AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Peter McDonnell for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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Tracy Daugherty

The purpose of this document is to display a portion of the work I have completed over the last two years. The Athlete is the recently written opening to a novel of the same name. I’ve decided not to excerpt a longer section of the novel because the novel isn’t finished and so the opening chapters will certainly change and may change significantly. The excerpt included herein is to show a part of a major project I’ve been working on in the last two terms of my graduate work.

For the graduate workshop I’ve primarily written short stories. I plan to edit and seek publication for seven of them. The two included here were written in my second year of graduate school. All but one of the stories I’ll try to publish were finished in my second year.
The Athlete and Two Stories

by
Peter McDonnell

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Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

Redacted for Privacy

Chair of the Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Peter McDonnell, Author
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The Athlete

I am an athlete who lives on the tenth story of the Gatesworth hotel in St. Louis, one of the colossal copingstones of Skinker Boulevard that overlooks Forest Park, the museum, the ornate marble buildings from the 1904 World's Fair, Calvary cemetery, and the tepid Mississippi River that delineates Missouri from Illinois—that hazy state. From my kitchen window the land looks endless and gaseous from all the occidental corn fumes. The softness of the Midwestern mind, its nice tired manners and slack incomprehension, its ruddy tractor drivers screw-faced at their encounter with a Picasso at the local museum touring on loan from the Art Institute, maybe it has something to do with corn fumes—someone at Monsanto should study it. No great ontology in some places, but in any one country there are many different kinds of smog. My friend Farthington Garber, the elementary school teacher and philosopher thinks the Midwest farms should be roboticized and all the rural folk sent to Oxford on scholarship, see what that would do to the voting public. For Farthington there's no egalitarianism or sympathy on other people's terms. So I've set up my typewriter on my kitchen table to make a record of things, for the doctors say I'm dying, handed me a bleak prognosis, told me a high percentage of their guesswork is probably accurate and I should treat the coming months with appropriate finality, whatever this means, whatever it will look like. Well if they are right—and does winning a major spring cycling race prove nothing?—I want to make a record for Arthur.
I’m not one to wait for good weather or learn the fashion of a thing before I use it. I learn as I go, so I’ve decided to sit and begin the record now, and type it with my index fingers—the others will follow. I have some food in the refrigerator and a pot of coffee on the stove and some cigars from Alvin Lupchuck, the CBS broadcaster who has smoked them in his underwear with Castro, he says, and on my balcony at 1235 Skinker. Lupchuck keeps a cigar burning just off camera when he reports in his frog voice about Korea, the Gum Nebula, Citation and Native Dancer, Galt’s Canada Company, Stalin and containment, Castro, from whom he gets these things—Alvin’s a good friend. A storm is coming and I’ve caught the flu from a cold bicycle race outside Memphis, where I took third, damn, because I’d inhaled a plate of rawish beef and kraut, all Hungarian style, it knocked wrung me dry at both ends, and so I raced sluggishly—though I had less weight to pull. Today I have the chills. I can’t go and dig at the grass in the park with Arthur, who’s in Chicago with his mother, who left me two baseball gloves and a postponement note, but I’m in good spirits. Arthur’s birthday is in two weeks—he’ll be sixteen, my God. If I am dying I need to tell him I’m not his real father.

My, that was rather easy to type.

I set the alarm for seven and dressed immediately and put on a bicycle racing cap and went to the office store on Clayton Road and got this typewriter and a couple reams of paper, and ribbons. The elevator has been undergoing its annual maintenance for a year now so I got some exercise carrying the Olivetti ten
flights up. It is May 12th, 1958, noonish, and out my window I see Marty with a
hero sandwich with hot pepper cheese and salami, and are those pepperoncinis?
Marty’s the clerk for this hundred room, two-star hotel, lots of near bankrupt
matrons live here week to week, with thrift store firs, lot of cheap liquor with
cheap olives, lot of smirking on the balconies, lot of willful denial. I went through
a divorce a year ago and have found the pay by the week arrangement convenient,
as I like to leave my options open. Next week I’m supposed to travel to Milan for
a race but my death may prevent it. Do you think I can finish this book before
Friday? If not I’ll just haul the Olivetti with me. You know, I like the way Marty
lives, out there on the bench, on break, his shoes off, what a dumb genius, white
socks, toes awiggle, youngish, can’t hear or see anything cause he’s blinded by
that two-handed mélange wrapped in yesterday’s cartoons, a sandwich from
Soulard which he’s had delivered—he takes maximal pleasure from his routines.
“Heya, Marty!” He waves at me, squirrel-cheeked, and I can see the cheese in his
teeth. The sky’s dark. It really barrels down here from the Lakes. My window’s
up all the way and it’s getting cold and the leaves are shivering. There’s a
Japanese maple below, its lacy leaves atremble, and the grass in the park goes
silver-tipped. I’m writing it down as it goes. Now here comes the weather. The
sky looks streaked with oil. Thunder! Sounds like we live in a beaten drum. The
air smells clean. It begins to rain, drops as big as marbles, and the sound is a
million paper bags crumpling. Marty runs in like a soldier under fire. The
sidewalks are empty. Cars start their wipers slinging. This paper’s getting wet so I’m closing the window.

The dull sound of the rain will focus me. What do I remember? Hmm. I remember, I remember, hearing the crickets cease sawing, remember the drone of an indiscriminate crop duster abandoning some nearby soybean fields and flying overhead, low, low enough to rattle the windows, and I remember that my mother burned her hand on the oven rack pulling out a ham, a ham with brown sugar and orange juice, and maybe I remember that Misha, my grandmother, was in the rear of the house dutifully killing flies with National Geographic.

“He doesn’t need to give me anything. He just needs to come home,” I’d said to my mother. I was seventeen and well as milk. I was balled up like a pilot in a cockpit, on the convertible sofa, redundantly calculating for Mr. Edmond’s physics class Earth’s life enabling distance from the sun, when my mother stalked into the living room, her hand draped in a wet rag, and began shutting the windows. “Tell me you have a date for the prom?”

“I might have,” I said, chewing on my pencil. “But I have to work that evening with Eugenie.”

Eugenie was my age but had a parenting as prudish as they come and wasn’t allowed to go to prom. She wore nothing titillating but muslin calf-length dresses, went to Mass every day, had big puckered lips she nervously tucked under her teeth, they were so big and flaunting, this five-foot twelve Eugenie LaPierre who I tutored in math. Her hair was a convent cut, I called it, short as a
monk's, and she hated it and wore scarves and sunglasses and people assumed she endured great tragedy in her life and yet, it was her short brown hair she deigned. She had no power of concentration because of it. She’d done it herself too, staring into the mirror too close one night and the closer she got the more she dared herself to overthrow her looks and out came the scissors, her father’s for trimming his nose hair, and she snipped hers until it stuck up unruly. Eugenie was thin with large breasts, sure, but it was her irascible defiance and criticism of all the taken for granted ways of the world that made me like her. In confession she told outlandish lies. The priest thought she was pregnant with my child! He passed by me downtown one week, gulped and nodded; it will all come out in the heavenly wash. My mother thought girls like Eugenie were allowed to date. She wasn’t and it was why I kept tutoring her; we’d straddle the quadratic formula and kiss.

“You’re probably too prude and boorish for her,” my mother said, and pinched at a nagging strand of her sweaty hair. It got hot before the thunderstorm. She’d been baking and sweeping the ceiling for webs. “Men are fated to go unsatisfied, so driven are they to ride high,” she said. “I was never so picky, but then, they’re not a very diverse bunch, men—grapes on a vine.”

Which was when the old grape she’d picked flung the front door open and the rain chimed in behind him like an army madly driving at cymbals. It all came at once that day. My father was more than disheveled. He’d been dry just then but became wet as a swimmer when he ran out to the driveway to fetch his other bags. As he stood a second time in the doorway, dripping, his blue tie was off and
stuffed in a pocket, and his jaw was whiskered, his teeth dark in the pockets, and his eyes shattered red. He came in, shut the door behind him with his foot, and straddled the foyer’s chessboard tiles as if they were sea-tossed. A streak of blood ran from the breast of his tan trenchcoat to its hem. A purple bruise swelled around his right eye and his leaden pupil hid down in the purple crater. That eye looked in fright, humiliated, so the other stuck out far and confident, bright and ranging, as a counterbalance. And a white bandage tented the rudder of his nose. Most disfiguring was the nudity of his upper lip. He’d shaved his mustache. Remember when you first saw Chaplin without the costume? Shocking.

