LOAFING IN THE ABYSS

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Loafing In The Abyss is a collection of short stories exploring the idea of the unknown other. The unknown, and how we respond to it both as actors and readers is an important element of our culture. Whether it be an unplanned pregnancy, or a strange new culture our world view is always challenged when we meet and interact with the unknown. For example in "In a Freak Show," the narrator's ideas about normalcy are challenged when he meets and interacts with a family of side show performers. His view is based on stereotypes and misinformation, but by the end of the story a respect and quiet admiration emerges from his changed world view. This response is shared by the reader, and as the narrator's views change, so does the reader's. The exploration of the unknown is central to all
of the stories in this collection, and the element that ties them together. The title of this thesis is from Sonnet #4 by John Berryman. The "abyss" represents both the thematic elements of the collection, and the numerous interpretive possibilities posed by any piece of fiction.

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He said his name was Darryl Kittyhawk. All day long on the first day of seventh grade he bragged about being from Monroe, Louisiana and how Kentucky sucked and he was going to move as soon as he was old enough to land a job on the railroad. His blonde hair had tinges of brown underneath, and his teeth were white and straight. He said that his daddy had been president of some company down South but had quit. He didn't say why, but just made it sound all mysterious. The family moved to Kentucky, and his daddy took a job at the mine. Darryl Kittyhawk wore a brand new store bought shirt with wide red stripes crisscrossing all over it. Patrick Anglin said that it looked like a table cloth from a pizza joint he once ate at in Lexington.

All that day in homeroom class Darryl ran on about how tough Cajuns were and how they were crazier than most, so you better not mess with a Cajun or he'll whip you good. Me and Thomas and Patrick just kept our distance and listened to the brags he made while the other boys tried to match him. We wanted to check him out.

"Cajun my ass," said Patrick at recess. He got out a plug of tobacco and cut three chews off. "He's no cajun. And I bet he ain't really from no Louisiana."
"What makes you say that?" I said, taking my chew.

"Cajuns speak French or some such shit. His accent is Tennessee, maybe even Kentucky, but not no Louisiana," said Pat. We trusted his judgment, because his dad was a traveling salesman that worked for the Orgill Brothers. Mr. Anglin had been to every state in the Union.

"If he keeps running his mouth so, I say we shut it. Especially if he's from Kentucky and is talking trash about us. There's not much use for liars. He's so full of shit," said Thomas as he put his tobacco in his mouth. He was the biggest boy in the seventh grade, because he failed it twice before. Thom was dumber than sled tracks, but he was good for football or in case there was a fight.

"Yeah, maybe so. Let's just see," I said.

The three of us sat under the only tree in the playground area. It was a walnut tree that wasn't but fifteen feet tall. The trunk was only a foot or so around. Patrick, Thomas, and I usually spent recess playing football with the rest of the boys, but today was different. We decided that we should watch the new boy to see what kind of kid he was. Darryl spent recess doing handstands for the girls, who clapped and blushed. He could do back flips without faltering. He could walk on his hands and jump up and down on them. Big Thomas tried to mimic these acrobatics but ended up on his ass; his chew
That day we three sat under the tree and watched the new kid doing his flips for Mary Helen and Abigail and the rest of the girls. Even Mr. Brewer, who had been scolding Danny Johnson and Victor Crane for ruining their clothes, clapped and smiled before going back into his classroom. Two minutes later the bell rang.

Darryl Kittyhawk was in my English class with Mrs. Stift. She was an eccentric woman who threw wild tantrums when she couldn't control the class. Mrs. Stift always made time for introductions on the first day. She had each person stand up and say where we were from and who we were. Most of us had been in school together for our whole lives so we already knew these things, except, of course, for Darryl. Things began to get out of hand after the third or fourth person. Finally it got to my row, and when Alby Jacobs got wise I decided to follow suit.

"I'm Seamus Leary. My folks run a farm about a mile down the road. I am half Scottish and half Irish," I said. The boy behind me, Den Preston, carried the line further.

"I'm Den, and I'm three quarters Irish and one quarter Dutch. I was born cross-eyed, my mother tells me," he said. He made a cross-eyed face. So far we hadn't really angered Mrs. Stift by our cutting up, and in fact, she seemed almost amused. When it came time for Darryl to
speak he stood up and in a loud clear voice said:

"My name is Darryl Kittyhawk. I am from Monroe, Louisiana. I am one seventh German, one seventh Portuguese, one seventh French-Cajun, one seventh Lithuanian, one seventh English, one seventh Syrian, and one seventh Cherokee. I write poems about the Cherokee."

As he sat down he smiled, and I could see that he thought he was cute. But outsiders couldn't get away with it—not yet at least. The class was silent until one boy said, "Don't forget one-hundred percent Polack!" The smile broke from Darryl's face. Mrs. Stift stood up and took over class.

"Isn't that a nice mixture. You could say you were from the melting pot! I should like to hear a poem sometime," said Mrs. Stift as the class quieted down.

"How about now?" said Den Preston.

"Excellent idea, Dennis! Quiet down class. Darryl, do you have one ready?" she asked him.

Instead of answering her, Darryl stood up and pulled a piece of notebook paper out of his pocket. He cleared his voice and spoke in a rather strange accent.

TRAIL OF TEARS
Bloodstained, strewn with bodies of
Broken women and beaten children
Searching through the broken promises
for the new road home.

Mrs. Stift, whose eyes were closed during the poem, sighed and looked at Darryl as if she wanted to eat him up right then and there. The rest of the class was full of jokes. Darryl stood quietly in his table cloth shirt. One boy pretended to cry. Another imitated the high tone of the poem. Cyndi Edwards asked very seriously, "What was the Trail of Tears?" Darryl turned to her and looked at her as if she were a fungus growing out of the desk.

"You've never heard of the Trail of Tears?" he half-yelled.

"No," she said. She blushed at being made to feel so stupid.

Darryl's lips curled up in disgust when a wad of tobacco-spit soaked paper hit him squarely in his red and white chest. It left a brown and yellow stain on his shirt. Darryl looked at it as if he would cry.

"I demand to know who threw that! You'll pay for the dry cleaning!" he said. Both of his fists were balled up.

"Dry-whating?" said Den Preston, in his thickest accent.

Mrs. Stift rushed to Darryl and led him out of the room. He looked embarrassed as she took him by the hand and led him away from the class.

After school Thomas, Patrick, and I walked to my
family's farm.

"Did you hear about the new kid? He broke down in English today," I said.

"I heard he's a queer. Reads poems or something. We should kick his ass," said Thomas. He was always wanting to kick someone's ass, but this year the principal had told him that if he got in any fights he'd get sent to a reform school.

"He read something about tears and mothers and babies and some bullshit. He tries to talk like a Yankee when he reads," I said.

"I bet a month a chews that he ain't from the South like he claims," said Patrick. Neither Thom nor I took the bet.

Patrick cut off three chews from his plug.

"I say we try to find out who the hell he really is. Why he's telling lies. I don't like liars," said Patrick.

"Okay, I'll tell him to come to the tree during recess on Friday. He's in my homeroom," I said. "And if he's a liar, we'll catch him in his lies."

The week went pretty much the same. There were more handstands, flips, and flirts. Mrs. Stift let him hang a couple of his poems on a wall in the classroom. That Friday was Parents' Day, and a huge empty calendar hung beside the homeroom door. Only one space was filled in for
the afternoon, a Mrs. Isabella Kittyhawk. In the morning Darryl was wearing a long sleeve buttondown shirt with tie down collars. He sat quietly in the back of homeroom and spoke to no one. When I slapped his shoulder to get his attention he winced.

"We, that is, me, Pat, and Thom thought maybe you'd like to run around with us at recess," I said.

He looked up with eyes that had baggy circles under them.

"Sure," he said, "under that tree, right? During the first recess. My mom's coming for lunchtime."

"Yeah," I said. He turned back towards the window and drew circles in his composition book.

When the bell rang for break, I walked out into the courtyard. Almost the entire class was in the football field playing Freeze Tag. Patrick and Thomas were under the tree. Darryl walked out from the building and up to us. We introduced ourselves. Darryl declined a chew from Patrick with a sour grimace.

"Where'd you go after English Monday? I didn't see you," I said.

"Back in classes. You must have missed me," he said with a nervous grin.

"Why don't you do a flip?" said Thomas. He was trying to stand on his hands the way Darryl'd done the day before.
"Not today," said Darryl. "I have my good clothes on and my mom's coming for lunch." Thomas fell on his ass and quietly looked at Darryl.

"What'd you have?" said Patrick.

"What'd I have when?" replied Darryl.

"After you left English the other day."

"Is this twenty questions? Maybe I had none of your business," said Darryl.

Patrick walked towards him. He didn't like smart-mouths.

"I wanted to know's all. There a problem?" said Patrick.

Thomas walked up behind him and stood for a minute before trying another handstand. Darryl shook his head.

"You really from Louisiana?" asked Thomas after he flopped onto his ass.

"I was born there," said Darryl.

"But not raised there?" I asked.

"No, I was raised in Louisville," he said.

Patrick pushed him. "Goddamned liar. Here you badmouthed Kentucky all week, and you from here. And you lie about being from Louisiana. Well, fuck you! And fuck them Cajuns, too!" he said.

Darryl turned his back and calmly started to walk away. Patrick hadn't gotten to him. But that's when I
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noticed the shoes. They were white suede, the kind that rich people call "Bucks." He was high stepping so as not to get any grass on them. I saw this and ran at him from behind, shoulder bumped him, and he went flying to the ground. Surprisingly the new kid remained clean. The three of us formed a circle around Darryl and started to sing "Don't Mess With My Blue Suede Shoes." When he started to get up, I pushed him into Thomas, who tackled him hard and really ground him good. To Darryl's horror one of the shoes had a terrible grass stain on it. He took it off and sat on the ground trying to clean it.

"These shoes cost a hundred dollars. My dad will kill me," he managed to get out. He took the other shoe off and hung them around his neck. As Darryl got up, he assumed a fighter's stance.

"I'll fight one of you, but not all," he said as he got up.

Thomas charged him like a bull and knocked him to the ground. Then he took the shoes from Darryl's neck, ran over and tossed them into the tree, tangling them up in the branches.

"What did I do to you guys?" said Darryl. He was getting up slowly.

"You're a liar. I have algebra with you, and you wasn't in class Monday; I heard Mrs. Wemby call you absent."
And you badmouthed us. And we just don't like you," said Patrick.

Patrick swung at Darryl and missed. On the return, Darryl hit him with an uppercut that knocked him down. He kicked Patrick a few times in the chest before I hit him from behind. He went down like lead, and I climbed on his chest and punched his face a few times.

"Goddamn, where's that Cajun bad ass now?" I said.

Thomas pulled me off when he saw the blood running out of Darryl's nose. He pulled me over to where Patrick lay, holding his chest. Darryl got up as if nothing had happened and went to the tree to try and free his shoes.

"You all right, Pat?" I said.

"Yeah, I think so," he said. His lip was swelling up and it began to bleed a little. He was still trying to catch his wind.

We pulled Patrick up and started to walk towards the tree. When Darryl saw us he lifted himself into the branches with great ease. Thomas reached his shirt tail and ripped his shirt open to the chest.

"Patrick, Seamus, what did I ever do?" he yelled from his perch.

"Fuck you," said Patrick. His lip was swollen purple. I could tell by the look in his eye that Darryl was in for it if he ever got down from there.
"There ain't much use for liars," Thomas said with a hint of true disappointment.

Darryl sat and tried to untie the knot in his shoestrings. He was definitely more worried about the shoes than the ass-kicking we planned on giving him. The crowd of boys that had been playing tag ran over to the tree.

"Let me down, you guys. Don't be such assholes. My mom . . . " He had a look that was a mixture of anger and fear, but I knew he wasn't afraid of us.

"Cry your way out, Mr. Cajun," said Patrick. "I don't see any Cajun bad-ass to save you now, eh, Mr. Louisian'."

The crowd of boys started circling the tree and chanting "Cry your way out, baby!" Darryl was furiously trying to untie his shoes and shouting at us to shut up. And that's when she arrived.

