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IDENTITY IN LIFE WRITING: FACT, FICTION, AND MEMORY

Bridget Langdon

80 Pages

This thesis is a collection of excerpts that explores the lives of a Midwestern family who are forced to cope with a new reality following the AIDS diagnosis and eventual death of Bruce, the son and brother. The stories are meant to examine the way new identities are created posthumously through memory as well as identities that result from social expectations. Additionally, this collection explores the concepts of truth and fact on individual and social basis within the fiction and non-fiction aspects of memoir.

KEYWORDS: Life Writing, Identity, AIDS, Midwest, Social Constructs

IDENTITY IN LIFE WRITING: FACT, FICTION, AND MEMORY

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Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of English

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IDENTITY IN LIFE WRITING: FACT, FICTION, AND MEMORY

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B. L.

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CHAPTER I: CRITICAL PREFACE

For my creative thesis, I am presenting a collection of creative nonfiction stories that center around the death of my uncle Bruce who died during the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco in 1986. Bruce is not present in these stories; instead, they center around the people who are affected by his death—a middle-class family who live in the Midwest. The events in these pieces happened, but they did not happen, perhaps, within the settings, conversations, or timelines as I depict them.

My focus is on stories that I received second- and third-hand, some of which are stories written by the subjects themselves. Because of this, my writing intends to disassemble and then reassemble these lives, while simultaneously placing them in a larger analysis of social constructs of the American middle class. I expand upon factual events using a third-person narrative, and hope to mitigate the more discriminatory pressures of class, religion, gender, sexuality, addiction, etc. Most importantly, I hope to draw attention to how life and death, living and dying, are constructed by the stories we tell about ourselves, which often reveal the influence of social norms. In my selected works, I take a poststructural approach to the narratives of my character's lives and deaths, in hopes of returning to them a sort of agency, exemplifying the manner in which life stories can be reshaped to reconfigure social status.

My thesis evolved from death. I've lost a lot of people in my lifetime; so many, in fact, that someone once told me that I had an "uncanny proximity to death." Within a month after I started my graduate studies, I lost my sister unexpectedly; I lost a few acquaintances and a couple of professors; I lost a dear friend of mine; and I lost my father and grandfather within four days of each other. Through each of these incidents, I watched and participated in the proverbial

rebirth of those who had passed. Friends, family, and acquaintances came together to combine selected stories to reconstruct the life of the deceased in order to fit their own narrative.

From that, I realized that the same is done in writing, specifically life writing and memoirs. Whether it is a version of ourselves or characters throughout our lives, nonfiction writers reshape people to tell a story. The art of memoir is rooted in the foundation of truth. In his introduction to memoir, G. Thomas Couser draws the distinction between fiction and memoir when he states, "...[M]emoir depicts the lives of real, not imagined, people" (15). However, I would argue that memoir depicts the imagined lives of real people.

Couser's book *Memoir: An Introduction* goes through great lengths to define memoir and its differences from "the novel." Couser starts by stating that "the novel, being entirely imagined, cannot lie, and novelists cannot be accused of deception or misrepresentation within their fictions" (10). I agree that this is true, but I don't believe that this is always the case, which is why subgenres such as historical fiction or fiction that is "based on a true story" have spawned. Because of the limits of biography and autobiography, in which the formation of a narrative around the lives of oneself or others is constrained by "its almost legalistic definition of truth telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable, even in the presence of some ambivalence about those criteria," there is a fear of taking artistic liberties in life writing (Gilmore 3).

Couser admits that "...memoir is based primarily on memory, a notoriously unreliable and highly selective faculty" (19). This revelation follows the assertion that "memoirists assume two distinct kinds of obligations—one to the historical or biographical record and another to the people they depict" (10). I wonder how both of these claims can be true and how the definition of memoir can live within both realms. My writing, at least in the context of the stories of my

uncle Bruce, is derived exclusively from the memories of others; the writings that still exist from him; the family members who are no longer alive to tell their stories; and the few remaining family members who are alive, but whose perceptions of Bruce offer a vast discrepancy as there was a different version of himself to everyone he met.

I cannot attest that my writings are factual in the sense that they cannot be disputed; I can only attest that my writings are compilations of truths that have been relayed to me, and I have selectively arranged a narrative that conveys the story I want to tell from that information. I feel it's important to make this distinction because, with the emergence of the internet and social media, society has been exposed to an unprecedented amount of information, and from that has emerged the demand for "truth" (and the subsequent accusations of "fake news"). I would argue that there is not universal truth; "everything comes from somewhere and functions in a particular context or set of contexts; there's no such thing as 'natural fact'" (Nealon & Searls Giroux 7). The purpose of my writings is to assert both that narratives evolve from social constructs and that humans are complex.

In *Beginning Postmodernism*, Tim Woods posits that "there are several currents to modernism and postmodernism, and one's perception of the ideological significance of a postmodern text largely depends on whichever construction of writing has been established as the normative model of modernism" (64). Postmodern fiction materialized after World War II when there was a dispute over who had control over the historical narrative. Authors like William S. Burroughs and Kurt Vonnegut took the realism of culture and biography and added a fantastical element to challenge history and create a historical realism; "however, many cultural theorists have argued that postmodernism anaesthetizes the politics of literary works, and creates a dehistoricising fiction" (Woods 69). I dare to postulate that postmodernizing art, and the

indefinite access to such dehistoricizations, changed the way that American society interprets history and, therefore, fact.

In “The Pastime of Past Time: Fiction, History, Historiographical Metafiction,” Linda Hutcheon writes,

The nineteenth century gave birth to both the realist novel and history, two genres which share a desire to select, construct, and render self-sufficient and closed a narrative world that would be representational but still separate from changing experience and historiographical process. Today, history and fiction share a need, if not really a desire, to contest these very assumptions. (279)

Though my work is not fiction, it cannot exactly be considered nonfiction, either. Because my work is comprised of second- and third-hand information, I cannot contend that the narrative is one-hundred percent factual. For this very reason, part of my aesthetic is informed by the works of Joan Didion, Martha Gellhorn, and Truman Capote, who wrote works what are now considered to represent the first modern wave of creative nonfiction. They composed true accounts that were tempered by their own subject position as authors; although they are present, as narrators, they are not the main focus of the work. In his study of Didion’s essay “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” John Schilb says of Didion,

Didion extensively quotes people involved in the case, thus creating the impression that she served as a human tape recorder. The reality-effect of the essay is heightened as well by Didion’s withholding of information about her own activities as a reporter investigating what went on. Even though she doesn’t claim an omniscient point of view—and in fact suggests that the minds of people she encountered were in some way

opaque—her omission of data about when and how she herself entered the scene as a particular interpreter of it enables Didion to establish a certain narrative authority. (265)

I am not present in my works, at least not as an active character—I am more like a non-playable character (NPC) in the sense that I am only two and a half years old when these stories take place—but I intend for my characters to have a sort of distance from the readers. There is not much internal dialogue, so the motives of the characters are revealed through traditional dialogue and actions. While my aim is to subtly steer the readers through the narrative to recognize where pathos and ethos can be evoked by the characters, I also intend to trust the reader to make their own decisions about each character. Like Capote in *In Cold Blood*, I am present after the fact, collecting the pieces to construct a narrative. My aesthetic is also informed by these authors, insofar as I take the real events and present them in a narrative form that represents a larger cultural commentary. I take an insider role in order to unfold a larger depiction of the world (Schilb 267). My writing echoes, at times, Didion’s fragmented prose, heavily reliant on scenery; and Capote’s and Gellhorn’s ostensibly emotionless accounts—that subsequently make them more emotional—of traumatic events.

Lucas Mann breaks down identity in his character both from the language he prescribes based on his own personal relationship with his main character, as well as the language prescribed by others he’s interviewed. Of his work, Mann writes, “People’s memories contradict one another, and many of the scenes are my imagined versions of the stories they told me, complete with my own subjectivity” (*Lord Fear* i). My collection attempts to take a similar approach in creating the stories based on writings and interviews I have conducted, and, while my own subjectivity is present, as with any narrative, my writing aims to focus more on the

identity of the characters in order to release them from the social norms that were posthumously attributed to them.

This sense of voyeurism is also present in the works of Mikal Gilmore. Gilmore “must speak to and for the dead. To organize his identification with them, rather than simply to be a living emblem of their pain, he must lay down a line between the living and the dead, between his story and their story” (Leigh Gilmore 72). I use this same method of creating a voice for the dead who can no longer speak for themselves, but my hope is that my story and their stories are seamlessly interwoven so as to humanize each character instead of having them serve merely as plot devices to drive an agenda. Of course, I do have an agenda; however, my intent is to be somewhat clandestine in its delivery. In order to do this, like Gilmore and Mann, I draw from personal biographies, letters, and poetry written by my subjects. In some cases, there is a disconnect between what they write and the truth. Postmodern works relating to history and fiction “have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent, either in terms of language or structure” (Hutcheon 275). Though my writing draws from historical events experienced by the common person, I am not in a position to claim verisimilitude, exactly, and not only because I wasn’t a participant in these events, but because I prefer to emphasize my inexorably perspectival approach to the facts as I understand them. Also, to claim verisimilitude would, I think, require a sense of linearity in the characters and remove the complexities of being human. This is not to suggest that I don’t deal in facts and representations. In *Lord Fear*, Lucas Mann takes a fact—his brother died of a heroin overdose—and disassembles narratives about the brother in order to reassemble him with

humanistic qualities, feelings, motives, etc. My writing attempts to shatter absolute truths so as to free my characters from the restrictions set upon them by their disease, religion, social status, *etc.*

Hunter S Thompson famously brought attention to the subjective nature of writing, in this instance journalism. In *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, he stated, “With the possible exception of things like box scores, race results, and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms” (33). I would expand upon this to say that there is no objectivity—at least not without perspective—in any literary genre, including memoir, nor should there be an expectation of such.

It is no coincidence that there was an explosion of popularity in memoirs, historical fiction, biopics, documentaries during a time when the once-trusted American news outlets essentially divorced into separate partisan organs, though the partisanship lies as much with the consumers of media as with the outlets themselves. In some cases, partisan readers will interpret news articles as hostile and/or biased simply because they present an opposing view, thus making the reader feel attacked. Other research shows that media can cater to pre-existing biases (Tsfat & Cohen 7-9). I don't mean to incite a debate about media and its effects, but rather to illustrate the way people and actions can be categorized by simplistic terms and labels, including but not limited to good and bad.

The purpose for the creative portion of my thesis is to illustrate the complexity of humans and their situations. Judith Halberstam states that “[q]ueer studies, like any other area of study that agrees upon principals, modes of historiography, and sites of investigation, also has a tendency to solidify into what Foucault calls a ‘science,’ or a regime of knowing what depends absolutely on commonsense narratives about emergences and suppressions” (147). She goes on to discuss the way that gay men and women have been written in postmodern culture. In some

cases, if a gay character is met with abjection by another character, that character must have “a belated recognition of his or her legitimacy,” at other times the character will need to rise from their “burial grounds of history and [be] granted a proper place in an account of social movements” (147). While all of that makes for extremely important literature and writing, especially in the current climate, Halberstam also asks what happens when the character or historical figure was not a good person or a martyr. In her example, she speaks to how persons of the LGBTQ were treated by the Nazis, but there is never discussion about the gay men who were Nazis.

My aesthetic relies heavily on the complexity of the characters and the dialogue. Bruce is gay and is either dying or has died of AIDS in these pieces; however, he is neither the hero nor the antihero. He is a character who made choices in his life that led to the AIDS diagnosis, such as indulging in unprotected sexual intercourse and intravenous drug use; however, as a result of this, the people who knew him are forced to come to terms with the new identity that is being created for him when he is not there to defend himself. Other characters populate my stories who can likewise be seen, initially, in one-dimensional terms. The matriarch is a God-fearing Christian who lives her life with one foot on the other side—everything she did in life was to prepare for Heaven—and her husband is a simple farmer who must maintain a certain image within the community. Bruce’s sister is the wife of, at the very least, a verbally and emotionally abusive alcoholic. While these are oftentimes defining characteristics for stories that are generally driven by agenda, my stories are meant to provide characterizations that are more complex than labels.

In theoretical terms, several dualities, if not binaries, are at stake in the project. Aside from that of fact and fiction, and author and narrator, I address, too, the problem of subject and

object, and agency and lack thereof. As I have stated numerous times, I am using the written works of my subjects to construct their stories. In many cases, their writings purposely omit information in an attempt to formulate their own narrative to fit their social constraints; or in other words, they create an image of themselves based on how they want their readers to view them. As the author, I face an ethical dilemma: do I usurp their agency and change the very substance of their writing, or do I forgo what some will see as a transgressive act and retell the tales pretty much as they've been told (Couser)? By deciding to alter the nature of the writing, I hope simultaneously to recognize their intent and expand upon their personal narratives to position my writing and their lives in a larger cultural context that not only humanizes their characters but provides cultural commentary to demonstrate the reason they were compelled to craft their own narratives in accordance with social norms.