My mother forgot all about her burned hand and the spray of rain through the windows and the webs at the ceiling, and rushed at him, hysterical. Harold, my Harold, oh what happened? She grabbed him by the arms, shook him desperately, but his vinegary stench, his rich hops pungency, repelled her tenderness, so just when she’d unbalanced him with a hug she let him go and slapped him on the chest with her injured palm, and he teetered there with his hands splayed out for balance, his good eye wide and fearful at her, as she stamped her stocking foot forward at him: “Because you’re drunk!”

When I trotted into the foyer to see it he smiled at me. A chipped tooth too. He understood this entertainment. “Where’s your mustache?” I said. “You look naked.” I’d never seen a man so naked. Why all these sudden amendments to his face? The nude upper lip was horrifying and thrilling—he had a big nose and had broken it before, and when he did his eyes went violet as New York asters, so
that was no surprise. But the mustache, it was as if he’d shaved off a bit of integrity, a bit of assuredness, confidence, security. And how strange that the new thing was an absence—we’re so used to dealing with changes of addition. He looked younger and, if I imagined him without the black eye and broken nose, a lot like me.

The room began to fill with him, yeasty, acrid, and wet. He shook his head. “Madeleine, some broker with Magnus is all elbows, you see.” His deep voice trudged through the marsh of apology. He worked on the floor at the Board of Trade in Chicago and had been gone all week. Every Saturday he returned and made apologies, hung his head, offered to relocate to St. Louis to play the fiddle on Market Street or shine shoes at Union Station. He showed my mother what he meant by ‘all elbows’ by slapping his right elbow against his left hand, except that he missed. He hiccupped. His eyes glazed, crossed, a pain waved up from his neck to his mouth, nose, eyes, forehead. This was part of his act. He looked down at his large shoes, scuffed, thin at the heels, as if they housed foreign feet. He trapped a belch back, set his briefcase beside his odd and massive feet, but had trouble rising. He leaned on his thighs in the retching position. “Happy birthday, Alexander,” he said. “I have a gift for you.”

“This must be it,” I said. “What happened to your face?”

He stood and winked at me with his good eye. “Razor slipped, just so.” He shuffled to the banister. “Why hell, the bar was crowded and I was trying to tell these two big men, human conduct during disputes will differ whether you live
according to the federal law or the Darwinian law and apparently, neither of them are federalists, so I found myself in an evolving world, a small one albeit, and that in the end I was less fit, just a bit, and so I snuck away from the fuss, one eye blackened, one nose wrenched, nothing new, and had a drink, or nine, and when I was good and ready for battle, well, they were gone. Let that be a lesson to you young people. Stay longer and you’ll own the place. Back at the apartment (he kept a studio on State and Division) the nose was so blue and red and the mustache so dark, I suppose I wanted some contrast to my face. So there you have it.”

He stepped away from the banister and threw his arms back as if offering his heart to a bird. His trenchcoat slid off into his hands. “Triumph demands an obstacle,” he said to me, as he hung up his coat and missed, picked up the hangar and tried again. “Hey, Madeleine, no kidding, does it look bad?” he put an index finger across his upper lip, and then removed it.

An impressive bloodstain ran down the arm of his white shirt and he let us admire it before clomping past me, rustling my hair, and scrabbling upstairs. He palmed the walls.

“Well just blame me all you want,” he said to my mother. “It was a long week. But, I survived to return to you, my loves, my dearest loves. Hey, Al,” he turned around. “Did I mention I got you a gift?”

“I can’t wait,” I said. I’d been asking for a car for a year now because I couldn’t afford it as I didn’t have time for a job. I ran every weekday and
weekend for the Webster track team for which I was on the cusp of greatness, I felt, I was told, but there is no money in some things. So I tutored Eugenie for money but the more we kissed the less she paid. My mother had to drive me to town in the Cadillacs and then use the car herself to run errands and go to her volunteer job at the Voice of America office in downtown St. Louis, where she sang thee vocals for bebop recordings in German. Her voice was velveteen and she had good range, but she was chosen because she could pronounce the words correctly. She had an ear for the sounds of language if not a mind for its meanings.

"The mustache was graying," she said to me. "He’s just trying to look young again. Men are ruled by such vanity."

Her hair had gone suddenly gray before I was born, and she’d hid it under Woolworth’s bandanas for years then one day had it cut like a reverse pageboy, so the long back was in the front, which she held up with barrettes. It was very stylish. Upstairs my father turned the shower on and my mother snorted and yanked her dress down. In all the fuss and bustle it had rucked up over her knees. She pulled his coat out of the closet and pointed out the stain. "You ruined your coat!" My father never heard my mother when she yelled. She huffed, and returned to the kitchen to pack some ice in a towel to cool his swollen head.
Down the Hatch

I’m drinking V-8 in my grandmother’s house in Webster Groves. I don’t know when the can was first abandoned in the back of the pantry, but it was ancient enough, lodged in the dark behind a fence of lima beans, gelatin boxes, applesauce jars, and whatever else Americans eat when they are old and without heritage, my family being deeply from Missouri. The V-8 outlived her, and without a dent. The top of the can glinted in the natural light of the kitchen, fed by two western windows and a late afternoon, a room unchanged since the 50s, dirty eyelet drapes, full-bodied appliances that half worked, and a rotary phone with grime in the finger holes. I knew where the church key hung, above the stove, and I wedged an arrow into the V-8. It went, “fsssss”, and expanded, “ahh.” “A good gassing,” she would say. The label was dim but the juice was as ripe and salty as I remembered. I took the can with me and wilted into a chair at the breakfast table. On the floral vinyl tablecloth was the mountain of her mail. I’d let it pile up. The house was under my care until my mother could fly out and do its massive inventory. At first the mail had been mostly bills, and I paid them and they stopped coming, but what took their place were dozens of letters from her friends across the Midwest, and from Florida and Tennessee, and one from Girona, friends we hadn’t invited to the funeral, friends who couldn’t have known. I never knew what a champion letter writer she had been. I spent my Saturday afternoons writing these people back.

I have a letter in hand now, from Marvin Meeks of Memphis.
“Dear Bluebird,” it says. “My eyes are poor but I can still see you, when I
close them. How is life in the old domain? Miss me? I bet you do. I hear a
meadowlark on my telephone wire. It says see-you. A Baltimore oriole says hoo-
li. It is time for the thrushes, cheery-o, and the warbler, sweet-sweet-sweet. Is your
birdfeeder full? Check it, dear. I’ll feed them on through Tennessee if you can
host them in Missouri. Pass the birds.

“Look at this letter,” my grandmother had said on my last visit to the
house, some months ago. It was on legal paper and folded in quarter sections.
“It’s from Marvin Meeks, my first boyfriend. He was a fledgling birder—ha! He
drew birds and wrote about them. He shot them too. Poor things. He loved them
but had to kill them for a closer look; he had the sharpest colored pencils. He took
me hunting once, on a Monday in March, cold as hell. I wore a dress! He taught
me how to hold a gun, padded my shoulder with a towel, and I put a few holes in
the sky. It was a 22. Then, I guess I kissed him. But Marvin went to college, just
like you, and met and married Selma Burns from Wichita. He called her Robin,
but he always called me Bluebird. I was his first, ahem. Read the letter. See? He’s
got your sense of things.”

On all the Saturdays when I visited her as a boy she spread Miracle Whip
on white bread from edge to edge then buried it in grated cheddar. She toasted
these delights with the oven door cracked so she and I could witness the melting.
Then she poured us two teeny glasses of V-8. The fountain arc of the dull red
juice seemed to come from her wrist. She sprinkled each elixir with dried parsley.
Her patterned bag dresses squeezed her short plump shoulders and gave her large biceps, so she appeared muscular. She had the jaw of a statesman but soft eyes that angled down at the ends, suggesting sorrow. I put the letter down and asked, “Do you still love Marvin Meeks?”

She laughed and faced me western style. “Down the hatch,” she said. We downed our drinks and the acidity of V-8 made me shiver.

Then we ate. She was a terrible cook. My grandfather’s life overlapped only a little with mine; I never knew him, but he must have cared little for food. Her meatloaf was a cobblestone. She understood this and served ketchup by the dollop from a Pyrex bowl. Salads were a quarter of iceberg lettuce with no accoutrements, and a bottle of Italian dressing that everyone composed to violently shake. The wine came from a jug, my water in a glass so small it seemed rationed, and for dessert there was nothing. There was a drawer in the dining room where gumdrops were stored in the open on a bed of sugar. I ate these—they never go bad. There are still some there. The black ones. My grandmother stayed quiet through most meals. “How are you doing?” my mother would ask her, politely.

