

Foreword

I know he has an illness; I'm reminded everyday: *Male Nurse Accused of Fondling Geriatric Patient; Brother Sentenced in Rape of Sister; Woman Questioned for Videotaping Sexual Acts with Animals*. The headlines are as bizarre as they are endless: a minister charged with solicitation; a doctor with fondling anesthetized patients; a day-care worker with molesting a four-year-old boy. Everywhere you look. Everyplace you turn. Voyeurists. Exhibitionists. Rapists. Stalkers. Of course, these behaviors are the extreme, but pornography, infidelity, promiscuity—though widely accepted in relative terms—can be just as debilitating.

Sexual addiction is devastating. Not only to those who are afflicted, but to each person who must endure its consequences. The addict—whose life becomes a progressive, compulsive drive to obtain “the feeling”, risks everything: family, friends, career and even their life. The addict's partner—attempting to love someone who is no longer capable of being loved; efforts met with lies, secrecy and false intimacy. Marriages fail. Children are abandoned. And the victims—the actual victims of rape, stalking, molestation, and of every other crime committed by a sexual offender—what can be said of the lifelong scars left to each of you?

We share his past not for fame, nor infamy, but to educate. Educate society to the true experience of the sexual addict; educate victims to the reality of their abuse—that the responsibility lies solely with the abuser; and finally, educate those suffering from a sexual addiction to the knowledge that recovery is possible. That it is a disorder they are suffering from, not a fate.

The following pages are, shamefully, an account of my husband's twenty-year struggle with sexual addiction. Names, dates and places have been changed to allow for the anonymity of those whose lives he has touched. The first draft of *He Danced Alone* painted an erotic, suspenseful exploitation of sexual addiction. But sexual addiction is not erotic; it is not entertaining. Therefore, this final draft, with its edge in humor, is a better representation of who *my husband is*. Not a stalker, rapist, or adulterer, but a loving father and husband. Not a sexual addict, but an athlete, a friend, a brother and a son. This is his story.

I. THE PROGRESSION

RED FLAGS, YELLOW LIGHTS, AND GREEN M&M'S

I despise yellow lights. Always have. Well, maybe not always, but certainly for the past eight-and-a-half years, which is when my mom took me to get my learner's permit. Not my real mom, mind you, my adoptive one. Since then, yellow lights have been, without a doubt, the single most troublesome experience of my life. Sure, red lights are stressful, but only when I'm late (which, actually, is more often than I'd like to admit). Green lights are never a problem; unless, of course, I'm thinking they're about to turn yellow. But yellow lights, with their demand for action, for split-second decisions...who needs it? I'd just as soon walk.

"**Thank-you, officer,**" I said, offering him my last piece of Bubble Yum. After all, this was my fourth warning in the past two years for running a light and I've yet to pay a fine. *Damned yellow lights!* I wonder what swayed him: that it's a typical Nebraska winter; that my car, a primer-gray, 1975 Pinto, was missing among other things: three of four hubcaps, both side-view mirrors, its gas cap, muffler and the windshield wiper on the passenger's side—not that if I did replace it, anyone could see through cracks in the

windshield; or maybe, just maybe—nah, it was the weather. With a wind-chill at minus thirty-three and falling, there's not a whole lot of tickets being written. In fact, there's not a whole lot of anything going on, except maybe some last minute Christmas shopping. That's how I met Kim.

Tall. Thin. Brunette. She was picking-up some toppled Batman figures when her toddler knocked over the Star Trek display as well. She was attractive; he was a monster. Attraction won. It always does.

"And friends wonder why I leave my little ones at home." I grabbed Captain Kirk from the floor and handed it to her. In the split-second our fingers brushed, a tingle raced from my arm to my chest. That's when I knew. That's all it took.

"Believe me, if I had found a sitter—" Her initial hesitation was quickly replaced by a warm, inviting smile. Thank God I at least look normal. **"He can be a handful, that's for sure."** She lifted the boy into the cart and kissed his cheek. **"Kyle, be good."**

I continued to search for signs that she was interested. I hate not knowing. I grabbed my cart and dashed for the neighboring aisle, flashing a smile just before I turned the corner. She smiled back. Good first impression.

Discreetly, I continued to watch. I watched as she sorted through the laundry detergents. I watched as she tossed two boxes of angel hair spaghetti into her cart. I watched as she struggled to tie her little boy's shoe as his foot darted this way and that. After thirty minutes of watching, there could be no doubt: this would be the woman I'd spend the rest of my life with. Finally, after years of searching, I had found her.

The checkout was always the natural setting for a second meeting. "Accidentally" running into them again prior to checkout was just plain uncomfortable. For both of us. But at the checkout, I simply needed to arrive just before, or just after, she did, and our relationship would begin.

"Oh, you first, please." I say, pulling back my cart to make way for Kim. Always the gentleman.

Her son was now bathing amidst groceries, gnawing a crayon he had ripped from the pack. Kim, distracted by her attempts to wrestle the groceries away, barely noticed that I had begun unloading her

cart.

"I heard Santa made some extra presents this year?" I said to Kyle, gently removing the crayon from his lips. I gave her a knowing wink, then returned to her son. **"He told his elves to make an extra toy for each boy and girl on the list."**

"What list?" he said wide-eyed, without so much as a blink.

"You know what list!" I teased. **"But with Christmas only three days away, I sure hope you've been good."**

"I've been good! Haven't I mommy? I've been good!" He yanked her sweater, causing the pen to dart across the check she was signing.

"You've been wonderful!" she said, meaning it.

I couldn't help but wonder how Erin and Taylor, my own children, would feel about Kim as their step-mom. About Kyle as their step-brother.

Closing her purse, she turned to me, lipped the words "thank-you" and left.

I wanted to catch her in the parking lot, but didn't. I never do. Damned shy bug gets me every time. I had everything I needed though: Kim Schaeffer. 3882 Elm St., Apt 10. Phone number: (402) 334-5752. At least that was the information I gathered from her checkbook. She was driving a '91 Geo Prism, cherry red. License plate: 1-R3043. I stayed with her for close to three miles when the light changed. I hate yellow lights. I hate policemen. I hate what I've become.

(2)

Big Gulps and Another Handful of Green M&Ms

When did it begin? I've often wondered. I figured the answer to that question would go a long way towards unlocking the mystery of why I did the things that I did. But still, I know little. I've heard stories: that my biological parents were abusive, that I was "hospitalized" on several occasions, and something about protective services—but that part was never clear. What I do remember about my childhood was that it was wonderful. From swimming to surfing, from baseball to bugs: I loved being a boy. Especially a boy from Southern California, which is where I grew up. Specifically, I grew up a few blocks from Venice Beach, near LA, but my adoptive family moved when I was nine, and so I have always considered Huntington Beach my home. My beginning.

With a population of ninety-thousand-plus, Huntington Beach defined middle-class. In the early seventies, everything was fresh and everyone friendly—which included the five boys I met while walking my older sister to school. They were tossing around a football when an extremely tall, shockingly skinny kid heaved it my way. It was a good football, pure leather, shoestring laces—nothing like the rubber crap I

received as stocking stuffers each Christmas. It'd been years since I'd touched a ball like that. Two years, to be exact. That was when I quarterbacked my team to the league championship and was named the Most Valuable Player. How important it seemed to me at the time; how meaningless it turned out to be.

The catch should have been easy, but as the ball thumped my chest and bounced away, I knew I would save face with the throw. Throwing a ball, any ball, was my forte. I planned to really show 'em something by firing a tight spiral to the curly-haired one, who was furthest away, but I lost my grip and the ball went hobbling into a patch of Honeysuckle across the street.

"It slipped!" I protested, but they were laughing too loud to hear. **"Come on, throw it back!"**

"You want another chance? Meet us here after school. You can be on Terry's team!" One of the boys ran to fetch the ball. **"And bring a buck, 'cause we go for Big Gulps afterwards."** I spied the curly-haired one mumbling profanities under his breath. As I discovered later that afternoon, that was Terry.

The game itself was pure. Football: three-on-three. Tackle, of course, with trees for touchdowns, sprinklers for sidelines and a "one-alligator, two-alligator, three-alligator" count before rushing the passer. One run every four downs and two completions for a first. Only playing in the Rose Bowl, in front of a hundred thousand lauding fans would have been better. Possibly. Though I don't remember who won the game, it never really mattered. For the next ten years, we'd play our hearts out: diving into bushes, trudging through mud puddles, dodging parked cars. We'd sell our souls to score the game-winning touchdown or hit the last home run before dark. Then, when we couldn't see any longer—and usually ten minutes after that—we'd gather our bats, our balls, our gloves and head to the 7/11 for the ultimate test of adolescent manhood: the *Big Gulp*. It was there, under the glow of red and green, with the occasional June bug whizzing about, that the game finally ended. Won by each of us, no matter what the score.

I wish I could return to my friends; share with them how sick I've become. Ask them to play ball with me just once more. But how could I? They still remember me as "Johnny", the scrawny, brown-haired, blue-eyed kid who possessed the greatest arm on the block. They envied the way the girls, even Dana Spagnoli, took to my shy, sensitive ways. How I earned the top grades and always stuck-up for the kids who got teased. How genuine I was. They could never have imagined what I am today. But for that matter, neither could I. Those days on the football field hardly gave clues to what I would become: a

voyeur, an exhibitionist, a stalker. My God, someone capable of even rape? I wish I were dead.

"Hey, give me some!" Terry pleaded as he reached for the bowl of M&M's my mom had placed on the coffee table.

I cherished the nights he'd spend at my house. He did, too, on account of his alcoholic parents.

"Get your own," I razzed, yanking the Tupperware from his outstretched fingertips.

"Get my own? I'll get my own—" The pillow's force knocked me to my knees. I raised my own pillow in retaliation, but he caught me again before I could get in a whack. Although a month younger than I, he was much stronger, even for a ten-year-old, so I summoned the only weapon I had left at my disposal. The "time out".

"Time out!!!" No matter what mischief we were into, no matter who was pummeling whom, the mere mention of those two words brought an immediate halt to our adolescence. **"You got me pretty good!"** I conceded, trying to clear my head.

"Sorry..." he shot back, without looking the least bit so. **"How 'bout those M&M's now?"**

I grabbed a handful and passed him the bowl.

"You didn't leave me any green ones." He continued digging through the bowl without looking up.

"So? What's the big deal? They all taste the same."

"Don't you know?" He looked up to see if I had any in the pile on my lap.

"Know what?"

"Green M&M's make you horny!"

"They what?!"

"It's true. Green M&M's *make you horny!* I heard some eighth graders talking about it."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!" Of course, this, coming from the guy who told me that kissing girls is like kissing marshmallows (I never told him I actually tried it). And now he wants me to believe that eating green M&M's would make me—nah, that's nuts.

We talked about a lot of things that night, and for many nights to follow: our friends, our families,

our future. Every now and then we'd stop for snacks, usually M&M's. I, of course, would save the green ones for myself, just in case...

FLASHBACK

What light remained was filtered through cigarette smoke and strangers. I remember the color: yellow. Yellow drapes, yellow carpet, yellow couch. Not a bright, cheery yellow; but a grungy, dusty, dirty one.

I'm naked, bouncing through a crowd when one of them—I think it was my dad—picks me up and tosses me to the couch. My back itched, itched terribly. I warned him I had to use the bathroom, but he wouldn't listen; he wouldn't stop. When I began to pee, he took the cigarette from his mouth and screamed something. I'm not sure what. He placed the cigarette near the opening of my penis and pressed. Pressed hard.

The pain I don't remember, but the sizzle I can't forget.

(3)

The Girl Next Door

Mrs. Miller wasn't all that attractive. Mid 30's, maybe mid 40's...old, anyway. She had those curly red locks that swept a little too far down her face, a smile that most mistook for a grimace, and umm...well, she was fat. Not too fat, but fat enough. Of course, any woman that a boy of thirteen could see naked is beautiful. Automatically. It's a law or something. And naked is how I saw her, time after time after time. My neighbor, Mrs. Eva Miller, baring to me her soul each and every night.

Well, specifically, it wasn't her soul, and technically, she wasn't baring it to *me*. Rather, she had this pattern: weeknights, between ten-thirty and eleven, she'd dim the lights in her kitchen and retire to the bedroom with her husband. Twenty minutes later, the lights would return and there she'd be, alone, in the kitchen, completely naked (I couldn't see her feet, but assumed...). Two Ding-Dongs and a glass of milk later, the lights would die and the night would end. Oh, but in those precious few moments—every jiggle, every bounce, every bend, every turn—it was pubescent heaven! I wonder now, if I would have stopped

watching, could things have turned out differently, but it doesn't matter. I didn't stop and soon watching wasn't enough.

What began as reality quickly blossomed into fantasy. Obsession, Jon, you can say it. My nights were planned with one simple aim: to see Mrs. Miller, in her kitchen, unbridled. To assist in my quest, I rearranged my bedroom so that my bed lay beneath the window; my desk, by sliding it just two inches to the right, provided the perfect anchor to barricade the door; and my shutters, forever wedged in an I-can-see-her-but-she-can't-see-me position, stayed at the ready. Then I'd wait. An hour...two. I once waited until the sun came up, only to find that they went on vacation two days prior—needless to say, those were the longest three weeks of my adolescent life.

For six months I watched. After six months, watching was no longer enough. I began to act out sexually—pulling down my pants and pressing my genitals against the window. Though I knew she couldn't see me, I pretended she could and it was that thought which excited me. Immensely. Two weeks later, I found myself sneaking out of the house, climbing her fence and touching myself outside their kitchen window. Once, when I saw their garage door open, I even stole a pair of her panties from the laundry. These behaviors should have triggered some kind of internal alarm, but they didn't. No shame. No guilt. Only love, or so I thought.

The favors began to mount: mowing her lawn, washing her car. I wanted to be near her. I needed to touch the things that she touched, care for the things that she cared for. It wasn't a choice I was making, it was just happening: gradually, progressively...compulsively. I went from playing peek-a-boo at my window to breaking into her yard. From breaking into her yard to stealing her possessions. Then, finally....

"Good morning!" she smiled, carrying some freshly squeezed lemonade towards me. The ice in the half-filled picture chimed like church bells on Christmas morn. It was a refreshing sound for the middle of July. **"What a beautiful day! They say it's supposed to climb to ninety-four degrees."** She strolled across the patio, stopping a few feet from where I was pulling weeds. **"The yard looks fantastic!"**

I took great pride in caring for their lawn. Not because it was hers, but because it was mine—something that I was responsible for. Like everything else I did, it had to be perfect. Each pass of the mower had to be aligned, each overlap the same width as the one before, and the one to follow. If it

weren't, I'd start again. It wasn't easy, but I did it. I could do anything if I put my mind to it.

"All I have left is to pick up the clippings and I'll be out of here."

"No hurry. Jim's gone for the day..." She winked, then headed back to the house with the lemonade.

Was she flirting? She always leaves the lemonade on the patio, so why didn't she this time? I tried returning my focus to the yard, but couldn't. Maybe she wants me to follow her. Maybe she knows I watch her. Maybe she likes it! Maybe she wants me to come inside. My heart began slamming against my chest. Should I go in? Should I stay out here? If I did go in, what would I say? What would I do?

"Are you coming in or not?" she said from the window. *The kitchen window.*

"Sure—" I said, my voice cracking at least twice before uttering the word. She wants me! I'm going to have sex! Me, a thirteen-year-old boy, about to have sex with a grown woman! Now, I've been in her house many times before, but never like this, never as a man.

"You're sweaty. Would you like a towel?" She poured us both a glass of the lemonade.

"Nah," I said, impressed she was checking out my body. I reached for my glass, trying desperately for a muscle to appear. No luck.

"You know, I've never really thanked you for all the work do around here. Stay put, I'll be right back." She went to the bedroom and closed the door.

This is it! She's going to come out of the bedroom naked and want to have sex! Should I take off my clothes? Maybe she'll want to take them off for me. I looked down to see that I was forming an enormous erection—well, as *enormous* as an erection can be for a boy of thirteen. Embarrassed, I pulled my T-shirt down as far as it would go, but that only seemed to frame my phallic quandary. I'll pretend I don't notice. Yeah, that's what I'll do—ignore it. I took a deep breath, leaned against the wall and tried to relax. Ignore it? I can't ignore it. It looks like I'm smuggling a banana. I made a quick dive for the couch. I wonder what sex feels like. Should I kiss her with my tongue? Terry said that girls liked it that way. I wonder if he practiced that on a marshmallow, too. I couldn't stand it any longer.

"What are you doing in there?"

"Almost ready, OK, close your eyes. Here I come!"

I listened to her footsteps grow closer. Then, much too soon, they stopped.

"You can open your eyes now."

No, I couldn't. I was scared stiff—pardon the expression.

"Go ahead, open 'em."

My heart throbbed; my hands trembled. Even with my elbows planted firmly on my knees, I couldn't keep my legs from shaking. What if she really is naked? What would I do? What if she laughs at me? Or worse, my erection?

"It's a UCLA Bruins sweatshirt!"

I opened my eyes; my jaw fell on its own. She was still in the same hideous, mint-green sweats she was wearing just minutes ago.

"Do you like it? My sister sent it to Jim for his birthday, but it's much too small. I thought it might fit you in a couple of years."

"Yeah, thanks." I again tried to flex, prove to her that I wasn't some skinny little kid—that I was a man—but nothing. Not a ripple. Not a bulge.

"You'd better finish up the yard so your whole day isn't wasted around this place. Thanks again for all your hard work." She leaned over and kissed the top of my head.

That's it? A sweatshirt? A peck on my scalp? What about the sex? About seeing you naked? I stood up to return to the yard when I remembered—the erection. Though the moment lasted no more than a second, and she did what she could to look away, we both knew what she had seen. We both knew she held her gaze a little too long. Only I knew that I liked it.

By my fourteenth birthday, Mrs. Miller was history. Sure, if I happened to notice her lights were on, I'd peek, but never again would I go out of my way. Why? Well, and I think I told you, she was fat. No fourteen-year-old boy could be attracted to someone who was fat. It's a law or something.

FLASHBACK

"Get in there and don't make a sound!" I don't remember who said it, whether it was my mom or my dad, just that it was said. Time and time again.

"In there", I later discovered, was a closet that my sisters and I were kept in—for "safety". Nobody knows for sure how long, only that we were.

(4)

Watching with My Eyes Closed

As Fridays go, it was typical: school, sports, then a five-minute sprint to get home for dinner—four minutes late, usually. By 7:15pm, the gang would gather at Terry's for our I-dunno-what-do-you-wanna-do meeting. We never planned to meet. We just did.

I was always the first to show. The timing was set with such precision that I no longer bothered to ring the bell; I'd simply sprawl across his porch and wait a few seconds. Most nights, Terry would already be out, and so we'd play backgammon, or toss a ball around until the others arrived. But sometimes he wouldn't come out at all; those were the nights we'd hear the yelling. The nights our meetings were held elsewhere.

Danny would arrive next. He and his "ma" lived in an old townhouse across the street from Terry. We all felt sorry for Danny, he was the only one without a father—his parents having divorced when he was an infant, his dad returning to Ireland to farm. He didn't talk about it much, and we didn't ask, but we knew what it did to him—why he was always lonely and sad. My dad would invite him along whenever we'd go fishing or to a ball game—I reckon he knew, too.

The next one to show was anyone's guess. They'd come barreling around the corner on their bikes, leaving rosebushes and sprinkler heads in their wake. The Wee brothers: Jani (pronounced

“yawnee”) and Joe (“yo”); the two most blood-sucking, cutthroat competitors south of Segerstrom Boulevard. Born in the Philippines, they were always having to outdo each other—and everyone else. Winning was never enough with these guys, there had to be blood. Or at least a broken bone.

Last, but certainly not—well, he pretty much was least: Thor. The name speaks for itself. Six-foot-four, one-hundred-and-thirty pounds—if he’d have just finished a meal. We’d know he was coming by the sound of his basketball echoing throughout the neighbors’ yards. We’d never know from which direction he would arrive, but then again, neither would he. That was Thor. “I’m gonna play in the NBA!” he’d constantly remind us (he never made it, though he did score twenty-two points in the final game of his senior year—eighteen points *above* his average). On this particular night, he came from the south.

“It’s about time you show, Thor,” actually impressed that he’s forty-five minutes earlier than last week. He said nothing, but feigned a good-looking hook shot.

“You guys want to go to my house and play cards?” By cards, Danny meant Gin Rummy 500, which no one could beat him at, but we passed. It’s not that we disliked cards, just that we disliked his house—so stagnant and lifeless.

“How ‘bout we check out the sewers again?” Leave it to Jani to suggest that one, trying to prove he wasn’t scared the first time. But we knew he was; we all were. The sewers were an underground maze of trails and tunnels that traveled the length of the city. A lot of fun that was, wading through muck, dodging foot-and-a-half long spider webs, forever worrying about what we’d do if our flashlights would give out. A lot of fun that was, wondering just how many turns we could take before we were lost; around which corner we would find *the dead body*. A lot of fun that was, needing to shower three times to keep our nasal passages from convulsing. And poor Thor, having to duck the whole time. No, thank-you, we tried the sewers once, never again.

“I’ve got it, Ditch ‘em!” It was our favorite stand-by, and no matter who suggested it, they were greeted with whoops and hollers. Not one of us ever said no to Ditch ‘em. We’d divide into teams of two—our reason being, if we were in pairs, we wouldn’t cheat—and off we’d go. No place within the three-block boundary was off limits: trash cans, parked cars, rooftops. Rooftops, how ironic.

On this night, Terry and I chose a big oak nearly two blocks away, on Foster Street. The problem with choosing a tree is, should they find you, you have no escape. But we were good enough climbers to

take the risk. We learned that if you climbed high enough, wrapped your arms and legs around the trunk tight enough, the enemy could be standing directly beneath you and not detect your whereabouts. Until the enemy was near, however, we'd perch ourselves on a branch, get as comfortable as possible, and...

"This is almost as good as Old Man Harrington's shed," I said with a wink, as we both knew Old Man Harrington's shed was a full three houses out-of-bounds.

"One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand—" Terry began whispering to himself.

"What are you doing that for?" I asked.

"Cause every time we hide together, you always talk about something deep and depressing." He took a pack of Bubble Yum from his pocket and handed me a piece.

"Do not!" I unwrapped the gum and popped it in my mouth. We both watched as the wrapper fluttered to the sidewalk below.

"Okay, if you say so. One-one thousand, two-one thou—"

"Knock it off!" I countered, slugging him in the arm. Some leaves buckled under the footsteps of two figures nearly a half-block away. We stiffened as their shadows stopped at the gate below.

"Is it them?" I said, barely audible.

He shrugged with uncertainty. One of the figures continued up the street, the other opened the gate and walked toward the lighted porch.

"Oh my God! It's Dana!" I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Spagnoli?" he asked.

"Yeah! I didn't know she lived around here." Dana Spagnoli. Though she was a freshman like us, she was nothing like us. While we dressed in shredded jeans and T-shirts, she wore blazers. Neatly pressed bloomers. She even wore matching socks. Dana was a woman.

"Let's invite her up here," Terry joked, raising his eyebrows. Well, eyebrow is more accurate, as he seemed to have one long brow covering both eyes.

"Shut up, dork!" We both knew that Dana was special to me. Whenever we'd talk about who, "out-of-anyone-in-the-world", we'd choose to kiss, or have sex with (we were both virgins, but we never stopped dreaming), Dana would be my choice. I'm not sure why I was so attracted to her; Terry said it was her breasts. She was my "soul mate". My first soul mate anyway. As Dana closed the front door, the porch

light died and we were once again left to each other.

"So, what do you think is going to happen to us when we get out of high school?" Okay, so Terry may not have been absolutely mistaken. I was never much for small talk.

"You mean, like, careers, or what?" With that, Terry bowed his head and dropped a thick lugey between two of the branches about twenty feet below.

"I don't know. What do you think you'll be doing in say, ten years?" I hung a lugey of my own and received a high-five as it bounced off a branch and splattered onto the hood of a car with a curious ping.

"I don't know (why we started every conversation of value with 'I don't know' is still a mystery), **if football doesn't work out—**" Terry had dreams of playing professionally; he was a tenacious high school linebacker, but too small for college, much less the NFL. **"...thought I'd try selling cars like my dad."**

I didn't ask him about college. Once, in English, we were assigned to write a sentence pertaining to Christmas on the blackboard. Most of us tried to impress the class by compounding sentences, dangling participles and what not. But, in his best effort, Terry wrote:

"Santa raped the packages."

(Translated: Santa wrapped the packages.)

When word got out that Santa Claus was a rapist, he laughed right along with the rest of us. But they didn't see him crying later, like I did. No, Terry wasn't going to college.

"What about you?"

"You know me, same ol' dream: get married, have kids, move to the country." Neither he, nor I, knew of my past. Every now and then I'd have flashes, but they never felt real. Nothing about my past seemed real.

With no signs of anyone in the perimeter, my inquiry moved forward. **"How 'bout this? If you had one wish, what would it be, within reason?"**

"You first this time," he protested.

"I don't know, make a million dollars playing baseball; buy some land in the Rocky Mountains. Then Dana and I would get married, build a cabin and start having kids. Ten of 'em. Or maybe we'd adopt a few."

He validated my dreams with an accepting nod.

"Then I'd build another cabin next to mine so you and Penny Overman could join us." Penny was the ugliest girl in school, and though I normally avoided making fun of others, I was, after all, a kid.

To this day, it amazes me that I cannot relate to men. I have always had the ability to communicate with women—intuitively; but other than Terry, no male have I ever gotten close to. I miss Terry and the feelings we shared.

"Hey look!" He motioned towards Dana's house. The light flickered in the room above the garage. There she stood, posing in front of a full-length mirror. We must have been twenty yards from her window, with only an occasional swaying branch obstructing our view. *Snap!* Terry took care of the branch. Dana stood there for nearly two minutes, in full view, modeling several different hairstyles. Then, after a short visit to the closet, she returned with a pair of pajamas that she tossed to her bed. Her hands slipped slowly behind her neck and began to unfasten the buttons of her blouse.

Terry jabbed his elbow into my ribs. **"Can you believe this?"**

A sick feeling began to invade my gut. The thought of him seeing Dana—my Dana—naked, was too much. He understood as only best friends do.

"I won't watch," he said, turning away. **"But if I can't, neither can you!"** He cupped his hands over my eyes as I playfully struggled to break free. Truth be told, I didn't *want* to see her, not like this. It was Dana Spagnoli, the woman who was to be my wife. The woman who would some day be the mother of my children. Seeing her like this would be wrong.

Terry was still talking about it the next morning as the gang and I lay sunning on the beach. **"She was standing right in front of us, about to undress, and Jon didn't want to watch!"**

"You're kidding!" said Danny.

"No way!" chimed Jani and Joe.

"You're not—" Jani wagged a limp wrist in my direction, **"Are you?"** His face was an anchor of concern, until he burst out laughing, along with the others.

"Man, you guys are dicks!" I noticed three girls tanning themselves no more than ten yards from our towels. **"Anyone seen Thor?"**

"Couldn't make it. Said he had some church thing to go to." Of all of us, Thor was the only one to attend church regularly. Myself? I didn't believe in God. Wanted to, just didn't.

One of the girls sat up, stretched, then turned onto her stomach. She was wearing a red and white striped bikini and I could tell, from the angle we were at, that she was built nicely. She wore black Ray-Ban sunglasses with a Walkman crowning her bleached bangs. I couldn't help but notice that she kept looking over at us. At me, I think.

"Who's ready for some waves?" Danny challenged as he grabbed his Boogie Board and headed for the water.

"I'm sittin' this one out," I said, **"I may join you in a few—"** But they were already too far away to hear. Each of them took off in a blaze, sandblasting sunbathers as they passed. Joe stuck out his leg to slow Jani, who was a full step ahead, but missed and fell face-first into the sand. My attention returned to the girl.

Knowing that I could never muster the courage to go talk to her. Knowing that I would leave the beach without ever getting to know her name. And knowing that I would most likely never see her again, I reached my hand into the pocket of my bathing suit and pulled away the mesh lining. It wasn't something I had planned; it wasn't something I had even fantasized about. It just happened. A breeze crept up my thighs and grabbed hold of my testicles. Well, if she is looking, she certainly has something to see now. I spread my legs a little more. Naturally. Discreetly. I could see she had begun to stir, which lifted me to an indescribable high. *I later learned that men were the visual ones, women—the emotional; but on that particular day, ignorance was bliss.* The sun warmed my erection to full length, leaving me no choice but to join my friends in the ocean—the cold ocean.

On the bus ride home, Terry asked for volunteers to spend the night. Danny, Jani, Joe and I tossed a cautious look at one another.

"They haven't had a drink since last winter." He reassured us with neither pride, nor embarrassment.

"I'll be there, but there's something I need to do first."

Dana. The tree. I didn't want to—I had to.

What am I doing here? Just yesterday I said I didn't want to see her like this, so why am I heading to the very same branch? Panicked, stressed, worried: I continued to climb. By the time I settled into position, my thoughts had changed: somewhat. How much longer 'till she gets ready for bed? Peacefully, euphorically, excitedly: I continued to wait. A boy on a Moped rolled through a corner stop sign, causing an oncoming car to screech its brakes. I turned back to her second-story window. Nothing. No lights. No movement. No hurry. In that tree, time was irrelevant, as a minute and an hour became one. The longer I had to wait, to think, to fantasize—the more aroused I would become. Twice my leg had fallen asleep; twice I swatted spiders crawling across my forehead. I hate spiders. It was as the third inched its way up my arm that she arrived.

Fifteen minutes passed before she flipped the light on in her bedroom; another ten as I waited for the pajamas to hit the bed. And then it happened. She was facing the window as her sweatshirt flew from her head. My eyes fixated on the laced black bra that framed her breasts. Please take it off. She unfastened her jeans and pushed them slowly to the floor, stepping out to reveal the bra's matching panties. Please God, I'll do anything, just let her take off the bra. She walked past the window and out of sight. Please, God! Please, God! Please, God! When she returned, I saw them. Never in my life had I imagined anything so perfect. Once, several years ago, I gave birth to a water balloon so big, so full, so round—I needed both hands to support it. Dana's breasts were better. Not only were they bigger, they were permanent—unlike the balloon's introduction to the back of my sister's head. The hair above Dana's vagina was thick and dark—nothing like the red puffs peeking from behind Mrs. Miller's fat. It was more than I had ever dreamed. The moment lasted but five seconds—the time it takes someone to pick up a nightgown and put it over their head—and for this I sacrificed nearly three-and-a-half hours of my life, yet, it was worth it.

Many times over the next several years, whether it was in Dana's tree, a hotel parking lot or a stranger's roof, I'd think about how crazy it was to spend five, six, seven hours a night in search of a five-second flash. The answer? I had no idea. There were so many more productive things that I could have been doing with my time, but still, I couldn't stop. It was the waiting, the fantasizing, the preparing which

hypnotized me. An evening peering through a darkened window was an evening spent in absolute harmony. My condemned reality temporarily pardoned by incredible fantasy. At that window, I would have sex with whomever I wanted, whenever I wanted and it always perfect. At that window, there were never any parents, or teachers, or police. No failure, stress, or judgement. And, most significantly, at that window, there was never any *rejection*. Each night's fantasy found me in the perfect relationship, with the perfect woman.

It was closing in on ten-thirty when I rang Terry's doorbell.

"Where've you been?" he asked, obviously hurt by my inconsideration.

"I'm sorry. I told my neighbor I'd help clean out her garage, but I had no idea it would take this long." Why am I lying to my best friend?

"Well, we missed it. My parents were going to take you, me, and my sister to the movies, but they couldn't wait any longer, so they left." He walked over to the couch, leaving me to close the door on my way in.

"Man, I said I'm sorry. You think I wanted to scrub oil marks all night?" I began setting up my side of the backgammon board.

"How much you get? Enough to get some baseball cards tomorrow?" Without asking, he switched the board around so that he could play white. I wasn't going to argue. We were starting our twelfth game of backgammon when Terry's family finally pulled into the driveway.

"Hi Mr. and Mrs. Criss!" Though they occasionally embarrassed Terry with their inebriated antics, I had always found them quite pleasant and fun to be around.

"Hi Jonny, how are you?" Mrs. Criss asked, looking much better than the last time I saw her—stumbling down the stadium steps at one of Terry's football games.

