

I nodded because he was right and because Kurt had proved himself to be a pretty good guy this whole time.

"There's a halfway house…"

"No way man," I cut him off before Kurt could finish his sentence.

"Before you say anything remember what I just told you," Kurt gave me these squinty eyes. Those eyes totally mean something in treatment. Those eyes mean that your story is

typical, like if you gave a psychiatrist your history and your habits and asked him to fill in the blank, then he'd get it right on; And he'd be squinting his eyes the whole time.

Evans George, father was an alcoholic, mom blew up sometimes. Evans has spent the past three months living on the street doing crack. He hasn't gone one day sober in four years, and he has a temper of his own. He is graduating from treatment, where he will then go back home, move in with his parents. There his mom will blow up and _____

That blank is an easy one to fill, even if you aren't a doctor.

"Fine, you're right." I admitted.

"It's in Florida, Cocoa Peach actually." Kurt said with raised eyebrows.

Cocoa Beach, a land of golf courses, retirement homes, and waterfront properties. I nodded in agreement, and moved to Millburn, Florida (Kurt, it was actually about forty-five minutes from Cocoa Beach) the next month.

The halfway house had five rules: no girls, you had to come home every night, no firearms, no drugs, and you had to get a job. This house is a piece of shit but at least it is right on the beach. It was like six apartment buildings. Right next to the building was this local Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, which I hated because every person in recovery is drinking like six cups of coffee and chain smoking. So in this AA meeting everyone

has this raspy smoker's voice and coffee breath and the whole time my palms are sweaty and I am nervous that it'll get quite and that they'll start calling on people. And I keep glancing at this lady's skin that looks like taught leather with a few cracks in it, but she's only like thirty-eight years old or something. I had to go though; I had finally admitted that I was in-fact an alcoholic.

So I go to these meetings and I get this job at a miniature putt-putt course and café. I'm a fry cook and I work in the back with no air conditioning. The Florida humidity off the ocean feels like this sauna and I start sweating all over in the back kitchen, my greasy fingers picking up orders to be filled, and my brow dripping sweat into people's hamburgers. They didn't know about all the sweat, they liked their cheeseburgers and I liked the pace of the job because there was always an order to be filled until finally you were able to go home.

I still go to clubs at this point, but I slam Diet Cokes back perpetually the whole time because I need something in my hands and mouth and I was nervous. I would try to talk to these girls and it was like I was trying to talk to Stephanie all over again. It was like the time at Denny's when I tried to ask that dad for a couple of bucks, slurring and stammering because the words seemed thick and a choking hazard. So at these clubs, I stumbled, stuttered, and stammered over my words, choking on

charming sayings that sounded right in my head but never really made it past there. I thought these girls were so cute and I just couldn't find the right words. It helped that I would go to the clubs with Wade. We called him "get laid Wade." He knew how to talk to girls, to the summer camp counselor girls of the world.

Wade worked construction all day, in his Levi jeans, ratty t-shirts, thick-rubber-soled work boots and hard hats. He had a smirk that would charm you and mock your uncharismatic ways all at the same time. He'd throw bricks just as good as the rest of them. He'd get up at five in the morning and fix a cup of coffee that he'd refill all day until he got home in the evening. When he got home, I used to figure that he'd be too tired to hang, but instead he would drive me to the dog races. A lot of us didn't have cars at the halfway house, so we'd share and fit out our work schedules to make it work. But Wade had a car.

Wade also traded addictions. He'd make these ridiculous bets on these greyhounds, bets where five dogs would have to come in order. No one could talk him out of this, although everyone knew. We all traded things for other things, we all dropped one habit and picked up a new one by the end of the week. Wade had been living there for five years, so he was exempt from group counseling that everyone else did once a week in Cocoa Beach. When Wade moved out, the criminal moved in.

You couldn't trust your roommates; they were all dope fiends just like you had been. They all made a lifestyle out of lying and hawking other people's stuff. No one wants to be so selfish, but the drive for more just supercedes anyone else's feelings. One other thing, people do some stupid shit in the first few months of recovery. Some people hate even the few rules they get, and they go back out as fast as they came in. So, this guy from Battle Creek, Michigan moved in at the same time that I was nearing my sixth month mark of sobriety. I now have a car, a checking account, and the steadiest job of my adult life thus far. Pretty soon, I notice that I'm missing some cash in this checking account. I go to the bank and they have the nerve to tell me that, "you are taking the money out, sir." I probably muttered my typical "that's bullshit" line but I said it under my breath because I was trying not to swear so much these days. As it turned out, this Battle Creek-guy was taking my car out and then cashing my checks using my driver's license. So one night, I pretend I am asleep.

I lay down, sprawled with one arm out, to make it more convincing. I knew he'd be coming in near the middle of the night. It was dark so I put the wallet on my nightstand. Sure enough, Battle Creek-guy moved toward my nightstand and when he did, my arm flew up and caught his wrist.

“What the hell!?” I shocked myself with my own rage. I didn’t expect my temper to be so high when I had already found out anyway.

He just stood there looking at me with what I must assume would have been wide eyes but it was too dark to see.

“I’m sorry man,” he began to say and his voice was quivering and quaking a little.

I threw up my hand and let his wrist go and then stomped on the floor with my foot, frustrated.

“God, why would you do that?” I was kind of sad if you want to know the truth. We were all in this gig together, and none of us enjoyed being where we were. I was making five bucks an hour, I had just pulled it together for the first time probably since Uncle Mutts BBQ and now my own roommate was stealing from me.

“I just…” I couldn’t really get the words out because I just wanted him to think that I just wanted to beat his head in, but in actuality I wouldn’t do that because I have never really been able to do that.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated the apology with his face looking at the ground.

“God, you know, we go to group together, we carpool, Jesus we are just trying to work and be normal.” I was surprised that I was yelling a bit. I hadn’t ever been this emotional on the

streets because my brain was too dull and numb, these emotions felt hot and sensitive and wrong.

"I didn't…" he began to say what I already knew inside my own self.

"I know." I stopped him short. "I get it man, but you know you can't live here anymore."

With that statement, Battle Creek- guy packed his bags and went back home. I'd get calls from him every now and again, and he'd tell me that he was just drinking a little. I knew and I know he knew too that it was only a little while before "a little" turned into something monstrous and impossible to pen down.

Twenty-One

At the halfway house we like Spades. Some of us played the game in prison, and others of us just thought it was a great game for groups. In prison we had to use these soggy-stained milk carton sides and magic marker the numbers on. We got real playing cards here. This was definitely better than prison where people are playing for lemon crème cookies and cigarettes, and if you lost you might lose your cot or your floor sleeping space.

I lived in that house a little over a year, enough time to get sober and pick up golf. I played practically every day, remembering the nights Dallas and I spent in clubhouse bathrooms

under the hand dryers and freaking out the rich yuppies that played that next morning for their business meetings and contract signings. Wade traded his dope for dogs and I traded mine for golf, five days a week because it was cheap. In retirement towns the price wars are thick between golf courses. I loved Payne Stewart. Other guys were good but Payne seemed like a guy that would be fun to go share a beer with, or a Diet Coke if you were an alcoholic. He also had some great plaid shorts.

The coolest thing was watching the space shuttle, "Atlantis," launch. That thing lit up the sky and you could hear it miles away too. We all piled into our two cars and tried to get as close to the launch as possible. Like I said this halfway house was a total piece, the house itself that is, but you could not beat the scenery. I found out recently, that my name, "Evans" means "God has been gracious." I guess these nights, like the space shuttle night where the sky lit up like a fireball right over the dark green waters were proof of that. Even when I was homeless, I got to see one of the best rock concerts in history. Robert Smith and The Cure played at this amphitheater in this haughty place in Houston. What business does a homeless crack addict have going to a Cure concert? An old college friend had got in touch with me and she picked me up. We both sat on the grass and drank one right after another

to get a buzz and stave off the craving to smoke crack long enough, while the straight edge yuppies who were with us were there. When I was on the street, interacting with people who didn't smoke crack was a rarity and it always shocked me to find people who didn't. I'd forgotten how to handle myself without a rock (cocaine that is). Finally, someone passed a joint around and it turned out to be one of the greatest concerts ever. I'm not saying that God's grace had anything to do with the drugs, and I'm not saying that God appreciated the drugs, but it always seemed like I was surrounded by some real beautiful stuff. Rock concerts when I was living on the street, popularity when I was in treatment, and Cocoa Beach when I was living at a halfway house, that's a sweet deal either way you cut it.

After I got sobriety and a golf swing, I knew it was time to go back home. I'd been living there for fifteen months. Elizabeth, my sister who'd visited me a few times, flew down to Florida and we drove back to Texas. I moved into her Austin apartment, slept on the couch, and started dating one of her friends. It was that type of thing where you're living somewhere but you're spending the night somewhere else. Technically, I lived at Elizabeth's, but I spent the night with Tiffany.

Twenty-Two

It sucks when you mess up a relationship, especially if it's one of your sister's friends. It was a bad deal, the break

up that is, just how it happened with me and Tiffany. It was a worse deal when that made this awkwardness between her and my sister, and I was Elizabeth's tenant. Luckily, it was at about this time, four months after leaving La Hacienda that my brother Mike cut out a hiring add in the San Antonio paper and mailed it to me. It was just like our hunting days and that job in Houston, I would look to Mike to see how he loaded his gun and cocked it, which deer he chose to take out, and I would write my own resume copying the format of his as I went along. The add that Mike mailed was for some golf resort. For the past four months all I was doing was golfing, so I moved to San Antonio and the first week Mike's wife takes me apartment shopping. The very first one is this pad that sits right above the Majestic Theater, I fell in love with it on first glance. I thought about the girls in long evening dresses and pinned up hair on the arms of guys in suits, it's this haughty urban utopia effect at night and this inner-city grit in the day, this place is perfect for me.

So I am at this gold resort handing people buckets of balls and keys to carts and this guy walks in.

"No way Bubba?"

"Hey man, hey I do by Jack now."

I couldn't help but laugh at him, he was being the most serious I'd seen him, "alright," I paused long enough to let him

think that I'd honor his seemingly spontaneous name change, then I blurted "Bubba!"

"Bubba was my using name." He was most the serious when he said this, I looked at him for what felt like twenty minutes but was probably twenty seconds real time.

"Hey that's cool." I finally responded.

"I hear you've got sobriety now?" Jack asked.

"Yea, I've got about two years, you?"

"I've got about nine years," Jack replied.

I was kind of shocked by this, how did this guy with the black shaving kit get so many years on me? I didn't want to think about the difference, so I rang him up for a free round of golf. Birds of a feather flock together, Jack Miller used to be a user just like me, and now I found myself a normal friend who could do normal things, and I only had to go as far as my own past.

~

There's this phrase that's tossed around in those meetings where phrases get tossed around a lot, AA meetings. The phrase goes like this, "my disease is in between my ears," addiction begins with obsession. Alcoholism cannot go uncured, the obsession will get to you, tear you down, and put you right back to the place that you swore you would never go to. I couldn't believe that in two years that obsession was obliterated. I

would go to clubs and slam back my Diet Cokes without any after thought. I was able to say something without choking on my own words, it all felt normal, and the years started to blur together because it was all so normal. I get this job working at this intramural sports club; people would play in these leagues on Monday and Tuesday nights and then get half off on drinks. The market sucks in this city so this Texas piece of the sports club chain closes down, and I start working at this Jewish deli. It was called "Max's Deli," and it had this problem of the salads being too hot and the soups being too cold. So this Jewish guy, Stewart, he hires me to manage this place better, to save it.

It's weird when you conquer something. It's like you feel like you have a right to feel like you completely understand everyone else who is stuck in that same sordid position that you once were in.

I'm watching this waitress, twirl in between tables with her tray tipping, spilling people's drinks down her arm and sometimes on their shirts. Her hair is pretty ragged and you could kind of tell if you looked hard enough that her make up was from yesterday. Problems with appearance are one thing, if you have this phenomenal personality to make up for it. But this waitress would curse at people. Stewart wouldn't fire her because she was, "on medication."

"So what, yea she's on medication but she won't take it. If she took it we wouldn't have this problem." I shot back at him.

"Besides, she stays up late and drinks and comes in all messed up, who wants scrambled eggs from that?"

My time at Max's was just a long string of conversations like that, eventually they shut down and I found the answer to my question, that is, nobody wants scrambled eggs from that.

Twenty-Three

I'm not particularly a fan of shopping. This could be because I have never had a particularly high amount of cash to my name, or it could be the memories I had of stealing designer jeans and polo shirts. It would be great if department stores could like read your mind, if the stores could know already what you would want and what size you would wear, and if you could just come home one day and have those clothes already hanging in your closet. So, naturally, this idea of a personal shopper was real intriguing to me. I met Mike Rodriguez at the apartment complex, the same way I got that landscaping job. I just hang around and strike up these conversations where people offer me work. This personal shopper guy maxes out is credit cards buying twenty thousand dollars worth of suit and leather for men who don't like to shop for themselves. Mike and I go to Paris, he is after all a clothes guy, and from there we meet up with Elizabeth. Thank God I had worked at Max's Deli and learned all

of my Yiddish phrases, potatoes pancakes and the whole deal, because Elizabeth had married a Jew. So, Elizabeth and her new husband, Rick, are in Florence. Western Europe, I quickly realize, is different from Texas and it only takes a few hours to get to Italy from Paris, with no sprawling desert and oil-rigged landscapes to go through. Mike and I go to Florence to meet up with Rick and Elizabeth. It's there that I meet this guy who actually *makes money* trading *his own money*. It's a fairytale only adults could believe in I am sure. This stock-trader-guy starts talking with me about the logistics, or more specifically, how if you trade your own money then you don't have to be licensed, you just spend a whole workweek buying and selling essentially what you don't have to begin with. And believe me, I really didn't have enough to even start day trading, but this complete stranger, this stock-trader-guy spots me fifteen grand to start me. I had to put in two weeks of paper trading, this mock form of buying and selling just to see if I liked it enough to stick with it. I loved it. It reminded me of fourth grade when we did a mock Oregon Trail because on the trail the stakes were high, you could spring for a spare wheel and five pounds of beef here but if you got a fever later then you'd be wishing that you had one less pound of beef and a couple of ounces of penicillin. In trading, the stakes were high; it was something to keep my blood pumping. I was

constantly calling people, checking the news, and going to work in my gym clothes. Like the trail, you started with a minimal amount, but instead of sacks of flour in day trading you began with thirty grand and you could bet up to thirteen times that amount. This means that I could have dug myself a million dollar hole, but it was a matter of seconds and when things got sour you sold the rancid stock. Pretty soon, you made enough money, hundreds of thousands, and your buying power increased exponentially to where you could buy bigger blocks and larger shares. I had my hand in brands that I was eating, drinking, and wearing. I was a five-hour at a time highest tax bracket American man, I would sell enough to get a six digit amount of money and then drop out at the end of the day to avoid a millionaire dollar grave. I don’t care how altruistic you want to be in your heart, everyone wants a taste of that lifestyle. There were three of us boys and we’d get these tables of twenty people at these upscale restaurants, charging up a five hundred dollar tab. The waitress would take each of our cards, slip them into her hand, one of us would pick the right or left hand and whose ever card got chosen would pay. It was that obnoxious, the next step would be lighting a cigar with a hundred dollar bill just to watch it burn. I fell in love with Alan Greenspan and trained my eyes for tickers on television screens. It was one of these mornings, watching the Industrial Average dip and the

NASDAQ rise on the bottom of the screen when everything halted to allow space for pictures of planes ramming into buildings and giant hellish grey dust clouds chasing men in suits around avenue street corners. The terrorist attack happened and everyone soon thereafter decided to stay home in their sweat pants and stop spending money. The brands I was eating and drinking and share holding in, lost business and I lost my six digit salaries that normally I'd have by lunch hour. The market was tanking and come tax day I am paying taxes on the eighty thousand dollar salary from the previous year that I'd already blown, and that I couldn't even touch after terrorism. Day trading was just not a lucrative business anymore. I had the blueprints for my first house and as I built that foundation my own life lacked one.

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My sister Elizabeth was always trying to get me to go to church with her. I was sober but I wasn't exactly driven toward anything but using a driver, I golfed on Sundays. She'd call me and just casually invite, "hey come to church with me." I'd tell her that I had a tee time, she'd let it go, and then we'd have this conversation all over again in a week. This particular week was different because it was raining, so my golf excuse was botched. "Hey come to church with me…. I mean it is raining," she said it already knowing that she had me.

It was this big sanctuary, dark red seats, dark floors, and high ceilings, real holy looking. So I am flipping through this bulletin, and I see in bold letters, "The Guyana trip is leaving in a month," they needed some more supplies. I didn't even know where Guyana was.

"Wouldn't that be cool?" Elizabeth asked me, in more of a rhetorical way I am sure.

"Yeah, I'd love to do something like that." This is one of those throw away lines. The trip was leaving in one short month, it's not like I really expected to board a plane to this obscure South American country and teach children about Jesus. My sister, however, was Elizabeth, and Elizabeth called the church offices the very next day to ask if there was a slot open. She calls me back, and tells me that there is a meeting Tuesday and that if I wanted to go then I had to make that meeting, to start taking these Malaria pills. I didn't think I was going to actually *do it*, but I end up going, shots, malaria pills, a passport, and basic Jesus knowledge. I didn't know anyone on this "team." It was this mission trip and I wasn't even sure that I believed in Jesus fully. Luckily, there were also two homosexuals on the team so my not knowing Jesus really flew under the radar in comparison. I should have guessed, however, that it would be an expectation that I would pray eventually over the course of this trip. So, this one evening we are at

dinner, and everyone glances over at me. Randy asks me to pray before we eat, and I immediately clam up. I didn't really know how to pray, but I figured you were supposed to thank God for the food or something. So that's what I did, with my heart racing and my tongue tripping all over itself. The next morning we went to a schoolhouse that was supposed to seat one hundred kids and about five hundred kids total show up. I couldn't believe my eyes, all five hundred of their eyes were locked onto me and they all really wanted to know about God. That image is frozen in my mind. Maybe there was something to this God after all, but like treatment, it was hard to keep that same feeling when I returned home.

Instead, whenever I thought about what I should do about Jesus and church and everything else I just gave God props for relieving me from the disease that was between my ears, but God did that ten years ago and I seemed to be managing well, slamming back Diet Cokes and booking trips to Mexico with the group of guys that took me skiing, and started me trading in the first place. I shouldn't have gone to Mexico; terrorism had tanked the markets. But perhaps more significant than a shitty day trading market, I had forgotten that night with Pete Lopez. I forgotten about the God whose love had made me sob in the middle of the parking lot of a Kerrville treatment center, and forgetting about that love I boarded a plane to Cozumel, Mexico.

Twenty-four

I've decided that we all just really want to *be cool*. It sounds stupid and simple I am sure, it's like in every public service announcement since Nancy Reagan, but it's true. It's like in the beginning, in that scene in the garden. It says that Adam and Eve were naked and that they weren't ashamed. I mean think about that, to be completely stripped down bare, exposed and what not, in front of the person that you have a crush on and you're unashamed. Then they screw up and after that they look down and notice what's been there the whole time, except this time their nakedness freaks them out. I guess what I am trying to say is that maybe that's all we ever want, to be unashamed I mean. God kills an animal for its skin to cover them, that's the first sacrifice. I think somewhere deep at the core of us, we just really want to be fully known, and then once we're fully known, to be fully loved. In short, we really want to fit in, and so much of our behavior is tied back to us really wanting to *be cool*. So, I go to Mexico with these guys, all of them are millionaires except for Darryl and me. I didn't even particularly like these guys, mostly because every time I was with them I was real self conscious, completely made aware of the fact that I didn't have any money. This was two years after the terrorist attacks and the economy is still shit. Here's the thing though, when you're a day trader trading your own money

you are out of the loop. Those Wall Street traders are buying on the up curve before you catch wind of it and you are so late on the game that by the time you start buying, their getting out. It's pretty viscous so the only hope of local day traders was to look for the stocks that had bottomed out, that way you could buy on its way up. So this whole time I am buying these bottomed-out stocks, I have this brand new house with these brand new house payments. It was time that I needed to start looking for an actual business, and I had just had another girl leave me in this big house of mine. It seemed like the perfect time to fly out, away from it all. There are fourteen of us, and we rent these little bikes to take around the city while we are there. One night, I decide to go out to the clubs and as I am driving away from the hotel I get about a block away before this guy in corner store parking lot whistles at me and tells me to pull over for a bit. He asks me if I want to buy weed and my blood starts pumping a little bit faster in my veins like it's been doing all the times I've drove around Hackberry St. Hackberry St. is this street at home, downtown where are the crack dealers hang around. This disease in between my ears, it'd subsided for close to eleven years now, but it didn't mean that I had forgotten what it used to feel like or that my blood didn't pump faster or my stomach do flips just a little when I drove around. I'd sometimes take a little detour just to look, I

always said know, but I'd look and I'd look at the girls down there too. And now this guy, here in Mexico, across an ocean is making my blood pump just like it used too. I shook my head "no."

"How about some cocaine?" His eyes perked up as he asked about this, "eighty bucks for one gram." My blood was really pumping now, I reached my hand in my pocket and rubbed the chip they gave me when I graduated from La Hacienda that said "to thine own self be true," it was from some Shakespeare play. So, I start thinking about it. I was very close to eleven full years of sobriety at this point, but the chip said to be honest to *myself*. It's not like anyone else had to know, the sobriety date didn't have to change. I could buy a gram, stay up all night and smoke it, and then I'll sleep it off and be fine. Then I started to think about how many hits were in a gram, it didn't seem like enough. I didn't want to go through this whole process of finding another gram when I was through with this one, "fuck Shakespeare" I thought as I ripped my hand out of my pocket. I bought couple grams. Just like that, it took hardly nothing to wake up the old dopamine routes, the wicked monster of "more." I skipped out on the club, went back to my room, grabbed a Dr. Pepper from out of the mini-fridge, drank it, and crushed it with my heel. I used to always dog the guys that would smoke from crushed aluminum cans because it wasted so much of the

product. You had to poke these holes in it and put the rock on this ash so that when the tiny bit of water hit the ash, this was to coke it, and then you could smoke it. It wasted more than the glass pipes that I used to use to use. Interesting thing about crack and fire. Crack is super volatile, so much so that when you place a flame under it, it runs from the fire. It's weird to watch. Some of the old laws about God call Him a "consuming fire" that is concerned with holiness. It's as if God's holiness burns away the unholy like an all-consuming fire. Crack runs from fire, but I was used to using so I lit it up and it hit me, making me feel weightless and superhuman like it always had.