She was a woman with long black hair who weighed maybe two hundred fifty pounds. She was bigger than the biggest teacher at R.S. 16. Her arms rippled with muscles as she parted the sea of seventh grade boys and made her way to the tree trunk where Pat and I were standing. With more ease than any man, this woman lifted me and Patrick out of her way and looked up into the tree.

"Come down from there, now," she said to Darryl.

"We were just playing, right guys?" said Darryl. He
was frantically trying to button the ruins of his shirt. The glare of that woman's face dared any of us to answer him.

"Now, Darryl," she said. Mrs. Kittyhawk never changed her tone of voice during this whole time. She seemed calm, even if she was grim as death.

"But mom, it's okay. We're just having . . ." he said as she cleared her throat. At this signal Darryl forgot his shoes and quickly lowered himself from the tree. His shoes were still tangled in one of the branches. Darryl took his mother's hand as they walked through the crowd and towards a rusty gray pickup.

"Your father will be upset," was the last thing I heard her say as they got to the truck. Darryl looked back at the tree and the silent crowd of boys standing under it. The bell rang for recess to be over. One of the girls ran to get Mr. Brewer, the principal. Patrick and I knew we'd be paddled by him for fighting and decided not to hang around for it. We left school and ran all the way to the Anglin farm.

I thought we were safe in the barn until we heard the bellows of Mr. Anglin. He was yelling for Patrick. We were in the loft behind the hay bales when he came into the barn.

"Patrick, Goddamnit, get down here," yelled Mr.
Anglin. He was a huge man who was strong from years of carrying suit cases full of plumbing parts and catalogs. Patrick's father stood directly below the loft with a strap. We could hear him cracking it as he waited. Patrick closed his eyes for a minute then stood up and walked towards the ladder.

"Get down here, boy. Brewer called from school. We got a problem," said Mr. Anglin as he cracked that strap.

I watched as Patrick descended the ladder until his head was out of view. I didn't dare move, because Mr. Anglin was as likely to whip me as he would his own son. Patrick started to say something, but it was cut off by a loud crack and then a muffled thump.

"Get up and go out to the back," Mr. Anglin said. After a moment I heard the scuffle of Patrick's feet.

Patrick said nothing now, because he knew nothing could help him.

I heard a few more cracks and Patrick starting to cry. I peered over the bales of hay to the back door and saw his hands under the door trying to open it. His father was yelling at the top of his lungs, most of the time I couldn't understand him. I heard him pick Patrick off of the ground and slam him into the door. Patrick was quiet. That was when I decided to break for it. I was down the ladder when I heard his father yelling: "Where the fuck did
you learn to act like that? Was it that Thomas? I'll teach it out of you."

I saw dust cloud up from under the door where Mr. Anglin was yelling at Patrick, and doing God-knows-what else, and started to run as fast as I could from that place. I hoped that my father would be a little easier, but probably he wouldn't be. As I rounded the dirt road that led behind our house I saw the lights on in the barn and a strange car in the drive. The house was silent. I hid outside until I heard the car door slam and then stole into the house by the back door. My father sat at the kitchen table waiting for me.

"We was beginning to wonder if you'd spend the night out there," he said. His fingers drummed the table. My mother came in from the hallway and sat down next to him.

I started to open my mouth to explain when my mother put her fingers to her lips.

"Mr. Brewer just left here--but you know that. Do you know what kind of day I've had already?" he said.

I couldn't answer him.

"I'll not have you acting like that redneck Anglin," my mother cut in.

"I had to tell him that I'd talk to you later and have him tell me that I can't control my own son--a boy!" He was beginning to get angry.
My father stood up and took me roughly by the shoulder. He bit down on his bottom lip, then he said, "Go on out to the barn, Seamus. Stop at the tree."

He always made me cut my own switches out of a cherry tree in our yard. If they were too little, he'd cut a big one and make it hurt. So I cut a limber branch, one that would be just big enough, and walked out to the dusty black barn and waited. In the quiet hush of nightfall I could hear him cracking his knuckles as he walked to the barn. My father was completely silent as he slowly picked up the switch . . .

Before we left that barn my father made me swear to apologize to Darryl the next Monday, but I never got the chance. Mrs. Stift said he had changed schools. We never saw him again.

The shoes hung in the tree until Patrick climbed up and cut them out. In a few weeks that passed they had weathered so that the suede was smooth as bone. He wore them as a joke for a few days, until no one laughed anymore. I never could laugh at the hundred dollar shoes again.

Cyndi Edwards gave a report on the "Trail of Tears" that month. Mrs. Stift reads a poem once in a while for the whole class to hear. She still gets that hungry look in her eye.
In A Freak Show

Life story. Wallace, who now wants to be called my "Off-Track Betting Agent," calls and wakes me up at noon. Says there's a carnival in town and a sideshow freak there owes him for a number he let ride on the Derby horse last May. Says I owe him so he wants me to call in the debt.

"Why don't your normal runners get it, Wall?" I say.

He says, "You mind yours. Go to the sideshow and get the cash. He's a freak--calls hisself Lobster Man or something. It's three hundred. Tell him who sent you. And it's Mr. Wallace."

He hangs up and leaves me to my hangover. Sure enough the paper has the carnival listed in the "Today" section. Lansing Park near Fourth and Cooper. I try to go back to sleep but I keep on seeing Wallace's face in my head. He's reminding me that I owe him. So I get up and dress. I decide I need to look like a wise guy, so I break out an old black suit I used to wear when I sold policies for Cosmopolitan Life Insurance. Not real policies. You know, life insurance on kids and babies. For ten dollars a month you too could get a ten thousand dollar policy on your five year old, Ma'am--shit like that. Anyway, it's easier to beat the horses than the streets.

Now, I'm not a runner. I don't do numbers. But when you owe someone like Wallace twelve bills you do what he
likes you to. I don't even have a Pabst for breakfast and he wants me to go to a freak show? I never collected debts for anyone before and the whole thing makes me nervous. But after a couple drinks at Larry's I decide to beat the Saturday crowd and amble my way to the park. I practice my tough guy look the whole way down and at least a few people seem scared by it. Tough guy. Wallace is a tough guy. He don't have to practice. Just looks at you over those god damned rose colored glasses and cuts right to the point. That fuckin' guy could scare the shine offa your boots.

Everybody on the midway knows where the freaks are. They are always to the left of the center tent, a guy on stilts tells me and I wonder what the fuck he means because tents are round and don't really have sides. Left of which side? I guess I don't get the joke. But a man in clown makeup shows me where to get tickets and I pay a miniature Barnum Bailey and walk through two golden gates that say across them: "The Finest Sideshow In The Land." Two guys on stilts are tossing bowling pins on the other side of the gate. There's already a crowd.

There's always a crowd at the sideshow. After seeing a rabbit with ears cut down--it's supposed to be the world's biggest rat, "El Raton"--I head into an exhibit called "The Headless Model!!" Story goes like this: Beautiful woman. Bad Car accident. Decapitation. Life
saving surgery that saved her body and head, though separately. And finally relative fame and fortune as an exhibit in the Finest Sideshow In the Land. In the painting on the side of her booth she is a dream. Blonde hair, the works. Inside, however, is a fifteen hundred pound guy with his head stuck in a T.V. He's holding a fake head on his lap and has one hand down his shorts scratching himself. I get the fuck out of there and ask one of the stilt-men where the good stuff is.

"Down the main strip," he calls down to me. "That's where the best exhibits are."

Exhibits. Like this is a fucking museum. The stilt men are juggling torches now and the smell of tar hits my nose. I watch the flames for a few minutes before I walk towards the main strip of freaks.

The first booth I come to is marked "Blockhead." I walk into the room, and on a stage in the back of a small tent is Blockhead. This guy's wearing a red union suit and tennis shoes. His body is whole, but his head--his head is a fucking block. His face is flat and his ears and the back of his head meet in horrifying corners. He's standing on stage putting three inch nails into his nose and ears. He puts them in, walks calmly around the stage, and sticks his head towards all who watch. He really enjoys this shit, I think to myself, and before I know it I've shouted
"Get 'em Blocky Baby." I figure he can't hear me but I say it anyway. He looks my way and pulls a nail from his ear. He tosses it towards some old lady in the front row. She squeals and squirms out of the way. Blockhead bows as the show ends and I decide to move along.

The next tent is labeled "H. Chinasky--The Lion Faced Boy" and is empty except for two black kids smoking a joint. There doesn't seem to be a freak on exhibit here so I ask the kids for a hit (which they don't mind giving me). The black kids and I stand in a corner of the tent and pass the joint. They quietly watch me as I inhale the smoke. I can tell they might think I'm security before I prove to them I'm really smoking the joint by blowing smoke out my nose. One of them laughs as I cough a little. When the buzz hits me I decide to look for Chinasky.

"Hey Chinasky!! Hey! You got paying customers here," I yell to the back of the tent. This is enough to give the blacks the noid and they leave, having finished off the joint. One of them mumbles something like "Be cool, cracker," but I'm not sure I hear him right. But bein' called a cracker sort of pisses me off and I start out the tent when I hear a voice from the darkness.

"Come back--if it's just you," a voice says from the shadows. "Come behind the flap."

I open a flap in the back of the tent to see this boy
of about fifteen sitting in a recliner. His jaw and forehead make his head look twice the size of a grown man. He's got scars all over his huge face and white blond hair on the top of his misshapen head.

"Those spades gone?" he says. "I don't like spades--they give me a feeling--like sickness."

"They're okay," I say. "They had some good smoke. Blacks get the goods."

He acts like he's ignoring me. Chinasky thumbs an empty beer can.

"Wanna beer?" he says to me as he stands up on size 15 feet. I nod and he hands me a beer. As I take it I notice his hands. They're giants. Like a basketball star's hands. His forefinger is as big around as a silver dollar. He sees me staring and pushes them in my face.

"Take a look," he says,"you're a paying customer."

"Sorry. It's just that those hands belong to someone else. Not to a kid."

"I'm seventeen," he tells me. "I'm not a kid."

"What the hell happened? I mean, why are they so big?"

"The same reason my face is big. The doctor called it 'Acker-meglia' or somethin'. Chemo gave me these pimples which my daddy used to lance with a pocket knife. That is, until I got here."
"That's fucked. Acker-meglia you say. That is way fucked up."

I can't take my eye off of that face. It's like the surface of a moon or something. Rough and pitted and aged fifty years. I notice he's staring back at me as I sit there red eyed. My left ear is itching but I can't get my head together to scratch it.

We sit in silence for a few minutes and he finally says, "I got to sleep. Drink up. Five dollars for the beer."

Nothing comes easy, I think as I hand him a five. "Thanks for the beer, kid. Where's lobster-man?"

Suddenly he bows up and comes right up in my face. "Don't call me a kid again," he says. He holds up a giant fist to menace me but I've got my tough guy look down. I set the beer on a table and push my sleeves up. He stops and his huge fist falls to his side.

"Where'd you say he was?" I ask.

"A booth down," he says as he sits back down.

"Thanks for the beer, kid," I say before leaving. I always feel good just after my look works on people.

The man in the next window calls himself the "Lobster Boy." He's hardly a boy, I'd guess at least fifty years old, and, judging by the beer bottles and cigarette butts lying on the ground beside him, he is a drunk lobster boy.
His hands are deformed so that they form two clumpish claws. One of his grotesque hands holds a cigarillo which he puffs between drags of Red, White and Blue beer. Lobster Boy has little stubs for legs that end in little grey clumps, not like feet at all. To heighten the effect of his deformed hands, the side show has him wearing a little plastic lobster tail. They also have the little room painted like an underwater scene--complete with a mermaid in the back corner. The bright red plastic tail keeps getting under his feet as he paces the 6 by 6 room that is surrounded by plexiglass on three sides. This exhibit is crowded and faces line the walls.

"What the fuck you looking at?" he says to a teenaged girl beside me. She turns away, her face reddening.

"We paid to see you. So shut your hole, freak," her boyfriend spits back at the little man. The kid's tough guy look is pretty polished.