"Good. Hi Tiff." Tiff—Tiffany—was a year younger than I. I had been in love with her since the day she first spoke to me. Physically, she was attractive: deep brown eyes with thick lashes that would crash against her bangs when she'd walk. She had long, brown hair set in spirals, and a body that, though a little too thin for my taste, was still quite attractive. But it was the way she spoke which I found so irresistible. The left side of her mouth hung a half-inch lower than the right. Her bottom lip puckered

outward ever so slightly—a casualty of nerves. She had this endearing habit of chewing on it whenever she'd be in a crowd. Terry, and most others, teased her for the drawl, but not me; it was the prettiest mouth I had ever seen. I once drew the courage to tell her how beautiful I thought she was and how much I loved the way she talked, but I was too afraid to sign the letter and so she never knew.

"We're playing Backgammon, want to join us?" Terry asked.

"Thanks anyway. I've got to get up early for cheer tomorrow." She bolted up the stairs and shut the door. Her parents excused themselves as well.

"She has cheerleading on Sundays?" I wondered aloud.

"I don't know—who cares. Are we going to finish the game or not?"

Spending the night with anyone else meant laying out our sleeping bags, watching TV, then goofing around until we passed out—or our parents threatened to send us home. At Terry's though, when the time came, he would retire to his room and the visitor, usually me, would be banished to the couch in the living room. As I began to drift away, my thoughts turned to Dana, and her breasts. They awoke with Tiffany, and hers.

No sunlight had yet pierced the room. It couldn't be later than six in the morning. Who would be up now, on a Sunday? I peeled my eyes to see Tiffany exit the kitchen and return to her room. A pink nightshirt covered her light blue panties—covered them until she reached the stairs, anyway. A few drawer bangs later, she returned to the kitchen holding what appeared to be a wadded cheerleading uniform. A squeak of the washing machine's door and three clicks later, she returned to her room via the stairs. The sight of her nipples teasing the cotton gown started "it". The feeling. The fantasy. My mind began racing wildly. I could feel that there was an opportunity at hand, I just couldn't figure out what it was. Then, like most of my sexual behaviors, the thoughts just came.

I positioned the blanket so that my eyes were buried within its shadow, then waited for the washing machine's buzz that I knew would send Tiff tearing down the stairs. As the load finished, I could see that she was still wearing the nightgown, though now I could make out the outline of her pubic mound. As she moved the clothes to the dryer, I removed my shorts—leaving only my Fruit-of-the-Looms and a T-shirt. I draped the blanket between my legs, exposing everything but my penis. Tiffany passed quickly.

Maybe she didn't notice. I uncovered my trunk completely, exposing a hardened pair of briefs. Maybe she'll wake me up...ask me if she could touch it...let me touch hers.

Not wanting to soften for her next trip down, I reached into my underwear and stroked my penis back to life. When she finally returned, I didn't merit a glance. This is it. When she comes out of that kitchen, she'd better look. Reaching once more into my briefs, I guided my penis through the hole, fully exposing its length. She'll think it slipped out as I was sleeping.

Tiffany dashed from the kitchen and headed for the staircase. Damn! Then, as she was nearly halfway up, she stopped. Slowly, she descended the stairs and walked past me, back to the kitchen. She turned and passed me again. And then again—slower each time. I took a deep breath, assuring her I was asleep. When she passed me again, the uniform had been transferred from both hands to one. Then, she just stood there, looking. I tossed a bit, which sent her scurrying back to the kitchen, but she returned. Careful not to frighten her again, I laid there motionless. She bent over to what must have been within inches of my genitals. I could no longer see her face, but I could feel her breath. Suddenly, a warm, soft wave overwhelmed the tip of my penis. Was it her tongue? Her lips? *Years later, I had the chance to ask her what had happened. She said she didn't do anything. That this "stuff" oozed out, she got scared and left. So much for my fantasy.*

The following Friday, huddled on Terry's porch, we again decided, by default, on Ditch 'em. We found Danny and Thor lying in the back of a camper shell on Willow Drive. Jani and Joe weren't as much found, as they were rescued—treed by a German Shepherd a block away. On this night, however, Terry and I weren't about to be caught. We had other plans. Tonight, there would be no trashcans, no sheds, no trees—we were going cruising.

"Make sure you stay in bounds!" we mimicked, mocking Danny's last words while crossing Los Altos Boulevard, almost a mile from home.

"This isn't right. They're going to be looking for us all night!" I said, giving Terry the opportunity of turning back.

"Do you want to sit in some stupid ditch waiting for Thor to find us or do you want to meet some girls?"

"Girls?" The one topic that always got my attention.

"My cousin lives in the apartments across from the mall. He says girls are swimming there all the time. Cute ones. High school girls."

What Terry didn't say was that the Cherry Tree Apartments had three pools and three Jacuzzis, spaced over an area of four square blocks. What Terry didn't know was that we would spend the remainder of the year, and the majority of the next, cruising the Cherry Tree Apartments. Sometimes we'd find girls swimming, other times they'd pass us on the walkways. Always would we talk about meeting them; never would we follow through. Too shy. Too afraid of being rejected. We once saw a couple having sex in the Jacuzzi and many times watched people getting dressed from their windows. Most often, though, we would come up empty, simply fanning the fire for what might be discovered the next time out. The Cherry Tree Apartments—poor Danny, Jani, Joe and Thor, they never found us much after that...

FLASHBACK

Naked. Men, women and children—everywhere—naked. I remember how hot the sand was. How fast we'd run to escape the searing heat. I remember the castles we'd build at the water's edge, the sand crabs we'd catch with our bare hands. I remember the gazillion attempts we'd make at burrowing our way to China—or was it Japan? Our never-ending search for the perfect Sand Dollar. And I remember the big people. Walking around with their "jugs" and their "gallons". Wondering why some of their "thingies" stuck straight up, while others hung so far down?

Venice Beach, California—nude bathing legalized. I was six.

(5)

YOU BELONG IN PICTURES

A boy of fifteen, without a few coins in his pocket, just wasn't fifteen. Becoming a man meant buying your own ticket to the dollar theatre (even though we went on Tuesdays, which was half-priced). It was for that reason, and that reason alone, that I accepted my first babysitting job—a Saturday evening stint with the Alley twins.

Delightful girls, all of six. Sweet, charming, and notably well behaved. They weren't beautiful by society's standards: coke bottle glasses amplifying definitively crossed eyes; feeble blonde hair ratted back into ponytails; and a mild limp suggestive of Cerebral Palsy. No, the modeling agencies wouldn't be busting down their parent's door anytime soon, but they were certainly beautiful to me. Mr. and Mrs. Alley

warned me that their daughters' favorite game was "guess-who's-who," but they never fooled me. I told them it was because I saw their individual beauty, which made them beam with pride; I didn't tell them that Melissa breathes through her mouth, Alyssa, her nose. My sense of humor and ability to communicate on their level created a close bond between the three of us.

Most nights, we'd watch TV, play games, sometimes, even talk about grown-up stuff. I never really felt like I was babysitting as much as I was just spending time with friends. Then again, boundaries had never been my strong suit. "I can't wait to be a father," I'd think, right before one would jump on my face, the other, my back. They'd read to me; I'd read to them. They'd sit on my lap; I'd sit on theirs—at least until they stopped laughing long enough to push me off. When it was time, they'd change into their nightgowns, brush their teeth, then climb into bed for their "night-night story". The book finished, a hug for each, and the night would end.

"Come stay with us!" they'd beg, but a smile is all they'd receive.

"Good night, ladies...I love you!" Not one sexual thought. Not one sexual touch. Not one...ever. Maybe I am normal. Maybe Terry has been doing the same kinds of things that I have. And Danny... and, no, not Thor.

Satisfied they were sleeping soundly, I did what any normal, healthy teenager would do—snoop. A quick glance to the driveway, then a sprint to the bedroom. Underwear drawer...underwear drawer. I lifted a pink teddy and held it up. The front was delicately laced, with a white satin back. I set it on the bed and searched for the matching panties, all the while imagining Mrs. Alley filling their seams. Then, Dana. I unbuttoned my jeans and began to rub Mrs. Alley's panties on my erection. What am I doing? What if the girls wake-up? What if Mr. and Mrs. Alley come home? I carefully returned the lingerie to the drawer—panties folded, left-hand side; bra between slip and socks, halfway down—before settling in front of the television.

I remember the movie: an old black and white about a mass-murderer locked away in an insane asylum. It was fairly captivating, but still didn't keep my eyes from wandering: a Monet print above the sofa, a collection of Gone with the Wind plates in the foyer, a dirty laundry basket, a tank of water without fish, a dirty laundry basket...*a dirty laundry basket.*

I opened the basket slowly, ignorant to the threshold I was about to cross. There they sat, a

plain pair of Fruit of the Loom, 100% cotton, no frills, no nonsense panty briefs. I lifted them into the air and again tried to picture Mrs. Alley inside of them. Then it happened. I had never smelled a vagina before (Terry thought it smelled like tuna. I asked him how he knew—again, eighth graders), so my first whiff was met with intense curiosity. I inhaled again, holding the odor within. It's sweet. No, sour. No, bittersweet. No,— Each breath filled me with comfort. Something about the scent was so satisfying, so erotic, so familiar. To this day, I have never tried cocaine, or any other drug, but imagine that that is how it must feel: safe, hypnotic. The scent of a woman became a central point in the rituals that were about to follow. Throughout my illness, I must have gathered over three-hundred-and-fifty pairs of panties. I'd keep them until the scent would fade, then, most would be returned. *Why return them? Why take the chance when it would have been so much easier to simply toss them away? Welcome to the irrational world of sexual addiction.* It was the indescribable feeling that came with having touched, kissed, or licked something so personal of theirs—something that would soon be touching their private areas or their mouths. Possessing such knowledge was akin to having an affair with the person. The secrecy. The forbidden act. On this night, I stuffed her underwear into my book bag and continued to snoop. It was in the Alley's garage that I struck gold.

Playboys. Lots of them. Four stacks, probably fifty per stack, plus a milk crate full sitting on the workbench. This wasn't my first experience with Playboys. Thor snuck two from his dad's closet once. I say *once* because they blistered his bottom pretty good when they found out—it was simply the first time I had them *to myself*. With friends, it was an activity, much like sneaking into the drive-in or playing puppets with our dissected frogs. But looking at a Playboy alone was an experience.

The next few times I babysat, I'd sneak away with one or two. Gosh, they had so many. But within a few months I had built a pretty good stack of my own, hidden away in "the hole". Word got out that I was a pretty terrific babysitter and offers from all over the neighborhood came pouring in. By the end of the summer, I had saved over two hundred dollars...along with twenty-six Playboys, three Penthouses, one Hustler and eleven pairs of panties.

"Where were you Friday? We missed you." Terry asked over the phone.

"Had to baby-sit." Keep answers short. Limit details.

"Again? That's like the fourth weekend in a row, isn't it? When are you gonna start hanging out with your pals again?"

"I know, I'm sorry." And I really was sorry. Not so much for babysitting—I hadn't babysat in over two months; I was sorry for lying to him. I cherished honesty, but what was I supposed to tell him? That I was spending all of my free time in "the hole" looking at dirty magazines? No, *I had to lie*. Or, not say anything at all. I learned early on that the more information I shared with others, the greater my chances of being caught. Of someone finding out my secret. It was this thought pattern that, over the next five years, would lead me down a path of almost complete social isolation.

"We're going to see *Young Frankenstein* tonight, you want to come with?"

"Sure, I'd love to!" I assured him, already knowing I had no plans of going anywhere but the hole.

From my bedroom to the garage. From the garage to the wooden rafters above. Behind three moving boxes, a crate of old newspapers, and the rolled-up rust-colored carpet from our last house was *the hole*. In the center sat my throne, made from moth-ridden clothes and sun-bleached curtains. On my left, in a box marked *Christmas*, were my magazines—stuffed carefully between Rudolph's behind and three Santa lawn figures. To my right, in a box labeled "stuff", was my collection of ladies' underwear—themselves hidden in a smaller box marked "junk". Couldn't take chances with the panties. The magazines I could explain, somehow. But women's panties? No way. My mom caught me with those and my life would end instantly. Behind my throne, a six-inch by six-inch window, barely permeable, which offered my only connection to the outside world. It was my alarm as to when my parents would arrive, when a cute girl would walk by, when my neighbor would wash her car. With practice, I was able to make the trip from the hole to my bedroom in four seconds flat. Much quicker than the electric garage-door opener my dad installed the previous summer.

In the hole, I learned to communicate with the opposite sex. And it wasn't terrifying. It wasn't gut wrenching. Rather, it was sweet. Every woman on every page of every magazine—and believe me, I met them all—became my girlfriend. Each one had a name, a personality. Each one was real. I hadn't yet learned to orgasm, but I was learning other, more important things: what men could do to please women,

what they did that, pardon the expression, sucked. Outside, I was Jonny, the shy, insecure boy, but here, in the hole, I was a man. The perfect man.

Today, it was Victoria's turn. Nineteen years old from Palm Beach, Florida. Hobbies include: water-skiing, snow-skiing and horseback riding. She likes intelligent, humorous, sensitive men who love the outdoors. She dislikes prejudiced, macho or aggressive men. I chose one of my favorite pictures of Vickie. She's lying on a diving board at night, face down, with moonlight illuminating her flawless frame. Beads of sweat lay puddled in her every hollow, held by a viscid layer of oil. Her skin, so deeply brown, almost black, now prayed for my touch.

She was lonely. Married too young. She now questioned her ability to live the rest of her life with an abusive husband. *How could she have been so wrong about him? This wasn't the way her life was supposed to turn out.* I, sensing her sorrow, go to her. She fears neither my presence, nor her undress.

"Would you like some company?" I strolled confidently to within a few feet of her and sat down.

"I'd like that."

"Your body is absolutely stunning." I say, assuring her of my sincerity with a smile.

"Thanks, I wish my husband felt the same way."

"He doesn't?"

"He used to. Now he just says I'm getting fat and that my breasts are too small. Do you think they're too small?" She sat up and faced me. I quickly turned to page eighty-six for an accurate view.

"No, they're beautiful."

"Would you like to touch them?"

I reached my hands toward her chest, rubbing first her breasts, then all of her. Her arms, her legs, her back. Page 103 of the September issue of Penthouse taught me how women wanted their partners to focus on more than just their sexual organs.

As I continued to stare at the pictures, I could feel her skin as I caressed her shoulders; taste the oil as I licked her thighs. I reached to my right and pulled out a pair of panties. Now I can smell her, too. When it came time to make love, she did it exactly the way the guy described it on page 147—bucking and grinding, twisting and turning; all the while, screaming my name. After she climaxed, I picked her up,

carried her to bed and held her tenderly till morning. And then we parted. Strangers once more.

When the doorbell rang, I didn't need to look to know who it was. I did need to look, however, to know when they left. What's wrong with me? Those are my best friends. I should be with them, not up here by myself. I began to think of all I had given up recently: after-school sports, babysitting, friends. A sense of remorse began to overwhelm me. I opened the Hustler's Holiday issue and turned to page seventy-eight. And felt a whole lot better.

(6)

Don't Worry, It's Paid For...

I don't think anyone—not my supervisor, who's nomination I received for Employee-of-the-Month; not my teachers, who plastered my papers with academic accolades; and certainly not my coach, who had been helping me sort through scholarship offers from some of the top schools in the state—could have foreseen my next move. June 17th, one day after high school graduation, I loaded my Pinto and drove. No good-byes, no two-week notice, no turning back. Mexico was two hours to the south, the mountains an hour to the east. Or perhaps Canada? It didn't matter where I was going, only that it was far from where I began. No longer could I maintain the facade of Mr. Perfect to those around me. I fooled them for as long as I could, but the pressure was too much. All the lies, the sneaking, the stealing—sooner or later I would get caught, then what? No, I had to run away. My life was out of control but only I knew it. It had to stay that way.

I settled just north of San Diego, CA. Just me, my car, my magazines, my binoculars... Within a month, I was promoted from the hospital's food service department to central supply. Two months later and I was asked to supervise the central supply department at night. It was to be the last day job I'd work

for many years.

Supervising the graveyard shift wasn't hard. Having eight-and-a-half hours to finish three hours of work left plenty of time to do nothing. Which, for a blossoming addict, is a prescription for disaster. Best of all, I had no one to supervise except myself—which offered my second prescription. By days, I'd sleep on the beach, in the hospital's stock room, or in my car; at night, I'd work as hard as I could: cleaning, labeling, stocking. Doing anything to show how wonderful of an employee I was. How friendly, how responsible, how...*normal I was*. How unlike the person I became on my nights off.

It didn't take me long to realize what being free meant. No longer was I restricted to the Cherry Hill apartments or Dana's tree. Every house, every hotel, every apartment, every dormitory was mine. Whenever I wanted, as long as I wanted. Bored? Start up the car, pull into a parking lot, grab my binoculars and wait. Most nights, especially with the larger hotels, my hours would be filled with a variety of erotic scenes: a woman coming out of a shower; a man on top of a woman; a woman's head bobbing up and down in the sheets, the man wriggling beneath her. Each scene feeding yet another morsel to an insatiable appetite.

Voyeurism was a lot like fishing. Frequenting your favorite watering holes, waiting...waiting...waiting for a bite. Some nights, you reel in a tiny Bluegill or Bullhead; still others, you spend all night without so much as a nibble. But then you hook a thirty-pound Catfish and you're reminded why you're alive. You're reminded that it's okay to feel good. That it's okay to dream. That every now and then, life can be perfect. That it is possible to experience absolute harmony.

It wasn't the sex—it was never the sex—rather, it was the fantasy that the sexual act triggered that left me satisfied. And confused—as it became harder and harder to rationalize that "no one was getting hurt" and that, since my fantasies involved pleasing the women that I fantasized about, I was still a nice, decent person. Not when the evening news was telling me otherwise.

In the upcoming years, the threat of being caught by a passerby frequently invaded my thoughts, but always *after* I finished masturbating, never before—and it never prevented me from doing it again. Society may have thought what I was doing was wrong, but I knew in my heart that it wasn't. In my heart there was kindness and love, not perversion. Was it my fault if no one else could understand? I loved women. That's all. No big deal.

Sexuality, in the first seventeen years of my life, had been limited to two main senses: sight and smell. It was time to add a third: touch. Though I frequently touched myself, a constant reference in my readings was of the way a man's penis felt in a woman's mouth or hand or vagina. And the result of such contact: the exploding white, hot, sticky stuff that, article after article, filled "buckets" or "shot out in waves". I had never experienced such a feeling. Light-headedness, yes; clear stuff oozing from the tip, yes; but an "explosion"? Never. Could there be more?

I didn't know how to begin answering that question. My parents and I had never discussed sex, only respect. Premarital sex was "dirty" and that's all there was to it. Girls who had sex were bad and guys were scum. Period. The end. Comments I'd hear—from girls, that guys were only after one thing; from guys, that the girls were right—did little to dispel my image that sex was wrong. I was determined to be different, however. Never would a woman see me as using them for sex. Ever. I would treat them with sincerity, with honesty, with *respect*. Unfortunately, I didn't have any such woman to treat this way. And had no idea how to get one. I was clueless when it came to relationships—with a woman or a man. Sure, in fantasy I was the perfect conversationalist, the perfect gentleman, the perfect lover; but in reality, I was a social leper. The real me, trying to live up to the fantasy me, created an anxiety which paralyzed my social life. The key to unlocking this paralysis? A return to fantasy. But now I was trapped. I wanted to be with a woman—a real woman—but couldn't without jeopardizing my two worlds. Enter: *a prostitute*.

I passed them frequently on Mission Boulevard, often turning my car around to pass them again. *And again*. Their short, tight skirts; their clutching tops. The way they stood; the way they walked—these girls weren't real, they were objects. Sexual objects (maturity and experience has since taught me otherwise). Unfortunately, I had no idea how to go about hiring one, other than from what I've learned in movies and on TV, but that wasn't my style. It seemed dirty, disrespectful.

"Excuse me." I had walked the streets close to forty-five minutes before finding one I was attracted to. One that had "it". It took me a half-hour more to muster the courage to approach her. What if she isn't a prostitute? Though I knew better. Naive as I was, some things were obvious.

"Hey, cutie, looking for a date?" Her eyes were olive—a pretty olive—though lost in a bulwark

of mascara.

"Well, I just thought you were really beautiful, and I was hoping—"

"Are you a cop?"

"No, I'm not a cop?" My anxious smile melted into concerned reality. A cop? What if she's a cop? Should I ask her? That would make me sound stupid. What am I doing? I should just leave. Just walk away.

"You've never done this before, have you?" she said, breaking into a comforting smile. **"Okay sweetie, follow me."**

She nodded towards a diner across the street. I followed her to the side of the building, staring beneath her skirt as we climbed the fire escape and entered an apartment on the third floor.

"This is my...office." She tossed her jacket onto a piece of green lawn furniture in the corner.

"What can I do for you?"

"What do you mean?" I knew exactly what she meant.

"How much money do you have?"

Already knowing I had fifty-three dollars, I reached for my wallet and pretended to count. **"Forty bucks."**

"And what would you like for your forty bucks?" she said, seemingly amused.

"Well, I've never had an orgasm. I guess I'd like to have one. If that's okay." There, I said it.

"Girlfriend doesn't put out, huh?"

I didn't know what to say, so I just stood there—my usual response in the company of females.

"Well, don't worry about it, I do, so lie down." She took my hand and led me to a mattress in the center of the room, working at my zipper as we walked.

"I see you're ready." She eased my hardened tool through the lining of my boxers. I remember thinking back to my mom and the terror I knew she would feel if she knew I was here...without clean underwear. It was for just that reason that I showered and changed just hours ago. An obsession for cleanliness: yet another ritual that I could never understand, yet practiced anyway.

"Before we start, do you mind if I asked you something?"

"You're not nervous, are you?" She grabbed my penis firmly and began slowly stroking it

between her fingers.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Don't you worry about a thing." She ran her tongue from my testicles to the tip of my penis, sending waves of fire throughout my body. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. In the back of my mind, I couldn't help but wonder why such a pretty girl would be doing this sort of thing, but with the next pass of her mouth, I no longer cared.

"What's your name?"

"Mindthy." She let out a little laugh, raised her head and said it again, **"Mindy"**.

"Hi, I'm Jon."

"That figures, one more John in my life." (I didn't get the joke until a few days later.)

I wanted to ask her how she got involved in prostitution, why she got involved, but settled for the mundane. I think the first question was in regards to her age.

"Just turned eighteen."

"Hey, me too!" I was surprised by the cheerfulness in my own voice. That we now had something in common, that we shared something normal, helped ease my anxiety. I wanted to feel close to her, to make her believe that, in another lifetime, we could have been friends. I don't really know why, but it was important to me. **"You sure don't look eighteen. I'd say sixteen, maybe seventeen."** And she did, too, except for dark circles engulfing both eyes.

"Yeah, a lot of people say that. I sure don't feel sixteen, though." She looked sad, pensive—for the first time weak.

"Would you mind if I kissed you?" It wasn't a horny type of kiss that I was looking for, more like a friendly one. One that would assure both of us that what we were doing was okay. It worked. Our kisses led to touching, our touching led to why I was there in the first place.

"Now about this little problem of yours—" She laid me down and held my penis with both hands. Up and down, up and down. Her hands went faster than I had ever imagined trying with my own. **"I guess this won't be as easy as I thought,"** she mumbled, brushing a patch of stringy blonde hair from her face before taking me in her mouth once more. She continued to alternate her hand and mouth stroking until it was all I could do to stay on the mattress. I caught her by the arms and pulled her to my

chest.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"Nothing. Oh My God...that felt wonderful!" I wiped away a bead of sweat that had pooled on my forehead.

"But you haven't cum yet." Her fingers began teasing the base of my penis.

"It felt like I've been cumming for the past twenty minutes." And it had. A most wonderful, intense, passionate feeling.

"It only lasts a few seconds. You'll see." She lowered her head to begin again, but the moment her lips touched my skin, I stopped her. I had to. The sensations were just too powerful. I pulled her face to my chest and, sensing I couldn't continue, she conceded.

"Listen, I've already been up here way too long, and you really don't have the money—" She reached for her purse and took out what looked to be a condom package.

"Mindy, wait. I think you're terrific. I really do. But kind of saving *that* for when I get married. But thank-you..."

"Let me get this straight. I'm offering to have sex with you, on the house, and you're turning me down?" She kissed me on the cheek. **"...*what if I paid you?*"** It was the perfect ending to a perfect experience.

Driving back to the hospital—I was already a half-hour late—I kept thinking about Mindy's hands. How fast her stroke was. I reached for the bottle of suntan lotion stored in the glove compartment and began to recreate the scene. Faster and faster I stroked, until— The first wave shot through my eye; the next plastered my nose and lips. I pulled the car off to the side and tried to look past the white flashes that were tearing into my face. My eyelid was on fire, burning so caustically that even the sperm-free eye was now streaming tears. Is this what they meant when they said if you play with yourself you'll go blind?

I would have laughed had I not wanted to immobilize my lips. The bitterness of this white, warm, sticky stuff was more vile than anything I had ever tasted—a menu that included such non-food items as scabs, soap, and mud. Some of the sperm must have gotten into my mouth, as first my tongue seized, then my throat. Vomiting, I knew, was soon to follow. How could any woman swallow this? Several emeses later, as my vision returned, I scouted for damage: splattered shirt—ruined; steering wheel, dashboard, side-door—ruined; pants, underwear, shoes—ruined. Luckily, it was nothing a little Tide and Armor All couldn't fix, but I didn't know it at the time. With the way my eye felt, the way my lips felt, I was sure it was just a matter of time before the sperm ate its way through everything it touched.

Work, rest, play: the orgasm changed everything. Added a new dimension to my existence. Work was no longer work, it was waiting for down time, then heading to aisle 3-A where the bottles of Keri lotion were stored. With an eggcrate mattress as a bed, a locked storeroom as a house and an entire hospital full of fantasies, I began looking forward to work each night. Deliver an endotracheal tube to the ER—invite one of the nurses back to play "doctor". Not a real nurse, mind you—one created in fantasy. A vaginal speculum needed sterilization—become a doctor and use it to bring the patient to orgasm. The options had no limits. And now, each fantasy could finally be reinforced with an incredible, conscious-altering, earth-shattering orgasm.

The initial one or two daily masturbation sessions were soon dwarfed by what was to follow: six, seven, eight times a day; with each session becoming more detailed, more ritualized, more time consuming. No longer could I simply lie down and orgasm, I needed to construct my sexual partner's identity—her personality. If possible, I would obtain an object that she once touched. In the hospital: a piece of paper, a used instrument or a water glass would do. On the outside: an item from their balcony, from their car, or the ultimate—a pair of panties. Preferably used. Often, I would find myself out of lotion,

which would force a less-than-suitable replacement: saliva, shampoo, soda. Anything that would allow my hand to slide along the shaft. Every few weeks, be it by quality of lubrication (Prell shampoo and toothpaste were learned antagonists) or quantity of friction, my penis would swell in painful, flaky patches along the shaft and head—much like a sunburn. A severe sunburn. It was then that I would need to stop. Would need to, but didn't. *Couldn't*. I continued masturbating through the pain, often causing the condition to intensify. The orgasms were no longer pleasurable, the semen seeping through the cracks causing radiant pain throughout my trunk, but it didn't matter. I had to continue.

My free time (i.e. time not masturbating) was spent reading. Anything I could get my hands on regarding sex and sexuality I'd read. Practically memorize. *The Hite Report; Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (Kinsey report); Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex; Any Woman Can!; Men in Love*: I became an expert in the field. By Autumn's end, my life had been lost in an abyss of sexuality. No longer was I enjoying my nights in hotel parking lots or my creativity in exposing my genitalia. I was lonely. I was depressed. And I had nobody to talk to about my thoughts of suicide.

(7)

TWO STEPS FORWARD

(And three back)

Three sharp knocks...two steps forward...salute.

"Permission to enter, sir!"

"At ease, sailor. Come in and have a seat." As company commanders go, Chief Petty Officer McNichols was a good one. Throughout boot camp, as others belittled their recruits, he treated each of us with a touch of respect. Don't get me wrong, he pushed us—pushed us hard—but he never let us forget why we were there: to become not only the best sailors we could, but the best *human beings* as well. He led our entire training company with compassion. That was especially appreciated during my "bedwetting period".

It's not hard to imagine the reaction of my peers, should they have known about my enuresis, but Chief McNichols wouldn't allow it. In a system designed to prey on weaknesses, he took mine and turned it into a strength. He designated responsibilities that allowed me to remain in the barracks well after the other recruits had left, leaving me extra time to take care of "personal business", as he called it. The

enuresis lasted several weeks—the longest continuous period since I stopped bedwetting at age twelve—with no way of explaining its recurrence. They ran tests—including a prostrate exam with this missile-shaped object they shoved up my...well, suffice it to say, physically, I was normal. Sore, but normal. With no physical reasons for my bedwetting identified, only one option remained: psych.

The military's policy was, should you be a bed wetter, you were given a medical discharge—something about posing a health risk to operations in the field. I was given this option, but immediately turned it down. Returning to my previous lifestyle was not my desire, and if the doctor believed that psychiatry might help me overcome my “problem”, I would go willingly. Several weeks of stress management at the infirmary by sailors called "psych techs" and my sheet-soaked nights were over.

“Private Marsh, you've shown yourself to be a competent leader and your test scores are outstanding. I'd like to talk to you about a future in the Navy's nuclear program.”

"Thank-you, Chief, but I've already chosen my field: physical therapy."

"I see." Chief McNichols skimmed through what I could only guess was my personnel file.

"I grew up with a step-sister having Cerebral Palsy and saw how difficult it was for her to live a normal life. I'd like to try and change that. Maybe design special prosthetics or develop exercise programs to help people with disabilities."

He pulled out a piece of paper and ran his index finger down the first column.

"There's a waiting period for that one."

"Sir?" I was bewildered at the thought of what was coming.

He again rummaged through some papers in his desk, his fingers coming to rest on a black notebook, which he opened and turned in my direction.

"In order to get into the program for physical therapy, there's a one-and-a-half-year waiting period. You're also required to sign a contract extension of two years." He pushed the notebook even closer towards me.

"Two years? I'm planning on joining the Peace Corps when my enlistment's up."

"The Peace Corps?" He shook his head exhaustedly, as if he had been through this many times before.

"The Peace Corps is where I initially went to enlist, but the recruiter said I needed a degree

and steered me towards the Navy."

"I don't suppose he mentioned their restriction from hiring ex-military personnel?"

I shook my head. I was not prepared for such a reality. Suddenly my future, which I had believed was locked in, was now changing before my very eyes.

"Are there any other jobs available where I could help people, that don't have waiting lists?"

He handed me the list of all advanced training currently offered. Only one stood out: Neuropsychiatric Technician. If I couldn't deal with the physical aspects of disabilities, I'd focus on the emotional consequences of having a disability. It was the perfect choice. At least it seemed so at the time.

Boot camp did more for me than simply establish my desire to become a counselor. It proved to me that my past sexual behavior was merely a stage I was going through—a stage that I had now moved beyond. Adding up the months: two for boot camp, two for basic medical training, three for Neuropsychiatric training and an additional six weeks training with the Marines as a field medic left no doubt—I was normal.

My first official counseling session at Portsmouth Naval Base, Portsmouth, Virginia was with a twenty-year-old Army private who tried to hang herself during basic training. We talked for hours. And would have talked for hours more had it not been for my charge nurse's interruption.

"May I see you a moment?" Nurse Hadley immediately turned and walked into a nearby conference room, not waiting for my response.

"I'll be right back." I said, thanking Gayle for the conversation and offering a hug that lasted a few seconds longer than I had anticipated.

As I walked into the room, I could see that Nurse Hadley was upset. I was lost as to why.

"I know you're new, but there's a few things you need to be aware of. First, you spent way too much time with that patient."

That patient? She wasn't a patient; she was a person. I thought about correcting her, but remained silent.

"Marsh, you are responsible for all of the patients assigned to you and to let one monopolize your time means the others go without. Also, we have a very strict policy regarding fraternization. These patients are here because they're sick. They come to us seeking help and it

is our responsibility to provide them with the best care possible."

"But that's what I was trying to do." I offered innocently.

