

LIFE ACROSS FRIENDS

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Submitted to the faculty of Morehead State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Bachelor of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
Morehead State University

May, 2012

Accepted by the faculty of the Creative Writing Program, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree:

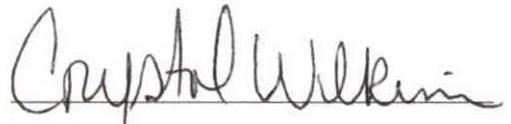
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Introduction

Over my years as a writer I have gathered a variety of influences depending on which style I am writing in at the moment. From a prose perspective, one of my major literary influences, especially for this thesis, is Chris Holbrook. After reading both of Holbrook's books of short stories, I caught the concrete way he describes things and how it remains grounded in reality. I took this sort of approach, as well as general subject matter, when I set out to write *Life Don't Change*. That same style has also been the inspiration for other stories I have written.

Another literary influence was Alex Taylor, author of *Name of the Nearest River*. This influence primarily comes out in *Across the River*, as it originated as a pastiche where I tried to imitate Alex Taylor's writing style. The key stylistic aspects I pulled from Taylor was the gritty way his characters tend to be, as well as the interesting speech patterns they seem to have.

I do pull some literary influence from more historic literary figures, such as Robert Browning. While Browning was a poet and not a prose writer, I tend to find the influences leaking from one style to the other. For instance, Browning was part of the inspiration that came to be *Old Friends*. It was that idea of a person telling a story and leaving certain things out as well as imposing their opinions and thoughts on the person they are telling the story to that started me thinking about how I could write a story focused on this unreliable, violent narrator who perpetually lives in the past while rejecting the changes that come with time.

For the most part, stylistic and thematic influences of mine tend to be limited on a story by story basis. Usually, after I read a story or a poem by a certain writer, that influence leaks into my works, sometimes bridging style gaps, such as the time I wrote a poem titled *Ivory Eyes* after reading the story *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad.

Other literary influences of mine are George Eklund, Harlan Ellison, Lord Alfred Tennyson,

Wilfred Owen, John Fox Jr., J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

My writing process begins, as I am certain all do, with an idea. I usually find my best ideas come when I am not looking for them, like when I am in class or at work letting my mind wander. From there, I prefer to jot down notes or little scenes in a notebook before I begin typing, as it allows me to just write with the knowledge that I will change almost all of the wording as well as bits of plot when I transfer it over to the computer.

After I do that, I sit in front of the computer for a long while and just type everything out, referring to the notebook constantly while not being completely true to it's wording. The notebook becomes more of a guideline of events and a reminder of specific lines that I liked, not necessarily anything like the final story will be. I find it easier to dismiss the original version of an idea when I still have it. I feel some form of sentimentality towards the original as sort of the birth of it all and do not like the idea that I don't have access to it even though I rarely, if ever, look at it after the work is finished.

From there, I tend to let things sit for awhile. At first, I tend to have an overconfidence with my second draft that says that it's perfect and ready to go out, so I have to get over that before I can continue the process. As time goes on, the time that overconfidence lasts has gotten shorter and shorter to the point where, sometimes, I only have to wait a couple days before I am ready to go at a third draft. Between the second and third draft, if I have access to a group of writers, I allow them to look over the second draft and make marks, noting where I misspelled something, as I often do in second drafts, or any other notes they deem important.

When the third draft begins, I usually find myself hating the entirety of the piece, finding its every flaw as a beacon to my incompetence as a writer. So I go through once again and completely change whole scenes to fit to my idea of what it should be. Sometimes, during the time between the second and third draft, I will come up with a better idea for a scene and forget that I had written the

original idea, so, when it comes time to write the third draft and I read that scene, I am utterly confused and immediately go about completely rewriting the scene so that it goes according to the better idea.

I find that my third draft is usually a mostly finished version of the story, most of the fourth draft is simply a matter of cleaning up typos, awkward sentences and strange transitions that came about from completely changing a scene.

In all of my writings, there always seems to be a few constant themes popping up. One of the most constant ones, and thematic concern most prevalent in this compilation, is the idea of change. Change is in almost every good work of literature, but it tends to be more of a device as opposed to a theme. If there is not change in a story, it does not move and, therefore, is boring. However, once I came to a full realization of this, all my work that followed became strongly focused on this idea that is more commonly a device, making it the center of the stories as opposed to just a means to portray a different theme. This is most prevalent in *Life Don't Change* and *Old Friends*. *Life Don't Change* being about a momentary change that then goes away, leaving life the same as it was before. The lack of change in Jim's life is the theme. In *Old Friends* it is the lack of change from the narrator and the substantial change in his friend, Brian, that becomes the story. It is also in *Across the River* as the focus in on the change in the character of John, at least the change in the perception of the character of John through the eyes of the narrator.

Another one of my thematic concerns that repeats itself in almost all of my work is the idea of violence and death. Physical aggression becomes a perfect means to express inward turmoil or the state of a characters mind. It is not just the act of aggression that must be focused on, but the reason behind the act of aggression. For instance, in *Old Friends*, the acts of aggression the narrator and his friend committed in high school were mostly meaningless, which speaks to their character in high school. To follow this, the act of aggression that the narrator commits to Brian at the end of the story has a specific reason behind it, which shows how he feels about the way Brian turned out and what he thinks of

people like that in something stronger than words. In the end, I think the best way to express my “violence obsession” boils down to the idea that actions speak louder than words. That it is easy to say something without an understanding of what actually enacting those words would truly entail, but the action itself and the response to the action speaks more to a character and his or her motivation.

Following along this same line, death is one of my most constant thematic concerns. It shows up in everything, sometimes in the most indirect ways, as in *Life Don't Change*. None of the characters die in the story, however, the character of Rene does specifically tell Jim about her father who died. The other two stories have a much more direct relationship with death, as it is a primary focus of both of them in one form or another.

Narrative strategy is sometimes a difficult thing for me to talk about, as I find it strange to look over my work and try to find connections between stories where the only real connection is that I wrote them. However, there are a few things I have noticed in my own work. For instance, my point of view mainly is third person limited, however, I do dip into first person on occasion. I find that I need a reason to dip into first person, as opposed to third person limited, which is simply my default. When I do do a first person narrator, they tend to be more reserved and more of a means to portray a story about one of their friends as opposed to the main character themselves. I have found through my reading and writing experience that there is something inherently arrogant, unlikable and boring about first person narrators that set out to tell their own story. While this is not true about every first person story I have read, I find it best to avoid that. I also tend to think of first person narrators as inherently unreliable, an idea I enjoyed playing around with in *Old Friends*. Therefore, in order to portray a story that I knew the audience could trust in as opposed to questioning the reliability of the storyteller, I tend to write in third person limited.