Lobster Boy throws a full beer at the boy. It hits the window and shakes it, and the crowd is temporarily shocked. The can splits open and beer spurts everywhere. What a waste of good drink.

"Fuck me!" says Lobster Boy as he realizes he's thrown his last can of Red, White and Blue at the zit-faced teenager.

Lobster Boy rings a buzzer and lights another
cigarillo. He has it gripped between his teeth and it shakes when he growls at the crowd that presses against the glass. A door in the back of the room opens and a wheelchair edges into view. Another Lobster Boy is sitting on the chair. He is fifteen, maybe twenty years younger than the drunk in front of me and has no legs to speak of, just little nubs with toenails. They whisper and the younger sideshow freak gets this nasty look on his face. All of a sudden the older freak clubs the younger one in the face and storms out of the little door. Most of the people leave with him because it suddenly doesn't seem as fun to stare at a Lobster boy with a bloody nose.

Outside of the room the older Lobster boy comes walking through the crowd (without his tail), and enters a tent marked:

**THE AMAZING SHEILA ANN**

**COME SEE THE WORLD'S SMALLEST AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN!**

The sign takes me off guard because I've never heard of a PC freak show. What a world. The crack dealers in my neighborhood are calling themselves "Street Pharmacists," and the strippers at my favorite strip club have taken to calling themselves "Sex Workers." It's a crazy fucking world. I stand outside the tent wondering if inside there's a mini-Rosa Parks demanding equal treatment for all freaks and shit like that. After a minute I decide that
there's only one way to find out. So I follow Lobster Boy into the tent. Inside there is a tiny black woman, only two and a half feet tall. She is enormously fat and sits beneath a fan. A sign behind her reads: "I will stand up for a dollar." Another reads: "I will sit on your lap for a picture--three dollars." Lobster Boy walks across the tent and starts rooting through a small fridge in the back of the room while Sheila Ann pays no attention at all. He hands me a beer, pulls out one for himself, and struggles with the top. We are the only people in the room, except for an elderly woman who is taking a picture of Sheila Ann. I feel this tap on my hip as the lady walks out.

"Give me a hand here, fella," says Lobster Boy, looking up at me. He holds up the bottle of beer in his claw. He is too drunk to see that it is a twist off top, or maybe he can't open bottles. Cans must be impossible. I open the beer and hand it back to him.

"Here you go," I say. "Who was the other lobster?"

"My son, of course. This is a God damned family sideshow!" he says as he raises his bottle.

"I don't want to ... I mean, well. Wallace sent me to get his money," I say. "He says you owe him three bills."

The Lobster ignores me. I am suddenly aware that I haven't introduced myself. He pulls hard from the beer and
eyes the woman.

"You're a debt collector. What you gonna do? Break me up? Cut off a finger? Fuck Wallace," he says as he downs the first bottle and snatches mine out of my hand. "You drink my beer and then pull this shit! Sonfa' bitch, I should rip your fucking head off your shoulders."

Lobster Boy stumbles back a step or two. His eyes are wild and angry. I suddenly can't remember my tough guy look.

"It's not like that. He just asked me to come down here and see about it. I don't care if you pay or not," I say.

He downs the second beer and grabs another from the fridge. His face and neck are turning red. Life story--I can see that I'm going to get it either from Lobster or Wallace.

"Fuckin' weasel come down here and drink my goddamned beer, look at my wife, and ask for money. God dammed pencil neck," he says and slams the fridge shut. "Mama, we got a pencil neck here."

Sheila Ann finally takes notice and gets up and walks over to us. She motions for me to hit it while I can and I start to ease my way to the tent flaps.

"Let's take it easy on the booze today Ernst. Jacob can't do another night show," she says in a soothing
southern accent.

"Fuck him. He's got no ambition. None. And fuck you for taking his side all the time," says Lobster Boy. He turns to me. "And fuck you while I'm at it, weasel."

"Excuse him, he doesn't know what he's saying half the time," Sheila says. "Most of the time."

She starts to say something else but Lobster Boy cuffs her on the side of her head with a clawly hand. Sheila rolls like she's going to fall, then rights herself and straightens her hair. She holds up a stubby finger and draws a line in the air.

"Excuse us for a minute," she says to me. I start to go but before I get a chance to get out he's on her and has a claw around her throat. She's kicking and scratching and the veins in her head are popping out. Lobster's gritting his jaw and I can hear his teeth grinding.

Her voice is raspy and close.

"Heyyy . . ." she gasps, seemingly to me. I don't like to get involved in these types of things but I can see that I am already.

So I kick Lobster Boy in the back. Both of them tumble down and he suddenly turns on me, grabbing my wrist. His claws are unfuckingbelievably strong and I feel like he's going to break my damned arm. He's got me with a claw and is clubbing me with the other hand. Life story, to be
beaten up over a marital thing between a Lobster Boy and the World's Smallest African American Woman. Now I can taste blood in my mouth and I punch out and connect with something soft and scratchy. When Lobster Boy lets go I keep on hitting him. My fists pound him in the face and chest and he heaves vomit onto the floor and over my arms. In the momentary lapse I remember Wallace and decide to belt him a couple for the debt, just so I can tell Wallace about it later.

Suddenly I am being pulled off the freak from behind and I can feel kicks and punches being thrown against me. Something catches me in the gut and I lose my wind. I look up and see Sheila Ann and the younger Lobster. He has a baseball bat and is swinging at my head. I'll be lucky to get to my feet again. Life-fucking-story--Man Killed in Freak Accident at Carnival. I kick at the young Lobster's wheel chair and manage to push it out of range. Half crawling, half running I make it out of the tent. Security is waiting outside.

It takes a while to regain my wind, but the security guards wait silently for me. Sheila and the Lobsters sit inside the doorway of the tent, arm in arm, claw in claw. When security sees them, both the young men in black t-shirts shrug their shoulders and turn away.

"Fucking freaks," one of the men mutters as he
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disappears into the crowd that has formed to watch me dry heave. Someone in the crowd tosses me a bandana and I dab the blood from my chin.

"Got your ass kicked by a freak!" says the same teenage boy who was in the Lobster tank when I walked in. He still has the tough guy look on for his girl, I guess. "A freak with no legs!"

No sooner do the words leave his mouth when a beer bottle hits him in the ear. He shrieks and goes down on one knee. The Lobsters are on him in a flash. Sheila Ann is egging them on. The teenage girl is screaming. She looks at me in terror.

"Help him! The freaks are killing him!" she screams.

I get up and dust myself off. The younger Lobster starts slapping the girl. The security officer runs to help the kids.

I hear the young lobster yell, "Freaks? I'll show a freak to you, bitch!"

A crowd has formed. The girl is screaming. A man next to me yells, "Stop this! For God's sake!" He gets a punch in the gut from Sheila Ann and doubles over in the dust. A full scale brawl begins between the crowd and the Lobsters and I'm convinced the freaks will win. The older Lobster sees me through the dust.

"I'll fuckin' kill you, you sonfa' bitch," he rants as
he tries to break through the crowd.

I don't even pretend to go back in there. I suddenly understand why Wallace wanted me to make this run, but I guess I'm not that mad. I'm counting my teeth and watching the Lobsters take on four or five guys when the real police arrive. The crowd splits apart and in the middle of the dust the teenaged couple is huddling together, bleeding. The younger Lobster is out of his chair walking on his hands. He's yelling something at the gathering crowd.

"Come on! Well . . . Do it!" He menaces from the ground.

His father grabs Sheila Ann and turns to go back to his tent. He waves a deformed hand at the rookie officer who's trying to read him his rights and says, "See my manager you fuck. I got rights too, you sonfa' bitch. Even if."
The sun was low over Kenoji Lake when the men and boys finally finished unloading the large Sea Plane. The pilot, barely sixteen, sat in the cockpit smoking a cigar that one of the men handed to him when they had landed the big plane.

"This will keep the skeeters from carrying you off," the man had said.

Kenneth sat quietly on a rock where he had stopped with a load. He looked out at the line of men and boys, fathers and sons all, standing on the sagging dock. They were passing cases of Canadian beer in a fire line. The small group had brought twenty cases for the week. The plane quickly emptied and the men and their sons stood with bottles of warm beer. They laughed and smoked. Off into the woods thirty feet behind them, Kenneth noticed a small tent. He walked to where his father stood with a green Cuban cigar clinched in his teeth.

"Whose tent is that?" he asked the pilot, who was drinking a beer himself. At this the pilot scratched his head through his ragged ball cap as if he were thinking. Kenneth wondered what was behind his dark glasses that seemed to cover his entire face.

"Ladwigg said to tell you that tomorrow two Indians
will be out here to work on the dock and fix the icehouse," the young pilot said. "Don't give those bastards any beer. Indians can't handle beer, or any alcohol at all for that matter. In fact I'd hide the extra cases you have here. Just don't give 'em a drop."

"Are you flying them in?" Kenneth's father asked.

"Hell, no. Those guys canoe in from the reservation near Ignace," came a quick reply. "They're Metis--French-Indian mix."

The men and boys were impressed because they knew it was at least an eighty or ninety mile trip from Ignace to Kenoji. They stood around drinking and smoking until it was almost too dark for the bush pilot to get back out. The water was down fifteen feet and the pilot had to miss a large rock formation that was recently uncovered as the lake dropped. With no fish for dinner, the group built a fire and cooked a shoulder of venison from the coolers that were secure in the giant A-frame icehouse. Each winter Arland Ladwigg, their outfitter, and his help came here and carved huge blocks of lake ice that would last all summer insulated by sawdust in the cool darkness of the A-frame.

One by one, each exhausted man and boy entered the main tent and fell to sleep.

By dawn two Indians arrived. The sun was high by six o'clock and they began to hammer away at the dock. The men
were cooking breakfast as the boys gathered firewood. The Indians, a small one and a giant of a man, made swift progress on the dock. By noon all the men and boys except for Kenneth and his father were off fishing. He and his father stayed to finish pitching camp. His father was napping in a hammock between two giant birch trees.

By mid-morning the sun was high and Kenneth could see the heat reflecting off the dark water. The shade was cool and relaxing, but the water reflected the heat straight up and into the two workers' faces. Kenneth got up from the porch and walked through the camp to where the Indians hammered away at the loose boards.

"You all hot?" he asked.

"If we get hot we'll take off our shirts," said the smaller of the two. His face was worn. His teeth were a rotten brown and yellow. Both men wore flannel shirts over long underwear. Neither man was sweating. The giant was over six-five, if he was a foot. He never looked up from his job. He effortlessly pried old boards from the dock while the small man hammered on new boards. Kenneth noticed that the giant's hands were covered with scars. He caught himself staring at them as they wrapped tightly around the pry-bar.

"Can I get you anything?" said the boy. "We've got some bug juice. You know, punch."
The men looked at each other.  
"Do you have a coke?" asked the smaller man.  
"Sure. My name's Kenny," he said, extending his hand.  
"Thomas," the smaller man said as he continued his work.  

Kenneth wiped his hand on his dungarees. As he walked into the icehouse he heard his father stir and swat at something and curse the bugs.  

Inside the icehouse, hidden under mounds of sawdust were cases of Labatt's Blue, Molson and one beer named "Grizzly Beer." Kenneth found the Coke and wiped the wet sawdust off the can as he left the coolness of the icehouse. He walked to the hammock where his father was reading a book.  

"Why do they always say that Indians can't drink?" he asked his father. "It seems to me that they ought to make that choice. I mean if they were white men we'd probably offer them a beer, right?"

"Arland Ladwigg knows what he's talking about. All I know is what the pilot told us," his father said. "Besides, we don't know any Indians. Just don't even ask them."

Kenneth walked the Coke out to Thomas. He thought his father was probably right. Columbia, South Carolina, might have an Indian or two, but Kenneth never knew any. The two
men had already finished more than half of the dock. Thomas took the Coke and opened it. He then passed it to the giant. The can looked little in his scarred hand as he nodded thanks and bent back to work.

"Do either of you guys know anything about engines?" said Kenneth. "That nine horse power motor sitting there won't run."