My writing also hopes to depict the affective transference of "cruel optimism" which "names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant 94). More specifically, my project "points to a condition different than that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject's desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object or scene with which she has identified her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss" (94). In my collection, all of the characters are prone to this type of optimism. Each character stands to lose something they hold on to, whether it pertains to a relationship, a drug, health, social status, and the like. Each story forces the character to grapple with the loss.

Much of my aesthetic is informed by this theory alone, as cruel optimism is ever-present in modern and postmodern fiction and nonfiction. It is the driving force of characters, especially

in the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson in their search for, and loss of, the American Dream. My writing hopes to capture this same elusive dream of middle-class America, as my characters poise themselves to mimic the upper class. All the while, I attempt to render vital the rural middle class, which, ironically, is often overlooked by the societies narrativized in the works of Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*. Each of my characters maintain that there is an image to uphold, and it is that image that becomes the attachment, while their lives and the families are lost to the pursuit of this image.

Narrative is inextricable from language. Life writing may demand its own, discrete style. Marlen Kadar explains in her essay "Whose Life is it Anyway? Out of the Bathtub and into the Narrative" that, although the narratives of life writing are linked thematically, "in recent years, they have come to share a more complex feature: a philosophical and linguistic imperative that comes first, and then a sincere, probing disregard for genre and its rules, which has the effect of blending genres, creating new genres, and derailing the once-respected 'objective' speaker or narrator" (152). In response to this quote, I would like to discuss the stylistic features of my writing. My writing relies heavily on two key aspects: setting and dialogue.

My subjects use colloquial language in their writings, and I feel it would be an injustice to impart their narratives under the guise of beauty. Instead, the language of my dialogue is sharp, evocative of the pain of the characters, and it makes no attempt to smooth the rough edges of adversity. "[A] tradition of writing already exists that is not just autobiography or confession or journal writing, and in which all life-narratives share something" (Kadar 257). What my characters and life-narratives in general share is the language that makes it possible to deviate from the canons and constraints of journals, confessions, and letters; life-narratives share a style

that creates characters from the authors of the writings, a reworking of self, and the setting in which the characters are positioned.

The setting, the place where these events occurred, requires a specific voice or accent that must be present in my dialogue. Mary Karr penned a chapter titled “A Voice Conjures the Human Who Utters It” (Karr 35). This singular title sums up what my writing hopes to do with voice. My writing hopes to conjure the characters, the real-life counterparts, in a way that is believable and illustrates the setting, the place, for my readers. My intent is to use my own knowledge, plus the works of my subjects, to capture what I trust readers from these locales would see as an authentic voice. Karr uses voice, dialogue, and dialect heavily in her works in order to give the reader a sense of both place and class, and it is this exact linguistic style that my writing hopes to achieve. That being said, this aspect of Karr’s writing is the only influence that Karr’s work has on mine. I find that her memoirs have become formulaic and have also become part of a canon. My stories are not meant to be coming of age stories. In fact, my characters do not reach a purported age of enlightenment; instead, my intent is that an awakening happens for the readers during the aforementioned affective achievement.

Setting is not just important for the dialogue, however. There are two main settings that become, I’d suggest, characters in their own rights. One involves the rolling hills, the river bottoms, and the fertilized corn fields of Illinois that also cultivate, if you will, the social constructs of the rural kinfolk. The other is a small town on the brink of decay. It is trapped between two times: the idealisms of the WWII era and the reality of the everchanging post-Reagan era. There is only one other setting in the book, San Francisco, which I hope will prove representative of the future.

As is likely apparent at this point, several nonfiction writers have influenced my writing greatly. My writing borrows from the stylistic approaches of Jesmyn Ward, Mikal Gilmore, Joan Didion, Lucas Mann, and Martha Gellhorn. Lucas Mann's *Lord Fear* was my first inspiration for the stories I have enclosed. Mann, who was a young child when his brother died of a heroin overdose, makes the conscious decision to shatter his idealistic image of his brother in order to reconstruct a caricature into a character. The subjects of my writing are either family members or close friends, and through my investigative journalist process, I have had to reconstruct them in the same manner.

In *Men We Reaped* by Jesmyn Ward, the story follows the deaths of various men in Ward's life, and she uses these deaths to illustrate a bigger picture of racism and poverty in America. Though my writing does not depend on those identities specifically, I do employ stories of death to bring attention to the social injustices that surround sexuality, gender, and addiction as experienced some decades ago, when such injustices were not as remarked upon as they are today.

Mikal Gilmore's *Shot in the Heart* is, perhaps, the work that influenced me the most. Mikal makes many different stylistic choices speak to my ambitions as a writer. Leigh Gilmore notes that "the dead stalk the unconscious and wait, in [Mikal] Gilmore's text, for any opportunity to appear: dreams, current relationships, the writing of his book" (72). My own works use dreams, ghosts, and family history as elements of narrative structure. I use these same tropes in the retelling of my stories of the dead to effectively demonstrate the impact that the dead have on the living: the persistence of the need for their stories to be contextualized and heard.

Finally, Joan Didion uses setting and landscape to further “middle-class ambitions that manifest themselves in disturbing ways” (Schilb 270). My works aim to use place in the same sense, to paint a picture of rural America, from the bluffs, to the cornfields, to the rivers that surround the region. As a juxtaposition, I also use the landscapes of San Francisco to symbolize an escape from the rural Midwest that amounts to a false sense of utopia. All of these narrative gestures play an integral part in my writing.

In sum, my writing is meant to illuminate social hardships that are still prevalent today, even though all of my writing is set in past time periods. My work reconfigures the history and relationships of family: from a son born to a Christian, middle-class family who dies of AIDS in the 1980s; to a lonely housewife who is fighting to save her dying son’s soul; to her husband whose only concern is upholding his social image; to the wife of an alcoholic who is fighting for a new future; to my vision of what it all means. My work aims to peel off the labels that have been assigned to my subjects. While these stories were rendered initially by a collective comprised of family, friends, and associates, the effect has been to strip the agency from those who no longer have a voice to defend themselves. My collection of stories intends to rehumanizes the people who have been dismissed in rural, middle-class America.

CHAPTER II: HOWELL HOLLOW 1986

December 13, 1981

Folks,

I'm really sorry I can't come home this winter, I really thought I would be but there's this small matter of a tropical disease—Yes! Strange as it may sound, yes it's true.

Apparently one or more of Tom's parrots got into the country without being quarantined. A couple of birds got sick, were taken to the vet, and sure enough—parrot fever (ugh). A stubborn thing, too. I had three weeks of antibiotics and a follow up test which indicated that the critters were gone, but then a few weeks later it came back. It affects digestion and elimination process and at one point was terribly uncomfortable, but now, with the medication it doesn't bother me at all, except that I know it's there. I have to go in for blood tests this month, I'm sorry.... I'll give you an update later but I'm sure everything will be OK, at least I'm under doctor's orders not to get depressed. Ha! (I mean, ho, ho, ho!).

Bruce

The Storm

Pregnant clouds charge the sky with air too thick to breathe. Thunder rattles the little house in Howell Hollow; a magnificent storm stampedes the bluffs of rural Illinois. Static crackles through the receiver that Juanita clutches with both hands, her knuckles whiter than her blood-drained face. She perches on the stool next to the mounted rotary phone.

“Mrs. Puterbaugh?” a voice queries from the other side.

“Yes?” A gust of wind slams the screen door against the frame in the kitchen, as though the storm were determined to keep the trepidation from seeping into its turbulent order. No one ever calls this late. The dogs scamper off the sloped porch into the rain, away from the unwelcome atmosphere.

“My name is Tom Brownfield. I’m a friend of Bruce’s.”

Juanita scrawls “Bruce” on the memo pad that hangs next to the phone. Lynold nods and silently takes his dutiful position next to her. He sets his jaw and his eyes go vacant until he is the bust of Menander. *He who labors diligently need never despair.*

Juanita turns on the stool so that she has her back to him, and he clutches her shoulder. “Is everything okay?” she asks. “Mrs. Puterbaugh, Bruce is in San Francisco General Hospital.... He has a serious infection in his lungs. It was caused by the AIDS virus. I’m so sorry to have to tell you over the phone.” Juanita’s eyelids flutter as she tries to blink away the image of her ailing son. Her lips move with rapidity while she quickly spits her prayers into the thunderous heavens.

“Is there any way I can speak with him?” she asks in a meek voice.

“I’m sorry. He didn’t even want me to call you. He didn’t want you to know, but we—our friends and me—didn’t think it was right. We thought you had a right to know.”

Lightning illuminates the farmhouse kitchen to reveal their grandson, Jamie, standing in the doorway, his eyes full of bewilderment. Awakened by the deluge, he was drawn to the kitchen by apprehension, maybe, or empathy. He is rather intuitive for a seven-year-old. A sob escapes from Juanita, and a slight movement from the corner of Lynold's eye sends Jamie back down the hall, his little feet pattering over the swollen wood floor. Jamie would later pen this moment as "The Night Thor Brought News of Uncle Bruce's AIDS to Howell Hollow."

"Thank you, Tom. Please tell him to call home when he can. Please."

"I will, Mrs. Puterbaugh. I will."

Juanita gently rests the receiver back into its cradle and collapses into Lynold. "AIDS, Lynold, he has AIDS!" she sobs.

Lynold doesn't respond.

"How can this happen? You've read the news." Her voice drops to a whisper. "Gay men get AIDS."

Lynold stiffens, but strokes Juanita's back anyway. A wail from the bedroom off the kitchen pierces the tension. Bridget coughs, and mucus rattles deep inside her lungs. She gasps for breath as her airways whistle and wheeze.

Juanita swims through her own insurmountable fear and lands in the bedroom in three strokes. She sweeps the toddler into her arms. "Lynold!" She screams. "Lynold, she's burning up! She can't breathe! Her lungs!"

A Cockroach on the Hospital Floor

Lynne runs down the halls of the empty hospital corridor. Even the fumes of sterilization fail to mask the smell of filth. The fluorescent lights flicker above her, and a cockroach scurries across her path. Bob stumbles behind her. The call came late. He's been drinking for hours.

An image flashes in Lynne's mind. Only two and a half years earlier, she was wheeled swiftly through a hospital. It was cleaner and bustled with life, but the smell was the same: the odor of sick buried under cleaning solutions. Bob had dropped her off at the emergency room entrance so that he could hit the tavern a couple of blocks down from Memorial Hospital in Springfield. "I'm just going to grab a cheeseburger," he told her. "There's plenty of time." Two hours later, as she started to push, Bob swayed into the delivery room with only a hint of urgency, his greens haphazardly draped over his clothes. The alcohol fumes were toxic.

"Where the fuck are we?" he calls behind her. "I can almost hear the banjos."

Lynne ignores him, desperate to find the someone who can tell her where her child is. It's a small building, only two stories tall, but it seems impossible to find anyone. She peers into each room as she passes. An image persists in her mind; her little girl with tubes coming from everywhere, a monitor beeping furiously, a team of doctors and nurses urgently trying to save her. But there is no one.

They round a corner to find a wall of windows with a view of a similarly inactive Main Street. Nothing is open late at night in small towns. Even the bars close at midnight. This place had once been familiar to her; she was born in this very hospital in Pittsfield, Illinois, a town of only a few thousand, twenty minutes from her hometown of Pleasant Hill, which is too small for a hospital of its own.

To her left there is a reception desk with a young girl, maybe in her early twenties, staring out into nothing. “Yes, hello. I received a call that my daughter is here. She was brought in by my mom because she couldn’t breathe.”

“Name?” the clerk asks apathetically.

Bob laughs as though her questions is absurd. “Well. How many fucking two-year-olds do you get in here in one night?” He drapes himself over the desk to keep himself stable, He giggles again, and focuses his red-rimmed, watery eyes on the V-neck of her scrub top. “I’m only joking with you.” He flashes her a crooked smile, clearly pleased with himself.

“Langdon,” Lynne interjects, her patience waning. She shoots Bob a sharp look, and he laughs again.

The desk clerk picks up the phone and dials three numbers. “Yes, is the Langdon girl still here?” She pops her gum with utter boredom, then gives an apathetic “Thanks.” Just to make sure she has Bob’s full attention, she leans forward across the desk. “She ain’t here.”

“What do you mean she *ain’t* here? We got a call that said she was here.”