As for my characters, there is typically one gritty, hard, hardhearted man who has had a rough life. This gritty character is usually the focus of the piece, as I tend to find them the most interesting

people in the work. The way they interact with a world that tends to both admire and dislike that type of person seems to be something that intrigues me.

When it comes to structure, I find that my stories tend to slowly build up at a methodical pace. I tend to take the approach of the tension should be so great at the climax, either for the reader or for the characters themselves, that the only possible reaction is to explode. This is most prevalent in *Old Friends*, but it can be seen in the other two stories as well. I tend to go towards a slow opening in order to take the time to fully introduce the audience to the characters and to the world that they inhabit.

When I begin a story, I tend to write an opening where the main character or characters are in a normal, or at least seemingly normal, situation that way the abnormality that occurs in the story becomes more strange.

Life Don't Change

Jim scratched the back of his coal crusted hand. The grime broke and gathered beneath his fingernail. He had come to this bar every day after work, and had never seen her before today. Everything else had been the same. The drive to the mines. The time he clocked out. The smell of the bar as he walked in, smoke, sweat, coal and mud, all confined to one room.

Her presence was the only thing that broke the rhythm. She wore sand colored cowboy boots and had smoker's teeth. Her fingers were pressed against the bright green buttons of the pinball machine, pushing in rhythm with the sounds. Her hair was cut short and dyed blond, though her natural brown showed through at the roots.

He considered going across the bar and talking to her. He did not know what he would say, but he knew he could come up with something. A catchy line perhaps, like "You come here often?" or "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" It always worked in the movies.

Instead, Jim just sat at the bar and stared, occasionally lifting his mug to his lips. He thought of something his pappy said to him when he was growing up. "You listen up good Jimmy," he would always begin. "Life don't change. It may seem like it every now and then, but the day ends in the same way every time. Starts the same too. You just remember that." He would say it once a month at least. Jim had always wondered why, he guessed it was as much for his pappy as it was for him. There was only so much hope a man who grew up in the mines could have. Jim supposed he inherited that from him too.

Jim sighed and rose from his stool. He worked his way across the crowded bar to the bathrooms. They smelled of chewing tobacco and piss. Orange grime clung to the white tile walls. Jim never could figure out what the grime was, but he was certain, no matter what it happened to be, he didn't really want to know. He walked up to the sink and let the water run for a moment. It never rose

above or fell below lukewarm. He rubbed his palms together beneath it and watched it turn black as it ran off down the drain.

Jim stared into the grimy, cracked mirror. There were black blotches in his red hair from the coal. Stains coated the oversized white t-shirt he was wearing. Jim had picked it up by mistake one day when he was visiting his uncle and never bothered to return it. A free shirt was a free shirt after all.

Jim shut off the water. He rubbed the rough papers towels over his hands. Then returned to the bar.

She had left the pinball machine. The remainder of Jim's beer rested an inch from her elbow. Jim stared at her from the doorway to the men's room. Now was his chance. It wasn't as if he had a real choice. He slid back onto his stool, his thin forearms pressed against the bar. She stared straight ahead as if sleeping with her eyes open. Jim followed her gaze to the mirror that lined the wall. There was a table behind them with three men Jim recognized from the mines. They were talking amongst themselves and taking turns doing shots of whiskey. Jim heard one of them say something about the other's mother and the whole table roared with laughter.

“They're scum.” she said.

Jim turned to her. She was no longer staring at the mirror. Jim cleared his throat and turned his eyes to the floor.

“What's your name?” she said.

Jim liked the sound of her voice. It was smooth, nothing like the voices he usually listened to all day.

He hesitated a moment longer before he could force a response. “Jim,” he said. He returned his eyes to her. A smile pulled at the corner of her lips.

“Jim? Rene.” She stretched out her hand. Jim forced his palm against hers, struggling against himself the entire way. She had a strong grip. “You work in the mines?”

Jim nodded. His voice had become caught somewhere in his stomach. He could feel it vibrating.

“Seems like everyone in this town works in the mines.” she said. Her fingernails tapped against the bar in a tune Jim did not recognize.

It was true. At least, everyone Jim knew. All his neighbors either worked in the mines or were unemployed. His brothers worked in the mines. His father and uncles had as well, until they died. Even the barkeeper use to work in the mines, it was how he paid his way through school.

“You like it in the mines?” Rene asked.

“Well... um... It's alright I guess. Pays bills and all.”

Rene smiled. It was the kind of smile Jim could not help but return, though he didn't really fight against it.

“My daddy worked in the mines.” Rene said. “I hate them.”

Jim's smile dropped. He had seen protestors outside a mine once on the news. Now that he thought about it, she looked like a woman they had interviewed. He tried to remember what name, but it was so long ago he couldn't even remember what they were protesting.

“My daddy lost his arm in an accident.” Rene said. “Company fired him right on the spot. Refused to pay his medical bills. The accident wasn't even his fault.”

“I'm sorry...”

“You a company manager?” Rene asked.

Jim glanced over to her and shook his head.

“Then you have nothing to apologize for.”

Jim paused. “And if I was?”

Rene smiled and leaned in closer. “Then I'd say your apology don't mean shit and you can shove it so far up your ass that they'd have to mine it out of you like coal from a mountain.”

She paused for a long moment. Jim could feel her breath on his face and neck. He shifted on his

stool as her stare bore into him for a long moment. Then she sighed and leaned back onto her stool.

“But you're not,” she said. “You're just a man trying to get by, like my daddy was.”

Rene grabbed Jim's beer. She pressed it to her lips and tipped the bottom towards the ceiling. Jim watched as every last drop of it swam down her throat. When she was finished, she slammed the mug back down onto the bar and turned her head back towards Jim. “Let's go somewhere.”

Jim stared at his empty mug. “Huh?”

Her hand touched his shoulder as she placed her mouth beside his head. He could feel the breath between her lips slide into his ear as she spoke. “Let's go somewhere.”

Jim swallowed hard. She smiled at him. Jim tried to pry his voice out from his throat. “Like where?”

Rene's face retreated a bit. “Who cares?” She sneered at him. “Anywhere that isn't here!”