"Again, you're new, so I'm just making sure we got each other straight. I will not tolerate any of my employees taking advantage of a patient. Understood?"

"Yes, m'am." Taking advantage of her? How was I taking advantage of her? She needed to talk, so I listened. What's so wrong with that?

That afternoon with Gayle, I was especially careful. When she told me I was the only person who really cared about her, I assured her the other staff did as well. When she told me she could never open up to anyone the way she did with me, I reminded her that the more people she talked with, the more insights she would gain. When she told me she was being discharged the next morning and wanted to keep in touch, I gave her my address. She wrote often.

The next letter I received was from a Private Kelley, who had not only been discharged from the hospital, but was being processed for discharge from the service as well. Her letter was typical of the many to follow: sharing how special I was; thanking me for caring about her; saying how she wished she was still in Virginia so we could be "more than friends". Knowing she was a good thousand miles away, I wrote back wishing the same. What's so bad about a *Brief Psychotic Episode*, anyway? She sent me a picture of what she looked like before the accident, before she dipped her face in hydrochloric acid to kill *the bugs that were all over it*. She was beautiful, stunningly so.

The letters, the phone calls, the conversations: they each convinced me that what I was doing was right. That I had "a gift". The doctors weren't curing these people. Nor were the nurses. I, however, was. They told me so. How genuine I was; how I was able to reach places inside of them that no one else could. How they appreciated the little things I would do: the gifts, the poems, the drawings—the special things I'd do to let them know they mattered.

Our conversations, first aimed at specific issues, invariably led to philosophical explorations of death and love and life. By the time of their discharge, they felt, as did I, that our relationship had become something more than just "counseling". I couldn't control the depth of my feelings for these women. These were sensitive, caring, *special people*. To say good-bye because a few hospital administrators were worried that some staff might take advantage of their vulnerability wasn't an acceptable reason for ending

a friendship. I would never take advantage of a patient; I cared about each of them. No hospital policy could ever convince me that *it* was more important than saving these people's lives. Which is what I was doing. I thought.

"I had the most wonderful time!" Angela Davis. Petty Officer: third class. Borderline Personality Disorder with Mixed Features. Discharged six days previous.

"Me, too."

She searched her purse for the key to her room.

"Want to come in for awhile?"

"I thought guys weren't allowed in the women's barracks?"

"Nobody cares around this place." She grabbed my hand and pulled me through the door.

"Angie, I thought we were just going to be friends?" I took a step back, but she followed, playfully pinning me against the door.

"Aren't you attracted to me?" She flirtatiously ran her finger up the side of my arm.

"I think you're beautiful, but your friendship means a lot more to me than anything physical between us." This time, I meant it. Later, it simply became a part of the dance.

"So why can't we have both?"

"I'll be honest, I'm scared. I've never done it before."

"Done what?" Her mischievous smile disappeared when she realized that I was still a virgin.

"I'm sorry if I let you down." Though by the look in her eyes I could see that it was no let down. Quite the opposite.

"I'm the one who's sorry—for assuming. Most guys have had sex before they've learned to read. I should have known you'd be the exception." She kissed me softly on the lips. **"I'd be honored to be your first."**

For the remainder of the year, and for several years after, each patient I "fell-in-love-with" became my *first*. It didn't matter that it wasn't true, what mattered was that they wanted it to be. They wanted to believe that I cared for them enough to sacrifice something so precious. It was especially meaningful to those with a history of sexual abuse. Don't get me wrong, this wasn't a manipulation to get them into bed—the desire to sleep with me was already there. Rather, it was my way of making them feel a little bit

more special. In return, I felt special, too.

My attraction to his wife was not the sole reason for accepting their invitation. I was sick of barracks life. Sick of hearing how many “chicks” my roommates “bagged”. Sick of the three-in-the-morning salute to AC/DC. Sick of the lingering odor of second-hand vomit. When Bobbie and Neil mentioned they were renting out their basement, what choice did I have? Besides, they were newlyweds—madly in love; passionately in love. Certainly she would find no interest in me.

"I love you, Jon."

"Bobbie—"

"I can't help it. You're everything I've ever wanted. Everything I've ever hoped for. It's you I love, not Neil." In the six months we lived together, she confessed this only once—after several wine coolers and a lot of tears. Of course, we never meant for anything to happen, but with all the late night talks, the innocent hugs, the glances over dinner, we fell in love. *Both of us.*

I fought hard against it. I tried to respect their marriage. Their friendship. It just happened. He wasn't treating her the way she deserved; I was. He'd camp out by the T.V.; I'd help her with the dishes. He'd leave for another “night with the boys”; I'd stay home and challenge her to a game of Scrabble. Occasionally, we'd go to a movie or out for a walk. She even introduced me to Jennifer, my first official “girlfriend”. But each night, she and Neil would retire to their room and I to mine. It was all so innocent—until she left the note detailing how she wished it was me in her bed, instead of him. That's when things changed.

Back on the ward, two new admissions meant two new chances to meet someone “special”. With the mention of a woman's name, my interest was sparked; discovering she was between eighteen and twenty-one triggered the fantasies. Finally, and most critically, the diagnosis: major depression was good, but the addition of “with suicidal ideation” meant I had the perfect candidate. It was with these patients that I truly connected. The others: the schizophrenics, the psychotics, the *men*—they were just patients; but a twenty-year old overdose victim was already a friend. Someone I could relate to; someone I could care for. And I would—if she was attractive. Not beautiful, but attractive. Be it through looks, actions (*I've always found people who excel in areas such as music, athletics, or academics extremely attractive—irresistible*

some *might* say), or personality. On this day, however, we had two males, both alcoholics. There's always tomorrow.

"Grab your clothes and get the fuck out of my house!" His voice shattered both my dream and the affair I was having with his wife.

I didn't need to look at the clock to know we had overslept. I could feel Bobbie begin to shake behind me.

"Neil, I'm sorry. We didn't mean for this to happen—"

"Go to hell!"

Bobbie didn't say anything, I'm not sure she even understood it was real. That it wasn't just a dream. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, with both of us waiting for the moment we'd wake to the pulsating buzz that had so faithfully woke us every other morning. The buzz that gave Bobbie the time to shower, to fix her husband breakfast, to make their sheets look as if they'd been slept in. The buzz that warned us he was on his way home from work

"If it means anything, I do love her." I said it more for Bobbie, than Neil, but he said nothing in return. He didn't need to. Bobbie and I knew, though we spent much time convincing each other to the contrary, that what we were doing was wrong. Funny how it never feels wrong until you get caught. After the final door slammed and Bobbie and I were once again alone, I held her in my arms.

"I'm so sorry, Jon. I set the alarm. I know I did." She reached across the nightstand and pressed the alarm button: 6:30pm—shit.

"It'll be okay, I really do love you, you know. We'll be great together."

"Jon, you know I can't be with you. I have to make my marriage work—somehow." Lesson two: they always want the marriage to work after they sleep with you, never before.

"But I love you. More than he does. You know you'd be happier with me."

"I'm pregnant." The way she said it, I knew it was mine.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You've meant so much to my life, I didn't want to lose you."

"Is...is it mine?"

"I'm not sure, I think so."

"But if it's mine—"

"I love you, Jon, you know I do, but it's complicated. He's my husband. I know it sounds ridiculous after everything we've been through, but I believe in all that till-death-do-you-part stuff. Besides, what about Jennifer? You love her don't you?"

"I love *you*."

My back was still aching when I arrived for work. Having to move everything you own from a basement to a hotel, then from a hotel to an apartment in the matter of six-and-a-half hours can really take its toll, so when the charge nurse gave report on twenty-two year-old Sarah, who earlier this morning ingested two bottles of Tylenol, I didn't pay much attention. When I was assigned to her as a 1:1—meaning she couldn't leave my sight the entire shift—I thanked the Lord. I knew she was special the moment I saw her. In much the same way that I knew Bobbie was. And Jennifer. And Dana. And every other girl I've been attracted to.

"Sarah? Hi, my name's Jon and I'll be your nurse today." I gave her the sweetest, I'm-the-nicest-person-in-the-whole-world smile and offered my hand, which she accepted. "How long are you stuck with the I.V.?"

"I'm not sure. My doctor said I could have screwed up my liver, so they're giving me some kind of medicine to help."

"Mind if I ask why?"

"Why they're giving me medicine?"

"No, why you tried killing yourself. It's hard for me to imagine anyone so beautiful wanting to take their own life." She seemed genuinely touched by the compliment, though she looked away as she thanked me. Low self-esteem.

"What could be so bad?" I grabbed one of the green plastic chairs and pulled it alongside the couch she was sitting on.

"I've been really depressed. It started a few months ago, when I found out my fiancée was having an affair, but it's gotten worse since he moved out. I'm always lonely. I never feel like doing

anything anymore. Life's just lost its—" Her eyes reflected her desperation. As she spoke, it appeared as if she would have liked to make eye contact, but simply couldn't find the strength.

"Sarah, I know there's nothing I can say to take away the pain you're feeling, but I would like to share something that may help the healing begin. A few years ago, I met a girl with whom I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with. I shared with her the deepest parts of my soul and believed she did the same with me. When I asked her to marry me, she said yes, but that I had to know something first."

"Did she have an affair?" Our eyes met for the first time, though I quickly looked away so as not to scare her.

"Yeah, she did. She said it didn't mean anything, that I was the one she loved, but it no longer mattered. Our relationship was over. I guess why I shared that with you is to remind you that, even though it may not seem like it now, there really are people who believe in the same things that you do: honesty, trust, fidelity. You can't punish yourself for believing in what's right. You should be proud of yourself for that."

"And how did you feel after she told you?" Our eyes were engaging freely now, which assured me that her defenses were melting.

"Like you. That maybe I didn't belong in this world. That life wasn't worth living if I had no one to share it with. That if I can't trust the girl I was about to marry, how could I trust anyone, ever?"

"You really do understand, don't you?" She let loose a soft smile.

"I really do. And I'll tell you something else, even though it's been pretty lonely for me these past couple of years, I know that someday the right person *will* come along. Someone like you, who's sensitive, caring, intelligent. And the right person will come along for you, too."

"You think so?"

"I know it. Sarah, if I had met you in the real world, I'd have scooped you up and carried you to the altar!" I squeezed her hand to let her know I was being playful.

"Right, I must look so attractive with matted hair and dried charcoal caked down my cheek."

"You are beautiful. You're boyfriend was an idiot to let you get away."

"Thanks. A lot. I guess there are some good guys left in the world."

"Yeah? Well I wish I could say the same for women!"

She voiced her playful annoyance by wadding a tissue and throwing it in my direction. I dipped into my cup and bounced some ice chips off the top of her head. I was in love. Again.

"Can I ask you something else?" Sarah had *the look*. The one they get when they stop seeing me as a staff member and start seeing me as a friend. **"Have you ever thought about killing yourself?"**

"I'm really not supposed to talk about stuff like that, but since you've been so open with me, I'll tell you...yes, I have."

"Really? Maybe I'm not such a nutcase after all? I mean, if you've thought about it..."

"Sarah, don't ever be ashamed for feeling pain. It's people like you that remind me why my life is worth living. You care. You care so much you're willing to take your own life. That's what makes you special. You have the ability of feeling the deepest kind of pain there is and even though it feels like crap today, with it comes the ability to one day feel the deepest kind of love, too."

I paused for a response but received none. She appeared overwhelmed by such passionate talk from a relative stranger and so I continued. **"This guy wasn't right for you. If he was, he never would have done what he did. In the long run, you'll be glad. Someday you'll be lying in bed with your husband, your children in the room next door, and you'll be so thankful this guy was out of the picture."**

"Are you seeing anyone?" she asked, exhaling with a whisper of vulnerability.

I reached over and held onto her fingers. **"I'm not, but it's against hospital policy for staff to date patients within six months of their hospitalization."** Yeah for me! Ethics.

"I understand." She lowered her eyes as if embarrassed.

"But I'd love to go out with you, and if you'd like, in say," I counted the months in my head, **"September, I'll whip you up the best can of Raviolis you've ever tasted!"**

Before her discharge, Sarah left me a thank-you note, a phone number, and a promise that, should I not want to wait the full six months, she wouldn't tell. She kept her word.

Though the examples I shared with Sarah weren't real, in my world, they were. Like the rest of my life, reality had become an internal event bound no longer by fact. Feelings were my guide. Though I had never had a fiancée who cheated on me, or any fiancée for that matter, my ability to fantasize allowed me to understand and empathize with Sarah's situation. And the situations of any other patient who needed me to listen. And to care. It was my gift—and my curse.

FLASHBACK

"Watch this!" The man grabs me by the hair and lifts me to his face. Laughing, laughing... everyone laughing. Except me.

He takes a long drag from his cigarette, exhaling a cloud around my face. Coughing, gagging—I see them laughing still. He waits for silence, then extinguishes the remainder of the butt in my mouth, bringing on a new round of mirth. As he drops me to the floor, he orders me to swallow, which I'm unable to do. His blow knocks me against a wall.

Why are they all laughing?

I get to my feet and run. The closet. Where's the closet? Once there, I join my sisters already hiding. One of them, too dark to tell which, puts her arm around me. The other wraps me in a blanket. Neither say a word.

(8)

The Special One

Special. That's what I was. And each time a woman would hold me or kiss me; each time she would orgasm because of me: I became even more so. No one else could make them feel the way that I did; no one else could make them feel so deeply loved. Only me, *the special one*.

I had no more doubts about my life. Or my career. I had found my purpose: making love to women. Not their bodies, but their minds. Discover a woman lost, hurting, depressed and help her to feel loved. To feel needed. Help her to discover a part of herself that she never knew existed. Sex was only part of the equation: saved for the ones who were abused or neglected or insecure. And it wasn't even sex, it was communication. It was trust—no matter whose bed I was in the night before or who's I would be in the next.

Understanding my role helped me in other ways. I now knew that my past behaviors—voyeurism, exposing myself, fantasizing, pornography—weren't a sign of an illness, they were simply proof of how much I loved women. The times I'd stare into a stranger's window: it was the *woman* I fantasized about; when my genitals would *accidentally* slip out of my shorts during a bike ride: it was to make the women feel good; and when I'd spend all afternoon huddled in my apartment with magazines: I'd never fantasize about having sex with these women, I'd make love to them. I'd care for them, nurture them. See, I wasn't such a bad guy. That's why I was so confused when she called the police. Didn't she know it was just a romantic

letter?

It's something I had done many, many times before and not one woman ever felt the need to involve the authorities. Sure, I listened to a few calls from angry husbands, but most women would only call to thank me for making their day a little more special. For making their lives a little brighter. When I write a letter to a stranger, I'm writing how that person made me feel. I'm letting that person know she meant something, that she was special. Why can't people just except a compliment? Why do they have to be so paranoid?

It's funny, but I don't even remember what I wrote. I imagine it was much like the others: "I think you're beautiful; my heart jumped when I saw you." That kind of stuff. Only dressed up a bit. And, of course, there was probably a poem or flowers. Had to sweep them off their feet, let them know that things like romance and chivalry are still alive.

The officer wouldn't tell me who filed the complaint, so I wasn't sure if it was the waitress from the neighborhood Sizzler, or the girl in the mall—who's beauty so struck me that I ran to the Hallmark store, scribbled out a poem and gave it to her before she left the food court. Or maybe, just maybe it was my neighbor, whose letter included some pretty personal stuff, if I recall. Perhaps it was too personal? It didn't seem too personal at the time, but I do get carried away sometimes. I'd put my money on the girl from the mall. I remember when I approached her, I said something like, "Excuse me, I don't mean to frighten you, I just wanted you to know how beautiful I think you are. I know this seems pretty strange, so I'll just give you this—" Then I handed her the card and left. But there was something about her look. Most thank me on the spot, mention how flattered they are, but not her. She took the card and walked away. No smile, no thank-you. Come to think of it though, it couldn't have been her. Sometimes I leave my number and a message about hearing from them again, but other times I don't. Some women, I believe, would be more touched by an anonymous compliment, without attachments, while others need more. How did I know? It depended on the fantasy. If they looked lonely, or sad, I'd leave the number; if they appeared outgoing and confident, I'd keep it anonymous. The girl from the mall was definitely outgoing. So who could it have been?

Another benefit of finally accepting my role in life was that I was now free to set goals. No more

aimless wandering. I could now focus on becoming normal: three classes at a junior college; intramural softball, basketball and flag-football. I even joined a competitive men's baseball league. All that was missing were my friends: Terry, Danny, Jani, Joe and Thor. I still had Jennifer though, and she brought something that they could never bring to our relationship: virginity.

We'd kiss, hold hands, sometimes even touch each other *there*, but never anything more. "Let's wait until we're married," she'd always say. And, of course, I'd remind her of my conviction to do the same. I was, after all, still a virgin as well, or so she believed.

Technically Jennifer wasn't a virgin. At seventeen, she was engaged to a boy she thought she loved. A boy she thought loved her. A boy who, after finding out she was pregnant, told her he was in love with someone else. Men are scum. Both the loss of her engagement and the guilt over the abortion left her devastated. Even suicidal. That's why I waited over six months to kiss her for the first time; why it was so important that she think I was a virgin. With me, Jennifer regained all she had lost. And with my insistence that virginity was a mental state, rather than a physical one, her's was reinstated as well.

We had been dating for over a year, and though I loved her more than anyone I had ever known to that point in my life, something was missing. Our relationship was the first I'd had with a woman that wasn't sexual, and the more nights we'd stay up holding each other, the more days we'd spend at the zoo, or at the beach, the more certain I became that I wasn't doing my job. I loved her, and I wanted her to love me. I wanted her to experience the feelings I'd shared with so many others. What was more, I wanted to experience them for myself. I now understood what it felt like to be in love.

"Bobbie, hey, it's Jon. How are you?" I switched the phone from my right to my left ear.

"Good. It's great to hear from you."

"You, too. Listen, I wanted to ask you something. Jen and I have been dating for what will be a year-and-a-half next summer and I was thinking about asking her to marry me."

"Oh, my God! That's wonderful. You two will make the best couple!" Her voice beamed with sincerity.

"And I'd like for you to be my Best Man. I know it sounds stupid, but you are my best friend and there's no one else I'd want up there with me."

"Jon, I love you."

We caught each other up on the past few months. I listened to her horror stories about the pregnancy; she listened to my disastrous attempts at integrating into Jennifer's family.

"Hey, what's the story behind Lisa Mulroney's transfer? Rumor has it her husband thought you two were having an affair and made her leave the unit."

"No, it's nothing like that. She mentioned she was having some problems so we talked about them over dinner. Okay, a couple of dinners, but we never slept together." And that was the truth. Her boyfriend would get off work around 11:30p.m., so I'd always be dressed and out by 11:00p.m.

"You'd better be careful..." Bobbie playfully warned, having seen through my encrypted statement with ease.

"I know. But I swear, if Jenny says yes, I'll never so much as look at another woman as long as I live."

"Well, she hasn't said yes yet, has she? Neil's ship pulled out last month and he won't be back 'til after the baby's born. I really miss you."

We discussed further wedding plans the following morning.

(9)

My One, True Soulmate...(s)

"Jenny, you know I love you, right?"

She pulled my arm tighter around her shoulder and nuzzled her head into my chest to acknowledge. It was the perfect night for a proposal. The moon, hovering above the ocean's crest, swallowed the few remaining hints of daylight. Our wine glasses caressed in the sand, next to the remnants of what was a particularly exquisite bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

"All my life, people have come and gone, and I've never really cared. But you, you're the first person I've ever truly loved. You're the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. So please say you'll marry me..." I took out the ring and placed it on her finger.

Technically, she never said yes, but that night, under the stars, wrapped in our picnic blanket, we made love. And I had my answer.

The four months I had remaining in my enlistment were used to plan the wedding and to say good-bye to the others. Once married, I knew I could no longer continue my relationships with the others, so I began to prepare. At first, I concentrated on not having any new affairs: all comments, all letters became anonymous; all patients that I felt something "special" for, now heard, "I wish I would have met you sooner, but..."

Next came the relationships already in progress. It was important to end each of them in such a

way as to leave them both feeling good about themselves and admiring me. The truth worked well for most, as they came to realize that I had never asked them for anything, never pressured them into anything and never promised them anything; rather, I simply wanted to be a part of their life. For no other reason than that I enjoyed being with them. Most, I think, even respected my decision to commit to one person.

Finally, there was Bobbie. Possibly, the one I truly loved; possibly, the one carrying my child. I could never end that relationship, so, when my enlistment was up, I returned to California.

Jenny and I were still getting married. The date was set for July 20th—now eight months away. We simply decided that it would be good for us to live together first, away from her family. Okay, I decided, but she agreed. The plan was for me to set up an apartment, a job and to be enrolled in school, then she would fly out to join me. By December, just five weeks later, I had found a cozy two-bedroom apartment near the psychiatric hospital where I worked. Psychology classes were to begin in January, but since my enrollment was now confirmed, I made the call. Cold feet. She needed three more months to think about it. She still loved me, still wanted to get married, but was afraid her parents were right. Why *don't* we get married in Virginia? Why *don't* we live in Virginia? It would just be a few more months she assured me.

By February, "it" returned. "*It*" started with deep conversations with the "special" patients at the hospital. "*It*" continued with the anonymous letters to strangers and the fantasizing. Soon "*it*" was infiltrating every aspect of my life, except sex. I would not betray Jennifer. Ever. But when March came around and she still loved me, still wanted to marry me and still wanted another three months, I lost it. The dreams of finally settling down, of committing myself to one person were slipping away. I held on to that dream as long as I could, but the night I went home and fantasized about the patient I was working with, and ended that fantasy with an orgasm, was the night I let go.

The next night, I fantasized again. The following day: at work, with a pair of her panties I stole from the laundry bag. I'm still being faithful. I'm not cheating. On the way home, when I picked up a copy of Playboy's lingerie issue, it was to take the place of Jen not being there. I would throw it away as soon as she joined me. Besides, it's better than having an affair, isn't it? Then that weekend, when I took a stroll around our apartment complex and climbed the tree to look into that ladies' window—I wasn't hurting anyone. Nor was I when I intentionally left the blinds open for my neighbor to see me as she climbed the

stairs to her apartment. She couldn't *prove* that all the other nights I slept with clothes on, or that the sheets didn't fall to the floor on their own. And she certainly couldn't prove that the erection I had wasn't caused from a dream I was having. The levy had burst.

Strangely, it wasn't guilt I was filled with, but relief. Like an enormous pressure had finally been lifted. I made a promise to limit my behavior to looking, not touching. I must stay faithful to Jenny. By June, the end of the latest three month wait, I was *looking* everywhere. Neighbors. Strangers. Hotels. Dormitories. My mind swarmed with all sorts of possibilities: climbing into the air duct of a public restroom; dressing as a woman and spending the day in a women's locker room; setting up cameras in a neighbor's apartment. I never did these things, just got indescribably excited while thinking about them.

Though it had been three years since last peeking in a window, it felt as if it were yesterday. Imagine, trying to convince myself that it was just a phase. It wasn't a phase, it was reality. It was what made me happy. It was who I was. So when Jenny called to ask for another postponement, I knew I didn't need her anymore.

(10)

When All Else Fails...Try Marriage

“How 'bout this one?” She raised a jumpsuit from the rack and dangled it in front of me.

“Sure, if you really think our son will look good in pink.”

“Very funny! It's *going* to be a girl. My sisters had girls, my cousins had girls—believe me, we're having a girl.”

“If you say so. So what should we name *him*?!”

Truth be told, I didn't care what sex our baby was. My euphoric plunge into the past lasted barely a month; then, depression returned. I forgot how exhausting it all was. How I missed the dreams of being a daddy. Of being a husband. How much I missed Jenny.

When I first met Lisa, she was just another “special” girl in my life. Our first date was a stroll along the cliffs of LaJolla. It was there I learned about her recent move to California, having left Indiana and a troubled relationship behind. She was staying with her friends' family until she could find a place of her own. That night, in bed, I shared how Jenny had broken off our engagement, leaving me with a spare room and an astronomical rent. The next day, she moved in. Three weeks later, she was pregnant.

Apparently, one of my little sperm swam right through her pill's 99.9% loophole. She said she was on the pill. But I was glad. Even if I didn't love Lisa the way I did Jenny, I would learn to love her. After all, she was carrying my child, my baby—*my savior*. I could never go back to my old life with a family to look after. I had to grow up. I had no choice. All the past relationships—the caring, the nurturing—they were merely practice for the two people I would now love forever: my wife and my child. And, best of all, I knew

what having a family meant. No more chances. No more failing. I had to make this relationship work, no matter what. The time in my life had come to make a permanent change: no more affairs, no more fantasizing. And so I vowed to myself, as soon as we were officially married, next month in Vegas, I would stop.

“I love you, Lisa.”

“I love you, too.” She put her arms around me and waited for a kiss.

“Honey, we're in public... people are watching.” I pecked her discreetly on the lips.

What she believed was an innate shyness, was actually a constant fear that “that special someone” would be waiting around the corner, or standing behind the cashier's booth, or waiting in line at the movies. I didn't want to think such things; I wanted to be happy with Lisa. I wanted to feel proud to be spending the rest of my life with her. But I couldn't help but wonder...what if? What if I look up one day and there she is? My true love. I pulled her in my arms and kissed her. Not a peck—a long, passionate, I-don't-care-who-sees-us kiss. I've got to make this relationship work.

By the seventh month of pregnancy, and fifth of marriage, I had ended all but three of the affairs. Most importantly, I began no new ones. I fancied my new titles: Official Foot and Back Masseur; Official Cat-in-the-Hat Tummy-Reader; I was even nominated Official Nipple-Roller, while helping Lisa prepare for breast-feeding. We shared in all the household responsibilities—though spaghetti and hot dogs were my cook night staples. I knew I was ready for this family stuff, and the more time I spent with Lisa, the more confident I became in my decision to marry her. It was time to end the last three affairs.

The first was Michelle. We had been seeing each other for nearly four months, though, like most of the affairs, the time between each encounter was growing.

“It's about time you come to see me again. Too busy with all your other women?”

“Oh sweetie, you know you're the only one.” I returned her sarcasm with some of my own—and a wink. **“How've you been? How's Joe? Did the marriage counselor help things?”** Her husband Joe, like so many others, left their marriage for the pursuit of money. Left emotionally, anyway.

“No,” she paused, sprouting a distant smile, **“she did for awhile, but once the counseling stopped, so did Joe.”**

"I'm sorry." *Sort of—it was men like Joe who opened so many of my doors.* **"As beautiful as you are—why don't you leave him, marry me?"** It wasn't so much a question as it was a compliment.

"Jon, I wish it was you."

"But if you were my wife, who would I have an affair with?" I knew the jest was a mistake the moment it launched, but now it was out there, stumbling around like a lame elephant.

"Do you really think what we're doing is wrong?"

"No, of course not. I was kidding. You know how special you are to me. You deserve to be with a man who loves you. If Joe doesn't want to fulfill that role, that's his problem. Let me take his place. I couldn't imagine being without you." What am I doing? I came here to end the relationship, not commit myself further.

"If only we had met before Joe came along."

"You're so sweet. You'd better find your clothes and get going, he'll be home soon."

I wanted to break it off with her, I really did, but how could I? She never did anything to hurt me. She was a beautiful, sensitive woman. Maybe it wasn't "love" we shared, but it was something. Something that made both of us feel. Besides, we weren't hurting anybody. My feelings for her had nothing to do with my feelings for Lisa. When I was with Lisa, I thought of Lisa; when I was with Bobbie, or Shelley, or Anne, it was they who gained my favors. One never influenced the other. At least that's what I kept telling myself.

The next morning, Lisa started in before I could take my first bite of toast.

"What happened to you last night? You were supposed to straighten the house while I was at work. The place is a mess!" She rinsed some dishes in the sink and poured herself a glass of orange juice.

Answering questions was the hardest part of the relationship—any relationship. Trying to keep each lie in line with the next. Struggling to deflect faults of logic before they were recognized and confronted. Not that Lisa was a suspicious person, quite the opposite. She was trusting, naive. She was so unlike Jenny, who always had to know where I was, who I was with, how long I was with them. And she'd keep at it until all the answers matched. If she'd ever catch me with details that didn't, I'd have no choice but to jump on the offensive, spurting such cover as, "If we're going to have a serious relationship, you

have to start trusting me!” Or, when I knew I couldn't get out of a particularly deep lie, “I'm sick of this! If you don't trust me by now, maybe we should end our relationship altogether.” No, Lisa wasn't Jenny. She believed everything I said, the first time I said it.

“I started to clean, I really did, but I just have so much on my mind that I ended driving down to the beach and walking around.” I continued to munch on my toast without looking her in the eyes.

“What's wrong, hun?” She walked over to me and hugged me from behind, engulfing the chair as well.

“Nothing really. Just thinking about the baby—and you. I can't tell you how happy I am. I spent the night up by the lighthouse just thinking. I never thought I'd be this happy.”

“Our lighthouse?” It was there that I asked Lisa to marry me.

“Uh-huh...” That's it. Crisis over. Lies protected.

“I love you, Jon.”

“I love you, too.”

“I love you, Jon.”

“I love you, too.” For a second, Paula's name eluded me. It had been several weeks since I last saw her, which, of course, I apologized for.

Our relationship began as most: intense, highly erotic—with each of us believing we had found the “love of our life”. A month passes and what was once an every day rendezvous slips to weekly; weekly plummets to a few times a month, and then, in desperation, they go for a commitment. With Paula, it had been almost six months and, seeing as though I was now married, I looked forward to her next move.

“Jon we've been dating for some time now and don't get me wrong, I always have the best time when I'm with you, but I need something more. I need someone to love me every day. Like you used to.”

Uh, Paula. **“Paula, you know you mean the world to me, but I can't promise you something I'm not able to give. I don't know if I'll ever be ready to settle down. You know me, I can't commit**

myself to next Thursday, much less next month." I took her hand and softly stroked her fingers to assure her of my sincerity.

"I'm not talking marriage here, Jon, just something solid. I want to be able to come home from work and know you'll be there to talk to. To ask me how my day was. I want to sleep with you at night and wake up next to you in the morning. When we first started dating, you made me feel so loved. I want to share that love with you again, all the time."

"You're asking me for something I can't give right now. Maybe not ever."

"Is there someone else?" She asked in an understanding tone, not accusatory.

"Of course not. I date a little, sure, but there's no one who makes me feel the way you do. I told you from the beginning, my life is dedicated to writing, to poetry. That it was a choice I made a long time ago."

From her words and facial expressions, I could tell that my freedom had been granted. I wasn't going back. **"But I need more."** She said it, but knew it was in vain.

"And as hard as it is for me to say, you deserve more. That's why we shouldn't see each other anymore. You need to be free to find someone who shares your dreams."

"What about us?"

"What *about* us? We've shared something that few people will ever have the chance to share: true love." I knew the words sounded as if they were coming straight from a dime-store novel, but it didn't matter. It wasn't the words so much as the way they were spoken—with sincerity. **"It's something we can hold in our hearts forever. And who knows, maybe some day—"** Perfect, end it without ending it—just in case things don't work out with Lisa.

The more Lisa started to show, the less attractive she became. Of course, I never mentioned this *to her*. What was once a myriad of shared sexual positions was now relegated to one: her on her side, me from behind. That wasn't the only drawback, either. How is a man, engaged in lovemaking, supposed to get lost in the moment when he's constantly worried about poking his fetus in the eye? What's more, the hormone changes produced a certain...uh, odor. Couple that with the cheese-like discharge; the bitter, bitter, BITTER taste; and the secretions oozing from her breasts and it's safe to say our sex life wasn't

what it used to be. To be fair, in some ways it was better. This was *our* child inside of her and watching it grow, feeling it move—that was more satisfying than any orgasm. But erotically, two more months seemed a long, *long* way away.

"Rub my back."

"Sure, hun."

"Rub my feet."

"Sure, hun."

"Make love to me."

"Sure, hun. How many more weeks till you're due?"