“Well she ain’t here now. Her grandparents took her home. She was released.” The clerk turns away to indicate that she’s not willing not provide further information.

Bob turns to Lynne and shakes his head in disbelief. “Who is this fucking bitch?”

* * *

The old station wagon winds through the hills on the back roads between Pittsfield and Pleasant Hill. The gravel crunches under the weight of the car, and the tires kick up dirt that suspends in the humid air, thick enough to make her want to choke. The corn is getting tall, which means it’s harder to spot the deer. Her eyes scour the darkness for the shine of their eyes

in the headlights. It's the only indication she'll have if they rush at her from the darkness. If she sees one, another will inevitably follow, so she proceeds with caution.

Bob is passed out in the passenger seat, and she welcomes the silence. Things have been bad since Bob lost his job at Country Companies. Bob and his best-friend Leo had been the top insurance salesmen in the area, to the point that their work bled into leisure time. They'd hit the dim, musky taverns and throw back a few cans of Miller Genuine Draft before one would inevitably say to the other something along the lines of, "I bet I can get more than half this bar to buy a policy from me." With a sly smile and raise of the eyebrow, they'd slide off their barstools and go to work on their respective sides of the bar. By the end of the night, they'd meet triumphantly to count their winnings while patrons piled into their cars feeling more secure about their futures. At least that's how Bob had always told the story, beaming with pride and self-assurance.

Lynne slows down in anticipation of the S curves. The road is so familiar to her that she no longer sees the signs that warn motorists to reduce speed. The corn fields give way to cow pastures, and the smell of manure and hay elicit the nostalgia of her childhood, breaking her out of her thoughts only momentarily, long enough to evoke the image of her younger self in a sundress, running after her brothers through the farmlands, their laughter carried away by the breeze.

Bob had teetered into the kitchen one evening in '76. His alcohol-fueled alter-ego had an exaggerated air of defiance that night. "Wes came in and started giving me shit about how much work I've missed. Me! Can you believe that?" He locked eyes on Lynne, willing her to be appalled along with him. He had missed a lot of work, it was true, but she was practiced enough

that she didn't point it out. He had grown so volatile that maintaining his complacency had become a full-time job for her.

Instead of speaking, she feigned a look of disbelief.

“So I told him that he needed to quit worrying about me. He needs to be worrying about his employees and their so-called heart problems. I told him Leo went with us to Indy last weekend and partied it up like a college kid. He's too sick to work, but I guess he ain't too sick to party. So now he's outta there.”

“You got him fired?!” She couldn't help herself this time. “For God's sake, the man just had a heart attack!” She couldn't fathom that Bob would betray Leo so easily, for no other reason than to deflect from his own shortcomings.

“Listen here! Leo's out there claiming he's too sick to work, and Wes wants to get on *my* ass about missing too many days? No. He can't treat me like that. I haven't done nothin' that anybody else hasn't done. He's just picking on me because I'm a better salesman than he is, and he can't stand it.”

Lynne idles at the stop sign in Martinsburg, a tiny township—population 24—that had arbitrarily sprouted between the woods and the farmland. She shakes her head, remembering how much Bob had needed Leo. The competition and the friendship were the key ingredients to his success. The night Leo was fired, Bob began his descent into a self-aborrent catastrophe.

She turns left where the density of the trees makes the night seem darker. A cemetery hides, tucked away in the woods. Her parents had taken her there when she was young, though she doesn't remember why. She pictures them kneeling close together, trying to read the faded, moss-covered etchings. They meandered from stone to stone without deliberation; there only purpose was to be together.

Along the road, Lynne watches a fox glide alongside the car. He steps deliberately, tempting fate. One misstep could end him.

There were still a few good years in there for Bob, though he had only been weaving in and out of work, of life, essentially. He once won an award for selling over a million dollars in life insurance policies; it was sometime during that year. At the ceremony, someone yelled, “Oh, who are you kidding? Give that award to Lynne!” The joke could have easily been taken as emasculation, and Lynne remembered flinching. Lucky for her, the idea of a woman agent had been too absurd to be taken seriously.

The car crests over the hill, and the gravel turns to pavement. Tiny houses are sprung about in no specific pattern, the yards landscaped with moderate care and precision. Lynne pulls into a driveway off Union Street, the home where she grew up. The large walnut tree casts shadows over dull white siding, and the windows stare absently in her direction.

After her youngest was born in '83, Lynne took a teaching job, and Bob swam to the bottom of his MGD can. Sometime last year, after Bob's work performance had become so insufferable that it could no longer be overlooked, Wes stopped by to offer one last lifeline. “I think you need help, Bob. There are some great facilities and programs available. I'll give you a leave of absence. I think it would do you some good.”

“Get the fuck out of my house, Wes.”

Bob hasn't been back to work since.

There are no cars in the driveway which indicates that her parents had taken the kids back to the farm. With a sigh, Lynne backs out the car and starts for Howell Hollow. Her joints, ache from the car ride, and her muscles throb with worry. She brings the car to a stop at the bottom of the hill where the “Four Way Stop” serves as the major intersection of the town. She turns left on

Quincy Street, the main street, that will lead her to the Farm. Windows of the storefronts reflect her old car as it crawls by. She passes the Barber Shop with the old-fashioned red and white barber pole, stationary in the early hours of the morning. Then there's the meager library, full of books that go unread. She can almost smell the dust and oil from the hardware store, owned by the same family for decades and forever unchanged. Next to that is a parking lot where the Nickelodeon used to be. It had once contained many of her fondest memories. The little high school marks the edge of the town, and the world opens again. To the east, the sun begins to peek over the bluffs, the pink and orange hues spanning to the west over the river bottoms, kissing the silk of the corn stalks along the way.

Down the hollow—she had worked hard to break herself of calling it a holler—fallen branches adorn the road, and grassy fields lie flat, as though the hand of God had smoothed them down once they had become too unruly.

There had been a great storm here.

May 5, 1982

Hi,

I guess I owe you an apology. Lynne called me and gave me hell for being such a creep. She's right of course. She called me at work and said, "Bruce Puterbaugh, call your mother." It was really quite touching. I'm sorry.

Sometimes I feel guilty about being so far away and being really wrapped up in my own life but there's no reason to feel guilty about that. It's gotten to the point when time is such a precious commodity that I have to rob myself of sleep just to get everything done and that ain't right.

I guess the news is that I'm in a rock combo, Jett Rink, named after the James Dean character in *Giant*. We're writing, recording and looking for a drummer. I'll send a tape when we have completed a collection. We're copywriting songs and trying to sell them but are most interested in performing. We have a sound man, Ed Escobar, and electronic tech at the Med Center. We recently put together a professional PA system and are renting it to other groups to help pay for it.

I'm training for the Bay to Breakers, the longest track for a foot race in the world (60,000 runners can race comfortably), on May 15. It's about 7 miles across the city (one really steep hill) from the Embarcadero to Ocean Beach. I'm living now in the Richmond--or the Avenues as it's called. 48th Ave is at the beach and I'm on 25th, just 2 blocks from Golden Gate Park. This neighborhood is prominently Asian and has lots of really good restaurants. It's a few blocks from the Presidio. I'll try to get some photos together. This apt. has a spectacular view (Golden Gate Bridge, Transamerica Pyramid, Lone Mountain USF, UC Med, Mt. Sutro—really panoramic!). It's a modern bldg. with glass

from the ceiling to floor on the entire east side. You can see the ocean from the roof. It's great.

I have a job interview tomorrow in the Department of Neurological Surgery at UCSF. Personnel work is getting tiresome—I hate my job. The job in Neurosurgery is in the editorial office and I have a very good chance to get it. Working at the Medical Center is quite different than downtown where everyone stresses and hurries about. It's a major research center and so an invigorating place to work. Some of the docs are really ego-inflated but they don't intimidate me. Some of them have been peering into the microscopes for too long, and of course everybody wants to get published. That's really why teaching and research hospitals exist, and not the myth of patient care. You get cynical after a while.

So I'm up at 5:30 most days, take about 10-15 laps around this lake in the park (the track, not in the water) then shower and catch a streetcar to UC, 8-5, back home for rehearsal til about 9 with a break for dinner and bed about 10. I bet you thought I was up to 2 am every night taking drugs and getting laid. Wrong! If I'm up after midnight it takes me two days to recover.

I'm thoroughly disgusted by the Reagan Administration—further proof that the Chase Manhattan Bank is running the country but I won't go into that. If you liked Vietnam, you'll love El Salvador.

Everyone is invited to come out and see me (is an invitation really necessary? – I hope not). San Francisco is ~~probably~~ the most beautiful city in the country and I love it for its city qualities although I miss the country, especially summer, which we really don't have here. I'm not opposed to the "good old American values," we just don't have them here.

People who do, try to overcompensate and go off the right edge. Visitors here look at the bizarre or unorthodox people and feel threatened instead of amused. Middle America has got to lighten up!

I just want you to know that I'm not just okay but doing quite well, thank you. I'm just not sure how much longer I can resist adulthood. Wish me luck.

Bruce

Idiot Chicken

Lynne swings the screen door open and steps in to see Juanita sweeping the shining linoleum. They both stop abruptly when their feral eyes meet, both taken aback by the look of the other. Lynne's mascara has darkened the circles under her eyes, a stark contrast to her pale face, and her dull brown hair frizzes in the humid air that clutches Bob's stench, that bittersweet smell of stale beer and sweat coaxed from his pores by the heat. Juanita's hair, on the other hand—usually voluminous after her rigorous morning routine—is matted to her head so that the bits of gray, generally disguised by the blonde dye, shine through at the roots.

Bob shoves past Lynne to drop himself into the bedroom to the left, where his daughter had struggled for breath only hours earlier, and he gives Juanita a slight grunt and a head nod along the way. Juanita sets the broom against the wall and her fingers linger on its touch as though she's afraid that, upon its release, the dirt will creep in from the crevices and pervade her immaculate kitchen. The need to work, to scrub, plagues her until Lynne's arms wrap so tightly around her tiny frame that she must let go, and she begins to weep.

"Is it bad, Mom? What's wrong with her? Where is she?" Lynne looks around wildly for traces of her daughter. Fear clutches and pulls at her chest.

"Oh, no! I'm so sorry! She has an ear infection, sore tonsils, and pneumonia. They gave her antibiotics, but she's so congested that I stayed up with her all night. She'll be fine. I didn't mean to alarm you." She sweeps her hand down Lynne's arm in a light caress. "She's sleeping now, and so is Jamie. Lynold has already gone out to check on the animals."

"Mom, I'm so sorry I wasn't here. This was clearly a strain for you. If I would have known...." Lynne slides into the vinyl kitchen chair. It's part of a dining set that was bought new in the 1950s and was meant to resemble the sets at those old diners—the kinds of places that

brought comfort with middle-class nostalgia and a solidarity in mid-century modern décor. No one ever seemed to mind the distorted reflections in the metal framework. Lynne pulls her legs up close to her and traces the checkered pattern of the tablecloth with her fingers while Juanita disappears around the corner of the L-shaped kitchen.

After some clanging, the room is perfumed with roasted coffee beans and comfort. Lynne folds into herself until Juanita reappears with two cups of coffee and pulls out the adjacent chair. When Juanita sits, finally, her body deflates. It feels like the first time she has exhaled in hours.

Juanita is quiet for a bit, and her mouth contorts as though she's intent on forming words with perfect articulation, so Lynne lets her legs down and leans forward. "What happened?"

"A man named Tom from San Francisco called last night." Juanita pauses, willing herself to continue with some semblance of strength. "Your brother is in the hospital." Her lip begins to quiver. "He...he has... AIDS in his lungs."

Juanita crumples and the vinyl squeaks under her.

"What?" Lynne asks. "What?"

She shakes her head as though she can will it away. If she can just make sense of it, she can find a solution. Mascara-laden tears begin to trickle down her cheeks, and her eyes search for anything but Juanita's face, for that would surely break her. A chicken by the coop catches her eye. The old hen struts along the fence of the pig pen with utter confidence until she falls off for ostensibly no reason at all. She flogs about, squawking until she regains her balance, and then, like an idiot chicken, jumps to the fence rail again, missing badly.

Lynne's mind reaches beyond, into the distant trees and rolling hills, her eyes searching miles of farmland, of rivers, of cities, of canyons, of America. Somewhere she finds a memory, something to elicit some emotion to cut through her shock, and her brows furrow.

In '76, when she was moving from one apartment to another, Bob and Bruce had both shown up to help. It had been the only time they met. They regarded each other with cold condescension, unable to hide the disgust they felt for the other while some kind of combustion rifted through them.

Bruce pulled her aside. "Are you insane?" he asked her. "He's twice your age. He's gross."