Twenty-five

We'd stayed up all night nursing that aluminum can filled with liquid ash and the monster that had destroyed me just ten short years ago. That morning we each sat on our separate beds and wondered why in the hell we did "that." We referred to it simply as "that" both in our own minds and with each other because no one could know about "that." It's weird, you know? We all know, I think, about the ways in which we justify and talk and move around things. That chip said "To *thyne own self* be true." I knew what it really meant, we always know what "that" really means don't we? It was supposed to mean that I was supposed to run far away and incredibly fast from anything that

would place me back into Hell on earth. I instead, took it to mean that I could keep everything to myself. But, as I looked across the room at my friend, I immediately looked down at my shoes with the fullest knowledge and recognition that I could lie to myself all I wanted too, but in the end I wasn't fooling the disease in between my ears and the obsession began again. Everyone else had an early flight, so I said my goodbyes trying to appear as normal as anyone else, and then with red eyes and a headache I boarded my own flight back home.

My sister, Elizabeth, had a two year old and was pregnant with another kid. My house was built, Elizabeth was building a house, and so they moved in with me. With all of these new house payments I finally gave up on the idea of making fortunes day trading, the market failed me. When people are going to have a baby they spend a lot of time around hospitals and medical professionals. There will always be sick people, I figured, and kids will always break limbs and stuff. I met a guy who ran a business selling things like crutches, the first stop after people are released from the hospital. I decided to buy some equity in this business. Although, at this point money wasn't going into normal people bills, money was being smoked in a crack pipe. I'd drive around those same street corners that I used to drive around, when I wasn't looking to buy but was just looking for a thought or temptation to get my blood pumping, to

unleash my imagination to wonder about getting high again. This time, I knew where to go to get the grams, dimes, and rocks. I naturally, had plenty of things to blame this on. Your pregnant sister, her husband, and two year old move into your house, how could that not drive you to bad habits? Elizabeth was ready to pop, and I'd sneak in early in the morning before Rick, her husband, had to get up to go to work. They never knew exactly what time I came home, and I'd pretend to be asleep when they got up to begin their normal people days. Then I'd get up and begin the chase. There was this AIDS hospice near the neighborhood that I bought. These people where dying, full blown sick with a disease that ate them up from the inside out, like mine but theirs looked worse and it wasn't self imposed, at least not at its current stage. Most of them caught the bad blood intravenously. Not intravenously through a transfusion or something heroic like that, they shot up the same drug that I smoked. I never shot up, and I naturally, didn't shoot up with them either, but I did smoke. It's a strange picture. All of these people who are dying, who are torn up looking so much so that people try and keep their space from them, and then me. I'm young, I'm in gym shorts, and I could be healthy, but instead I am cooking up rocks to smoke with the Hospice people. Maybe I just wanted to be around people who I thought looked worse than I did. Maybe in all of my efforts, efforts that ultimately I

knew were killing me in more ways than one; I just wanted to be around people who were also dying.

That guy that I owned the medical supply business with told me to take out a loan for eighty thousand dollars. I went to the bank with the honest intentions of doing just that. There were however, more options available. So, I took out a loan for fifteen thousand dollars and cashed the remaining dollars to spend on crack. I remembered my halfway house roommate from Battle-Creek Michigan who took my wallet while I was sleeping. I naturally, didn't let myself think to long about Battle-Creek Michigan guy. As I was cashing the check I got "The Call." Anyone who has ever been a nuclear family member to someone who was having a baby knows what "The Call" means. Elizabeth was going into labor with Ryan and I told them that I would be there in a little while. I was too excited to rush off to the hospital, I had a cash flow coming and in my mind I had already spent it and gotten high.

That night, I drove to the hospital and found my sister, her two year old, her husband, and a perfectly healthy baby. Elizabeth had a family and it was a beautiful one, even in my own messed up state I had the clarity of sight to see that. My hair was disheveled and long, hanging in my face, I was bone-skinny sitting in this chair holding this pinkish pure baby. It's easy to be envious almost of infants. It's like they are

this eleven-inch, eight-pound, glossy eyed, kicking limb clean slate. That first day is exactly just that, a first day, and newness. I wanted a first day, sitting there out of touch and on drugs, I still new that I wanted that. And as I held Ryan in my arms, the soft and vulnerable patch on her head lying up against my own chest, I really did not know how I was going to get it.

Twenty-six

Geoffrey was his name. He had a house behind the Hospice. The Hospice was where he'd go to try and "die gracefully." The house was where he'd go to kill himself in another fashion, and he did it with us. People get weird when they are on drugs. It takes awhile for it to happen, but it's just science, fact. Every single neuron in your gray matter goes through this process, all things being equal; your neurons are always at work. It's called "Active Potential," it's when the energy level of the neuron rises until it peaks and then it plummets. Before the neuron can fire a transmitter again, it has to wait until it plummets and resets itself. This is some natural way of your brain keeping it's neurons from double firing or pouring out a surplus of neurotransmitters, which would cause you to do some pretty whacked out things. Neurotransmitters however, feel bitching good. Crack, when it's released into your blood flow, moves its way up to your brain, latches on to a neuron, and causes that neuron to act like a Super-Soaker water gun full of

dopamine. Then it blocks the re-uptake process, or the reset, of that same neuron. In short, it doesn't let the neuron reset so the feeling lasts longer, as if you keep repeating pleasure like a broken record. Once the dopamine is blocked, it takes a while for it to recharge and work right again, and a body without dopamine is a sad sack. Addicts are sad sacks that always want that first hit again. All of this I learned from Dr. Mehendale, the M.D. that would lecture us back when I was in treatment the first time. Even though I knew this, sometimes people scared me in their freaked states. Geoffrey, every time he took a hit, pulled his pants down to his ankles. On most days, I would look away and ignore this, figuring that Geoffrey was a guy who was probably always oversexed anyway. It was hard to ignore, however, on a day like this.

"Jesus, I'm going to die," Geoffrey, naturally, was stripped down to nothing but his underwear and he said this with his hand pressed hard against his chest. "I can hear it man," His chin was pressed onto the hand that was on his chest and he seemed seriously convinced that he was going to die. He had some cold sweat going on and the shakes, but none of that was unusual for any of us. "Calm down man," I told him as I sat not looking at him and focusing on the pipe that was in my mouth.
"Shit," Geoffrey said with this weird scary crack in his voice, like a small child being chased by a dog or something. It was

almost like a squeal, but he was a grown man and that's not normal. He opens the door and the next thing I know he is sprinting down Josephine Street. Geoffrey looked like a victim of Dachau, his skin was taught and a strange palish gray. Some days he woke up with lesions and purple bruising with no warning. He was so skinny that his eyes sank far back resting in what looked like hollowed out coves. Here was Geoffrey, running, sickness all over him, with his hands cupped around his mouth screaming, telling the whole world that he was going to die. He was right, he was going to die, but not today, and I was not going to go to jail because he was getting a little too freaky on crack. Cops drove up and down that street, constantly, looking for hookers and dope fiends. I was peering out the blinds of Geoff's house and I see him flag down an ambulance. "Shit," I mumbled it too myself, my own brain was throwing out scenarios. Scenarios like the paramedics will ask him where he lives, the cops will come and search the place and find me here.

Turns out, they just hooked Geoffrey up to all of these machines and fluids, and didn't bother to go looking. I guess they figured that Geoffrey was dying, I guess they could see how bad it was for him, and I guess they figured what does it matter? It's between his own immune system or an overdose anyway.

~

The guys at the Hospice introduced me to a bunch of new junkies that lived on the West Side, behind an Air Force base. The Dallas Cowboys were playing on this Sunday and I figured I had already blown it so bad with the blow that it didn't matter if I decided to have a beer too. I waited until noon, because Sunday is a holy day according to Texas law, and I drove to a corner store. Normally, you're so geeked out on crack that T.V. doesn't catch your interest, but we had been up for almost five days straight and we had put so much of that super charged dopamine into our systems that we were cooked and not feeling too much at this point. We were actually so high that we began to feel normal again. I run in to this black guy at the corner store that reminds me of "Easy Money Sonny," who I used to sell hooks with. This black guy calls me over and asks for some cash. I liked that he wasn't trying to sell me anything, so I asked him if he liked to get high. He, naturally, told me he did, so I unlocked the doors and he climbed in. I had a car that was worth almost as much as the houses in this neighborhood. He told me to go around this back road that circled the base so that we can start taking a hit as soon as possible. We start smoking and all of the sudden, I look up and an Eastwood School District cop is following me. It's so lame to get trailed by a School District cop, but they have guns and cuffs just the same. My eyes are so focused on the cop behind me in the rear view mirror, that by

the time I glance back down, I see a stop sign in just enough time to slam on the breaks and draw attention to myself. Naturally, the cops' lights turn on.

"Dude, put it on you," I told my passenger. I wanted him to stick the pipe down his pants so that the cops couldn't find it in a quick visual scan. I had about a quarter of a gram of cocaine in my console. The idiot in the passenger seat doesn't take my advice and as the cop approaches my window, the passenger chunks the pipe out his window. Naturally, the cop noticed it and sent his partner over to see what it was. They find it and the next thing I know they are coming back up toward us with their guns drawn screaming at us to get on the ground. The black guy who was with me was on parole for murder. He was of course, breaking parole. We were both breaking the law and they took us both to jail at gunpoint.

Twenty-seven

Mike, my brother, had naturally set it all up for me when I got bailed out of jail. He planned a return to La Hacienda. I was put in a relapse group, and I was under the care of this chick that is very spiritual, not like Jesus spiritual but abstract God spiritual. I'm not sure "chi" was big back then but if it had been then she would have been all about it. Her name was Sunny, long blonde hair, comfortably thin, creeping in on middle age. We were all relapse victims, so many of us with at

least a decade under our belt. Sunny really dug Mother Earth and the whole bit. Every morning she'd lead us on this hike up a neighboring hill at five thirty in the morning. We'd light this bonfire together and we'd sit up above these trees, read a scripture, and talk a little bit about God and what it means to be his reckless children. I hadn't really thought much about God that night with Pete Lopez had become just like any other memory. Lost in the annals, paired up with winning a junior high school football game or Jimmy Gonzales' science fair project, or that first night when Kevin convinced me to free-base. But now I was back, same places with the same stars above me. Sunny gave me a book to read on the Sermon on the Mount, it's like Jesus' favorite sermon. It was a tough read, real thick. Dr. Mehendale was gone, he had started his own private practice, but I still held my position as the cool kid. The popular guy, again I imagined people walking around with La Hacienda letter jackets. This time, I wasn't just president of the treatment equivalent to student council, I got to lead the devotionals early in the morning in front of the fire on Serenity Hill. They called it "Serenity Hill" and it was very summer-campy, but hey I always loved summer camp, but this time there wasn't any archery. I remember the first morning I hiked back up Serenity Hill, almost twelve years since the first time I made that trek. I was kicking the rocks and dirt beneath my feet, wondering how many

times a person can end up in the same place again. We reached the top and started to settle in, I almost missed it. There it was, the rock that I had painted the first time I went to treatment. It was that messy type of scribble, the black paint unevenly smeared across grooves, bumps, and cracks. There weren't any rules about the rocks, you could write whatever, and some people wrote just that, "whatever." Some people's rocks reflected bitter longing, anger, and resentment. Others were calmer in the sentiments. I chose a line from the "Big Book," the creed of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was stripped from the chapter "We Agnostics,"

He has come to all who have honestly sought him, when we drew near to him, he disclosed himself to us.

It just broke it down in such a sweet way, you know? All I had to do was look around for this God and he was going to hold up his end of the deal. I saw the rock and all of my kicking around in the dirt, wondering how I could possibly keep doing this, just seem to be crushed under the weight of that rock with that statement that took away the bullshit for me, gave me some hope. I didn't have to paint a new rock, I realized. I still felt the same thing, I still wanted the same thing, and I resolved to keep seeking it.

I put in my thirty days time, and I got my eighteen thousand dollar "Big Book." It's a treatment joke, it's cynical,

but it always brings about a laugh for those who know what it's like. Treatment cost eighteen thousand dollars when you pay cash, but when you leave they give you a free "Big Book."

~

This happens every time I get out. It's a snap back into the daily drudgery. All of the "What am I going to do?" and the "Why?" questions resurface. I needed a job, but I wasn't sure what that was going to be, or truthfully how to even do it. So I start hanging at coffee shops. I get there every morning and I read this devotional. I start to notice this girl that comes in about the same time every morning when I do. She's always on her laptop, pretty consumed by it, but she'd occasionally glance up and notice me. Finally, she started to ask what I was reading.

"It's a devotional, you know stuff to get you thinking on scripture?"

"My dad's a pastor in California," she cracked a smile and we warmed up to each other. "I'm Charis," he stuck her hand out. "Evans George," I shook her hand and took another sip. Her computer made a bleeping noise and she glanced down at it, "Oh, I just made about a thousand dollars."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I sell stuff on EBay."

"Like what?"

"Dance clothes, in mass quantities. Clothes that are a little messed up, you know tiny holes, miss-sized, and that kind of stuff. I'm getting a shipment in for the flea market this Sunday."

"Oh yea?" I still needed a job.

"Yea, it's real easy, and you make good money."

"Huh?" I started to think about it more seriously.

"Hey, you should buy in with me!" She beamed at me.

"Oh yea?"

"Of course, why not, it'd be great."

"Well I'll go in half on your next shipment then," I told her. She agrees, and pretty soon I start packing these boxes of a hundred and fifty leotards for elementary school girls. The business is bringing between three and five thousand dollars a month. The more we hang out; I start to notice that she's taking these pills.

"What are those for?"

"Oh, Hydro codone, you know generic killers? I have a bad back."

My blood started pumping a little faster. I thought about asking for some, but I let the idea go as I thumbed the new chip on my keys in my pocket. That night I thought about those pills a lot. I had never tried painkillers before, and I wondered how it would feel. I tried to shake the thought, but it kept

creeping in over and over again. “You have to have a prescription,” I figured inside my head. This would keep me from abusing. “I will limit my intake to just two when I am with Charis working.” I was still going to AA meetings, I was getting my chips, staying clear away from alcohol and crack and cocaine and dope.

The next morning at the coffee shop, she gave me two pills. I told her that my back hurt too, not that I think she even cared. It hit me like a warm rush, like a cross between coming inside to a warm house when it’s so cold outside that you can see your breath and sinking down slowly into a hot tub. My muscles felt heavy but not with pain, it was like they were wrapped in warm cloth. It made me want to slump a little lower in my seat. This feeling would only last me thirty minutes. This, naturally, created a problem for me. Charis kept supplying them for me. She’d order them off shore; mix them with shipments of our dance clothes. I was downing them too fast for her to keep up with, so I had to start going to med clinics, faking back pains to get doctors to write me prescriptions. I ordered the highest form of pain killer, narcotics, most doctors won’t even supply them so I had to get them online. It was hell waiting for the UPS man. I was taking almost thirty times the regular dosage. It made my stomach do flips and my pours break out into heavy sweat when I wasn’t on the meds. It felt like all

of my insides were going to get pulled out of me and I was shaking so hard that when the UPS man did come, I could barely sign my name. It didn't take long before searching for and popping prescription drugs became my full time job.

In the middle of all of this, I get a call from the church that my sister goes too. They tell me that the mission team is going to go to Guyana again. So I am going to these meetings and I am taking so many narcotic painkillers that my eyes are rolling back in my head and I am dosing off in the middle of people's prayers.

"Evans, are you okay?" Randy gave me one of those looks, a mix of concern with suspicion.

"Yeah, it's just the Depression meds." I don't even remember if I was on Depression meds at this time, but if I was, it certainly wasn't the cause of my falling asleep. If I had to take a shot in the dark, I would say that it was the forty narcos that I was taking a day. At the same time I am taking these Hyrdo Codone, I decide to mix it with "Soma," these muscle relaxes (or Benzodyism) a med anxious people take to slow their heart down. I'd take ten, ten, and ten, you know "every four hours as needed." Although, I am sure that's not what the FDA had in mind. Soma, the muscle relaxes, stayed in your system a lot longer than the Hydro Codone.

So, It's Charis's birthday and a group of us decide to take her out to this ritzy restaurant. I'm feeling pretty foggy at this point, and my muscles take what feels like twenty minutes but was probably twenty seconds real time, to move. They ask me to cut the cake and right when I stick the knife into the frosting, I freeze, and for the rest of this story I am speaking from what I heard and not what I remember. They say my muscles totally jerked, my eyes rolled back, and I hit the floor in a grand mal seizure. EMS came, rolled me out on a stretcher, and the next thing I know I wake up in intensive care, with my sister and a bunch of nurses staring at me. And, naturally, the next thing I know all of my insides pour out of me, I apologized for the smell and mess and then fell back asleep. The next day, they're sending me through these brain scans. It was so loud in those machines that it sounded like a lawn mower was running over my head. As it turns out, my brain was working fine, nothing was messed up in the seizure. I was just detoxing and it felt like my stomach as going to be ripped out. They wouldn't give me any meds to help with the detox. It takes me awhile, but I finally realize that the Guyana trip is leaving in three days. It's a Sunday afternoon and Randy comes to visit me.

"Hey Evans, I brought you some magazines." He laid the bag on the end of the bed.

"Hey thanks man, listen I'll be okay, I'll be out by this evening and I can still go. The scans are alright."

I really did want to go again. I remembered the five hundred little eyes.

"Okay," Randy kind of smiled and he gave me those eyes that people give you when they have more to say but they decide that it is better left unsaid in this moment. It is a hard look to describe but we all know how it feels. It's a, you said something that somebody wants to respond to but can't figure out how to without hurting your feelings, type of feeling. I was glad Randy came, it was kind and it helped ease the sting of how bad my cover was blown. I told Elizabeth that I still wanted to go to Guyana. She simply replied, in the one line that she had gotten used to telling me since the first time I called her to bail me out, when we were both in college, "no Evans you're not right, you're messed up." She was right, but I let myself get pissed off at her just like I always did, it was just how our relationship went.

~

It was a good thing that I didn't go because Hydro Codone is essentially synthetic heroine. The withdraws are so bad that even if you wanted to wean yourself off, you can't do it because your body feels like you have swallowed a package of nails.

These nails cut at your stomach, while your muscles tense, and your pores overflow.

Even though you sweat and dose off on these meds, it is exceedingly easier to be out in public on painkillers than on cocaine. This was helpful because I was still trying my best to be normal.

I had this neighborhood kid that lived across the street from me. Every now and then he'd see me chunking a basketball at the hoop on my driveway or mowing my lawn. Case was ten, and he was an average type of ten year old. The type that's into basketball sneakers, his Dad, T.V., and sugary cereal. He'd walk across the street and ask me if he could push the mower or take a shot at the basket. He didn't have an awful shot, he even got the ninety degree elbow and the knowledge that the power rests all in your wrist to propel the ball where you want it to go. So, when he asked me to coach his ten and eleven year old boy's basketball team, I said yes. I still had these experiences where my eyes would roll up into my head and my head would feel ten pounds heavier and hit the back of my chair, but I'd pop out of it before a kid gave a glance my way in between scuffing up the gym floor, squeaking their sneakers, and flailing their arms against the other players. I really liked coaching. They all loved me, it was like a whole team of summer-camp-Darren, and we had some serious athletic prowess as far as pre-pubescent

athleticism goes. What made coaching even better was that we played at this gym that was the hub of corporate Americans; who on their lunch breaks tried their best to run off their spreadsheet stress.

We made it to the play offs, but I wasn't making it on these pills. I didn't want to take them anymore but I couldn't handle the withdraws, my mind wouldn't settle on the thought of crapping on myself. I had Googled doctors that were certified to feed you a sub-lingual pill (the ones you stick under your tongue) to get you off of Hydro Codone, but their were only three in the area, and one you had to be a veteran to receive treatment. The other two doctors were in Kerrville. Dr. Mehendale was one of them, thriving in his private practice, but I couldn't stand the thought of standing in front of him again, unclean. So I chose the other doctor, and I decided to leave for the detoxification house as soon as our playoff game was finished. The kids had all signed a basketball and I started to cry just like I used to when I watched Spanish soap operas in the middle of the day, one year out of college and without a job. With tears in my eyes, I ran my hand over the tiny bumps and the black grooved lines reading the names and appreciating that these kids never knew a thing. All that they ever saw was "Just Evans," the same "Just Evans" that only came out when he somehow found a way to be comfortable in his own skin. "Just

Evans," however, had a problem with painkillers and I walked straight from the locker room to my car, my bags packed and my check in secured in Kerrville.

It was the coldest house that I've ever been in. You always had a strange urge just to step outside because at least outside just because it was so cold. It was that hospital type of cold, obnoxiously chilled to keep down germs. We all slept in bunk beds and took a sub-lingual three times a day, this time really as needed because we had a M.D. right down the hall. Everyone in this house was from some small Texas town, dirt and oilrigs all around. The type of Texas town where if you weren't the quarterback of the high school football team, then you either got out, opened a diner or gas station, or got addicted to drugs.

No one could go out of the house unless they were going to a meeting. This was a smart rule because so many of us, sitting in our hard plastic chairs, scanning the secondhand of the clock, and waiting for our net dosage, would have gone straight to a med clinic for more. Some guys were even talking about breaking into these clinics after hours because their names were black balled, scribbled onto lists along with others who faked back pain. It was here that I learned that sometimes people want to live in their shallow muddy puddle type of life. Sometimes people were too infatuated with the warmth, the slow sensation

that rolled onto you and into your muscles and marrow like a high tide. I told them that I really did want to stop. I told them that I wasn't going to eat these pills like candy anymore.

Twenty-eight

I wish that what I had said to those men, in that God-awful-cold house of bunk beds and puke bedpans, had stuck. But I couldn't wean myself off by going from thirty pills to just three a day, so I started smoking crack again to ease the pain.