Jim tried to figure out whether or not he liked the way she made him feel. He had not had much time to meet new people, especially women. The women he did meet were always old, ugly, married or all of the above. He nodded uncertainly. The stool creaked as Rene rose to her feet. Jim watched her work her way towards the door. The people she passed barely even registered her movement. She was like a ghost just passing through the moment. A ghost Jim was not about to let get away. His exit was much clumsier.

Rene stood in the parking lot, arms behind her back, hand on her wrist. Jim shoved his fists into his pockets and meandered from the doorway.

“Which car is yours?” She asked.

Jim extracted a hand from his pocket and pointed at his '89 Camry. The bumper hung low and a crack slid horizontally across the front windshield. The driver side door did not match the rest of the car. It had been replaced after a coal truck ripped it off a few years back.

“Well that's no good.” Rene said. “We'll take my truck.”

Jim followed her to a large black pick up truck. Mud covered the tires and slowly faded from the bottom to the spotless roof. The inside smelled like pine, thanks to the five air fresheners hanging from the rear view mirror. Jim yanked the door shut as Rene cranked the engine. She rolled the windows down, letting the night air in. Jim pulled his pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

“Want a smoke?” Jim asked. He offered her the open pack.

“I don't smoke cigarettes.” Rene grunted. She slowly backed out of the parking space.

Jim slowly began to place the pack back into his pocket.

“You can if you want,” Rene said. “Just keep it out the window.”

Jim nodded and lit up a cigarette. Rene pulled out onto the road and pressed the pedal down to the floor.

“How long have you smoked?” Rene asked.

Jim thought for a moment. He took a quick puff from the cigarette, then blew the smoke out of the window from the corner of his mouth.

“Since I was twelve.” Jim said.

“That's a long time.”

Jim nodded. He flicked the ash into the wind.

“You ever think about quitting?”

He hadn't. Everyone he knew smoked. It did not really seem like a choice to him. It was just something you did, like breathing.

He stared out the window at the trees flying by. He recognized the area. He passed it every day on his way to work. He finished his cigarette and tossed it out the window. The wind flung it back across the pavement.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

She did not reply. A smile crept onto her face that told him she had something planned, but

whatever it was was a secret. Jim sighed to himself, then lit up another cigarette.

They pulled into the parking lot of the mines. The mountain stretched up behind the chain link fence and the security booth. Jim stared at the locked gate he passed through every morning. It seemed more foreign to him at night. Like this was not actually the place he worked at, but somewhere entirely different. "What are we doing?"

Rene grabbed a hammer out of the bed of the truck and walked towards the gate. Jim followed behind at a distance. The company had fired the night watchman two weeks back after they caught him selling alcohol to minors. They were still going through the process of hiring someone to fill in. It was hard to find someone in the area with any experience, especially ones willing to work for minimum wage.

Jim watched as she swung the hammer down on the padlock holding the gate shut. It broke off and fell onto the gravel below. She kicked it aside and yanked the gate open. Jim tried to say that they should leave before someone showed up, but once again found his voice caught up somewhere between his stomach and his mouth.

She hefted a rock the size of his head from the ground. The glass window shattered and the rock slammed against the wooden desk inside. Jim turned away as Rene climbed in through the broken window. She yanked open drawer after drawer, tossing the contents of each out onto the ground. The papers were not irreplaceable. In fact, they were not even that important. However, in that moment, she did not care. She could not disassemble a company in one night, but she could at least make it a little harder on them from time to time.

When she had finished, she crawled back out through the window.

Jim looked up at her as she passed him on the way to the truck again. There was a smile cut across her face. Jim glanced back at the booth. The rock still laid on the desk. Papers, pencils and folders were scattered on the ground around it, most stuck in the mud. As he climbed into the passenger

seat, he wondered why she had brought him along.

He buried his face in the crook of his elbow as she pulled back onto the road. Rene laughed at him. "There ain't anybody around."

Jim lifted his head and stared out the window at the trees speeding by. Rene just continued to smile, fingers wrapped around the steering wheel.

She pulled off the road into a clearing. She reached across his lap and retrieved a wrinkled paper bag from the glove compartment. Jim shifted as she opened the door and climbed out. He watched her hop into the truck bed from inside the cab. She stared at him, and he stared back.

"You coming?"

He laid beside her staring up at the stars. The bag sat between them, the paper touching Jim's forearm.

"I use to come out here every week and just stare up at the stars." she said, "It was almost like they were enough to make everything wrong right, you know?"

She turned her head to look at Jim. He stared back for a moment, then looked back up at the sky.

"I named each of them," she continued. "There was Molly and David and Ricky and that one there was Patrick, named after my brother."

"You have a brother?"

Rene smiled her beautiful, crooked, yellow smile and sat up. Jim watched as she pulled a sandwich bag of pot and a small stack of rolling paper from the paper bag. She slowly rolled a joint, her fingers moving precisely. Jim pulled himself up.

"You got a light?" She asked.

Jim waved the flame of his lighter beneath the tip of the joint. She passed it to him and he took a long drag before passing it back.

“You got a girl?” Rene asked.

Jim shook his head. “You?”

“I’m straight!” Rene laughed. “but no, I don’t have a guy.”

Jim nodded. He searched his mind for something to say. Something to keep the silence out for just a little while longer. “How long have you lived here?”

“I don’t live here anymore,” Rene replied. “I left when I turned eighteen.”

“Where’d you go?”

“Lots of places. Made it all the way to California once, piece of shit State that is, I’ll tell you that much.”

“Why’d you come back then?”

Rene paused for a moment. Her eyes fell to the metal truck bed. For what seemed like an hour, she did not move. Then, when she did, it was only her lips.

“I don’t remember what my brother looks like anymore, or the names and faces of anybody I have met in the last couple years. They’re all blurs, like I’m speeding by while they’re standing still... All I really want is a moment where something truly spectacular happens and I can absolutely recall who I was with when it did... Just something that would change me so utterly, that I could not help but remember and think about it until the day I died.”

She looked up at Jim. There was suddenly an innocence in her eyes that had not been there before. A sense of honesty, that tugged him in until his lips were on hers, and everything that followed became engrained into his mind.

They laid beside each other, the cold metal of the truck bed pressed against their skin. Her head was on his arm. The joint hung from her lips as she took a final drag before tossing it out onto the grass. Clouds had rolled in, confining the stars to a shrinking circle.

“Ain’t that something?” Rene sighed.

Jim shifted against the metal. “You know... My pappy used to always tell me stories as a little kid, but they weren't your typical stories.”