"He's not twice my age. It's only a twelve year difference. We're adults."

Bruce visibly shuddered. "Run, Lynne." And with that, he walked out.

Bob appeared from the other side of the door and snorted. "That stoner faggot is your brother?"

"He's not a faggot."

"Are you kidding me?" Bob laughed at her pointedly. "That guy's handled more cigars than Cuba." He laughed again, pleased with himself. "He flew in from Fairytown with a layover at Toadstool."

"Oh, shut up. I think I would know if he was gay. I know only some of the women he's slept with, he's been with so many." But she remembered the way her mind flashed to his Senior profile book. He had listed his favorite actress as Julie Andrews and proclaimed his love for musicals. She remembered that she had shaken the image from her mind at the time.

"You mark my words," Bob continued, "next time you see him, he'll be wearing a tutu and talking with a lisp."

Bob's words bring her back to the kitchen table. "I knew something like this was going to happen," she says with disgust. "Bruce just has no regard for anyone. He ran off to California with that Chris guy and just lived recklessly!" Lynne seethes, and she can't stop the tears from

flowing faster, streaking her cheeks with black webs. “I told him! Last time I talked to him I told him—”

Her voice lowers to a whisper. “Oh god, Mom. I told him he was going to Hell.”

Juanita sniffles, and stays quiet for a moment. Her stoicism says that she’s already considered the idea and swept it away for later. She notices the desperate look on Lynne’s face, and leans in. “You had no way of knowing. He bedded so many women when he lived here, and he loved sports!”

“But I did know, Mom. Or at least I suspected.” Lynne tries fruitlessly to catch the remainder of her mascara with her finger.

“Even before the epidemic showed up in the news, I knew that gay men gathered in San Francisco. He never told me he was gay, but I knew.” She shrugs as though she’s submitting to her follies.

“He was talking more effeminately, and the whole San Francisco thing, and when he wasn’t calling home as much.... I just knew.”

Juanita reaches for Lynne’s hand and squeezes to urge her to continue. Lynne sniffles. “So, I called him, or rather, Bob tracked him down at work. Once Bruce was on the phone, Bob handed it to me. I just lost it, Mom. I knew you had been worried about him, and the words just fell out.”

Lynne’s breath gusts from her chest in a near cough, and she can no longer stifle the sobs. “I yelled...I screamed, ‘What the hell is the matter with you! Why can’t you call your mother! She’s worried sick!’”

Lynne takes a hard breath, sucking the snot from her nose and the tears from her cheeks into her mouth. “And what is going on out there?” she continues. “What are you doing with your life, Bruce? Do you know what happens to people who live so carelessly!”

Her voice lowers to a whisper. “And he was crushed. Just crushed. He just kept apologizing....” Lynne trails off.

Juanita grabs a box of Kleenexes and sets them down on the table. Then she heads to the kitchen to pour more coffee, giving Lynne a chance to get a hold of herself.

She returns and sets down the mugs before sliding back into her seat. “You mentioned his, well, ‘friend,’ Chis.” Juanita wads her tissue and mops up the coffee ring on the table.

“Remember when he came down with Bruce that one time? Before they left for San Francisco?”

“Yeah?”

“He told me he was gay.”

“What? How come you never told me?”

“I just didn’t believe him.”

“Well, what did you say?”

“I just said, ‘Oh, you are not!’ and left it at that!”

A loud, high-pitched laugh escapes Lynne, starting from deep inside and forcing its way through her clenched teeth. Juanita gapes at her, eyes wide, before doubling over in laughter. The tears continue to flow without any specific emotion tied to them—laughter and sadness, and laughter, and anger—until it is still again.

“What are we going to do about Bruce’s soul?”

Dickie's Loyalty

Sizzling chicken pops grease onto Bob's bare arm, prompting him to yell, "Goddammit" in an otherwise religious household. Static trickles down his spine, indicative of the remark. His skin prickles with the guilt bestowed upon him by centuries of Catholicism funneled through his unforgiving parents into him, inescapable even after their deaths. Lynold and Juanita don't acknowledge his outburst, so he decides not to draw attention to it. He sips his beer and laughs to himself, muttering, "That sonuvagun is hot." His eyes bounce from side to side, waiting for waves of judgment from the older couple.

Jamie bounces into the room with excitement. "Dad! Dad! Look, I made an airplane!"

Bob jolts out an arm to keep Jamie from venturing any closer to the spitting pan. "Hey, that's great, Jim. Tape some pennies in the middle. Give it a little weight, and it'll fly better."

"Grandpa! You got any pennies?" Jamie asks and burrows his eyebrows while he considers the logistics of Bob's advice.

Lynold smiles and pretends to think on it. "Well, I believe I might just have a few." He laughs so his shoulders shake, genuinely delighted by Jamie's precocious enthusiasm. Lynold and Jamie disappear around the corner. Bob sees them pass by the French doors that separate the main kitchen and living room. As they pass, Bob catches a glimpse of Lynne lying on the sofa with Bridget, who is beginning to stir, her cheeks flushed with fever.

The living room is a modest yet cozy space. A love seat, two chairs of lime green and orange, respectively, a tube tv on a small metal frame, a wood-burning stove, and a sewing machine adorn the room. The wood floors still hold their deep amber shine despite the sags where the foundation has settled. The front door is wide open to beg a flow from the still air. Beyond the door sprawls a front yard with a tall oak tree that sits alongside the gravel road

before the countryside gives way to cornfields. “You know what would be perfect?” Bob says to Juanita.

“What’s that?” she responds, more out of hospitality than curiosity.

“A great big hammock coming off that oak tree. I bet I could lay there all day without a care in the world. You’re really lucky, being out here so far away from real problems.”

With a slight flinch, Juanita responds, “I suppose I am blessed with the gift of God and all His beauty.” Irritation cuts through her sweet voice, but her face remains pleasant.

Behind her, Lynne shuffles in with Bridget on her hip, and they pull up the seat at the table. Bob watches as Juanita flashes Lynne a look that says, “He’s done it again.”

He recognizes the look because he’s seen it time and time again. His skin prickles again, and his words replay in his mind. *So far away from any real problems....* He shouldn’t have said that she doesn’t have problems, but that’s not what he meant, and he sincerely felt like she should understand that. *Some people are just so goddamn sensitive*, he thinks. But the anxious feeling nags at him, his stomach poking at his chest as if to remind his heart that he should feel ashamed. He swigs his beer, long and hard, covering the mouth of the can, suckling the nectar. Bob flips over the pieces of chicken and plops them back into the grease, and the kitchen roars with sizzles and pops.

Fuck ‘em, then.

The door slams, and Bob turns in time to see Jamie blur by the windows. Bridget looks longingly at the door from her mother’s lap and begins to whimper and wiggle. “No, now, you’re sick. You can’t go out there,” Lynne says.

“Ah, let’er go,” Bob says. “She could use the fresh air. She’ll be fine.”

Bridget begins to climb down again, and Lynne shoots Bob a helpless look. Bob waves his hand dismissively. “She’ll be fine. She’s had her medicine. Go on. Let ‘er go.” Lynne sighs and the door squeaks and slams again.

Lynold bops into the room, nearly dancing, with a brimming grin on his face, despite the tension. “So, Bob,” Lynold says, “we’re thinkin’ ‘bout breedin’ ol’ Fred out there. Whatta ya say we give ya one o’ the pups for the kids?”

Bob chuckles. “Ah, I don’t think so. You know who’d end up taking care of it, don’t ya?” He points a finger at himself and gives Lynold a look that dares him to guess incorrectly. “Me,” Bob says with a nod of finality.

Bob takes in Lynold for a moment. Lynold is a short and lean man, his skin aged by the sun. His bright blue eyes, not so different from Bob’s, hide behind the dark framed, eyebrow glasses. Behind those eyes, Bob realizes, is a smart, calculating man.

Lynold often plays the elated, happy-go-lucky farmer, but everything he does is with purpose. He’s a hard worker, and he prides himself in that. Shame washes over Bob, trickling down from his brain and dripping through his pores to meet the greasy heat. Bob hasn’t worked in a long time.

He had quit after the Indy trip with Lynne, Lynold, Juanita, and Leo. He and Leo partied hard for that entire weekend, even though Leo was, apparently, too sick to work. Wes had come by the house a couple of days later, after Bob had called off work to recover. Wes had the nerve to ride Bob’s ass for lagging at work, but gave Leo, who had been “too sick to work” after his heart attack, a pass. Sickness hadn’t stopped Leo from partying it up in Indy and slobbering all over Juanita the weekend before, and that was exactly what Bob told Wes. He’d be damned if Leo got all the praises while Bob got his ass chewed for...what? Getting drunk over a weekend?

Leo was fired the next day, but nothing was the same after that. Wes was gunning for Bob. Jealous is what he was. Bob was selling so much insurance that he was making Wes, the big boss man, look bad. Wes eventually came by the house talking some shit about rehab or something. That's how he wanted to get rid of Bob. He wanted some kind of record showing that Bob wasn't right in the head. Corporate would have been pissed if Bob, their top agent, was fired, so Wes had to do something to cover his tracks.

Bob refocuses and notices that Lynold seems to be regarding him with interest.

"I had a dog once," Bob says. "It was a good ol' dog."

"Oh, yeah?" Lynold responds. "What kind?"

"Oh, he was an old mutt. Dickie was his name." Bob looks past Lynold until he can visualize the pups in the box, suckling from their mom's teet. "The farm was just a mile from mine, so I'd ride my little horse over every day just to see them little pups." Bob smiles as he looks upon the scene in his mind. "They'd just root their way around, trying to find that milk, and eventually, they opened their eyes and looked around like, 'Who's gonna take me home?' I picked the runt of the litter."

Lynold smiles too, and nods along knowingly, urging Bob to continue.

"My mom, she always had a thing for the underdogs." He laughs. "She was a feisty one, but man would she fight for those underdogs. One time," Bob says breathlessly, "she was at a basketball game, and she got so mad at the ref, she hit him in the head with her purse!" Bob is barely able to get the final sentence out before he bursts into a high-pitched howl oozing with admiration.

Lynold chuckles along, either out of sheer politeness, amicability, or perhaps he actually finds it funny. Bob isn't sure, but he is pleased by it.

“Anyway, I picked up the pup and got on my horse and took him back home. Mom, she wadn’t too happy.” Bob chortles as he replays the image. “She gave me a look that said, ‘You got to be kiddin’ me.’ But she wrapped him up in her apron and off she went with him anyway.”

Bob pauses to take the chicken out of the pan and sets it on the paper towels to soak up the grease. “That ol’ dog was mean though, I’ll tell ya what. By the time he was big enough, he would run that mailman off every day until the mailman said he wouldn’t come back no more as long as Dickie was there. So, Mom sent ol’ Dickie off to live with Uncle Jerald Langdon.”

“Did you get to visit him often?”

“Yeah, yep,” Bob says, nodding his head with fervor, “I’d go visit when I could. It wasn’t the same though. Not for either of us, apparently!”

“As a matter of fact, some years later, I don’t know, maybe two or three, Uncle Jerald had Dickie in the back of his truck and took him into Jacksonville. Bout the time they hit the town square, Dickie jumped out, and he was off! Boy, I tell ya, he showed up at the farm. It was 20 miles from there! The pads on the bottom of his feet, ya know, were cracked and bleeding, and he had been shot somewhere along the way.”

Bob’s eyes go vacant as his mind wanders to the past, and his shell is left standing in front of the stove with a goofy grin. “Yep, nothin’ could stop that stubborn ol’ dog,” he says finally.

“Mom went and took him to the back of the house to remove the pellets from him. That sonuvabitch lived for 14 or 15 years after that!” Pride swells in Bob, but his smile fades with the remembrance of loss. He shakes his head as though he could cast off the grief somehow. “Yep. Good ol’ dog, that Dickie. Good ol’ dog. Loyal too.”

Bob draws long and hard from his beer can before turning off the burner. Lynnold and Juanita excuse themselves and disappear down the hallway. Lynne steps in beside Bob to tend to the pot of potatoes waiting to be mashed, and she turns the burner on to heat the corn. She hands Bob the cannister of flour for the gravy, and they commence preparation of the elaborate meal, ebbing and flowing rhythmically, creating a masterpiece of sustenance. There is no need for words. Lynne understands Bob's needs.

She reaches across him for the salt and catches his gaze. "Thank you for doing all of this and for not bringing up the whole Bruce situation. I think you helped take their minds off of everything."

"Well, they wouldn't have wanted to hear what I had to say about it anyway."

Lynne's green eyes blaze, and she turns back to the food, careful to keep her back to him.