My bedroom had this thick white carpet. I would cut rocks on my dresser, and sometimes, in the process of chopping it up the rocks would pop off and land in the carpet.

My face would end up on the floor, one of my eyes would be open scanning the carpet for crack. I ran my hand across the shag to see if any would bounce up. They would pop up and hit chair legs and floor tiles, bounce all over and under everything. I would spend half an hour looking, scanning, and chasing the last of my crack before I had to go buy some more. Even though I lived by myself, I'd hide rocks all around the house like Easter eggs on a Sunday morning. It's like when you forgot that you put five bucks in your pocket and then the next thing you know when you're washing you pants, you find it and get all excited as if it wasn't your money in the first place. I'd run my hand along the top ledges of my doorframes and discover a rock. Hiding these rocks seemed like a great idea,

and lying on the floor scanning the rug with my hand gave me something to occupy my time with, but I forgot about Gracie.

Gracie was this terrier mix mutt that I got at an AA meeting. Some guy, he'll remain anonymous, found her and her brother in a cardboard box in the middle of the street. He heaved the box into the front door, it was rainy-cold outside and I guess he figured that they shouldn't be out there.

"Look what I found," he said lifting the puppy with one hand under her ribs and the other petting her hard on her head.

"They were just sitting in this box in the middle of the road." I thought Gracie was adorable, so I took her and named her that day.

I let her hang out inside with me, and I'd tied her up outside when I left. I went back to hanging around the Hospice, Geoffrey was somehow still alive, and those guys kept me smoking for days on end. I'd return home and Gracie's water would be turned over, spilled damp on the concrete, and she'd have wrapped her leash so tight around the post that she could barely wiggle. When I was home and she was inside, her nose picked up on the crack throughout the house. Usually, I could push her way from dressers and doorframes, but I didn't even know about some of the rocks that landed on the floor. One day Gracie found a rock and before I could kick her away, she licked it up.

I watched in a horror and worry that I hadn't been able to achieve in a long time, even when "Easy Money Sonny" nicked his girlfriend in the face, or when Elizabeth cried after I came off the streets and broke the promise I made to her within the first hour of making it, or when one of the Hospice guys finally died. Gracie jerked and her eyes rolled back in her head, just like I had done at Charis's birthday party. She threw up on the floor and then lay there rigid. I could see her heart pounding, I could actually *see it*. After I stood there awhile in shock, I squatted down next to her head and started stroking it.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry. Please don't die. I am so sorry," I started to cry. "I am so sorry," I just kept repeated as I wiped snot on my sleeve. She stayed like that, rigid, asleep, her heart beating wildly, for a few hours. Finally, she opened her eyes, and in what felt like twenty minutes but was probably twenty seconds real time, she came to and slowly rose. I grabbed her neck and hugged her tight. I had almost killed my own dog. It was different when the causalities in my story where high school kids, frat boys, or grown men who were dying in Hospice. Gracie was completely without fault, a totally victim of my stupid disease. I hugged her and then I let her lie in my bed for the rest of the night as the crack worked its way through her system.

~

After that night, Gracie too was an addict of sorts, and I'd have to push her snout away from any patch of carpet that she hung around for too long on. Charis didn't know I had gone back to smoking, and even in all her nonchalance about turning me onto to painkillers, I knew that the crack would make her flip. I still packed boxes of little girls dance clothes. We bought this air conditioning storage unit because folding leotards in the piss-hot Texas weather was enough to give you a stroke. Other people's units who converted them into their office space because real office space was too expensive surrounded these storage units. At seven forty-five in the morning sedans would be parked outside of storage shed doors, and men and women in suits would step out with gas station Styrofoam cups full of coffee in their hands. Then I'd drive up with the Mercedes that I couldn't afford, in basketball shorts and sneakers, my uniform since college. The inside of that thing gave me goose bumps, so cold that you could hang meat in it. It was just dark enough too, to make it seem okay for me to smoke. I'd lean up against the steal garage door, the rumples of the door cutting pressing hard against my back. The metal on the building would vibrate with every little noise. I would lean my head back against it, thinking every twenty seconds that felt like twenty minutes, that someone was going to walk in on me.

Every ten minutes, the phone would vibrate in my pocket and I didn't even bother to see who was calling because at this point everyone would be horrendously disappointed in me. Even the friends whom I used to smoke with, with the exception of Geoffrey who was still wasting away, had managed to pick up the pieces of their shambled lives. They'd managed to get married, get careers, and have children. They all still called me; they invited me over to see their houses, to have dinner with them and their wives. Then inevitably, they would ask me to leave when they realized that I still wasn't right. I started to try and pack boxes again, the crack was waning, but the phone was vibrating continuously in ten-minute intervals so I glanced down at the screen. It was Charis, and I knew that if I tried to answer that my tongue would be so lazy that I would stammer myself into guilt. Like when I was on the streets and tried to approach people for money, all I could do was mumble no matter how hard I tried to get the words out. They got caught in my throat. Finally, I knew I had to answer because at this point, I knew that she already knew.

"Evans, you've been smoking crack haven't you?" Her voice was angry and demeaning as if I was a child who got caught in the grocery store stealing by my mom.

"Yea," is all I knew what to reply with?

She rattled on a list of "I can't believe this" and "why would you do that's," then she hung up. And I just leaned my head against the door, staring at the boxes that were stacked all around me in this dim storage shed. Charis called Elizabeth and told her that I'd been smoking. I wasn't there when Elizabeth got the call, but in my mind I could see it. I knew the way her mouth dropped open, the way her hand raised to her forehead and pushed her bangs up. I knew the way she leaned on counter tops, with her hand still on her forehead, tears streaming down her face unashamedly. I knew that as my head lay against that metal door that her head was in her hands, and I hated Charis because of it. I didn't know what to do, so I just slowly rose to my feet, kicking the cardboard boxes all around me. I found my car keys and drove home.

Twenty-nine

I heard a pounding knock on the front door, as I lay in bed with one eye open, my face pressed hard against the pillow. I wanted and I waited for it to go away. I knew who it was and why they were there. "Evans!" it was Mike and I hadn't locked the front door last night. His steps were heavy and I knew he was so frustrated that he was angry. One of my dirty shirts came flying in a clump toward my head.

"Let's go, you're going to treatment."

"No." I didn't even move to look at him.

He made his way toward the bed and I sat up.

"No way, what's the point?" I shouted back at him and he stopped short at the end of the bed.

He looked at me and the way he looked at me reminded me of all the times that he has played this role. Since the time when we hooked all our arms on the back of the pick up truck and he told me to blame Charlie. He didn't cry, but his face was a little red and I knew he wanted to rip me out of this. But, I just sat there, unwilling to move.

"Go away," I finally said breaking the silence. What was he going to do? He couldn't make me go, but he couldn't just sit there at the foot of my bed and agree with me either. Mike picked up a pillow on the end of the bed and threw it at me as he sighed, something deep and hurt. He then turned and walked away heavy footed, slamming the door on his way out.

~

Dealers don't want to drive north. All of these gated suburbs, neighborhood watches, kids playing waffle ball, and their moms who'd call the cops on any African American male, at least that's what they thought, the African American males who dealt me drugs thought that is. Sometimes, I'd have to go to them. There was this dealer, "School," who lived off Hackberry. When girls do crack, they tend to do other things for more crack. They aren't prostitutes necessarily. They are primary

drug addicts and they sell their body for more. School's house was a meat market.

I was driving down Hackberry and about two blocks away from Skool's house I notice this woman on a pay phone. I knew what she was like because nobody uses pay phones post millennium, but she was beautiful. And I really do mean beautiful, not like hooker pretty. She didn't have hose with holes in them, or grey hairs peeking out, or cellulite. She looked like an average person, except she was above average in her appearance. I pulled up near the curb and rolled down my window, and she immediately started walking over as if she had intentions of getting in. I naturally, agreed with these intentions and she slid in next to me.

"Hello Hon," she smiled over at me.

"You're a kid." I said to her hoping that she was not too young because I still kept my sentiments regarding *that.*

"I'm twenty years old."

"Well then, what are you doing this evening?" I asked her. I didn't want a hooker; I wanted a date. She smiled at me, I suppose happy that she had found a guy who would do crack, give her some, but that respected her enough to take her out like a human being.

"I suppose I will be going somewhere with you?" She said and I watched her eyes trace my body up and down.

"I'll pick you up at Skool's at seven." I told her and she opened the door, slowly getting out, slow enough for her skirt to creep a little up her left thigh. Her heels clicked against the ground and her hand ran smoothly over the car door until she reached the handle to close it. All of this was a very calculated seduction that she no doubt had discovered the skill in an effort to buy a rock. She let her mid drift and breasts remain in the passenger window just long enough to tease until finally, in what felt like twenty minutes but was probably twenty seconds real time, her face came down to eye level.

"See you at seven." She said through a wink.

"Okay." I nodded and then shifted gears into drive. I had to go back home, I'd forgotten the check that I was going to use to take this hooker out on a date. When I got home, I heard an animal cry in the back. It was sick, it wasn't a bark that dogs give when an intruder comes and it wasn't just a bark out of hunger or bodily functions, but it was a hurt and pain ridden sound. I knew it was Gracie. As I rounded the fence post and unhooked the gate, my heart began pumping in my ears, my blood ran hot like battery acid, and I held my breath scared. Gracie was again, with her neck half an inch away from the post, the leash wrapped around the post, and her water bowl flipped off the porch. I was almost scared to unhook her on her leash, thinking about what I would do to a person if they'd left me

like I had left Gracie. I could touch a rib and her tongue was hanging out thirsty. I decided to unhook her, but I did it quickly just in case I had to fling my hand away from her snout. I waited for a bit and then decided that I should grab the garden house and fill her water bowl. "I'm sorry," I said to her as I ran around the side of the house and grabbed the hose. Gracie stuck her mouth underneath the water, her tongue licking the metallic ring on the end of the hose, she was drinking so fast that I could hear her throat and esophagus contract and expand. I just watched, waiting to see if she, once revived from death, was then going to retaliate. Instead, her tail slowly began to wag, and once she got her fill of water she ran her face up and down my shorts. I stroked her head and wondered if dogs just lacked a refined long-term memory mechanism in their brains, or if dogs had some potential for forgiveness that far exceeded my own. I remembered my check and went inside to look for it and get ready to head back to Skool's house. I threw some handfuls of dog food on the ground for Gracie, filled her bowl, and locked the gate back the way I left it some 72 hours before.

~

Skool could quote scripture. He didn't just quote the verses that you read on people's bumper stickers or that you hear at funerals, he quoted all over the Bible. He told me that the reason her knew all of those scriptures was because his

grandma always prayed over him. So you'd pull up to this house, shades always down, grass overgrown, a chain link fence, and it's a few blocks away from the AIDS Hospice. There were always guys there cooking up crack and saying things that are too graphic to write in the ears of these girls who'd do anything for a hit, sometimes they got a hit they weren't expecting. The kind of hit that makes your lip bleeds or face get hot and stingy. And the owner of this house starts pulling out this scripture. For Skool, quoting scripture was like the accent of an Englishman, it flowed naturally. When I got there, she came out immediately, but her outfit was less "I'm getting paid to give you sexual favors," and more "my name is Katy and I am an actual woman." Katy and I went to Wal-Mart to buy some wine and we started mixing the effects of wine with the effects of crack. When you have substances like that on a date, you don't need to bother with questions about career, politics, and immediate family members because you are too geeked out to really care. We drove around for hours just smoking and drinking, finally it was about five in the morning and we hadn't slept all night. I only had one rock left in the console of my car besides the rock I was smoking with Katy. I started to feel warm and my forehead began to feel like there was a half-pound weight glued to it, pulling my chin toward my chest.

Then the lights cut right through our windshield, Katy's scream snapped me awake, in time to see car headlights in the middle of our lane. It wasn't really our lane, it was their lane, and we had intruded. I snapped the steering wheel and the other car nicked mine and it was thrown into a tailspin. I kept my hands on the wheel and it jerked and popped, with no road underneath it. We landed in a medium with the passenger side of our car on the top of the grass. The automatic windows still worked and we climbed out. I reached in and helped Katy climb up and over the driver side window. I had this strange experience of seeing my arm but still wanting to make sure that it was there. I started to pound the ground with my foot, making sure those worked too. Katy was standing there, looking at the wreckage, and shaking a lot wondering how her flesh wasn't smeared on the pavement along with the glass of the once-was-a-passenger window.

She pushed herself up to look inside the car, the wine bottle had shattered all over the backseat, and there it was,

"Shit."

"What?" I said, I was now at the back of the car getting a different vantage point of the vehicle and the woman who hit us was calling 911.

She just looked at me, she seemed scared out of her mind but I figured it was because she just had a near death experience and all.

"Come here," she said to me very very seriously. I decided that I wouldn't argue and I walked over and peered inside. The crack pipe we were taking our last hits from was right there on the driver side floor, completely unscathed.

"Oh my God," I muttered and the paramedics were making their way toward us. They grabbed Katy's arm and told her to sit down on the stretcher. She opted to go to the hospital to get us out of this mess. The cop stopped me and started asking me questions, I started sweating and I wondered if I could fake a condition to get out of this. I told him that I was Katy's boyfriend and that I wanted to ride in the ambulance with her. He put his hand on my shoulder and was convinced that I needed to answer all of his stupid questions. At about the same time that I was thinking about telling him to f**k off because I needed to get in that ambulance with my "girlfriend," his partner noticed the pipe. That's a felony.

I called an old friend from La Hacienda to bail me out. She was pissed that I wasn't clean, shaking her head, probably thinking about the rock that I'd painted on top of Serenity Hill and wondering, like I was, about how that could turn into this in just six months. Even in all of her rage, she knew because

she had the same disease, we were both quarantined from normal lives, together with every other addict.

We walked out together.

"Evans, you've got to fix this." She said it and all I could think about was how I think I'd heard that same phrase somewhere else.

"I know," it wasn't hard to admit. She dropped me off at home, I took two Advil (in anticipation for the muscle aches I knew that I was bound to feel the next morning), and I pulled the blankets in my bedroom on top of me hoping that my eyelids would shut hard enough to make the world and this day vanish.

Thirty

The thing about Dopamine is that people call it "the reward transmitter," meaning that it draws connections between actions and rewards received. The thing is, Dopamine doesn't just recognize that you *got* your reward stemmed from your action, Dopamine only draws connections between the reward you were *expecting* and the reward you *actually got.* This creates a problem for dope fiends because after that first hit, nothing else compares. This nature of Dopamine only succeeded in putting me in increasingly stupid and compromising situations.

My collar was stiff and rubbing up against my neck. It was the first time I had worn in a suit in a long time, always opting for gym shorts and t-shirts. Every time I looked down and

swiftly looked up into the rearview mirror, the stiff fabric would rub annoyingly against the stubble that I'd forgot to shave off. My hand was sweaty against the glass tube and I swirled the powder around, waiting until it clumped up into little balls. I had to meet with my attorney at eight AM, I thought about this as my hand slipped down into my suit pocket and my fingers, exercising muscle memory, dialed the number of Arthur. I pulled off the highway and swerved into the parking lot of a gas station. I placed a bag with one rock and the pipe in the front breast pocket of my suit jacket. My blood already started pumping because my mind assumed that everyone knew. I walked passed everything and straight into the bathroom. Locking the door, I already began pulling the pipe out and packing it with my index finger. I sat on the toilet seat and took a deep hit, thickness invaded my lungs, and after waiting a few seconds I arched my neck and blew the smoke into the vents above me. It was a "bell ringer," sounds like sirens began reverberating around my skull. I walked out of the bathroom searching everyone's faces for any hint of their recognition of my illegal act. The thought of being caught in the act really sent tingles all over my body, they came in swift and fast and left my hair standing all over. Arthur met me at a greasy fast food place a couple blocks away from the courthouse. I thumbed the cash in my

pocket, and thought about how weird it was to buy drugs in a business suit. Arthur pulled up in the slot next to me.

"Hot dog, look at you in that suit." Arthur said as he sauntered over to give me a half hug, half handshake.

"I know," I said this coyly, "I got a court date this morning."

"Damn, what for?" his eyes scanned me up and down, searching for any indication of the severity of my crimes.

"Felony, possession," I said looking at the ground because the irony of this situation, me buying more dope en route to my court date for having dope, made my ears hot.

"Been there," he chuckled, "I got ten years, some public defender."

"Shit," it was the first time that I got scared this whole time; it was the first time that jail became a real possibility in my own mind. As I thought about what'd it be like to sleep in a cell with another Skateboard, to have fights about green beans and that chocolate milk they serve you in fourth grade, Arthur carefully removed the bag of powder and squeezed it into my hand. I gave him the cash, easy. Something so dark, so sinister, something that is such a wrecking ball, but that is so easy to get.

"I'm going to be late," I broke the silence.

Arthur began to climb into his car and unrolled his driver side window.

“Hey man, if you need a lawyer you can call my guy, he got me ten years!”

I laughed as I drove off. It was funny, but I didn’t want it to happen to me nonetheless.

The courthouse is crazy at eight in the morning. You have all of these white-collar business men who are doing their civic duty, drinking their lattes and turning up their noses at all of the minority fourteen year olds who got caught tagging or pulling a knife out in their high school cafeteria. The lobby is totally unwelcoming, everyone has to go through these metal detectors and the line is sticking out the door, with people waiting to pass through sitting on the steps that lead to the street. I had a quarter ounce of dope inside my suit pocket, the one that rested up against your dress shirt on the inside. I took out my lighter and cell phone and placed it in the little baskets that the security guard slides alongside you as you pass through the machine. This whole time I have deer-in-the-headlight eyes and I am sweating a little, dampening that starched collar. At this point, I am thinking about how I had just told my attorney over the phone that I was sober, “going to some meetings,” I’d say. I spotted him and he asked me if I wanted a breakfast taco, and I almost threw up at the thought of

it. My stomach would churn and buck if I tried to introduce anything else to it, so I took a cup of coffee instead. My attorney had to go check on some other sap in a different courtroom and told me to meet him in the lobby in twenty minutes. So, I naturally, decided to go to the restroom to smoke. I used to eat this cereal that would crackle and pop when you poured your milk on it. They call it crack because just like that cereal, it crackles when you light it on fire. This sound is like opening an aluminum can of soda in a library that doesn't allow food or drinks; everyone it seems can hear it. I lit it as fast as I could and let it crack and pop itself until it couldn't pop anymore, then I took a hit. I was squatting with both my feet on the toilet seat, so no one could see, and hunching just enough so no one could see my head above the stall. It was a good calve work out. After the hit, I blew the smoke up into the air vents. The thickness invaded my lungs; I put the pipe back into my pocket, and walked out into a sea of law enforcement agents poised to take my freedom away. It was the dumbest hit I ever took, but I never got caught. My court date got reset for the next year, and the thought of jail left my brain.

~

While the felonies sat stuffed in some file in the courthouse, my disease festers and oozes so bad that everyone in

my life can see it. Like watching a car wreck, everyone can't rip their eyes away but what can they do for me? Dealers had to come to me, because my car never moved again after it found itself lying there with its passenger side window melting to the black top road. I lived in this suburban home, the type of house where people would expect 2.5 children. Instead, I was doing almost 2.5 ounces of crack a day. I can't pay for my utility bills. I'm buying bags of ice to keep my food and drinks cold and sometimes it gets so dark in my room at night that I can't see my hand in front of my face. Everything *feels* dark too.

Arthur comes over often now. He sits at the bar when I light up in my kitchen. His hand is propped up under his chin and he is leaning in watching my eyes that are watching the flame, just close enough to light but not close enough to vaporize his product. All of the sudden he sighs a big clear sigh.

"What?" I said not understanding what was apparently so burdensome for Arthur.

"You smoke to much." He said it so matter of fact that the smirk that was forming on my face, in anticipation of a joke, faded quickly.

"What?" I said.

“You should cut back.” It was like a doctor telling his heart attack survivor that he should cut back on chocolate milk and pork ribs.

“Shut up.” It was a simple response on my part.

“Evans,” he said it in way that your teacher would tell you to look them in the eye, “I am your dealer and I am telling you to cut back.”

Silence. It was thick like the smoke in my body. I didn’t know what to say to that.

“It’ll mess with your brain.”

I made my way over to the ice chest, ignoring Arthur’s wisdom.

“What are you doing?” Is eyebrow was arched but his elbow remained planted on the granite with his hand pushing up his head.

“I don’t have water,” I said, annoyed.

Arthur got up and unlocked the back door.

“Where are you going?” I followed him around the back of the house. I watched as he broke the lock of a beige box. His arms shook and he bit his lip as he turned this giant blue week.

“Now you do,” he smiled. “Look at you, you don’t have any lights, no water, shit it’s like some African dirt hole right here in the suburbs!” He seem to relish a little too much in this phrase.

"You need to stop," he looked at me with oddly kind eyes, and I nodded because I didn't know what else to do.

~

Arthur wasn't the only one trying to get me to quit. Elizabeth would sneak in when I wasn't around and tape notes on my bathroom mirror. She'd leave post-its on my bed pillow. They said things, things that reminded me about the God that Pete Lopez always talked about. I'd walk in and stumble around, tripping over my dirty clothes in the middle of the floor and running my hand over the corners of my dresser to avoid running head first into them. And there it would be, a note, "Evans the battle is not yours, it is the Lord's" written in Elizabeth's handwriting. I wanted to believe those notes the way she did.