“How so?”

“Well, ya see... they would always end the same way that they began. This great, big thing would happen to the hero, and then... nothing. His life would just keep on going same as ever.”

“Your pappy doesn't sound like much of storyteller.”

Rene laughed at her own joke. A smile lightly tugged at the edge of Jim's lips.

“I suppose he wasn't.” Jim said. He paused for a moment. The stars danced in a way without ever moving. “You know, there was something he use to say to me every single month...”

“What's that?”

“He'd say 'Life don't change. It may seem like it every now and then, but the day ends in the same way every time. Starts the same to. You just remember that.' I guess that's what his stories were about, now that I think about it. The way things go.”

“Never mind what I said before.”

“Huh?” Jim looked over at Rene.

“Your pappy was a hell of a storyteller.”

“You ain't ever heard his stories.”

“Don't need to.” Rene smiled. “At the end of a story all your left with is a message. I'd like to meet your pappy sometime.”

Jim turned back to the stars. He felt a chill run through him. “You can't. He died a few years back.”

“How'd he go?”

“Lung cancer.”

“Smoking caught up with him, huh?”

“Suppose so.”

“Life doesn't change... it just goes away.”

Jim flexed his fingers, the memory of his pappy weighing down his thoughts.

She dropped him off at his car at five in the morning. He drove home slowly, his mind fleeting back to the time spent in her truck bed. He had almost forgotten about what she did at the mine entrance.

The next morning there was some men putting a sheet of plexiglass in the security booth and a combination lock hung on the gate. Other than that, the day went on the same as ever. Most of the files that had been lost or damaged were just copies and easily replaced.

The co-workers Jim had seen at the bar the night before asked him about the girl he left with. He told them nothing and they mocked him for it. He ignored them and continued on with his work.

Rene was not at the bar that night, or for the week that followed. Jim sat in his normal spot, eyes always fixed on the pinball machine where he first saw her.

Two weeks later, he saw her again, standing at the pinball machine. He rushed over to ask her if she wanted to go someplace. She asked him who he was.

That night, someone cut through the chain link fence at the mines. There was no real damage done, just a few new scratches on the plexiglass.

Jim spent the rest of his life sitting on the bench in the bar, drinking beer and scratching the the back of his coal crusted hand.

Across the River

John rose out of the brown water of the Ohio like a monster out of an old, black and white horror movie. I sat cross legged on the muddy shore, barely in the shade of the trees that lined the river. I flexed my toes against the fall breeze that swept in from the water, but it didn't help.

“There's a car down there.” John said, tilting his head towards the water.

“There's a lot of cars down there.”

I pulled my cigarettes from my hoodie pocket, which lay beside me in the mud. The package crinkled in my hand as I pulled out the cigarette with my teeth. John gestured to me to toss him the pack. He caught it with an outstretched hand. He carefully pulled out the cigarette, making sure to keep the tobacco away from the drops of water that fell from his skin. Then, he threw the pack back to me. I tucked it back into the pocket before retrieving my lighter. I ran the flame beneath the tip of the cigarette before tossing the lighter to John.

“This one's got a body in it.” John lit his cigarette as punctuation. He climbed out of the water and tossed my lighter back to me.

“What?”

John stood toe-deep in the mud and smoked his cigarette to the filter, then tossed it into the tide. He rung the mud brown water out of his black hair, then slowly walked up the shore to his truck. I watched him fumble around in the bed for a moment before returning to the river with a long stretch of rope. I buried my burnt out butt in the mud, just out of reach of the water as John waded back in.

He disappeared beneath the surface. I sat in silence, watching the ripples make their way across the river. When he resurfaced, only one end of the rope was still in his hand, the rest tied up somewhere beneath the water.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Marking it.” He climbed the river bank to the tree line. His hands worked the rope around a thick limb and pulled it tight. “Ain't every day you find a body.”

“Yeah,” I said, “Should we call the cops?”

“Hell no man,” John plopped down at the base of the tree and pressed his back against the trunk. “I want to see how long it takes to rot down there. I once heard that bodies can last for twice as long underwater. Preserves them, or something like that.”

“Yeah, I think I heard that too.” I hadn't. Usually when the topic of dead people was brought up I stopped listening. Animals were one thing, but to hear about another human being dying was something different. I had a hard enough time talking about things when my father passed, though everyone wanted to hear about what happened. I wasn't really sure what to tell them.

“Did you bring Sadie up here last week?” John asked.

I tried to swallow, but couldn't find the spit to do it. This place had been a secret spot that only John and I had known about. It had been an accidental discovery of ours two years ago. We both agreed the day we found it that if we ever got into trouble, we'd come here, though I don't think either of us knew entirely why we decided that.

“Yeah,” I said. “Figured with us engaged and all, it was only proper.”

John tugged at the rope above his head. “You sure she's pregnant? It ain't showing yet.”

“She's pregnant alright.”

John scanned the Kentucky shore across the river, then let his eyes sink back to the mud. “You sure it's yours?”

He said it straight, as if it was a question anybody would ask.

He saw me staring at him in disbelief. His voice grew forceful. “I'm just asking is all.”

I paused for a moment. “Well... She ain't sleeping around, as far as I can tell.”

John stretched his legs out onto the ground and scrapped a fingernail against the side of his

head. "As far as you can tell, huh?"

I let the conversation die. I didn't feel like talking about Sadie or the baby anymore. So I stood up and walked into the water. It was cold enough to turn my skin blue in seconds. It ran over my legs, carrying off the mud, but leaving me feeling dirtier than before. It was, after all, the Ohio. By the time I was waist deep, my legs were numb.

"I ran into Burt the other day."

I felt John's gaze shift at the mention of Burt's name. I could hear the forced calmness when he spoke. "Burt who?"

I turned my body to face John. "Burt Kemp. You know?"

John nodded from the base of the tree.

Burt had moved into town in the third grade. When he first walked into the classroom, we thought he was lost, the way he turned around and rushed back out. We became friends shortly after that. We would take turns sneaking out different things from our parents place, like cigarettes, cigars, whiskey, beer, or the occasional magazine. Once we forgot whose turn it was, so we each took something different and had a hell of a night out in the woods behind the school. We must have spent every day of the next couple years together, all the way until our Junior year of high school.