Of all the women in my life—from Dana Spagnoli, to Jenny, to Lisa—no one matched the qualities I sought in a wife better than Julie Abrams. At 36, she presented herself as a woman ten years younger. It never mattered that she was fourteen years older than me, or that she had three children ranging in ages from four to nine—or that she was divorced. Okay, it bothered me a little that she was divorced. But she owned her own home, earned her PhD in Psychology, and did some fantastic things with the patients that were assigned to her. I loved her in a way that I had never loved anyone before. A common theme throughout my life. Why was I so sure I loved her? I don't know. It was something in the way we made love—so gentle, so full of care. Others could imitate the motions, but none the sincerity. She was the only woman to ever care about me "just because". With all the others, even Jenny, I had to prove myself. But not Julie. She took an interest in my schooling, my writing, and my career. She'd spend hours in her kitchen making my favorite dishes. Chicken Parmesan, barbequed ribs—anything I desired. If she went shopping, she'd surprise me with a shirt or a tie. With each trip she made to the library, there'd be a new book of poetry waiting for me on our pillow. She was the perfect mother...uh, I mean lover. I didn't want to leave Julie. Actually, I wished it was she who had gotten pregnant, instead of Lisa, but it wasn't. And once again I found myself trapped.

Knowing the truth would break her heart, I told her I was moving.

"To where?"

"Arizona. I got a job offer from the Menninger's Clinic that I just can't pass up."

"But what about us?" The tears had begun to well in both eyes and simply crushed my heart.

"Julie, I love you. I love everything about you. I love your daughters, your home, the way you treat me. You're the closest thing to a family I've ever had." And for once, I meant it.

"Then why are you leaving?"

"Because I have to. I'm twenty-two years old. I need to build a life of my own. Expand my career." Have a baby...

"But what about all those talks we had about our priorities? Jon, the kids would be devastated."

"I'll make a deal with you. Come with me to Arizona and I promise to stay with you for the rest of my life." I wasn't sure what I would do if she accepted—probably kept my word—but she didn't. Priorities.

"If it was just us, you know I would, but the girls are still in school, and I have my own career to think about."

"I know. I didn't expect you to say yes. I just hoped you would." She said no. Thank God.

Moving to Arizona hadn't been a bluff. Lisa and I had talked about it several days before I told Julie. For Lisa, it was the best move financially, as our rent was upwards of seven-fifty a month, bills were piling up, and the collection agencies had begun to swarm. For me, the decision began and ended with the Julie's and the Jenny's and the Sarah's. My secret life was about to catch up with me, and so it was time to start over. Again.

(11)

Promises, Promises

From the moment our son's body—still bloody and blue—was pulled from Lisa's belly; through the doctors' attempts to resuscitate—a Divine wisdom had settled within my heart. Born dead, my son had been given a second chance. My first real proof that He existed. There had to be a God. I saw my baby—lifeless. The bags pumping on his face; the fingers pushing on his chest. It wasn't until I prayed that my son, my little Taylor Marsh, took his first breath. I made a deal with God and He came through. Now it was my turn. I will stop my extracurricular sexual activities forever.

Though money was tight, my working nights as a counselor allowed us to get by. I was proud of who I had become: a daddy. I woke each day with a purpose. A meaning. The first time a patient hinted that we could be a little more than just friends, I said no. I said it gently, but no just the same. By the second and third propositions I had my answer down pat: *"I'm sorry, but it would be unprofessional to see you outside of the hospital. You are in a vulnerable position right now, and for me to take advantage of that would be wrong."* Saying no was easy once I learned how.

When Taylor reached three months, Lisa went back to work. Though part-time, her working had a full-time impact on our lives. When Lisa was staying home caring for Taylor, we were a family; when she returned to the business world, we became tag-team babysitters. No longer were we sharing the responsibilities of raising a family, we were separating them. You take the seven to eleven shift. I'll take the twelve to four. Today, I had the eight-in-the-morning till three-in-the-afternoon shift.

It started like most, with lots of cuddling and reading. Lots of songs and diaper changes. And, of course, the thawing of breast milk. At least over the few minutes Taylor managed to stay awake. The rest of the time I'd watch TV, or work on my writing. On June 27th at 12:17p.m., I met Joyce. Joyce Alexander. She was an employee at a local mall, being interviewed by Channel Seven news. Something about a legal holiday for Martin Luther King. But her eyes. Her lips. She had "it". I went to the phone book and searched for her name:

ALEXANDER JOYCE A 3882 Hemmingway Cir..... 533-5763

As Taylor and I pulled onto her street, I realized that I had no apartment number to match the address. It didn't matter though. Being in her apartment complex, knowing she lived somewhere in those gray and white buildings—that was enough. Enough to make me feel as though our relationship had begun. It was time to go shopping.

"Hey, aren't you the one they showed on TV earlier?" She was special. I knew we would have made great friends, given the chance, but I promised God: no more affairs. Besides, just seeing her, knowing where she lived. That was enough. For now.

"What'd you two do today?" Lisa tossed her keys on the counter.

"Not much. We stopped by the mall, went for a drive—that's about it. How was work?"

"Exhausting! I had this one client who..." Bitch. Bitch. Bitch. It's all she ever did anymore.

"That's too bad. How 'bout we get a babysitter and see a movie tonight? We haven't been alone in months."

"You know, that sounds nice, but not tonight. I just want to relax. Would you mind if I soaked in the tub for a while? What's for dinner?"

What's for dinner? Is she kidding? I worked last night, watched Taylor all day. I haven't slept in over twenty-two hours and she wants to know what's for dinner?

"I thought maybe we'd order out. How does pizza sound?"

She shrugged her indifference.

"Listen, after your bath, would you mind if I went out and caught a movie? I'm feeling a little cooped up." A little wasn't exactly true. I was suffocating. From diapers to Desitin, marriage was nothing like I had expected. Where I thought I'd find unlimited, uninhibited sex, I found scheduled intimacy; where I hoped to feel love, I felt the warmth of yet another Ultra-absorbent Huggies. But tonight, there would be no wife, no child. Just me—and a world full of possibilities.

Theatres, like all public places, used to be difficult for me. A constant flux of women meant an endless number of fantasies. Around each corner could be found that "special someone". Or worse, two. I didn't want to admit it, but the fantasies didn't end with the birth of Taylor. The behaviors did, as did my motivation to save every woman in world who was suffering, but the fantasies grew stronger and stronger.

And now, as I waited for my Pepsi, popcorn and change, I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to kiss the girl behind the counter.

I don't remember the movie; my concentration waned after I gave her the note. The one that told her how beautiful I thought she was. The one that said, though I was married, seeing her tonight gave me my first doubts as to whether or not I had made the right choice. I'm not sure what I was hoping, maybe that she was as romantic as I; that she would sit down beside me and hold my hand. That, when saying good-bye, she would tell me how much my note meant to her, then kiss me. Not a sexual kiss, a romantic one. But she didn't, and when the movie ended, I drove. Drove to the base of a small mountain in the middle of Phoenix. Didn't she like me? Wasn't she attracted to me? It took close to an hour to reach the summit, but once there, I took off my clothes and danced.

Looking over the city, looking over the world—I danced. Alone.

(12)

Love Isn't a Crime

"Don't forget, I have to go in early tonight."

Truth was, I didn't have to go in at all—called in sick for the third night in a row. Yesterday, I spent the evening with a woman I passed in the frozen-foods aisle at Safeway. I saw her once and "it" happened. She smiled as I held the door for her on the way out. Her smile grew upon realizing they were automatic doors. Such a gentleman. A stop for gas, a video rental, then finally, she drove home: 2207 Rivendale Drive. A two-story gray duplex, centered in a well-lit cul-de-sac. Too dangerous. Game over. Though I knew it was no game.

Tonight, though I toyed with returning to the theatre, I chose to stay home. At the center of our complex lay a swimming pool, which Taylor and I frequented. I remember eyeing the roof of the maintenance shed nearby and wondering what views such a fortress might hold. Tonight, I was determined to find out.

A trash can lift to the branch, a hop to the rain gutter and I was there. The roof's perimeter was barricaded by a three-foot wall, which allowed me to hide safely in its shadows. On this particular night, nothing happened, but by the end of the month I knew each of my neighbor's patterns.

Of the forty or so apartments enveloping the pool, four became primary targets. Alone in 32C lived a college-aged blonde, thin and fragile; another, a married couple—late twenties—with two small children were in 14A; and the last two, apartments 41C and 44D, both occupied by a pair of female roommates. Of course there were others—the woman in 16A, the daughter in 22B—but those four were the *special ones*. The ones that, if they could just see me for who I really was, would fall as deeply for me as I had for them. And I had fallen for them—each and every one of them—even if I didn't yet know their names.

The rooftop became my life. *One of my lives, anyway*. By day, I would shower my son with stories and songs and games but come nightfall, I'd retreat to the sanctuary of the roof. To "*write*" is what I would tell Lisa, and indeed I'd try, but I could never concentrate for more than two or three minutes at a time. There was too much pressure that I may miss someone undressing, or talking on the phone, or just sitting there. It never mattered what they were doing at the time, only what they might do next. *Well, okay, sometimes it mattered what they were doing at the time.*

From the rooftop I could see it all: Mrs. Phillips going down on her husband; the girl in 39C massaging herself; the woman in 20B sleeping alone, again. From their windows, I could see it all: *clearly*. After awhile, the long distance fantasies gave way to up-close intimacy. As I learned their routines, I discovered that hiding amidst 33A's begonias, just after the main bedroom lights went out, held quite a treasure. That, just before showering, Mrs. Shepard always turned out *living room lights, kitchen lights... then hallway*. As soon as the hallway darkened, I had less than a minute to get from the roof to the top of her stairwell. It was easy with a little practice.

The rooftop wasn't without its disadvantages. On any given night, my vision was limited to both the direction and angle of the blinds. But in its own way, even that seemed to add to the excitement. Heighten the suspense. Some nights, Julie, in 13D, would go to sleep without adjusting her blinds. Other nights, she would after slipping into her nightgown, exposing, if only for a few seconds, her billowy breasts. Still other nights, the blinds would be closed well before arrival, leaving me mournful for the night, but with the highest anticipations for tomorrow. Most nights, after the *special ones* were asleep, I'd climb down from the

roof and go for a swim. The exercise felt great, as did the opportunity to peer into the apartments of those blinds that had been turned south—an angle not readily accessible from the roof. Breasts were about the best I could do from the pool, and only a quick glimpse at that, but I didn't need more—fantasy took care of the rest.

The last of my sick days were spent weeks ago, but when I overheard Tammy talking about a party she was having, I decided to take the night off anyway, without pay. I had to. Tammy was one of the *special ones*. I'd wish her sweet dreams as her last light flickered; place flowers on her car, or a poem on her door. Anonymously, of course. I *was* married, after all. And the days we'd pass each other in the parking lot, or sit by each other at the pool, would be days filled with dreams and fantasy and love. It had to be love. So tonight, I looked forward to a most intense evening of watching.

There was another reason tonight was special. Fantasies could be thought of on a continuum. On one end were impossible situations with imaginary people—fantasizing I was the photographer for last months' Playboy centerfold, for example; on the other were fantasies which featured real people in real situations—making love to my charge nurse atop the examination table. The closer the situation came to mirroring reality, the more arousing the fantasy. When the fantasy became reality, which it often did (see—*charge nurse on exam table*), the distinction dimmed even further. Tonight, Tammy was having a party. Most likely, she will be serving alcohol. Across the walkway was a heated pool. My fantasies were becoming very real.

She'll leave the party with a few of her girlfriends and come sit out by the pool.

"How's the water?" they'd call out.

"Great! Come see for yourself," I'd holler back.

They'd whisper and giggle, then strip to their panties. One by one they'd walk to the edge of the pool and dive in. I'd slide my own trunks off and swim towards them. One in particular, on this night Tammy, would follow me with her eyes.

From this point, the fantasy would change. Sometimes, we'd play Marco Polo—having to find each other with only sound (I'd imagine their surprise when they discovered, by touch, that I had removed my

swimming trunks); other times we'd have chicken fights, or teach each other how to float. Still other times we'd simply remain anonymous, just staring, neither willing to make the first move.

I watched a stunning brunette pass by Tammy's window. I imagined her, in the pool, making love to me. Neither of us saying a word. She would orgasm, as would I, then we'd part—strangers once more.

By two a.m., the party had dwindled to three. Though I had several orgasms by this time, it was for Tammy that I had saved tonight's ultimate fantasy.

It began with Tammy's exhaustion after her final guest had left. She decided to relax in the Jacuzzi, and was surprised, pleasantly so, to find me already there. We'd talk about nothing important, then she asks me to rub her aching shoulders, her tired feet. As I worked my way up her thighs, we both knew what was going to happen.

As the fantasy grew, so did my erection. I left the pool and sunk into the Jacuzzi. Realism. I began stroking myself, preparing for release, when Tammy came out of her apartment with a large trash bag. She walked to the dumpster and tossed it in. She's cleaning up. Who cleans up a party at three in the morning? My fantasy added a new wrinkle—one that included reality. Go help her. Don't be nervous. Walk up to the door, tell her you couldn't sleep and offer to help clean up. I knew she at least thought I was attractive, as she frequently chose the lawn chair not too far from where Taylor and I played. And all those smiles she'd throw my way... Do it, Jon! Go to her door and ask if she needs some help. What have you got to lose? But thoughts of rejection once again got the best of me—*they always do*—and so I returned to the safety of my dreams. It wasn't a total loss; my struggle to integrate reality left me one step further on the continuum—meaning one step further in arousal.

On her next trip to the dumpster, two things became clear. One, she was alone. If anyone else had still been there, they would have certainly helped her carry the load she was now dragging across the parking lot; and two, her door was unlocked. I had never before thought about raping someone—fantasy or otherwise—as I knew, *rapists were bad*. I couldn't be a rapist; *I was good*. I was nice. I loved women—loved people. I would never hurt them. So why, then, on her next trip out, was I trying to talk myself into sneaking into her apartment? Why was I so sure that I would be safe by hiding in a closet until she finished showering? That I would wait until she climbed in bed before attacking... er, before making love to her? Why had I already thought about the police focusing their attention on the party guests, instead of me?

Why was my rape plan so detailed? So exact? From the way I'd awaken her by caressing her breasts to the way I'd run my tongue up her legs and across her thighs. Why, if I had no intention of raping her, did I think about whispering to her how beautiful she was; how, since high school (thus eliminating me as a suspect), it had always been my dream to be with her? Why did I know that, once she felt my body on hers, felt how my tongue was making her feel, she'd be just as excited as I? Why did these thoughts come to me, if I'm not a rapist?

I was still in the Jacuzzi when she closed the door for the last time, leaving me nothing more to decide. I had passed the test. I was not a rapist—this time.

The next afternoon was trying, to say the least. Taylor and I played out by the pool, but all I could think about was her and what could have been. I wished my thoughts reflected a *Thank God I came to my senses* sort of pattern, but they didn't. I felt as though I had missed out on something. That I had the opportunity to make love to someone so beautiful and I let it slip through my fingers. It was such an empty feeling. Though the moment was gone, the thoughts remained, and so every time I saw her, I'd picture myself tying her to the bed, licking her, tasting her, fucking her—and wondering just how far I'd be willing to go the next time. The *next time* came three weeks later.

"Need some help?" Tammy was struggling to get a bundle of luggage to her car.

"Sure, if you don't mind."

I grabbed one of her suitcases and followed her to the parking lot.

"Where you headed?"

"I'm flying to Chicago. Family reunion time."

"Chicago? That sounds like fun."

"You don't know my family." She rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Say no more. My family's the same way."

"I don't believe that for a second. You're the guy whose always out there playing with your son, aren't you? You look like you have a wonderful time with your family." She wasn't challenging me, flirting would be a more accurate description.

“Yeah, that’s me. And I do love my family. So?” I mockingly flexed my biceps and pecs in a bodybuilder’s pose, which made her laugh. **“You noticed me, huh?”**

“Yeah, I noticed you—and your wife,” she added with a tease.

“Wife? Oh no, you must be mistaken. You’re probably thinking of my sister. Yeah, that’s it. My sister.” I said it in such a way as to assure her I was playing. She mentioned something about seeing me acting awfully friendly with my sister and we both let loose a smile.

“I’ll see you when I get back, Hercules.”

She’ll see me when she gets back? What does that mean? Is she interested in pursuing a relationship? She knows I’m married. I know I’m married. Was she propositioning me?

Thumbing through the stack of past due notices, I knew I couldn’t afford any more time away from work—but she’ll be in *Chicago!* That meant her apartment would be vacant for at least several days. Several glorious, uninhibited days to learn everything I could about Tammy. What she eats, drinks, even what laundry detergent she uses. I had passed up the opportunity to make love to her once before, I was not about to let this pass, too.

With as many times as I had locked myself out of my own apartment, I wasn’t worried about getting in. Getting caught? That’s another story. But with a jerk of the screen and a butter knife up the window’s seam, that was that. Tammy even left her window cracked, which made it that much easier. I’ll be honest, I was scared. I had never done anything illegal before—at least, illegal in my mind—but even I knew that entering someone else’s apartment without permission was a crime. But I wasn’t going to steal anything. I just wanted to feel closer to Tammy, that’s all. Love isn’t a crime.

From watching her the past few months, I had a pretty good feel for her personality. It was one of the reasons I felt so attached. So it came as little surprise to find her bedroom dressed in delicate pinks and white. Her bed, the same bed I had fantasized about so many times before, lay littered with stuffed animals, decorative pillows and a big, black Teddy Bear. On her headboard sat a row of books—romance novels mostly—and the tiny flowered lamp which cast the peaceful shadows which allowed me to watch her sleep. Across the room stood a white dressing table with accompanying mirror; next to the dresser: a

matching desk. A bulletin board hung above the hamper with pictures of, among other things: horses, her Chi Omega sorority sisters, and some guy—gay, I hope.

In the top drawer of her desk, I found nothing out of the ordinary—paper, pens, pencils. Very neat. Very organized. In the next drawer, beneath some Mademoiselle magazines, I found her diary and wondered immediately if she had written about me over the past few months. *I read it a few days later, anxiously awaiting the mention of this “cute guy with his son”. But no such entry was found.*

I explored everything: her photo albums, scrapbooks, love letters. Each bit of information now driving my commitment to our relationship even deeper. Each letter allowing me to trust her just a little bit more. Each drawer allowing me to feel just a little bit safer. And, with each uncovered memory, with each discovered heartbreak, the fantasy drew one step closer to reality. Beyond reality. I searched the shower drain for her pubic hair—to see what it looked like, what it felt like. From the inner ring of the toilet, I swiped a drop of urine with my finger and smelled it, tasted it. I did everything I could to experience Tammy.

I didn't do it because I wanted to violate her privacy; I did it because I was falling in love with her. That, because I was married, this would most likely be the closest I would ever come to making love to the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. After all, the things I was doing: tasting her, touching her, smelling her; discovering what things she cared about—these were the same things I'd do with any woman I'd make love to. The fact that she wasn't there could leave no doubts about the sincerity of my feelings. I was there to experience *her*, without asking for anything in return.

Along the way, I gathered a few things: a picture of her family, a letter from an old boyfriend, a receipt from the grocery store—just enough to remember her by, but not enough to be missed. Except the diary, she'll probably miss the diary. There was only one thing left that I had to do. The experience wouldn't have been complete without an orgasm. A powerful orgasm—in *her* bed, with *her* nightgown, and a pair of *her* panties draped across my face. And it was. Powerful, I mean. I caught most of the semen in my hand, dabbing bits of it around her apartment. Leaving splatters on the panty liner of her bathing suit, some on the inner lining of her mattress. Even a few drops in the half-gallon container of chocolate-chip ice cream she left in the freezer. The thought of my cum touching her lips, her vagina—what more could I do to show her I cared?

FLASHBACK

"Mommy! Daddy! Help!"

I wasn't asleep. They kept telling me I was asleep, but I wasn't. It was not a nightmare. The *Glubby Hand* was real. Its shadowy digits, scaling the wall like a spider. Sometimes slow, sometimes fast—I never knew what approach it would take. Not that it mattered, as the glubby hand would find me always, whether I hid in the closet, or under the bed. And it wasn't alone, sometimes there would be hundreds of them—grabbing me, touching me. I'd run screaming into my parent's (adoptive) room to get away. The glubby hands were afraid to go in there, but some nights I couldn't break free. They'd pin me against the wall, or anchor my legs to the floor—all the while touching me. My face, my chest, my thighs... They wouldn't stop touching. It was on those nights that I'd yield; fighting only lengthened the terror.

I was thirteen when I first mentioned these experiences to my sister. She and I were listening to records in her room when she began to cry.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I just remembered something from when I was little."

"Tell me." I nudged her shoulder for . She spoke of this imaginary creature she had named, "*The Glubby Hand*".

(13)

Moving Right Along...

When we received the notice about the meeting, handwritten by the apartment manager himself, neither Lisa nor I knew what it was in regards to. Sure, we had been late on the rent a few times, but never by more than a few days. We wondered whether or not a neighbor had complained about Taylor's colic—nonstop nightly from six-thirty to eight—but we never could have imagined the truth.

"We've had a complaint that your husband has been looking into your neighbor's windows."

I thought I was going to die. Right there. Just spontaneously explode into a zillion red-hot pieces of flesh. I glanced towards Lisa and shook my head in denial. Who saw me? I can't believe my world is going to fall apart now. I'll change. I swear to God I'll change. Just get me out of this. Spontaneous conversation was never my strongest suit. It always took me awhile to think about my answers—the curse of living with so many lies.

"There's been some mistake. My husband would never do anything like that."

"Have you ever been on the rooftop of the maintenance shed?"

The rooftop. I had been seen. My mind began to churn frantically, while my face displayed serenity.

"Sure, I go up there, but not to look in people's windows, I go up there to write."

"You scale a two-story building in the middle of the night to *write*?"

"I know it sounds weird, but it's the truth. I work nights at the Menninger Clinic, and on my nights off, I write." I looked him squarely in the eyes, making sure I didn't blink even once.

"What's wrong with writing in your apartment?"

"Nothing, except that my typewriter disturbs my wife. I tried sitting out by the pool at first, but I couldn't concentrate. You never know what kind of people will be out at that time of the night. Besides, I think clearer when I'm outdoors."

He stirred in his chair, not knowing what to believe.

"Well, you're going to need to find someplace else, the roof is private property and I'm not in the mood for a lawsuit should you break your neck."

"No problem." Thank you, God.

"There's something else." He pulled a letter from a manila folder and handed it to Lisa. Not to me, to Lisa. **"It seems this letter you wrote to your neighbor has really got her upset."** Gratification filled his eyes.

I tried to remember what I wrote, while at the same time appearing calm. I saw from the envelope still in the folder that the letter was the one I slipped under the door of the girl who lived upstairs. I didn't say anything that should have scared her. I remember mentioning how pretty I thought she was, but I also emphasized that I was happily married, and for her not to misinterpret my intentions. That I only wanted her to know that I thought she was special (God, how I've learned to hate that word). That, if she ever needed someone to talk to, I was there. How could she have gotten scared over that? *Some people are so screwed up.*

"I'm really sorry for all this. It was just a misunderstanding. I'm not at all interested in her." (of course, that wasn't the case several days ago, when I saw her, in a T-shirt and panties, lying on her bed reading *Cosmopolitan*—though her blinds were shut, even the tightest blades have openings where the strings are thread.) It was then that I gotten the idea for the letter.

When we got home, Lisa was as angry at our neighbor as I was. I explained to Lisa that she must have been the one to see me on the roof, which is why the letter scared her. Of course, I knew the truth. I

knew why she no longer smiled at me when we'd pass each other in the parking lot. Lisa wanted to confront her, but I encouraged her to just drop it.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that—" I cuddled her into my arms and kissed her softly.

"They just don't know you the way I do. How sweet and gentle you are. I think it's great you reach out to people the way you do."

"Thanks." I gave her another gentle kiss. **"I don't want to live around here with people thinking I'm a pervert. How would you feel about moving? We'll need an extra room anyway, now that we're expecting again."** I rubbed her belly and gave it a kiss.

The manager was only too glad to let us out of our lease. I guess he didn't believe my story. We found a three-bedroom apartment across town, but six months later we had to move again. Imagine the nerve of someone suggesting I climbed the tree to see into their bedroom. Lisa understood that I just needed to get away from the city. That high amongst the tree tops I felt alone, safe. That I was different.

Lisa loved me even if I couldn't sleep with her anymore—spending most of my nights on the couch; or that I couldn't pay all of our bills; or that I needed to spend a couple of nights each month "by myself". All she asked was that our daughter Erin, born August, 1989, be raised in a stable environment. So, in October of that same year, we moved for the last time.

(14)

How Dare You Act Like Me!

"See the mountains?"

Taylor strained all of his one-and-a-half years past the car seat's harness, inching even closer toward the window.

"Those are the Colorado Rockies. That's where your daddy wanted to live when he was a boy."

"Big!" He reached out and smeared the window with his lollipop.

"Yes, they are big. How would you like to climb to the top?"

"Big! Big! Big!" he hollered before popping the candy back into his mouth.

"Yes, sweetie, they're big!" For a fleeting moment, I toyed with pulling to the side of the road, unpacking the U-haul and trudging up the side of the mountain to live. Build that ranch I'd always dreamed of. Spend the rest of my life where it belonged: with my family. The mountains would be perfect. So pure. So innocent. So far away from "it". But we pushed on. Boys Town, Nebraska was another days ride, and we hoped to arrive with plenty of time to settle in to our new home. Training to be house parents was to begin in a week's time, and we wanted to make a clean start of it. Everything. The finances, the friendships, the sexual behaviors. Well, I wanted to make a clean start of it all, anyways.

There I was in the mountains which offered so many dreams to my youth. The mountains which gave me so much strength and courage. And now, it was of these mountains that I asked to shield me from my past. I have a beautiful wife; two healthy, happy children; and I'm on my way to care for a house full of abused and neglected kids. It was my dream, and it had come true. It may not have been—*it wasn't*, the path I would have chosen; nevertheless, I made it. Now if I could just stay where I was at. Please, God, help me stop.

The first six months were rough. Not because of my sexual behaviors, perhaps because of the lack of them. We were too busy. "Transition" is what they called it; hell is what it was. Kids testing limits, testing our patience, testing nature—eggs thrown up, *will come down*. The seven years I spent working on psychiatric units left me prepared to deal with such anticipated behavior, but Lisa wasn't as fortunate. Where she believed that love alone would bring these kids around, several months of being referred to as "*the bitch*" gave her a truer picture of what we had gotten ourselves into. She came here to share her love for children, but found only resentment in return. To be fair, we were told exactly what to expect, but somewhere in her heart, she believed that love would be enough. After three months, she was ready to leave.

"Where are we going to go? We have no money, no jobs. We have two little ones who are dependent on us. We can't leave." And that was the truth. We had totally cut ourselves off from the outside world. We had no way of surviving should we have left our jobs.

"I don't care. I can't stand it another day." She had been making this plea on an almost daily basis, and it was getting tiring.

"Why is this so hard for you?"

"They don't listen when I ask them to do things. They only listen to you—it's not fair."

"They told us what to expect before we moved out here. It was *our* choice to come. We can't just give up because it's harder than we thought it would be. These kids are depending on us. They need us to stick it out, not abandon them. I promise, when they're through testing, when they begin to realize that we're in it for the long haul, they'll change."

"No. I can't take it anymore." And she meant it.

"You have to! Now stop acting like one of the kids and start being a mother." I was desperate. We couldn't leave. I knew that; Lisa knew that. But the way she was acting, anything was possible.

"Damn you, Jon. Sometimes I think these kids mean more to you than I do. You spend all of your time with them. And if you're not with them, you're with Erin and Taylor. I need somebody to care about me."

I knew she was right. I did spend all my time with children. It's where I felt comfortable. It's who I best related to. Lisa and I had had sex three times since arriving in Nebraska, once being in the back of the U-haul after crossing the border. Why? I told her it was because I had no more energy. That, after taking care of ten kids ranging in ages from three months to seventeen years, for up to sixteen hours a day, there was just nothing left. But I wonder if she could have understood the truth: that sex was beginning to repulse me. That every time we touched, my skin would crawl. I had had the feeling before, a long time ago, I just couldn't place exactly when.

The guilt that was tearing me away from my wife continued to grow. It wasn't because I no longer loved her; it may have been because, for the first time, I started to. I knew how to perform. I knew how to act. I didn't know how to love. I thought I did, up until now. But love isn't sex. Go figure.

I should have told her everything right then. That because of the things I had done, I was being ripped apart by remorse and shame. I didn't. Instead, I made promises I knew I would never keep.

"Okay, so if I promise to sleep in our bed every night, and promise to get a babysitter one night a week so we can have some time to ourselves, as adults, you'll stay?"

"—and meet some other adult couples. And take over some of the monotonous chores like cooking and making out our end-of-the-month budgets."

"Fine. Though you know how well I cook." End an argument with humor. Always.

I did begin sleeping with her every night, but it was strained. Though I still found her attractive, even sexy, I couldn't bring myself to touch her. Even more harrowing was the thought of her touching me. Once we passed the initial foreplay, the initial *feelings*, I could concentrate on performance and once again return to a highly aroused state. At least until it was my turn to orgasm. Then the guilt—the *please-don't-touch-me-I-wish-I-were-dead* guilt—would return, forcing me out of her arms and out of her heart.

I fared worse with playing the role of an adult. We did make friends, with Bob and Cathy, another couple at Boys Town. We'd spend our adult nights at the movies, or going out to dinner, or doing the things that most normal adult couples do. I, however, spent my time concentrating. Don't flirt with Cathy. Don't look at that waitress. Don't pay attention to that girl who keeps staring at you.

My life was just as incapacitated by *controlling* my sexual thoughts as it was when I *couldn't control them*. For months I tried—tried my hardest—but it never felt like I fit in. I didn't know how to be social. Not with adults. So the first time I skipped out on our *night-on-the-town*, it was to catch up on some paperwork. The next was to straighten up the apartment. Soon, they started making plans without me and I was glad. When Cathy got pregnant, and was too tired to go out, they made plans without her, too. When those plans brought Lisa home at three and four in the morning, I knew.

"Where are you off to?"

"Bob invited me over to play some cards with his wife and sister."

"Sounds like fun."

"Not really. It's probably going to be pretty boring. You sure you don't want to join us?"

"I'm positive. My evening's set. I've got to get the kids to bed and then I'm spending a nice relaxing night in front of the tube."

I knew she was bluffing with her offer for me to join them, but so was I. My evening *was* set. The minute she stepped out of the house, I called the babysitter, then set out to catch them. I knew they were having an affair; I'd been with too many women who cheated on their husbands not to know. Still, I had to be sure. I needed proof.

"Jon, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Damn it—not now!

"Sure DiAngelo, what's on your mind?" DiAngelo was one of the greatest kids I had ever met. He grew up in the streets of New York—gangbanger to the core. But he wanted more from his life. His Grandma wanted more. So they brought him to us. At first, the racial barriers forced a distance, but once he began to trust me, he became a part of my family. *I love you DiAngelo, wherever you are.*

"I was just thinking about my dad. Why he left me. Why he left momma." As the tears started to well, I knew we were in for one of our long talks.

"Come on in the office." I'll catch you later, Lisa. "Let me tell you a story that's just between us, okay?"

He nodded.

"When I was little, neither my mom or my dad wanted me. They put me up for adoption when I was three or four and I haven't heard anything from my dad since. My mom, my real mom, came back into my life when I was your age." I was trying to add emotion to my words, but had none to offer.

"So what happened?"

"Truthfully? I'm not sure. We started getting close, but when I asked her if she wanted to be my mom again, she said she wasn't ready. That she had "issues" she was still working on. I've often wondered, "What kind of issues could she be working on for seventeen years?" I wiped away a tear before he could see. "My point is, it would be easy for me to focus on the things I never received as a child, but that's not who I am. I chose to take charge of my life. I chose to break the cycle of abandonment. To make sure that my children will never feel abandoned. That they will grow up to love their children.

Not having a mom or a dad can be a tragic thing. You know it and I know it. But to take such a tragedy and move forward—to grow from it. That's what makes people great. And you're going to be one of the great ones, DiAngelo, I have no doubts about that."

"At least you were adopted. *You had parents.* Didn't you?"

"It's not the same. They fed me, clothed me, that kind of stuff, but they never loved me. My dad did, I guess, but his drinking numbed it, and by the time I reached high school, it was dead. My mom? I can't believe she's loved anyone. Ever. I don't think she knows how. Love, to her, was sacrifice. Control. Not that I blame her, I understand that her mom was as much of a bitch to her, as she was to my sister and I."