The thought of Elizabeth lurking around the house, leaving notes on my dressers and mirrors made we want to clean. My house regularly looked like a refugee camp. Stuff strewn everywhere, plates stacked, everything dark and in shambles. I started vacuuming the carpet at three in the morning. It was so dark outside that when you turned on the light inside the house, all you could see was your own reflection staring back at you. The only glow available was the streetlights outside. It was the type of quiet that kicking a rock down the sidewalk sounded like an avalanche and when I turned on the vacuum in my house it startled me and made me quickly turn it off, wondering if anyone

else heard. It is a viscous thing to be awake while the rest of the world sleeps. The knowledge of this makes you ache with tiredness, but no matter how tired lying down makes your legs feel like there are one thousand ants running around inside of them, and like you need to run a marathon across the Sahara just to get them tired. I couldn't sleep. Luckily, I found a way to pay my utilities, enough to be able to watch television at like one in the morning. There are some limited options on after twelve AM, and if I wasn't watching soap operas then I'd turn on televangelist. My favorite was this preacher with a real thick South African accent. It'd be three in the morning and he'd be spelling "color" with a "u," and talking about our justification and sanctification, with an accent that only made me thinks about apartheid. After him, an infomercial came on for a Rainbow Bible. It's Bible with color tabs based on topics and stuff. It came on always at around five in the morning and it was my rooster's crow, my signal that in about one more hour the rest of the world was going to wake up and begin their normal people day. This Bible was a dream to anyone who deeply loved stationary because it had all of these tabs and dividers, 73 colored tabs based on theme and 365 memory verses. It was pretty cool, except it was this Kings James Version, which essentially turned reading Jesus into an experience like reading Shakespeare in Freshman English class. It got me thinking about that night

with Pete Lopez and my rock that is probably still paper-weighting dead leaves on the top of Serenity Hill. I guess that I was still drawing near to this God that I scribbled some line from AA too on this mini-boulder, and I guess I was still waiting for Him to fulfill His part.

Thirty-one

Every day I woke up sober, fresh from a six-day binge, I would call Elizabeth immediately. Then she'd drag me around to all of these different church services, convinced that every time this was going to be the one that healed me.

First she took me to a sanctuary that had floors that were loud when you walked on them, like vacuuming at three in the morning type of loud. There was deep red carpet and dark shiny wood everywhere. There was jagged jigsaw Jesus painted on stained glass that let the sun shine in on us all. They lit candles here and sat in long benches with hymnals placed in wooden shelves with holes for your pencils. It was all together someplace unearthly and separate from what I knew. It was something alien from bags of ice, chopped lines, and sleeping on dirty laundry. Elizabeth would squeeze my shoulder and we'd walk up to front and stand in a corner surrounded by these people who when you looked into their eyes you knew that they believed. I'm not saying that I believed that there was really somebody there, that who ever they wanted to believe in actually cared, but they

believed in something and their eyes made it seem worth it to try it. We didn't have to explain much because Elizabeth had been to these places before, she had placed herself under their hands hoping that whatever power lay inside of them would heal my own sickness. Their hands lay warm across my back and shoulders and they started asking God to take it way and they started telling me to "let it out." Everyone always told me to "let it out," to stop fighting the massive excavation that God was supposedly doing inside of me. It always made me cry, and I wanted it to work every time. I wanted whatever it was inside of me, ripped out by something that was more massive than me. I meant it every time. I meant it under the stars with Pete Lopez, I meant it painting the rock, I meant it seeing that same rock ten years later, and I meant it now under these hands with people whispering all around me.

It never worked, and I never knew why.

Sometimes we would go to these churches, and sometimes, the church would come to us.

~

Interventions are pretty easy to spot. The second that a couple of cars drive up and your uninvited friends walk up to your door, it's a dead give away.

I stuck my forehead against the slender glass window that was to the right of my door, it was lukewarm and I squinted to

see who it was. The glass was frosty, to keep people from seeing in, which is what I wished that it would do right about now. I started sweating and I put my hand on the knob, thinking that it would be more normal for me to open the door for them than for them to have to stand there knocking, but all together it is just an awkward experience. I made out the lines and colors of Elizabeth and figured that this was another crusade for my healing. They made it to the second step from the door and then my hand spun the doorknob and pulled. They stopped right in front of the door.

"Can we come in?" Finally, Elizabeth spoke in what felt like twenty minutes but was probably twenty seconds real time.

"Sure," what do you say to that when you are trying to prove to the rest of the world that you really don't want to be who you are anymore?

They pulled the chairs into a semi-circle, a seating arrangement that I was familiar with. I just kind of looked around and wondered what this would all look like this time. Elizabeth pulled up a chair right next to me. This blonde woman, Randy's wife, started pacing around, occasionally stopping to rest her hands on the back of my couch or run her hand across the granite kitchen counter tops. I sat still, but the whole time my eyes were scanning her to see what she'd do next. This guy, Scott who was the pastor when I went to South America,

started telling me about how God wanted to help me and how he could only do just as much as I'd let him do. I started wondering in the middle of his talking what that meant about all of those times that I was sure that I wanted God to do something but that He hadn't.

"Like Lizzy," Scott pointed to Lizzy who also went to South America with me, "that's her heart. If I'm thirsty and I need a glass of water but I can't get it at that moment then Lizzy will go get it for me. That's her heart; she can do that for me. There are things that she can't do, but she does what she can." I was kind of confused about his metaphor, but I decided to nod figuring that A.) Scott was really trying his best and B.) The more that I nodded in agreement then the sooner they'd all leave. In the middle of Scott telling me about how Lizzy got him water, this blonde lady takes out this little vile and starts dabbing it on her fingers and running her fingers across the door frames. Elizabeth isn't saying much out loud during all of this, but her eyes are doing a ton of talking. I meet her gaze for a couple of minutes until something in it makes it unbearable to keep looking and I have to stop.

"Where do you get high?" This blonde woman looked over her shoulder as she rubbed oil all over my doorframe.

I thought about how I stood in front of my mirror, watching the flame of my lighter to make sure that it hit the pipe just right but not enough.

"My bathroom," I told her and then I remembered locking my closet door and sitting underneath my shirts, "and my closet." She was quick and rounded the corner toward my bedroom. I looked over at Elizabeth again briefly and then returned to Scott and then just conceded to the fact that this was all very weird and at least there wasn't any whispering this time. I wondered what kind of oil it was that she smeared all over my house. I had never seen that before, and I laughed to myself thinking "I bet it's extra virgin olive oil."

~

I couldn't believe that it was Thanksgiving already. Every Thanksgiving I thought about what Rick and Dallas were doing. I imagined Dallas walking around through Houston streets scoping out church populations and gagging which denominations served the most white meat or the best sweet potato pie. Elizabeth was hosting this Thanksgiving at her house. She only lived a couple of miles away from my house and I still didn't have a car, so I told them that I'd walk and that I'd see them that day. I still had dope that needed smoking. Elizabeth told everyone to get to her house at around ten, so at about ten o'clock exactly I started walking across my neighbors' lawns heading toward her

house. My mind starts playing back all of these tapes during the holidays. I started thinking about how I cried when I tried to call my parents on the pay phone when I was homeless and it was my birthday or Christmas. Which then got me thinking about all the times that I broke out in a sweat and I felt my heart pound because mike and I had been drug out of our beds as atonement for my mom's own chaos. As these montages swirled around inside my brain, I packed the pipe as soon as I made my way past the trees on this lot that some church just bought. As soon as I was covered enough from the road, I lit the pipe, heard the crackle and began walking crouched down, squatting like some prisoner of war. I would here these sounds of cars and branches breaking and it made me stop to where I could only hear my breath. Like I said, I only lived a couple of miles away from Elizabeth's house. In other words, it should not have taken the two and a half hours that it took me to make it, but like I also previously stated, I had dope. I finished the last of it all and before I emerged from the trees I hid my pipe, deep in my pocket so that my family, who already knew, wouldn't know. My tongue was acting up and it wasn't producing the words that I wished I could say. My muscles felt like molasses and I just let my head hang a little so that I could avoid looking at other people as much as possible. It was so insane, smoking the whole way to our family Thanksgiving, but it was the same shit. I here that the

definition of insanity is continually being surprised when your actions yield the same results that they have in the past; my crawling up the hill was insanity. I didn't want to be in the mouth of the monster that had consumed me on the streets, which had cut me off from the people I knew with nothing but discombobulated pay phone calls that let them know that I wasn't dead, yet. I didn't ant to rest in that monsters belly, but I could not put it down. It's the same reason that I went to meetings and headed out chips in between my eyes rolling back because of all the hydro codone that I'd ingested. It's the same reason that I tried to pack boxes of little girls' dance clothes in between taking a hit. It was even in the most clinical of definitions, insane.

Everyone had those same faces with those same eyes that told me that they knew and all inside of them a mixture of A.) Relief that I was still alive, B.) Pity, and C.) Resentment that I had chosen to destroy our feast and that they could do nothing about the state that I was in.

My nieces were there. The kid that I had held in my lap, with her soft spot against my chest, was now walking around in that kind of walk where your legs aren't sturdy enough to support the rest of your body, so you just wobble around slapping tables and falling back on your butt.

Everything was foggy, my mind incapable of trapping any new memory, but I do remember that. I don't know what happened really that day; a reporter could maybe try and piece together recollections from the sources that were present. The people who watched the car wreck that became me that holiday, but all I can imagine is that it wasn't a happy day or a good celebration. Other people's Thanksgivings are not like this. Worst-case scenario, you have to go to three separate houses because of all the stepparents involved, or you have to endure a really long and boring game of Monopoly. Not our holidays, our holidays were a culmination of what I had become since it all started. Since when I was a kid who wrecked an Uncle Mutts BBQ van because I'd been drinking or since I was a Criminal Justice major who chopped lines with his roommates down the hall. It was all much worse and much more dramatic than any lousy card game of Spades with your first cousin.

Part Four

(God, my wife, and now)

Thirty-two

I suppose my performance at Thanksgiving made it all much more pressing for all parties involved. Let's get this straight, normally; I wouldn't have gone to treatment when they broke into my house. I would have seen someone walk up to the frosted glass

on the front door and ran and hid in my closet. I would have ignored their knocking, their yelling, and their pleading for me to come with them. I would have gone back to lying on my white carpeted floor for hours running my hand over it for rocks to smoke, or sitting on top of the ice chest I used because my electricity got cut off again. The dope always took precedence and I would push my binges up to six days of no sleep, just smoking and watching televangelists and infomercials for Bibles. But this day was different, not because I had made some grand decision to fix what people had been trying to get me to fix for years, but because on this day Dennis Fuel (who traded stocks with me), Jimmy Ellis, and Darryl walked into my house at the last few hours of my six day binge. These boys were the best candidates for this mission to get me back to normal. In these last hours, I was out of crack and I was almost comatose on my recliner sleeping. Jimmy Ellis, one of the guys who would go skiing with me and who went to Cancun with us on the night when I broke ten years of sobriety, did most of the talking. He talks in such a fast and personable way that almost every conversation is like selling a product. Today, Jimmy was trying to sell me treatment. I, naturally, hadn't eaten so they convinced me to go with them to this burger place and they ordered me a cheeseburger. I inhaled it.

"Look Evans you have these felonies," Jimmy started his pitch like a prize door-to-door salesman, and I just looked at him wondering why he felt the need to make known to me what I already knew. It was annoying and at my current state, I didn't mind being a complete asshole.

"You have got to go to treatment though, I can't help you unless you go." It was such a classic phrase in recovery; no one can help those who won't acknowledge that they need help. I knew that I needed help; I just didn't really want to go to treatment again. I didn't want another group of us sitting in a circle talking about our selfish desires, our childhoods, and out propensity to always have "too much." I didn't want to paint another rock or read another Big Book. Pretty soon all of these thoughts and frustrations boiled up into my throat until they came out of my mouth in a simple,

"No."

Jimmy continued to plead his case.

"I don't have any insurance," I tried to refute his arguments.

"You didn't have any before," Jimmy countered.

"Yeah, but I don't have any money," I started thinking up other excuses to chase the ones I had already thrown out.

"Don't worry about that, just go and we will figure it out," Jimmy assured me in a real warm and kind way.

They were all warm and kind until every single statement they tried to persuade me with was met with a "no" or "I'm not doing it," and I said these things in a less-than-kind way.

It had been almost a complete three full hours. One hundred and eighty minutes of Jimmy giving me all sorts of fantastic reasons why I should find a way out of the muddy rainwater-hole-in-the middle-of-a-Costco parking lot-life that I found myself swimming in. I guess Darryl's frustration was also boiling up and over. I guess he, like Jimmy Ellis and Dennis, was not going to take my "no's" any longer and he just said,

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Everyone else kind of stopped, as if we were all young and new to the world and had never heard a phrase like that. Something in me, in the middle of all my "no's," flipped.

"Okay," I knew right when I said it that somehow it wasn't really me talking, "I'll go." It was one of those times where you wish that you had a little man that hung out right outside your lip just to catch phrases like these. Immediately after I said it, I wondered why in the hell that I had said it. I guess that I had had my burger, that I was feeling a little more normal, and that whatever it was about their unwillingness to let me wallow around in my own mire had turned some gigantic page inside me. Every other time, I went straight from jail to treatment, there wasn't this choice. There wasn't this three

hours of my being a complete and total ass hole and their being these unwavering people dedicated to pulling me out. There is something to that, that choice I mean. There is something to giving an "okay" and an "I will." I wonder if it ever feels as if the person giving the "I will" is actually the person that is giving the "I will?" What I mean is, I wonder if it always feels so unlike you? I wonder if that type of surrender ever feels natural, or if we are all, for no apparent good reason, clawing onto our old selves as if in them was the power to save us. It's like in that moment, I knew I needed saving, I hated where it had to come from, but I knew I needed it nonetheless. It's like God was doing for me what I couldn't handle doing myself, and although He wasn't getting me a glass of water. In some weird way Scott's metaphor, that he was preaching that day at my house as my doorframes were being anointed, began to make a little more sense.

Thirty-three

I didn't go to La Hacienda this time; I couldn't afford it the third time. So I go to this place, Starlight, it's a couple thousand dollars cheaper but not chintzy by any means nonetheless. I naturally, got voted vice president immediately.

Sometimes, I imagine that God has this one big giant invisible hand and that he is always at work weaving and pulling the strings that string up our lives. If this image is true,

then God was pulling some strings when the first person that I saw at La Hacienda was Kurt. It was a little embarrasing and my first inclination was to look away at the floor tiles. Kurt was my very first group leader when I was part of the "young adult" group at La Hacienda, almost fifteen years ago. He, unlike me, had progressed. Drug counseling is a very strange thing. It's fundamentally one of the only jobs, besides maybe a fry cook, where you have to be a former drug addict and a felony is like some badge of courage, a credential proving just how brilliant you were at your addiction. Felonies in drug counseling are like Honor Bachelor's Degrees. Kurt was now running his own rehab facility. Like I said, at first I was embarrassed, but Kurt was happy to see me. And in some strange and unexpected way, I was happy to see him too.

~

This time in treatment wasn't much different from the other two times. Except that on the second week, Dennis, Jimmy Ellis, and Darryl come to visit me. They had followed through. I've decided that what makes these visits so awkward: like visits to the hospital, or sympathy dinners after someone dies, or visits where you are sitting on the other side of some glass at the county jail, what makes these visits so awkward is that we never know what to say exactly. In all of those situations, this situation of me in treatment included, no one ever really knows

what to say. No one ever really knows if its one hundred percent a great thing that they are there, or if a simple card might have been a better choice. Darryl and his wife, Tracy, were carrying this bag when they walked up.

"Hey dude, we got you some snacks and magazines and stuff. Oh and hey, just to let you know, Tracy stuck a Bible in there." Darryl quickly threw that line in choosing to punch the words magazines and snacks over Bible. It was like a statement that you would chase something very uncomfortable with. It was like they were all abdicating their responsibility in the matter of the Bible. This did not seem to bother Tracy,

"I don't know, God told me to put it in there so I did." You have to love the way some people just seem to float through life with that kind of gal. "God told me," with a statement like that on any other day I would have mocked her, but today it was just great to see them. Tracy smiled and walked over to me, grabbing the Bible out of Darryl's hands and leafing through it, "see it has it broken down into days. You read a portion of scripture every day. It starts in January so you can still catch up and just read a few days until you get to today's." It seemed easy enough, "Okay," I said nodding and actually at least mildly interested in what I was going to be reading tonight. After all, you can only read the Big Book so many times before you want a different flavor.

~

It's weird, the deals that we make with God, you know? I know that everyone has had those moments:

Moments like, "God if you give me this promotion, I swear I will stop cursing in traffic."

Moments like, "God if you get me out of this one, I swear I won't get high or jack off anymore."

I'm not dumb enough to know that my bartering with the Almighty is any different from anyone else's.

There's this commercial on T.V. that comes on sometimes, in between the Bible with colored tabs and Spanish soap operas, it's this "Magic Bullet" that grinds up food and stuff for things like smoothies. I think God to me was like the Magic Bullet, like you can stick all sorts of stuff out there and then He'd take it and make it into something that's worth savoring. I in short, kind of treated Jesus like he was magic, and I thought that this Bible that I held in my hands, that God apparently told Tracy about, was laid out in some magical way.

The stories were really gritty. To my surprise, I was discovering that the Bible had more sex and violence than any other movie I'd seen and when you match that up with angels and miracles, it made for some above-average reading in my opinion.

When we went to church as kids, the only thing that was cool was the coffee creamer-like cups of grape juice. We never heard these stories of intercourse with angels or the earth opening up to suck people in that were rebelling against the system. I guess my Sunday school teachers couldn't figure out a way to make this odd wrath of God sound like anything that anyone would willingly sign up for, but now I couldn't stop reading. I'd peek ahead to the next day's reading, the whole time wondering if that was breaking some sort of unspoken rule that everyone else knew about. I'd flip ahead and apologize, telling God that if it was rule then I didn't know about it, hoping that my eagerness to read more would stroke some sort of Divine ego. I was actually looking forward to the evenings when I could read. I was looking forward to something besides meetings and steps and crafts and counseling. I'm not sure that my new zeal for the Bible was anything more than a complete lack of a better idea. I'm not sure that my repentance of sorts was something greater than the knowledge that everything else that I'd done up to this point had failed me.

I keep reading, and every time I do I tell Elizabeth. Finally, my thirty days ends and I graduate again. I left on a Monday afternoon. I gave Kurt a hug and took another Big Book, slipping it between my hand and the Bible that Tracy had given me. Climbing into Elizabeth's car, I felt a little different. I

am not saying that I felt drenched and washed clean or anything, but it was like this time some new switch had been flipped that wasn't there before. I don't get that. I don't get why the government runs hundreds and hundreds Public Service Announcements a year and yet kids still smash their brains in by not wearing a helmet or junior high schoolers still think it's a fantastic idea to huff paint. I don't know why smokers start smoking when the warning is on the package, but then fight to quit years later. And I don't know why it took three treatment centers, one young adult group, a painted rock, and two relapse groups to finally wrench something out of me and turn something new inside of me. It's a mystery to me, but driving off, I didn't care to figure it out. I was just happy that the mystery had grabbed hold of me.

Thirty-four

There must be some fine line that exists, between the awkwardness of having all of your dark moments talked about amongst people you don't know who are committed to "praying" out that sickness and the display of love that having your dark moments talked about by people committed to "praying" out that sickness shows you. Elizabeth, in between dragging me to churches around town and having the church knock on my front door, had been having people keep constant vigil over my disease

for years, and now I found myself standing in the middle of all of those people.

I decided to focus my attention and I made a beeline toward the coffee brewer. I was hoping that the doctoring that I'd have to do, with creamers and sugar, over my cup of coffee would occupy me long enough to strip the sting off of me that was created be my knowledge that although I was "meeting" these people for the first time, *they* totally knew me as Elizabeth's brother with a drug problem. So I am shaking all of these hands, looking at their faces long enough to not be rude in my handshakes, and trying to be totally normal in all of this. This became increasingly difficult when I spotted the blonde haired wife of Randy; her name was Linda, who had smeared oil all over my doorposts. Randy came immediately over to me and with that same warmth that invaded my hospital room, the day after that grand mal seizure, and gave me a hug. In the middle of this hug, one of my eyes caught Linda's face and she was smiling a crazy-broad smile. My heart increased its pounding a little bit, as I thought about how I must have looked that day when she was pacing behind my couch with her lips moving in prayer without any sound. I swung behind Randy to where Linda was standing and in what felt like twenty minutes but was probably twenty seconds real time; I just simply smiled and waited until my insides settled down. I decided that she was all right after all, and in

the back of my brain I figured that whatever she did that day could be all part of the mystery that now held me, so I shrugged and gave her a hug too.

"Welcome back," Linda all of those who knew me told me and it really did seem to me that they meant it. In these moments it occurred to me that maybe they always meant it, meant what they were trying to do to help me that is. Maybe they always meant but for some reason now, just like smokers who quit after ten years, I was finally able to see it. I didn't really know what "welcome back" was supposed to look like because I didn't really want what was "back." "Back" was a place that I didn't care if I never saw again. I wanted that newness instead, the newness that first entered my brain as I held baby Ryan, now almost three and coloring all outside of the lines. She was here, running around, in between these people's legs that must have looked like trees to her eyes. She would run up and just dead weight onto someone's leg, like there wasn't a stranger in the room. I picked her up and she monkey-armed my neck as a man with a guitar started singing songs with his eyes closed and his chin slightly raised up to a God that none of us could see but that we all had some inkling, in a mystery-type of way, was there. The words in these songs didn't make too much sense to me, words about courts and kings and thrones, as if the British Parliament was where Jesus himself hung out. I didn't care though, I liked

to, with one arm holding Ryan and the other slapping the chair in front of me, listen to the beat and the melody and sing with a bunch of people who also couldn't sing but who knew that that never mattered anyway. And I guess that's what attracted me the most to this place; they all somehow knew that it all "never really mattered anyway." They knew that they looked silly whispering and placing their hands on my shoulders. They knew that the very concept of believing in one guy whose death somehow cleared all our debts and whose subsequent coming back to life somehow gave us more life sounded crazy. They knew that breaking into an almost stranger's house and smearing oil everywhere was weird. They knew well the awkwardness of visiting hours in treatment centers. They knew it all, the silliness and the discomfort, it was all in front of their faces, but they did it all the same. Because, somewhere at some moment in their lives, they had all been taken hold of by the same mystery that had grabbed me too. And that, in the middle of this place with these words that didn't make any sense, with these people who didn't know me, and with my three-year-old niece monkey-armed around my neck, gave me just enough to decide that this time I was tasting the newness like never before.

~

Don't get me wrong, there were parts of God that I read about that really made him seem like an asshole. You know, the

parts where he smites a whole town, including women and children. It's like sometimes God gave some serious slack to some people and then other times all people had to do was one small little mess up and they turn into a pillar of salt or die some other eerie-violent death. So I am sitting at my sister's house because I still have not gotten a car since the one that ended up flipped on its passenger side, like some B-rated Bruce Willis movie, on the pavement. I keep reading these verses that show the consuming fire and ultimately concerned with justice type of God, and Tracy will pop in every now and again because at this point we are all pretty excited about how well I am doing.