"Hey." He grabs her arm and pulls until she is facing him. "You listen to me."

She looks at him, flakes of gold fire blazing in the green of her irises.

"You don't need to worry about him. He left to go prance around California like the fairy he is."

Lynne looks down shamefully. Bob shakes her to regain her attention, to be in command. He needs her to know he has the final say in this.

"I'm here. Your kids are here. We're all you need. We're what you need to focus on."

His face softens, and he smiles, snorts really, at her naivete.

He feels her deflate beneath his grip.

"See now? You're okay." He snickers again and claps her on the back. "I'll finish up here. Go on and grab me a beer."

Perspective

In a vision I saw

Down a dimlit road

Some distance ahead of me

A lonely youth, with head bowed low,

By a burden I could not see.

Yet I sensed the anguish and pain he felt

In his faltering steps, so slow,

And I longed to gather him close in my arms,

His peace of mind to bestow.

As I put forth my hands

To lighten the load,

His head raised to me, with a smile,

And there in the gloom

My eyes fell upon, the face of my own child.

-Juanita Puterbaugh

The Layover

“Oh, I just can’t stand it Lynold.”

“What’s that?”

“Waiting. Stuck here in this filthy ol’ airport and nothing to do but sit with my thoughts.”

Juanita pulls at a thread in the seam of her pants. “Would you look at that?”

Lynold looks down to where her fingers struggle helplessly at the side of her leg. “Yeah, I see it.” He looks away again and reaches for the tobacco pouch in his shirt pocket. He hits his pipe against the palm of his hand to empty it of the old ash and packs it full of fresh tobacco, lighting it with a match while he smacks his lips off the stem in successive pops. “I reckon’ you got a sewing kit with you like ya usually do. You can fix it up when we get to the hotel. I wouldn’t worry too much ‘bout it right now.” His tone is coated with reason.

Juanita smooths her pants and then folds her hands in her lap. “Well, I suppose you’re right. I just can’t shake this feeling.”

“Oh, I’d say it’s only natural. No tellin’ what we’re walkin’ into.”

Anxiety creeps over her. A sort of pressure falls upon her shoulders, pushing her down into herself. Even under the Dallas sun, she feels shrouded by darkness, as though death is dancing in her peripheral, only stopping to kiss her temple in a playful tease. Breeze sifts through her hair as a plane starts down the runway in its preparation for ascent. As it gains speed, the air begins to roar, and the plane noses up, lets go of the ground, and tucks its wheels away. Her thoughts reverberate with screams so loud that she can no longer hear. Silhouettes dance over her, and she becomes paralyzed by her own perceptions, fully aware of her growing madness.

In the window of the plane, Bruce’s expressionless face peers back at her, so strangely clear from such a great distance.

She holds his gaze while they both sit motionless, aware of the barrier between them.

She closes her eyes, and her hands clench in her lap as she braces for the waves of violence to wash over her.

And just as suddenly as it came on, it's over. Lynold's hand rests on hers. The jet, in the distance now, becomes smaller and smaller in its flight, higher into the Heavens until all that is left is the white streak through the sky: a fading memory. A feeling of peacefulness settles over her for only an instant. Juanita touches her face and finds that it is wet with tears.

She turns to Lynold, whose piercing blue eyes gaze at something so far into the distance that she can't feel him with her in this moment.

"We didn't make it in time," she says softly.

After a moment, Lynold answers from somewhere else. "We still have to get on the plane."

CHAPTER III: THE TENDERLOIN

10-8-85

Dear Mom and Dad,

It's so hard to write after not having done so for so many months. There's so much I should have said right along and now as, I try to retrieve it, I stumble. I wonder if you are O.K. and looking forward to the future. I hope that I'm not too great a disappointment. It must seem that I, at some point, chose to share my life with friends at the expense of family. You must regard me as cool and distant, maybe cruel. This was never my intention. I'm told that parenting is both difficult and rewarding and I feel that I've been more the former than the latter. You helped me to become independent, then I moved away—it seems unfair and ironic.

I want the tone of this letter to convey confidence and happiness, but, truth is, this is a difficult time for me, as it is for all of us, so I won't try to hide that from you, of all people.

I left my job at UCSF last May. My "boss", the Sr Editor in the Anesthesia Dept., moved to St. Augustine, her husband's hometown, and I learned how much my approach to the job depended on her inspiration and motivation. I left without a clear idea of what was next for me. The uncertainty appealed to me for a while in a romantic sort of way, but now keeping up and paying rent in this terribly expensive city (which I love) has become a task. The skills and abilities that I developed at UC do not easily lend themselves to a setting outside of the rather narrow framework of medical research activities. That is to say, I've had a couple of service-oriented jobs since then and miss the security and income I had at the university. The last job I had—a restaurant—ended

when the landlord tripled the rent (a common practice re: nonresidential properties) and the place closed. I'm shopping my resume around, trying to find a "desk" job that suits me.

Last month a close friend (actually, my mentor at UC) of over 5 years confirmed that he was dying and moved to rural Oregon, leaving me angry and confused. It's a relief, in a way, not to have to watch someone you respect and admire waste away; but other than that, I can be a loyal and supportive friend but am being denied that opportunity. I've been thinking of 1985 as, in the sporting vernacular, a "rebuilding year," but all of this has left me in a shallow funk that I can't quite shake. I'm hoping to reestablish communication with the "home folks" and gain a nice round perspective on where to go from here. I'm ashamed to say I don't know where to write Gerry and Lynne and hope to get credit with the phone company soon.

Love and warm regards,

Bruce

Shedding Skin

Lynold backs himself against the living room wall of this dingy little apartment. The walls are stained with the sins of San Francisco. The orange of dusk shines through tar-stained windows and dust flutters in the streaks that wash over Bruce's emaciated body.

Juanita waves her hands over his skin, pausing over the lesions like she wants to wipe them away but is too afraid to touch. She fluffs the pillow behind him and sweeps the exposed sheets with her hand as though she is banishing critters.

Bruce's friends, Chris, Pat, and Loretta, had met Lynold and Juanita at the airport and informed them of Bruce's passing, though the news did not surprise them.

"We kept him there for you," Chris had told them.

Lynold understood that Chris meant Bruce, but what he really meant was Bruce's body. Bruce wasn't there anymore. Lynold didn't reckon that Bruce had been there for a long time. At least not Lynold and Juanita's Bruce.

When they had first arrived at the apartment on Natoma street, in The Tenderloin as they had called it, a woman was standing on the sidewalk in her underwear, and a sickly man seemed to be sleeping by the trashcan in the alley. Lynold wrapped his arm around Juanita, and they mounted the steps to the studio apartment. Even the concrete seemed dirty and infectious.

Lynold crossed some kind of vortex upon entering, where the stale air stole his breath and time slowed down so that he could only sludge forward through the swamp. A strange man draped himself over Bruce's body and wept openly. Lynold tensed to keep from drowning and had backed up to the wall, careful not to disturb the smudges.

From across the room, Pat, a tiny Italian man, catches Lynold's eye, and Lynold recognizes Pat's displacement. He wears an expression that mirrors Lynold's, like he's trying to

hide his discomfort. He doesn't belong in this scene either. Pat tips his head slightly toward Lynold in a nod of solidarity.

Juanita blows her nose into a Kleenex she had pulled from her pocket, and suddenly Lynold can breathe again. He sucks the contaminated air into his lungs and steps forward to console his wife, drawing her into his arms. Over her shoulder he sees the shell that used to be his son. Bones protrude as though they are ready to shed the discolored skin that no longer belongs to him. Marks track their way over his arms, bruised holes that had never been allowed to heal. It's hard to say if they were made by a nurse, if they were medically induced. Lynold didn't suppose so. They seemed too old for that.

25 Feb. 1979

Dear Folks,

Sorry it's taken so long to get this written. I'm at work, Sunday afternoon, very slow, and it's nice to have this convenience of a typewriter.

I like this job—most of the time. I guess you could say it is at the bottom of a sinkhole of human grief—at least it seems that way sometimes. There are a large number of “burnouts” and people who talk to themselves in public. Maybe this is true of all large cities, I don't know. But then S.F. is not really very big, as cities go—400 some thousand. The City (as it's called) is surrounded by the Bay Area (as it's called) with a combined population of over 5 million. It's mostly a tourist town, that's probably why I'm working where I am—tourism is where the jobs are. Oakland, which offers the sanctuary of the Bay now has all the docks and most of the industry has moved south, down the peninsula to San Jose (which is larger than S.F.) It remains a banking/financial center, 250,000 white collar types work in a small, vertical downtown area just blocks from here. Then there is the Tenderloin, a district where the new mayor donned a blonde wig and stood on a street corner at night for 3 hours. I'm surprised she lasted that long. This hotel is on the fringe of the Tenderloin, but on the south side of Market Street.

I'm working 8-4, a new experience. Friday and Sat. off. This is a union job. Two thugs from Local 2 walked right out of a 1930s movie into the hotel and informed me I was going to join. One thug identified himself as my “business representative” Mr. Steiner. Didn't know I needed one.

It is so curious that ISU is billing me since I didn't attend classes there last semester. Oh well, I'll take it up with them.

Mom, glad you enjoyed your trip to N.J. I hear there was an earthquake there recently. I took a phone reservation for a guy from New Jersey, who said he was coming here to get away from the quakes.

Can you remember if we, as a family, drove to the top of Twin Peaks, here in the City? I'm sure we did, it looks so familiar. Anyway, that's very near where I live.

Got to get back to work—I'm sending Grandma some photos which I've asked her to share—will write more later.

Love,

Bruce

Gilts Could Start Pigging

Juanita awakens to the smell of Lynold's pipe. She breathes in the sweetness, pulling it into her lungs. He sits at the window and puffs; his eyes somewhere else. Chris and Loretta had arranged for Lynold and Juanita to stay at Family Link on Castro Street—a place for parents of AIDS patients. It is surprisingly clean and very efficient.

Lynold says, "I didn't want to wake you, so I thought I'd have a smoke while I waited. I need to call Dennis to check on the farm."

"We should call the kids too. Let them know." Juanita slips into her robe and tightened the belt.

"I reckon so," Lynold replies.

Lynold uses the phone first and asks Dennis—the neighboring farmer who had agreed to tend to the farms while they were gone—how things were going. There are a series of "uh huhs" and "yups" before Lynold thanks Dennis and hangs up the phone.

"Well?" Juanita asks

"Gilts could start pigging."

"Well, that'll be good, I s'pose."

In the bathroom, Juanita splashes water over her face, still in disbelief over their interaction, wondering why Lynold hadn't told Dennis. Or had he? She couldn't imagine that Dennis wouldn't have asked.

Juanita had also called to tell Lynne, who seemed curiously unsurprised at the news. She said she was washing dishes when the words "he's gone" had crossed through her mind. Bob had, of course, been out somewhere, maybe outside with his drinking buddies, but he wasn't there with her. Gosh darn it, Juanita just wished that Bob could get it together. She worried about

Lynne and the kids living in that kind of home. But being a good Christian means not giving up on your husband. They had taken vows, and they needed to stick by them. Lynne had already been divorced once, and Juanita couldn't bear to think about what it would look like, what the repercussions would be, if she had a second one.

Once Juanita is dressed, she bows her head over the sink.

“Heavenly Father, I thank you for the safe trip and for the good fortunes you bestow upon us. I ask that you have mercy on Bruce. I believe he was a good boy and that he meant well. He was just confused. He was tempted by the devil, and the devil won. Father, I don't know if it was something I or Lynold did, but I ask you, please, do not condemn my son to Hell. Also, please help heal Bob and Lynne's marriage. They need you more than ever, Father. Please shine your light over them and show them the way to redemption. In Jesus's name I pray, Amen.”

Juanita wipes a tear from her cheek, smooths her clothes, and opens the bathroom door. Lynold is waiting with coffee.

“What time did Loretta say they'd be here?” she asks him.

“Around 9:30. They said the place opened at 9:00.”

“I don't like this.”

“I wouldn't s'pose anyone would.”

“You know what I mean, Lynold. I can't stand the idea of him burning.”

“Juanita, we don't have a choice. 'Cause of the disease, he has to be cremated.” Lynold reaches into his shirt pocket to retrieve his tobacco pouch. “They'll scatter the remains on the Bay from a boat. Won't be so bad.” He struck a match and held it over the end of his pipe until the tobacco blazed gold and sweet smoke rolled from his purposed mouth.

“It’s unnatural, Lynold. He should have a proper burial at home. My brother died on a boat. He, too, was lost to the sea.”

“That was war, Juanita.”

“And this isn’t?”