"Oooh, swearing! That'll cost you two thousand negative points!"

"Sorry, only we give out the consequences around here. But it's like I was saying. Cycles. It was up to me to break the cycle in my family, and it's up to you to break the cycle in yours."

"And I'm going to. I'm going to be the best dad in the world. My kids will be so sick of me kissing them, and hearing how much I love them..."

"I bet they will." I gave him a hug.

"I wish you were my dad."

"DiAngelo, you are my son."

"You and Lisa aren't going to leave us?"

"No, I promise. I'll always be here for you. And not just until you graduate, but for the rest of your life, if you'll let me."

Lisa came home almost thirty minutes past three. I pretended to be asleep, but watched every move she made from under the sheets. What did she toss in the trash? A piece of paper. What was it? A love letter? A receipt from a hotel? Damn it! How could she do this to me? She entered the bathroom and drew some water for a bath. A bath? Now? Wants to wash away his cum, probably.

"Hey, what time did you get home?" I wiped the non-sleep from my eyes.

"A few minutes ago. We ended up watching a movie after cards and I fell asleep."

"Really, what movie did you see?" I tried to sound like I believed her.

"I don't even know—that's how boring it was. I was really tired!"

"You must have been." Liar. **"Well, come to bed. I'll help you get back to sleep."** The thought of touching her, kissing her was loathsome, but I had to know. *Did he fuck her?*

"Sounds nice, let me jump in the shower and I'll be right there."

"Don't shower, come join me."

"Jon, what's gotten into you?"

"Nothing, I just missed you, that's all."

"I really want to shower first. I've got cigarette smoke all over me, and I know how much you hate it."

"That's okay, just climb into bed." My loving husband facade was wearing thin. Several seconds more and I would have thrown her on the bed and ripped off her clothes. I had to find out if his cum was still there, dripping from her—funny, I have an affair with a woman and it's beautiful, romantic. My wife does the same and it's vulgar, repugnant. Can't explain why—it just was.

I began to unbutton her blouse. No bra. Was she wearing one when she left? Damn, didn't notice. My mouth worked its way from her breasts to her thighs. Clues. Have to find clues.

"Ooooh, Jon."

"Shhh... just lie back and relax."

I slid her panties past her knees and placed them carefully on the nightstand. Check for cum stains in the morning. My tongue danced along her thigh, teasing every inch of skin on the way to her vagina. At least teasing is what she thought. Searching. Exploring. Just one drop of that bastards cum and I had her.

"Wait. Just make love to me." She tugged on my shoulders.

"But I really want to taste you." You're *not* going to stop me.

"Not tonight, I started spotting this morning."

Spotting? Where's the tampon? Or the pad? God-damned liar! You just realized what I'd find.

"Your periods never stopped me before." And they didn't. I discovered early on that licking women during menstruation added to their feeling of how much I cared. How far I'd be willing to go to please them. And it really wasn't that bad for me either, as long they washed first, and lied on their backs, and only wanted me to lick in certain areas, and— Anything to please a woman.

"Hun, please." She continued to tug.

"Fine." I rolled to my side of the bed.

"Wait, we can still do other stuff. I really want to make love with you."

"I lost the mood." What? Have some fantasy about fucking two guys in one night?

"Just like that? You lost the mood?"

"I'm sorry I got you all worked up. Go take your bath." The panties. I still had the panties.

The next morning, as Lisa tended to breakfast, I resumed my search. The panties. Where are they? I found them hanging on the shower rod—dripping wet. The piece of paper. I pulled it from the garbage. It wasn't a love letter, or a hotel receipt. It was a piece of stationery with numbers written on it. Scores to card games, or so she wanted me to believe. Maybe she planted it. She did make a lot of noise when she came home, maybe she wanted me to see her throw it out. Maybe it was a deliberate attempt to cover her tracks.

Maybes—that's all I had. No proof. It was driving me crazy. For weeks, every time we talked, I wanted to ask her; every time I looked at her, I pictured her with his cock in her mouth, or his dick pounding her from behind. Disgusting thoughts. Vulgar thoughts. Thoughts so completely opposite of what I had always believed sex was. Why? Why were the images so graphic? So repulsive? Why was I trying so hard to prove she was cheating on me? I knew what it would mean: that we'd lose our jobs, our home; that our kids would lose the chance to grow up in a stable family. That I would lose the chance to be the first person in my family to have never been through a divorce. Why then, was I so obsessed with catching her? I checked everything: store receipts, check stubs, even the odometer. When I could, I'd follow her. Listen in on her phone calls. Read her mail. She was having an affair. Why can't I prove it?

"I think we should see a marriage counselor." She said it calmly, reasonably; but I wasn't interested in saving our marriage. I wanted to know if she was having sex with Bob.

"A marriage counselor, what for?"

"I'm not happy. We've talked about it before, and you promised you'd change, but you haven't. You've gotten worse."

Gotten worse? How could she say that? I haven't had an affair since we moved to Nebraska. I haven't looked in anyone's window, or opened a pornographic magazine. I haven't flashed anyone, or wrote anyone romantic notes. Hell, I hardly even masturbate anymore. How is that worse?

"You never kiss me, or hold me. When we make love, it's like you're not even there. Your body's there, but your heart isn't—not the way it used to be. I don't think you love me anymore?"

"Of course I do. I swear, inside, I have all the same feelings I used to, I just don't know how to let them out."

"How come? You used to make me feel so special. What happened?"

What could I say? That I only know how to fall in love, not maintain it? That every relationship I've ever had ends like this? That I don't know how to stop it?

"Jon, what's wrong with us?"

"You really want to know? It's not us, it's you. You're fucking him, aren't you?"

"Who?"

"Bob."

"Of course not! I'd never cheat on you. How could you even think of such a thing?" She sounded sincere.

"Fucking liar!"

"Jon, what's wrong with you? Why are you talking like that?"

"You want to deny it, fine, answer me this: What are you doing with him till three and four in the morning, when I know that Cathy is already home and in bed?"

"We talk, that's all. He listens to my problems and I listen to his. We're just good friends, I swear. I've tried to talk to you, but you're always too busy with everything else to pay attention."

"You talk? Till four o'clock in the morning? Bullshit!"

"Stop swearing. Please. You're scaring me."

"Last month, you said you fell asleep after playing cards. I talked with Cathy. She said she never went out with you guys that night. She stayed home because she wasn't feeling well."

She had the look. The one that told me I caught her.

"We did play cards. Then we went over to his sister's house and had a few drinks. We put in a movie and all three of us fell asleep on the couch."

"That's not what you told me. You said you fell asleep at Bob and Cathy's house."

"I know. I just said that because I was scared."

"Scared?"

"Yeah, you've been so suspicious lately. You question everything I do, everyplace I go." !
didn't think she noticed. **"I knew you wouldn't believe me if I told you the truth."** Damn, the classic defense, attack the attacker.

"So you lied?"

"Yes, I lied, and I'm sorry. But you're really starting to scare me."

I thought back to the stationary I pulled from the trash. There were only three columns of scores. Maybe that part was true. But what about the panties? Why wash them by hand when she throws all the others in the laundry? Spotting. She had an answer for everything.

"What have I ever done to make you not trust me? I've always been faithful to you, and I always will." What if she's telling the truth? What if this is all in my mind? I've never doubted her before, so why now? Why have I become this insanely jealous person? I knew what I had to tell her: everything. My past. My behaviors. It was time for me to trust her with my true self. Allow her the chance to be my wife.

"Lisa, it's not you. There's something about me that you don't know. Something that I've never shared with anyone before."

"What is it? I'm your wife. I'm going to stand by you no matter what, I promise."

Will you? Stand by my side. Or will see me for the monster that I am and run?

"I do want to open up to you. It's just going to take some time. Let's set up an appointment with one of those counselors." Conversation ended—my guard now down; I was hoping that hers was, too.

The call came at a quarter to twelve that same night. Bob was having "problems". He wanted to come over to talk with Lisa for awhile.

"This late?"

"Yeah, he sounds pretty upset."

"It's fine with me, but I'm not waiting up, I'm exhausted." Not waiting up, hell, I couldn't sleep if I wanted to—which I didn't. Tonight was the night. The last time I snuck out to watch them "talk", they closed the office blinds before sitting down. Not this time. This time I closed them first—all but one tiny rung at the bottom. This time, I'd catch them.

Thirty minutes after he arrived, she came in to kiss me goodnight. I was expecting it. She needed to see if I was sleeping before—. When she returned to Bob, I popped the screen from our bedroom and took refuge behind the azaleas outside the office window.

Looking back, I wish that I didn't. I wish I would have talked to her. Burst into the room and told her that I loved her—or at least that I wanted to love her. I wish I would have spent all the energy I had learning to love her, instead of finding reasons not to, but once his pants came off, and she kissed him, it was too late. They denied having an affair. Said the kiss was just out of friendship. That he only took his pants off because he was hot. Besides, he was wearing biker shorts underneath, so what was the big deal? But I didn't listen to the excuses. Couldn't. I'd heard them so many times before, from my own lips. And now, it hurt just to look at her. Each time I'd close my eyes, I'd see that kiss. Every thought, every action reminded me of them. My life was paralyzed.

The following weeks threw me further and further into darkness. Days I would spend sitting. Just sitting. Expressionless. Motionless. Nothing could bring me out of it. Not the thoughts of working with the kids, not the thoughts of working out our marriage, not even Erin and Taylor. It wasn't until Lisa said she couldn't take it anymore, until she and the kids returned to Indiana to stay with her family, that I was able to break free. Courtesy of an Exact-O knife.

I was sitting on the couch. No thoughts, no concept of time, when I leaned toward the desk and pulled out the blade. Something about it was so comforting. So peaceful. I'd never before intentionally set out to hurt myself—never even considered it—but here I was, digging the knife into my skin. And liking it. It wasn't painful; it was, if anything, pleasurable. I was starting to feel again. With those feelings came thoughts. One of the first, what in the hell was I doing? The next, where do I go from here?

Irreconcilable differences was the official divorce decree. Joint custody, with Lisa being the custodial parent. That was okay, though. I needed time. Time to get my degree. Time to save money. Time to recover. I realized that, no matter how much I wanted to blame Lisa for the divorce, it wasn't her fault. It was mine. I somehow convinced myself that I was the perfect husband, but I wasn't. Far from it. All the time, all the energy spent fantasizing kept me from being anyone's partner. It cost me my family, my friends, my job. Everything I held dear to me—but never again. I now realized that juggling the two worlds was impossible. That, though I believed I was helping others, I instead left a trail of pain and emptiness everywhere I went. It was time to change. Forever.

Forever lasted two weeks.

(15)

II. THE RECOVERY

December 22

“**Thank-you, officer,**” I said, offering him my last stick of Bubble Yum. Okay Jonathan, think. Her name—what was it? Kim Schneider...Shrader...Schaeffer... that's it! Kim Schaeffer. I slowly pulled from the curb. Turn signal. Don't forget the turn signal. From my rearview mirror, I watched as the officer made a U-turn, crossed the divider and headed south. Her address? Elm street...thirty-eight-something. Ordinarily, I would have transcribed the information I had gathered from her checkbook onto a napkin, a candy wrapper, anything, but in my scramble to catch up with her, I never had the chance. If only the light hadn't changed. Damned yellow lights! I continued north to Elm, then headed east on 38th. I thought back to the moment we first touched. The charge I felt as she lifted the Captain Kirk doll from my hand. The site of her toddler gnawing on a box of crayons. This one was *the one*.

The only apartment complex in the district housed two hundred apartments canvassing a three-block area. Kim's cherry-red Prism was parked in garage #112. Like most apartments, the garage number didn't match that of the apartment; like most apartments, the mailbox did: Schaeffer K./Apt.10. The dashboard clock, now twenty minutes slow, flashed 1:30p.m.

2:00pm—With Christmas only three days away and no sign of activity in Kim’s apartment, I swung by Lisa’s to surprise my kids with a visit. When I did think of my children, I missed them terribly, and wanted nothing more than to spend time with them. Over the past year, I had seen Erin and Taylor maybe four or five times each week. Whenever I needed an escape. They were my sanctuary from what would have been a complete return to sexual air.

“I was in the neighborhood and I thought maybe the kids would like to see a movie or something.”

“You were supposed to pick them up almost two hours ago.” Lisa tried to voice displeasure, but saw something in my eyes and eased her attack.

“I am so sorry, Lisa. I completely forgot.” What kind of father forgets his own kids?

“Are you feeling okay? You look horrible.” She motioned for me to come in, but I declined and remained standing on the porch.

“Kids...daddy! “

They ripped down the stairs and jumped into my arms.

“Daddy, guess what?! Guess what, daddy!?” Erin shouted, her eyes flashing as bright as ever.

“What, sweetie? “

“I wrote a letter to Santa asking him to bring you a fishing pole! “

“You what?!” Taylor began tugging at my jeans while mumbling something about it being his turn to climb daddy. Erin was oblivious.

“I wrote a letter to Santa asking him to bring you a fishing pole! ‘member last summer we went camping and you taught us how to fish and I caught three fish and my brother caught two fish and you didn’t catch any fish and you said that your pole must have been broken and I said you should get a new one and you said that you didn’t have enough money so I asked Santa to bring you a new one so next time you can catch some fish like my brother and me.” She kissed my cheek before taking a breath.

“I wrote a letter too, daddy!” Taylor had made his way up to my waist, and, by digging his heels into my shins, got a few inches higher still.

“And what’d you wish for?”

“I asked Santa to bring you a new car!”

“A new car? Whoa, I sure hope he can fit it in his sleigh!” I squeezed them both as tight as I could. It was the hug of a dying man whispering goodbye with all the love and humanity he had left. Would they still love me if they knew the truth?

It was the fourth time we had seen *Beauty and the Beast* in the past two months, but seeing as it was playing at the dollar theater, it was a choice between that and *Nightmare on Elm Street #58*...or something of similar caliber.

“Did you guys see when the man got swallowed up by the dresser and it spit him out dressed up like a girl?!” Taylor squealed, doubled-over in the back seat laughing.

“That was pretty funny.” I gave Erin a wink and my hand and put it in her lap.

“Anybody hungry?”

A chorus of **“I am!”** quickly followed.

“Okay, who chose last time?” I always asked.

“Erin did!” “Nuh-uh, Taylor did!” They always answered.

“I seem to remember that the last time we went out, we went to McDonalds, and...” I paused for suspense. **“Erin chose!”** Taylor let out a victory yelp. **“Okay, kiddo. Where do you want to go?”** As if I couldn't have guessed. They always choose McDonalds. For two years, we ate nowhere but McDonalds. McDonalds, McDonalds, McDonalds. Darned Happy Meals. **“So, where's it gonna be, buddy?”**

He thought seriously for several seconds. **“McDonalds!”**

Erin clapped her approval.

Two Happy Meals, three twist cones, and a fight over who received the better toy and the kids were back home with Lisa and I at my own apartment. The holiday decorations were hung by seven. The gifts—wrapped and under the tree by nine. By nine-thirty, I was outside garage #112, watching an elderly couple enter Kim's building—stepping carefully past the snow and ice.

After waiting for the lot to clear, I made my way to the courtyard to see what tools I had to work with. The plan was unfolding on its own. Two large Spruce trees were centered in the courtyard. Too far for anything intimate, though with the binoculars I stored under the driver's seat of my Pinto, they held

potential. But not for Kim. Kim deserved better than peering from a faraway tree. Someday, she could be my wife, my lover—I owed it to her to go farther than I had ever gone before.

The icicles draping from each balcony's railing warned me the climb would be a dangerous one. Both the danger of the climb and the danger of being caught excited me. It heightened my awareness of everything. Every sound, every sight, every movement were potential warning signs. I can't allow myself to be caught. *Just knowing what people would think, knowing they wouldn't understand, frequently drove me to thoughts of suicide.* I must protect my secrets. The other benefit to such a dangerous climb was that, once I was safely in position (and a dark balcony in the middle of winter was safe), I was rewarded with a most intensely euphoric high. The more danger that was involved, the more effort I'd put into the preparation—the more aroused I would become.

Kim and her son (Kyle, wasn't it?) were snuggled on the couch watching a video. Beauty and the Beast. It was yet another sign that we belonged together. The movie was less than halfway through, so I buried myself into my jacket, tied the hood as far over my ski mask as the string would allow, and waited. It didn't take long before my feet began to burn. I wiggled my toes to keep the blood flowing, but by the end of the movie, both feet were on fire. Two months ago, in a similar situation, I jump from a second-story balcony, spraining both ankles. The pain became so intense as my feet began to thaw, that I screamed silently for most of the night (pain matched but three weeks later when my frostbitten ears—on yet another balcony—swelled and scabbed for over a month). But why worry now? I wouldn't have to jump for another few hours.

Kim and Kyle left the living room together, Kyle turning off the lights before scampering down the hallway. She'll come back. She'll put him to bed, get ready for bed herself, then come back to the kitchen for a bite to eat—or to the living room to watch TV. I know she will. They all do. An hour passed—nothing. No lights, no movement. Two hours passed. Then three. There's always tomorrow.

DECEMBER 23

7:45am—From the courtyard, I could tell that neither she nor Kyle was awake. I drove to Burger King for a croissant.

10: 20am—They've been up for over an hour. Kim made a quick trip to the garage, returning with a medium-sized brown box. *The garage. I had all night to see what was in there—to find a souvenir or two—and the thought never entered my mind until now. What's wrong with me?*

12:45pm—we had lunch at Perkins. I sat three booths away, in smoking—which I despised. On the way out, I scanned their plates. Kim had a BBQ chicken sandwich with a garden salad (Italian dressing). *Why did I need to know? I'm not sure. It somehow made me feel closer to her.* I could make out the imprint of her lipstick on the glass of ice water she had with her meal. The compulsion to take the glass was overwhelming. It created a burning deep within my gut that I knew wouldn't be relieved until I took the glass. But I didn't. My world was a private one, and I couldn't risk a waiter or patron stopping me for petty theft when my wife and stepson were now getting into their car.

3:10pm—After stops at Sears, Target, and a tiny antique shop called Rudy's, she pulled into a residential tract and entered 10322 Jasmine Ct. She didn't come out again until six-thirty. That's a lot of trips up and down Jasmine Ct.

7:05pm—We saw *Dances With Wolves*, which reminded me of my own dreams to live in the mountains. *Isolated.* Sitting behind Kim, I had several chances to touch her hair. It was pinned against the seat and a few strokes of my finger would have gone unnoticed, but I lost my nerve and settled for its smell and the few strands that were left behind.

11:00pm—Both in bed, lights out. Still haven't seen her naked.

DECEMBER 24

Erin and Taylor arrived early the next morning. This was *her year* to celebrate Christmas, so I had from eight in the morning till three in the afternoon on Christmas Eve to create *the magic*. And Christmas

magic was my specialty. I must have spent seven hundred dollars on presents, decorations, and goodies. Six hundred more than I could afford. Lisa used to say that if I spent half the energy that I do on Christmas on something useful like, say, a career, that I'd be a millionaire by now. But millionaires can't buy the way I feel on Christmas morning. Loved. Accepted. I can't explain why, but Christmas somehow validated my existence. It reminded me that random love and kindness—the exact attributes that comprised my life—were good things. Not things to be ashamed of. If people loved Christmas, then they could love me.

“We could be experiencing blizzard like conditions, so unless you absolutely have to go out, don't.” The radio continued with its grizzly forecast. **“...up to eight inches of overnight accumulation, with temperatures dropping to six below. Wind-chills are expected to plummet to anywhere from thirty-five to fifty below. Merry Christmas, Omaha.”** What am I doing here? The drifting snow reduced visibility to no more than ten yards past my windshield. It's so cold! I cupped my hands and blew. Where is she? It's Christmas Eve. Please don't make me waste my Christmas Eve. The clock flashed 10:38p.m. Maybe she's spending the holidays with her family. *It's where I should have been—if I had any, which I didn't. No family. No friends. Only the relationships sowed and stored safely in my head.* I tugged the jacket tighter against my face and inched closer to the dashboard's heater.

Ten minutes before midnight, a car pulled a few feet from my own. A figure ran from the car and jerked open the garage. It's her! Thank God! She grabbed some packages and trudged towards her apartment, leaving the garage door wide open. A moment later she returned for more, again, leaving the door ajar. Where's Kyle? I couldn't see inside the car, but she certainly would have taken him first, in this weather. I bet he's at his dad's! On her next trip out, I made a dash for her building. If she left the garage open, she probably left her apartment open as well. It was, a welcome mat wedging the door to the wall. Knowing I had no time to think, and driven on by the intense rush that was beginning to overwhelm me, I threw caution to the wind. I ran inside and quickly searched for a place to hide. Kyle's room.

I settled in his closet, concealing myself behind a massive Kermit the Frog. My heart was pounding like never before; this was the greatest rush of them all. The dead bolt sliding into its case assured me we were safe. And alone. I continued to listen: a refrigerator door opening, a microwave beeping, the radio softly playing Christmas songs. She seems so...normal.

I thought about going to her, explaining why I was there: that I was in love with her; that my being there was proof of that love, that of all the people in the world, it was her I chose to spend Christmas Eve with. Surely, she would understand—once the initial shock had passed. She would see how special I was. She would see that we were meant to be together. That I wasn't crazy. Just in love.

Five minutes after the music ended, I emerged from the closet. From the shadows in the hall, I saw that the only light remaining was from her bedroom. I had to get a better view. I didn't have a plan, but remembered the girl from Arizona. *Fantasy approaching reality.* My heart beat even faster. I was stationed behind the door when the shower began to flow. She's getting undressed right now! She has to be! I couldn't wait any longer. I needed to orgasm. Taking off my shoes, my socks, my pants, and my underwear, I peeked into her bedroom. Nothing. Upon hearing the shower door close, I removed my shirt and entered her room, stopping just outside the bathroom. What am I doing here? I'm not a rapist. Get the hell out of her apartment—now! *But I was so close.* I could see her body outlined in the beveled plastic, her tiny breasts lost in the steam's haze. I reached into the bathroom, grabbed her panties, and took a long whiff of its crotch. I began to stroke myself furiously, needing to explode. Come on, Jon! Do it! Cum! Cum!

Now, I heard the shower cut-off, so why didn't I leave? Why did it feel so much like a dream? Run! Get out of here! She's going to see you! But I couldn't. I couldn't move. I couldn't stop. I wanted her to see me. I wanted her to make love to me. Her face was buried in a towel when I spoke.

“Don't be alarmed! I'm not going to hurt you!” She let out a short sharp scream, covering herself with the towel. I stood there naked.

“What do you want?” Her voice trembled; I saw from her terrified expression that she recognized me. **“Why are you here?”**

“Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you—that's the last thing I want. Just give me two minutes and then I'll leave... if you want me to. Okay?”

She was still shaken and said nothing.

“I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. When I saw you a few days ago, I couldn't help but wonder how great it would be to meet you. You touched something inside of me, something really special, and I knew we were meant for each other. I didn't think I'd ever see you again, then yesterday, as I was driving home from the movies—” A lie, but a chance meeting was less

threatening than the truth. **"I saw your car in the lane next to mine and I knew it was fate. I followed you home, hoping you'd stop someplace where I could run into you again, spontaneously, but you didn't. When you came home so late, and I noticed your door open—" I was hoping she didn't follow the absence of logic** **"I walked in. At first, I was going to surprise you as you walked through the door, but I chickened-out and hid. I swear, I was going to leave when you started the shower, but the thought of seeing you naked—"** I forced a blush.

"You can be arrested for being here!" Her voice was full of anxiety, but something about her face changed—relaxed. **"Still, it is kind of flattering."**

"Oh, Kim, I think you're so beautiful! If you want me to leave, I will, but I don't want to." I felt my manhood once again thicken.

"I don't want you to leave, but you really didn't need to go through all this. Why didn't you just ask me out when we first met? You had to know how attracted I was to you." She released her towel, exposing her hardened nipples. Nothing more needed to be said...

Just then, a car pulled alongside my own. Is it her? It wasn't, just another elderly couple. I checked the dashboard clock—11:20pm. Where in the hell is she? I returned to my fantasy.

She released the towel, exposing her hardened...

A moment later, Kim's cherry-red Prism pulled into her garage. Just as I'd imagined, she loaded her arms with packages, leaving the garage wide open. Just as I had imagined, she returned alone—no signs of Kyle. I waited for her next trip to the garage before running up the stairs to her apartment. As I reached the top, I saw that her door was closed. I turned the knob. Locked. Kim's footsteps warned me she was near. Think, Jon, think. No place to hide. No way of getting past her...Shit. She ascended the stairwell and recognized me immediately. Finish the fantasy. Tell her why you're here. Tell her how you feel. Just be yourself, she'll understand.

"Merry Christmas!" I tried to sound friendly, but reality struck swiftly.

"What are you doing here?" It was hard to read the expression on her face—confusion or fear?

"Well, it's kind of a long story. Can we go in?" It was fear.

"No, and I'd like you to please leave right now or I'll scream."

“ Wait, you don't understand—”

“If you don't leave right now, I'm going to call the—”

“But—“

“I'm not kidding! Get the hell out of here! Police! Help! “

What was her problem? I just wanted to talk. That's all. What'd she have to get all paranoid for? I'm not dangerous; she had no right to treat me like that. God, what a bitch! I brushed the snow from my windshield and tried to start the engine. Nothing. I see you up there peeking out the window. What'd you think I was going to do, rape you? I again tried turning the engine over without success. I'm leaving.

The two police cars that passed sent daggers through my chest. She *did* call the police! I didn't do anything. This isn't fair! I made another attempt to start the car, then abandoned my Pinto for an escape on foot. Why am I running? I didn't do anything. Go back, talk to her. Tell her you were having car trouble—no good. How could I explain knowing where she lived? Coincidence? She'd never buy it. And that crap I told her about needing to talk. No, going back wasn't an option. I ran for one of the Spruce trees in the courtyard. The driving snow had begun to freeze my eyelids.

The trouble with choosing a tree is that, should they find you, you have no escape. But I was a good enough climber to take the risk. I lifted myself through the iced branches, coming to rest some three-fourths of the way up. I wrapped my arms and legs around the trunk and waited. Why am I doing this? I didn't do anything! I could no longer see my car, or Kim's apartment, but the lights' reflection off the falling snow warned me the police were still in the area. Please God, get me out of this. I'm a good person; I don't deserve to be arrested. I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING! I thought back to Terry, and the talks we used to have amongst the treetops. How long ago it all seemed. How many lifetimes had passed. This isn't the way it was supposed to end.

The biting cold no longer burned; my limbs began to feel warmer. I'll find a thicker branch...Get some rest...so sleepy. I reached out, but couldn't feel. Anything. No branches, no limbs. Got...to get...down.... too cold.... I'm not sure from what part of the tree I fell, but I wasn't hurt. Not that I knew of,

anyway. The police now gone, I returned to my car and tried to get the engine started. Come-on, come-on...yes!

I drove to an empty garage and closed the door. Complete darkness. I flipped on my headlights, illuminating the red-bricked walls that now imprisoned me. That bitch, she had no right...how could she call the police? I cracked the garage door to keep the carbon monoxide from building inside. From that thinly sliced opening, I saw her. Getting more packages from the car. Is she crazy? She calls the police one minute, then goes outside alone the next? You deserve to be raped, bitch! I scanned the parking lot. Alone. I ran for her garage, perching myself behind the rear bumper.

What am I doing? I'm not a rapist! I'm not a rapist! I considered leaving, but as she leaned in the car I made my move.

"Shut up and you won't get hurt!" I slammed down the garage door, shutting off any chance of escape, or rescue. No turning back. **"Do exactly as I say and don't try anything stupid!"**

"Please don't hurt me," she sobbed, **"take whatever you want but please don't hurt me. I have a son."**

"Why did you call the police?"

"I didn't."

"Fucking liar!" Why do women always lie to me?

Her hair felt coarse as I drug her from the car, nothing like I had imagined it would be, back in the theatre. I forced her chest against the car's hood and fumbled for her belt, her pleas for me to stop simply intensifying my arousal. Reaching beneath her sweater, I pinched her nipples—not to hurt her, to excite her.

"I want to make love to you so bad!" The words were coming out of my mouth, yet they didn't seem real. It all seemed like a dream. I ripped off my pants and shoved my dick inside her. It took several thrusts and lots of saliva, but it finally went in. I drove her as hard as I could, stopping only at the point of orgasm. I wanted this one to last. Forcing her to lie on the hood, I began to lick her thighs. Even now, I wanted her to climax first. I began teasing her clitoris with soft, slow strokes. They always like it when I do that. I continued to build momentum, expecting her to cry out at any moment. But nothing. What's wrong? I'm doing everything the way I always do. Why isn't she enjoying this? I lifted my head.

“Listen, you have no idea who I am. It's pitch black in here, just close your eyes and enjoy the way I'm going to make you feel.” It made sense to me. I knew that, if she would just lie back and give me a chance, she would love the things I could do to her body. She would love me.

Through her stifled sobs, I was able to make out what she was saying, **“Are you going to kill me?”**

(16)

Finally, A Way Out...

“Del Amo hospital, how may I help you?”

“Yes, hi, ummm, I'd like some...information.”

Silence.

“About your program.” I had gotten the number from a crisis hotline that I had called just minutes earlier.

“And which program would you like to know about, sir?” Her voice was professional, comforting. No shame. Don't be ashamed.

“Uh, I've had some problems—”

More silence.

“With some sexual stuff.”

“Okay, sir, one moment and I'll connect you.” The phone went dead. No music, no currents. Then, just as suddenly as it went dead, it clicked again. **“I'm sorry sir, the intake counselor is out of her office. If you would leave your name and number she'll get back with you as soon as possible.”**

My name? My number? **“That's okay; I'll call back later. No, wait—”**

I spent the afternoon waiting for her call. I tried watching television—first reruns of Matlock, then reruns of Magnum PI—but I just couldn't concentrate. I couldn't sit still. The radio was no help either.

I did it. I actually did it. I took my first step. I went to the fridge and poured a glass of lemonade; my hand shook in much the same way it did ten years ago, in Mrs. Miller's kitchen. No more peeking in strangers' windows, no more following people for days at a time. No more obsessions. No more fantasies. I'm going to get my life back. I'm going to be human again. I ran from room to room, gathering everything that reminded me of *it*. The magazines, the books, the videos, the clothes—everything. I'm going to beat this! I piled them in the corner of my living room. I'm going to need a box. A big box. I couldn't imagine what life was going to be like. It had always been with me, as much a part of my existence as food and water. I can become a writer, a poet. I can finish my degree; save money for a house. I can fall in love. I can even start to have friends again. *Friends...Terry.* I ran to the phone and dialed.

“What city, please?”

“Hello?” her voice told me she was no more than seven. Has it been that long?

“Hi! Is Terry home? “

“One moment, please. Daddy, telephone!”

I thought I would be more nervous than I was.

“Hello?”

“Yeah! This is Old Man Harrington. Stay out of my shed you little shit!”

“Oh my God! Jon? Is that you? We gave you up for dead!”

“Merry Christmas!” I began telling him everything. The things I'd done, my desire to get treatment, why I've been so afraid to contact anyone over the years. It felt like we never missed a day. Best friends—still.

“I expect your butt out here when you get out of the hospital. We've got a lot of football games to catch-up on! Hope you haven't let that golden arm go to shit?”

“Doesn't matter, I can still out throw you with either arm!”

Thirty minutes after we hung up, I received the call. Del Amo Hospital. Intake counselor.

“Thank-you very much for returning my call.”

“Thank-you for calling. How may I help you?”

“I'd like to be treated for some problems I'm having.”

"Okay, what sort of problems are we talking about?"

"Well, I'm not really sure. Sexual problems, I guess. Not with my performance" (had to get that straight—pardon the pun) **"just—with some behaviors."**

"What kind of behaviors?" She seemed to expect my generalities.

"I can't stop fantasizing. I watch people undress from their windows. I follow people I don't even know. And I've started having thoughts about raping people."

"I see. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?"

"No, please. Ask what you need to. I just want help."

"How long have you displayed the behaviors you've mentioned?"

"About ten years." Somehow, answering her questions seemed less shameful than volunteering the details.

"And have you ever..." Then came the list. I never realized how many behaviors had become a part of my "routine". Or, for that matter, why they had appeared at all? Why, for instance, did I find exposing myself exciting, but masochistic behaviors perverted? Why did I find peering into women's windows erotic, yet the thoughts of child pornography repulsive? Of being with a man sickening? It didn't make any sense.