"Tracy," I looked at her with this Bible she gave me under my hand, "this is so not the God of AA, what happened to the abounding in steadfast love and merciful God?"

"I know, just keep reading, it will all make sense," Tracy responded. Just like that day that she and Darryl came to visit me at treatment, Tracy was like the captain of the faith team. And just like everything else in the past few months of my life, I couldn't think of a better idea so I just kept reading.

I kept reading at this coffee shop that hardly anyone ever went into, so I frequented it so much that it became like my job. I still didn't have a job. Those felonies were like my shadow, they'd adhere themselves to my criminal record like a

parasite sucking out all occupational opportunities, and my court date kept getting reset like it did the day I smoked crack in the court house bathroom. I couldn't just sit at home. I couldn't shower, choose clothes to wear, run my hand through my hair, and light up that first cigarette without having any direction in my day. I couldn't go through some habitual morning routine, only to end up on my own recliner reading. So, every morning I went through this routine and then Elizabeth would pick me up and drop me off at the coffee house. It was one of these days at the coffee shop that I spotted, in between reading a verse and taking a drag on the back porch, one of the most beautiful girls that I'd seen. She worked the coffee bar. She wasn't the type that was trying hard, in fact she sent out a vibe in such a way that seemed to say that she was only looking for a serious man, not just some good-looking Bryan Adams-type of boy. She made some eyes turn in the room for sure, but again she carried herself in such a lady type of way that if a man's eyes were focused on her then he'd have to find a way to hide the fact that he was looking. I immediately put out the cigarette, grinded it under my feet, and kicked it out of sight. I'd throw a glance at her, then look down at some verses, and then take a few sips of my coffee. All of this became like some mathematical pattern and I was performing it hoping that she wasn't catching onto my stare. She was cute, no doubt, and she

carried herself like summer-camp-Stephanie used to, with purpose and charm. I winced a little thinking about summer-camp-Stephanie and my poor performance on that one, and I hoped that this wouldn't turn out the same way.

Thirty-five

So I'd eavesdrop every time this girl was around the table I was sitting at. I was trying to get some Intel on her without having to gather enough guts to actually speak to her. It was like I was in High School all over again, but worse because in High School girls already wanted to sleep with me.

I was able to piece a couple of broken conversations together to discover that this girl dug art. She taught kids how to paint, and sometimes she'd walk around with this gigantic stiff paper and jars of brushes. This was the needed springboard for our first conversation. So today, I decided not to smoke so I didn't have to worry about the way I smelt to her. I walked in the front door and I spotted her working and begin to think about (inside my own head naturally and only for a few minutes of course) how I was going to say what I had planned to say with just enough casualness to it to not make it look like I had planned to say it.

"Hey," I said to her while doing that thing where you nod your head up a little.

“Oh,” she turned around from the steamer and recognized me, “hi Evans.” She knew my name because someone had already introduced us, but that day was not like today in that that day I really could not figure out how to talk to her.

“So, I hear you paint?” this was step one of my advance.

“Yea,” it wasn’t a cold “yea” it was just a very factual “yea” and I could tell that this conversation was going to have to be lead by myself because all she was giving me was “yea.”

“Okay, well I was thinking maybe you could paint something for me,” this was step two of my advance.

“Sure,” she did seem a little excited but not too excited. She did not seem to be too “I’d love to!” excited just kind of a “yes okay I will do that” type of excited.

“Well you’d probably have to come by my house, you know to see the colors and stuff to decide how you’re going to paint it,” this was step three in my advance. “I’ll pay you,” as soon as I told her that I’d pay her I got a little scared because I didn’t have much money to pay her, “I mean not much.”

That last statement was a mistake. It must have been a mistake because her face went from emotionless and contorted into offended in a matter of seconds.

“I don’t think I will come to your house,” she said with that same factual tone and then she returned to her washing of cups and saucers.

So I reverted to the charming Evans that used to work when I got in trouble in middle school.

“Oh come on, come over!” I smiled broadly at her and she turned around briefly.

“No,” she said but she cracked a little bit of a smile. Don’t get me wrong, she was still aloof but she wasn’t angry.

“What are you worried about?” I said egging her on, standing over the creamers and stir sticks.

“Nothing, I just don’t have a lot of time you know?” Almost every time she said something she shot a quick glance and then returned promptly to whatever she was doing. She was refusing to give me undivided attention, I suppose out of her apparent discomfort.

“Alright,” I sighed and conceded to the fact that I had lost this one, but it wasn’t a total loss because she still worked there and I still went there to drink coffee. In my own mind that meant that there would be plenty of time for conversations like these. It was going to have to be a series of small advancements I figured because this girl was not giving me an inch to work with. Although that is initially just annoying, it was the thing that made her different than every other girl.

~

So this coffee house that this girl worked at only had one paid staff member, the manager, and volunteers ran the rest of

it. This girl was a volunteer, so *naturally* I became a volunteer too. I figured that if this girl were so keen on doing the dishes, steaming some milk, or sweeping the floors when I was trying to get her to my house then I would join her in doing the dishes, steaming some milk, and sweeping those floors. This was perfect, I figured, because it'd give my hands something to do and maybe I would seem more natural. There were a couple of weeks where we were the only two working, it was in these weeks that I was going to have to figure out how to stage a casual onslaught of advancements to get this relationship some sea legs. "Sea legs" is this term that people use to refer to how people who work on ships have to get used to the back and forth motion of the boat, like when you step off an airplane your legs feel like jelly. I was not used to the back and forth motion of a real relationship with a self-respecting girl who wanted a serious man, so I figured the metaphor worked well. We started talking for seven hours a day on end. We started figuring out stuff about each other, and with that we started discovering just how different we are from each other.

"So where did you go to school?" you always have the usual arsenal of icebreaker questions when you are first getting to know people.

"I was home schooled," she told me.

“Home schooled? In Victoria if you didn’t go to school it meant that you lived so far out in the middle of nowhere that the buses didn’t run to your house, or you were retarded or something.” That last line about being retarded did not go over too well with her.

“I mean, I just don’t know much about it is all,” I tried to save myself.

I told her about how I loved basketball and how I coached a team of ten year olds, thinking that a girl would always fall in love with a man who coached kids sports teams.

“Oh yea, I played basketball too,” she smiled.

“How did you have a team if you were at home?” It was all very confusing to me.

“Well there’s this co-op, you know me, and my sister, and all of these other homeschoolers get together and play sports or go to Physics class or any other class that our parents can’t teach well. We do it at this co-op.” It was a clear explanation, but the concept was hopelessly alien to me.

“Huh, well that’s cool,” it should be recognized that the phrase “that’s cool” is a total fall back phrase when you can’t figure out anything else to say.

Her phone rang and she went outside to take it. I got a little worried thinking about who that was on the other line, so when she came back in I said,

"Whose that your boyfriend?"

"Well no," she didn't sound too sure about that.

"What it's just some guy that when he calls you have to step out on the front porch to take it?" I decided to risk it and pry deeper.

"Well we used to date."

"So you broke up, but he still calls you?" I was doing that thing where you interrogate people but you do it with a smile to try and turn it into something playful.

"Well the Lord told us to take a break for a season."

At this moment the only words that came into my head were "You are so full of shit," but I decided that those weren't smart things to say.

"So the Lord told you separately and him separately, at the same time, that ya'll needed to take break?" I tried not to sound like I was scoffing but rather like I was genuinely seeking understanding.

"Well yea," she said it so casual as if Jesus is always right there with her, in the passenger seat of her car, or across from her at the dinner table giving her dating advice among other things.

"And what is a season? Like you're taking a break for the summer and getting back together this fall or something?" In my head I wanted to finish that question with "talk English woman,"

but again I figured that was not the best thing to say in the moment.

"No like a *season*," she stressed.

"Okay," I said indicating that putting emphasis on the word did not help me understand it any better.

"It's like a period of time, a period of 'God time.' He takes us through seasons. It's in Proverbs." She did her best to explain it, but it was like she was reading a Spanish-English dictionary to order at a restaurant in Mexico.

My hands this whole time are flailing back and forth in front of the coffee brewer as I am talking to her. The hands are saying "bullshit," but I'm doing a fair job at controlling my mouth.

"So there's four seasons. So did 'God tell you' to take a break for two seasons, so like when the Equinox happens you're back together?" I was in full razz mode this time.

"No, God told us to take a break for a season, which means that we don't really know when we are supposed to get back together."

"So you're just as confused as I am then?" I said through a smile and moved my face a little closer to hers but not uncomfortably close.

"I guess so," she finally cracked a little bit of a smile and then retreated to the back room to get back to work.

I took this conversation as a win for me. Evans George is now 1 and 1.

~

This coffee house, where we work, is in this small community north of town, on the outskirts. And there is nothing out there but a grocery store, a few gas stations, and a couple of restaurants. There's this fast food burger joint just down the street and we liked to go there for our lunch breaks. So this one day, we'd ordered our cheeseburgers and we were sitting there and she says,

"Who are you?" She squinted her eyes a little.

"What do you mean," I smiled back at her.

"Well you just show up one day, you don't have a real job, you spend like ten bucks a day on a liter of coffee, and then spend like forty bucks a week on books. You have to admit this profile would spike anyone's curiosity."

I laughed a little and then said, "Well do you want the full story or the abridged?"

"Give me as much as you can."

"Okay," I said and I took a bite of my cheeseburger hoping that whatever I told her in these thirty minutes wouldn't ruin any chance I had with her in the next.

I started talking, and for the first time in the whole time I've known her she was giving me undivided attention. I figured it wasn't worth lying or sugaring anything about my past because lying and pretending only wears me out, and if we ever did get any sort of serious then she'd figure it out eventually.

I told her about the drugs, the drinking, the treatment, the relapse, the treatment, the relapse, and the treatment. I told her about not liking or knowing God and then kind of liking and just getting to know God. I told her about the two felonies I had and my court date that was continually being reset, and at the end of all of this I said, "So, there you have it, that's who I am." I looked down at the picnic table, at the middle school vandalism written all over it, and I prayed that whatever came out of her mouth next wouldn't sting.

"Wow, that's a lot." She said and I just kept looking at the table, "yea I know," I told her.

"Thanks," she said and I looked up long enough to notice her smiling.

"For telling me I mean. I'm glad your okay now." she kept smiling.

"I am too," I smiled and then began collecting our trash, stuffing it in the paper bags, and throwing it away.

"Hey," she said and hesitated a little, "and I guess that's not who you are anymore, I mean that's who you *were* right?" She

said to me as I threw away the paper bags. “Yea,” I smiled at her. “We should head back now,” I told her as I began digging around in my pocket for her car keys to drive us back, and she nodded in agreement.

“Oh and by the way,” she said with a lighter tone as she got into the car, “I know you still smoke cigarettes.”

“What!” I couldn’t believe she knew, “really?”

“Yea I can smell it on you.”

“No way,” I said disbelieving it because I hadn’t smoked before she came into contact with me since the first days I saw her at the coffee house.

“Yea, even if you air out, I can tell.” She said in her factual tone.

“You’ve known this for awhile?” I asked her.

“Oh yea, when we first started talking with each other I remembered you as the guy who used to smoke every now and then on the back porch.”

“So you noticed me then? Before we started talking?” I smiled at her.

She just smiled and looked out the window.

“So you noticed me?” I egged on.

“Yes,” she threw out her factual tone again, but I could tell that she was cracking all sorts of smiles underneath it.

I never would have guessed that this particular lunch break would end like this when we started it, but Evans George was now 2 and 1 because the girl had noticed me.

Thirty-six

"So I met this girl," I'm telling Jack Miller as he fishes around in his refrigerator for a soda (Jack was the guy who had run me into the sand in high school with his pickup truck). Jack was also now sober. "And?" One of Jack's eyes raised and his hand flipped through the channels to find the football game. He was performing the task of finding the football channel without looking, like the muscle memory of some blind Blues musician. It was the first quarter and Jack lowered the volume so he could hear about my romance.

"And she's beautiful but she's kind of different."

"What do you mean different? Like she's "touched" or something?" Jack said already laughing at whatever answer he'd assumed I was about to give.

"No, nothing like that." I said not knowing how to explain what I meant.

"Well then what?" Jack pressed on impatiently.

"Well she's this Christian girl who was home schooled all her life. You know she's real conservative, like she won't even

go anywhere alone with me and she keeps talking about “seasons” and about how God tells her things. In fact,” I smirked remembering the way my arms flailed in front of the brewer, “God told her to dump the last guy!” Jack also laughed a little and then shrugged. “Well how do you know He didn’t” Jack said with the same smirk that my face just wore.

“She’s real cute though and I already told her my junk and she seems okay with it.” I tried to make up for the weirdness of the attribute that I had just described to Jack.

“I need more,” the jury was still out for Jack on this one.

“Well, like she wouldn’t come with me today because she had to study up on something called BSF that she’s some leader of…”

“Oh, you’ve got to marry her!” Jack cut me off because he was so excited.

“What do you mean? I have to marry her because she’s leading a Bible Study Fellowship class?”

“Yea, dude trust me she’s money if she’s doing that. You have to be smart and be in with God and everything to lead one of those groups.” Jack was nodding as he was saying this because he was so convinced that I needed to marry her.

“What’s her name?” He continued.

“Esther.” I said it thinking about what it’d be like to be married to her.

"Dude, marry her. Trust me." He squinted his eyes like that EMS driver had done when he told me to stay away from dead-man's-corner store.

"Okay, I'll tell her that I like her, but quit looking at me like that," I threw a sofa pillow at him and then fished around in his fridge for some sparkling water.

~

She wouldn't hang out with me one-on-one, but I figured that I really needed to tell her how much I liked her. We had to go do the mass quantity shopping for our job at the coffee house, so when she grabbed the Costco card out of the safe in the back I jumped at a chance to go with her. She consented in that way that she always did; in a way that was trying not to be too excited but cracking all sorts of smiles underneath. We are walking around this store, passing mayonnaise and muffins in bulk next to vacuum cleaners and plastic toddler pools, and I am just following her trying to think about how many hints it would take for this girl to realize just how much I liked her. *She* on the other hand just kept checking off the list and placing pallets of paper towels in the cart.

"What do you think about going to a movie after this?"

"Sure," she said with the cap of a fine point pen in her mouth, "let me check and see if my sister wants to come with us."

"Well, I mean we could maybe just go," I was in my mind doing all sorts of flailing with my hands that would have screamed something about how I was amazed that she couldn't tell yet.

"I'm not going to a movie with you by myself." She finally put the list down and looked at me.

I couldn't help but flail a little, "why not? Can't you see that I like you? Don't you get it, I mean really like you Esther?"

Her face kind of gave this "oh crap" face.

"Would you say something? I mean we are walking around Costco here, in public. You gotta give me something because right now I look like one of *those* guys. The guys that really like a girl who doesn't like them back. I mean don't do that to me. I already don't have a job and I'm just figuring this God thing out, and if I find out that He talks to you and then you go and do this, well that could just be a deal-breaker for me and Him." I couldn't help but laugh at the end of this statement. I'm glad I did laugh too, because she soon followed.

"Shut up," she couldn't help but give me a laugh and she had to turn towards the bulk buy of pickles to hide it.

"So, will you hang out with me?"

"Yes."

“Yes, so you like me too?” I was egging her on just like that day in front of the coffee brewer, and at the burger joint, and now.

“Yes, but in groups.” She again was looking straight at me.

“Really?” I thought for sure that this confession on my part that I wanted to date her would demolish the group rules.

“Really.” She said, and at that point I knew; that it was either work with her and with this God that she said spoke to her, or give up on any idea that I had about me and her together. And if I gave up on that idea then what would I tell Jack Miller this Sunday when we watched football?

“Okay,” I conceded.

“Okay,” she agreed.

“Just promise me one thing?” I asked her.

“What?”

“Promise me that if God starts talking to you about me that you’ll let me know what he says.”

“Shut up,” she slapped me on the chest with the grocery list and was unashamedly, while looking straight at me, cracking all sorts of smiles.

~

I tell her that I like her, but her quirks don’t cease. I’m filling up this espresso press and in the middle of pouring the

steaming water my hand slips and the water splashes down my apron. This, *naturally,* made me drop the f-bomb.

"You know you don't have to talk like that, or use those words I mean."

"I know, but at the time it seems very appropriate." I said kind of annoyed that she was mom-ming this moment.

"The English language is so vast, there are so many other words available to you."

"Yes. And I like that one." I said in the snidest way I've ever said anything since I've known her.

She stopped talking for a little bit, we both did actually, and in that silent time I wondered what it would be like getting on my knees to say my prayers after our first night *together*. My sponsor told me that every morning and every night I should get down on my knees and thank God for everything and ask Him to keep me sober. I was thinking how awkward that would be that first night, if after everything, I rolled out of bed and got down on my knees like six year old to say my bedtime prayers. I was scared to mess with the formula though; I thought it was just like that Bible that Tracy gave me and that the knee thing like the daily reading portions held some sort of magic. I thought that if I missed a morning or a night, even if I just had sex that night and it would be incredibly awkward, that that would be the morning or night that I broke sobriety.

I guess she noticed me looking off and detached.

"You want me to finish making that coffee you spilled?" She asked. I knew she wasn't going to apologize because I think she was right and I also know that she believed she was right too.

"Sure, thanks," I smiled and I figured that if any girl could handle the awkwardness of me getting on my knees and praying after the first time, that she'd be the one.

It wasn't until later that she also informed me that she did not believe in sex before marriage.

Thirty-seven

I have the same attorney that I did that day when he asked me if I wanted breakfast tacos, but my stomach was so doped up that it couldn't handle it. When he asked me if I was clean that day, I lied. Today I told him the truth. I was clean, but I still had to go to court and wait for the judge to decide. I had some friends writing letters to the judge to prove how I had changed. I had boys that I couched their basketball team write letters and I had these leaders of Bible studies I went to write letters. It's so surreal when you walk into court. I had a bag full of letters that my attorney, breakfast taco-guy, told me to bring to my court date. He gave me the impression that the judge would be swayed by this, and in my mind I pictured this grown man in a giant black gown wiping his tears on his sleeve because he was so moved by this life transformed that stood in front of

him. I just didn't think, now that the old me was dead and buried away, that I would go to jail.

I walked up to the stand and stood in front of the judge, his eyes were looking down at me. It felt like those days when you were in Kindergarten and sitting in those tiny chairs when grown-ups passed by your desk. I glanced back at Esther and she was smiling through nervousness. Elizabeth was standing there clutching her Bible with her arms folded across her chest like a school-girl whose a straight A student clutches her Biology book. Linda, Randy's wife, stood next to her with her hands clutched in a way that I knew she was praying for me. I felt their warmth, and then the judge snapped my attention back to him,

"Is there anything you want to say?" He was asking me in such a cold monotone that I almost forgot the letters.

"I have these," and I pulled the pile out from under my arm and gave it to the bailiff to put on the stand. The letters spilled out in front of the judge.

"What are these?" He said kind of annoyed.

"Well, they are these letters that people who know me wrote to tell you how much I'm different now," I was kind of shocked by how young I sounded, as if I was explaining some school-boy crime to my mom in the Principle's office.

“Why didn’t you give me these earlier?” The judge was really annoyed now, “I’ve already read the charges against you and I’ve written my decision.”

“Well can’t you change it? I haven’t heard your decision.” I was worried because the judge sounded like he made a decision that I wasn’t going to like and I felt my eyes get hot with tears.

“I can’t do anything now, is there anything you want to say before I sentence you?” The judge shook his head.

“I chair meetings and I’ve gone to treatment and I go to this church now. I’m completely different,” my words felt heavy and I was tripping all over them.

“I guess because of these letters, I’ll give you three months instead of six.”

“Three months?”

“Three months in incarcerated treatment.”

My lower lip slung open, weighed down with sadness and awe. I couldn’t stand to look back at Elizabeth and Esther, knowing full well the tears that were already streaming from their eyes.

“I’m sorry, you should have gave me these earlier.”

In that moment I wanted to throw my hands around my attorney’s neck and wring it out like a wet pair of pants. I burned all over in sadness, embarrassment, and regret over my stupid attorney.

Esther hugged me. I had almost two months before I had to go and check into the county jail, as if I was checking in to a Days Inn. Except at this place, they took your stuff away, gave you a jump suit, and locked the door. You didn't get a Bible in the bedside table placed by some dude from the Gideons.

None of us knew what to say, so we all walked out to our cars like teary-eyed zombies. We decided to go have breakfast although I am not sure any of us were particularly hungry. I don't know why we do that? When something tragic happens we bring people food or we take people out for food, as if you are actually hungry, as if you aren't so sad that you're stomach hurts. I wonder if any of those casseroles or dishes of spaghetti actually get eaten, or if they just burden the already burdened with leftovers. I stared down at my potatoes and tortillas. I thought about what kind of food I'd get in that jail cell. I remembered the green beans and macaroni and pale hot-dogs. We all looked at each other almost wishing that they had hauled me off in cuffs that day because this two months of waiting before I have to check myself in is going to be strange. I keep looking over at Esther, nibbling on my taco, wondering if she was wondering how such a good-girl like her ended up with a convicted felon like me. It's not that I doubted that she loved me. It had been almost a year since we started working at the coffee house, but something dark and terrible inside of me made

me think that while I was shivering on a hard cot in a jail cell that she would find some serious-guy that she was looking for in the first place. She's telling me that she'll take care of Gracie, my dog, and water my plants on the windowsill above the kitchen sink; I tell her that I don't really feel like talking about that right now. She starts reassuring me, telling me that she will figure it out, how it all worked, how to send me blankets and books and stuff like that. I tell her that I can't talk about that now and that I'd much rather focus on our breakfast.