“Oh, fit as a fiddle,” she would say, and sip wine. My father would raise his eyes at me. I was his only child, and we ate our meatloaf with discipline, cutting it bite by bite with the dull press of our fork edge. Afterwards, in the living room with our instant coffee, my grandmother would pat the plastic cover on the sofa. “If you can’t say anything nice about someone, come sit next to me.”
I sat next to her. We talked nonsense. She said such things: for instance, that the conductor sneezed last night at the symphony, “during Vivaldi, Spring.” Had I heard about the woman from the wealthy family in Minneapolis who left her husband for a root farmer? “Because of the great size of his rutabagas.” Her eyes snickered. She liked to say, “Pomposity is wonderful from a distance,” and stare at my mother.

My grandmother hugged me tight, with a grunt, “Mmm—M!” and then, whether I was alone or with my family, we always parted at nine. When she died she had long white hairs on her chin, like a wise goat.

She had asked me, every time I saw her, who my bird was. “Whom are you flying with now, young man?” She toasted me with juice and took pride in my sheepishness; she acted as if I were a cad. “You are so handsome they must flock to you.” I’d blush and look at my feet. “Oh, I knew it,” she’d say.

Once, I went over to my grandmother’s without calling first. I’d been out on a bicycle ride—I must have been about 12 years old—and the June weather was uplifting and I felt one of those wonderful moments of affinity with all the world when I wanted to reach out and help everyone, so I decided to pay my grandmother a visit. When we are young, old people are such a mystery. I had no idea what my grandmother did all day. I had probably never even occurred to me that she, or anyone, persisted through the waking hours with all the internal climate changes that frustrated me. She was, I thought, an old woman in a perpetually fine, light mood.
I laid my bike in the middle of her driveway and walked past the bell that hung on a sheepherder’s pole—I liked to ring the rusty bell until my arm burned and my ears hurt—and up to the back porch where I expected she’d be. She wasn’t there. The door was unlocked so I went in and walked softly over the carpet. Fear overcame me and shut up my senses. I didn’t want to go on and felt compelled to. I passed through the porch, peeked around the brick wall into the living room. She wasn’t there, but I didn’t expect her to be. The room was a dismal dark yellow and the furniture was covered in thick plastic bags. I went on, passed the staircase, to the entrance to the bright kitchen, where I saw her. She was sitting at the kitchen table, wearing a floral dress, her hair rolled up in bun at the back, her face sagged in contemplation over a particular picture in a photo album open before her. A tissue was in her hand, and I was not sure, but I thought she’d been crying. It must have bolstered my mood, because for some reason I felt as officious and purposeful as a man at a podium before a crowd.

“Hello,” I said

She jumped and spun toward me. I jumped too. “Jonathan!” She slapped the table and said, “Ugh!” She looked at me sternly. My good mood crumpled like a foil ball. Then, in a turn that still makes me esteem and marvel at her, she smiled. “You just about killed your grandma.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I still felt little and held onto the edge of the stove.

“Are you all right?”
“Come here,” she said. “Oh, just come here and give me a hug. You frightened me. Who taught you to just sally into people’s homes without knocking?”

I could have said I was worried she was dead, but I shrugged.

“I was looking at pictures,” she said. “I loved a man before I met your grandfather and I love him still. What do you think of that?”

What could I say? Even now, when I feel suffocated by an inarticulate and nebulous reaction my eyes widen as if to take in air, and I stand dumbly and say something like, “Wow.” I probably did so then, but all I recall is that I didn’t know what to say. And I remember that after she kissed me on the head and stood up to go pour me some V-8, I looked at the picture she’d been focused on. It was of a young man in a double-breasted gray suit, standing on a staircase. His hands hung at his sides, fingers lightly curled. I wanted to be him. The edges of the photograph were faded and the tone was brown. He was the one bright thing in the picture, and I remember he was handsome, a proportionate face, flat blonde hair parted, and that his eyes were intense, confident, and they looked alive; that was the thing that stunned me most. The eyes were not aware of time passing, or of sadness or worry. They stung the world. The picture was taken in 1932.

For a long time, even as I often remembered that photograph and the picture of her bent over it, of her getting older staring at that picture of Marvin Meeks, who is so full of possibility, I didn’t understand why she was looking at it if it made her sad.
But I suppose I began to understand when, in high school, I met Laura, who drank iced coffee with cinnamon and sugar, and we spent afternoons after school leaning on the hood of her car drinking these granitas and saying little, and I felt I would from now on always have such fine bright hours with girls. Then she went to college in Amherst and wrote to me—I was still in high school—about sitting in Emily Dickinson’s garden and how the weather was. She told me what flowers grew in the garden, what Emily could see out of her window, and how her poems were discovered posthumously, over 1700 of them, and how Emily was shy, wore only white, and would not visit with anyone, a recluse. But Laura never wrote to me about herself directly. Then she dressed up as a hooker and went to a Halloween party and got carried away with the role and I told her goodbye.

Then I met Rachel, who wrote badly about the best things and drank orange soda in a glass with ice wedges and sat by the pool. Her legs made me shudder with painful lust, the vertigo of attraction. She had a rope swing in her endless rolling yard and I sat on it, then she sat on it, and together we stretched the rope stiff and swung, but it was not easy with so much weight. Rachel spoke in run-on sentences. We dug into each other very lightly. If marriage is a tattoo we were fat purple markers. We brought orange sodas along everywhere and then I’d drive home alone late in the night with the radio on. Then I decided orange soda was not for me and I wrote a letter to Rachel about it, short, simple, and
kind, I thought, and tucked it under her windshield wiper before I left Missouri for college in New York.

There, I met many girls who drank many different things and we wrote to each other in emails and small cards with timeless quotes we’d forget by the afternoon, and so those quotes were like the girls and me, priceless each of us, but somehow insufficient, and therefore temporary.

Then I graduated and saw Mary at a crowded party and we escaped to the rooftop and shared a glass of water from the tap. New York has the sweetest, cleanest water of any city and yet no one trusts it. Mary tried a number of other drinks with me. It seemed important that we love the same drink, to hold us near, and remind us, as we ingested it, of each other. But coffee irritated her stomach. Tea was for a cold night but not in the summer. She would plummet to bed after a sip of wine. Though there was a kind of tea that tasted like coffee and for a time we made it ours, but it was expensive and the effort to brew it wore us out, so we did not settle on anything but water, it seemed so pure and simple, but common and tasteless, and therefore lacking.

I thought I was cursed in life to do everything to exhaustion because that is what it took, and more, to succeed. At night we sat in her boxy living room and read books and worked on projects and felt bedraggled. We were both surprised and frustrated at our youthful enervation. Where was that confidence I’d seen in Marvin Meeks? Were things so different then; did people feel different emotions, act less craven and nervous, less brain-wracked, in 1932?
If the evening included sex it was furtive, aspiring, overwrought with expressions of bliss, and rarely did it instill me with the peace that is the boon of exhaustion, the flight of fear and responsibility, the reduction of ambition to this, the fulfillment of having the right someone in my arms. No, we’d both roll out of bed to finish our plotted tasks, endless lists of books to read, ideas to convey on paper, or else roll over and get to sleep to prepare for the next stage in the race. I was working as an assistant editor at a magazine, but I will never get anywhere, I feared, unless I am focused and tireless. Long after midnight we’d drag to bed, always at her apartment. Sometimes there was not enough space for both of us to splatter on the mattress in bodily surrender, as we desired. Sometimes we clutched to each other, but of course, we were separate in dreams.

In the morning I’d leap out at the alarm, dizzy and disheveled, and hit the snooze button for her. I’d kiss her on the head and go into the living room to dress. At some point I’d have to put one hand against the wall to balance myself. It is silly, but that cold wall burned the fatigue of sleeplessness out of me; it made me aware of the size of my lungs, my ribs, all the way up my throat to my teeth—aware of my parts in such a matter of fact way that I could count on them, as a carpenter has tools.

Then I would fly down five flights of stairs and run out to the sidewalk, where I would look up to her bedroom window and wave. I wondered if she was still in there? Of course she was, but the window reflected the sky, often azure, often gray, clouded, or not, and sometimes there was a glare that made me squint.
I'd think about her sleeping, imagining her interminably there and me interminably below her window, as I hurried to the subway at Eastern Parkway, zipped under the East River, popped out in Manhattan at Second Avenue, dashed over to my Alphabet City apartment stairs, scampered up four flights to my shower, then into my closet, then over to my coffee pot, until I sat down at my table by the window above the street. I sipped coffee with milk and wished I had a newspaper and a larger bank account, and thought, she will never be mine. Then I went to work at the magazine.

Mary wrote her dreams down in a red pen in a three-sectioned spiral notebook she locked together with a thick rubber band. The pages she wrote on first thing in the morning thickened and the notebook swelled as if a seed was growing in its center. If I woke up late she would not speak to me until her dreams were conveyed in the notebook, which she held close to her chest as she wrote in it the remnants of her secret and distant land. I was jealous of her dreams. Mine, I thought, were weaker, less genius, noteworthy, affecting.