"From what you've shared, you appear to be an excellent candidate for our treatment program." She paused, waiting for a response, but none came. **"Let me tell you a little bit about the unit you will be assigned to. It's a twelve bed sexual offender's unit, with three beds currently open. The inpatient stay is a minimum of thirty days, but your actual length of stay will be determined by you and your treatment team. You'll be involved in individual and group therapy, behavioral therapy, recreational therapy, biofeedback and, of course, medicinal therapy as needed. Does this sound like the type of program you're looking for?"**

"I guess so." The information was coming so fast I could hardly process what it all meant. But it didn't matter. I needed help and they could help me.

"Great. Let me get some insurance information from you and we'll get you set up for admission." Insurance. I don't have insurance.

"Well, see, I lost my job a few months back—"

“That's no problem. With private pay patients, we do require a deposit of half the estimated bill prior to treatment. Would you be coming in before or after the holidays? “

“A deposit? How much money are we talking about? “ I was hoping to hear the words: "two thousand" or "three thousand". It didn't matter how much it was. I was willing to sell my car, my furniture. Whatever it took to get help. I can't live like this anymore.

“The average bill runs around twenty-two thousand a month, with eleven thousand required to hold the bed,” she said, disturbingly casual.

“Eleven thousand dollars? Cash? Wow, that's a bit steep. Are there other programs you might recommend for say, half that?” Who am I kidding, I can't even afford that.

“I'm sorry, sir, we're not allowed to give references to other institutions, but you may want to call your local crisis center. They should be able to help you.”

In one motion, I slammed down the phone and ripped the cord from the wall. I wasn't mad at them. I wasn't even mad at myself. I was angry at a society that would charge twenty-two thousand dollars a month to someone desperate for help.

I knew I couldn't go on with my life the way that it was. And now, I knew I would never be able to afford treatment. It was clear what had to be done. I rummaged through some boxes stacked in the closet until I came across an old Statistics notebook from several years back. I tore out some blank sheets of paper and began:

“To whom it may concern, “ Too formal. I wadded it up and tossed it towards the wastebasket—missing by more than a foot. A flashing memory of Thor brought a brief smile to my lips.

“Good-bye, cruel world, “ Please, can I be any more melodramatic? Another wad, another miss.

“Dear Erin and Taylor, “ No, I'll write them separately. After doing just that, I returned to my final worldly message and settled on the following: *“Though I realize I am but a speck, and my actions even less; I must take responsibility for what I've done. I can no longer control the decisions that I make; save, this final one. And so I leave my soul—my kind, gentle, loving soul—to the Mercy of God.”* No salutation—good touch.

I remembered a story about a famous man who slit his wrists in a bathtub. I don't remember who it was, only that they referred to him as a genius—maintaining the bathwater at body temperature to allow

the blood to drain painlessly. I went to the tub and drew my bath. Opening the medicine cabinet, I grabbed a Bic disposable razor from the three that remained. Finally, no more pain. I cracked the protective barrier, exposing the full edge of its blade. It's finally over. I began to remove my clothes as I made my way towards the couch. Staring at my wrists, I sat. An hour passed, then two. This is it. No more shame. No more failure. Just do it. Don't think about it any more. Do it! I glanced over to the mound of pornography still piled in the corner. How did it get to be this bad?

The first slice was smooth, deep, horizontal, two inches below my wrist. No veins, no arteries, and strangely enough, no pain. But lots of blood. It didn't spurt like I thought it might, rather it oozed, a steady, thick ooze.

When I reached the tub, the water was freezing. No good. I'm two classes away from graduating Summa Cum Laude, can't go out with people thinking I was stupid. As I waited for the water to warm, I looked back at the red splatters lining the carpet. My thoughts flashed back to the previous winter, when I took Erin and Taylor to the country to play "Who's-tracks-are-these?". I'm so sorry kids. You have to know it wasn't you. The blood continued to flow through my fingers and onto the tile below. I pushed play on my cassette recorder, triggering a bevy of Christmas songs I had spliced together some years back. Mahalia Jackson was bellowing Oh Holy Night as I lowered myself into the tub. The music filled the room, and my soul, as I began to drift away.

Click. The tape ended. Not dead yet. Though I couldn't see my wrist through the tainted water, I felt it. Sharp pains radiating throughout my arm. Some farewell this is turning out to be. I need to go deeper. I returned to the couch and grabbed the blade, scratching away the clots with my fingernail. What am I worried about, infection? I laughed at the thought—a sick, psychotic, suicidal kind of laugh.

Spreading the wound between my fingers, I looked through the mush for a vein. What the hell, I'll whack it all. Only live once, you know. I angled the blade between the flaps of skin and pressed. Pressed hard. Much the same way my father did twenty years ago. I watch the hole grow wider with each pass of the razor. I don't want to die. I just don't want to live-not like this. Not anymore.

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Twelve stitches: eight on the outside, four within. A six hour wait, then off to psych. What did I do? I have children. How could I have thought about killing myself? Three security guards escorted me to a thick, gray door. An intimidating buzz told me all I needed to know.

“A locked unit? But I came here voluntarily. “

“Talk to the nurse. We just bring you here, they let you out.”

“I'm not staying if it's locked!” my voice became as firm as their grip on my arms. Calm down, Jon. You need help. Don't fight it.

A middle-aged woman walked towards me. She wore dark blue corduroys, with a white smock covering a vertically striped, blue Cardigan sweater.

“What seems to be the problem?”

I noticed two other nurses in the background, being obviously discreet.

“I'm sorry. I didn't know the place was locked. It scared me, that's all,” I said, my voice now relaxed.

“My name is Cheryl, and I'll be your nurse tonight. Because it's so late, I'd like to ask you a few questions then get you to bed, okay?” She motioned for me to follow her, which I, and my entourage did.

The room we entered was dim, without pictures or personality. She proceeded to ask me the same questions I had already answered for the nurse in the ER, the doctor in the ER, the psych resident who interviewed me—but now I had some questions of my own.

“What's going to happen to me?”

She said nothing, her head buried in the records from downstairs.

“Have you had many sexual offenders here?”

“We've treated many people with sexuality issues.” She chose her words carefully.

“I understand, but have you ever treated anyone like me?”

A petite, straw-haired girl tiptoed into the room holding a cup in each hand. In her left, a white paper cup, no bigger than a thimble. In her right, an 8oz Styrofoam with beaded water clinging to its side.

“This is Dixie, another nurse on the unit. She has some medication your doctor ordered to help you relax.”

“Thank you, but I'm feeling better.” Honeymoon's over. **“Your doctor feels—”** Her pressured smile faded, replaced by a stoned scowl.

“Listen, I don't mean to be difficult, but I don't take drugs. I never have and I never will, so please, let's finish these questions so I can get to bed.” My voice sharpening once more.

“Okay, calm down.” I am calm! **“We're not going to force you, the doctor just felt it would help.”**

“Again, thanks anyway.” She looked over to Dixie and nodded, sending her, and the medication, backpedaling from the room.

“Is there anything else you'd like to know? I'm really getting tired.”

“No, that's about it. We need to do a search and then you can get to sleep.”

I followed her to another room, a nicer room.

“This will be your bed.” She pointed to the one nearest the Plexiglas window. **“The doctor ordered a private room, so you won’t have to worry about...you know.”** No, I didn't know (and to this day, I still don't). She handed me a gown and instructed me to remove my clothing.

“Is there a place for me to change?” I said, suddenly feeling embarrassed to expose myself in front of a complete stranger. That's a good sign, I think.

“I don't think you understand. I need to search you to make sure you don't have any matches, drugs, razors—or anything else you could hurt yourself with. It's okay, I'm a nurse.”

“I don't think *you* understand. I tried to kill myself because I can't control my fantasies. Forcing me to undress in front of you is not going to help. So, please step out of the room and I'll get changed.” I was proud. Another step in my commitment to recovery.

She continued to stand firm, arms chiseled shut, without saying a word. A screech from a walkie-talkie broke the silence. Entering the room were three security guards, Dixie, and two male nurses. Dixie was holding a needle filled with some kind of fluid.

“YOU BITCH! YOU FUCKING BITCH!” I couldn't believe the words were jumping from my lips. I hardly ever swore, at least not aloud, and never, ever showed anger. She promised she wouldn't force me to take the medication. I thought back to that quaint little nod she gave Dixie during the interview. Bitch.

“These people are here to make sure everyone stays safe. The doctor has ordered some medicine that you *will* take to help you relax. If you don't agree to take it orally, then we will be forced to hold you down and administer it intramuscularly. Which would you prefer?”

I grabbed the pills from Dixie's hand and popped them in my mouth. My parents took drugs. I can't be like them. I have to break the cycle. Turning to Cheryl, I spit them in her face. One hit several inches below her left eye; I lost sight of the other in the mayhem that followed.

“Grab his arm!”

“Get his leg!”

“Someone get the leathers...”

“Heard you had a rough night,” the voice said. I turned to see a gangling figure, standing behind inch thick, black-framed glasses. His faded blue eyes were enormous—at times appearing to spill beyond the boundaries of his face. Most likely in his fifties, he could have swung ten years either way. Sweat beaded in what remained of his curly blonde hair, itself unruly and unkempt.

I struggled to dig the crust from my eyes, but couldn't muster enough slack in the restraints.

“I'm Dr. Anderson.”

“Listen, I'm not angry anymore, and I don't want to hurt myself, so could you please let me out of these things?” I glanced around the room. Beige. Beige walls, beige ceiling, even the gown they changed me into was beige.

“You know, we're not the enemy. Fighting us will only—”

“I wouldn't have fought if they would've respected my right to be drug free.”

“Your rights?” His face reddened as those eyes seemed to grow even larger, **“What about the rights of the people you've stalked? The people you've violated?”** This is therapy? Make me feel guilty for what I've done. I really don't need any help there, doc. **“We'll let you out when you prove to us you're under control.”** He closed the chart.

“How long will that take?” I asked, but he walked out of the room without acknowledging.

“BASTARD!” That couldn't have helped. Mental note: keep profanity to self. I was amused at how ridiculous the situation was. Me, lying in a mental hospital, strapped to a bed screaming obscenities at strangers. Where was all this anger coming from? I'm not an angry person. I'm a nice person. Gentle, loving...aren't I?

Moments later, a nurse entered the room with another needle.

“Good morning!” Someone new, I liked his shirt. Plaid.

“What time is it?”

“Almost three.”

I felt stupid but had to ask, **“AM or PM?”**

“Three in the morning. You've been out for quite a while.” I added the hours in my head: almost twenty-six. Dang, what did they give me? **“May I ask you something?”** he inquired without waiting for a response, **“What could be so horrible that you'd want to take your own life?”**

I didn't care to be today's guinea pig for Psych 101, but I did want out of the straps. **“If you did the things that I've done, you'd understand.”**

“Like what? Show my dick to strangers? Stare into peoples' windows?” What? Does everyone know? **“That sounds like an illness to me.”** Bullshit. I'm responsible, not some disease. **“And if it were me, I'd find a way to beat this thing—then I'd help others do the same.”**

“What do you want me to do? Write a book?”

“Whatever. I just know that giving up serves no one but yourself. The victims are still out there; the disease is still out there. You think by killing yourself the world will know how sorry you are, but that's not being sorry; that's being selfish.”

Who does this guy think he is? He's a student. A nobody. A peon person working a peon job. What did it matter that he was right.

“Hi! My name's Emily. If you'll follow me, I'll show you around the unit.”

I stretched my arms as far as the sockets allowed. I felt strange, somehow free. It was a freedom felt only once before, after graduating from boot camp.

“This is where we get our linen.” She opened a closet to display six shelves of assorted whites, all neatly arranged. **“And over here—”** she pointed to a silver chute built into the wall, **“is where we put the dirty stuff.”**

“What floor are we on?”

“Fifth, why?”

“No reason.” Fifth floor. Hmmm. That's a long way down.

“When you have dirty linen, just put it in a pillow case and ask one of the nurses to unlock the chute.”

Locked, shoot. I laughed at the pun; Emily looked puzzled. Walking behind her, I couldn't help but notice she stood to lose a few pounds, still, she seemed nice, and a friend wouldn't be such a terrible thing.

“How long have you been here?”

“It’ll be two years in February.” Two years! How crazy is this girl?!

“Over here we have the recreation area. This is where we play cards, watch movies, that kind of stuff.”

I noticed two older gentlemen in the corner playing chess. **“I like to play chess,”** I offered.

“Well, they’re not exactly playing chess.” Then what the hell are they doing? They have a chessboard, chess pieces...

A frail woman, dressed in a musty green full-length housecoat, buttoned up to her chin, hobbled between Emily and I. The *Thorazine shuffle*, they called it. I tried to make eye contact, but couldn't. She had no eyes, only sunken hollows filled with death. What am I doing here? I shouldn't be with these people—they're insane.

“And over here, we have—”

“Excuse me, I really appreciate you showing me around, but if it's all the same to you, I'll just figure this out on my own.” I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but she's been here for *two years*—I can make friends with someone a little saner, like, say *Sybil*.

“Would you mind if I asked you something personal?”

“That depends, what do you want to ask?”

“What are you in for? I don't mean to pry or anything, but two years—that's a long time.”

She started a deep rolling laugh. Oh God, she's gone psycho! Now what do I do?

“Actually, I work here.” A slow burn worked its way up my neck and into my cheeks.

“I'm sorry. I didn't see a name tag and assumed—”

“No problem.” She continued to chuckle under her breath. **“Want to finish that tour now?”**

We entered the dining area. Two columns of three tables each sat joined in the middle of the room. An additional column lined both sidewalls. A girl, a beautiful girl, was sitting at the farthest table crying. Two staff members—these *with* nametags—sat by her side, softly talking to her.

“Are all the meals here so appetizing?” I blurted, trying to bring a smile to the girl's face. She wailed louder.

“She's on a special program,” Emily said, without discussing it further.

The tour ended several doors down.

“How long am I going to be here?”

“Don't worry, it won't be longer than two years.”

“Very funny.”

“You need to talk to your doctor about that. A lot of it has to do with your progress, insurance benefits, treatment program, that kind of stuff.” Insurance?

“Who is my doctor?”

“Dr Anderson. You should have met him yesterday. Didn't he get to you?”

I thought of the gangly man reading my chart while I was strapped down. **“Yeah, he got to me!”**

Emily ignored the sarcasm.

“Well, group starts in the day room at one-thirty, so if there's nothing else, why don't you spend the next half-hour...”

I thanked her for the tour, then returned to my room. The dining room was now abandoned, except for the still untouched tray of food.

“Group time!”

It took me a second to remember where I was; to remember it wasn't all just a dream. Did I fall asleep? I don't even remember lying down. I splashed some water on my face and patted down my now thinning hair. The person standing before me was a stranger. Eyes silent. Beneath them, circles so dark, so black, that only hell could see its true color. What happened to me?

I chose the chair closest to the door, inching backwards closer still. Group—as a patient no less. I can't wait. The other patients filed in separately, each choosing the chair furthest from the other. The last, a disheveled gentleman in his mid-forties, pulled a chair from the circle and settled himself in the far corner of the room.

“Jack, you need to join the rest of us,” the counselor said, adjusting his silver-framed glasses to his silver-framed hair. He was a handsome man, dressed in blue jeans and a white pullover sweater. Relaxed. Casual. He appeared much like I thought my own father would, wherever he may be.

Cursing, Jack rejoined the group. Sitting far away from me, thank-God.

“Welcome. As most of you know, this is group therapy, and it's open to whatever issues you'd like to talk about. It looks like we have two new members today, so why don't we go around the room and introduce ourselves. I'll start. I'm Dr. Calloway, and I'm the group facilitator.” He looked to his left.

“I'm Cindy, and I'm here because I have to be.” Dr Calloway interrupted, **“Cindy?”**

“I'm here because I found my husband—excuse me, my soon to be ex-husband—in bed with my neighbor.”

“Thank-you.” Dr Calloway nodded to the next patient.

“I'm Sheila, and I'm here because I drink too much.”

“My name is Hector. I also drink too much.”

“I'm Jack.” He shifted sharply in his chair.

Next came the two men playing chess, or whatever it was they were doing. The first claimed he was Napoleon, the second refused to participate. Dr. Calloway nodded to both. A girl walked in—the girl from the dining room—and selected the seat next to mine.

“Hi, I'm Jon, and I'm an alcoholic.” I thought I'd insert a little humor in the glum.

“You think that's funny?” It was her. **“You think you've got a sense of humor? There's people here with real problems, they don't need shit heads like you making fun of them!”** Ouch!

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend anyone. I just thought it would help for people to smile a bit.”

“What a jerk. I'm Cari, and it's none of your fucking business why I'm here!” Ouch, again. I'm still not sure if it was the meds, or maybe the pressure of always having to be Mr. Nice Guy, but for whatever reason, I said it.

“What a bitch!”

“Go to hell!” Her seat flew against the wall as she stormed from the room.

“What? What'd I say?”

For dinner we had a feast: flaccid meatloaf with cold peas and warm Jell-O. I couldn't tell if the milk was spoiled, but from Mr. Bonaparte's description of how tasty the cottage cheese was, when no cottage cheese was offered, I guessed that it must be. Cari was in the corner, picking at her plate; a staff member sat by her side. What did I have to piss her off for? She's incredible. I thought about what it would be like to run my fingers through her golden hair. To kiss those tight, venomous lips. "The feeling" was beginning to creep back.

"What are you looking at?" The bite of her words stunned me, causing a retreat to the solace of my meatloaf.

"Don't worry about it, she treats everyone like that," I heard someone say, but it was of little comfort.

Emily had suggested I begin a journal of my thoughts and feelings; I began that evening.

DAY THREE

What am I doing here? It's been three days and I haven't learned a thing. My doctor's an ass, I've insulted the sweetest nurse, and now a gorgeous patient wants to castrate me. What can they do for me here anyway? To them, I'm just a pervert. A freak. They could never understand why I do the things I do. Hell, I don't even understand. How can I fall in love with women through a television set? Or just by hearing their voice? Why must every relationship I have be based in fantasy? Why can't I be normal?

But then again, maybe I am. Normal, I mean. Maybe I just haven't found that special person yet. The one who will understand why I do the things that I do and will love me because of them. Someone who will appreciate how different I am. How deeply I love women. Maybe that person's still out there. Looking. Maybe I should check myself out of here. Go find her. Make my life right again. Maybe.

"Yesterday, if you remember, we had a few problems in our group." Dr. Calloway said to the eight of us, now reassembled in some resemblance of a circle. **"Cari has asked to say a few things before we begin. Cari?"**

She was seated across from me, her thighs held in by a black mid-length skirt. Her thin, toned, milky-white thighs. I searched her crotch for any sign, any hint of panty or pubic hair. Nothing. With two

fingers, she combed back the hair from her eyes, continuing the motion over her head and onto her brittle shoulders.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry for the way I acted yesterday and that it won't happen again."

She made eye contact with no one, conversing instead with the gray tiles below. A flurry of acceptance followed.

"I'd like to say something too, if I may?"

"Go ahead, Jon." Dr. Calloway sat back in his chair, enjoying the evolving dynamics.

"I'm sorry, too. I had no right to make fun of anyone and I also promise it won't happen again." I looked directly at Cari. **"I really *am* sorry."**

"Forgiven." She neither looked, nor sounded like she cared.

"Can I go first today?" Cindy asked without waiting for a response. **"I had a long talk with my husband last night and he wants to try and work things out. He says he's sorry for the affair and has agreed to see a counselor so that it doesn't happen again. What do you guys think?"**

Hector spoke first. **"I think your husband is full of shit. Every guy has made those promises at one time or another, but they don't keep 'em. Maybe your husband will be the exception, but I doubt it. It's hard to pass up a good time—if you know what I mean!"** He nudged the patient sitting next to him and winked.

Dr. Calloway looked directly at me. What? What does he want me to say? I don't know this lady.

"I agree with Hector," Cari said. **"If he's done it before, he'll do it again. People like that don't change—I know."** I know? How could she know? She couldn't be more than twenty.

"Did the same thing happen to you?" That I was the one who asked seemed to disturb her.

"No." Silence erupted throughout the room. Now what did I do?

"Remember, everything said in this room must stay in this room. We have absolute confidentiality here." Dr. Calloway leaned forward and looked at Cari, prompting her to continue.

"I don't have anything else to say."

I wouldn't exactly say that I was looking forward to my first official therapy session with Dr. Anderson, though I knew he may not have been as bad as I had made him out to be. I did raise quite a ruckus

when I first arrived; perhaps he deserves a second chance. He was sitting on the corner of my desk as I returned from the restroom.

“Good afternoon, I'm Dr. Anderson. I'm not sure if you remember me, but I'm the doctor who will be managing your stay here.”

“I remember who you are. You're the ass who tried to make me feel guilty when I came to you for treatment.” Not the "second chance" I was hoping for. I sat on the edge of my bed and challenged him with a stare.

“Can you tell me why you're here?”

Here we go again. I searched for the button and pushed. **“I'm here because I tried to kill myself...”** Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

The recital over, he stood. **“I'd like to start you on some Prozac, and schedule a therapist to meet with you several times each week.”** He turned towards the door to leave.

“Do you know how long I'll be here?”

“I'll check back with you in a few days to see how you're doing.”

“One more thing, I wanted to apologize for my behaviors the other day. I wasn't myself.”

Without so much as an utterance, he turned pompously and left the room.

“Bastard!” I thought it, but didn't say it. Perhaps I am getting better.

Dinner was no more appealing than last night's. In fact, it may have been last night's. No wonder Cari is refusing to eat. I looked over at her: cutting, picking, separating—everything but putting the food in her mouth. Grabbing my tray, I walked over to her table and sat across from her.

“Excuse me,” the staff intervened, **“but this table is off limits for the moment. If you'd like to rejoin the group, I'd appreciate it.”** So polite.

“I'm sorry,” I scanned her name tag, **“Stephanie, is it? But I'd rather eat here with my friend.”** I wasn't sure how Cari would respond, and it appeared Cari was just as confused.

“Cari has an eating disorder which makes her uncomfortable to be around others during meals. Please, for Cari's sake, return to the group.”

“I don't mind if he stays.” She didn't look up, but did smile, ever so slightly. If there's one thing I've learned about eating disorders, those suffering from them are as manipulative as hell.

Stephanie excused herself from the table.

“You'd better leave, they're not too keen on patients breaking the rules around here, but thanks—” Her eyes reflected the appreciation. Or was it mischief? Either way, we made a connection. A full eternity passed before I looked away. I've often told women how beautiful their eyes were—with sincerity—but none struck me like hers. She simply had the most amazing combination of blue and gray shades imaginable.

DAY FOUR

I think I've met her. The girl of my dreams. I know I've thought it before—a few hundred times—but this time it's different. This time, she is just as lost and lonely as I. How ironic that it took coming to a psychiatric ward to find her—the true love of my life. Together, we will prove that neither of us are crazy. Just different.

Closing my notebook, I settled in to bed. It's been four days since I've brought myself to orgasm. I closed my eyes and thought of Cari: the color of her eyes, the smell of her hair, the shape of her thighs. Four days—that's a long time. I deserved a reward.

(18)

“Breakfast.” The nurse's head shot through my doorway, flipping the light switch with one hand, closing the door with the other. Good morning to you, too, whoever you were. The splattered stiffness of the sheets reminded me that my four-day celibacy had come to an end. Proud of my fasting, I reached to harden myself for another reward, but couldn't focus; I didn't feel sensual, or erotic, or romantic, or any of the usual feelings that led me to fantasize. Besides, what if one of the nurses walked in? I came in less than a minute.

At breakfast, I realized that the feelings stirring within me weren't based in guilt, or shame. They were laced in sadness. I wanted those four days back. To know I had gone so long without sexual activity would have given me strength to fight “it” the next time, but it was too late. I couldn't have them back, nor could I have the past ten years of my life—all I had was today.

Looking up, I saw that of the twelve patients who initially sat down for breakfast, only Cari and I remained. She sat nibbling on a biscuit, Stephanie by her side. Our eyes dodged several times before finally embracing in a warm hello; she quickly returned to her frown and her food. She was glad to see me.
I know she was.

Dr. Calloway began the morning's group with a twist.

“Rather than our normal introductions, I want each of you to close your eyes and imagine the one person that has hurt you more than any other. When you have a clear image of that person, I want you to then assume their identity. For the remainder of the group, I want you to think like, act like, be—that person. Any questions?” Jack moaned and motioned to leave. **“Nobody is being forced to take part, but your participation *will* be reflected in your chart.”** He stayed. **“Okay, so who would like to begin?”**

Whether few understood his directions, or few wanted to brave the first assault, it had become clear that no one would volunteer.

“Jon, why don't you start us off?” Damn, why me?

“To tell you the truth, I don't really have anyone that's hurt me all that bad.”

“Nice try, but no go. We'll come back to you. Cari?”

“Sure, I'll give it a shot. My name's Louise. Louise Sterling. I'm Cari's mom.”

“Why do you think Cari asked you to be here today?”

“I haven't the foggiest. I've never done anything to hurt her. I've tried to give her everything she's ever wanted.”

“Everything?” He leaned towards Cari, as if isolating her from the rest of the room.

“Everything. We sent her to the best schools, the best dance instructors. She always wore the prettiest clothes.”

“What about safety?” he asked, followed immediately by an uncomfortable silence.

“Jon, who did you come up with?” His abruptness took me by surprise. I blurted out the first person to pop in my head.

“My dad.”

“Okay, what was his name?”

"I don't know. He abandoned my sisters and I when we were young."

"You abandoned them—assume his identity."

"But I don't know him."

"Then get to know him. Right now. Why did you leave Jon and his sisters?"

"I didn't leave them, they were taken from me."

"By who?"

"The police. I used to have a drug problem. We all did back in the sixties."

"Not everyone had their children taken away. Why were yours?"

Once more, I was speechless. Why was I taken away? It was a question I had never asked myself. The cloud I couldn't outrun. Dr. Calloway worked with several others before returning to Cari. My focus remained intensely on my past. On why I simply accepted that I was adopted. Accepted the fact that one of my sisters had been raised three thousand miles away. When Cari said the word "rape", my attention returned to the group.

"So you let your husband, Cari's step-father, rape her whenever he wanted?"

"No, it wasn't like that. It only happened a few times, when he'd get drunk. He couldn't help himself."

"And who was there to help Cari?"

Cari didn't answer.

"Who was there to help your daughter when this man was forcing her to have sex with him?" I could see she was about to break, as did Calloway. He went on to someone new.

"It'll be okay," I whispered, squeezing her knee. A tender, caring squeeze, not a sexual one. She offered an embarrassed laugh, then wiped away the tears. Not so strong after all, are you?

Before group ended, Dr. Calloway asked to see me in his office. He informed me he would be my primary therapist during my hospital stay. We had our first individual session that afternoon.

"Let me start off by saying, of all the addictions I've worked with, sexual addiction has been the hardest to monitor, and the most difficult to recover from. I'll be honest with you—most don't."

"This is supposed to motivate me?" I offered a weak smile.

“I just want you to know what you're in for. A lot of people think they'll go through the motions and be cured. It doesn't work that way. You have to take the responsibility for recovery. I can point you in the right direction, but you have to do the work.”

“I'll do anything.” And I meant it.

“So you say. First, I want you to read this.” He pulled out a yellow highlighter and a book, *Out of the Shadows*, by Dr. Patrick Carnes.

“Read this and highlight everything that applies to you.”

“What if nothing applies?”

“Then you don't have a sexual addiction.”

I left his office and went straight to my room. Out of the Shadows? It sounds so criminal. I sat on my bed and opened the book. Page one, “*A moment comes for every addict...*” Word after word, page after page—this wasn't a book about sexual addiction, it was a book about me. Every thought I've ever had; every behavior I've ever displayed—right there in black and white. I wasn't special. I wasn't unique. I was a syndrome. An *addict*. For the first time, no amount of intellectualizing could hide the fact that I had a problem. A real problem. Sure, I knew my past behaviors, if caught, were technically against the law, but the law didn't account for what was in my heart. Those laws were made for perverts, deviants—not people like me. I cared about the people I stalked. Did I actually just say that?

I read the book through dinner, and most of the evening. The staff, other than to pop their head in every fifteen minutes to see if I was breathing, left me alone. It was a quarter past ten when I finished. Without hesitation, I turned to the beginning and began again.

I didn't know how to feel. On the one hand, there wasn't a single page not flooded with highlight—*not one single page*. This meant that someone *did* understand what I was going through. That I wasn't some freakish sexual mutant. On the other hand, I no longer had a life. Everything that I had based my values on was all related to a disease. Take away the thoughts and behaviors related to that disease and I have no identity. I'm not special, or unique. I'm nothing.

DAY FIVE

How did it happen? I only wanted to love people. To make people feel good about themselves. In return, I only wanted to be loved. How then, did it happen that my life got so screwed up? Following people I don't even know, falling in love with someone through a photograph—am I crazy? Am I insane? I always believed I had all the answers. Answers regarding life and relationships. I thought I had found a deeper meaning to life that ordinary people just couldn't comprehend. But it wasn't true. None of my beliefs were true. It said so right there in the book. I thought I experienced the deeper side of life; it turns out I've avoided life altogether—lost to a world of fantasy and delusion. How did I become so sick?

And now what? What am I supposed to do after discovering that not only am I not special, I'm defective? I wanted to change the world. I wanted to make it a better place for children. I wanted people to look at me with admiration and respect. Now the best I can hope for is to be labeled a recovering sex addict. And that's if I can recover. What's the use? Addict. I hate that word.

(19)

I didn't show for breakfast—couldn't have eaten anyway. Who am I? How did I get this way? I asked for an early appointment with Dr. Calloway, as I needed someone to talk to. I needed someone to confirm that I was real. That what was left of my life mattered.

"I don't think I can do it."

"Do what?" Dr. Calloway reflected.

"Recover. I know the way my mind works. I can't turn it off. I've tried so many times, but every time I see a woman, every time I think of a woman, it starts up again."

"The Prozac should help with some of that."

"But I don't want to depend on drugs to be normal. I don't want to depend on anything."

"Or anyone?" he said, gently redirecting the session.

"Well, I've made it this far by myself."

"Have you?"

"I was doing pretty good until my wife had the affair."

"Careful, you said yourself she may not have even had an affair. That it was all in your head. You have to be honest with yourself if you want to get through this. Was your life really that good? Or were you just trying to make it appear as though it was?"

"I thought it was good. I really did. I never intentionally deceived anyone."

"Except yourself." He loved to toss a wrench into my well-rationalized machine.

"I guess so, but I was proud of my life."

"You were proud of secretly looking into people's windows? Of stealing women's undergarments?"

"No, of course not. But that wasn't a part of my life, it was a part of me. It's hard to explain. It's like, I judged myself not by my behaviors, but by how other people perceived my behaviors. I could look into a stranger's window and feel good about myself, but the thought of being caught, the thought of someone else exposing that part of my existence—I'd have rather died. I was the person people saw—the father, the husband, the counselor; not the person I kept hidden. So, yeah, I was proud."

"Yet you tried to kill yourself." He said it not as a question, but a reflection. **"Have you ever had problems with drugs?"**

"Never. I've never so much as smoked a cigarette or drank a cup of coffee. And I've never taken drugs. Even when my friends did, I always said no. A doctor prescribed Tylenol with Codeine after I had my wisdom teeth pulled, and I refused to take a single pill."

"Not even prescription meds, huh?" he muttered approvingly.

"Maybe an antibiotic or something, but nothing that messes with my head."

"How come?" He knew where he was taking the conversation; I was blindsided.

"Cause everyone in my family has had drug problems, and I don't want to end up like them. I saw what it did to their lives, and the lives of those around them. I don't want that to happen to me."

"Hasn't it already?"

I paused, not knowing what to say.

"What about alcohol? You said you've never done drugs, but what about drinking?"

"I used to drink, back when I first joined the Navy. And yes, I know that alcohol is a drug, but it wasn't the same. Besides, I woke up one morning and realized I had a problem and stopped. Just like that. Haven't touched a drop since."

"I don't steal, I don't swear—at least not until recently, and I've never been in a fight." I thought about what I said. I steal panties and other objects; I've sworn more times than I can count this past year alone. Why do I keep lying? Why does it feel like I'm not?