John sneaked a sandwich bag of pot into school one day. He only told Burt and me about it. Burt stole it from his locker between classes and smoked the whole thing in the boys locker room before John realized it was missing. John must have stomped his face into the grass for a solid hour before the cops showed up. It was the first time I had really seen John mad at Burt. Burt would occasionally do something stupid, but John would usually just laugh it off and say "well that's Burt for you. Dumb as hell and funnier than shit." There were no laughs that day.

Both of them were expelled after that. John finished out high school a town over. Burt went North somewhere. I had not seen him again until that day.

John lobbed a rock into the water.

“He asked about you.” I said.

“What'd you say?”

“I said you were fine.”

“Should've told him to go to hell. What's he doing in town?”

“His dad died. Came down for the funeral.”

“Is he staying?”

“I don't know. I think for the week at least.”

“When's the funeral?”

“Tomorrow at noon I think. Why?”

John groaned as he rose to his feet. He washed off his calves in the current before climbing back up the hill to his truck. I glanced at the rope that stretched down into the water.

“What about the body?”

“What about it?” John called back.

“You're really just leaving it?”

“Why wouldn't I? It ain't like that guy's still alive?” The growl of the engine echoed up and down the river. I stared up at him from the water as he leaned his head out the window. “You comin'?”

We stopped off at the old school house on the way home and took turns throwing rocks through the few windows that remained. Then John dropped me off at my place and drove off. As I opened the door, my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was John.

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

I walked down the hallway towards the bedroom. “Sadie wants to go out to dinner.”

“I'll have you back in plenty of time for that. We're going to a funeral.”

I peered into the bedroom. Sadie was curled up beneath the covers. “Alright.”

I hung up and dropped the phone back into my pocket. I wandered into the kitchen where the smell of mashed potatoes and steak still lingered in the air. I checked the fridge for leftovers, but only found a two month old slice of cheese I had been meaning to throw out.

I tossed a frozen dinner into the microwave and lit up a pre-meal cigarette. A cockroach scurried out from under the stove. It crunched between my heel and the piss yellow tile. I scrapped it off on a table leg before retrieving my dinner.

I finally crawled into bed at midnight after stepping out back for a few puffs of dope. It had gotten to the point that I could not fall asleep unless I smoked first. Sadie had not moved. I slipped into sleep with her strange scent in my nose, a mixture of grease, grass, wood and sweat.

Sadie was gone by the time I woke up that morning. It was not unusual for me to go almost a week and only see her while she slept. I tossed on a pair of jeans with the knees worn out and a paint stained black shirt. I grabbed my hoodie from the kitchen table and slipped it on as I walked out the door.

The morning was colder than it had been the day before and I had my hands tucked into my pockets to stay warm. John pulled up at eleven thirty on the dot. He was dressed nicer than I had ever seen him, a dark green button up and black slacks. He stared at me as I got in.

“Don't you own something nicer?” he asked.

“No,” I said, cupping my nose in my palm. “Why the hell is it so cold?”

“You look like shit.” John growled.

“So? What's the big deal?”

“It's a funeral.”

We pulled into the graveyard a few minutes before noon. Only a handful of people had come out. John pulled me behind an oak a ways off and stared at the people gathered. He focused in on Burt,

who was the only person in the front row. He was dressed in gray and smoking a cigarette while the preacher gave the eulogy. He had a thick beard and a shaved head, which made him look much older than either John or myself.

“Why'd you get dressed up if we ain't actually going to the funeral?” I asked.

“We're here ain't we? Now shut up.”

The preacher finished the eulogy and Burt stood up. He walked up to the podium and gave a very brief statement of his own. It mustn't have been more than a couple sentences before he rapped on the casket with his knuckles, then walked off. The rest of the people looked confused as Burt walked down the path towards the exit. They slowly started to lower the casket into the hole, a few staring back at Burt.

John tugged me out from behind the tree. He straightened his shirt and began walking towards Burt. Burt's eyes squinted for a moment as he saw us closing in, then a smile broke his beard.

“Son of a bitch, if it ain't you guys!”

“Burt, long time no see.” John said. He stretched out his hand and Burt grabbed it enthusiastically.

“Damn right long time. How have you been, John?”

“I've been getting by. You?”

“Alright. Hell, better than alright, I've been fantastic!”

“Good to hear.” John released his grip, but Burt held fast.

“What the hell have you been up to?”

John managed to pull his hand out of Burt's grasp. “Nothing much. Been working at the garage.”

“No shit? Hank's place?”

“Hank's dead Burt. His son owns it now.”

“Well damn, that's a real shame. Hank was good people.”

“Yeah he was. His son is too.”

“Glad to hear it. I've been working at a motorcycle supply shop up North. It's a good job. Easy. Fun. All that shit.”

“That's good...” John forced a smile. I glanced between them. “What happened to your pa?”

Burt glanced back towards the funeral that had begun to break up. People went every other direction, a few heading toward us.

“He died. Car wreck. Hit and run. Guess he found himself between a hot head and a street race.”

“That's a shame.”

“Yeah, shit happens. Say, you boys eaten yet?”

I began to shake my head, but John placed a hand on my chest to cut me off. “Sorry Burt, but we can't. We have some things to do today. Besides, figure we should give you some grieving time.”

“Grieving? My pa ain't one to be grieved over. Hell, I ain't even seen him since I moved out four years ago.”

“That so?”

“Damn straight it is. It's been a crazy life since high school.” I saw Burt's face droop at the mention of high school. “By the way, John, I'm real sorry about that shit that happened Junior year.”

Burt stared at John's face, so he couldn't have seen John's knuckles turn white. “Don't worry about it man. I had forgotten all about it.”

Burt's face jumped back to a smile. “Hey, you know what, I'm back for the week. We should hang out some time. Chill out, smoke some shit, you guys still do that right?”

“Sometimes. We can't today, but I promise we'll see each other again before you leave.”

“Well that's real stand up of you, John. I am damn glad to see that you ain't holding a grudge

against me for the things I done in the past.”

“The past is the past, Burt. Can’t hold onto it forever.”

“Well, I got to get to the reception and make an appearance and all. You know how this shit is, real pain in the ass.”

“Yep. I know.” John said.

“I hope to see you boys real soon. I damn sure do.”

Burt vigorously shook John's hand, then continued on towards the exit. When he had gotten into his car, I turned to John.

“What else we got to do today?”

John did not reply. He started down the path towards where the funeral had been. The people had packed up quick, taking everything that didn't belong. All that was left was the tombstone and dirt. I followed John up to the grave. I read the engraving to myself. It had been kept short, simply the name and years. Nothing else.