Lynold puffs his pipe in silence. Juanita concludes that he is on his own boat now, somewhere outside of Japan during the war, though he’d never say it. Maybe it wasn’t right for her to make that comparison, but death lurks in the corners of this city. Depression clouds over Juanita, and sunny California seems like such a dark place to her.

She remembers the vacation they took to San Francisco when the kids were a bit younger, the last time they had all traveled together. It wasn’t until she was looking through the pictures after they returned that she realized Bruce had worn all black for the entirety of the trip. She hadn’t remembered buying so many black clothes. She didn’t know what was wrong with him.

She didn’t ask.

A swift wrap comes from the door. Lynold springs up to open it, welcoming the interruption. Chris and Loretta are waiting on the other side expectantly. Loretta says, “Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Puterbaugh.”

“Good morning, Loretta, Chris.” Juanita answers. Lynold shakes Chris’s hand with a hint of reluctance.

Lynold and Chris gather the bags while Juanita and Loretta follow behind them. “It’s not too far from here. We’ll go right by the park, and the Neptune Society building is just beautiful.”

“It used to be part of Odd Fellows Cemetery.” Chris calls over his shoulder. “Seems fitting.”

Juanita smiles politely, but Lynold giggles, tickled by the wordplay.

“We figured we would take you around the city and show you some of the places Bruce lived. He wasn’t always in the Tenderloin. He had a pretty nice place in the Richmond District, when he worked at the university.”

Chris briefly glances at Loretta with urgency before he unlocks the trunk of the Buick Riviera where he and Lynold stow the luggage. Loretta moves the passenger seat to allow Juanita to crawl into the back and slides in behind her to allow the men to sit in the front together.

“He really loved that job. It’s too bad that he lost his will after his boss left. But that was really Bruce, wasn’t it?” Juanita looks down at her clasped hands. “He had such a fire in him, but, it’s like he got bored too easily or something. He never saw things through. It was just on-to-the-next-adventure for him.”

Anticipation, or perhaps anxiety, rises in the car as though everyone has something to say in response to that, but no one speaks.

4-20-84

Mom –

Thanks for the nice card—I don't have one for you so I'm turning this one around. There is a copy store next door; they often toss out (on the sidewalk for pick-up) neat "seconds" and overruns like this note pad.

Wasn't much of a Holiday tho. Worked today (Friday) and go back Mon 8 a.m. Blame it on "godless" science and the fact that 50+% of the docs are Jewish—or both. No Easter at the UC Med Center, but good weather this weekend.

They won't let us forget that the Demos are coming and that Feinstein "doesn't particularly" want to be VP. Dianne, as she's known, as President of the Board of Supervisors (11 in all) announced the murder (assassinations?) of Mayor Moscone 6 weeks after I moved here. She became mayor by virtue of her office, then won reelection against another (more conservative) Democrat 75-25%. There are no (few) Republicans here. She wants national office (probably Sec of Health, Human Svs or transportation in the Mondale-

--Wasted Space—

Hart admin. Hart will win Calif, then Jackson will throw support to Mondale, who will pick Hart who will accept. Dianne will be there and go to D.C. and out of here so we can look at someone else. Some say she is fair, sensitive, strong-willed; others say she is wealthier, aloof and spoiled. She's both and every inch a politician, above all. She's

more qualified to be President than any of the mayor candidates but she is a Jew from Kooksville. Sad, the woman has guts and know-how (some say charisma). If only she called Peoria home!

Let's see how many of my predictions come true. I live 3 blocks from Moscone Center and looking forward to the fight...

Later - (and with much love)

Bruce

Political Malaise

Pat meets them at Original Joe's for dinner, an Italian restaurant in the Tenderloin.

Lynold and Juanita will be leaving to go back in the morning, but Chris, Loretta, and Pat insisted that they go out for dinner on their last night.

Arthritis curves Lynold's idle hands until they ache for work. He is anxious to get home to the farm, to tend to the cows and prepare the gilts. They need the piglets, and they need the cows to go to sale.

Lynold adjusts in his chair. "So, Pat, how did you know Bruce?"

"We actually went to ISU together. I was the one who hitchhiked out here with him the first time."

Juanita gasps so hard she chokes. Loretta hands her a glass of water and rubs her back. Lynold snickers and says, "Don't believe we ever heard that story."

"I wish there was something exciting to tell." Pat wipes his mouth with the red cloth napkin that had been draped across his lap.

"That's so dangerous," Juanita says with her hand on her chest. "How did you get anyone to stop?"

"We seemed to get rides easily enough just hanging out a sign. We got one really long ride in a VW bus-like vehicle."

"Of course," Lynold chuckles.

"Went from, I think, Iowa or Nebraska almost to the coast. Occasionally had to sleep on a highway ramp or some unobservable location."

"Oh my Lord." Juanita says.

“I recall hitting Oregon somewhere on the Columbia river. It was sunny, and everyone was in shorts looking oh-so West Coast-y. But little did I know it was a deception.”

“Oh yeah?” Lynold asks with raised eyebrows.

“When we actually made it to the coast, we spent miserable hours in the back of a pickup, freezing in the fog. Northern California and southern Oregon are noted for the marine inversion layer, which keeps the coastline smothered in fog all summer. Crossed the Golden Gate Bridge in the evening, and I don’t recall what happened next.”

“So, did you stay while Bruce went back?” Chris asks.

“Nah. I think at that point I became a big drag to the whole trip. We made it to Southern Cal and stayed on the beach for a day. But Bruce saw I wasn’t happy, and we headed back. My heart was still in Illinois.”

“But Bruce and I didn’t move here until after you did.”

“I came back to attend computer school in ’77. You guys came in 78, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” A sullen look falls across Chris’s face, and his eyes drop to his untouched plate.

“Look, I don’t know what went on with you guys. Bruce and I didn’t talk much about personal things. Our visits centered around music and politics.” Pat pauses as a young waiter reaches over the table to refill waters.

Chris shakes his head, “No, I know. It’s just an overwhelming loss, the worst one so far. He was brilliant and funny and talented. He was somehow incredibly happy and hopelessly sad simultaneously.”

“I always felt we both suffered from a political malaise. In Illinois, it was like we were in the hinterland where nothing much was happening, while the coasts experienced huge ferment. Vietnam was just such a...” he shakes his head, “words fail me.”

The teenage waiter, unaffected by the topic, interrupts, “Is there anything else I can get for you?”

Pat waves him away and continues, “It was horror incarnate, and we couldn’t do anything about it. I know Bruce was frustrated by it all. ‘People are in jail,’ he said to me once. He thought Berkeley was a place one could go to be in the thick of things. He really admired Mario Savio and the free speech movement.”

“So why did you stay?” Juanita asks with the greatest attempts to mask her disgust. “Why would you stay in this Godforsaken place?”

“I’d just gotten a job in Silicon Valley and spent the next few years traveling and partying with my wife, Mary. For me it was a great new career. I was in the promised land. The AIDS epidemic didn’t start until ’81. Deaths didn’t start mounting for a couple of years. My contacts with the queer community were very limited, mostly through Mary’s brother and a little bit with Bruce.”

Lynold clears his throat and reaches for his shirt pocket.

Juanita glances at Lynold hesitantly and looks back to Pat, her eyes pleading with him. “I just assumed you were... you know... one of—right in the middle of it.”

“Most definitely not in the middle of the scene. I was around when Milk and Moscone were murdered. Welcome Dianne Feinstein—end of the liberal dream, but I digress. Then all those people died in the Jonestown Massacre.”

He shakes his head, chasing away the memories. “Mindfuck enough, but I was out of the city long before the real hell was unleashed. And don’t forget, Castro Street was still a very exciting mecca when we first got here. It was an energizing and uplifting time, but my job took me to Berkeley. Ahh, the peaceful, non-political burbs.”

Chris and Loretta emanate discomfort, Loretta visibly flinching at Pat’s words. In a swift action, Pat begins to backpedal, “I mean, obviously the burbs are a little more sheltered. Hell, it was made all the worse by good President Reagan’s ignoring the epidemic. Until nice middle-class women started contracting it from blood transfusions last year.”

He chooses his words with purpose. “Yes, helplessness has been a rampant feeling. But I just haven’t been in the middle of it, so I can’t really speak to it.”

Chris stands up to pay the bill. Loretta starts to gather her purse, which prompts everyone to pile their napkins and silverware on their plates of dried-out pastas and dried-up sauces.

Lynold shakes Pat’s hand. “I know what you meant. Nobody has been too concerned about it in my parts neither.”

November 14, 1986

Dear Mr and Mrs Puterbaugh

I meant to write this letter much earlier but it brings up such a sad subject. I just hated to do it. I was Bruce's supervisor for over three years at the University, and he was such a special friend. I wanted you to know what a great employee he was, and how much all of us at work loved having him around. He was truly a person who lit up a room—so funny and witty. He made many days delightful that would have been dreary.

He was very good at his work and extremely conscientious and reliable. Also intelligent and resourceful. But most of all, he had a tremendously good sense of humor and generous spirit.

My life as the senior editor was pretty grim until Bruce was hired as my assistant. There was so much work and constant pressure. He was a godsend—one that I never took for granted.

There is not a day that goes by that I do not think of him and miss him. He was a very special person who made a lot of people happy, and you must have been proud of him.

Please accept my condolences. He will be missed more than I can say.

Sincerely,

Pauline S.

Leaving San Francisco

The room blazes orange as the sun comes up over San Francisco. The weight of reality settles over Juanita, and she feels an urgency to go home, as well as a reluctance.

Bruce died, and he's staying in San Francisco.

She had only really begun to understand him over the last couple of days. She had trespassed into his world, waiting to visit until after he had left so that she could poke around uninvited.

She slips out of bed and rummages through the drawers for a clean outfit. She settles on immaculately white jeans and a floral tunic. Lynold's breathing is steady, which means he's awake, but Juanita tip-toes to the bathroom anyway.

After she cleans herself, she collects her own toiletries and places them in the carrier, careful to arrange them in order by shape. When she opens the bathroom door, Lynold greets her. He's beaming and doing a little hop like a child who can't wait any longer to use the bathroom. Lynold's natural state is elation; as a result, his default expression is a smile. Juanita had always admired him for that.

While Lynold finishes in the bathroom, Juanita folds and packs the clothes with precision. She leaves the suitcase open so that Lynold's toiletries and dirty clothes can be packed as well. She makes the bed and cleans up the few pieces of litter from the floor.

Lynold comes out of the bathroom in just his jeans and undershirt. The fresh-scented steam follows him, and Juanita leans in to the mist as he passes her, taking in the smell.

"You know they pay people to clean the rooms." Lynold says.

"Oh, Lynold," Juanita says dismissively, "We can't let them think we're slob."

There are three short raps on the door, and Lynold answers, pulling on his button-up, flannel shirt. Tom Brownfield hands them both coffees and says, “Your flight leaves in an hour, so we’ll have to leave here soon.”

“Well, thank ya,” Lynold says with a smile. He turns to find the corner chair, his socks slung over his shoulder. He seems to have the music in him, and he can’t hardly stand it. He gives each leg a shake as he steps, and he begins to whistle in vibrato. Juanita can almost see the notes looping through the air.

“He was a lot like you, you know,” Tom says to Lynold, smiling in the afterthought.

Lynold doesn’t respond, but he forces the smile to stay on his face; Juanita can see the strain in the corners. “Except that he had an intensity to him. One minute he’d be telling jokes and goofing around, and then he’d be fired up about some world injustice.”

“Was he happy?” Juanita asks, her hope rising into her throat. She holds it back with tears.

“He used to be,” Tom said. “He really did.”

They walk out to the car, Lynold carrying the bags, and Tom is in his own head, obviously deliberating over his next words. It is clear by the way his lips are moving. Finally, he says, “His life started to go bad after he lost control of his IV drug use. He lost his job at the hospital for using their needles and morphine. Then he moved into a cheap apartment in the Tenderloin a couple of years ago.”

Juanita blinks at him as though he had just lashed out and hit her. “Why are you telling me this?”

Lynold puts his hand on the small of her back and prompts her to move into the back seat. He and Tom drop down into their respective seats.

“All I mean to say is—” Tom starts.

Lynold clears his throat to indicate that it is his turn to command the conversation. “I used to come back and forth ‘tween this city and Illinois when I was a kid. I had family who lived both places. We’d just pack up and move whenever we felt like it.”

He fondles his pocket for his pipe and pouch. “It wouldn’t just be my parents and brother neither. It’d be the whole clan. We traveled in *packs*.” Lynold pauses to let the image sink in, quietly laughing, anticipating that his audience would catch up at any moment.

“The traveling went on for decades. Bruce always said that we musta had some gypsy blood in us.” He laughs again, a hint of pride on his face.