~

I guess that I should have talked about it then because in the roughly sixty days that I had left, I didn't want to talk about it either. I've never had a terminal illness, but I figured that the timeline that they give you must feel like this. It feels like you should be doing the smart things you know? Like if you were going to die then you should meet with a Life Insurance agent and sign a will and see all of those people that you always told yourself that you'd make time for but never did. I felt like I should be doing smart things. I felt like I should be quitting dipping because they don't have chewing tobacco in jail. I felt like I should be memorizing scripture in hopes that the piety of it all would smother the anxiety that riddled my insides. At the same time though, who wants to waste

time on meetings when you're dying of cancer? I didn't want to do smart things. I just wanted to make my own choices before I had others making them for me while I sat like a zombie in a one-piece jumpsuit.

It was a mistake because when the day came, to check myself in, I didn't know what to do. All these other times that I'd been in jail, I was there to sleep off some drug and I was there because someone had thrown me into the back of a car and drove me there. Like treatment, it was never something that I did, a choice that I made, with my own hands. I'd read the part already, the part where Jesus is sprawled out in the dirt of some garden, sweating blood and crying, asking God for any other way but *that.* I realize that comparing my few months in "incarcerated treatment" to a terminal illness and Jesus Christ before His crucifixion seems overdramatic and self-important, but it felt like that. So, I asked God if there was any way out of this, knowing inside of myself that there wasn't, and I asked Him that if there wasn't some way out of this that He would please be there with me because I just did not want to go. The only scripture that I could remember when that day came was, "Consider it pure joy my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds." I started repeating it in my head. All of the thoughts inside of me had ravaged my immune system so hard that a fever

blister exploded and covered half of my mouth. It was sore, red, and raw.

That morning, I told Esther to come at 8:15 in the morning because I had to check in by nine. That morning, I showered, lathering as much fancy soap onto my body because I knew that in the next few months all that I would have was thirty seconds and hard lye to rub all over me. I shaved carefully and even slapped my neck with some scent partly, I guess, because I was going to see Esther for the last time for months and I was still secretly worried that in that time, she would leave me. I chose my favorite jeans and golf shirt, and I laced up my favorite basketball sneakers like a prisoner stepping up to his own execution would want to dress in his favorite outfit before the poison entered his veins. Again, I realize that these comparisons seem so overdramatic and self-important but again, that is how it all feels. I started pacing around for a while and then I wasn't sure how I should look when Esther came to get me. Would it be better for me to sit in the kitchen casually drinking coffee or reading my Bible, or what? I couldn't move much further than the bedroom, sitting on my own sheets and my own plush comforter looking over at the empty snuff can on my bedside tables with nickels and quarters and a half-drunk glass of water there. I looked over at the clock 8:10AM, the red letters made me nervous, I felt a little like throwing up, but

instead I ran my index finger over the raw fever blister on my face. In my head, it was all playing out so clear. I knew she would leave me for someone better. I knew that she didn't want to marry I guy who smoked himself into debt and who still had car impound payments due ten years after he first go them. I don't know what happened really, or why I waited until now, but I just started to cry. I didn't want to go to jail, but what I didn't want even more, was for her to leave me. All I could think about saying was "why didn't she come earlier?" The house was so quiet that every little sucking up of air that I was doing, because I was having one of those weepy animal-noise making cries, was scarily loud to me. My face was buried in my hands and even though it kind of hurt to touch the sore I needed a hand there to catch the snot and tears that ran all over my face.

I didn't hear her come in.

"Evans?" She sounded confused. She had to just walk in because I apparently didn't hear the knock on the front door.

"Evans?" Now she sounded concerned.

"Why didn't you come earlier?" I threw my arms out and her eyes were big, not scared big, but maybe more of a "this is too much" type of big.

“You told me eight fifteen.” She said, almost pleading with me not to cry over her but to cry over jail and let her comfort me like she is supposed to do.

“I know,” I sucked up some air, “but I thought you would want to come early.” In my head I thought that the fact that she was doing what I asked didn’t mean that she loved me but that she didn’t want to come early to spend more of those last hours with me.

“I’m so sorry,” she said as she sat down next to me and hugged me.

“I just thought you wanted me to come now.” She said and she sounded serious to me so I tried to stop crying.

“I just,” I didn’t really know how to say any of this, “I thought you’d left me.”

“What?” She sounded genuinely shocked so I tried to stop crying even more.

“I’m not going to leave you,” her arms and hands were still around me and she was looking me straight in the eye.

“Okay,” I wiped my eyes on my sleeve.

“Evans,” she said in a tone and with a pause that made me want to listen.

“Yea,” I looked at her finally but I was a little embarrassed.

"I am not going to leave you." She said it and I believed it.

"Okay," I noticed the clock said 8:25AM, "we should go then."

The whole way there I drove and she sat beside me in the passenger seat completely silent. It was like the morning with the breakfast tacos but worse because on that morning we all just could not think of anything to say, but on this morning we physically could not say it because that stupid lump would have gotten in the way of the words caught in our throats. So we just drove, down the highway, toward the jail, in silence. She unzipped her purse, and again all of those little daily sounds sound so much louder when everything is so sad and silent. She handed me some face lotion, "put this on your blister," she said and she unscrewed the cap. "It'll make it feel better," she told me and I stuck out my finger for a dab and gingerly rubbed it on there, knowing full well that this would be the last attempt at medicating it.

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I found myself reaching up and covering it with my hand as I walked up to the screened and cold window at the county jail. They gave me a grey bin and told me to change and place everything I had on me in that bin, which wasn't much just a belt, a shirt, and some jeans. I changed and they slid a white

mask toward me like the people who work at the movie theater slip you a ticket at the box office. They “have to test everyone for tuberculosis,” they told me and they told me not to take that mask off for seventy-two hours. I looked like a dork, with my mask on and little red splotches rimming the outside of it because of the world’s biggest fever blister. They frisked me. I gave Esther my watch to wear, which she did wear like a widow would wear the dog tags of her husband who is M.I.A. There’s this series, this beige maize of heavy locking doors and people with guns who lock those doors behind you and frisk you. It’s a maize of holding tanks, little cells that they place you in until you are finally processed. Looking at the guns of these people in the middle of these freezing rooms that are cold enough to hang raw meat, I started asking God where He was. I hadn’t been there long but I already felt like sweating blood as they handed me a “Johnny Sack.” I still don’t know why it’s called a “Johnny Sack” but essentially it’s a sack lunch. It’s the type of sack lunch quality that FEMA would hand out in a Hurricane relief effort, the bologna sandwich was always smashed no matter how short it’s travel was between the kitchen and your hands. The bread was soggy in places from the uneven spread of mustard. You did get two vanilla crème cookies, the type of cookie you’d impulse buy at a corner store. No matter what time of day, you got a carton of orange juice, the national beverage

of elementary school, to go with the sandwich and cookies. I just wanted some coffee and at this point I didn't even need anything fancy like espresso. I would have settled for break room-afternoon-level of quality coffee. I would have settled for moderately luke-warm and a little too weak or strong level of quality. I ended up in the last few rooms of the maize, a series of holding tanks where they process us all. These holding tanks look like a room with white brick, cold steel benches, and about eight guys. Murderers rubbing shoulders with rapists, rapists rubbing shoulders with domestic abusers, and domestic abusers rubbing shoulders with dope fiends like me. It's not even five minutes into this and a small black guy walks in with a sack of stuff. He had just been transferred from another jail and had yet to give all of his stuff over to the grey bins of the Bexar County Jail. He pulls out this instant coffee and my glands start salivating. I remembered to thank God for the coffee, but the deal gets sweeter when this guy pulls out a Bible and raises it up in the air, "Hey any of you want a Bible?" My hand shot up fast, in a way that it never did for any answering of questions in grade school. He threw it over at me and I sloppily caught it, one of my fingers already flipping to find the only verse that I could remember. I moved the mask a bit, rubbing against the blister and wincing a little, "hey thanks." This guy was from Wichita Falls, and I shook my head as I touched the thin

gold-lined pages wondering what the odds were that somehow I'd end up in this holding tank with a Bible and a guy from Wichita Falls who had instant coffee.

Thirty-eight

The instant coffee gets you a long way in a Commissary system. The Commissary system lets people put money on your books so you can order stuff off this checklist that had things like vanilla crème cookies. Coffee was top shelf and people would have to trade a whole tray of cookies or a few pencils and stamps for coffee. It's like trading baseball cards with convicted felons. The Commissary brought you your product at the end of every week, I figured out real fast that I should have let Esther talk about "figuring it all out" because for the first week I didn't have money on my books. I salivated and burned with frustration as vanilla crème cookies and coffee passed by me every Friday. I immediately started bumming and by the second week, when Esther had figured out how to put money on the books, I owed so many cookies and coffee that I had to pay back interest for the next few weeks.

My first night there, felt like the first lunch hour of Junior High School. With the exception that this time instead of the jocks and the preps and the table of the kids who smoked in the bathroom, you were being shunned and bullied by rapists. I still had my stupid medical mask on and my fever blister. I

took the tray of two hotdogs and a slop of macaroni and sat down close enough to someone else to not draw attention to myself, but far enough away from someone else to not draw attention to myself. My eyes kept wondering to this long table of guys, but I didn't want them to think I was gay or something so I had to time it just like the mathematical pattern that I used when I first started stealing glances at Esther. I thought, and I hoped, that they might have been doing a Bible study but I didn't want to risk intruding on some small group that would only give me a bloody lip, a bloody fever-blistered lip that would make sleeping even harder than it already was in the meat locker-cold rooms on the steel mattresses on the bunk beds. After I finished inhaling my hot dog and macaroni, so hungry in a place void of snack food, I walked over to replace my tray to the kitchen. I hovered around this brick pillar, one of my eyes was able to investigate even further what the guys at the long table might be doing. I didn't want to stand there like some voyeur, so I just paced back and forth in a three tile-square pathway. Finally, in what felt like twenty minutes but was probably actually more like five minutes real time, I decided to go back to my cell and meet back at that same place tomorrow to see if I could weasel in if it was a study. I guess that I wasn't as inconspicuous as I thought I was because as I walked away I jumped after some guy yelled, "hey you want to join us?"

I stopped and tried to play it cool (pointing to my chest in a “who me” type of way) and reaching up to move the mask, trying hard not to wince as it rubbed the raw skin I said, “maybe what is it?”

“It’s a Bible study,” this big guy that sat at the head of the table told me.

“Sure man,” there were what felt like tiny electrodes running through my vessels because I was so excited as I took my seat. I took inventory in my head over how many guys were sitting there. There was a majority of black guys, one guy with a Nuevo Testamente, and a small cluster of white gangly guys like me. I smirked as I realized that when I sat down, the group now equaled twelve.

“My name is Skool and we call it all joy here.”

“I do too!” I immediately regretted the dorkiness of my excitement. I wasn’t sure yet if you were supposed to smile at anything in jail but raunchy sex jokes or violent scenarios, and I really did not want to get a bloody lip. I couldn’t help it though, the phrase just kind of spilled out of me when I realized that the group was founded on the only verse in the Bible that I could remember. Skool kept talking and something about his voice triggered the tissue in my mind that had been scarred. It triggered old tapes that long ago were shut down by too much crack.

“I know you from somewhere,” I pointed at Skool.

“I don’t know,” Skool shrugged.

“That voice, I know that voice,” I tried my best to remember where I’d heard that voice before, like an old Chevy engine death rattling before it clicks into life.

“Yeah I know that voice,” my arms were flailing in a way that was pleading for him to remember me.

He just gave me a series of blank stares.

“Where do you live?” I started to try to piece together tattered pieces of fragmented memories.

“Hays Street,” Skool replied simply and factually.

Hays Street, it clicked that was the street on the corner of the AIDS hospice that I used to hang out at near Geoffrey’s back yard.

“Yea! Near the AIDS Hospice? Do you know Geoffrey?” It was all coming together in my head, as if I had successfully managed to assemble the border pieces of jigsaw puzzle and now it was just a matter of filling it in.

“Hey yea,” his face began to show recognition now too, “you used to buy crack from me and you drove a Trailblazer?”

“Yea!” In any other scenario of someone recognizing me from those years, when my pants would end up around me ankles as I lay passed out on the base of some toilet, my ears would have

gotten hot and I would have hid my eyes, but here it was a miracle akin to giving the mute words.

Skool smiled big-smiles too, but we both changed the subject quickly to topics on God because neither one of us wanted to stay back in the mire that got us here, in our navy jumpsuits with trays of hotdogs, for very long.

That night, I did what my sponsor had always told me to do, I got down on my knees on a hard cement floor and I thanked God, but this time was different than any other time. This time, Jesus was not some magic rabbit's foot that I could rub to make me into a better person, because this time, I had found Him here at the county jail. He was sitting right next to me with His own tray of hotdogs and macaroni, in a group of twelve jump-suited disciples.

~

You eat at odd times in jail. You have breakfast at 4am, and it's always hard to distinguish between you eating in your dreams or you eating for real at that hour. You didn't even care to rub the sleep off your eyes as you rolled over shoved eggs into your mouth and put the empty tray back on the floor. Then you had lunch at ten and dinner at five. By the time five o'clock came, that seven hours of nothing in your belly made

your stomach start talking trash (gurgling) and you couldn't wait to stop the hunger burns. The bologna sandwich at lunch was just like throwing newspaper on a fire and it was altogether like the "Trail of Tears" because you were cold, tired, and hungry everywhere you went. So, when one night at dinner I opened my Styrofoam tray to find one and half hotdogs instead of two, I almost flipped over the very table I was sitting at like Jesus flipping over the tables of moneychangers in the temple, except not as righteous as that. The thought of half a hotdog soured my whole body, and I sulked over to the Bible study long table. Skool just sat and listened to me expound upon the horror and tragedy of not getting two hotdogs until finally he squinted his eyes at me and said,

"So let me get this straight Evans, your whole spirituality, your joy, is dependent upon whether you get one and half hotdogs or two?"

It was a question that cut to the quick of my soul. Immediately I burned throughout with embarrassment and my heart slowed as I realized that he was right. The next morning at 4am I would be hungry again, along with everyone else who got two hotdogs, and none of this really mattered.

"You're right man." I nodded in agreement and Skool raised his eyebrows as if to make sure that I would remember what he

said the next time I had half a square (in our divided Styrofoam trays) of macaroni instead of one full one.

"Let's pray," Skool lifted up his arms and scanned the table, making eye contact with everyone before his head bowed in prayer.

I flipped through the Bible below me and I glanced up at Skool praying, rocking back and forth with his eyes closed in some sort of passionate dance with God. I remembered him as the guy who sold crack to men, with purple lesions, dying of AIDS. I smiled to myself, imagining that in Skool's big-beautiful-moment of conversion that he would have dumped out a whole zip lock bag of crack and smashed his pipe under his feet. I don't know if that's what happened really. All I know is, the Skool who now sat across from me, with his eyes shut and his mouth praying to the God that none of us could see but that all of us had been saved by, was not the Skool of Hays Street that I once knew.

Thirty-nine

I lived on the second floor. It was a concentric set up. My roommate, who could not speak a lick of English and who read his Nuevo Testamente until the corners were dog-eared and soggy, and I lived in a small six by six foot room with two bunks and a toilet in the open air. There were, naturally, heavy doors that locked us in and right outside of our cells there was a common

area where we all ate, but you couldn't walk out there until some person with a gun let you. It was not as bad as the stint I had where we played Spades with chocolate-milk stained Sharpe-markered homemade playing cards because I didn't have to fight to get a bed and no one stole my ice-cream scoop of green beans off my tray. The second floor was also the cream of the crop, the cream of the crop means that these inmates were just drug dealers and not armed robbers or capital murderers. They called us the "Trustees." The "Trustees" were able to have jobs around the cell, which although I normally don't like to work much, in jail a job was welcomed to pass the seven hours of emptiness that generally filled your day. I didn't know this until one of the guys at lunch asked me how I, "got on the second floor?"

"What do you mean, I didn't choose it. It was just like everything else here. They told me where to go, they have guns, so I went." I was trying to be lighthearted about the men with guns thing because by this point I was very board of bologna and I figured that some laughter might be some medicine for me.

"You mean you didn't apply to get here?" One of his eyebrows raised and he actually seemed a little frustrated. As if he had to apply and I just walked in, like a trust fund baby or something.

"Apply?"

“Yea, most people have got to apply to be on this floor because you get to work here.” Now, the guy sounded really frustrated.

“Really? Well, when can I get to work and what do I have to do?” I couldn’t believe it, and I was almost jumping out of my skin. Just the night before, I was talking to Esther on a pay phone.

“I can’t do it?”

“Do what?” Esther asked, which I thought was kind of a dumb question but sweet none the less.

“Live here for three months and do nothing all day.” It made me burn a little throughout my body thinking about doing nothing all day. It made me want to scream and I was itching out of my skin with restlessness.

“I’m sorry,” Esther meant it. She also had no idea how to help me and the pay phone only allowed a certain amount of time and inside, without the need to say anything, we knew that this particular conversation was not worth our time.

“Do I need to talk to anyone,” I remembered my friend standing in front of me, who had just told me such welcoming news that I wanted to kiss him on the lips, but the passion soon subsided.

“Don’t worry about it.” He waved me off. “Just wait until you get that thing off,” he flicked my mask and it scraped the

blister and for a split second I wanted to punch him in the face, but that passion soon subsided, “at the end of your seventy-two hours when we all know you aren’t gonna give us TB. Then, they’ll let you work.” He had an annoying smirk as if he was poking fun at the mask to make up for his frustration over me magically skipping over the application process. He walked off and I returned to my bologna, this time miraculously unaffected by the soggy patches of mustard-bread.

~

I worked the lunch assembly line, and because I had gained a level of sympathy for what it’s like to eat smashed cold sandwiches I tended to have a level of pride in my work that probably far exceeded most inmates. The trustees came from all different cell blocks on the second floor. A big clump of us in navy jumpsuits that had proved themselves still a menace to society but slightly less so than the others represented at Bexar County jail. We ate breakfast at 4am like everyone else, fell back asleep for two more hours, and then walked down to the kitchen at six in the morning to start assembling 4,000 lunches and dinners. It was even colder behind the kitchen than in our cells and it only encouraged you to try and toss apples on trays as fast as you can to generate some body heat. The air conditioner was so loud that a fleet of aircraft could have been taking off over our assembly belt. The line leader was a yeller.

He wasn't even a yeller with good reason; he just liked to yell I think. Some of the guys who sat with me in our Bible study worked beside me on the line. Skool liked to pray with a Southern Baptist Jesus Freak on a street corner infliction. He'd always say "We thank you in the name of JeeesUS," (phonetically this is difficult to get across, but it sounded like John Maiden on Monday Night Football when he speculated that "he could go all the way" as a player ran toward the end-zone). This became our battle cry when we were yelled at by our line leader. Skool did tell us that "we call it all joy here," but I don't know if he ever expected us to take it this far. In the middle of tossing two vanilla crèmes in a bag we'd yell out, "thank you JeeesUS" simply not caring about whoever else was around us. This kind of behavior was never and remains never to be replicated out in normal society, at grocery stores or movie theaters, but at the time it kept us all sane.

Sometimes I would start to sing. I can't really sing, and I didn't really know full songs. In fact, there was only one chorus that rang in my head over and over again. Because the air conditioner was so loud I began to play the kick drum on the tile floor, tapping my foot and slapping one hand on my thigh like a snare, while throwing hotdogs on buns. Our line leader would yell at me to shut up and stop singing, this naturally, only solicited a chorus of about nine "Thank You JeeesUS"s, it

didn’t take long before our counterintuitive praise had won over the yells of the line leader and the guns on the hips of the men who watched us work.

~

“Babe,” I was telling Esther into the payphone, “we have to get money on Skool’s books before I go.” I had finally gotten word that I was going to be transferred in the next couple of days to the “incarcerated treatment facility,” where I would finish up my sixty days.

“I don’t know how,” she told me and although I knew that she was serious about her good intentions of putting money onto Skool’s books, I also knew that she was happier to talk about how I was being moved. I was only supposed to sit in the county jail for a few days, none of it counted toward the completion of my sentence, it was just a holding place until I got sent to incarcerated treatment.

“I have to have his SID number,” she told me, “will you be able to have visitors in treatment?” I knew she would only rest on the topic of Skool for so long. I wanted to give Skool money on his books because he had somehow found me a New International Version Bible. In our regular Bible studies, we used this weird type of translation Bible. It had the Apocrypha in it and the way they translated the Greek was different than I was used to. So everyday at the study, I’d almost always say, in between

highlighting parts of John, “man it says something different in the NIV.” I guess Skool got tired of this because he managed to make a few calls and bring me a torn, tattered, dog-eared but nonetheless beautiful NIV Bible. The best part was that I could take this NIV with me to treatment.

“No, we can only write letters,” I told her. I know that we lived in the same city and that the mail would come everyday, but I wanted to see her and hear her.

Visiting hours sucked. It was the type of sucked that you wouldn’t trade for the world though. I wanted visitors, but I wanted visitors wearing my jeans and basketball shoes, not some one-piece jump suit and shower shoes. I wanted some sort of gel in my hair and most of all, I wanted to touch people, and I didn’t want to see their lips move behind a plate glass window and hear their voice a split second after. It’s weird to look at the person whose talking on the phone with you, like watching a poorly dubbed foreign film. We’d talk and we’d try, for the sake of everyone involved, not to share how difficult it was for us all. I was sad because I was there, and they were sad because I wasn’t there with them. Some of us were better about not crying, although the crying always makes you feel loved. Crying in jail visitation makes you feel loved in that feel-loved type of way that still makes you kind-of bummed out nonetheless.

"I'll write you," she told me and I knew that before she said anything anyway.

Forty

They called my name at three in the morning. I took my Bible and they walked me down to a van that would drive me to the treatment facility. I slid into the van and they turned on the heat and it felt like Heaven had invaded my bones. I was so cold for three and a half weeks and nowhere that I could walk would bring me relief from it. I couldn't walk outside and feel the sun and no blanket took away the convection that happened between my flesh and the steel mattress that I lay on. I started to get nervous again, just like the first day I checked in, because here is new and I was new again. Pulling up was like pulling up to your first high school party as a freshman, except back then I at least had something in my system to cool me down.

"All right give me all your stuff," they immediately yelled at us while they ripped the one duffel bag that we had to our name out of our hands. They shaved our heads and because I am white and gangly tall, I looked like a supremacist. They yelled at us to walk toward the showers. There were five of us lined up and they handed each of us this hard block of lye that we had to rub ourselves down with to prevent the spread of lice. It was like high school sports but worse because here they did cavity

searches. The made us open our mouths and they cotton swabbed us.