"I'll look at it in a few minutes, when we break," said Thomas. After a while he said something quietly to the giant, who stood up, walked to where the motor was hanging, grabbed it with one hand and carried it onto the dock. He didn't make a noise. Kenneth decided that maybe he didn't speak English or maybe he was mute.

"I'll look it over," said Thomas.

The boy walked away from the dock and sat down in a patch of sunlight. The giant began quietly talking to Thomas. He looked sternly at Thomas and in the direction of the tents. Kenneth decided he was talking about the fathers and sons. He grew more animated, though he never raised his voice. Just when Kenneth was sure the giant was angry, Thomas started to chuckle. Pretty soon both men were laughing quietly. The giant stretched his full length on the dock and stared up at the sun. He closed his eyes and seemed to fall asleep with a smile on his face. Thomas sat down on the edge of the dock. He laughed to himself,
and shook his head from side to side.

Later that day Thomas fixed the motor while the giant stacked the old dry wood in a neat pile to be burned.

"Do you guys work for Arland year round?" Kenneth asked Thomas.

"Yes," he replied. "During the winter we help to fill the icehouses, and the rest of the year we do this work."

"You live in Ignace?"

"No."

"Near there, then?"

"Yes."

Thomas was clearing water from the engine. Kenneth lit one of his father's cigars. He knew that the men must live in Deauville, outside of Ignace. The campers had driven through this little village days before. Outside a tavern was a huge tree, the bottom half of which was being carved into a totem pole. Kenneth was attracted and repulsed by the sharp angular faces that lined the tree. There were no people out on the main street, but Kenneth thought he saw the shadows of faces staring out of the filthy windows looking out onto main street. A sign on one of the boarded up buildings read "Deauville Native Reserve Est. 1925." There were several large holes in the sign as if someone had taken shots at it. Kenneth especially hated the trash that seemed to be everywhere he looked.
It was late afternoon and the first boat of fishermen arrived back. The men in the boat were half drunk from Canadian whiskey that Jamie, one of the older sons, bought in Ignace. The two twenty-year-olds in the bow of the boat sang a bawdy drinking song.

"Give me a beer!" said Daniel, Jamie's younger brother, as he stepped onto the boat landing.

"I'm for that! Damn whiskey is too rough for this time of day!" said his father, Lee Hires.

The two Indians looked at each other.

"You fellas have done a wonderful job. Just spectacular!" said Lee. "This dock was a piece of shit just hours ago and now look! Hell of a job, hell of a job. Can I get you guys a beer?"

The Indians said nothing. Thomas continued to tinker with the motor and the giant sat whittling a stick. Kenneth noticed that the stick was shaping into a mini-totem pole.

"How was the fishing?" Kenneth said to Lee as he walked down the dock.

"Lots of pike, but not enough walleye," said Lee.

"Kenneth, go get those two a couple of beers, please, I've got to talk to your dad."

Kenneth said nothing to Lee, but decided to go get the beer. Once in the cool A-frame icehouse it took his eyes a
few minutes to adjust. He located the beer and dug two out. The Indians were finished for the day. In the morning they would leave and travel back to Ignace to get paid. He offered the beers to the Indians.

"No, thank you," said Thomas deliberately. "Do you have maybe another Coke?" Kenneth nodded that he did. Thomas looked over at the giant and said something in Metis. Kenneth surmised that the two were either brothers or good friends. The giant reached out to accept the beer but then stopped and extended his massive hand.

"I'm sorry. My name is Paul Travailian," he said. "My brother is afraid that Arland will find out that we're drinking on the job."

Kenneth noticed that the giant had a massive scar across his forehead. His eyes were small and bloodshot. Both men had leathery red skin and jet black hair. Kenneth reached out and took Paul's hand and shook it. Paul's palms were rough and hard. Kenneth withdrew his hand and replaced it with a bottle of beer. Paul took a sip off of it and grimaced slightly.

Kenneth opened the other beer and began to drink it as he walked to the icehouse to get Thomas' Coke. The hum of night bugs and mosquitoes could be heard on the water and in the woods around them. Kenneth gave Thomas the cola and stood with the two men in silence. The Indians began to
speak in soft tones as if they were trying to whisper. Kenneth stood stiffly for a moment, then walked slowly away from the two men as they murmured to one another.

About twenty yards from the two Indians, Kenneth's father began to clean fish on a table that had been built between two trees. He was not a good hand at filleting, often leaving hunks of meat on the carcasses. The long fillets of the Northern Pike especially pained him. He found it nearly impossible to cut a fillet without leaving tons of bones in the meat. He was grumbling as Jamie carried stringers of fish to the table where they hung on nails. Thomas walked over from the dock to where Kenneth's father stood with his hands inside a Pike. He watched him cut away the flesh from the sides of the fish, trying to avoid the ribcage with the sharp knife. He then cut away the strip of yellow meat and began to pick bones out of the fillet. Kenneth heard his father curse as he tossed the mangled piece of meat into a pan of water.

"It's the Y-bone," said Thomas. "It's a different cut you have to use."

"Show me then," Kenneth's father said as he handed the knife to Thomas and stood quietly aside.

The Indian took a medium sized pike from the stringer and gutted it. He made a cut behind the gill and down the dorsal fin and then, as he began to slice the meat from
tail to head he made a sharp twist with the blade. The fillet came away without any bones and left very little meat wasted on the fish. Kenneth watched as his father slowly practiced the cut on the next fish. Thomas nodded approval, and his father resumed his duties. Thomas took out a long knife and joined him, the two of them finishing the stringer in twenty minutes of silence.

Soon after the sun began to boil in Lake Kenoji, Thomas and Paul went into the tent without a word and stayed there. As the men and boys ate dinner, Kenneth wondered if they shouldn't offer dinner to the Indians. No one else said anything about the two men. The Indians' tent was dark and silent long before the rest of camp settled in and finally went to sleep.

By mid-morning the next day Paul and Thomas had finished the dock and left in their canoe. It would be a day long trip back to Lake Caribou where Arland would pay them. Kenneth and his father went fishing.

"Those men didn't eat much while they were here," Kenneth said that day on the water.

"They probably did, you may not have seen them. They were rough looking, weren't they?" said his father.

"Only looked rough. I liked them," Kenneth said.

"They seemed pretty nice."

"Paul had so many scars on his hands that it looked
like he'd been in a lot of fights. And one great big one all the way across his forehead."

"Maybe his tribe does that ..."

"Ladwigg says there aren't any left in this part of Ontario, tribes I mean. One time he said that the Indians here have all gone to pot. But those two seem ..."

Just then his father got a bite. A Northern Pike, about two feet long jumped out of the water and landed with a splash back in again. After a few minutes, the fish wore down, Kenneth placed the net under it and scooped it up. His father removed the hook and tossed the Pike back into the water. The fish floated on top of the water, alive but confused. Usually the fish would swim away. This one floated carelessly with the current. Kenneth and his father scanned the sky for eagles. Sometimes when a fish acted like this one, an eagle would see it and scoop it from the water to take to her nest at the edge of the water. They did not see an eagle that day.

Two days later there were yellow planes circling the sky. These were game warden planes. No one at the camp could figure why the planes kept circling. Finally one of the planes landed and made its way to the new dock. Kenneth and his father stood back while the two older boys caught the plane as it eased up to the dock. A warden with a brown hat got out of the cockpit. He was wearing
mirrored sunglasses that sat at an odd tilt on his long, skinny nose. The warden was a small man about five-and-a-half feet tall. He had a small Chaplin mustache.

"Those two Indians that were here two days ago . . . have they been back?" he asked.

"No. We haven't seen them since they canoed away. Why? Didn't they make it back?" Kenneth asked.

"Yes. They got paid and then they got soused. We think Paul and Thomas Travailian canoed to a fishing camp two days ago, took two young men hostage, and forced their grandads to feed them. No one's seen those two since, but the description sounds like Thomas," the man said.

"You think those two did that?" said Kenneth.

By this time Lee and his father were on the dock. The warden recounted his tale while they looked at each other in disbelief.

"You said they were drunk?" asked Lee.

"That's right. They fought in town that night and the barkeeps says that they broke up the bar at close and when he left they were still brawling with someone on Queenstreet. Since then no one has seen them. And those fellas from Wisconsin got mugged yesterday by two rough looking Indians. Put two with two," said the warden. He finished his sentence with that annoying punctuation "eh?" Kenneth's father almost always made fun of this little
quirk. Today he was silent. Lee and his boys left the
dock walking towards the icehouse. They were laughing.

"Was anyone hurt?" asked Kenneth.

"Nope. Just kind of shaken," said the man.

"Where do they think they're going?" asked Kenneth's
dad. "They wouldn't come back here, would they?"

"We don't know, but I'd be careful if I were you.
Until they're caught, just be careful," said the warden as
he made to get back in his plane.

Kenneth and his father watched as the warden's plane
pulled away from the dock and lifted into the sky. His
father stood at the end of the dock for a while. He was
smoking a cigar. He turned towards Kenneth and offered him
a cigar. Kenneth stuck the cigar in his pocket and stood
the same way his father did, shoulders slumped, hands in
pockets. They looked like father and son, both with olive
skin and dark hair. Kenneth had his mother's blue eyes,
not his father's eyes. His father's eyes were so dark that
you couldn't see the pupil, they were like staring into the
night sky.

The afternoon was spent in camp. Lee and his sons
drank beer from the icehouse and spoke of how lucky they
were that they hadn't gotten the two Indians drunk.

"Indians are worse than niggers," Jamie said. "At
least a nigger can drink. Good for something."
Kenneth looked around and saw that all the men and boys were laughing at this. Even his father smiled as he puffed on a cigar. Kenneth forced a smile and stood up.

"All I know is that that big one could kill us all if he wanted to . . ." Lee was saying as Kenneth walked away from the group towards the tent where the two men had slept nights before.

Kenneth opened the netting that made the front and peered inside. The stick that the giant whittled was inside, along with some blankets. Kenneth found himself inside, sitting on the damp blankets. He began to imagine the giant was inside the icehouse, listening to Jamie as he spoke. Suddenly he would spring out and break him like a dry twig or the dry old boards from the dock. He would demand beer and money, perhaps kill someone. Thomas would of course be there laughing his soft laugh and sharpening a hatchet. He imagined that his father and Lee would wrestle and lose, each being killed brutally. The image of Paul Travailian dressed in buckskin and wielding a tomahawk danced in his head. He picked up the stick that Paul whittled. It was about a foot tall, carved with the same sharply angled faces that he had seen in Deauville. On the bottom was an owl with pointed horns. Directly above a bear or wolf, something with fangs. The eyes were bulged out. The teeth were carved until they were razor sharp.
Above the wolf was a man. The man had straight hair and small, narrow eyes. Kenneth recognized the well defined cheekbones of an Indian. Around the neck was a collar of ornately carved beads and shells. Kenneth imagined it was a noose and the image was of Paul himself. The top and final totem was a intricately carved animal skull. It had no teeth or nose, but seemed to stare out of its empty sockets. The skull chilled Kenneth and made the smell of the tent seem worse than it had been. The rest of the stick was unfinished and there were about six inches of raw bark. Kenneth guessed that Paul would never be back to finish it.

When Kenneth emerged from the tent the sun was sinking into the lake and he stopped to listen for the hiss of steam, as his father once told him to. The rest of the campers were circled around the fire smoking and laughing. His father noticed the piece of wood that Kenneth carried.

"What you got there, Ken?" he said quietly.

"A totem pole. The big one carved it while they were here," he said. "I found it in the tent over there."

"Well for God's sake, leave it there! Put it back," said Jamie. "I'd hate for him to get angry at missing it."

Kenneth saw Daniel laugh, and elbow Lee, who laughed as well.

"I'd like to keep it, if I can, Dad," he said.
"I'd rather you put it back. And while you're at it, how's about getting me a beer?" Lee raised a hand to signify that he wanted one as well.

Kenneth returned to the front of the tent and gently placed the stick inside the flap. It excited him to be so close to a criminal. That subject was the only conversation until the sun went down and the men and their sons went to bed.