"You don't have to prove to me what kind of person you are. Or is it me you're trying to prove it to?"

"I've tried so hard to get people to like me. To make them happy. And now I'm stuck in a hospital for a reason that, should someone from the outside find out, would have me banned from society. They picket people like me."

"I don't think things are as bad as they seem. You have a problem, true, but you're also beginning to take responsibility for it. That, to me, says a lot more about your character than any list of accomplishments you can rattle off."

"I guess. I've never thought of it like that."

"I'm sure there's a lot of things you've never thought of, like what would you say if I told you, you are a drug addict?"

"I'd say you were nuts."

"Am I? It's obvious your family has strong addictive tendencies. You recognized it, and did what you could to avoid being a casualty. But the addictive process is just that—a process, and there are many things that trigger it. Drugs, alcohol, those are just a few. Gambling, sex, sports—people can become addicted to anything. Take away the behavior, see it from an internal posture, and you'll understand what I'm talking about."

"I'm not following."

"A normal person, in a state of sexual arousal, has an increase in the level of chemicals—drugs, if you will—circulating throughout his or her body. Adrenaline, endorphins—this is powerful stuff. Stuff you *can* get addicted to. You've heard of runners' high? It's the same thing except on a much more powerful level."

Imagine a cocaine addict having a tiny coke dispenser built into his head. All he has to do to get high is to think about something—sex, for instance. At first, he wouldn't need to think about it too often, as small amounts of the drug kept him satisfied, but time passes and small amounts

aren't having the same effect. He needs to get more, but how? Longer sessions of fantasizing help, for awhile. Then comes the orgasm. Full blown ecstasy—without having to pay dime one. The addict learns over time that the more illicit, the more dangerous, the more prolonged the exposure to sexual stimuli, the more drugs that are pumped into his system.

It's not as simple as that, of course, but think about it, an endless supply of mind-altering chemicals, unlimited access, there for the taking whether you want it or not." He scanned my face for understanding. "You've been hooked so long, your life has been running on a constant high for years. I'd be willing to bet when you do try to quit, one of two things happen: either you become depressed, or you switch sources."

"What do you mean?"

"Describe for me the last time you tried to stop. What happened?"

I thought back to the last time, about six months after Lisa and I separated. "My life wasn't turning out right—I had no friends, no family; my career was stalled; and I was constantly behind on my bills. I knew it was because of all the time I spent following people, and looking at magazines, so I decided to quit. Cold turkey. Just like I did with alcohol."

"And what happened?"

"I played a lot of basketball. A *lot* of basketball. Like four or five hours a day. I'd have blisters covering both feet and shin splints that killed, but I'd still get out there and play."

"Anything else?"

"I spent some time at the casinos up in Iowa. Video poker, I *love* video poker! They were only about an hours drive, so I'd head up three or four times a week."

"What made you go back to voyeuring?"

"I didn't. I haven't voyeured in years." Why that was an important distinction to make, I didn't know. Why, when I follow someone, then look through their window, I don't consider it voyeuring, yet, if it's a random watch, I do consider it voyeuring is also a mystery. Of course, when did logic ever play a part in any of this?

"Okay, why did you return to doing whatever it was you returned to doing?"

"You mean following people?" Stalking—yet another word I hate. "I don't know, it just happened. Even with all the basketball, I'd find myself sitting around my apartment thinking. When I think, I get depressed. With the depression comes the suicidal thoughts and bam—I'd be right back on the streets. Back with the magazines and the tapes and the fantasies."

"Exactly my point. Basketball, gambling—they produced a level of endorphin release that satisfied you for short periods, but they couldn't match the levels you're accustomed to. Of course you'd get depressed. Of course you'd feel suicidal. You cut off the supply of the only thing that made you feel normal."

It was starting to make sense. How I could sit so long in the cold. How I could masturbate through the pain of chaffing and edema. When it came right down to it, I was a drug addict. Though I had spent my life looking back, trying to outrun it, the monster was a step ahead of me all along.

Tonight was the night. I'd watched them sitting in that corner for too long; it was time to find out what it was, *exactly*, they were doing with those chess pieces. I passed by Cari's room to recruit her for the mission.

"Hey, you busy?"

"Nah, I was just sitting here journaling. What's up?"

"How would you like to be my partner in a game?"

"What game?"

"I'm not sure, that's what I want to find out. Those two guys in the day room, they just sit there playing with those chess pieces. It's driving me nuts."

"You really don't have much of a life, do you?" she rose from her desk and followed me down the hall.

"Excuse me guys, we would like to challenge you two in whatever game you're playing."

"Game? This is no game! Leave us alone!" I couldn't remember if he was Napoleon, or the paranoid gentleman, not that it mattered either way.

Cari was already tugging at my arm, hinting to leave, but I remained steadfast.

"If you'd just show us what to do, maybe we could join your—" I took my best guess, **"army?"**

"Army? What do you think this is? Please, leave us alone!"

They began to rise from their seats. We didn't wait around to see why, retreating instead to an abandoned fortress several doors down: the dining room.

"Can you believe those guys?" Cari asked, still amused by it all.

"I don't know about you, but I think I'll stick to checkers." I joked.

"Would you mind if I asked you something—on a serious note?" Our legs brushed as she shifted positions in her chair.

"Not at all." I knew what was coming, and that I would have to explain it to people eventually. That I'd have to break down the walls dividing my two worlds. But now? Here? With Cari?

"Why are you here? I mean, I know about your dad, and trying to kill yourself, but why? You seem like a pretty decent person. Why would you want to kill yourself?"

"Thanks, and I am a decent person. Though I'm not sure most people would feel that way." I struggled with what to share. How to begin such a conversation. How do you look at someone you care about and admit to them the things I have to admit? **"Believe me when I say, I'd like to tell you everything, but I don't even know where to begin. So much has happened to get me to this point in my life."**

"Like what? You really don't have to say anything if you don't want, but I would like to know."

I knew I would have no better opportunity, so I just blurted it out. **"I'm really screwed-up sexually."** She stirred in her chair.

"What do you mean?"

"Ever since I was a kid, I haven't been able to stop fantasizing about women. At first, I used to peek at my neighbor from my bedroom window, but over the years, it sort of grew."

"What do you mean, grew?" She was trying hard to appear at ease, but she wasn't the least bit so.

"I don't want to go into detail, but the doctors call it a sexual addiction."

"Are you some kind of pervert?"

"You don't beat around the bush, do you? No, I'm not. Or maybe I am, I don't know. I've done things that other people would think were perverse, but they didn't feel that way to me. Not until recently, anyway."

"So, you're like my step-dad?" I could see in her eyes that she was pleading with me to say no. And thankfully, and honestly, I could do just that.

"No, I'm nothing like him. I would never force anyone to do anything against their will. What about the girl in Arizona? The rape fantasies. The thoughts are there, aren't they? If anything, it's the exact opposite. I'd do whatever I could to please a woman, even if it meant doing something I didn't want to."

"There was one lady, a neighbor of mine in Virginia, who kept getting beaten by her husband. I talked to her maybe three times total, and though I was attracted to her, it never became sexual. One day, I saw her with two blackened eyes, and immediately offered her my car and all the money I had to help her get away from him. I told her to leave the state and start a new life. She declined, but that's what I'm talking about. If I feel something for someone, boundaries don't exist. I'd do anything."

I sensed I may have said a little too much, a little too soon, as Cari looked nervously into her hands. I scanned her face for disgust, but couldn't find any.

"I know this isn't what you expected to hear, and I'm sorry if I've made you uncomfortable. You're the first normal person I've told. I should've known what normal people would think."

"Me, normal? That's a joke." She looked up, into my eyes. **"I'll be honest, what you've said is kind of creepy, but no more so than me wanting to starve myself to death. Or looking in the mirror each morning and seeing nothing but fat, when everyone else tells me I'm nothing but bones. So who am I to judge the way your mind works?"**

"Thanks. But I want you to know that I'm changing. I can feel it. Since I've been here, and I've started taking the meds, my thoughts have slowed. I'm not obsessing like I used to."

"Good for you. That's more than I can say. I don't even have the desire to change. My doctor says I'm depriving my body of nutrients; that I need to put on a few pounds just to survive. Truth is, I'd rather die. So, who's the normal one now?"

I held out the bandages on my wrist. **"Hey, I've been there. I know what it's like to not want to fight anymore. But I realized something: I can't let it beat me. If I die, then the addiction wins. The cycle continues. But, if I beat the addiction—and I will—then I can show others how to beat it too. Cari, the same goes for you. If you die, then your step-father wins. His raping you will have cost you your life."**

"He didn't rape me."

"But I thought—"

"He used to come into my room at night and touch me. When I turned thirteen we started sleeping together. I never tried to stop him. A part of me liked having him there."

"But you said in group—"

"I know what I said in group. You think it's easy to admit that it felt good to sleep with my father?"

"Of course not. So why are you sharing this with me?"

"I think you know."

And I did. Even if I wasn't ready to admit it.

DAY SIX

Today was the best day of my life. I tore down the wall. I shared my secrets with someone and they didn't run. They didn't hide. Instead, they shared a secret of their own. Who knows? Maybe we all have a secret or two hidden deep within?

Tomorrow, my stitches come out. I snuck a peek at the scar earlier—It's pretty gross. I guess it'll be there the rest of my life. Damn. I hate scars.

(20)

Bowling used to be one of my favorite activities. I once rolled a two hundred and forty in high school. So when Emily announced they were taking us on an outing to the bowling center, I began my verbal prepping to save Cari from the humiliation I was about to bestow upon her.

"You've got to remember, I used to bowl quite a bit back in my younger days."

"Well, that was a *long time ago*." Spunky, I like that.

"I'm just giving you fair warning. I know how you women can't stand losing to a superior male, so I was just getting you ready." I knew my feigned arrogance was starting to get under her skin, so, of course, I turned it up a notch. **"Maybe I can give you like...a two hundred pin lead to make it fair?"** She finally caved.

"You want to put your bio where your mouth is?"

"Excuse me?"

"Best two out of three. Loser lets the other one read their autobiography."

My autobiography? I've written everything I've ever done in there.

"What's the matter? Afraid you'll lose?"

“Lose? To a girl? Not a chance.”

“**Here.**” I handed her my notebook. “**Just remember I’m doing this under protest.**” I didn’t technically lose. The first game found me ahead until the final frame, then my thumb got caught and she beat me by three pins: 111-108. Just warming up. The next game, I’d rather not talk about: 132-101. It wasn’t fair. I formally protested the match due to the obvious effects of the Prozac on my coordination (even though the doctor said there wouldn’t be any. What do they know?).

“**You just won’t admit I’m a better bowler than you, will you?**” Her smile was so...smug.

“**You wait till we get out of this place. I’ll show you who’s the better bowler!**”

“**Just name the day! I’ll whoop you so bad next time you’ll wish— Well, I don’t know what you’d wish, but it won’t be pretty!**”

Our first mention of staying friends outside the hospital. Life is good.

DAY SEVEN

Something’s different. I can feel it. My thoughts have slowed; I feel lighter. Stronger somehow. Life, for the first time, seems under control. Maybe I’m losing my mind. I don’t know. But I like it—this feeling.

I had the dream again. For the second night in a row, I dreamt I was being watched. Everywhere I went people were watching me. Real people, peeking under the bathroom stalls, over shower curtains. People everywhere, watching me. So when Dr. Anderson entered my room at a quarter to eight, awakening me from my nightmare, it wasn’t hard to figure out why I screamed. I was going to explain, that it wasn’t him, only his humongous eyes, but dropped it altogether.

“**Good morning,**” he said, taking his place on the corner of my desk.

“**Hi.**” I propped a pillow behind my head and sat up.

“**How is everything?**”

“Pretty good.” I didn’t bother with specifics; he didn’t ask. **“Actually, there is something. I’ve been having problems with my heart.”**

“Your heart?”

“Yeah, the last few days, it feels like it’s been skipping beats. It really isn’t that big of a deal, I just thought you should know.”

“How often has this been happening?”

“It started a few days ago, maybe once or twice an hour, but lately it’s been doing it every few minutes.”

“Are you having any pain? Shortness of breath?”

“No, do you think it might be the medicine?”

“I doubt it. We’ll run some tests and check it out. Is there anything else?”

“Not really.”

“Okay then, have a good day.”

Excuse me? Have a good day? Has anyone seen *my doctor*?

I didn’t get to sit in on group; two minutes into the session, a nurse pulled me out for an EKG. When it came back abnormal—something about my heart’s electrical system being off kilter—I was sent to the cardiac center to have a Holter monitor—a monitoring device that records heart rhythms over a twenty-four hour period—attached. Twenty-four hours hooked up to leads, wires and straps. Cari’s going to have a field day.

“What are you listening to?” It was the third time someone made the Holter monitor/Walkman joke, but since it was Dr. Calloway, I laughed anyway.

“It’s a heart monitor. My heart’s been acting up the last few days.”

“Anything serious?”

“No.”

“Then let’s get down to business. Tell me about your parents.”

“My parents?”

“Your adoptive ones. You’ve never mentioned them.”

“Not much to say. They treated me all right. Never abused me or anything. My dad and I spent a lot of time together when I was little; he taught my how to play baseball and took me sailing—stuff like that. My mom, she was a bitch.”

“A bitch?”

“She yelled all the time. Nothing we ever did was good enough. Same thing you’ve heard a thousand times before.”

“Humor me. Make it a thousand and one.”

“I really don’t want to get into it. It’s so piddley compared to what some of these patients go through.”

“Stop right there. You can’t do that. You can’t compare your experiences—no matter how trivial, or how tragic—to anyone else’s, because everyone responds to life differently. Getting raped can be just as traumatizing to one person as verbal abuse is to another. The event itself isn’t as important as the response it elicits. Tell me how *you* felt growing up.”

“I hated it. I wasn’t a bad kid, but they treated me like I was. Not really they—*she*. My mom. She was the boss. Of everyone. Even my dad. She controlled everything we did. Privacy? Forget it. She’d go through our closets, search through our desks, peek under our mattresses. Not while we were there, mind you, she’d wait until we left for school, but I always knew. I’d set traps—a piece of string along the door jamb, papers arranged in certain ways—and without fail, they’d be moved when I returned home. It was like living in a prison.” I felt an incredible amount of tension build in my chest.

“How’d you do in school?” Apparently, Dr. Calloway sensed it as well.

“Great. I always earned A’s and B’s, but even that wasn’t good enough. I never heard how proud of me she was for something, only how disappointed she was in something else. Don’t get me wrong, in a way I’m grateful she pushed me so hard. I just wish she did it with a little more love and a lot less authority.”

Like with my kids, I praise them for their efforts, not their results. I'm teaching them to take pride in their own work—to challenge themselves. But, with my upbringing, it wasn't pride that drove me, it was fear. Fear of getting screamed at, of getting the belt. I used to hate coming home. She completely dominated our lives and we never fought back. We never knew how. My dad, he escaped in alcohol, but us, we just took it. Powerless."

"How long did the abuse take place?"

"Hold on, we're talking fifteen, twenty years ago—it wasn't abuse back then. Besides, I don't believe she intentionally set out to do the things that she did. It was the only way she knew how to raise children. It was the way *she* was raised. Cycles, you know?"

"I understand, but it was still emotional abuse."

"I suppose, if everything needs a label these days. But knowing it was more a lack of parenting skills than it was a hatred for me goes a long way in my forgiving her."

"And that's what you used to think? That she hated you?"

"Yeah. We weren't her real kids. There was never a bond, at least not one that I felt. And since she never hugged or kissed us, I doubt if she felt it either."

"Have you ever talked to her about this?"

"We haven't said five words to each other since I ran away. Not about our lives, anyway. She's been great with Erin and Taylor though. Positive, supportive—she's a wonderful grandma."

"But nothing with you?"

"Again, no bond."

"Does that bother you?"

"That's the thing, no. I've had family members die, friends move away—nothing. No feelings whatsoever. It scares me. How could I feel so in love with a woman I met just minutes ago, yet a four year marriage ends and I couldn't care less? My grandpa passes away and I don't feel a thing. What's wrong with me?"

"Are you staying up to watch the ball drop?" I grabbed a juice from the refrigerator and sat down beside Cari.

“Can you believe it? Are we a couple of losers or what? New Year’s Eve, the pinnacle of young adulthood, and our sole plans revolve around watching TV. Last year, some friends of mine rented a cabin near Lake Okoboji. The whole weekend was one long celebration. This year? I’m stuck here with you.” She raised her Styrofoam cup in a mock toast.

“Oh, and I’m so blessed to be in *your* presence?” I glanced into my cup. **“I got apple juice, how ‘bout you?”**

“Water. On the rocks. With a twist of...something floating around in there.” She dipped her fingers into the cup and rescued a piece of lint, which she wiped on her pant leg. **“This is going to be such a long night.”** She closed her eyes and threw her head back. **“So what would you be doing if you weren’t stuck in this place?”**

“Depends. Would you be with me or not?” *A little flirting never hurt anyone.*

She smiled—a flattered smile.

“I’d probably be home with my little ones playing Chutes and Ladders and munching on a slice of pepperoni and pineapple pizza. We’d camp out by the TV watching videos well into the New Year.”

“And if *I was with you*?” She asked, raising her voice playfully. *A little flirting in return never hurt anyone.*

“The same, except you’d pay for half the pizza.”

“You pig.” Her fist landed squarely on my shoulder. It stung a little, but I couldn’t let her know.

“I love being with you too.” I said defensively.

“I love being with you, too.” she said, sincerely. **“Let’s promise each other, next year, no matter what happens, we’ll spend New Year’s Eve together. Just the two of us.”**

“It’s a date. But you know, I haven’t totally given up hope on this year, yet.”

“Jon, are you propositioning me?” Her shy, innocent teasing was driving me crazy.

“No, of course not. Um, unless you want me to.” I playfully raised my eyebrows in a suggestive manner; she again, not so playfully slugged me in the arm. **“I’m kidding. I was talking about our resolutions. If you want, we can spend tonight coming up with some New Year’s resolutions. Good ones—ones that could have a real impact on our lives.”**

“Sorry, I don’t do resolutions. If I want to change, I’ll change—be it New Year’s, Christmas, or a week after Saint Patrick’s Day.”

“Come on. Don’t be such a poop.”

“Fine.” Her voice reflected irritation, but I knew that some part of her was looking forward to it. That by creating her own recovery plan, and then sharing that plan with me, she was letting go of the hopelessness that had prevailed throughout treatment.

“Tell you what, we each have to come up with two resolutions on our own, then we’ll give each other one. Deal?”

An evil look crept across her face.

“Deal. I’ll go first. I promise to lose ten pounds by the end of the month.”

“Very funny.” And it would have been, had it not been so deadly serious. **“Try again.”**

“Okay.” She took a moment to think. **“I promise to gain one pound a week until you can’t stand to look at me anymore.”**

“That will never happen.”

“You say that now. Just wait until I balloon up to four hundred pounds.”

“You could be four thousand pounds and I’d still think you were beautiful.”

“Oh, you’re smooth. All right Casanova, your turn.”

I thought about what would signify a true commitment to recovery. What could I do to ensure that there would be no going back? I knew what I had to do.

“My first resolution is to get rid of all my magazines, tapes, books—everything I own that is associated with sex.”

“Really?” Cari seemed surprised that I would volunteer something so difficult. Though not nearly as surprised as I. She walked to the sink to refill her cup. **“Do you want any more juice?”**

“No thanks.”

When she returned, she shared her second resolution.

“I promise to stick to the exercise program my doctor and I agreed on. No more extras. Your turn.” We were on a roll. I guess deep down, we both knew what we needed to do. Why it took this night to finally accept it was anybody's guess.

“I’m not sure if this one counts, but—”

“Hold that thought. I have to run to the bathroom.”

While she was gone, I thought about the commitment I was about to make. What it would mean to the rest of my life: being vulnerable, facing rejection. *Living*. By the time Cari returned, I was ready to take the plunge.

“If I don’t feel comfortable with a decision I’m about to make, I’ll ask myself, ‘Would I tell Cari that I did this?’ If I wouldn’t, then I know the behavior isn’t appropriate and I won’t continue.”

“Take it one step further. Ask yourself if you would feel comfortable telling a complete stranger. A neighbor. A mother. Ask yourself if you would feel comfortable with society knowing. That will be your true test.”

I gave her my word. Another step closer to recovery. We continued to talk and share. I found myself coming alive. Remembering what it felt like to have dreams. To feel good. The resolution I assigned to her was a commitment to be honest. I liked the one she gave to me better.

“You, Jonathan Marsh, will not kiss anyone for the remainder of the year, *except me*.”

For the next two hours, both Cari and I joked nervously about the traditional midnight kiss. When the time came, I reached over and pecked her on the cheek—though we both wanted more.

DAY EIGHT

I’m so confused. I’ve met a girl that I love to be with. I want to hold her, kiss her. I want to share the closeness that can only come from making love. But is it real? Is this feeling real? It’s so intense, so passionate. I don’t want to be with her, I need to be with her. I need for her to know that I can make her feel good. That I can make her feel loved. Is that so wrong? To want to please someone you care for? How will I ever know which feelings are healthy and which are destructive if they all feel the same?

Oh, Cari. My sweet Cari. If I could just make love to you one time, then all of this confusion, all of this pain would be gone.

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No program today. As Cari and I watched the Rose Parade, I carefully noted that the Rose Queen had “it”. I wondered what it would be like to kiss her. To lick her. I wondered if I could find her name in the phone book. I took it as a positive sign that, although I was having such thoughts, at least I was feeling guilty about it.

The remainder of the day I spent alone watching football. As announcers commented on the extraordinary potential of a particular athlete, or the competitive intensity of another, I thought back to Terry, and the rest of my friends. Will I ever be able to face them again? What about my family? I was the one with potential. I was the one with intensity. How could I ever show my face after how far I've fallen?

Over lunch, there was a major inquiry into who was responsible for wiping boogers on people's doorknobs. I, of course, publicly blamed Cari. I noticed, as she fired a pea at my head, that she was eating alone for the first time since we'd met. She even shoveled in a spoonful of mashed potatoes to spite me—of course, she spit them right out again, but it was progress.

DAY NINE

Ten years. I've lost ten years of my life. Time I could have spent loving, and learning, and living. It's such a hopeless feeling. To know that certain things are now beyond my reach. Like baseball, and marriage. It's not easy to accept that I can never be who I wanted to be. That I never was who I thought I was. But I have to. Accept it, that is. I have to stop looking behind; I have to stop looking ahead—and just be me. Me now, not after I recover, or after I earn my PhD. I have to take responsibility for who I am today.

I have to stop believing that people will reject me if I'm less than perfect. I am less than perfect. So why am I so afraid to show it? I have—

“Psst.”

I lifted my head from the journal and looked towards the doorway to see Cari toss a piece of paper into my room and leave. A love letter? I picked it up and searched for words. Nothing, just a tiny booger squished in the center of the page. I couldn't have loved her more.

Rubbing alcohol. Why am I waking up to the smell of rubbing alcohol? I lifted my head from the pillow to see a willowy figure standing by my desk. Immaculately dressed, he picked up the note that Cari had left, and, seeing that it was blank, put it back down.

“Excuse me. Can I help you?”

“I didn't know you were awake. I'm Lance, and I'm going to be your staff today.” He spoke downwards, as if talking to a science project.

“Well, Lance, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't go through my property without asking.”

Assertiveness—good for me.

“I thought it might have been a picture you drew or something.”

Though his remark had made no sense, he spoke again before I could pursue the matter.

“It was passed on in report that you refused to participate in the fire drill last night. Is that true?”

Fire drill—that's what all that racket was.

“No, I didn’t refuse, I just didn’t wake up. I’m sure if there was a real fire, they would have come and got me.”

“That’s beside the point. Each drill is to be treated as if it were the real thing.” He walked over to the window and threw open the curtains.

“Are you a doctor or something?” Dr. Anderson’s evil son, perhaps?

“No yet, I’m currently working on my masters degree in psychology. Can you tell me why you are here?”

Haven’t I passed this stage yet?

“I don’t mean to be rude but I’ve been here for over a week. Can’t you just read my chart? I’m really tired and I’d like to get back to sleep.” I pulled the covers over my head.

“It’s almost eight-thirty. You know, excessive sleeping is one of the signs of depression. The only way you can break the pattern is to force yourself to stay up.”

“And can you shut my curtains again on your way out?”

He’s going to write this in my chart. I know he is.

“Good morning Dr. Anderson, how was your New Years?”

“Fine. Fine. How are things with you?” He acted as if he couldn’t care less. Simply making his rounds, collecting his paycheck. I, however, was bursting with self-assurance, and wanted him to know just how much.

“Actually, things are going really well. I’ve learned so much since I’ve been here. Things I couldn’t have imagined just a week ago. I’m going to make it. I’m going to beat this thing.”

“Well, don’t get too excited. It’s common for addicts to improve while they’re here in the hospital. They hear a few supportive words, they’re away from temptation—it feels good, but it’s not real. You’ve got a hell of a long road ahead of you. Once you’re back on the streets, back facing the situations that got you here in the first place—that’s when we’ll find out what you’re truly made of. And I’ll tell you right now, it’s going to take a lot more than what you’ve shown here to be successful.”

Don't say it, Jon. Just ignore him.

“Have you had any thoughts of hurting yourself recently?”

“Not until you showed up.”

“Was that a joke?” It was, sort of.

“Yes. I haven't had any thoughts of hurting myself. If I do, I promise I will notify the staff immediately.” Another one of the monotone buttons I learned to push. **“My heart's still fluttering. Is there any word on the results of that test you had me take?”**

“We should have the results of your Holter monitor in a few days.”

As the group made its way into a circle, Lance entered the day room.

“Dr. Calloway's group is cancelled for today. He went out of town and wasn't able to make it back in time. There will be a stress-management group at two and I'd like to see all of you there.”

He turned and left, with the others following.

“Hold on a minute. We can have our own group.” I was fairly impressed that I had made the suggestion. **“If anyone wants to stick around we'll have our own group therapy session—Dr. C never said much anyway!”**

The room let out a respectful laugh. Of the nine present, only four remained: myself, Cari, Myrna—a divorced mother of two, in for depression—and, to all of our surprise, Jack. The nursing staff allowed us to use the interview room, as it provided the least chance for interruption; they even offered, practically insisted, to have a staff member sit in, but we declined.

CARI- “So what do you guys want to talk about?”

ME- “How about how great it is to see Jack here?” The others agreed. Jack tried to form a smile, but was unable. The four of us sat in an uncomfortable silence for several minutes.

MYRNA- “Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.”

ME- “No, I have something. All my life, I've been scared to death of being around other people. “Normal” people. I don't know why that is.”

CARI-“What are you scared of?”

ME- *"I'm not sure. I've been that way since I was a kid. I could never go to parties, or talk to strangers. Just saying "here" in front of the class at school was traumatizing. I'd shake, my hands would sweat. It was terrifying."*

MYRNA- *"I'm like that too. I can't stand talking out loud. Especially in front of guys." I looked at Myrna—her plump frame, her freckled cheeks. She was suddenly becoming attractive.*

JACK- *"What's the big deal? If you like someone, you talk to them; if you don't, you walk away."*

ME- *"It's not that easy. Your heart begins pounding, your face gets flushed. You lose the ability to think."*

MYRNA- *"Yeah. It's like the whole world disappears and you're staring down an endless tunnel. No windows, no doors. You know that before you can answer any questions, you must first make it out of the tunnel, but you don't know where the exit is. The more you search, the faster you run, the longer the tunnel becomes. Somehow, you have to slow down. You have to stop searching. You have to stop thinking about the tunnel; it's then, and only then, that you finally make your way out. That you're finally able to communicate again. All the while hoping another tunnel doesn't appear."*
Very attractive.

JACK- *"That doesn't make any sense."*

ME- *"It does to those who have experienced it."*

CARI- *"You always seem comfortable around me." Jack mumbled something that no one heard and laughed.*

ME- *"I can't explain it. If I'm talking to someone who needs help, or is somehow different, I'm fine. Old people, kids, people with disabilities—I feel totally at ease. But peers? Especially groups of peers? Forget it. I'm socially castrated. Even with you, if you think back, remember the jokes? Those jokes weren't because I was comfortable, they were my defense. Get everyone to laugh with me—not at me. If I met you on the street, there's no way I'd get up the courage to talk to you."*

CARI-*"What would you do?"*

ME- *"I'd play out our entire relationship in my head. What you were like. What we'd be like together. I'd follow you around and try to learn as much as I could about your life. And all the while, I'd fantasize about the day we'd finally meet. The day we'd finally fall in love."*

MYRNA- ***“And if it were me?”***

ME- ***“The same. I don’t know why I’m so afraid of getting to know people up front. I’ve never had anyone that, once they got to know me, didn’t like me. After I get past that initial anxiety, after we sleep together, things are fine. Magical even. In fact, they can’t shut me up!”***

JACK- ***“How about me? Would you follow me sweetheart?”*** In his own deranged way, he was trying to take part in the discussion, so I took what I could from him and ran with it.

ME- ***“I don’t talk to guys. Not socially anyway. I guess if you came up to me and said you were suicidal, I’d talk your ear off, but the only other times I’d talk to men are if we’re playing basketball, or I’m forced to. Like when I was married.”***

CARI- ***“How can you live like that?”***

MYRNA- ***“It’s not easy.”***

CARI- ***“You, too?”***

MYRNA- ***“Well, not as bad as Jon, but yeah, I’ve had my struggles with socialization.”***

Very, very attractive.

Jack excused himself from the room. We waited a minute or two for him to return, but he never did.

ME- ***“Can you guys teach me?”***

BOTH- ***“Teach you what?”***

ME- ***“To be social. To introduce myself to normal people.”***

CARI- ***“Sure. I have an idea. We’ll be two strangers at a party and you come up to us and start a conversation.”***

ME- ***“About what?”***

MYRNA- ***“Think of something.”***

They rose from their chairs and began conversing. What should I talk about? Politics? What if they don’t agree with my views? How about domestic violence? Depression? Maybe forced abortions, or religion or euthanasia? Why can’t I think of any normal topics? I’m running out of time. I have to talk about something. What? WHAT? What if I say something stupid and fall into the tunnel? What if they see my face turn red? What if they see me struggling to swallow? They’ll wonder why I can’t talk. They’ll wonder what’s wrong with me.

MYRNA- “Jon, are you okay?”

Cari reached out and shook my shoulder. The tunnel. I fell in.

That afternoon, Lance informed me he was working a double shift and that I was assigned to him for the remainder of the evening. I turned in early.

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“I don’t know how much longer I can last.” Cari approached me in the hall; her eyes were puffy and red. **“I feel disgusting. I looked in the mirror this morning and all I could see was fat.”**

“It’s part of the disease. You have to remember that. The irrational thoughts, the false images—your mind is playing tricks on you. Making you believe things that aren’t true. You’re not fat. You’re beautiful. I know I can’t prove it to you, you just have to trust me.” If I could have just made love to her at that moment. She would have felt how beautiful she was to me. She would have known how much love I had for her. She would have had no choice but to start loving herself.

“Disease or not, I can’t take it anymore. I’ve been keeping my promises, but I can’t stop thinking about food. I can’t stop feeling fat. Do you know what I did this morning? I covered my mouth with a towel. Know why? I smelled breakfast and was afraid I might inhale some of the calories floating around. It’s crazy, I know it’s crazy—but I can’t help it.”

“Cari, you can help it. You may not be able to control your thoughts right now, but you can control your actions. This has been an obsession in your life for what—three and a half years? It’s

not going to simply go away because you want it to. It's going to take time. Time for the thoughts, anyway. The actions are a different story."

"That's easy for you to say—"

"No, it's not easy for me to say. It's so unbelievably difficult, because the same logic applies to me. It was easy to act on my thoughts before—they made sense. To me, at least, but now I know differently. My actions hurt people. They hurt me. You and I are in the same boat. I may not be able to stop falling in love with every woman I meet, just as you might not be able to stop feeling repulsed with every bite you take, but we both have the capability—no, the responsibility—to control our own actions. Your actions hurt people, and they hurt yourself."

"Hurt people? How does what I do hurt people?"

"Because out there somewhere is a man waiting to love you. Out there somewhere are children waiting for you to hold them in your arms. Out there somewhere is your future. To reach it though, you have to stay alive. You have to stay healthy." I took her in my arms and held her.