"What's this for?" I asked in the way that you answer your dentist when he has all of his drills in your mouth and asks you how your day was.

"Test for HIV." They said it real matter of fact, and when they did I got even more nervous but decided not to focus on that right now because I really just wanted to focus on getting clothes back on my body.

They handed us red shirts because, for the first three weeks, that is what you wore. Red shirts weren't allowed any privileges, no basketball or work duties.

Then, they walked us to our dorms, which was essentially a row of twenty-five parallel bunk beds with individual footlockers at the end of them. They showed us how to make our beds, and we had to make them exactly like that every time. I looked around and everyone around me was between nineteen and twenty-five, which means that I was old and that means that I was mocked. You have to sit at the end of your footlocker and you can't slouch. Let's get this straight, I'm pretty sure that my spine hasn't even been educated in how to stack straight so this exercise of sitting up straight until after dinner, when you could retire to bed, was naturally wrecking havoc on my

back. You weren't allowed to talk to anybody, which meant that the others had to whisper the f-bomb.

So, this whole time I have this NIV that Skool gave me and I am flipping through the dog-eared pages trying to take my mind off the screaming nerves in my back. The other guys who could read would pull one of the yellowed-old dentist office issues of Reader's Digest off the cart and try and read to get their focus off of every other idea of something better to do that ran through their gang-banger brains.

Every now and then, in between reading these articles that were targeted toward middle-aged white men anyway, they'd look over at me and say one of the myriad of inappropriate or filthy things that usually poured out of their mouths. I didn't know how I was going to do it. It was only the first two weeks, and almost everyday somebody got hauled off, their probation revoked and their future of five to ten years in jail set. We were the crew of second chances, which meant that if we made it through sixty days of incarcerated treatment then we wouldn't have to do our longer jail sentences that for crimes like ours, one was supposed to do. You couldn't hang out in groups more than two because three was a clique and a clique was a gang. You couldn't swear, you could barely even raise your voice, and if one fist were thrown then you'd be hauled off. This wasn't some lame threat that your gym teacher told you, you weren't going to have

to run a mile for being tardy. Real people really did get hauled off and they really did have to go to real jail.

Sometimes I'd look up and the boy across from me would be starring me down. He didn't say much and he didn't smile, but every morning it became like routine. I'd settle in to read my Bible and he'd be looking at me, burning holes through me with his pupils. It weirded me out, but I didn't know how to tell me to stop. Every now and then, he'd get up and walk past say and me something like,

"F***ing Bible."

What do you say to that? Overtime though, something about his stares and his blasphemy grew on me. Perhaps, it's because I am a creature of habit and his patterns some how soothed me in this cold steel-covered entrapment, or maybe it's just because underneath all of his weirdness Robert Mann was somehow charming, even if it was in that Jonesville type of way.

Every dormitory has to have a scapegoat, someone who is the easiest target out of everyone. Some guy who would never really pull a switchblade or a handgun on anyone and who just genuinely had a problem with wanting to do drugs and is now somehow lumped together with people who live and move and breath in and out violence for pleasure. Usually, I was the guy who always slept on the floor because I could not fight well enough for a bed. Usually, I was the guy who got punched in the stomach so hard

that the wind was completely knocked out of me, like that time when I tried to stand up for the hooker with a bloody lip. In short, usually I was the scapegoat, but this time Kevin was the scapegoat. Kevin was the only other white guy and he was very effeminate but he always talked about a woman that he loved. He just happened to always talk about the woman he loved with me and no one else because everyone else would have either A) punched him in the face for even approaching them or B) would ask Kevin to do something for them that was totally inappropriate and stemmed out of the sex-starved state of inmates. They'd always call Kevin a "homo" or something to that effect and I always told them not to because Kevin had told me that liked girls anyway.

His bunk was the top bunk to the left of my bottom bunk. When he wasn't talking to me, he just sat around quietly. The guy that shared the bunk with Kevin was a scrappy black guy who knew some about the Bible because, like Skool had told me, his grandma prayed verses over him too. So, the set up looked like this, when I was sitting on my footlocker, if I looked directly across from me I'd catch Robert Mann staring me down smirking and cursing out God. If I looked adjacent to me and glanced up, Kevin would be lying on his back quietly and everyone around him would be pointing and snickering at him and saying all sorts of mean things. If I looked below Kevin's bunk, Kevin's bunkmate

Brandon, the scrappy black guy, would be sitting there every now and then peering over at me to see what I was reading. The way Brandon looked over at me reminded me of the first time I hid behind the column in the Bexar County jail cafeteria, cupping my white mask and counting to myself how long I could hang around before things got weird.

"Hey," I decided to afford Brandon the same kindness that was afforded me.

"Hey," he looked away immediately when I said 'hey' which is only funny to me because I knew exactly what he was doing, and I think all of us always do. I think all of us play the same games in our minds and I think I finally realized, in a place where you shower in front of men with guns, that its really dumb because we all are aware of these games but we keep doing it nonetheless. And in the end, you're eventually going to have to be yourself because who you are always comes out at some point.

"I'm reading John," I showed him the chapter as I said it.

"What do you think you'll find in there?" he smirked and it oozed with snide.

"If I said Jesus would that be too cliché?" I smirked back at him and he laughed.

"I like you white boy."

"Yea well don't tell anyone else or they might give you a bloody lip for it," my eyes scanned the room and the only one who was looking was Robert Mann, as usual.

Brandon smiled and then began to rummage through his footlocker for some shaving cream and a razor because it was getting close to evening showers.

I decided to do the same and as I was looking for my razor, I saw a guard come walking toward me with a white slip of paper.

"George?" he asked and I was a little annoyed that they never used my first name too.

"Yes."

"HIV results," he said it as he handed me the slip of paper folded up. As soon as he slipped it into my hands he was ready to walk away. I froze, unable to open the slip of paper because my brain started the montage of Geoffrey images. I thought about Geoffrey and face lesions. I thought about Geoffrey and the way he ran down the street, passing the house that people like him went to die, and screaming in nothing but his underwear. I closed my eyes briefly as I opened the page, asking God for clean results, I had only shot up twice. The first time I stopped halfway because I couldn't do it. I couldn't look at my vein and watch the clean blood escape as it waited to be refilled with crack laced platelets. I knew also, that it would only take one infected syringe to inflict all of my cells.

"Negative," it was haphazardly circled in blue pen. I didn't even care to read about anti-bodies and false positives. I looked at "Negative" and let the news soak over my anxiety. As I folded the paper back up, I thanked God under my breath as I stuck the slip in between the pages of my Bible.

Saying his name, thanking him that I had miraculously avoided the fate of people like Geoffrey, I thought about how I wanted to be used by Him. "Used by God" is such a televangelist-street corner Jesus-freak phrase I know, but I really did want to be used. I wanted to be like Pete Lopez and I wanted to see people cry, or maybe not cry but just have something that was better than all of this. Something better than hard soap, shaved heads, macaroni, and footlockers. If all I had to do was use that footlocker like a pulpit, then that seemed doable enough.

~

I was getting a blue shirt today. The big thing with the blue shirt was that you were allowed to participate in "recreation time." We'd play one-on-one basketball and no one could beat me. This naturally gave me the street cred. that I should have gotten in the beginning but that nobody wanted to give me because I was a white-old-dork, but when I was a kid I used to practice all the time. I would pretend that I was the white-dork of the NBA, Larry Bird, and I would shoot until it was too dark to see the ball once it left my hands. I would

imagine my body, long and slender with muscle, sort of floating through the air or hovering on the court past all of my opponents as if God himself fashioned me as a perfect basketball machine.

Somehow the beast I was on the court made it a little bit easier for these guys to listen to me, and I would notice more and more eyes drift my way to see what I was reading. Now, it wasn't just Robert Mann who began to stare, and what really freaked me out were the guys who would ask me to pray for them. I wasn't much of an out loud prayer-er, I kind of just considered it to be just like normal talking, just with your eyes closed, and with a few "Gods thrown in. Every time someone asked me to pray, they would whisper to me to come over and look around to make sure no one saw us.

~

"What are you reading?" Brandon brushed past my bunk on the way to his.

"Oh man I'm reading Psalm 22, did you know that it's like a prophetic account of the crucifixion? Like when Jesus is on the cross he screams at God, "my God my God why have you…"

"Forsaken me?' Brandon cut me off.

"Yea, and then if you read Psalm 22, it begins with that line and it goes all the way through this graphic account of the

crucifixion, and you know how it ends?" I looked at him and showed him the page.

"How?"

"They will proclaim his righteous acts to a people unborn, for he has done it." I quoted the line looking Brandon square in the eyes. "He has done it," I looked at him with eyebrows raised.

"Yea," Brandon gave me a face that told me he was kind of confused by my apparent excitement.

"Dude, if it's all done then why do we do what we do?"

"What do you mean?" That explanation was apparently not helping Brandon understand anything any better.

"Well, I mean it's like it was taken away and done with then, I mean all of it you know?"

"You mean like the way we itch out of our skin to smoke crack or something?" Brandon replied.

"Yea and isn't cool that David saw that centuries before too? It's as if every thing," my hands cupped the first third of the Bible, "was leading up to that moment. That "For He has done it" moment, ya know?"

I saw something in Brandon's eyes that told me that he knew, he nodded his head and then started fiddling with his hands in a way that told me that he didn't know what else to do or say.

“Anyway man, it’s all in here,” I slapped the cover of the Bible and Brandon nodded and then went to his bunk.

Kevin was beaming down at me.

“Mail call!” When they call for mail everyone scrambles out of their bed and into a huddle around the speaker. It was a crappy PA system, crackly and staticy like AM radio, but they would call our names out to pick up our letters.

“George.” I heard my name and I got excited as I made my way to pick up my mail. The mail is the only connection we all had to the outside world, with no collect calls or visiting hours. My hands sunk with weight as they piled my mail up. The letters were sliding all over and I had to clutch them to my chest to make sure that I didn’t drop them all. Everyone’s eyes were hungry with jealousy looking at my lot of letters. I was averaging seven per day.

I would always rip open the ones from Esther first. She’d ask me questions about my bank account and if I was still cold and “how is your back?” I would get mixed up in answering these questions because by the time I sent off an answer, a whole new question was being asked.

“Hey man let me read your letter?” Robert Mann was peering over my shoulder.

“No dude, this is from Esther.” Some of the guys that I got to talk with knew the name of my girlfriend. I didn’t want them to read Esther’s letters.

“Can I read that one from your sister?” I looked up at Robert, who never got any mail, “sure man,” I handed him the letter and he quickly flipped it open like a high school senior opening their college admissions letter. He read it with intensity and as I was trying to decipher which question exactly Esther was responding to, Robert asked, “Hey is your sister hot?”

“What?” I know it’s a facility filled with sex-starved men but the question kind of grossed me out.

“Is you sister hot?” In typical Robert style, after saying his off-color phrases he would repeat them and look at you as if they were the most normal things to say ever and as if your astonished “what?”s were really asking him to repeat because you couldn’t hear.

“Yea I heard you. I don’t now she’s pretty and everything but she’s my sister dude.”

“I knew she was hot,” Robert said as he folded the letter back up and handed it to me. I took it, shook me head, and sighed as Robert retreated to his own footlocker.

I looked up to see Kevin reading something he got in the mail.

"Hey, what are you reading?" I asked him and he smiled and flashed the cover my way.

"It's some devotional my mom sent me."

"That's cool," I reassured him.

"Yea I figured that you're always talking about God so I better start learning some stuff too if I'm gonna talk to you. I asked her to send it to me."

"That's really cool, man." I was totally touched but really did not want to cry in this environment because people were just beginning to talk to me like a normal person.

"Who are all of these letters from?" I looked over to see Brandon holding a fist of them with wild deer eyes like a hungry animal who hasn't eaten in months.

"My girlfriend and my sister and stuff." I told him still trying to focus on answering Esther's questions about the tickets she was having to pay and the money that I did not have in my account to pay them.

"So your girlfriend and your sister write you seven letters everyday?" He said knowing that there were more people involved.

"Well you know and people from my church." I told him.

"You told people from your church that you were going to jail?" He exclaimed loud enough to grab Kevin's attention; Robert Mann's attention was already naturally fixed on me.

"Well yea," I told him and I realized that I had to stop focusing on Esther's mail long enough to engage their shock and amazement.

"Yea, actually they even had this prayer service thing for me to sort of send me off." I told him and I was smiling big smiles because in the middle of the yelling, the back pain, and the short showers I had almost forgotten about that night. Scott, the pastor who had tried an intervention, had called me the church's "first missionary," which is what got me thinking about "being used."

"So, let me get this straight. Your church knows you're in here *and* they send you letters?" Brandon was still sifting through all of them, reading the names, and fact checking to see if it really could be true. He wanted to be sure that it was safe to believe that a place that is usually known for it's: donuts, coffee, and homilies about being well behaved, could have possibly sent letters to a parishioner in jail.

"Jesus talks about being visited in prison and then they crucify in between criminals." I smiled at him.

"Well yea man, but you don't actually think people remember that when they see us out there in our blue shirts or jumpsuits. You don't think they actually think their seeing Jesus when they see your bald head?" Brandon smirked and slapped one of Elizabeth's letters on my shaved head.

I knew that people, more often than not, chose to ignore God when they saw jumpsuits and shaved heads but my brain couldn't shake the image of that night. I was standing in the middle of around thirty people and they all had their hands on me. There were I think two sources of warmth going on in that circle. Their hands and all our bodies so close started making sweat bead up on my forehead and the sweat mixed with the tears on my face. The other warmth was something unearthly. It was the type of warmth that flowed in waves all over my bones and muscles. It was the type of warmth that left tingles that started in my head and ended in my toes reverberating and echoing all over. That night that they "sent me off," they prayed to the God that we couldn't see. I wasn't sure that whatever they said would "stick." I was afraid that their words about me "being used" by God would only serve to make me feel good and that the promise would die soon after. I looked up at Brandon and watched his hungry eyes devour the words drenched in love that were written all over the page. When I did, I felt like I was watching the words that fell over my sweat and tear drenched face, that night of sending off come true.

Forty-one

I am getting a green shirt today. When you get a green shirt, you are in your final three weeks. Green shirts enjoyed all the privileges of blue shirts, but green shirts got to work

off their community service hours during their stay in treatment. I was given one hundred and forty community service hours. Three weeks is twenty-one days. Twenty-one times eight hours a day of laundry duty equals one hundred sixty-eight hours. Laundry duty was the most coveted of jobs because it allowed you a chance to escape your footlocker to go "check on the whites."

When I slipped on the green shirt and I thought about only having three weeks left, I wondered when I was going to "be used." I thought about it as I picked up people's dirty undershirts and tried to see what they were reading or writing about.

The three weeks dripped on like weeks always do. Until finally, it was time for "Family Night." "Family Night" was designed to hash out all of the "stuff" before you were allowed to go back home in two weeks. They gave some talk that sounded like step four "making amends" in A.A. When Esther walked in, I couldn't wait to hold her, but I also ran my hand over my shaved head feeling awkward. I started to worry a little bit how I looked to her because I had not looked in a mirror in over three months. She just smiled, through some glossy tears, and held onto to me. They made us sit down and listen to the talk and then they asked us to talk about all of our hurts and everything, but all I wanted to do was listen to Esther and all

she wanted to do was the same. I didn't want to tell her everything that was happening to me. I only wanted to tell her about good things like "negative" HIV results, Brandon's eyes as he read my letters, and Kevin's devotionals. I could tell that she was hiding something too, but I didn't want to pry. We both just wanted to know how much we each loved each other. I moved my face in closer to hers.

"We aren't supposed to kiss," she told me as her eyes scanned the men with guns to the right and left sides of the room.

He smiled at her and I couldn't help it. I landed a quick one, and she let me do it before she pulled back incredibly nervous, afraid that I would get hauled off to spend another five years in jail because I had kissed her and so broken a rule.

One of the guards noticed, he glanced quickly and then just chose to look away.

We held each other for as long as we could until they made people start to leave the center.

"Two weeks." I whispered into her ear.

"Okay," she was crying a little and wiping her nose on her sleeve cuff. I guess I must have looked pretty bad because Esther normally would never rub snot on her clothing.

She told me she loved me, and I told her that I loved her. She looked back as she walked off and I stood there waving.

We didn't hash anything out because the man who was now serving time was not the same man who had done the things that got me here. How do you hash things out when the man standing in front of you is nowhere near the same man he once was? Instead, Esther told me what I wanted to hear, that I was loved and she let me kiss her in the middle of a room full of inmates and guns.

That week dripped on too, and I kept thinking about the kiss and kept craving her more.

I am now in my last week and I am showering in the morning wondering if I was "used." I began to doubt again. I began to think that those words on that night of "sending off" where just a placebo effect on my emotions and that I had failed this acid test. I slouched back over to my footlocker, bummed at the prospect of failing as a first missionary. I pulled out my Bible, as usual, and I began flipping through it.

This morning was different. I couldn't put my finger on it. Our sheets were still scratchy. The air was still freezing. Our backs still hurt from sitting on our bunks. I tried to focus on the verses, but something made me look up. I am so glad I did because those warm waves started reverberating throughout my skin again. The place was quit, completely quit. I couldn't hear

whispered obscenities or mocking laughter. At first, it all felt very eerie, like the calm before a hurricane. At first, I started to get anxious that maybe everyone was plotting a mutiny or had plans to attack Kevin or something. Then I noticed it, every single person on every single bunk had a Bible splayed open on his or her laps or gripped in their hands.

"Hey Reverend George," Brandon whispered over at me to get my attention. I looked at him sitting on his footlocker with his own Bible.

"Check it out," Brandon nodded for me to look around the room. I nodded and I started crying.

"Guess you wore off on us Reverend George," Brandon cracked a smile out of the side of his mouth. I nodded and laughed to myself out of joy and out of amazement that "Reverend George" had replaced "Buzz George." I looked up at Kevin and he flipped open John and smiled at me. I looked over at Robert man and he was glancing at his Bible and writing something down on a piece of paper.

I decided to just let the tears stream. It was a great cry. It was the type of easy cry, when you don't care about stopping it. You don't care if you look stupid so you don't have to start sucking up air or covering your face with your sleeve, you just let it happen. You let the tears do their job. I whispered under my breath, "thank you," and smiled because I finally knew that

the person I was saying “thank you” too knew who He was. He was all over this the whole time.

~

Brandon and Kevin were gathered around me as I stuffed my shaving cream, razor, deodorant, toothpaste, and books in a bag to leave. I couldn’t believe that it was almost all over. I couldn’t think about it because the tears would get in the way of the smiles that I really wanted to give Brandon and Kevin in my last hour with them.

“Reverend George,” Brandon beamed. “What’s the word today?”

Brandon had been asking me every day, since the day he had read my letters with hungry eyes, what the “word was” for that day. I would ask him how he felt and then I’d give him a word, some verse, or mini-moral.

“We call it all joy.” I said to him thinking about Skool.

“That’s a good word,” Brandon nodded.

“I’m going to miss you man,” Kevin said as we gave each other a side hug.

“Me too,” I told him and I prayed that he wouldn’t be messed with any more now that I was not going to be there to act as a bulwark against it. “Hey keep reading,” I pointed to his devotional and he nodded in agreement.

Robert Mann got off his footlocker and started to make his way toward us. Brandon and Kevin looked at each other, wondering

if this was the moment when Robert finally snapped and pulled a switchblade on us. Robert had something folded up in his hand.

"Hey George," he wasn't really looking at me and he was mumbling a bit, "I have this for you," he shoved the paper into my hands.

"Thanks," I said looking at the folded piece of paper.

"It's just a letter you know, to you and everything," Robert mumbled and then in a total unexpected move that scared me a little, he reached up and hugged me hard. I patted him on the back looking over at Kevin and Brandon, whose eyes were huge. Robert let go and I smiled at him and he smiled back briefly before he walked back over to his bunk.

"George!" A guard called my name and I heaved my bag over my shoulder and walked toward him.

"Reverend George!" Brandon yelled out after me.

"Yea?" I yelled back.

"Call it all joy man," Brandon was waving.

"Yea George, call it all joy." Kevin was waving too.

I smiled back at them and then I felt my stomach do flips inside of me, this time out of pure anticipation of freedom. My veins felt hot with that same anticipation and I followed the guard quickly, clutching my letter from Robert Mann inside my fist.

Forty-two

They gave me back my jeans, my basketball shoes, and my cell phone. I called Esther to tell her what street they dropped me off at. I could hear the kiss she was going to give me in her voice. The streets downtown are barricaded with orange striped cones and yellow tape for some parade, but it was as if they were barricaded for us. I stood next to a barricade and an orange cone for a few minutes until Esther drove up. I ran my hand over my head, the hair was growing back slowly and I told her on the phone to grab a baseball cap. She pulled up and left the car running, jumping out of the driver seat because she was so excited. The whole street was empty, traffic relegated to other detours. It was just us and we held each other for a while, kissing without worrying about men with guns.

We both couldn't stop laughing. Not because anything was funny, but just because all of the excitement running through our insides needed some place to go.

Finally, in what felt like twenty minutes, and truthfully was probably at least ten minutes, she asked me, "where do you want to go?"

"Let's get some coffee," I started salivating thinking about it because I hadn't had it since I left the county cell. She also quit drinking it in an effort to show me how much she cared.

When we got into the car, I remembered the letter that Robert Mann had given me. It was slipped into my pocket along with the five bucks that I took with me on the day Esther dropped me off to be checked in. I pulled out the paper.

"What's that?" She looked over at me curious.

"It's a letter that this guy Robert gave me," I told her smiling.

"Are you going to read it?" She couldn't wait to hear it. She missed out on four months of my daily living and like a forensics investigator was ready to begin to piece together all of the evidence to construct an image of a piece of my life that she was not allowed to participate in.

"Yea," I unfolded it and began to read, "George…" I started crying as I read his words out loud to Esther, who was naturally, also crying.