Early the next day the men were awakened by the roar of a plane engine landing on the lake. Kenneth walked to the end of the dock and recognized the grey and red circle of the Greystoke Outfitters' logo. The pilot was Arland Ladwigg. Kenneth didn't care for him because he had a nervous laugh and sweated all of the time. The plane eased onto the edge of the dock and Kenneth and his father caught the ropes to tie it in.

Arland Ladwigg was a large man who wore both suspenders and a belt. He was almost always wearing a plaid flannel shirt and khaki pants. And there was always that nervous laugh. He lived in the states most of the year except for the summer when he made his money from outfitting fishing trips. Kenneth's father liked him and always brought him a bottle of bourbon when he came to visit. Kenneth noticed two other men inside the plane but couldn't see who they were.
"You have some excitement around here?" Arland asked as he stepped out of the little cockpit, adding his little "heh, heh, heh" to the end. He was grinning.

"Yeah, the warden came here yesterday and said . . ." his father began.

"Told you about the hostage thing, eh? What did he say?" Arland asked.

"He said those two Indians, Paul and Thomas, did it," Kenneth blurted out before his father could answer. Arland looked at him with a grin and started to laugh. Kenneth was angry that he would laugh at such an awful story.

"Com'on out, you terrorists," Arland almost laughed into the plane. Thomas' face peeked out of the cockpit, sheepishly. Inside the plane Kenneth could now see the huge form of Paul crouching by the door, waiting for Thomas to step down.

"The warden had you a bit nervous and I'm sorry," said Ladwigg as he helped Thomas from the cockpit of the seaplane. "His story couldn't be further from the truth. Thomas and Paul were at the bar that night but they didn't hold anybody hostage. They'll never find the two Indians that did that. But Thomas and Paul have been in trouble before, so naturally they got accused. Anyhow, I'm sorry about it all."

Paul stepped from the plane and onto the dock. He
looked from side to side as he took his place beside Thomas.

"Good morning," he said. Thomas nodded hello.

"Thomas and Paul are going to be working up here for the rest of the week. There's a leak in the stove and some of the floorboards need to be replaced. Where's the others?" Arland asked as he looked up the path to the cabin. The two Indians began to unload wood and boxes of nails onto the dock. Arland put his arm around Kenneth's father's shoulder and walked off the dock speaking in quiet tones as if he didn't want anyone to hear. Kenneth figured that they must be talking about money. He began to help Paul by carrying loads from the dock to the cabin, about fifty yards away. Inside the cabin Kenneth could hear Arland laughing and Lee and his father joking with him.

The sun was getting high and the black flies were coming out. On the dock the two men piled a few more pieces of wood and talked quietly. Kenneth sat down beside the fire pit and began to string a fishing rod. He watched as Paul got a small pack out of the plane and headed towards the small tent where the two men slept. His heart pounded as the large Indian opened the flap and bent low to enter the tent. When he emerged again he was holding the stick of wood. He walked straight to where Kenneth was sitting, with his back to the cabin, in the middle of camp.
The sunlight came through the trees behind Paul, so that Kenneth could not see his face until the Indian stood before him.

"You missed an eye," Paul said, pointing at the rod that Kenneth was stringing. Paul smiled, showing all of his teeth. They were a pearl color and seemed as large as matchbooks.

"Thanks. I hadn't noticed," said Kenneth. "How are you?"

"Wet. You wouldn't have any duct tape, would you? Our tent has a rip in it and all our bedding is wet," Paul said. Kenneth saw Thomas hanging mildewed blankets on the tent lines.

"Sure. Got some right here," said Kenneth as he found the roll he kept with his tackle. The Indian took the tape and turned away. He walked back to the tent and started to tape the holes. Thomas put his bag into the tent, came over to the fire pit, and sat down. Kenneth noticed he had a bandage on his right hand. He guessed it to be from the fight that the warden had told them about. He imagined two Indians fist-fighting in the streets of Deauville. The speed of fists, strength. Blood. Then he looked at Thomas, who sat quietly beside him watching the ashes in the pit.

Paul soon walked over to where Kenneth and Thomas sat
and handed Kenneth his tape. He sat in a chair beside Thomas. As he pulled out his knife and began to work on the uncarved section of the totem, the two men began to speak in what Kenneth guessed was Metis. Kenneth wished they would speak English.

"Well, I'm glad, at least the fish'n is good. Really couldn't ask for nicer weather," Kenneth heard Arland say as he exited the cabin behind him. Lee, Bill and Kenneth's father followed. Kenneth could hear the other boys getting dressed inside.

"We've had great weather. Remember two years ago? It rained on us for ten days straight?" said Lee. Arland laughed his nervous laugh.

"Well at least, now you know that my friends over there aren't lunatics. That warden's off in the head," said Ladwigg as he rolled his sleeves up to his elbow. Paul and Thomas smiled to each other. Paul stood up, and set his carving on the ground next to his seat in front of the fire pit. Kenneth liked the way Ladwigg always referred to his workers as "his friends."

Kenneth's father drank out of a dented coffee cup. The steam from the coffee fogged his glasses each time he put the cup to his lips. He went to a cooler and got out a plastic bag full of fresh walleye. This he handed to Arland.
"Here's a gift. Caught yesterday. Thanks for checking in," he said. Arland took the package and smiled. He loved fresh walleye, but hated to fish. He said he looked forward to visiting the camps because of all the free fish.

"Paul, why don't you show these folks that gut-rock you and Thomas told me about?" he said to the two men. "There's a couple of nesting Bald Eagles just around the bend. You can put your fish guts on a rock there for the birds. They'll come down and get them right in front of you."

Paul and Thomas each shook Arland's hand and said something to him in Metis. Arland, in turn, said something back. No one knew that the outfitter spoke any language other than English, but his voice bubbled out sounds that Kenneth had never heard before. When he finished both Thomas and Paul were smiling.

"You trouble-makers finish up in a few days and I'll be back to get you when I come for these folks," he said in English. He laughed, then walked down the path towards the dock. Lee walked beside him asking him about the prices and deposits for the next years' trip. Arland turned and yelled over his shoulder: "You should show these folks your walleye hot spots, Thom."

It was beginning to look like a beautiful day as the
sun rose over the tree line and spread warmth and light everywhere. His pole finished, Kenneth got up from the chair and walked the tackle and the pole to the boats. As he passed the filleting table he saw hundreds of flies swarming a five gallon bucket. Someone had forgotten to dump the fish carcasses from the night before. The sting of fish filled his nose and mouth. He could nearly taste the slimy skin and guts that had been sitting for nearly twelve hours.

Kenneth's father also smelled the bucket as he loaded his boat. He looked towards the tent where the two twenty-year-olds were just waking. Kenneth could see by the scowl on his face that his father was angry. He looked towards Kenneth.

"You wouldn't mind making a gut run, would you? If this bucket sits any longer the flies will kill us," he said as he grinned at Kenneth.

Kenneth didn't mind. The ride to the sea gull nest where they dumped the fish guts took less than ten minutes. When he was in range the gulls began to dive at him, screaming the whole time. Kenneth allowed the boat to bang into the flat rock and grabbed a rough corner with one hand. With his free hand he tried to lift the heavy bucket out of the boat to dump it. A large seagull dove and squawked at him. The bucket was too heavy for him and he
had to turn loose of the rock, setting himself adrift. He started the motor and made another attempt, this time with the bucket on the seat beside him. The boat banged into the rock and crept up beside it. The jarring almost knocked the bucket off the seat, but he was able to dump the bucket. A pile of silvery fish now lay on the rock, staring with glazed eyes into the air. The flies swarmed around the carcasses. The gull stopped diving at Kenneth and circled the rock as the craft drifted away. Behind him he could hear the birds scream to other gulls on the lake.

As he pulled back into the dock, Kenneth noticed that Paul and Thomas were stringing up fishing rods. Paul had an Ugly Stick ultralight that Kenneth recognized as his father's. Paul had one of Lee's ultralight rods. Kenneth liked ultralights because it allowed a lot more play than a normal rod and reel. Paul was whipping the rod tip back and forth, testing the flexibility.

"Paul and Thomas are going to fish with us today," said his father. "I thought they might like to, and Arland said that they are the expert guides for Kenoji walleye".

"Thomas is the great fisherman," said Paul. "I prefer to watch the water myself."

"That rod'll change your mind. Wait until you catch one," his father said. "What do you think we ought to bait up with?"
Thomas studied the contents of a tackle box and pulled out a rubber minnow with a spinner on it.

"This one," he said.

Paul and Thomas got into a boat and started the motor. Kenneth and his father got into another and pulled the cord. The motor angrily started and spit oily water into the lake. Kenneth watched as the two Indians pulled away from the dock and onto the open water. He didn't understand why his father was suddenly comfortable with the Indians. Kenneth looked at his father from the bow of the boat. He sat in the stern with a squared jaw, sure of himself. Four cigars stuck out of his pocket.

"Why didn't the others go?" Kenneth yelled over the roar of the Evinrude.

"Lee didn't want to. He said he's fine just horsing around with Jamie and Daniel," said his father.

Kenneth moved from the bow to the seat in front of his father. This made the boat ride higher in the water and go a little faster. Up ahead Kenneth could see Paul and Thomas sitting in the other boat. Paul was playing with his rod and reel while Thomas steered.

"What did Arland say about the whole hostage thing?" Kenneth asked.

His father looked at him quietly. His hair blew slightly in the wind.
"He said they didn't do it. He said they got a bad rap. Paul apparently wasn't even there that night. He just got lumped in," his father said.

"Did you see the totem? He's carving a new face," said Kenneth.

"Arland said he carved the tree in Deauville. He does it all with a chainsaw and woodworking tools."

Kenneth said nothing. He turned to the front of the boat and huddled against the wind. His father said nothing until they heard the rush of water and saw where the Ogoki River empties into Kenoji. The mouth of the river was fifty feet wide with huge rocks pointing up out of the water. Kenneth could see the silver streaks on the rocks from canoes that had scraped their way past the rapids. Thomas pulled up beside a rock downstream in the eddy current. He dropped anchor. Kenneth and his father pulled up near the two Indians and did the same. They threw the lines and reeled slowly through the dark water.

The two boats bobbed with the current below the rapids. Kenneth caught four huge walleye in just over thirty minutes, each bigger that the next. His father caught several and passed cigars over to the Indians. Kenneth noticed that Thomas put both in his pocket. Paul seemed bored. He trailed the tip of the rod in the water making tiny waves in the current.
Thomas scowled at Paul and said something in Metis.
The big man sat silently in the bow of the boat and reeled up his line. He put the rod in the boat and lay back to sleep. Thomas got a bite and began to fight the fish. As a four or five pound walleye came to the surface, he yelled to his brother to get the net.

"Hurry!" Thomas said. "Hurry with the net, the line's gonna break!"

Paul sat motionless for a minute, then leaned forward and slowly grabbed the net. Thomas was getting angry. Paul started to dip the net into the water when the line snapped. Thomas became livid. His eyes grew narrow and cold. He clinched his teeth at his brother. He said something nasty sounding under his breath. Paul said nothing. Thomas turned and apologized to Kenneth's father for the loss of the bait.

"No problem. We've plenty," said his father.

"At least you two are catching fish," said Thomas sullenly. "Better than I can say."

Kenneth continued to jig his lure under the dark water. He had two nice walleye, but wanted a third. As the sun was directly above, Kenneth began to notice thousands of little insects floating down the current from up stream. Thomas and Paul saw the insects and began to speak in Metis, their voices bubbling as smoothly as the
Mayfly hatch," Thomas said, holding the fly up for Kenneth and his father to see. "We won't catch another fish today. Maybe not for the rest of the week. Watch the water."

Kenneth and his father bent over the side of the boat and watched as thousands of mayflies drifted past them. Suddenly the school of walleye from underneath them began to hit the top of the water, rolling headfirst to get a mouthfull of larvae. The dorsal fins of the dark green and silver fish stuck up out of the water and rolled back into it. In six years of fishing in Canada, Kenneth and his father had never seen a walleye hit the surface, especially during the heat of the day. The walleye continued to roll on the top of the lake for another hour while the group sat and watched in awe.