At night in the living room she tried to write a play about her dreams. She sat at her particleboard desk, her lamp clipped to its side, her feet wrapped tensely around the legs of her chair. The lamp shone on her and made the right side of her face red. She would begin to sweat and have to scoot away from it. One time, the bulb burned out and we did not have another, and whether by candlelight or another lamp, she could not work. She was loyal.
Mary had short black hair that stuck up all over. Her neck was long and her jaw taut and angular, but her face was not. It was chubby. She had dark expressive eyes. When we passed through the foyer together in her building after going to the park or to a movie, she would stride inside and wave a vivacious hello to the security guard, Merino, with her face spread in grandeur to the glass of his cubicle, and I could tell he had a crush on her.

Merino drank wine from a thermos. He flattered her by praising her for her energy and directness, and then he directed her: You must do this; then this; then you will be a success. It is that easy! He showed her how simple by counting the steps on his fingers. Why in his home, Argentina, he was a professor. Oh yes, oh sure, but here, there is more money for a night watchman (here, Mary and I looked down and nodded). “But I love my wife,” he said and this seemed to shock him. He lurched and threw his arms up. How had he forgotten! He pointed a finger at us. One minute! He would dial her and talk in Spanish fast as a mouse, some heckling, some arguing, some old routine. He came out of the office his eyes aglitter. He would say, “So, how is the magazine?” “It is good,” I would say as I unbuttoned my coat. He’d nod and then in broken English tell me of the great authors he knew. Most of them lived in Mary’s building. I knew none of their names. “But I will introduce you to them,” he said. He told me that they traveled. They had political agendas. They were unearthing wrongs and pointing fingers and taking down the strata of the hierarchy one stone at a time. “One day, you will
too,” he told me and put the weight of it on my shoulder, with his hard veined gray hand.

I began to avoid Merino. Mary did too. She always ran late, and she told me that he would grab her on her way to work and dive into an endless monologue about the benefits of socialism. “There will be a revolution,” he said. He had sad, ocher eyes, a thin man’s droopy potbelly, and graying hair, and sometimes he brought a flute to work and pleaded with Mary until she relented, leaned against the foyer wall, and he played for her. He was not one to fine-tune his notes, but to let passion lead him to the sounds. “Oh but how he tries,” she said, misty-eyed.

The night after Mary told me this we determined to ignore Merino. He sensed it, and would not look at us, but sat deep in his seat, sullen behind the glass of his cubicle. We hardened ourselves. We hurried even more, so as not to see him in his sad way. We tried to look preoccupied. We rushed past, in and out. He played his flute anyhow and let the notes whine when we passed, and sometimes he was bent over the phone in the little office, the voice of his wife like a violent but muffled violin. Merino gestured at the wall as he talked with her. She seemed to baffle him. At such times any stranger could pass into the building unnoticed.

Then, four months after we met, Mary moved out of the building and in with me. It was early fall and the Japanese maple already red, and some of the cherry trees had blossomed. We spent an hour in the Byzantine mosaic dome of the foyer, saying goodbye to Merino. It seemed an ancient rite. We brought him
gifts: a collection of flute music on records and a dozen roses for his wife. Then in
the afternoon, Mary and I brought her chest of drawers, her bookshelf, her kitchen
table and chairs, her couch, and her artwork—to Manhattan and carried them
upstairs. We put the furniture in place together. Her own abstract paintings and
collages so precious to her succeeded to become important to me, deeply moving
if I did not look at them too long, so I championed her talent. I became infatuated
with the way she moved. There is much to study in the body’s reaction that
reveals one’s weaknesses and strengths. She held the end of a piece of furniture
straight-armed and clam-lipped for as long as she could manage before she
surrendered with a gasp and we put it down and waited for her fingers to recover.
We moved things on counts of three.

By noon we were done. We left the artwork leaning along the base of the
wall in the hall and sat at her table, which had taken over the kitchen—my table
was put in the basement. We drank tall glasses of water and passed an A&W root
beer back and forth, and we blew on the top to make the bottle whistle. Mary held
her neck high and her back was flat and her legs crossed, and in my apartment
now as a presence as invested in it as I, she looked bigger, so I sat up to match
her, and leaned over and kissed her.

“How’s the play coming?” I said.

“It’s a mix,” she said. “I have a scene where a girl speaks to the moon,
Luna, Luna, and another where houses float overhead, they have sails on the
roofs. Like a naval fleet of suburbia above me.”
Mary had grown up in the suburbs of Baltimore and looked at the moon most, I think, when she went to college in the southwest. "How do those things connect?" I asked.

She tilted her head and I saw all the muscles in her face and body flinch, her stomach tighten and her breath seize. She was imperceptibly frowning at me, insulted, but only because she didn’t know the answer. She considered me unimaginative, too terrestrial while she, the afflicted, took pride in her private unfurling into the unconscious, where plots die and themes don’t conclude, then tensed up again in the waking life—or so it seemed to me. I would have made the argument that, if dreams are to become conscious, they must be given form, and form is structural. Mary hated the requirements of the ego. After the many performances we went to—dances, plays, music, galleries—she found reason to criticize the art’s limitations, always at the cost of acknowledging its galvanic effects.

Asked to reveal the truth of the rough-and-tumble of real life, art will always fail. It is always approximate, always partial, and so, I think, is love. Love is also caught inside the bounds of materials, the insufficiency of voice, body, sound, and setting, but it is this conflict of our yearn for freedom against the limits of the singular and the material that results in art and in the dramatic attachments of humans into pairs.

Mary’s narrowness frustrated me. She was just frustrated by her own incapacity. But we soon developed a routine of having breakfast together in the
morning and I was happiest then. Mary worked three days a week at a law firm, and I sometimes worked from home, so we had many chances to go to the Vaselka bakery on 2\textsuperscript{nd} Street. We ordered two babka muffins and I got a large coffee, light. Mary got warm soymilk, or mint tea, or a yogurt and seltzer drink. Vassily, who never closed his mouth to hide his black teeth, packed it for us in a white bag. Then I held the door for Mary. Somewhere in Tompkins Square Park we’d find a bench in a bolt of sunlight. For a warm week in October we wore T-shirts and shorts and flip-flops, and as the weather changed we bundled up for breakfast and huddled near, as if all the shelter we needed was the pairing of our shoulders and heads. Mary never ate all of her pastry and so saved it in the white bag. Then at midnight, when we crumbled into zombies of hunger, one of us would storm the kitchen and snatch the leftover pastry, peel down its cupcake skirt and ravage it, sighing and licking fingers. There was never enough.

Sitting on the bench we watched people come and go. “Give me a sip,” Mary would say. I would hand it over, pleased to share. “It will hurt your stomach,” I said. She’d do it anyway, reliving this drama of her wanting to drink at will, anything. She lifted the cup to her lips to test the heat of it.

“Is it hot?” Her nose would become wet and I’d think it would not be long before I asked her to marry me. But sometimes I forgot I was in love. I forgot because my enchantment with the raised mole on her right breast, the hairs under her belly button, the smell of her scalp, had disappeared. She looked ordinary and the way she talked, what she thought about seemed little.
The routine of our mornings soured. She began to sleep late but I’d wake up earlier. Sometimes I went to the Vaselka alone, picked up a paper, sat inside, and tried new items, like pierogies with applesauce and grilled onions, or meatloaf and ketchup for breakfast. When Vassily inquired, “Where’s the girl?” I’d drop my head into the pillow of my hands, close my eyes, and smile. “Asleep!” he’d say, and nod. He had a monstrous balding head. “My wife sleeps till noon.”

Then one Friday night in February, Mary took me to the MoMA. It was as crowded inside as the sidewalks of Times Square. The museum was free on Fridays, so we could afford it, and an exhibition of photographs and models of Mies van der Rohe apartments and homes took up much of the second floor. We held hands so as not to lose one another in the crowd. Everyone was clad in winter clothing, sweaters and thick pants, and it was hot inside and the overhead vents blasted cold air down on us. People’s hair frizzed.

The most stunning of Mies’ designs were the ones that had never been built. These unrealized buildings had a special glow. They were mainly skeletal steel buildings, some tall, all sheathed in glass. Of course, the models were made of wood, painted silver, and the glass was some kind of clear plastic. I wondered if, in the privacy of their minds, everyone who passed by these models built them and briefly took refuge inside. From the middle of one building, a tall skyscraper, a bluish penlight burned cold and forlorn.

The exhibit was posthumous by some thirty-five years. I looked at a photograph of Mies, astute and contemplative, in a sweater. Then I thought of
Mies after the fact, entombed, rotted, encased in dirt, and his extant work, like a
dogma, somehow emancipated from grit and crack and chaos, from color and
memory, that he had resisted something inevitable, that the buildings were some
miracle of security, purity, and undaunted soul, and yet, they were only models of
buildings.