“Anyway, during one of our trips out here, my dad told me that when he was a kid, his mom—my grandma, y’know—breastfed my Uncle Harve ‘til he was 9. Way past when she shoulda been.”

Tom smiles, his eyebrow raised. He seems equally confused and enthralled. He glances at Lynold in anticipation.

“Finally, word got out to the community, and a woman, Bird Bland was her name, came over. She steps in the house, you know, and the first thing she says is, ‘you cannot keep letting him have it. It’s time.’”

“I’d say!” Tom says.

“So then, every time Uncle Harve would start to undo her blouse, Bird would say, ‘No, you can’t let ‘im have it. Stand your ground, else he ain’t never learn.’”

Lynold lights a match and puffs on his pipe. After a long draw, he says, “‘Bout the third or fourth time, he’d finally had ‘bout enough o’ that, and he turned to ol’ Bird and said, ‘Lady, you’re really startin’ to piss me off!’”

They all erupt into laughter. He waits for them to settle and adds, “Bird got up outta her chair real fast, and he whipped into the bedroom. But that didn’t stop ol’ Bird. She followed right along after ‘im. And was in there ev’ry bit o’ 45 minutes. I don’t know what she said to him, but he didn’t never try to get the tit again!”

Juanita takes a breath and releases slowly, letting relief settle over her. She knows Lynold is protecting her. He knows it’s just all too much to think about right now.

Tom parks the car along the sidewalk in front of the airport entrance and walks them to their terminal where the plane awaits. “I’ll send you pictures of the service,” he says to Juanita.

“I’d really like that, Tom.”

He shakes her hand and lays his other hand over hers to hold her still for a moment longer. He stares into her eyes with great intensity. “We live in despair here. It’s a graveyard. I guess I just wanted you to know that we may have lived recklessly in some aspects, but no one deserves this.”

Lynold puts his arm around Juanita, but she stays locked with Tom, waiting for him to finish. “He was very happy, and he was a good person with a brilliant mind who didn’t deserve this. This disease will kill Chris. It will kill me.”

“Well, thanks for everything,” Lynold says to Tom and shakes his hand.

Juanita says, “Yes, thank you.” As she backs away, she keeps her eyes on him, somewhat bewildered, somewhat curious.

Once they are settled in their seats, Juanita says to Lynold, without turning to look at him, “I think we should try to raise awareness. In Bruce’s obituary, I’m going to ask that memorial donations be made to the AIDS foundation in San Francisco.”

“Juanita,” Lynold replies, “Don’t.”

CHAPTER IV: THE TOWNHOUSE

December 5, 1969

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Puterbaugh,

In case you don't remember me, I am Miki (Phyllis), the girl who came to Springfield to meet Bruce and bring him back to school that Sunday night Susie forgot him. Although you've never officially met me, perhaps you remember this incident.

I have little doubt that before you've finished reading this you will both dislike me intensely or even hate me, and I have no doubt whatsoever that your son will hate me. He has already told me he would if I contacted you.

Because of his refusal to tell you, I've decided that it would be a little easier coming from me than someone off the streets of Pleasant Hill. Too many people know about it there as it is, and as cruel as this letter may seem, I think it would be ten times worse for you to hear it that way.

Since there is just no way to break the news gently, I shall tell you the facts and then explain. In a matter of weeks, I will give birth to Bruce's child, and he will bear the name Puterbaugh. We are married only in legal terms. Though I meant my vows, Bruce did not. You see, he married me so I could keep our baby. For this I am very grateful to him. I love Bruce as I love no one else, and I want to keep his child.

You see, when you first met me, I was pregnant. At the time, Bruce loved me but marriage was definitely not in the plans. He said he would marry me anyway, but I knew that Bruce had a lot of growing up to do before he took on the responsibility of a family. Besides, I have never believed in forced marriages. Therefore, I refused.

I knew that I could not give up our child, however, and I asked only that he be a moral support and a source of strength to me. I felt a name was not important as long as the baby had the love of a mother. I also wanted Bruce to be happy, finish school and be able to accomplish the goals he had set for himself. With a wife and child this early in the game it might be possible but definitely a lot harder. So to make it easiest on him I decided to go it alone.

I was counting on his strength and support for the battles that lay ahead. But when he returned from Europe, he had decided he couldn't even provide that. Needless to say, this nearly killed me, but Bruce really felt he was doing the best thing, and I couldn't blame him.

All summer I worked on the problem alone; planning how I could manage to keep our baby. I saved my money—enough, I hoped—to last me at least till he was born. I searched for a way to break it to my folks with the least pain. I saw how it hurt them, and I know you will be hurt no less. I think that someday, years from now, if you discovered you had a grandchild you had known nothing about, you would be hurt even more.

To make a long story as short as possible, my parents were dead set against my keeping our child unless it had a name. They could see the problems ahead in just getting a decent job to support the child if I didn't have a name. When an employer sees a woman is single but has a child they seldom give her the chance to prove she isn't a promiscuous person. People are also cruel to the child even though it is not his fault. I couldn't see this then, and I fought long and hard against them.

But finally I could see that unless they helped me, I had no possible way of keeping our child, and to me that was the most important. Bruce finally consented to

give us a name providing we get an immediate divorce when the child is born, as long as I pay all the bills, medical and legal. So, Bruce and I were married November 13th in St. Joseph, Michigan. I will do my best to follow through with the agreement even though I would like so much to be accepted as his wife by him and you.

I have prayed and prayed to God to guide me, something I had turned away from the last three years, but somehow He has given me strength through all this. I hope now that He is the one who has been telling me to write you.

Please don't be hard on Bruce. This hasn't been as easy for him as I would have liked it to be and as much as I want him to change, if he doesn't I hope he can make a good life for himself. We made a mistake, and I will be working for the rest of my life to make up for it. I would like very much to be considered your daughter-in-law and have you accept the baby as your grandchild.

If you can't forgive me, please forgive Bruce. Don't hold anything against him because of me. He's really a most wonderful person, you know.

Sincerely,

Miki

The Brood Comes to Lunch

“They’re here.” Juanita leans forward and peers through the window behind Lynne. A blue sedan rounds the corner and creeps into the gravel strip in front of their house.

Lynne turns to snap open the blinds. Her brown, vinyl kitchen chair lets out a squeak, and the wheels roar over the white stick-tiles as she moves closer to the window. “Well, here we go,” she says.

They both stand up, and Juanita pokes her head into the living room doorway. “Mom? They’re here.” Grandma Winnie slowly hoists herself out of the spring-loaded, orange rocking chair, and takes her post in the entryway between the kitchen and living room. She folds her hands in front of her and freezes in picturesque stoicism. Juanita heads over to the oven to pull the roast out. Lynne opens the cabinets to gather the dishes to set the kitchen table.

The screen door of the enclosed porch slams shut. “Hello?” Miki’s voice rings loudly from the porch, and she flows into the house following her own treble, emerging through the saloon doors that divide the porch and the kitchen with Ken following closely. A chorus of “Hi! Hey! How are ya?” rings through the room and the rounds of hugs begin.

They take turns embracing each other, whispering, “I’m so sorry,” and “I’m so glad you came.” Juanita holds Miki a few seconds too long. She squeezes her eyes shut, willing her body to keep its composure. One single tear trickles down her face before she’s able to stop it. With a snuffle, she says, “Well,” and brushes her hands over her clothes to smooth the wrinkles.

Miki’s eyebrows draw upwards in surprise or remorse, and she says, “Oh, Mom,” before pulling Juanita in for another hug. She sways and rubs Juanita’s back as though she is soothing a child.

Juanita straightens and says, “I expect the brood in for lunch at any minute. Lynold, Bob, and the kids are at the farm. We decided on roast with carrots and potatoes.”

“Yes, it smells just wonderful in here. Let Ken and I put our stuff in one of the bedrooms upstairs, and we’re ready to eat!”

The stairs to the second level are pocketed away behind a cedar door in the living room; stairs that used to go down to the basement now go up after the remodel. The creaking of the stairs echo through the narrow staircase and as they turn the corner at the top to follow the remaining steps that are carpeted with the same brown, orange, and yellow shag as the living room.

The ceiling above her squawked, and Juanita could tell that Miki and Ken had made their way into the Blue Room, once shared by Bruce and Gerry as children.

Juanita remembers when the boys shared the room. It seemed big enough at the time, but their individual personalities outgrew their respective sides and crashed together somewhere in the middle. The struggle rippled through the household until she and Lynold were no longer able to contain Bruce, and he left for what they had deemed “His Sojourn.”

Miki and Ken reappear and roll their seats up to the table. Lynne passes the roast and potatoes to Ken just as he is sitting down. He awkwardly takes the bowl and scoops a large helping from Butterfly Gold Corelle serving dish. “So how did everything go?” he asks. “As well as one could hope?”

“Bob set the kitchen on fire.” Juanita responds. She blows on her food and then looks up to gauge their expressions. Her eyes shine with laughter.

“What?” Miki yelps.

She and Ken look at each other and then glance around the table for confirmation. Lynne nods with a mischievous smile, revealing that, indeed, her husband is an idiot.

“How in the world?” she asks.

“You know how I always have that hanging hand towel there on the handle. Well, the oven had been acting up before that, and I’m not sure what happened, but it made a growling sound like it was firing up, according to Bob, and the next thing he knew, it was on fire!”

Lynne doubles over laughing and sputters, “He stayed home with Bridget while we went to the funeral—we thought it’d be easier—so Mom told him he had to keep an eye on the things in the oven—”

“Good thing he didn’t take me literally!” The room erupts in laughter. Miki is boisterous; her laugh is infectious. Stories never seem as funny when they are retold after Miki because no one ever seems to laugh as hard as she does.

Lynne continues, “So, just then, Bridget comes flying into the kitchen, and he’s trying to get her outta there but the *oven is on fire!*” She waves her arms around to mimic the chaos.

“I could just see it, too,” Juanita says, “yelling swear words and fumbling around. He probably yelled something at Bridget like”—she nods her head to indicate that she has redacted a bad word—“Go on, now! Git!”

“I’m sure that didn’t stop Bridget!” Lynne replies. “If Bruce would have been here, he would have been egging her on.”

“If Bruce would have been here, he would have set the fire!” Juanita said. Lynne and Juanita bellow laughter again, but Miki’s smile fades.

“In fact, I think he was here in some way. The whole scene is so Bruce. I feel like he created the whole thing somehow, and just laughed as chaos ensued.” Lynne shakes her head.

“It’s like he’s letting us know he made it to the other side, and he’s still the same old Bruce. He was just so funny.”

“And clever,” Lynne says.

The room falls silent except for the scratching of the silverware against the plates. Juanita is aware of the tension as well as she’s aware that Miki never fully forgave Bruce for abandoning her, and they had to play the game with her. She held Michelle over them like a carrot on a stick, so she could make them prance or trot at her will.

Juanita puts the remainder of the roast and potatoes in the small oven over the stove and pauses without releasing the handle. Lynold still hadn’t replaced the stove after Bob had almost burned the house down two weeks prior. Since the range still worked and they had another oven, albeit much smaller, he had decided that they could make do.

In fact, while Juanita was returning dishes and Tupperware to their respective owners a few days after the funeral, Lynold took it upon himself to cook up something to eat. He pulled out a frozen pizza, unwrapped it, set it on a cookie sheet and attempted to put it in the small oven; except, it wouldn’t fit. Instead of accepting that they needed a new stove, he went to the toolbox in the back of his truck, fetched the tin snips, and cut the baking sheet down to a size that would fit in the small oven.

He ate his pizza that day.

Feeling defiant, Juanita turns around and says, “Lynne, do you remember Bruce’s stories from when he worked at the Capitol in Springfield?”

Lynne makes a sound somewhere between surprise and amusement. “Didn’t he get up on a table in one of the meeting rooms and start dancing or something?”

“He did. He said he passed by the room, and the tables were so inviting. He couldn’t hardly stand it. He just had to get up and dance.”

“Wasn’t there a meeting going on or something?” Lynne asks.

“No, because he said that people started filing in for the meeting, so he jumped down and just walked out without a word!”

“Yep,” Lynne says with a laugh. “That sounds like him!”

“Actually, though,” Juanita says, “I was talking about that banter he had with that senator. Remember?”

“In the *State Journal-Register*?”

“Yeah, he would write a letter to the editor complaining about things that were going on with the State, and the senator would come out with a rebuttal by the next week—”

“Oh yeah! And the senator figured out it was him!”

“Well,” Juanita says, “I think he always knew. Bruce said he passed by him in the hall, and without even looking at Bruce, the senator said, ‘Your move.’ Bruce was shocked!”

“Oh, that’s right!” Lynne says with excitement.