"How often does this happen?" asked Kenneth's father.

"About every other year. This year it's early by at least a month," said Thomas. "Our father used to say that this is a sign of a long, hot summer. But that's just stories."

Paul was leaning out over the water so far that the boat tilted until it looked like the Indians would tip over. Thomas had to lean away from him just to maintain some balance. He grunted something to his brother, who
eased back into the boat.

"Can you fly fish 'em? I've got a fly kit at camp," said Kenneth's father. Thomas said he wasn't sure.

They watched the feeding frenzy for another few minutes before his father said it was time to go. Kenneth pulled the anchor from the dark cold water and sat down in the stern next to his father. Thomas and Paul were speaking in Metis again. Paul was laughing and Thomas was smoking a green cigar. Thomas looked emotionless and cold. He seemed disappointed even though Kenneth and his father had been amazed at the sight of the top-feeding walleye.

The trip back across Kenoji was cold as the sun hid behind clouds. Kenneth and his father followed closely behind the Indians, who slowed only to look for shallow areas where rocks might upset the boat or ruin the engine. These shallows always frightened Kenneth a little because when you hit them, they always came out of nowhere. There would be deep-looking black water and suddenly a huge rock, red and angry under the surface, would bite into the hull of the little boats. In some cases the shallows were right in the middle of the lake. The past five years had taught Kenneth where not to go.

As the four fishermen moved closer to camp, Kenneth could hear a loud whooping sound. He could make out the outlines of two men, Jamie and Daniel, jumping off the end
of the dock into the cold water. Each time they would jump
they would whoop as they hit the water. Lee was standing
off the dock a few yards from the campfire. When the
swimmers saw the approaching boat they got out of the water
and stood naked on the dock.

"How was the fishing?" yelled Daniel as they were
about twenty feet from the dock. Jamie pushed him into the
water. Daniel cursed and quickly jumped back out.

Kenneth held up the small stringer of fish for an
answer. They tied in the boat and stepped out onto the
dock. Jamie's body was red and covered with goose flesh.
Kenneth could see by his eyes and the beer cans that
littered the camp that he was drunk. Kenneth's father
nodded at the two boys and left the dock to tell Lee about
the mayfly hatch.

"I'm sorry about the fishing today," said Thomas as he
handed the rods back to Kenneth. Paul nodded at the boy
and walked past the twenty-year olds and towards his tent.

"Don't be. It was worth it just to see all those fish
feeding," said Kenneth, but Thomas had already turned and
walked off the dock.

Jamie and Daniel jumped into the water again. They
were trying to see who could last in the water the longest.
A bottle of Canadian Club sat, half emptied, on the edge of
the dock. With each leap the boys would swim to the edge
and drink from the bottle. It was clear to all that they had been playing this game for a while.

Kenneth walked over to the fire pit, where his father sat telling Lee about the feeding walleye. Lee, who was not drunk, stared in disbelief. He told the two that he wanted to see this the next day. He told Kenneth and his father that the three of them stayed in camp all day sleeping and chopping wood for the fire.

That evening the fire was roaring as the camp set up to cook dinner. Bits of burnt wood and the ends of logs that were too long were lying outside the pit. Kenneth looked down beside Lee's seat and saw Paul's carving knives on the ground where he had left them. The totem was nowhere to be seen. He could hear Paul snore from the tent where he had been napping for a short while. He scanned the ground near the fire and saw four inches of smooth wood, now charred from the fire, near Lee's seat. He knew in an instant it was the stick that Paul had been carving. He kicked the smooth end out of the fire and onto the ground. Nick-like cuts, evidence of the new section of carvings, on the remaining few inches proved to him that this was the totem.

"Who put this into the fire?" Kenneth asked, more forcefully than he'd intended. He grabbed the unburnt section of the totem and lifted it to show Lee and his
Both men recognized the piece of wood that Kenneth held.

"Shit," said his father. He looked at Lee and then to the dock.

Lee stared out at the two men jumping into the water. He called for Jamie to come to the campfire. When Jamie saw the look on his father's face he stopped smiling. He slowed down and sauntered into the center of camp. Jamie turned his back to his father and warmed his hands over the fire. He was even drunker than when Kenneth and his father got into camp that afternoon.

"Did you burn this thing?" asked Lee.

Jamie shook his head side to side. He had a dumbass grin on his face. His eyes were bloody red and his nose was running.

"No. But what does it matter anyway," he said. "I thought they work for Arland here; they're not supposed to be fishin'."

Lee sat quietly as his son said this. Then, he stood up and dropped the burnt end onto the ground. He put his arm around Jamie's shoulders and walked him towards the dock, where Daniel now sat on the wood with the whiskey between his ankles. Lee never raised his voice. Jamie walked stiffly, looking now and again at the green tent off
to the side. The snoring had stopped. Now Lee squatted on the end of the dock with his sons.

"Why would he do that?" Kenneth asked his father. "What's his problem if they go fishing?"

His father said nothing. Then, "I wish I knew. I hope Paul doesn't take it the wrong way."

Kenneth heard the zipper of the tent flap unzip and watched as Thomas exited the tent. He looked at the dock and then the campfire and walked towards Kenneth and his father. Thomas covered the distance in seconds. He took a seat where Paul had sat earlier. He was silent, looking around at the ground. Kenneth felt like he'd heard the entire conversation. Thomas saw Paul's wood carving set on the ground beside his seat. He reached down and quickly picked them up and opened them on his lap.

"Paul was supposed to go to some art school in Montreal when we were younger," he said, looking at the tools. "But the scholarship money fell through."

Kenneth's father looked into the fire. "Your brother has a talent for wood carving," he said.

Kenneth stared at Thomas, who put the tools in his jacket pocket.

He watched Paul's eyes as they fell on the blackened end, all that was left of the totem, lying on the ground before him. Kenneth thought he would be mad, or tell his
brother, but he did a strange thing. Rather than pick it up to inspect it, he quickly kicked the remains into the fire. His face never changed. Kenneth stared at him for a moment, then walked away from the fire and into the cool darkness of the icehouse. He heard his father call for two beers. After breathing the soft sawdust air for a few seconds, Kenneth grabbed the beers and returned to the fire.

Paul was getting out of the tent from his nap. Lee and Jamie saw this and watched him until he sat down beside his brother. Paul stared into the fire, trying to wake up. Thomas said something in Metis. Paul grunted a reply. Kenneth sipped quietly off his beer. He said nothing. His father was still talking about the mayfly hatch. He had gotten his fly kit out of the cabin and was making flies on his lap.

Paul began to warm up and wake up. Lee returned from the dock. He was grimly silent and carried the half bottle of whiskey. Jamie and Daniel began to get dressed. A fresh bucket of carcasses sat on the filleting table, collecting flies.

"We need to make a gut run before it gets dark," Kenneth said. "Paul, do you want to show me that eagle nest?"

"I'll do it," Thomas said. "I know where it is, too."
We go there every time we come to Kenoji."

Paul looked at Thomas and at Kenneth. He stood up and looked around the chair where he had dropped his tools earlier. Kenneth's father looked up from the flies in his lap and said, "Be careful," as he always did when Kenneth took the boat out. Kenneth watched Paul for a few seconds before Thomas touched his shoulder and said, "Let's go."
The touch startled Kenneth. It was the first time that Thomas had laid hands on him. It seemed more like a punch.

Lee looked at Paul as his sons came off of the dock. Both sons were obviously dejected.

"I'm sorry, Paul, I think the boys accidentally burnt that stick you were carving. You see, they were drunk and it was right there and..." Lee said. Jamie started to deny the act but decided to stay silent when he saw his father's stare.

Paul looked at the two as they walked up from the dock. He looked around the ground a moment, then he bent low to search for his tools. He stood back upright, his jaw set and his elbows akimbo.

"It's okay, that was a model, framework. I'd like to find my knives, though," said Paul as he kicked the leaves and dirt around his chair. Thomas walked to the boats.

Kenneth started to say something about the tools but Thomas called for him to hurry up. Thomas was sitting in
the stern of a boat, pulling the engine cord. Kenneth grabbed the bucket full of dead walleye and walked out onto the dock. He put the bucket into the boat and sat down in the bow of the boat. Thomas started the engine and pulled slowly away from the dock.

The sun was getting lower and the lake gave off a red glow. Thomas smoked one of the cigars he had pocketed earlier. He looked at Kenneth with those small eyes, and clinched his teeth down on the cigar.

"Your old man gets good cigars," he said as he exhaled a cloud of smoke. "He must be rich."

Kenneth shrugged his shoulders and looked at the gunwale of the boat. Thomas smiled and puffed the cigar.

The ride to the nest was short and choppy. They turned into a cove that was partially obscured by a windfall and an old beaver hutch. Further back in the cove Kenneth could see a group of rocks sticking up out of the water. Far above the rocks was a nest of dry sticks. Thomas pointed at the nest and said, "There they are."

After turning off the motor Thomas handed Kenneth an oar, and taking up one himself, began to paddle in long strokes. They were within five yards of the rock when the eagle showed herself. She soared high above them, in silent circles. Kenneth stopped paddling and stared at the eagle. Thomas also stopped as they bumped the rock. He
put a hand on the rock to hold them there. There was no wind or current. Kenneth got out onto the rock and dumped the bucket onto the flat surface. As he turned his back to the boat, he heard a distinct plunking sound, like a stone had been dropped into the water.

After dumping the bucket, Kenneth got back in and pushed off, drifting lazily away from the rock. The eagle screamed once, and another, smaller scream came back from the nest. She dove down and landed, a little over ten yards away. Kenneth watched as she stripped flesh from the fish and swallowed it. He had never been so close to an eagle. Her feathers were magnificent, and her all-white head gleamed red in the sunlight. She scooped a large walleye in her talons and flew to the nest. Thomas began to row further away.

After they had tied-in at the camp site, Kenneth thanked Thomas for taking him to the nest. Thomas only smiled and nodded. Paul sat next to Kenneth's father in front of the campfire staring into the flames and carving a new pole with a borrowed knife. Thomas sat down beside him and said something in Metis. Paul stopped carving and set his knife in his lap. He spoke angrily and pointed into the cabin. Kenneth guessed that Thomas had asked about his tools. Kenneth asked his father what had happened after they left to go to the nest.
"Nothing really. Jamie denies he had anything to do with this. I believe him. He's never acted like this. Anyway, Lee gave Paul Jamie's knife for trade on the lost ones."

"Those tools cost me half a month's pay," said Paul solemnly. He grimaced as he worked the hunting knife through the hard wood. Kenneth noticed that Paul was recreating the same totem that he had been carving before. He was up to the skull already. This one was more rudimentary than the last, with less detail and precision.

Kenneth and his father cooked and ate some walleye in silence. The entire camp was quiet. Jamie, Lee and Daniel were drunk or asleep. Thomas sat by himself on the end of the dock, smoking a cigar. Paul carved the new totem until well into the night.

The last few days passed while the group stayed out fishing and the Indians in camp, working. Thomas and Paul kept a separate fire at night-time. Twice Thomas refused offers to fish. Paul didn't really talk to anyone but Thomas. And they always spoke in Metis when they did talk.

After the Indians left Kenneth tried to show his father the cove where he and Thomas saw the eagle. He went the direction that Thomas went but the shoreline soon grew unfamiliar. He looked behind every beaver hutch and up any cove he could see but the efforts proved fruitless. He
wanted to tell his father about the log and the knife but couldn't. He felt like he had promised.

On the last day of the trip he and his father were once again searching for the cove. It was early morning and the sun was golden on the lake. Kenneth took the usual direction but instead of hugging the shore he cut straight across the water. On the other side was a familiar windfall. This was the cove. He and his father went back into the cove and cut the engines. They rowed to the rock. There was no sign of the eagle. Kenneth noticed that the water was only a few feet deep here and began to look for any sign of the tools. On the bottom about four feet under he saw a glint. While his father held to the rock, Kenneth used a net to scoop the bottom. He came up with nothing the first time and the water muddied and swirled. His father looked at him with strange eyes.

"There's something shiny down there," said Kenneth. His father got out a fishermans' magnet from the tackle.