John unzipped his slacks. I turned my head as he slowly pulled down the front of his pants. I heard the sound of urine against the headstone and felt a shudder go up my spine. I did not turn back around until I heard John zip himself back up.

“What was that for?” I asked.

John glared down at the headstone, which now glistened in the sun. “Lots of stuff.”

John turned and walked back down the path towards the exit.

He dropped me off at my place after a quick trip to a diner. Sadie was still at work when I got home, so I grabbed a six-pack of beer and sat on the porch. By the time she got home, I had worked my way through half the beer and a pack of cigarettes.

“Is this what you been up to all day?” Sadie said from the driveway.

I tossed my burnt out cigarette into the grass. “I went to a funeral.”

She walked towards the porch. "Who died?"

"Burt Kemp's dad." I handed her a cigarette as she stepped onto the porch. She lightly gripped it between her fingers as I ran my lighter beneath the tip.

"Oh right," she took a long drag from her cigarette. "Car accident, right?"

I lit another cigarette and glanced up at her. "How'd you know?"

"Didn't you tell me?" She spat into the grass.

I shook my head. "I didn't know til today."

"Oh." She flicked a trail of ash off her cigarette. "I must've heard it at work then."

I stared at her over the burning ember of my cigarette. The haze of the smoke covered her imperfections, making her look even more beautiful.

"Is there any more beer?" She dropped the cigarette onto the porch and crushed it beneath her shoe.

I pulled out a bottle from the pack. She took it from me and popped off the cap. "Thanks."

She walked into house. I flicked my cigarette away and followed. I saw Sadie disappear into the bedroom. "Where are we going tonight?"

I leaned on the door frame and watched her pull off her work shirt and toss it into the hamper. "I don't know yet."

She kicked her shoes into the closet before pulling the pants over her feet. "Well, I have to know what to wear."

"Where would you like to go?"

She worked the hooks of her bra. "Anywhere but Shilling's. I've been there enough for today."

She tossed her bra into the hamper with her pants, followed by her underwear.

"Well, we don't have a lot of money." I said.

She turned to face me, fists pressed against her hips. "I ain't asking to go to some five star place!

I just said not Shilling's!"

I stared at her naked body from the doorway. Shadows were cast around her body by the single light in the closet. The pregnancy wasn't showing yet, leaving her curves intact. I swallowed and forced my eyes back to hers.

"We could just eat in..." I said.

Her eyes rolled and she turned back to the closet. "I'm not in the mood for that. Just go to the kitchen and think of something."

I sighed and did as I was told. I began to think of every place within a ten minute drive and started to narrow down the options when the doorbell rang. I waited for a moment, considering not answering it at all. Then I heard Sadie shout from the bedroom.

"You going to get that or would you rather me flash them my tits?"

I rose to my feet. "I got it."

A cop stood outside, surveying my yard. He pointed to his badge as I opened the door.

"Hello sir, my name is Officer Truman, are you the home owner?"

"Yeah."

"Do you happen to know a man named John Ray?"

"Yeah, he's a friend of mine."

"Do you know where we could find him?"

I thought for a moment about all the responses John would give him, then chose none of them.

"No sir. I haven't seen him since this morning."

"That so? Where'd you fellas go this morning?"

"A funeral. Then to the diner a few blocks from the graveyard. Is he in trouble?"

"Something like that." The cop reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. "Now you call this number if you see him. We just want to ask him a few questions is all. Can you promise me you

will call?"

I hesitantly took the card. "Yeah, sure."

The cop walked back to his car and drove off. I stared down at the card. The word homicide was beneath the officers name. I shoved it into my pocket and went back inside.

"Who was it?" Sadie shouted.

"A cop. They're looking for John."

There was a long pause. I grabbed my keys from the table beside the front door.

"We ain't going to dinner tonight, are we?"

I pulled open the door and scanned the street. The cop was gone.

"You kick John's ass after you find out what the hell he did. Tell him it's from me."

I ran out to my car and drove off as fast I could.

John was standing shin deep in the river when I pulled up. He was just staring at the sun as it dropped down beneath the tree line. I shut off my engine and got out. I carefully walked down the bank to the shoreline behind him. I wasn't sure if I should ask him what was going on or if he would just tell me, so I stood still and silent until I figured it out.

"Cops are looking for me." John said.

"What's going on, John?"

"People die, you know, happens everyday. Just ask that guy in the car." John lazily pointed to where the rope dove beneath the water's surface. "Car wreck seems a better way to go than drowning, right?"

I shifted uneasily on the shore. John never looked back.

"You know, this river technically belongs to Kentucky." John said. "So the cops can't touch me here, right? I guess the Kentucky police might not be too happy with me either though, considering

gonna put a body in their river soon, though it probably won't be the worst thing down there.”

I swallowed as best I could. “What did you do, John?”

John twisted his neck to look at me. “What does it matter what I did? The past is the past... You can't hold onto it forever.”

John turned back to the look out over the river. His eyes scanned the Kentucky coast.

“You know,” he said, “I was actually born in Kentucky. My parents were off visiting relatives when I popped out. Ain't sure if that makes me a Kentuckian or not. I was raised here, that's for sure. Born in Kentucky, raised in Ohio, what a screwed up son of a bitch am I, huh?”

I scratched the back of my head, trying to arrange my thoughts. “What are you talking about, John?”

“You remember Jessica?”

Jessica was John's ex-girlfriend. He never told me why they broke up. Whenever I tried to talk about it with him, he'd call her a bitch and stop talking. “Yeah.”

“She got pregnant... told me it wasn't mine.”

My hand dropped from my head.

“Said she had been sleeping with another man... Burt's pa. Richard Kemp...”

I didn't know what to say, nor was I sure I was supposed to say anything.

John turned to face me. “She left me to be with him. He stayed with his wife, denied the whole thing. She ran off somewhere, I haven't heard from her since... I was going to propose to her. I even bought her a ring... Ain't that something?”

I slowly nodded, but regretted it the moment I did. John's face contorted into a scowl. “I wondered if Burt knew about the whole thing. Wasn't sure until today... If the cops don't get me... I'm putting Burt in that car. He isn't good enough to have a real burial. Let Kentucky deal with him.”

I kicked a small rock into the river and stuffed my hands deep into my pockets. “The cops are

looking for you.”

His face relaxed. “Yeah. I know. Sheriff ain't too smart though, should be able dodge them long enough to find Burt.”

“Then what? You ain't ever killed someone before.”