“What is it you like about them?” I asked Mary.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I like that we can see inside them but I wouldn’t
want to live in a glass house. Everything so clean and sharp, it’s oppressive.”

We had to move quickly through the exhibit. Righteous elbows speared us
on, and at the last of the models, a house, the crowd swelled into the exit and we
were pushed with it. But then something caught my eye and I surged back. Mary’s
hand came out of mine and I waved at her with my fingers. “Just a second,” I said.

I had to press against the belly of a portly man to lean in. Yes, I thought I
had seen a model of a man, a figurine frozen in mid-stride across the palatial floor
of the model house. Windows flanked the wide room, a corridor of glass, but it
wasn’t terminal. Where the glass wall would be at far end there was nothing, only
a ramp that led down from the floor to the ground. The funny thing about it was
that the man had a drink in his hand, a tiny glass of something red, a bloody Mary.
He looked committed to exiting the room. For some reason I had a fear about
it—a story popped into my head that he’d walk out of his glass house but never be
able to get back in. The missing glass wall would rise up and block him out. I
imagined he’d spend a long painful afternoon looking through it, his palms up
against the flat obstacle to that big open space he’d just passed through without a hitch, but now all he wanted was to return.

We hurried out of the museum and into the cold city night, the welcome cacophony of brakes, horns, yells, flares of laughter, the clip of heels on concrete, the strictness of every face, clamped into a way of seeing.

“How’s your play coming,” I asked Mary. She itched her head for a minute and stopped beside a pillar at a bank on 51st. She hadn’t mentioned her art in over a week. After much early exuberance, her ideas had stalled and staled, I think, and her commitment was tested. It was a sore subject.

“I’ve stopped work on it,” she said, curtly, which is when I realized I’d wanted her to fail. So I ceased wanting it. It seemed imminent anyhow, and then I felt sorry for her.

We took the F train downtown to a café we’d never been to on 2nd Avenue. It was Middle Eastern. Behind the counter, a man with a lazy eye was reading a book in Arabic. Sitar music played from a radio on a small shelf in a high corner in the back of the restaurant and heavy kilims in dark reds and blacks hung from the walls and sagged from the low ceiling. They brushed my head as I walked beneath. We were the only customers. “We stay open late,” he said. “Stay all night. I don’t mind you.”

We sunk into a booth in the back and each of us leaned against the wall with our legs stretched long across our seats. I ordered Turkish coffee with sambuca and two glasses of water. We sat for an hour, gingerly selecting topics to
talk about. I asked her about her parents and her brother’s new baby. She asked me if I was going home for my brother’s graduation from high school. It was three in the morning, my second cup of coffee, when Mary said, “I’ve been meaning to tell you. I applied for the Peace Corps in Africa. I didn’t think you’d want to come, but...”

I understand the expression ‘stabbed’ in the heart. “No, I’ve decided to apply to medical school,” I said. “But I also want to get married and have children.”

Mary put her glass down and furrowed her brow. She looked at me with her face scrunched against an outbreak of tears. She smiled to collect herself. Her eyes, the color of oyster shells, became wet. She looked up at the chaotic pattern of a kilim on the ceiling and blinked. “I’m not sure I want to marry you,” she said.

It is now, when I think back to that moment, that I imagine having my druthers, having courage and the heroic reaction to fight for love. I should have laughed and said, “Mary, don’t go to Africa. You’re crazy to do this. I should be angry with you for not telling me. You’re running away from yourself. Stay here and marry me, or marry me and we’ll go to Africa together.” But I defended my pain by saying nothing.

When we walked home that morning it was cobalt blue out, a sheer dawn that made glass the color of steel. I did hold Mary’s hand. We didn’t say much. She went to sleep first, and while she did, as the sun rose, I did something very, very bad. I took her dream notebook from the bedside table and carried it into the
kitchen. I wanted to peek at it. Every morning when she’d turned to it immediately upon waking I felt betrayed. I wanted to know what she dreamed about that was so secret and significant.

I slid the rubber band off, careful not to break it, and opened to the first page. The script was messy and dashed ahead, as if the words tried to chase down the images as they were evaporating. I could see my name amidst the bustle. I turned the page and scanned the next one. Again my name, three times, and I closed the journal; it was an impulse as if I were yanking my pants up before a crowd. I stood up and slapped the thin white walls of the kitchen and went to the bathroom and washed my face. Then I fidgeted with a cabinet that would not close flush, and then I paced and ironed my scalp with my hands. There was nowhere to go. So I brushed my teeth. Then I put the rubber band back on the journal and put it back under her books on the bedside table. Mary stirred. I climbed in beside her and kissed her forehead and tried to sleep. But then I got the journal out again. I got it out right in front of her, as she slept. I put my pillow against the wall and sat just as she always did, my knees up, the journal propped against my thighs. The sun was coming in through the drapes as I read the first fifteen pages. I saw my name ten times, but her dreams were not about me. They were not about anything in particular. Her dreams, captured in a headlong script, had no structure.

Four months later Mary became a Peace Corps volunteer in Cote D’Ivoire and I enrolled at Cornell Medical School. Two years later she married Owen.
LaPaz from Santa Fe. A year later she was pregnant. Two years after that she wrote to me to ask what had happened to her kitchen table? How long had it been since I’d eaten at Vaselka? Seen Merino? Ridden the 4 to Eastern Parkway and walked the Botanical Gardens during the Cherry Blossom Festival?

“Santa Fe doesn’t feel like home either!” she wrote. “I still write down my dreams. I think they bear less fruit than I once thought, but oh well, maybe it comes in waves. At least it’s a record of something, right?”

A record indeed. I wanted to write her back and ask if she had ever shared them with anyone. My guess was she hadn’t, and couldn’t, and that seemed the most poignant of our tragedies, that the vast adventure of our lives remains a private one, and it is mainly in isolation that we cling to our dreams, memories, loves. We have no interpreter but ourselves.

I penned Mary a return letter, telling her how I had set a leg that day, and stitched up a little boy who’d fallen out of bed at night and cracked his chin on the floor. And ever since then, every month or so, I’ll get a letter back.

I don’t know what happened between my grandmother and Marvin Meeks, but I have his photograph now and I put it in an album next to one I have of Mary, standing at the entrance to her apartment house on Eastern Parkway early in our partnership. She is wearing a dress and her hands are on her hips. I can see her firm calves, her feet in sandals. Her eyes burn with certainty. I believe that this woman still exists, and I know I love her, except I cannot find her anymore in this world.
Ice Cream, Orchids, and Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte

Nick had a recurring dream of warm blue water and green grass, and men in racing caps beside it who played a serious match of croquet and the major problem at hand was how to angle the balls around a dimple in the grass. In his mind there was a refuge from the serious painful work of living. In his dreams all families sat under red maple trees, ate breads, cheeses, and fruits and played xylophones and bells, and overhead, the sun bore a warm hole in an eggshell of sky and it never ever set and no one ever got tired of the place or ever had to leave it, and it was permanent as nothing else is and it was always Sunday afternoon.

“Rise and shine, Nick,” his father said. His father was young, but he affected his voice with solemnity. He knocked on the door, rat-a-tat-tat, then peeked through the crack to see if Nick was up, which he wasn’t. The deep lines on the man’s face were because he skipped lunch and deigned dessert. His thin Roman nose like a keelboard directed his eyes, which gleamed like tropical fish in a murky tank. He forced his thin dry lips to close over his large teeth. He had short brown hair, a bit scruffy like the coat of a stray dog’s, and grayish whiskers that he shaved twice daily, and he wore bifocals, and a few times an hour he cleaned them with a handkerchief and muttered, “Until the light blinds me.”

He did so now as Nick peeked out of his covers and shuddered. One day, Nick decided, he would relieve himself of his reliance on eyeglasses by completing a series of clenching, focusing, and blindfolding eye exercises that he’d read about in a children’s magazine at the optometrist’s office. He wanted to
see clearly without assistance. But now, he reached to his bedside table for his thick glasses to see his father clearly.

John Monforte had been up since four. He was a milkman and the assistant minister at a small church on the edge of their ramshackle Florida panhandle town, north of citrus, south of cotton. For as long as John could remember he’d found life barely endurable and because of this he feared he would live a long time, that that is how God works, and yet the longer he lived the greater was his strength, he felt, and this pleased him, the pain and the triumph. God is very complicated and works by coincidence, John thought. “What a coincidence,” he liked to say when a good thing happened, like the Bentley’s paid him the milk money. For John, good moments were like winks from above. His own father had been a cruel minister, a real irony, he thought, but nonetheless an incongruity he hadn’t entirely been able to shake in himself. He knew he loved the pain of enduring what is difficult and took pleasure in executing stern conduct when others were watching, as a method of ministering by example. But about his son, Nick, well, he was not sure how to bring up a child.