Kenneth lowered the magnet down to the spot where he had seen the glint and felt something hit line. He slowly reeled in the cord. He came up with nothing. Three more times he dropped the line. Three times nothing. Finally his father said, "Enough." They dumped the bucket of walleye carcasses on the rock and pushed off. Somewhere on the water Kenneth thought he heard an eagle scream.
Tabitha Bertram had been pregnant for three weeks before she could summon the strength to tell her husband, George. She had known since the night of conception because of a dream. She was lying in the dark; George rolled off of her and was asleep before five minutes passed. In the darkness she could hear him sleeping and soon drifted into sleep herself.

She was lying with her back to a brick wall. The coolness of the bricks made her shiver a little, but she was comfortable. There was no movement in the room and at the end of what must have been a long corridor, a small light that she could not get to. To be so still in a dream was unusual for Tabitha, because in most of the dreams that she remembered she was running from something or to something. Not a liberating run like her afternoon jogs, but an oppressive, overwhelming running that, at least in the dream, she knew would never end. In these dreams she could see her destination and her point of departure but could neither move forward nor could she return.

The brick dream was so memorable because of the light. Tabby was stuck and couldn't get to it in time, and then a woman's voice spoke out in the darkness: "Tabby, honey, you are ripe for the picking. A good fertile woman."

The next morning when George got up to go to work she
knew she was pregnant. So she went out and bought two tests, ones that you could use as soon as 72 hours after sex, and hid them in the bathroom behind her maxi-pads—a place that she knew George wouldn't look. The coffee seemed to burn a hole in her belly, and her palms would start sweating as she thought about pregnancy. This anxiety was only heightened by a talk show on the television that morning as she was drinking her coffee. She watched the Jane Stewart show, and the panel was a group of women who had gotten pregnant without asking their partners. There was a couple, married ten years, who said they never wanted children at all. The husband was incensed and kept saying that it was over. But the woman said her body clock was ticking, so she stopped taking birth control. Another woman was unmarried and seventeen. The teenager said over and over that the baby she carried would make her whole—somehow fulfill her. The audience, of course, crucified all of the guests with stupid comments like: "I hope that you're not going on welfare," and "I feel sorry for your husbands."

She thought about the way things had been going at the Dunlot Tire Plant. George was nervous about his position, to say the least. Cutbacks had already cost several of his friends jobs, but it seemed that George had ducked the boom for now. The show ended, never having resolved anything at
all, and Tabitha went about her daily routine.

Since they had married and moved to Ossining, George said he didn't want her working. He said he would rather have a clean home and dinner on the table each night, so Tabitha kept up the house, and every night she and George would follow the same routine. She would have dinner ready. He would eat and sit on the sofa to watch television. They didn't talk much, and it seemed the only thing they discussed was money and bills. Every once in a while they would fight, and he would drink. But he didn't do that very often, and when he did he usually ended up vomiting in the bathroom until dawn.

More often than not their fighting was over her cats. Jake and Elwood were two blue-point Persians that had cost a fortune. Now that she didn't work George wanted to get rid of them. Tabitha cried every time the subject came up. He claimed the shots cost too much. But he wasn't going to get rid of Jake and Elwood if she had anything to say about it.

Tabitha knew that in truth he didn't like the attention that she lavished on them. Rhinestone collars, the expensive canned food, and expensive grooming four times a year was enough to make him dislike the cats, but it was the fact that they were so damned needy that made him their worst enemy. And to make matters worse, even
though he hated the felines, they loved him to no end. Jake and Elwood constantly wanted to be on or near George. He hated it. Every time he sat down for a while they were on his lap. Every time he would go to bed one would lie on his pillow and the other on his feet. And it didn't matter how often he would remove the cats to another room. They were simply more persistent than he was. But what really disgusted George was when the cats would sit on him and lick themselves. He hated the sounds their mouths would make as they cleaned themselves.

And the hair. Jake and Elwood shed constantly. They coughed up hairballs. They left clumps of it everywhere they sat down. Tabitha was trying to make them into outside cats gradually, but they seemed to like the indoors better. And putting them outside didn't make George happier. Outside, they would eat grass and throw up. They brought home dead snakes and birds. Being let outside only led to more messes. And George hated messes. Tabitha thought, *If he hates the cats so much what will he say about a baby that spits up on him?*

The day seemed to drag on forever. Tabitha folded clothes, read and reread the instructions on the test. She groomed Jake and Elwood. She cleaned out the fridge, and made a grocery list. But most of all she watched the clock ticking on the mantel.
Tabitha prepared a special dinner of pork tenderloin for George. During dinner she watched him closely, waiting for a "thank you" or even a "great dinner, Honey." But he just chewed his pork. Powerfully, she thought, he chews with such intense power. She watched the way his veins popped out as he chewed his food and quietly shifted in her chair. George didn't notice that her food was untouched. The next morning she got out one of the testers and decided to get the results. And, as she knew even before she peed on the little litmus tester, the test was positive.

Tabitha spent the following weeks hiding ravaging morning sickness and trying to find ways to tell her husband. When he noticed that she didn't eat anything at meals, she found herself telling him that she had eaten too many snacks that afternoon. Then, after dinner, he would sit and watch television while she would excuse herself and quietly rush to the upstairs bathroom, holding her sides. Aside from complaining that her cleaning skills had diminished (something that he attributed to hours of watching live coverage of the O.J. trial) he noticed nothing. At night he slept so soundly that he never missed her getting out of bed to go to the bathroom.

In those weeks she just couldn't find a way to tell him. She just knew it would be like the soaps she saw in the afternoon. He would leave her. He would beat her.
She spent hours playing out conversations in which she would think of the things he would say.

GEORGE: We don't have enough money.

TABITHA: We'll make it just fine.

G.: But you aren't working and...

T.: I know. I can find a part-timer and maybe that will help with the money...

G.: We can't have the baby. It's that simple.

T.: (Crying now): What are you suggesting?

G.: . . .

Then she would play out scenes in which she was strong and he was the one who would beg and cry. She always referred to herself by name in these scenarios—like she was a stranger watching herself with a worshipful eye.

SCENE 1.

Tabitha walks into the dining room where George is waiting. He starts to talk but is cut off with a motion.

TABITHA: George, I'm having your baby.

GEORGE: We can't afford it. You trapped me. This is your fault, you bitch. We can't keep it. It's got to go . . .

(It helped to imagine George as being more unreasonable than he really was.)

TABITHA: Shut up. We won't and we can't kill our child. I don't care if you leave. Who was
supporting us before we were married? Before you got your lousy job? Who took care of you when you were cheating workman's comp? When do you ever stop thinking about you? It is high time you remember me for a change. And if you don't--Get Out!

(TABITHA SLAPS HIM. SHE WALKS OUT, LEAVING GEORGE IN SHAME. TABITHA IS TRIUMPHANT. SHE KNOWS SHE WILL SUCCEED.)

And while she was watching talk shows, she wondered what it would be like if it was she up on that stage--how would George like that? She could hear Jane Stewart or Sally or Oprah giving it to him for being so nonsupportive.

TABITHA: Really, Jane, he was cruel from the start.

He wanted . . . He wanted . . . (REALLY DRAMATICALLY NOW) He wanted me to abort our baby!!!

JANE STEWART: Let's bring out George and get his side of things. George, come on out!!

(THE AUDIENCE BOOS AND HISSES. GEORGE TURNS RED AND SITS DOWN WITH HIS ARMS CROSSED.)

JANE: Is it true that you wanted you wife to abort your child?

GEORGE (UNCROSSING AND RECROSSING HIS ARMS): It is, I guess. I just am not ready to deal with a kid.
And she sprung this on me without any warning. She had weeks to adjust, for Christ sakes.

JANE: Well, sir, that's the way babies happen, isn't it audience? (APPLAUSE) They sneak up. Mel and I never planned one of our six, and we still didn't think about killing them.

(THE AUDIENCE APPLAUDS WILDLY. GEORGE SITS, HUMPED OVER IN DEFEAT.)

But in real life she always took one look at him and kept her mouth shut tightly. Especially if one of those cats was anywhere near him. They always heightened his look of disgust in a way that paralyzed Tabby. One Sunday afternoon when she was feeling well, and when Jake and Elwood were outside, they were sitting in the living room watching television. Tabitha found herself staring intently at the father of their baby. George tried to ignore her thoughtful glances and finally turned the volume on the TV down.

"What's going on, Tab?" he asked her.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing really," she said and turned back to the silent television.

"No, there is something. You've been acting differently the last couple of days. Really. I thought maybe . . . your period. You know, you seem fragile or something," he said. He saw her staring at the television
and pushed the power off.

"Well . . . what do you think about having a baby?" she asked. She stared at her feet and thumbed the corners of the Cosmopolitan that lay on the table beside her. She could tell by the length of the silence between her question and his sigh that he was actually trying to answer her carefully.

"Why, are you thinking about starting a family?" He joked.

"I'm serious," she said.

"Really, I think that we don't have enough money. I think that we could wait until we're in better shape. You know . . . Dave at the plant says that I might actually get a promotion instead of a pink slip. But he says that I—we'll have to wait until the fall," he said. "Then maybe. We'll see."

Tabby had been expecting a different tone. In her dramas she had imagined that he would object to the idea, let alone the fact. But this was something different. This was calm. It took the wind out of her sails.

"Oh. I was reading in this magazine that women only have so long to be fertile, and I am 28," she said. She held up the magazine to support her lie.

"We have plenty of time for children. I just don't think that we're ready. I don't think we're mature enough."
I still get mad at the damn cats. And, anyway, if I don't have enough money to take care of Jake and Elwood, how can I take care of a baby?"

"Okay. We'll wait. I was just wondering," she said. A wave of nausea hit her. She could feel her feet and hands go numb. She got up suddenly, ignoring George when he asked where she was going, and went upstairs to the bathroom.

The tile felt cool on her legs as she leaned against the bathtub. This was the worst. To sit and wait for vomit that never comes. She could handle the vomiting, but it was the constant nausea that Tabby hated. Whoever called it morning sickness, she thought, was a freaking moron. He should have called it constant nausea. That would have been more accurate. Slowly the sickness drained from her and she felt a little better. It was hard to tell with her stomach all balled up from her conversation with George. As she stood up and bent over the sink to wash her face, she heard his voice behind the door.

"Baby. I didn't mean to upset you. You asked and I thought you deserved an honest answer," he said.

She sat down on the edge of the tub.

"You can't help how you feel. Just like with the cats."

"That's different. Anyway, I'm sorry I upset you."
You okay?" he asked. She could see him shifting from one foot to the other under the bathroom door.

"Uh-huh. I'll be fine," she answered. George's feet disappeared from sight. She heard him go downstairs and open the door. He must be letting the cats in, she thought. When she returned downstairs, sure enough, there sat George with both cats on his lap. But he was actually petting both of them. George turned and gave Tabby a half grin.

"If we did have a baby, I'd bet he'd be less demanding than these two," he said. Tabby forced herself to laugh and went into the kitchen for some soda crackers.

The next day Tabby decided that she had to tell him. Come what might, she had to tell him. But she had to figure out how. All day the cats followed her around. They cried to be picked up. They sharpened their claws on George's chair as she cleaned the living room. Jake was underfoot the whole time she did laundry, and Elwood sat on the ironing board while she pressed George's pants.

While she cleaned that day, they refused to go outside. The bundles of energy destroyed the house as she tried to clean it. Jake got into everything from the pantry to the liquor cabinet. Elwood had to be on top of everything she did. They made such a mess that by the time she finished the work the house looked like it needed
another go-round. Finally to get them out of her hair she put them into their carrying case. They didn't mind getting into the box, but as she locked the door they grew defensive, and their fur electrified. They think they're going to the Vet, she thought. Then she had another thought.