A clap sounds through the room, and everyone jumps. Miki’s hand is planted firmly where she had brought it down on the table. “I won’t sit here and listen to this!” She leans back in her chair and lets out a slow breath. “We’re not going to sit here and pretend that he was a good man. Death doesn’t rewrite history.”

Lynne stands up to get more coffee, and Juanita grabs the dust mop that she keeps in the corner to sweep the tension away. She always needs to keep the order.

She allows some time to pass before she asks in a meek, sweet voice, “Have you told Michelle?”

Miki sighs, "I finally told her last night. I said he died from a tumor, though, and I'd appreciate it if you don't tell her the truth right now."

Ken excuses himself and makes his way through the little office off the kitchen and then turns to enter the bathroom.

"She's fifteen," Juanita says, "you don't think she can handle it yet?"

Anger flashes in Miki's eyes. "Handle it?" she asks. "Handle what? That her mother didn't save herself for marriage? That she would have been born out of wedlock if her father hadn't been convinced that marriage would save our lives? That her dad loved us so little he decided sleeping with men would be a better than being a father and husband? That God punished him for his lifestyle? What do you think that would do to her?"

Lynne flinches. "Do you think that's better than letting her find out on her own someday?"

"How would she ever know?" Miki asks. "Nobody knows him in Pekin, and the only people she talks to from here is you." She eyes Lynne as if to gauge Lynne's intentions.

"Try to put yourself in her shoes. If she told even one person, if anyone up there found out, she'd be marked for life. She wouldn't have a chance."

The backdoor slams and footsteps patter across the linoleum indicating that a toddler is coming. The saloon doors slam against their respective walls, and Bridget leaps into Lynne's lap. Lynne catches her awkwardly but laughs anyway. "There's my girl."

"Are you going to tell *her* about Bruce?" Miki asks, nodding towards the toddler.

"When she asks," Lynne replies.

"Uncle Bruce dead." Bridget turns to look at Miki, seriousness brimming in her large blue eyes. Her cheeks droop as though they are too heavy for her face.

Miki stares at Lynne in shock, but Lynne hugs Bridget close and says, “Yes, he did.”

Bridget hugs her back. “Mommy sad.”

“Yep. Mommy sad.”

The door slams again, and Lynold and Bob appear. Ken rounds the corner from the little office, and they start the handshakes.

“Where’s Jamie?” Lynne asks.

“He’s runnin’ ‘round outside.” Lynold responds. “Says he’s on a mission and can’t eat right now.” Lynold giggles, only making a sound when he breathes in, every other beat. Bridget whips her head around as though she hadn’t noticed that Jamie didn’t come in. Just as quick as she arrived, she is gone again.

“In like a lion and out like a... lion.” Miki says. Laughter sings through the house once again. Juanita only smiles this time. She’s never been comfortable when Miki and Lynold are in the same room.

Though it hasn’t been as bad since Miki married Ken, Juanita always felt like Miki was shaking and wiggling in front of Lynold, trying to get his attention. Before Ken, Miki had dated a married man for several years. She talked about it openly with Juanita like she was justified in her actions just because they “loved each other.”

Juanita knew that the man would never leave his wife for Miki, and she felt that Miki knew it too, on some level. It always seemed to Juanita that after Miki would give Juanita the latest account of the affair, she would immediately set her sights on Lynold. He would be playing with Baby Michelle on the floor, and Miki would intentionally squat down over Lynold’s legs so that he could get the best view of her.

Juanita would need to take a minute to pray for the Lord to cast away her jealousy and anger. Things got better after Ken married Miki and adopted Michelle, but Juanita hadn't been able to fully shake the feeling that there was at least some chemistry between them.

"Dinner's in the little oven," Juanita says, bringing herself back to the here and now, but the boys had already found the food and filled their plates.

Lynold and Bob eat while they stand, shoveling food into their mouths as though they've just survived a seven-year famine.

Once they're finished, Lynold says, "Bob, you wanna go outside and have a smoke?"

Miki says, "I wouldn't be too sure about that, Pop! I hear he's not good with fire!"

"Hey now," Bob says with a laugh, "I put it out, didn't I?"

"Well, I was thinkin' I could use a light," Lynold says with a smile.

"Maybe I should supervise," Ken says.

A Living Death

Through vague and obscure veils of gloom

I sensed my wisdom fail,

Unless celestial spirits speak

The Tempter will prevail.

Angelic voices from within

All beg to deafened ears,

The sight of death is frightening

But there's little Satan fears.

The loss I felt destroyed my soul

As I chanced a final glance.

What right to love in wrong had I?

What right to take the chance?

What haunting guilt and shame I caused,

I slowly neared the door

For loving then and living now

I'll die forevermore.

Bruce Puterbaugh

Sojourn

Miki asks, seemingly out of nowhere, “What happened during the Europe trip? Everything changed after the Europe trip.”

Juanita and Lynne are silent.

“Well, come on,” Miki says, “you were there, Lynne. You must know something.”

“It’s been 16 years,” Lynne says finally. “Why do you want to know now?”

“Don’t you think I deserve to know?” Miki asks. “All I’ve thought about over the last 16 years is how it might have been. How things could have been different if he didn’t go on that trip.”

Lynne looks down into her coffee mug, and she wraps her fingers around it to steady them. Finally, she says, “I honestly don’t know.”

Miki crosses her arms.

Lynne puts her hands up defensively. “I swear. It was all very strange. We didn’t know why Bruce was even there in the first place. It was an unprecedented trip for the high school band.”

Miki narrows her eyes with incredulity, and Lynne leans forward with resolution. “The bus stopped in Bloomington on our way to O’Hare. Rieckhoff, our band instructor, had followed the bus in his ridiculous sports car, which wasn’t uncommon for him, nor was it uncommon for him to have one of his ‘chosen boys’ riding shotgun.”

Lynne leans back in her chair and crosses her own arms. “Bruce had told me he was going on the Europe trip with us. I told him he wasn’t in high school anymore, so he couldn’t go, but sure enough, he was jumping from someone’s passenger seat into Rieckhoff’s.”

She relaxes her arms again; intimidation is so far out of her wheelhouse that she finds it exhausting. “We didn’t really see him much since we all stayed with different host families. One day I just showed up to practice and everyone was asking me if he was okay. I had no idea what they were talking about.”

“Well?” Miki asks. “What happened?”

Lynne shrugs and shakes her head, “I have no idea. Rieckhoff showed up and gave this angry speech about being untrustworthy. We were all very confused. Later, Bruce told us he had been in the hospital with tonsillitis, but I never truly believed that.”

Miki relaxes too, so Lynne says, “Since I found out that he was...you know... I’ve wondered so many things. Did Rieckhoff come on to him? Is that what made him gay? Did he and Rieckhoff get caught together, and Bruce took the fall? Did he make Rieckhoff angry and Rieckhoff hurt him?”

Lynne shrugs. “When we got back from the trip,” she continues, “we found out that Rieckhoff had been fired. It didn’t make any sense to us. He had done more for the band than anyone ever had. I always suspected it had something to do with Dad since he was on the school board.”

Juanita stands and disappears to the living room. Lynne can hear her murmuring to Grandma Winnie, who had disappeared to the living room to take a nap in the rocking chair after lunch. She’d been so quiet lately. She had never been discreet about the fact that Bruce was her favorite. Even after the news broke about Bruce, she seemed particularly open-minded, neither concerned nor surprised that he was gay, which was remarkable for an 83-year-old woman.

Of course, Grandma Winnie had never been a stranger to adversity. She bore two children out of wedlock in the '20s. The father was married at the time, and he'd bumble over when he'd had too much to drink, and Grandma Winnie always let him in.

When Juanita and her brother were old enough, Grandma Winnie would send them outside to play during their father's visits. Gerald would run off with his rifle, ready to hunt something. Juanita would always go to feed the chickens. She always said she liked the goofy way they would peck and jerk around when she'd throw seed on the ground.

Juanita had told Lynne once that she suspected the man gave Grandma Winnie money for their encounters. Grandma Winnie's mother had died during childbirth with the eleventh child, and her father couldn't raise ten children on his own, so it was up to Winnie. They were terribly poor.

"So Bruce was taken advantage of by this band teacher?" Miki asks. "If it wouldn't have been for him—"

Lynne leans back and crosses her legs. "I guess we'll never know." Even though Miki's conjecture seems clean and easy, Lynne can't shake the feeling that it was more than that. Bruce had never been the type to be taken advantage of. He was too smart, always one step ahead of everyone.

"Would we have ever known for sure?" Juanita asks as she reenters the kitchen. "That was Bruce. He'd run away without so much as a word. Then he'd come limping home, and we'd never know why. Not ever."

"What else?" Miki asks eagerly.

"There was 'The Sojourn' as we've always called it." Juanita says. "He just stole Lynold's gas card in the middle of the night and left in the car he and Gerry shared."

“Well, there had been an incident that morning.” Lynne says with caution.

“He was being so defiant for no reason,” responds Juanita.

Miki watches as Juanita and Lynne disappear into the past. She snaps her fingers. “What? What?”

Lynne sighs. “For whatever reason, Bruce didn’t want to take Kay, my best friend and neighbor at the time, to school that day. We went out to get in the car, and he started yelling at us.”

Lynne shrugs with nonchalance, “So we went back inside to ask for a ride from Mom. We didn’t really care how we got to school, as long as we got there.”

“I got onto Bruce.” Juanita says. “He had been acting out so much, and that was just a breaking point for us, I think.”

“So, he just left from there?” Miki asks. “Things never really seemed to bother him much, in my experience. I can’t make sense of it.”

Juanita takes a folded napkin and wipes her area at the table. Lynne casts Juanita an apologetic look before she says, “Mom got out the belt.”

Juanita’s head jerks in Lynne’s direction, and she wears an expression of utter disbelief.

“It was so unlike Mom. Dad is usually the enforcer, and he wasn’t there, so Mom felt like she had to do something. She got out the belt and told Bruce to bend over. Bruce nor Kay nor I could believe it. Mom just kind of aimed it at him and let her wrist go limp.”

Lynne starts laughing and rubs her eyes, “It all would have been—” She laughs until she has tears in her eyes. “It just... It just would have all been so funny if the tension wasn’t palpable.”

Miki covers her mouth to hide her smile, but her shoulders shake with humor. Even Juanita can't hold back a giggle.

"I'm sorry, Mom." Lynne says, "You were trying so hard to establish dominance, but then you were just like, 'eh.'" Lynne imitates a weak attempt at hitting someone with a belt.

Juanita isn't able to contain her laughter, but after she allows herself to find the humor in the story, she straightens up. "It was really scary though. We were able to track the gas card to Pennsylvania, and then there was nothing. We assumed the worst."

"Where did you find him?" Miki asks.

"He ended up calling us from Blessing Hospital. He said he'd been beat up, and he was too embarrassed to call us. That was the most we could get out of him. I think he only called because one of the Crowders saw him in Payson, and he knew they would tell us."

"He said he had been robbed, but when he got in the car, he handed Dad a brown paper bag full of receipts. There were no extra charges aside from what was in there, and we knew he didn't have any cash. We're pretty sure he wasn't robbed." Lynne says.

Miki is enthralled. "How long was he gone?"

A better part of three weeks," Juanita says.

"He was in high school? How did he ever graduate?"

"Once he came back," Juanita starts, "we knew that we couldn't control him. He simply wasn't going to be told what to do."

"That about sounds right." Miki says.

"We had a talk with Lynold's mom, and she agreed to let Bruce live with her for the rest of the year. She had a large family room addition to her house. It was set off enough from the main part of the house that we thought Bruce would feel like he had the space he needed."

Juanita wets a rag and starts wiping down the table. “And Lynold went and talked to the school. They agreed to let him come back on one condition.”

Juanita and Lynne smile, remembering what it had cost Bruce. “They said they’d allow him to come back, and they’d allow him to make up all of his work by the end of the year, as long as he cut his hair.”

“That’s it?” Miki asks.

“Oh, it was a big deal.” Lynne interjects. “There was a rule about how long boys could have their hair, and Bruce exceeded it by three inches. They had already been threatening that they wouldn’t let him graduate before he left.”

“It was over the top.” Juanita says.

“It was ’65.” Lynne rolls her eyes and turns to Miki. “The older generation was rebelling against the Beatles, and he wanted nothing more than to be one.”

“I don’t mind the Beatles,” Juanita says.

“You hated the Beatles!” Lynne responds.

“I was just tired of listening to them! That’s all I heard in this house for 10 years!”

“Uh huh,” Lynne says with incredulity, “you hated everything they stood for.”

“Oh, I did not,” Juanita says, and she throws the towel playfully at Lynne.

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