Nick was not unaware of his father’s struggle to appear resilient and courageous in the common conflicts of working for a living, staying awake, and speaking honestly. Nick wanted his father’s approval but his own conflict he thought, was quite different from his father’s. Nick was insufferably imaginative and was prone to becoming lost in flights of fancy. But, one thing he’d done to
Please his father was to choose January as his favorite month. He said to his father, “I like it for its length and difficult weather.”

But John Monforte had grown up in Minnesota and knew how relatively easy Florida was in January. He thought it honorable of Nick to try to win control over the difficulty of winter by putting it in a positive light. It was not Nick’s fault that he only knew Florida winters. For himself, and to honor his own father, John made himself walk the four miles each morning to the dairy where his truck was parked, and then four miles home. It was January now.

“Nicholas, rise child.”

He liked to think his deep voice spurned the lilt of mercy and inspired self-sacrifice and durability in his son. He liked to think he was tougher than he was. He’d told Nick he disliked dreaming and that during his own rural and hardscrabble boyhood in the Depression he’d tried to prevent it rather than rely on it. Once, when he was in a bitter mood over some financial particulars pertaining to the mortgage of the house, which he’d miscalculated and underpaid, he told Nick that dreams were dangerous, distracting, improbable, creating a false sense of security and were a character-weakening recess from the actual. The actual needed to be faced without any false ideas of escape. John had forgotten he’d said this to Nick, but Nick had not forgotten it, though if he remembered it he did so in body language and fear of his father, who he also wanted to please but didn’t know quite how.
Nick was dumbfounded by his father's monologues. How is a seven year old supposed to make sense of his self-aggrandizing father's sermons on false idols, which is what this amounted to from a Christian angle? But John Monforte was merely at odds with himself, in the way that some men are endlessly able to endure their own bitterness by suppressing it with piety. These kinds of men squirrel away inside themselves or become teachers. But John Monforte was not hopeless. In fact, he'd become quite a good athlete, quite a smart man, and quite a handsome man too, if a bit too stern in his expressions. He tried hard, that was clear.

John said that there were certain reasons he did not delight in novels or paintings. It was the same reason one should not eat sweets and sleep in everyday and cultivate fanciful dreams. It creates bad habits. Need he say more? He raised his eyebrows. Still, every morning in the middle of his delivery route, he swung to the loose trumpets and drums of Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, and Roy Eldridge blaring out of the truck’s brand new 1951 radio. You’d never look at John Monforte and know the extent and skill of his mental jitterbug. In his mind he danced with his wife, and sexily too. This minister had a fiery libido and his wife knew it and didn’t see any conflict in this and his ordination, but John acted stricken by it, perhaps because he felt he should be in conflict with all things, for against conflict he’d always done his best work. John was also under the illusion that a minister could not show pleasure with earthly things—this he had been taught by the example of his father and his authorities at the seminary.
When John came to a delivery, or the rectory, or home to wake Nick (his mother was already at work at the library, from seven to noon), he shut off the radio and, stepping out of his truck he also stepped out of the theatrical lights of his heady stage and onto the gravel of the flat and invariable panhandle.

John took Nick by the arm and was careful not to pull hard but he was forceful and serious, and Nick slid out of bed. Looking at his son now, John was reminded of himself at the same age. He still wanted to punch out the lights of the bullies who’d hit him so many times when he was in grade school. For years he was frightened just to speak in class. His confidence had hung out in a dark recess of his chest for a long time afterward. John wanted Nick to fight back. He wanted a tough reaction from his son. So he was a bit rough with Nick, to try any drum up some resentment so Nick would lash out; but John didn’t want to be so rough that Nick would feel weaker and less capable of standing up for himself. John tugged Nick to the bathroom, where he turned on the shower, adjusted the temperature, and left Nick to undress and climb in. “Have a fine day, Nicholas. Stay smart at school. Keep your chin up, your confidence high, and eat all your lunch.”

When Nick got out of the shower he was as clean and pale as porcelain dipped in water. He scampered back to his room to put on his pressed black pants, a white shirt, and patent leather shoes. In the kitchen his mother gave him a bowl of oatmeal, honey, and raisins. Though breakfast made him nauseous, Nick ate it until he felt bloated and slow—he was undersized and skinny, but a sickly skinny. At school he ate only two or three bites of his gargantuan roast beef sandwich and
there were carrot sticks and two cupcakes and a sack of toasted corn. Nick did not like to go outside during recess, but sat by the window and read the Bible. Why the Bible? His father suggested it. “It has good stories in it,” he said, but Nick couldn’t find them, so he did not actually read it, but turned the pages lackadaisically and peered at the words, so many on such thin paper. They blurred and led him to think of many things, many mysteries that had nothing to do with school or home or the Bible. He did not ever see his father reading the Bible. His father read magazines on botany and sports. But daydreams, they were the reason Nick stayed inside during recess, he decided, as the boys in his class chased each other around with sticks.

Nick was as pale as enamel except for his hands, which were tinted blue by cold veins. He was thin like his father, but while his father was always sweating, swiping his scorched scored brow with a cloth, Nick was always cold. He wore glasses and had a slight stutter. He had a general slack-faced incomprehension about math. After dinner, at nine each night, his father stood over him at the kitchen table and tutored him in figures. “You may have some learning problems like me,” he said. “But I don’t know quite what to call what you have.”

Nick didn’t divide or multiply without a great puzzlement over the problem. Once, during a test in class, he’d raised his hand to ask of the very first question, “What is the use of multiplying twelve by twenty-seven?” His classmates laughed. They whispered, “Nick knows nil.” The catchphrase haunted
him on the walls of the bathroom stalls and on the schoolyard asphalt where it was written in chalk. He saw it from the window where he sat reading during recess and pointed it out to his teacher. She said, “Oh, they’re a mean bunch, Nick. You’re smart and I know it. The rain will wash it away.” He waited and waited and trusted in the weather, but it didn’t rain for a month.

One time, during the break between disciplines, as Nick drew the pinnate veins of leaves he’d found on the walk to school, another boy snuck under his desk and triple knotted his shoelaces together. Nick tried to stand up and resist, but another came around behind him and held him down. They wrapped tape around the knot. Nick struggled silently and when the teacher looked up from her knitting and asked, “What is going on over there, boys?” the boy holding Nick down said aloud, with worry and care, “Nick won’t even talk to us, Mrs. Johnson. It’s like he’s spoiled.”

On another day during art class, Nick wanted to cut a forest scene out of green construction paper. “Make it if you must,” the art teacher said, a bilious and gray-faced old man, “but it will be awfully hard for anyone to tell what it is.”

“But I know what it is,” Nick said. The man shrugged and said, “Please yourself then.”

So Nick began to cut out the forest he’d imagined, and as he did, one boy came behind him and put his hands over Nick’s mouth while another poured Elmer’s glue down Nick’s shirt. Then, with all he had, like a demon exploding from the guise of a rabbit, Nick slashed out with his safety scissors, but his slash
was strange. He slashed up, as if at phantoms overhead. He slashed through his forest cutout.

They laughed at him then. And the next week, during science class, they were making candlesticks, and two boys drizzled hot wax on Nick’s head. “God!” he screamed and tears rose to his eyes so he could not see as he tried to chase them away with a little lit match he had, which they blew out. They shoved Nick to the ground and knocked his glasses off. From the ground he tried to kick them and hit them but he could not see who they were. Foggy dark shapes, evil rain clouds, thundered over him and spit in his face. When the teacher came back from the bathroom and said, “What is going on over there?” they said, “Nick was running around with a lit match and fell.”

How does a teacher discipline a gang? She took Nick to the nurse, who put ice on his burn and cleaned off his face, and sent him to the principal who called the gym teacher in who sat on the edge of the principal’s desk and said to Nick: “Stay tall, big Nick. We’ll watch out for you.” He absently patted Nick on the head, jarring his glasses. Then they sent Nick to walk home early, one mile along the side of the coastal road, home to the fat white arms of his mother. Nick’s cold little hand knocked on the door and his mother came and lifted him up.

She was strong, and with animation and tears he told her how he was bullied and asked why people did it to him, of all people, because he did nothing to them, and she listened and told him that he was smart and likeable and had a vivid imagination and they just didn’t see it yet, or value it yet, and then she put
him down and blessed with a kiss the little red bald spot where the wax had
temporarily burned his hair away. He felt better. She gave him soda bread with
chocolate sauce and a stein of root beer.

"May I go to the park now?"