John stared at me in a way that made me shift again. There was a long pause where all I could hear was crickets. “I killed Burt's pa. Hit and run, remember?”

Goosebumps crawled onto my skin. John sighed. He shook his head as he climbed onto the shore.

“You hold on to that woman of yours, but you make damn sure that babies yours when it comes out, alright? Otherwise you don't marry her.”

John climbed the hill to his truck. I watched from the shore as he cranked the engine and drove off. It was the last time I saw him. I never heard from or about Burt again. Nothing about John neither. I called him a few times, but he never picked up. His work said he had quit, and that was all they had heard. Seven months later, Sadie gave birth to a boy. I told her about John's story about Jessica, leaving out names. We went out to the hospital and did a DNA test. It felt like forever before the results came back. The baby was mine. We got married two weeks later. It was a small wedding, John would have liked it.

Every now and then I walk down to the old secret spot. The rope is still stretched down into the river. I always consider going down and seeing if Burt is in the car, but I never do. Figure the Ohio river is brown for a reason. The things beneath the surface ain't meant to be seen.

Old Friends

In high school Brian and I had been best friends. We would hang out practically every day. Life was always more interesting when we were together and I don't think either one of us were quite the same when we were apart.

I remember once, during the summer after our Freshman year, we had gone to an arcade. The change machine short-circuited and spewed out every quarter it had. We played every game we could before the cops came, then we bailed. We came back the next day to find the place smoldering. The newspaper said it was faulty wiring. We just figured someone burned the place down for the fun of it. It made sense to us. As a matter of fact, it's what we planned on doing after the coin machine got fixed. We would never have burnt the place down alone though, we needed the other to push us to the edge. It was the only place either of us could have fun.

We did not have a set group outside of him and I. Sometimes a few others would join us, but they never stuck around long. Sometimes they would leave by their own freewill, other times Brian and I would kick them out. That was just how life went. One of the guys had started talking bad about Brian behind his back, so I convinced him to go with me to pick up some weed. When we got to the place I said the dealer was, Brian was there with a baseball bat. The kid spent a month in the hospital and never walked the same again. He learned that Brian and I had each other's back and there was nothing we wouldn't do to protect each other.

We would crash parties and "ruin" good girls. At least, that is what mothers shouted from their stoops at us. We ruined their daughters with one night stands or, worse, long term relationships. Not too long term, of course. We would dump any girl by the time six months rolled around. We could not afford to be held down in one place for longer than necessary. Get laid for awhile, then get out. That was the golden rule, and we followed it religiously.

Anyways, those days are passed. We graduated three years ago and moved on from that life. I went North and Brian went South, separated by a five hour drive. We tried to keep in touch, of course, but you know college life, there never seems to be quite enough time in the day. So you can imagine my surprise when I answered my phone to find Brian on the other end. We caught up quickly, the rough how-have-you-been's and what-have-you-been-up-to's. Then he asked me if I would be interested in coming down and visiting for the weekend. He said he finally had time to think now, as all of his major classes were out of the way and work had given him the weekend off. I did not have any plans at that point, so I agreed. I got the address and looked up directions. Two days later I was on the road.

After a five hour drive, I found myself in this strange town where the buildings are practically molded together, separated by a split that I could stick my head in, but not much more. I don't know how Brian and I would have ever gotten by if we had grown up in a place like this. No alleyways to hide from the cops when things went too far. They never did take too kindly to us busting people up or torching stuff, if the situation called for it, which it often did.

Once, Brian and I set up a pile of sticks and newspaper beneath the gas tank of a cop car and made a short fuse with a box of matches. The cops were in the doughnut shop at the time, out of harm's way, not that we were very concerned with their well being. We had barely gotten across the street before the whole thing went up. There wasn't a huge explosion like they did in the movies, just a loud pop and the whole thing was on fire. We had to run all over town that night, dodging patrols. We would never have gotten away with it in a town like this one.

When I arrived at the apartment, Brian was sitting on the porch, waiting for me. He looked sickly. His hair was buzzed down to his scalp and he had grown a goatee like a ring around his mouth. He had lost weight as well, perhaps twenty pounds or more. The only way I knew it was him was from the scar on his right hand. Our junior year, we got into a fight with a group of jocks and one of them busted a beer bottle over Brian's hand. We won the fight, bloody knuckles and all, but it left a nasty

scar. This person I saw sitting on the porch had that same scar, so it had to be Brian.

I played polite. I told him he had changed a lot and I hardly recognized him. He laughed. At least that was the same. He said he could not say the same for me, that I looked almost exactly like I did our senior year. Same shoulder length hair. Same clean shaven face. Same slightly protruding gut, although he did not mention that. I didn't even bother mentioning the new scar on my forearm. I got it slammed in a car door by some pissed off dad after I was finished deflowering his daughter. He had pulled me out of the car and I had tried to climb back in before he slammed the door shut. He took his daughter and left in a hurry after that. I haven't see either one of them again, which is fine by me. She wasn't that good of a lay anyways.

He invited me in and I obliged him for the time. After all, I did not just drive five hours for my health.

Inside, nothing touched the carpet except for some furniture and our feet. Textbooks lined the shelves, all set in alphabetical order. He asked me if I wanted something to eat, as he had some leftovers from the night before that he would be more than happy to reheat for me. I said sure. He pulled out this strange, fancy sounding chicken dish from the refrigerator. He told me that he had watched how to make it on the Food Network last week and thought he would give it a shot. He never even attempted to cook in high school. Neither did I. I am fairly certain I would only succeed in creating charcoal and ash if I did. Most of our meals were either cooked by one of our mothers, when they weren't on an "if your father could see you now" yelling fest, or bought at a fast food joint.

Once, we didn't have any money to buy food. I distracted an employee on her break while Brian stole her wallet. It only had ten bucks in it, so we had to limit what we got, but it was better than nothing. By the time she found out it was missing, we were long gone.

The chicken nearly fell apart on my plate. I did not even need a knife, I just used my fork. The taste was like something out of one of those restaurants that require you to wear a tie. Not that I have

ever actually eaten in one, though Brian and I had broken into one after closing once and flipped all their tables and broke their expensive vases, but I assume that is what their food tastes like. If not, it should.