After recleaning the living room and straightening the wash, Tabby took the case and put it in the floor of her van. She drove for almost an hour until she found herself in what looked to be a nice neighborhood. The cats wailed and squalled the whole time. Every few minutes Jake would let loose a low cry and Elwood a soft, kittenish meow. Both cries were equally disturbing; Elwood's because it reminded her that he would always be her kitten and Jake's because it actually sounded like a baby's cry. Tabby found a quiet street that seemed deserted and slowly pulled over. She opened the van door and then the door of the case. Neither animal would leave the case. They sat there huddled together until she tipped the back and sent both of them sliding out. The cats sat in shock for a few minutes before trying to rub on Tabby's legs. She kicked at them. She let out a yell that sent them scattering from her side. She saw them in the rearview mirror huddled together, their fur electrified.

The drive home allowed Tabby enough time to cry
herself out before dealing with George. She was not thinking of driving, or of the baby, when she ran through a stop sign and was pulled over by a motorcycle cop.

"You okay, lady?" the young officer asked her.

She wiped her eye on her sleeve and turned to the glove box to get out her registration. "I'm sorry," she told him. "I need to get home, and . . ."

The officer held up his hand and told her he'd let her off with a warning, then stood scratching his chin as he watched her pull away from the curb.

When George got home, he sat down in his usual position, flipping through the channels. They sat in awkward silence a few moments before anything was said. Tabby had worked up a speech that day while cleaning and was ready to give it when he spoke first.

"What'd you do today?" he asked. "Where're the little demons?"

Tabitha thought a moment then said, "Nothing much. I let them out this morning and haven't seen them since. They're probably off eating a bird somewhere. How's burgers for dinner?"

"Sounds fine. You cleaned up, I see," he said.

"Yeah. It took forever. I'm sorry I haven't really been into housework lately," she began. "It's just that I haven't really had much energy lately. But I'm feeling
"I haven't exactly been much help myself," he reassured her. "Anyway it looks nice. You want me to fire up the grill?"

"Not yet. I'm not ready," she said as she stood in the kitchen door. She watched as George sat down and flipped through the channels. The usual syndicated garbage blinked across all thirty stations. George would surf a while, then stop on a channel, and at the next commercial surf some more. Although it always bothered her, this evening it infuriated her. Before she could check her anger, George saw her reddened face and turned towards her.

"I don't mean to sound repetitive, but are you okay?" he asked. She leaned back in her chair and let out a breath of air. Her palms were sweating, and her heart was leaping in her chest.

"What's wrong?" George pressed. "Calm down a minute and tell me what's going on."

"We're... I'm pregnant," she said. "I'm carrying your child."

George's face broke into a half grin and then turned bright red.

"Don't fuck around. What's wrong? I thought we covered this one last night."
"I'm not fucking around. I'm serious. I did the test and everything. We're pregnant."

The grin broke from George's face. He gripped the arms of his easy chair.

"Maybe the test was wrong. Those things screw up all the time. Let's go get another test. Let's go to the Doctor," he said.

"I have another, and if you want I'll take it. But I'm not a moron. I know how to follow directions," she said, louder this time. "But if you want, I'll take the test again."

"How did this happen? You were supposed to be taking the pill. I thought we were safe," he said, his voice rising.

"It must have been those antibiotics," she replied.

"Bullshit. You did this on purpose. You know we don't have the money! You know our situation!" He was yelling now. "We can't have this kid, and that's that."

Tabby started to cry. She felt her neck heating up and the tips of her fingers were tingling. "You asshole..." she managed to get out. "You ... asshole."

George stopped yelling and seemed to brace himself in his chair. He still gripped the arms of the big chair. He took two or three deep breaths. His face was red and angry. Tabby quit crying and watched him as he got
up from the chair and put his coat on.

"It's getting cold out," he said. "I'm going out to find those cats."

Tabitha Bertram watched as her husband walked out the door into the gathering dusk. She could hear him calling for Jake and Elwood as he walked down the street. The street lamps flickered on, and in her mind she could hear Jake's low squalls. Or maybe, she thought, a baby crying.
I'm sitting on my favorite chair, thinking that it's starting to sag for some reason--fucked up springs or defective workmanship. I'm sitting there and this show comes on about kids that use box-knives to cut people up. The host is some mealy-mouthed wimp who's acting startled by all this crap, even though he's the one who booked these creeps on his show. And the kids on stage are poster children for mandatory sterilization. One kid, "Leon," is on the stage threatening to cut members of the audience. The talk show host gets tough and tells the kid to try it. Leon throws his chest out and says: "I'd do it in a second." God is watching you, Leon. He's watching and he's making a place for punks like you. Not a place where men will gnash their teeth for an eternity, like Father Dixon used to tell us in high school--that's too fucking simple. God's got a special corner of hell for all of them.

The rest of the kids on stage are showing off for the audience. Like some gang of trained apes. One of them gets up and shows off the Nazi tattoo he has on his forearm. And for a minute I think that the spades up there will jump him and beat him down for being a Nazi. But they actually slap skins with him. He keeps on flipping his
white-blonde bangs out of his blue eyes and I think, I'd like to take a box cutter and cut his fucking bangs out of his face. He'd be nothing alone. None of them are. They always attack in gangs.

The real fun starts when they bring out the victims. On the wall-screen behind the punks they show one picture after another of people with hundreds of stitches in their faces and arms. The audience is oohing and aahhing like they all want to puke. But the kids on stage smile when they see the pictures. None of them even shifts in his seat. One of them looks at the camera and starts to give some kind of hand signal but they cut the shot to behind stage, where a group of these guys called the Guardian Avengers is waiting to escort the victims out onto the stage. They look just like the guys who patrol our neighborhood on Saturday nights. Bright blue jackets and berets, like some group of fucking commandos or something.

Anyhow, the Guardians file out in a neat line and take their places behind the row of punks. The victims walk out slowly, not looking at the knife-wielding assholes. A few of them are already shaking. They interview this man, not a small guy either, who's shaking and scared to be on the stage. He looks like me. He says he bumped some punk on the train and this guy went ballistic. He gave him 183 stitches. Mostly on his arms and chest, but there's one
scar from his forehead to his throat, and he says he's got nightmares from the whole thing. He won't even go out anymore. He says his whole life is fucked up because of what happened.

Dumb fuck, I'm thinking to myself as I turn the cushion on the chair over to make it firmer. That's not how I would be. I'd come after the fuck that cut me. I mean if you cut me you better kill me. Cause one day I'll be there, waiting. I'd be stalking that fuck-wad down. I wouldn't wait for the Vengeance Is Mine bullshit. Let God have his Vengeance, but I'd have mine, too. There has to be a penance paid to God and man. A promised retribution.

And as the credits roll, I'm thinking about what I'd do in a situation like that. I took some defense classes about ten years ago, but only ever had to use it once, against my own brother. But I'm thinking about response time and quickness. I'm thinking about what to do if some guy swings a box knife at me. I can feel my body tensing up to react, and it feels good. I feel awake. I'm thinking about all this as I'm walking out the door and down to Charlotte's, and into the little bar that's only six blocks away from my apartment.

No one's there this early and Charlotte herself is napping behind the bar.

I startle her as I scoot out my stool.
"God-damn it!" she says, in her slight German accent. "I got to put a bell on that God-damn door. You could have been a robber!"

"Good day to you, too, Charlotte," I say as I take off my winter coat. I hang it on the peg beside the door and take my seat.

"God-damn it!" she says again. "You'll give an old woman a heart attack like that, Charlie!"

"I'll call next time before I come. How's business?" I say. She gives a look at the empty room and smiles.

"What can I get you, smart-ass? Cheap beer?" she says and steps to the cooler muttering something to herself in German.

The news is on the fuzzy television over the bar. The sound is down but the photos are of covered bodies, and I can tell from the missing street signs and filthy alley ways that this must be a gang shooting. God is watching, I think to myself, but he didn't help those poor bastards. He's watching and he knows what's up. I think about what the televangelists say about a loving god. A just god. That's bullshit. Maybe in some other world, but not in this one. And not for these people.

They're all over the fucking city like rats. One day, there'll be a pied piper coming through this country to lead all these bastards to death. I am watching the anchor
mouth words as she shuffles through a stack of papers, and the picture screen changes behind her. The day rolls by me outside the bar.

At sunset I've counted twelve bottles. The room is getting crowded now and some fat bastard keeps bumping my arm as I try to drink. I'd move, but who the hell is he to bump me? I can hear his breathing, wet and foul as he tries to pick up on a woman he doesn't even know. I can hear him sweating next to me in this tiny bar. The room tilts sideways for a while, and I can feel myself getting those bad hiccups—the kind that always tell me I'm going to be sick soon. The fat man leans on me as he reaches for another beer and I give him an elbow in under his drooping arm.

"God-damn," I say. "God-damn it man, get off!"

He looks hurt and wet as he slowly takes the beer and turns back around. Charlotte gives me the "Time to go" look and I finish my beer and plod towards to door. The hiccups are here and now I'm feeling pretty sick. I leave the bar hoping the cool walk home will save me from a night in front of the john.

The walk home is a short one, but I have to walk past a few vacant buildings. Most of the time I go before dark, avoiding the ghosts that creep in and out of these places. I even look around for a Guardian. But none are around so
I head down the block alone.

About two blocks from the bar someone is following me. I can hear the echoes of his steps, and the trash he kicks scooting along the sidewalk. I walk faster and the steps follow me as I do. Each alley and building opens up to me and more ghosts begin to follow me home. They scat and scuttle like horseshoe crabs after a piece of rotting meat.

I turn around to see a kid following at about twenty paces. He stops when he sees me looking at him and checks over his shoulder. He's a spade, and wearing one of those leather jackets that cost way too much for a guy like him. The kind they banned from the local high schools as a gang uniform. I stare for a minute and he looks over his shoulder again. Then he starts looking around in every direction. I want him to know I see him there, hear his breathing behind me.

We start to walk again and I hear his steps getting faster and faster. The fuck is running out into the street beside me--to cut me off--and I feel my body stop and brace itself for him, turning on him, yelling: "God is watching. I see you--you fuck--He sees you! Back off!"

I leap into the street at him, grabbing for his coat as he tries to run past me, and swing him into a burned out lamp-post. I am trying to grab for his collar but my hands are all tied up in the folds of his jacket. He starts
squirmimg all over the place and yelling in a language I can't understand. His hands are fumbling in his pockets—trying to get the knife out, and I start to throw him from side to side. Whatever's in his hands flies to the pavement with a dull thud. He starts to scream.

It's when I get a hand around his throat that I see he's not a spade at all. He's a chink or a gook, but those kinds run with the gangs too. I give him one or two to the head and he scrambles out of the jacket, and down the dark street ahead. But I keep punching the jacket, over and over until I'm on my knees, sick.

When the air around me clears, a Guardian is standing over me. At first I can't understand him. Then little by little his words come through.

"Can you give a description?" he says. He calls some numbers into the little radio hanging from his bright blue jacket.

I shrug my shoulders. I have puke all down the front of my shirt.

"Who jumped you? Was it a gang?" he says. "Looks like you got one of them."

"Just one," I say. "Just one guy."

He helps me to my feet and we have to work to pry the puke covered jacket loose from my hand. He gets out his light and looks into my eyes to make sure I don't have a
"What happened?" he asks, as we walk to my building. He stops and picks something up from the sidewalk.

I shrug a reply and shake my head.

"Is this yours?" he says as he hands me a wallet. I figure the punk dropped it as he ran to his homies. I'm entitled, and so I take it from the Guardian. It's probably stolen anyway.

"This kid came up behind me. He was going to," I say. "He was after me."

"Well he got his," he says before putting the wet coat in a yellow plastic bag labeled: "Evidence." He looks at the overflowing garbage cans in front of my building and says, "Looks like you can take care of yourself. But don't be afraid to call one of us."

"I won't. Thanks for . . ." I say. "Thanks."

My apartment is cold and damp, and I strip off my wet clothes in the dark. In the kitchen is a bag of uncooked rice which I grab and carry into the bathroom.

Before I get into the shower to wash the puke off, I spread a thick layer of rice over the cool tiles of the bathroom floor. Just like Father Dixon used to when we misbehaved. Kneeling on the rice, I pray for nearly two hours. I pray like I haven't prayed in months. I pray until I can't feel my knees bleeding anymore. I feel
alive.

God is watching. He has to be watching.