"Yes, Nick. Until your father gets home. Then you need to study your
basal readers."

"Yes," he said and ran into the bathroom to get ready. He combed his hair
in the mirror, put on a dab of his father's aftershave, brushed his teeth, put on
clean pleated shorts, clean white socks, polished his Sunday shoes, took his
glasses of, and took a last stance of judgment before the mirror. He took pride in
his looks. He was always confident when heading to the park. He was ready now.
He rushed into the kitchen, dragged a chair into the front hall, and lugged a book
off the top of the bookshelf. From the other room he heard his mother say, "You
sure look handsome, Nick. Have a good time."

"I will!" he said and strained every muscle to carry the book into the living
room and lower it to the floor. It was almost too much for him.

It was a book of paintings by Seurat and other pointillist artists that his
mother had inherited from a worldlier younger friend who'd died of an aneurysm
last year. It was the biggest book or piece of art the family owned, for they owned
very little art besides a dull tapestry of a very simple and prudent Last Supper that
hung unnoticed in the dining room like an example, but no one looked at it
because they ate in the kitchen and only his father's boss, the church minister,
expected it to be hung up because he had given it to them. And then on one
windowsill sat a rather obligatory figurine of the crucifixion, and then there were
dozens of colored drawings of plants that his mother had made that hung around
but Nick did not consider them art because it was his mother’s hobby and
anyway, they did not look like the pointillist play of light on the sky and grass and
clothing, of Seurat. They owned a good number of books though, but Nick
resisted reading them. A few Bibles and books about motors and cooking and
woodworking and lots on gardening and kite making and then there was a book
on Spanish phrases because they came in handy at the fruit stands and some
novels his mother especially liked, for she read a couple each week but mainly the
ones she checked out from the library where she worked.

Nick opened the book like lowering the drawbridge to permit his
entrance—or escape—into another kingdom. Each painting spanned two pages,
sinking into the gutter of the binding and rising out of it. After so many visits to
the book, the gutter was filled with crumbs of food. Nick climbed atop a page, sat
cross-legged, and met the people on the other side.

“Hello, Timmy, h-how was your day? Mine was g-great, thanks. I drew a
f-fire engine f-fighting f-flames. Oh, and I d-discovered a new k-kind of animal.
The elephant p-p-pigeon. It can f-fly like me.”

He wore his father’s racing cap and ate his bread with the people in the
paintings. After a long discussion about things like boats, aeroplanes, underwater
singing, and how to guess the age of a tree without cutting it down, he said, “S-so, s-super talking with y’all. S-see you around, then!”

But they all wanted to shake his hand. He was very flattered and he blushed. They are so polite, he thought. It made him squirm with delight. He’d crawl to the other side of the painting and meet the people he’d been sitting on, or else turn the page. Each day he moved through the book as if walking in the park, where it was always Sunday afternoon.

He met lots of nice people there: the prim and proper Johnsons, the demonstrative Marriotts (a family of actors), the stately Roosevelts, the scientific and curious Spencers, and more. They all had awful weekday jobs and had to do things they despised and had to tolerate mean people who disliked them for no reason, and all week they longed to get to the park and indulge in some imaginative play.

“The weather is always fantastic here,” Lonnie Spencer said, her good eye pressed to a telescope. She was watching the ducks on Mars. “The water is always warm and cool enough for a dip,” Timmy Marriott said and dove in, clapping his legs together in the air. “And the food is nonpareil,” Mr. Johnson added and dabbed a napkin to his lips. He sat before an undulating spread of cakes, meats, and fondues.

Nick became so immersed in the paintings he didn’t hear his father come home. Today, John was in a sour mood. Around noon he’d been carrying a full crate of quart bottles to the back door of Haines Diner when a drunken vagrant
came up behind him and for no apparent reason screamed. John flinched so hard he dropped the crate and fell forward, stumbling over the broken bottles, the milk splattering all over his legs. When he turned around to see who had done such a cruel thing he saw the vagrant laughing at him, laughing so hard he rested his hands on his knees and cried. He was a big man, tattered and feral. Then the vagrant just turned on his heel and moseyed away, singing a Christmas carol.

John always came home before Nick did. There was an hour or two when he could hold his wife and kiss her neck and have a drink with her and maybe climb into bed. But, seeing Nick already home, and sitting upon Seurat, dressed like a dandy and in his racing cap, he felt a boil of frustration. He took off his dairy cap and hung his head as he strolled into the kitchen.

“Margaret, what’s he doing home?”... “A hard day, all right, but he’ll never be a serious student, or stand up for himself if we let him” ... “I’m not being mean. I just, well, for goodness sakes, he’s communing with characters in an impressionistic painting.”

“Oh, he’s enjoying himself, John.” ... “No, you’re too hard on him. Let him be.” ... “I know you mean well, but you expect too much. You want him to be different than he is. Come to think of it, you want everyone to be a little different than they are.”

“And I suppose you had a hard day baking?” he said.
Margaret winced, and to that he frowned, and sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said. He placed his gangly exhausted hand on her shoulder and said, “Well you know what? The weather’s been good for walking. Have you been out?”

“I walked to the library.”

“Well, we should take a walk after dinner anyhow,” he said. “The three of us, to Haskell’s for ice cream.” He raised his eyebrows. He asked what she had on for dinner, and smiled the tiniest noticeable effortful amount that it was pea and ham soup. He did not always enjoy her cooking and she knew it. He went to his bedroom to change out his milkman’s outfit, put on his gardener’s overalls, and go to the small backyard where years ago, before Nick was born, he and Margaret had pulled up all the crab grass, laid down stone, added very expensive soil around the hard edges, and planted orchids in the flowerbeds, each one in a plot of its own. They grew well in the northern Florida climate he found. He hardly had to water them at all, just once a day after work. It was all he had time for and he was amazed that they grew. “An act of God,” he called it. “God oversees my orchids in the morning while I deliver his milk and consider his mystery.”

He had a favorite, a white one with arabesque petals that curled up the stem like the sails of concatenated boats tacking up a whorl of air. If he had one wish it was to nuzzle into the cradle of one of these petals and be carried out when he died. He doted on it. The white orchid received more of his attention than all the others combined. He watered it with an eyedropper, fertilized it with special dirt from out of the country, and delicately pinched its blooms off so it would
never stop flowering. It made him sad to think of the effort of this one orchid’s continual blooming, an effort that came to nothing greater than a constant threshold. But he felt that if he let the blooms end, it would be the end of him too.

What a long day he’d had! Six hours of deliveries, four at his desk at the church, writing sermons and paying bills. The management of the church’s finances fell to him. It comforted him to be outside with his orchids. He felt he shared with them a Sisyphean tragedy. He was a good man day in and day out. He kept himself fit, buoyed his spirit with music and honesty, focused on the good, trying to right the wrongs in his heart and mind, and he was disciplined in rising before dawn to work on a sermon that could raise the sun, and then he delivered his milk to the doorsteps of the many families who used it for their breakfasts. He liked to get there in the instant before they would expect him. He was a good man.

“But a day will come,” he said to the orchid “when I will be too ill to take care of you, because no one else knows how to take care of you, and then you will bloom one last time and so will I, and together we will die.”

He thought so every afternoon, and the thought so overwhelmed him with sadness that he had to remove his glasses and dab at his eyes. “Until the light blinds me.” But when Margaret or anyone at his congregation asked about his orchids, sensing from his devotion to them that the orchids were metaphors for his soul, he would only mention that the orchids were fairing well despite the drop in humidity or January’s threatening dips in temperature, and so when asked he was
only comfortable to describe them scientifically, except to add that some invisible hand is the real caretaker of his flowers.

Kneeling on the ground now, he swabbed his glasses with the corner of his shirt and looked up. He could see inside both the kitchen and living room windows. There was his wife warming the soup on the stove. Her hair was graying and she had it cut in a bob. She'd always been plump and now she was getting almost fat, and he worried about it. Age, he knew. But he disliked fat for he thought it was a lazy thing. He'd hoped being married to him would thin her out. Muscle and bone were not lazy. He knew that everything in the world is all right just as it is and yet, as it refracted through his eyes it warped. He must be the culprit.

He had a very bony frame and liked to feel his bones, liked to touch them once in a while all day, his wrist, his knees, his ribs, his cheekbones to remind him of the hardness of his will. Perhaps he valued thinness too much. Certainly. But he could not feel Margaret's bones under her skin and he wanted too. He wanted to feel how hard they were. He would love her more if she were thin. Damn, he thought, it's true. And he did not like how she got tired after dinner and had trouble rising on time. She needed to be told things twice. What was wrong with her happiness? Was it him? Did she even think about him during these long weekdays? He thought about her all day. I know everything about her, he said to himself, as if to protest her ignorance of him. But just then she sneezed and he
heard it and looked up. She put her hand to her mouth too late. She had sneezed in
the soup.