George I just wanted to wish you good luck out there and tell you that I am going to miss you. You help me get though each day that I've been here I have never had a friend like you. It feel good to have friend like you. When ever I felt down in the mornings I would just look across from my box and I would see you reading

the bible and that would cheer me up because it would make me say funny things. It's like you were an angel put there to help people so when you find yourself wanting to do bad just pick up your Bible it really help. Your friend Robert Mann. Thank You

God Bless You

And if no one has told you I love you. I love you

"He looked like a mass murderer," I half-laughed as I tried to describe him through my tears to Esther.

"I can't believe that," she was crying too and shaking her head.

"He would always look over at me and see me reading. I didn't know what he was thinking, no one did. We were all kind of afraid of him," I was full on laughing by now.

And Esther started laughing too, crying and shaking her head still. We had to sit there for a while, not saying anything, because we were both aware that this was a moment that we should protect. This was a moment that could be ruined or rushed past. So, as we drove around the barricaded streets,

through the detours, as if the whole city were waiting for this day that Evans George was coming home, we let the waves of warmth roll on over us and I smiled in a way that my face almost did not even recognize.

~

I asked Esther to marry me. She didn't lie to me that morning, when I sat in bed fully clothed, silent, and scared. She didn't leave me and she did, against all odds, "figure it all out" for me. She never missed a visitation. She handed out the address to the treatment facility to everyone we knew. She sent me blankets and she put money on my commissary books for vanilla crème cookies and coffee.

Esther had survived the "worse" the "poor" and the "sickness" right alongside me, cracking smiles and shedding tears the whole time. And now we were, against all odds, going to get married. Jack Miller, naturally, was my best man and he beamed when he found out that the girl who skipped out on watching football with me to go lead a Bible Study Fellowship class was now the girl who was going to be standing in front of him waiting to kiss *me*. "Dude, I called it," Jack told me on the phone every time that I called him to talk about how in the hell you go about marrying a girl. "Yea I know," I'd always respond and we both, usually, shared a laugh about that.

On that day, our wedding day, both sides of the church were colored with the suits and dresses of all our friends. Scott was dressed up almost as much as Esther, wearing the full on robe and collar and what I can only describe as the pastor shawl. He was wildly radiating with what must have been Esther and mine's joint radiance because his face contained more light in it than our unity candle.

Elizabeth stood there in the line of Esther's bridesmaids and I could tell that she was trying to ration out just how many times she wiped her face with her hand, not wanting to detract people's attention from us, because each time she had to figure out what to do with the flowers in her hands and how to discretely wipe her nose.

Linda was also in that same line of bridesmaids and, as usual, she was praying to herself. Her lips were moving without making any sound at all; she smiled at me like that first day that I came to church and looked over Randy's shoulder at her. Linda and Elizabeth were nodding every time I looked at them, as if to reassure me that it was all really happening.

It's true; I was lifted out of all the mess and muck by an invisible hand. I had grown to know whose hand it was and I knew His name and He knew mine and I loved Him.

He didn't just allow me to survive the muck and mess, but I got to get married and I got to be surrounded by all of these

people who sat in those pews so close together and carrying so much love that I imagine the pews were trying hard not to break under their glorious weight. We all cried. We all laughed as the truth of it all bubbled over us and ran through us. Something big and glorious and beautiful was running loose that day. And as Esther and I looked deep into each other, I knew well enough to call what ran loose God.

~

I had about an hour before I had to be back at my desk. I drove past the exit to the convenience store where, in the men's bathroom, I used to light up. I was thinking hard about what I wanted to eat. I finally settled on chicken strips and that restaurant was up the street from that convenience store. As I doubled-back, rounding the turnaround, I thought about how usually my heart started to pound in a faster 4/4 tempo and my stomach started to do flips at even the mention of the convenience store's name. I turned up the music on the radio and started pounding and slapping my hands on the steering wheel and dash, focusing in the alternating bass and snare. I noticed a man pacing in the medium and tossing out stacks of newspapers to people who waved dollar bills or dropped a handful of quarters out the window. He was on my side of the road and I screeched to a halt in front of what must have been fifteen cars behind me.

"Skool!" I couldn't believe it.

Skool turned around confusedly to look. He ducked his head near my window and then beamed.

“George.” He said throwing his arms on the sill of my window and ducking his head in.

“What are you doing here?” My peripheral caught the sign of the convenience store while my focus rested on Skool’s smiling face. And I kept shaking my head at the irony of it all.

“Selling papers man. I got out. I am all clean!” As he said this, he backed away from the car and threw his arms out beside him, like a child wanting to feel the wind would throw his arms out beside him.

“Me too,” as I said this, I threw my arms up in the air like a priest raising an offering.

The moment wasn’t aloud to last for too long before the cars behind me started making themselves known with their honking.

“Looks like you got to go,” Skool smiled.

Not to mention, that it is against the law for former inmates to associate with each other outside of jail.

“Yea, I guess so,” I smiled as I shifted the car back into drive. We both waved at each other and I began to pull forward, then I remembered.

“Hey Skool!” I yelled back out of him with my head out of my window like a dog.

"Yea."

"We still call it all joy?" I asked.

"We call it all joy!" he nodded and yelled back at me.

I rolled up my window as I approached the restaurant. I only had about twenty-five minutes before I had to get back to the office because I now had a "normal people's" schedule. On my way back, I was already a full five miles past the corner store before I realized that it lay on the access road behind me.

~

When I made it back to the office my pocket began vibrating because I hadn't had time to turn back off my cell phone. I looked at the screen and I didn't recognize the number.

"Hello," I answered skeptically.

"Evans?" the voice on the other end asked.

"Yea," I still thought that whoever it was was trying to sell me something.

"It's Howard." The voice said.

My mind put the jigsaw together in twenty seconds flat and I exclaimed, "Howard!"

"Buzz!" He yelled into the phone.

It was weird to hear that name again.

"Dude, we have to try something." Howard kept talking, "We have to try and get Buck on the line."

"All three of us? I don't know how to do that." I told him.

"Buzz, it's easy…"

"Hey Howard, listen man Buzz is dead and gone," I had to cut him off to correct him. I finally understood why Jack Miller once did the same to me.

"Alright man. Listen, Evans it's easy just hang on the line. I am going to call Buck and when you hear a beep switch over." Howard was determined to get us all three on the line at the same time. Howard disappeared and I hear static air and some clanging then a loud beep.

"Hello?" Buck's voice came on the other line.

"Buck!" I spoke into the receiver.

"Buzz?"

"Hey dude, Buzz is dead and gone." Howard went ahead and took liberty at correcting Buck for me.

"Evans George?" Buck was asking questions that he already knew the answer too.

"Yea man! How are you?" I was laughing I guess because it was all so surreal.

"I am doing great, what are you up to now?" I was expecting Buck to elaborate a little more, but I decided that I could go first.

"I'm sober. I've got a wife and I go this great church. I live in a house that's only about two miles down from

Elizabeth.” Howard and Buck would remember Elizabeth. Everyone that I hung around knew about the sweet girl with big hair.

“You guys have to see these pictures that I found of us online,” Howard chimed in.

“Who put them online?” If it wasn’t Buck, Howard, or me then I wasn’t sure who would post them.

“F***ing Kevin!” Howard I think said this so excitedly because we were all thinking the same thing in our brains, every time we thought about college, that is, “I wonder if that guy is still alive?”

“No way,” Buck and I said at the same time.

“Send it to us,” Buck asked.

“Coming right up,” Howard said and then he disappeared again for a little bit.

“So what are you really up to now?” I asked Buck.

“Well man, I’m a pastor out in El Paso.”

“No way?” I smiled.

“Yea, in fact, before I was so rudely interrupted by you two I was studying for this week’s sermon. You know, doing a little fact checking with a lexicon and some commentaries.” It was so weird to hear the word lexicon come out of his mouth.

“What’s the church like?”

“Well it’s non-denominational and it’s in inner city El Paso, you should come out.”

“Absolutely man. That is awesome.” I genuinely thought it was the coolest thing that I’d heard all month.

“Okay guys, check your email.” Howard, like me, was slacking a little at work.

I pulled up my email and opened the attachments and immediately had a wave of embarrassment mixed with nostalgia. There were two pictures. In one of them I was in the center, with these big Huey Lewis sunglasses hanging on the rim of my t-shirt, and Elizabeth was to my right. We were both holding a Lonestar and there was this awful fake-wood-paneling behind us.

“Look at Elizabeth,” Howard was kind of chuckling on the other line.

“Yea big hair and white shorts huh?” I was shaking my head but only with the fullest understanding that we are all committing fashion crimes daily but we just don’t know it until over a decade later.

“Hey Evans,” buck joined in, “it must have been a beach party dude because why don’t you have any sleeves?” He was already laughing at his own joke before he could get it all out.

“Shut up man, none of us wore sleeves.”

“Yeah Buck, look at the next one.” Howard was just egging all of it on now.

The next one was a picture of all of us in front of the frat house, but it looked more like a rejected Bruce Springsteen album cover.

“Hey Buck, what’s with the acid wash jeans and the teal and black sweatshirt?” I too was laughing before I could get it all out.

“Now now kids,” Howard the instigator was having, I could tell, loads of fun at our expense. “To be fair, Evans, look at your pose.”

He was right. I was smack in the center again but this time I had both of my arms raised into the air like some victorious marathon runner. Except that I am sure my victory looked more like me being passed out in the bathroom later.

“Okay that’s enough,” I told them eager to get on with the present because it’s okay to remember but I knew well enough that we could not live there without slowly setting ourselves back on the path to becoming those people again.

“Hey Howard, did you know Buck is a pastor?” unexpectedly I started getting teary-eyed.

“Unbelievable right? Evans, we have got to take a little road trip to go seem him in El Paso.” Howard hadn’t shown much emotion this whole time but excitement at talking with us.

“Yea. What are you up to man?” I was waiting for Howard to divulge.

"Same stuff. I've got a house and a wife. I've got a couple of kids. My son loves baseball," Howard always loved baseball too, "and we go to this church now too and everything." I hear Howard laugh a little, "I guess we all settled down huh?"

"Yea," Buck and I both responded and I now had actual tears rolling down, getting the files below my elbow a little soggy with droplets.

"Listen man," Howard broke the brief silence, "I've got to get back to work but I just had to see if I could get both of you on at the same time," I could tell that Howard was saying this through one broad smile.

"Thanks man," Buck told him and I think Buck might have been crying a little too but it was hard to tell.

"This was awesome," I nodded.

"Now that we have all our numbers I expect some more contact!" Howard was always the group organizer.

"Yea Evans give us a call sometime." Buck agreed with Howard.

"Okay, I will." I hadn't talked to so many, neglecting every chance I had to connect with them, because in those years I never knew what to say to them. I never knew how to talk about me drowning and flailing around in my sickness, while they were moving into their first houses with their wives and babies. While Howard was throwing a first year birthday party for his

son, I was scrounging for popcorn behind a dollar movie theater. While Buck was marrying and preparing for seminary, I was lying on the floor looking for crack rocks that I might have dropped. I didn't let myself hang out there for too long because now I was married with a home and a life. We were all okay, even Kevin. Somehow, we all grew in our own ways toward the same point. We all survived our fair share of treatments, amends, and growing pains and we'd come out fully and brilliantly alive on the other side.

"I will," I told them one last time.

"Bye guys," Howard said and then we heard his receiver click.

"Evans come on out anytime," Buck finished.

"Okay," I told him.

"And bring Elizabeth."

"Of course."

"Okay bye man." Buck finished and his receiver clicked and I was now on the line alone and still crying a little.

I looked down at the files below my elbows, spattered with salty water, and I clicked the little red phone on my cell.

I don't know why. I don't know why the mystery had chased me down and had grabbed a hold of me. I don't know why He didn't give up on me and I don't know why He didn't let other people give up on me.

Sitting there, I thought about Skool and his smiles on the side of the road, sober and selling newspapers. I thought about Dr. Mehendale and the rock that was probably still sitting on the top of "Serenity Hill" next to the rocks of other people clawing their way out of the steel bars that held them in. I thought about Case and the ten-year-old-boy signatures sprawled all over the Spalding that held a permanent spot next to my computer at home. I thought about all of the times that Mike, my brother, broke into my house determined to mend the mess back together. I thought about the way that Jimmy Ellis would not stop talking until he got me to treatment for the last time. I thought about Darryl and Tracy visiting me in treatment even when it felt awkward. I thought about Linda smearing oil all over my house. I thought about Robert Mann and his letter, and the grocery bags that I still had stuffed with the four hundred letters that I received in my four months in jail. I thought about all of those faces smiling and wet with salt water sitting in the pews at our wedding.

I thought about the picture that I found in a zip lock bag at the bottom of my closet. In it, my hair was long and dangling in my face. I was skinny and boney and on drugs as I sat in a hard plastic hospital chair holding my youngest niece. I thought about that soft spot that rested up against my chest and the way that I wanted to be brand new, just like she was.

And I realized now, wiping my eyes that somehow miraculously, I was.

Afterword

I was a mess. I was fighting hormones and sleepless nights, as I was nursing a 1 week old baby! My heart was broken for my brother; I was terrified that he would not survive this relapse. I felt like No one understood. No one knew how dark and deep this one was. I remember my stomach jumping every time the news reported a death, a murder, a car accident, or an OD; I knew any of these stories could be Evans. I prayed in fear for months, begging God to save him.

I didn't really talk much to anyone about it; it was too hard, too hard to explain the despair. I did have a few conversations with Jack Miller an old friend of Evans. He actually understood, with no discussion necessary. Jack was an addiction counselor and in recovery himself. He'd check in occasionally to see if I had seen Evans. We'd talk, I'd try not to cry and he'd try to be encouraging, but it was hard for him to hide his discouragement. He'd seen and experienced this ugliness first hand.

Late one night, the phone rang. My fears immediately took hold as a hysterical voice on the other end of the phone screamed that Evans had been taken by ambulance after convulsing on top of a table and then on the floor of a restaurant. The person screaming said that she thought he was not going to live. The doctors confirmed this. When I got to the hospital, Evans was not convulsing, but he was not conscious. The doctor said he should not have survived this ugly scene, that he couldn't believe Evans was alive. The irony here is that when Evans opened his eyes, he was angry and agitated, furious at the doctors, and nurses who had just cared for him. Oblivious to his near death experience, the only thing he knew was that his entire being was craving something that the hospital didn't have. He wanted to know

where his car was and wanted to" get out of here."

I spent a lot of time in prayer over the year and a half of Evans' relapse. My prayers gradually shifted from fear-based prayers to faith-based prayers. God sent me an Angel in the flesh, Linda, to walk me through this. I began to boldly believe God and his promises to protect and deliver Evans from these circumstances.

Two years later, Jack called again. He was very excited, but his voice was quivering a he tried to hold back tears. He began to tell me that he had just witnessed Evans telling his "story" to a huge AA group. Jack expressed being so proud of Evans! He described how the AA audience, a group that "had seen and heard it all," was hanging on every word Evans spoke. Jack, a fairly reserved guy, was gushing about the story Evans' told to his audience. Jack then admitted what he did not tell me in any of our prior phone conversations-that he did not believe Evans would survive this relapse. He repeated, "Elizabeth, He was too far gone, I just knew he would die. Nobody comes back when they are that far gone" and at this point we are both crying on the phone. He finished the call with, "he's a miracle!" I agree and wish I could hug Jack through the phone. As I ended the call, Evans walked through the door in a signature pink shirt. I get to hug the miracle and watch him walk over to the love of his life, his future wife Esther. God is good.
~ Elizabeth George Rosenblum

I knew that God would send me somebody, sometime. I was working in a small town coffee shop, I was teaching part-time, and I went to a church in this small town. I thought I might not ever meet "the guy". Someone had told me strangely and boldly many months before that God moves suddenly. Then this man looked me in the eye and said "SUDDENLY" is how God moves. I held onto that sentence, that moment, that adverb. Somehow it gave me hope that in the same Texas town, a girl who never got out would meet the right guy. My "suddenly" happened on a Wednesday night in February. This tall, very handsome, full of charm guy walked into the back of the church. Our church didn't have a building yet, so we met behind the local coffee house in a big white tent. I turned my head just to see him walking in with this lovely blonde. I figured it was his wife, so I

attempted not to make eye contact. I had seen here before, but not them together. They came and sat right behind me. I remember Elizabeth, who I would come to know as his sister, introduced us and I stared straight at his shoulder. I felt a lurch in my heart, in my very being that I had never ever before known. It felt as if something grand was about to happen. And, it did. Over the next many months Evans George became first a customer at the non-profit coffee house, a friend, and then joined our volunteer staff.

Over coffee and espresso grounds, sticky buns, and kolaches, we got to know each other. I was so confused when I tried to figure him out. It seemed he had nine lives. I came to find out, he really had. He had walked a rough road, one I couldn't imagine.

When our friend and manager left to going skiing, Evans manned the ship for the week. This was when I knew I really liked him. It was in this week, that he professed his interest in the bulk aisle of Costco. I was unsure. Our friendship grew. My "suddenly" was real. This man was the kindest and most real and genuine person I had met. He had this passion for life that was contagious. It wasn't long before I knew I loved him.

In Evans story, God has taught me many things. He has shown me that redemption is what He, God, is about. He has shown me how he often puts two very different people together because He has a very grand plan. He has shown me not to judge a person by their past or view them as "tainted or marred" because that would be saying God isn't big enough to make someone whole, fresh, and new. He also has shown me that we all have a "box" that contains us in or holds us back from moving forward. We all have something that takes our focus away from that which is important. It doesn't have to be crack cocaine to damage, control, or wreck us. It could be anger, resentment, an eating disorder, or fear. We all have believed some lie about who we are and who we were made to be at some point in time.

In Evans I see a daily reminder of the ability and heart God has to restore, love, heal, and bring peace to us. I get to be a part of Evans' story as I stand and watch, even still today, the ways God is restoring the broken pieces, replacing what has been lost, and touching hearts in the process. As Besty Ten Boom said to her sister while in a concentration camp, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still. God's love has been very deep for us. I am his, he is mine. It's like he has a banner stretched over us; and, it is love.

~ Esther George

The Process

It didn't take long before I realized that this story was a monster with a life of it's own. That first night that Evans and I sat down to interview was about ten months ago. I purchased a small digital recorder so that I did not have to rely simply on quickly jotted notes during our interview. The first thing I did was plot a trajectory. I knew that I would have to decide what the point of the novel was going to be and I asked myself, "where do I want to reader to end up?' If I could describe the story in one word it would be: Redemption. I knew this was a powerful theme and one that people are always hungry to hear, so I knew the story had some potential in that, it carried a weighted purpose with it. I knew the bare bones of Evans' story already because he is a close friend of mine. I knew I had to highlight pieces of his childhood to give a background of how he became the person he was. I knew that I had to highlight his descent into hard drug abuse and poverty. I knew I needed to address the bouts and relapses and struggles with his stay at different treatment facilities. I knew I had to dig deep into his perceptions and thoughts about God the whole way through. Finally, I knew that I needed to end the story with a picture of redemption.

I wanted to tell the story from a first person perspective because I knew that first person stories tended to be the most powerful and engaging, and my favorite memoirs were written in first person. In a sense, *Reverans*, is an autobiography written biographically because I interviewed Evans but then took the raw tape and wrote the story from a first person perspective. I would listen to the tape as I wrote, paying close attention to voice infliction, mannerisms, and uniquely Evans phrasing. We usually met for two hours one time a week (although as the project drew closer to a finish sometimes we'd meet twice a week) and before each session Evans would

read a short excerpt from what I had written to check its validity and voice to see if it matched his own. The voice is uniquely Evans but there is some embellishment and humor provided by myself throughout to make the story either A.) tie together more fluidly or B.) engage the reader more effectively.

Throughout the process I was able to talk to others who knew Evans to get their perspectives, some of these people are our mutual friends.

I was also made keenly aware every time Evans spoke about his past even if we were not in an interview setting. For example, Evans leads my church small group. Sometimes this group would chat about their past lives and every time Evans spoke up, I was able to gather more intel.

The first three parts were shaved and pruned in a way that would follow the trajectory that I set out to follow. Some parts were cut, edited, or added onto for fluidity sake.

Like I said, within the first thirty minutes of interviewing Evans, I knew that this story was a monster, but it was at once so gritty and depraved and then by the next page something beautiful and profound. There seemed to be, even in the middle of the worst of depravity, always something beautiful there, a diamond in the rough. Call it grace or mercy, compassion, or even coincidence, but undoubetly there was something invisible guiding Evans' story, or in his and my opinion some supernatural author writing it, God.

The Problems, Changes, and Reflection on Accomplishments

Closing part four proved to be the highest challenge. It is a testament to redemption in of itself that when I sat down to draw the story to a close, I could not decide which pictures of redemption in Evans' life that I should illuminate because miraculously there are so many. I decided to employ a common writing technique of a "series of three," and I chose three true occurrences to lay out in rapid succession. My hope is that the progression of these three

occurrences would give the reader a hint of just how amazing and dramatic the shift in Evans' life has been. The Bible verse that is featured on the first page, at the start of the story, seemed to sum it up the best.

I never would have guessed that this project, with probably about a whole week's worth of tape (in hours), around 283 pages of prose, and ten months of slow work, would end this way. I am proud of the project and I am encouraged by it's completion more than anything.

I would like to have fooled around with the layout of the novel more. I would like to have added more bold phrases, changes in font, etc. to add some more visual appeal. I would like to have also added real photographs that are featured throughout the story. Because of the time constraint and my limited knowledge in how to most effectively lay out a novel in a visually appealing or artistic way, I stuck to a more traditional manuscript.

I originally set out to write a book for junior high and high school students that were labeled "high risk," but it didn't take long to realize that this story, although appealing and valuable to adolescents, would most likely be better suited for adults. Hopefully, I believe that I crafted a story that is highly readable for adolescent audiences, and that features some problems that tend to be unique to "high risk" student populations, but that contains greater themes and reflections that might appeal more to adult readers.

Conclusion

In the end, this monster was challenging, massive, slow, engaging, stressful, fascinating, and a joy all rolled into one. Reflecting on what my favorite part of the journey was, I discover that I am so thankful to know the people featured in this story: Evans, Elizabeth, and Esther (to name only a small few) and I am even more thankful that I was given the gift to write it down for

them. Most of all, I find that I am just another person who is in need and is always hungry for another story that can be summed up in one beautiful word: Redemption.