"It won't be easy, but that's what you've got me for—to help you through it. And that's why I need you—to help me. Partners?" I whispered into her ear.

"Partners." she whispered back.

"I'm falling in love again."

Dr. Calloway sat back in his chair. "Is this with Cari Sterling?"

"How'd you know?"

"The staff reported you guys have been spending a lot of time together."

"What do you think? Could it be love?"

"I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a touch of a hopeless romantic in me, but is this the right time to get involved with someone?"

"But what if she's the one? I know it sounds crazy, but what if she *really is* the one? The one I've been searching for my entire life?"

"That statement alone tells me you're not ready for a relationship. Not a romantic one anyway. It's too early in your treatment. *And hers*. You're both vulnerable, and to try and escape the

pain of recovery by intoxicating yourself with love would be a mistake for both of you. To involve yourself in a relationship now is to deny both of you the opportunity of working through the painful issues you each must still face.” That’s why it’s wrong. The patients I’ve had relationships with, I’d never realized. I thought I was helping them. Taking away their pain. It never occurred to me I was merely postponing it. **“You, more than most, should understand how easy it is to use love as an escape.”**

“But how will I ever know what’s love and what’s sickness? What if Cari *is* the girl I’m supposed to spend the rest of my life with?”

“Do you think she is?”

I weighed the question deeply. The talks we’ve shared; the feelings I have when I’m with her.

“Yes, I truly do think she is the one I was meant to be with. She’s different. When I think about her as my wife, as the mother of my children, it feels so right. I really am in love with her.”

“Fair enough, but let me ask, How long have you known her?” I calculated the time in my head.

“Nine days.”

“What are her hobbies?”

I wasn’t sure.

“How about her career? What is she going to school for?”

Is she going to school? I never asked.

“Do you even know how old she is?”

I didn’t. Our ages never came up. I saw where Dr. Calloway was heading and he was right. There was no way I could be in love with her. I didn’t even know who she was. All I knew was that she was in pain and needed someone to rescue her.

“Somewhere along the line, your social skills got knocked off track. When it comes to relationships, you’re still a child. You’re going to have to learn how to communicate as an adult. It’ll take time, but you’ll do it. Once you have, you’ll understand what it means to be in love. Mature love—one that’s satisfying to both partners. You won’t need fantasy.”

DAY ELEVEN—

I know Dr. Calloway is right. I can't be in love with Cari, but why does it feel like I am? Besides, this is Cari at her worst. If she sees that I love her now, can you imagine how much she'll love me later? That alone will keep her from ever leaving me. I didn't abandon her in her time of need; maybe she wouldn't abandon me.

I haven't had a compulsion to masturbate in seven days. Still don't.

"Nurse, my heart's really acting up this morning. Is Dr. Anderson around?"

"In fact he is. He's making rounds on the adolescent side at the moment, but he'll be with you shortly."

I returned to my room to wait. What if I'm dying? I thought about what it would be like to never see my kids again. To never play basketball, or listen to music. And as hard as it was for me to believe, I thought about never having the chance to recover. *I want to have the chance to recover.* Sexual addiction was no longer a monster to be feared; it was a challenge to overcome. It wasn't external; it was within me. Within my control.

"Good morning." Dr. Anderson assumed his usual position at the edge of my desk.

Finally—the answers.

"I've looked over the results from your tests and there's definitely something going on." He rattled off a list of medical jargon—PVC's, PAC's, something about electrical conduction—all I understood was that there was something wrong. **"I've conferred with Dr. Cartesian in Cardiology, and he's ruled out physiological pathology."**

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that there's nothing physically wrong with your heart, so most likely it's stress. We'll continue to monitor it, but for now, it's nothing to worry about. If it doesn't go away in a few weeks, let me know."

During recovery, I studied the body's biochemical process as it related to thought patterns and electrical impulses. Though I leave the burden of proof to the experts, my rapid decrease in obsessional thinking, coupled with the simultaneous disruption of my heart's electrical system leads me to believe that

Sexual Addiction may one day be linked to such physiological disorders as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Alcoholism. This is not to suggest that Sexual Addiction originates physiologically, only that physiological processes maintain their behavior once established. Again, the burden of proof lies with the experts.

After dinner, I noticed Cari and a few others parked in front of the tube. Someone new had joined them. A woman. An attractive woman.

"Hi, I'm Jon." I reached out my hand, which she accepted.

"I'm Elizabeth. Nice to meet you." Seemed normal enough. Must be in for depression.

"Anyone mind if I sit in?" Cari moved a pillow from the couch and motioned for me to sit beside her. **"What are you guys watching?"**

"Right now, we're watching you interrupt our show." Jack. Asshole.

"I think it's *Sixty Minutes*. They're running a story about government waste."

"Sounds exciting," I said wryly.

"Actually, it's pretty interesting." Cari assured me.

"You look nice," I nudged her shoulder. She returned the nudge with a wink.

"Thanks, I took a shower after we ate—" then followed with a whisper, **"have to exercise someplace!"** I frowned a challenge to which she assured me she was kidding. She grabbed my pinkie and held it beneath the cushions.

"Coming up next," the show continued, **"—stalkers. What can you do to protect yourself?"**

I felt my heart stop. Not a flutter, a complete shutdown. Unfortunately, it wasn't permanent.

"Hey, Jon," Shut-up Jack. Keep your mouth shut. **"—looks like you may want to stick around. Maybe pick up a few pointers!"**

"Just ignore him," Cari said, trying to comfort me. **"He's an ass. Want to go for a walk?"** That's sweet, wanting to protect me. I'll pay you back someday, I promise.

I stayed, because I knew it was something I'd have to face sooner or later. I wished it were later. Every word ripped through me. Shame. Humiliation. Even Jack's heckling didn't pierce as deeply as the

program's portrayal of me—er, them. That stalkers were maniacs. Animals. That they chose to be that way.

Some may, but certainly not all. Not the ones like me. What person would willingly risk their career, their family, and their freedom, to pursue someone who doesn't even know they exist? I would never have chosen to be a stalker. Or an exhibitionist. Or a voyeur. Just as I would never choose to be a child molester or a sadomasochist. I would never have chosen the life that I've led, but until recently, it never felt as though it was a choice. As irrational as my behaviors may have appeared to society, and even to myself, the underlying feelings of love provided all the validation I needed.

The program continued, "If you believe someone is stalking you, call the police immediately. These people could be quite dangerous and taking action is the only way to stop them." Dangerous? I'm not dangerous. Jack's verbal assault had begun to wear on the new girl. She looked hard in my direction before excusing herself from the room. Is this what I have to look forward to the rest of my life? I didn't realize it at the time, but somewhere during the broadcast, Cari had let go of my pinkie. You, too? I stood to leave, passing Jack's table on the way out. I wanted to hit him with everything I had. With all the anger I'd built up over the last ten years, but who was I really angry at? Everything he said was true. He didn't follow people, I did. He didn't watch them undress, I did. I was the one who was wrong.

DAY TWELVE

Why should I care what anyone else thinks? Do they know how sorry I am? Do they know how seriously I thought about cutting off my penis to stop the compulsions? Do they know how desperate a man has to be to want to end his life? Not for attention. Not for sympathy. A man wanting to die because nothing else can keep him from having more affairs or from looking into more windows. Could people ever understand that I am not a stalker? Or voyeur? That I'm Jon. A human being. A very sick human being.

The people who rape out of anger, who stalk out of meanness—they're not like me. Are they? Am I capable of something so heinous? I don't want to be. I'd rather be dead than to hurt someone like that. I want it to stop. I want it all to stop. I want to find some other way of experiencing love.

So should I care? Yes, I should. Enough to empathize. Enough to understand that it's human nature to make fun of the things you don't understand. To attack things that threaten you. But not enough

to make me believe that I'm not worth recovering. People won't understand. People will be threatened. If I'm going to fit into this society, I'm going to have to respect that. Respect their opinions, their boundaries. I'm going to have to give myself the time to learn a new way of life. A new way of living. I can do that.

Tomorrow, I'm going home. I'm going to start over.

Dr. Calloway suggested, instead of a complete discharge, an eight-hour pass to facilitate the transition. I agreed.

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Everything about the apartment was the same. What did I expect? The razor, face-up on the coffee table, now mocked me. It's crusted blade now taunting the power it once held over my life. Over the lives of my children. I retraced the blood into the bathroom, and reached through the cold, ropy water. I opened the drain and watched every last drop of that night fade away. I sprayed, I soaked, I scrubbed, I scratched; I got rid of all evidence that that night ever took place. All evidence except the razor. And the scar.

Something told me I wasn't ready to let go of the blade just yet. Told me that all of this cleaning, all of this therapy, all of this hope, was just a waste of time. That, in the end, the truth would come out. That I couldn't change. No matter how much I wanted to. No matter how hard I tried. I'd always be sick. What do I have left to recover for anyway? My wife is gone. My kids are gone. My job is gone. I have no friends, no

family, I have nothing. Dr. Anderson was right, it was easy in the hospital. But now that I was back home—back in reality—the truth would come out.

I sat on the couch and held the razor in my hand. Not to use, just to hold. What do I have to live for? I held the razor up to my neck. Not to cut, just to feel. If I could only go back. Back to Mrs. Miller. To the girl on the beach. To Dana. If I could only go back and start again.

The razor's edge began to bury itself into my flesh.

"But what if there's still a chance?"

"A chance of what?"

"A chance that I could stop. That I could be normal."

"Normal? You've never been normal. Don't you remember? Your dad? The parties he used to have. What they used to do to you? Don't you remember Danny? In the back of his garage? You were what—six? Seven? Don't you remember Ray spending the night in your sleeping bag? What you guys did to each other? Don't you remember what you used to do to your dog? How you used to touch your cat? You'll never change. It's all you know. It's all you'll ever know."

"But I don't want to be that person! I want to change. There's a wonderful man inside of me, if I could just find out how to reach him."

"The question is, do you want to? Do you really want to reach him? What if nobody likes who he is? What if nobody wants to be his friend? His mother didn't want him. His father didn't want him. What makes you think anyone would?"

So many times I'd told myself I wanted to change. Told myself I would change. But no matter how hard I tried, I always allowed some sliver, some slice of sexuality, to keep my addiction alive: a peek at the lingerie section of the Sears catalog, a compliment to a coworker that I knew was more than just a compliment. Somehow, somehow I kept my ability to return to the one thing that makes me feel safe: sex. If I really wanted to change, I knew what I had to do.

The box of pornography—the magazines, the tapes, and the panties—still sat piled in the corner. I tossed the razor into the mix and headed for the door. All of it, Jon. I went back to the bedroom, where this month's Penthouse sat beneath some papers on my desk. I was going to throw it out as soon as I had the

chance to read it. I grabbed the pair of panties stashed on the top shelf of my closet, the deck of cards with suggestive photos, even the tape Bobbie and I made some years ago. Everything went. And not just to the dumpster, I tried that before. I drove to a bridge overlooking the Missouri river, and piece by piece, said goodbye to the monster.

Cari was sitting outside my door when I finally returned to the hospital.

“What are you still doing up?” She was holding my autobiography.

“I’d rather not say. You might let it go to your head.”

“Not me, I’m too perfect to let that happen.” I sat down on the floor beside her, my back resting against the wall.

“Is all this really true?” She handed me the notebook.

“I wish it weren’t.”

“Wow. I never would have guessed by looking at you.” Her tone was factual, not judgmental.

“This is what you were afraid would go to my head? That I don’t *look like* I’m that screwed up?”

“No, of course not. I missed you. I thought about you all day—wondering what you were doing, how you were feeling. Scary, huh?”

“Scary, no; heartwarming, definitely. Can you get away tomorrow?”

“And do what?”

“Talk. Go to the zoo or something.”

“I’d have to check with my doctor, but I don’t think it’d be a problem, he’s been trying to get me out of here for weeks.”

“Can you blame him?”

This time, she didn’t slug me so hard.

DAY THIRTEEN

I took one of my biggest steps today. I let go of not only the physical barriers to recovery, but the psychological as well. Watching those magazines sink through the icy reach; heaving those tapes as far as

the wind allowed—I felt it. I felt myself letting go of the past. Forgiving myself. Nobody forced me to get rid of them. I chose to. I took control.

Am I listening to what I'm saying? I want to change. Not because of how corrupt my life has been, but because of how noble it may still become. I have control over my actions. I have control over my future. And if I fail this time, at least I will have failed with my best effort—but I won't fail. Sex will never beat me again. I'll spend the rest of my life fighting it if I have to, but I'll win. I will win.

At the zoo the next day, I told Cari about all the things I had discovered on my pass.

“What kind of things?”

“Well, when I was little, my friend and I used to go to the back of his garage and do stuff to each other.”

“Sexual stuff?”

“Uh-huh, but we weren't really doing it to each other. I'd pretend he was someone I liked, then we'd go through the motions of what I'd do to her if she was there. I was crazy about his mom.”

“His mother?”

“Yeah. I know it sounds weird that a six year old would fantasize about being with a grown woman, but what would a six year old be doing with thoughts of sex in the first place? How would I have even known about that stuff? But I did. I remember always wanting her to kiss my private parts—and put her finger in places.”

“You were six? That's not right.”

“I know. Then a few years later, this kid used to come over and spend the night, except we wouldn't sleep. We'd end up playing games instead. If he'd win, I'd have to do whatever he said for five minutes; if I'd win, he'd have to do what I said. Do you know what I always chose?”

“What?” Her face modeled concern, not shock.

"I always wanted him to put his penis inside of me. Either in my mouth or wherever. I don't know why. I hated the taste, and it hurt really bad, but that's what he said made him feel good. And when he felt good, so did I."

"You've never remembered any of this before yesterday?"

"I can't explain it. It wasn't that I didn't remember, it was that I never tried. My life started when I moved to Huntington Beach, and that was that. But now it's got me thinking, on page seventy-two of this book I read, it says almost all the people who display the types of behavior that I have, have at one point or another been sexually abused. Cari, my sisters and I were taken from my parents when we were very young. A year after that and I'm having sex with my dog? Another year passes and it's with my best friend? Then two more years and it takes some boy sticking his—sorry—to feel normal?"

"There's something definitely not right. You don't remember anything about your real parents?"

"No, I have flashes, but I don't even know if they're real. They could just be my imagination."

"What kind of flashes?"

"Well, there's one I've had for as long as I can remember. There was a party and it was really dark and smoky. A man picked me up and carried me to a couch, where he made me touch him and stuff. I remember there being a lot of pain, and I accidentally peed on him, or on the couch, or somewhere. Then he took his cigarette and burned me."

"Jon, I'm so sorry." She put her arms around my shoulder.

"Don't be, I don't even know if it happened."

"Wouldn't there be a scar?"

When I returned to my room, I sat on the bed, unbuttoned my jeans, and eased my penis through the opening. I knew what people would think should they have walked in, especially Lance, but I had to know. I needed to know. What was the truth?

DAY FOURTEEN

The scar. How many times have I looked at it? How many times have I wondered how it got there? How many times have I convinced myself that it couldn't have been a cigarette, because cigarettes are round; my scar is shaped more like a heart. A heart-shaped cigarette? No way. How many times have I stopped myself from believing the truth? That a round scar, twenty years later, would no longer be round. It would expand. It would grow where the skin grew. It would look exactly like—like mine.

The moment my eyes opened, I jumped from bed, threw on my robe, and made a dash for Dr. Calloway's office.

"He's not in yet," a nurse called from down the hall.

"Do you know when he's expected?"

"Being that it's only four in the morning, I'd say not for another few hours, at least."

The moment my eyes reopened, I jumped from bed, threw on my robe, and checked the clock—9:06 a.m. I then made a dash for Dr. Calloway's office. After a forty-five minute wait for the client's *with* appointments, he invited me in.

"...So, you see, it didn't start when I was a teenager, I've been doing this stuff since I was a little kid."

"You were how old when you had sex with animals?"

"It wasn't really sex. There were times I'd be playing with my dog and he'd get an erection. When he did, I'd use my hand to make him feel better. I'd do the same thing with my cat when I'd rub her belly."

"Why?"

"I wanted to make them feel good, I loved them."

"What else did you used to do?"

"Does it really matter? The behaviors themselves aren't important—they're just humiliating. Isn't *why* a little more relevant?"

"Agreed. So why do you think you engaged in such behaviors?"

"I think I was sexually abused."

"You think?"

“No, I know, but it seems like such a cop-out. I’ve been screwed up for so long and instead of taking responsibility for what I’ve done, I cry “sexual abuse” and the responsibility disappears. I go from being a monster, to being a victim. I don’t want to take that road. I want to be responsible for my life.”

“You still can. In fact, you must, but admitting you were sexually abused has nothing to do with taking responsibility for your actions. If you *were* sexually abused, you still have to make the decision of what role you’re going to allow the abuse to play. Are you going to become a victim and have a ready-made excuse for all your life’s failures, or are you going to learn how the abuse has affected you and grow from it? Use the knowledge to become a better person? That’s where your responsibility lies—in the path that you choose.”

“Shouldn’t I find out if I was or not?”

“I don’t think there’s much question that something traumatic happened to you. You’ve told me about the nightmares, the bedwetting, the facial tics, the stuttering. You’ve sexualized every relationship you’ve ever been in. You’ve never had any concept of boundaries. These are all signs of a significant trauma. If you want, we can schedule a hypnosis session, or a Sodium Amytal interview, but if you want to know the truth, call your biological mom and ask her. It’s been twenty years, perhaps it’s time to reconnect with her.”

“It’s that easy, huh?”

“Why not? You say you want control over your life—call your mom. Not as a child, call her as a man who wants to become a better man.”

“I wouldn’t know how to get in touch with her.”

“Again, the choice of paths is yours.”

“Hi, mom?” Not my biological mom, my step-mom. Baby steps are better than no steps at all.

“Jonny, is that you? How are you?”

“I’m doing okay. Actually, I’m not...” I shared with her my last ten years, ending with the suicide attempt and page seventy-two. **“...so that’s why I’m calling. I need to know what happened to me before I was adopted. Was I sexually abused?”**

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you. Your mom and dad were sick people back then. Anything’s possible. Your grandpa and I used to do our best to take care of you guys, but the conditions you and your sisters lived in—“ Her voice began to crack, as the pauses between each word lengthened. **“— We’d send them money to help with groceries, but they’d spend it on drugs. When grandpa started bringing the groceries over in person, he’d leave in tears. He couldn’t stand to see you kids in the state you were in: filthy, malnourished.”**

She seemed relieved to be sharing so openly.

“We tried to adopt you earlier, but your mom and dad were given a probationary period to clean up their act. And they did, for a while, but a few months after getting you back, they returned to the drugs and conditions warranted your permanent removal from their home. We could only adopt the two of you, so one of your sisters ended up in foster care. It’s funny, when we were going through the adoption process, we were concerned about the lasting effects of what you had been through, but the doctors insisted there wouldn’t be any. That you were too young. I guess they were wrong.”

“What about sexual abuse? I have memories, scars—“

“I’m sorry. All I can tell you is that with the group they hung around with, anything’s possible.”

“Do you know where she is now? My real mom?” I shook as I wrote down the phone number. **“Thanks, mom, for everything.”** I hoped she knew that I meant everything. The adoption. Being a grandma to Erin and Taylor. Lord knows how I might have turned out had she not been there.

Dialing my mom’s number, I again began to shake. I tried wetting my lips but had no saliva. Maybe I’ll try later.

“I have my real mom’s phone number.” I leaned my shoulder against Cari’s door.

“Are you going to call her?”

“I’m not sure. A part of me feels like I have to. That the only way to put this all behind me is to find out what actually happened.”

“But what if she lies?” She was only trying to point out the obvious.

“But what if she tells the truth?”

“So what if she does?” Cari sat up on her bed. **“What will it matter? You know what happened. Five-year-old kids don’t do the things you’ve done, unless someone did it to them first. Scars don’t just appear. What can you gain by bringing her back into your life?”**

“She’s my mom.”

I didn’t know why it was happening, but there I stood: crying. Not a grieving, mature cry: a scared, five year old, I-want-my-mommy cry. Except there wasn’t any mommy. There was never any mommy. There was never anybody. I looked up to see Cari wailing louder than me.

“What are you crying for?”

“I don’t know—” She laughed and cried at the same time.

“Come here.” I opened my arms.

As she rose from her bed and embraced me, a different voice filled the room. **“Public displays of affection aren’t permitted on the unit. They interfere with treatment issues.”**

“Sorry, Lance,” we chimed.

DAY SIXTEEN

Could it be? Through all the years of “not needing anyone”, all the years of being independent, I still wanted a mommy? Still needed a mommy? How could that be? I was proud of growing up without one. It gave me strength. It gave me a sense of toughness. Why should I even care if she’s alive? She doesn’t care if I am.

Dr. Calloway noticed I skipped a day of journaling last week. I told him that nobody was perfect and he smiled.

I slept with the phone under my pillow. The moment I awoke, I dialed—all the numbers but the last. What am I doing? Cari’s right. I can’t allow her to have any control over my life. Not now. I need to take control over my own life. I placed the phone back on the receiver.

I’m not a child anymore. I can’t wait for my mommy to tell me she’s sorry. To tell me she loves me.

I have to find my own path. A safe path. A healthy path. I may not be able to change who I've been, but I can certainly change who I'll become.

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“There’s a note here from the benefits office. Something about there being a problem with your insurance.” Dr. Anderson’s eyes shuffled back and forth, looking every bit the part of a distrusting parent.

“But I don’t have insurance.”

“Well, that’s a problem. It says on your admission forms you’re covered by Prudential.”

“They used to be my insurance, but I lost my job and that went with it. I told them in the ER that I wasn’t sure if my card was valid when I gave it to them.”

“Well, somewhere along the line, someone screwed up. Are you having thoughts of hurting yourself? Any thoughts of suicide?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then it’s time for discharge.”

“Just like that? I’m not ready.” The truth was, I didn’t know if I was ready or not. It was all happening so fast.

“I’m going to be honest with you, I’ve worked with guys like you before. It’s always the same: you check-in professing how desperate you are to change; you talk about gaining all this insight, then you leave and within a month you’re right back where you started.”

“That’s not how it is. I really am changing.”

“Listen, play that game with somebody else. Don’t get me wrong, I do hope you change, but not for your sake, for society’s. You know what I think? I think you’re a pervert. Plain and simple. And you people never change. You can blame it on a disease if you want to, but we know the truth, don’t we? I just wanted you to know that I’m not like everyone else who’s been taken in by your charm. You think about that the next time you’re arrested for molesting some kid.”

Molesting a child? You people never change? I know what I wanted to say back to him. The names I wanted to call him, but what was the use? I didn’t have to prove my sincerity to him—only myself.

“I’m getting discharged tomorrow.”

“Good for you.” Dr. Calloway leaned back in his chair.

“Well, it’s not voluntary. Insurance reasons.”

“I’m still getting paid, aren’t I?” He gave me a wink.

“You know what Dr. Anderson said? He said I was just faking it. That once I get out of here, I’m going to go back to the way I used to be. Do you think that’s true?”

“I think it doesn’t really matter what I think. You’ve learned what you’ve needed to. What you do with that is beyond my, or Dr. Anderson’s control. You’re the one in control now.”

“But I’m not ready. I need you to help me. What if the old behaviors come back? What if they get worse? What if I start molesting kids, or raping people?”

“Maybe you will, but it’s a choice you’re going to have to make. You now know what sexual addiction is. You can either use that knowledge as an excuse for your behavior, or you can use it as a force to help you stay healthy. There’s nothing wrong with being scared, but you can’t spend the rest of your life hiding behind these walls. You have to get back out there and face it.”

“These thoughts you’re having about becoming a rapist, or a child molester, they’re not rational. They’re a manifestation of fear and ignorance, but you’re not ignorant anymore; you’ve educated yourself to what sexual addiction is, and what it takes to recover. Now give yourself the chance to do just that.

I’m not saying it will be easy. There will definitely be times when you’ll have to face your old patterns head on, but you’re learning how to do that. And each time you face a difficult situation and make the right choice, will be another step in your recovery. I promise you, you make it through the first few steps and you’ll never look back. You know what they say in AA about one-day-at-a-time? For you, it might be one-minute at-a-time, or one-situation-at-a-time—anything it takes to maintain your control. Challenge yourself to grow. Challenge yourself to take control over your future. You’ll find that that can be quite addicting as well.”

“I will. I won’t have anything to do with sexuality ever again.”

“That’s not the point. If you do that, then what’s the sense of recovering? Sexuality is an important part of a healthy life. It’s not like alcohol, where sobriety can be measured by abstinence. Boundaries—that’s what you’re shooting for. Staying within a set of boundaries. Learn what a healthy relationship is. Learn how to communicate. Even learn about sex—but learn about healthy sex.”

“You will be continuing counseling as an outpatient, won’t you?”

“I’d like to, but I don’t think I can afford it.”

“Nonsense. There’s always a way. Check with the nursing station this evening and I’ll have a list of Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous meetings in the area, along with a few clinics, which accept payment on a sliding-fee scale. Also, make sure your new therapist explains the twelve-step program to you. You’ll make it.”

DAY SEVENTEEN

Dr. C believes in me. Cari believes in me. I’m even beginning to believe in myself. So why didn’t Cari look at me when I said my goodbyes in group? Why did she refuse to eat lunch, then dinner? Why, when I went to her room, did she tell me to leave? I can’t let it end this way. I took out a piece of paper.

Dear Cari,

There are many things about my life that I'm not proud of. Many times that, if I could go back and change them, without question I would. But meeting you here, at this time, in this place, makes me believe that somewhere along the line, I did something right.

I want to thank you for looking past my behaviors, for looking past my sickness. For seeing all of me. Cari, I want to love again. I want to be a part of a family. I want to experience God. I want to spend the remainder of my life knowing what it feels like to hold my head up. To love myself. To feel the way I do when I'm with you.

I've told people I love them for a lot of different reasons. Sometimes to make them feel better. Sometimes to make me feel better. But now I say it for a new reason—because I mean it. Cari, I love you.

I folded the letter in half and slipped it into an envelope. The envelope I slid into my jacket pocket.

"Big day today, huh?" Cari said from her desk, buried in her writing.

"I guess so." I dropped my bags outside her door and moved towards the window. **"Looks like it snowed pretty good last night."** I touched her shoulder as I passed.

"You're gonna make it, Jon, I know you will." There was something about her voice—something desperate.

"Now don't go falling apart on me."

"Sorry." She wiped the tears as quickly as they came.

I wanted to go to her, hold her, tell her that, for the first time in my life, I had fallen in love, but didn't. Instead, I reached into my pocket and withdrew the letter. Why speak when I had everything I wanted to say already perfectly written? Why face the possibility of sounding stupid? Of getting laughed at? Of falling into the tunnel?

"What's that?"

"Just something I wrote."

"For me?" Her eyes came alive.

What am I doing? More letters? More wanting her to feel better? No, not anymore. If I can't say it out loud, then it shouldn't be said. I stuffed the envelope back into my pocket.

"It's for Dr. Calloway. Insurance stuff."

"Oh." I felt the pain inside of her and it crippled me.

"Would you mind if I came back for a visit?"

"I'd like that—very much." The words stuck in her throat as she continued to write.

Please look at me Cari. Please tell me you love me.

Emily entered the room. **"Ready to go?"** She was uncomfortable with my being in a woman's room, but said nothing.

Nodding, I passed Cari for the last time. Don't let me leave. Not like this. Stand up. Hold me. But she continued to write, more fixed than ever.

"I love you, Cari—" Silence.

It didn't take long before my own tears began to well. They came as I walked the dark, dismal hallway; they came as I listened to the *"buzz, click"* for the last time; and they're coming now, as I sit here in my car.

Damn you, mom! Why weren't you there to love me? Damn you, dad! Where were you when I needed someone to love? Damn you Dana and Lisa and Mrs. Miller! Damn you Sarah and Jennifer and Tammy! Damn every one of you for not seeing how much pain I was in. And damn me for not letting you.

With that, the tears ceased. I cleared the snow from my windshield—half the snow anyway (*got to get that wiper fixed*)—and began to pull away when I heard Emily's voice from across the lot.

"Wait!" her breath froze in the morning air. **"Cari wanted me to give you this."**

I tore open the envelope while pulling into traffic. Twenty-five miles and hour...thirty...A letter? Looks like I'll have to teach her a few things about healthy relationships...thirty-five...a quick check of the rearview mirror—all clear. It was as I approached forty-five miles-an-hour that the light changed. Yellow, damn! I pushed the accelerator all the way to the floor. I can make it! Fifty...fifty-five...sixty... I can make it...I can make it! Sixty-five...seventy. I have to go faster! I have to make the light! Seventy-five...eighty...eighty-five...eighty-five...eighty-five. Faster! Faster! Smoke began streaming from the

engine. Eighty-six...eighty-seven. The car's frame rattled a deafening roar. Eighty-seven...eighty-eight...eighty-nine...

Somewhere in that blur, somewhere in that madness, the road ahead of me cleared. I eased my foot to the brake and came to a complete stop. I've been walking ever since.

AFTERWORD

Shamefully, the sexual thoughts and behaviors detailed in this book are true. They were presented in a linear fashion for reader clarity. A more accurate picture of my experience with sexual addiction would have been an ongoing blur of stalking, voyeurism, pornography and relationships. Too constant to believe; too confusing to remember. Further, my recovery was captured in a single, seventeen-day hospitalization. In reality, I was discharged three days after attempting suicide due to insurance. The insights, progress, and failures presented were condensed from an almost two-and-a-half-year period of outpatient/independent recovery.

The rape fantasy that was depicted in *He Danced Alone* was just that: a fantasy. A very real fantasy that was triggered by very real situations. It was intentionally left ambiguous to represent how skewed my perceptions became towards what was real and what was fantasy. That no actual rape took place should in no way detract from the experiences shared. All that stood between me and acting on that fantasy was time. My values and boundaries had decompensated to such a degree that the objects of those rape fantasies became just that: objects. They were no longer real people, merely elements of a ritual. I have no doubts that, with a few more opportunities...I would have overcome the fear that kept me from making that last leap and lives of good, innocent people would have been permanently changed.

Emotions like shame, humiliation, remorse, and guilt—they kept me from believing that a permanent recovery was attainable. The social stigma that comes with sexual addiction reaffirmed this notion. Traditional treatment modalities, such as the Twelve Step program, served to further reinforce the conclusion that I was broken somehow. And would forever remain so. After several failed attempts, I discovered that, for me, admitting my powerlessness over sexual addiction was not the answer. Relearning social skills. Relearning values. Morals. That is how I was able to recover. That is how I was able to rebuild my life apart from addiction.

Looking back, I can no longer comprehend the life I once led. A life consumed by sexual rumination and romantic obsession. It is like looking back at my life prior to the birth of my first son. I know there was such a life, but it doesn't seem real. Instead, more like a movie. I have heard others describe similar feelings in relation to their lives before and after marriage. My past addiction is similar. I know I

engaged in those behaviors, but when I identify with my life, I think of my family, my friends, my job, my hobbies. I do not see myself as an addict. I look at myself in the mirror—and feel nothing but pride. The pride that comes with knowing that you *can recover from sexual addiction*. With a **sincere desire** to recover; with a **complete commitment** to rebuilding your life—a healthy, shame free life is not only possible, but assured.

It has been over eighteen years since I've last exposed myself in public. Fourteen years since last peeping into a stranger's window. My last stalking, "Kim" took place in 1991—not long by most people's standards, but a lifetime for someone like me. Pornography, promiscuity—they were the last to go, and the hardest to keep from returning to. But gone they are. I've had slips, the last being nearly nine and a half years ago, when, after one date, I wrote a letter to someone "special". Thankfully, she helped me recognize its inappropriateness. I haven't done it since.

It's been twelve minutes since bouncing my last basketball—nobody's perfect.

To assist those who have not responded to a typical sexual addiction recovery platform, I have authored free, comprehensive recovery workshops offered at www.RecoveryNation.com. In these workshops, the struggling addict will be exposed to a health-based recovery and the support needed to transition away from addiction...permanently. An additional free comprehensive workshop is also available for those partners seeking to understand the progression and mindset of the sex/love addictions. Because my only goal is to share this information with those who need it, and not to profit from my past, these services will forever be offered free.