As I ate, we talked about the old days. The days where we would run around until sunrise, then sleep through school. Sometimes we just would not go altogether. We were both shocked when we were allowed to graduate. We agreed that the system must have been rigged in our favor. That the teachers must have graded us on a scale to make sure they would never have to see us again. Not that we complained, mind you. We told stories that we both knew, continuing where the other's memory failed. Like the time we helped a kid take care of his bully problem, then dropped him in a dumpster with three broken ribs. We had both agreed we would rather be dead than be like him. He was helpless, looking for the good in people. We both knew the truth. There is no "good" people in the world, just people who believe in bullshit stories and people who know the truth. Life is meant to be lived to the point of self-destruction or not at all. If you wake up before one in the morning to a steady life, wife, kids, and a good job, you were already dead. There is no salvation for people like that. Not that there is any salvation of people like us either. We simply have more fun with what have.

Then there was a long pause and Brian said the most curious thing. I can even remember the exact words he used. He said, "All that is behind me now." I was not sure how to react to this, and I am still unsure what I should have done. I just sat there, staring at him. Why would someone want to leave that world behind? I mean, I have grown and changed, but the principles are the same.

Brian eventually took the burden of a reply away from me. He told me that he had to go pick something up from his girlfriend's house and then he would show me around.

You can imagine my relief to hear this. Finally, some piece of the Brian I once knew. A good girl he ruined. I imagined her mother's scorn when she found out her daughter was dating him. The late night phone call begging her to dump him and warning her to stay away. She, of course, would not

heed her mother's words. They never did. Would it be better for them in the end? Who knows. I never really thought about the girls I dated after they were gone. No reason to start now.

We crawled into Brian's car. It was a hybrid, but I was willing to overlook that minor detail at the time. The girl I was about to meet would surely make up for everything. I did not know exactly what to expect, but I knew it would be something spectacular. During the drive, Brian explained to me how he had been with this girl for a year now, their anniversary having been last weekend. I thought this strange. As I said, our relationships never lasted longer than six months. However, I figured he was just sticking with this girl as a matter of convenience. Not being faithful, of course, but using her as a back up in case a weekend went sour and no one else was available. I played that game once. However, in my case, the girl got it in her head that we were going to get married. Every time she caught me in bed with one of her friends or some girl she didn't know, she would leave for a day or two, then come back saying that she forgave me and knew I didn't love them and that I wouldn't do it again because I didn't want to hurt her. Then we would go to bed together, the same bed I would take whatever girl I picked up the next night to. She finally took the hint after eight months.

When we arrived at her house, my muscles were twitching with anticipation. It was a tiny house, one story tall, with a white picket fence. It looked awful, like one of those houses from an old, black and white sitcom, but I kept that to myself. Brian rapped on the door and then waited, hands stuffed in his pockets, swaying like a damn rocking chair. If it had been me, I would have just walked right in. Yelled at her to come down. Told her to hurry up, because I had things to do. Brian would have done the same in high school, but he just stood there.

I could not believe my eyes when she answered the door. Certainly she could not have been the right girl. She was completely plain, with no sign of Brian's influence. At least, not the influence of the Brian I had known. I thought it must be one of her roommates, but then Brian introduced her to me as his girlfriend and all my hopes were crushed. She smiled at me and I did my best to do the polite thing.

Inside, though, I was shaking. She invited us in, but Brian declined. I am glad he did, because I was not about to sit in this girl's house for any amount of time. Brian told her he was about to show me around the town and had just come to get his Bible. She retrieved it from the innards of the house. I tell you, my shaking must have become physical by this point, but neither of them noticed. Brian just kissed her on the cheek and thanked her. I mean, he actually thanked her. I have never thanked anyone for anything, and, back in high school, neither had Brian. We took what we wanted, and if someone was smart enough to just give it to us without a fight, we just left, laughing. A convenience store owner once told us to thank him for not calling the cops on us after he caught us eating candy bars without paying for them. Convenience store owner's with glass doors should watch what they say, especially when there is an abundance of rocks by the street. He did call the cops after that, but we were gone by the time they showed up.

I did not pay attention to the sights that Brian was eagerly pointing out to me on the drive. All I could think about was how this man could not possibly be Brian. He had to be some sort of imposter. A sheep in wolf's clothing. A liar in Brian's skin. I remember being told a long time ago that college changes people, but not this much. I have changed, of course, but not like that. I am still recognizable as the kid I was before, but I could not see a single sign of who Brian had been. At that moment, even the scar seemed different.

He drove us back to his apartment and pulled into the driveway. I waited in the kitchen as he retrieved some blankets and a pillow from his bedroom and laid them on the couch for me. It was not even ten o'clock and he was already preparing for bed. He told me that he usually wakes up by seven now, but he would make sure to keep it down for me if I wanted to sleep in. He retrieved a snack for himself. He asked me if I wanted something, but I turned him down. I do not think my stomach could have handled the food. As he ate, he explained to me what he had planned for tomorrow. I do not remember any of what he said. All I know is that I felt my stomach wrenching with every word. Then

he filled the sink basin with soap and water and began to wash his dishes. He smiled and told me how happy he was that I had agreed to come down. How he thought about the past often and wondered what had become of me.

Now, comes the part that, as you must understand, was not entirely my fault. I was the one who made the decision, but it was for the best. It had to be done, and I was the only one who seemed willing to go through with it. So, I walked over to him. I doubt he even heard my footsteps over the sound of the sloshing caused by his incessant scrubbing. Then, with both hands, I stuffed his head down into the water. He fought it, palms pressed against the sides of the sink and his fingers twitching. He tried to turn his head, but I could not allow that. So I dug my fingers into the back of his scalp and held him in place. Blood dripped out beneath my finger nails. It rolled through the stubble of hair and into the soapy water. I thought about how sickening it must have tasted as it filled his lungs. It was probably as hard to swallow for him as it was for me. However, also like me, he had no choice. I did not do it out of hate. I did it because that is how Brian would have preferred it. You would not understand, since you did not know him like I did. I was not about to let this man soil my friend's name any longer.

I felt his body go limp beneath my hands, but I only pushed down harder. There was still a chance that his body would spew out the water and foam. That his wretched lungs would fill with air once again, and I could not allow that. If I did, it would not have been fair to Brian. So I held his face beneath the surface until I was sure this imposter would never breathe again. Then, I let him go. I believe he is still lying on the floor in the kitchen where I left him.

I composed myself like a portrait. Wiped the drops of water from my face that he had managed to splash on me during his struggle. I took some of his clothes, as mine had become soaked through. Then, I walked out the door, to my car, and drove away. I had to be dignified. I could not cry for the loss of my best friend. He died a long time ago.