Oh Christ, he felt, and with an eruptive spin of joy stood up and said,
“Bless you, Margaret!” She looked up, startled, and blushed. She put her hand to
her mouth and smiled and he thought she was far prettier than his flowers. He
blinked and dabbed at his forehead with his shirt. He knelt again and went on.

I know what time of day she does each thing that she does, he reassured
himself. And what she complains about, and whom she remembers fondly and
whom she dislikes, and what she thinks is kind and right and lasting. There is a
beauty in that, he decided, and pressed the fingers of his right hand to his sternum.
He pulled the eyedropper from his shirt pocket and dipped it into the jar of water
he’d carried out. One hundred and fifteen drops per day at this temperature, he
knew. It was a warm January after all. He had a harder time describing his plants
to people when the plants were doing well. He looked forward to cold weather to
see if he could keep them alive. Then he had much to tell. They are so thin and
delicate. Neither fat nor bones nor muscles hold a flower up. It is the pressure of
its insides that keeps it standing. That, and some invisible hand.

He counted the drops. One, two, three, and at one hundred and fifteen he
stopped and squirted the rest of the water back into the jar. He moved to the next
orchid, a greenish one, with petals like paws, alternating up the stalk like the
creep of a cat. He knelt beside it. His knees hurt him. His back hurt. His fingers
hurt in the joints. He could hardly see out of his glasses anymore. With the last prescription he’d decided no more deterioration. He cleaned them now.

“Till the light blinds me.”

He put them on and looked back for his wife in the window, but she had disappeared. It struck a chord of fear in him. And now, I miss her, he thought. A tender moment of connection is followed by the light pain of a momentary abandonment. We endure, each day, the miniature arcs of great pain and joy.

Steam rose up from the stove now. But he could not see the stove or the pot, just the billow of steam. He looked to the left, to the living room window, to the face of his son bent over the great book of Seurat. He could only see his son’s head and shoulders. Nick had such big eyes. His thick glasses made his eyes look bigger than walnuts. They swelled out wider than his face and looked to be floating ahead of him. Behind glasses the boy always appeared to be in dismay. But John noticed that at the moment his son’s eyeglasses were off and that, through the window, Nick looked normal, handsome even. But what was he doing?

Nick was talking like an auctioneer when he suddenly flung his arms up to catch something imaginary. A ball? He was playing catch with a painting? Yes, and then he threw the ball back, and with good control. It appeared he’d thrown it very well. Nick waited for the return. The ball came out of the book and Nick reached up to catch it, except this one was not well thrown. Nick had to lean back to get it. Far back. He was losing his balance.
John rose to his knees and clenched his fists. “Catch it, Nick!”

The catch was made! John whooped, and Nick, holding the imaginary ball in his hands, looked perplexedly out the window. He couldn’t see anything farther away than the paintings. The world was more of a pointillist blur than the painting. Nick couldn’t bring what was moving in the garden into focus and it did not occur to him that his father was home yet. He turned back to the book and threw the ball back to Mr. Roosevelt, who was growing tired of the game.

Out in the garden, John squatted with terrific excitement. He was sweating unusually much today! He dried his face on the edge of his shirt then took his glasses off and looked around. Without glasses he could not see what was what either. He put them back on. “Until the light blinds me.” He dipped the dropper into the jar again. Ninety-five drops for the green creeper.

He’d never seen his son so happy. It is a shame, John thought. Talking with a book is how he spends his most precious time. He should be playing catch with me or with a friend. John carefully counted the drops for the green orchid and squirted the rest of the water back into the jar. He repeated this process four more times, drizzled soil around three of the plants, pruned one, and saw that his wife was spooning the soup into bowls, that Nick was shaking hands with the people in the book, so John stood up, gathered his equipment, and went inside for dinner.

John’s blue overalls were stained black at the knees and his undershirt had sweat splotches on the neck and underarms, but he still smelled like the morning’s
cologne. No matter how much he sweated he was, at core, sweet. He went into the living room and tapped Nick on the back.

"Excuse me, sport. Is your ball game over?"

Nick looked up and clenched his eyes. "G-get out of the p-p-park, mister. No b-bums allowed."

John reared back and put a finger to his lips. Nick’s head trembled. He seemed to go through a transition something like waking up. He looked from the book to his father and said, “Oh! You’ve ruined it!” He flung his arms out like a flightless bird.

John’s eyes widened and his jaw hung loose. Was Nick pretending? “Put your glasses on,” he said. “It’s me, your father. I just want to tell you dinner is on.”

But Nick was crying now. He’d cry at the smallest interruptions. It was hard to tell what would set him off. John hated to admit it, but he understood the rawness of his son’s emotions. He’d felt like crying that same afternoon, standing alone over spilled milk, humiliated by the taunts of a bullying vagrant. The world could sure make you feel small. Was that why he tried his damndest to believe in God?

John appreciated the atavism of God’s creatures. He saw that Nick was deeply committed to an inner vision. A vision of the world kept alive in the mind that simulated the joy he desired but was not readily found in the world. But this way of living is an escape, John repeated to himself, and though he relied on his
own flights of fancy, imagining himself a swing dancer and trumpeter, the white Dizzy Gillespie, he nevertheless thrust his own strict desire for extroversion and strength onto his son, his feeble son, who was just like him.

Fast as a punch, John grabbed Nick’s arm and tugged him out of the book. He lifted Nick into his arms and crossed the hardwood floor to the kitchen. He felt that he was rescuing his son. Nick cried against this abduction. He banged both of his fists as hard as could against his father’s determined spine. He kicked his hard-soled feet against his father’s flexed belly. “No, no!” he cried.

When, a step before the archway that led into the kitchen, John stopped and turned his face to his son. There was a pause of great tension and silence; compacted between their eyes, just an inch apart, was the timeless and heated conflict of fathers and sons.

“Grow up,” John said.

Nick stopped moving and closed his lips. His father’s face was bloodless. Margaret stood at the table, biting her bottom lip. No one breathed. Then, Margaret broke the standoff by bowing her head. “Men, come eat,” she said. John set Nick down and they all sat at the table. After a burble and a huff, Nick said, “I’ll r-r-renounce the prayer now.”

“Recite the prayer,” his father corrected. “Stand up, take off my hat, and try not to stutter, or we’ll have to start over.”

Nick did all right. He stuttered twice, thrice, four times, but John let it slide all the way to A-a-a-men. “Bless you, Nick,” he said. “I’m sorry we don’t
see eye to eye.” Silently, they ate soup. It was beef and noodles and carrots and potatoes, and with beer bread to soak it up it was not bad, and John smiled at his wife with a mouthful. He reached under the table and squeezed her thigh. He leaned to her and whispered, “I heard San Antonio Rose on the radio and nearly danced the truck into a ditch.” It was the song they had played over and over in a Miami hotel room during their honeymoon. “Let’s go dancing on Saturday.”

Margaret blushed, licked her spoon clean, and used it to push her husband back. “Your father wants to take me dancing, Nick. Would you like to come?”

Nick peeked up from his bowl. “Yes.”

“We’ll go to Petersburg on Saturday afternoon then,” she said.

John rolled his eyes, but after dinner he leaned back in his chair and said, “Well, I know we’re planning a trip for this weekend, and I was going to change my clothes right now and go to the rectory and compose my thoughts on the resurrection, but I think I’d rather go get ice cream. What do you say?”

“You two go,” Margaret said. “I feel hot and cold.”

“Oh?” John sat forward and canvassed her forehead with his hand. “You do feel hot. She must have a fever, Nick.” He whispered to her, “A fever for Saturday night.”

“Oh!” she said. “Boys, I’m more interested in reading a book than getting ice cream, which will only augment my figure.”

“What’s the book, mom?” Nick said.
“It’s called *Heart of Darkness*, honey,” she said, looking at John with an implication.

“Joseph Conrad,” John said, “is not my favorite. He likes to take you up a bad river and just leave you there. It’s not right. But we’ll do the dishes and slip out while you read.”

They all stood and stacked the dirty plates. Margaret went back to her bedroom. John ran a tub of soapy water and Nick stood by the sink with a towel and dried the things his father washed. Then he dragged a chair back and forth before the countertop, putting all the dishes away. They worked quietly for a while until Nick said “I have a b-bald spot, Dad, just like you. My hair b-burned away today by m-means of hot wax.” He leaned down from the chair, ducked his head and pointed right to it. “S-see it? I g-got in a s-scuffle.”

When they were done, John dried his hands, took his wallet from the bowl on the sideboard and said, “Let’s push off to Haskell’s.”

They went out the front door and down the concrete steps into the warm January evening. The sun had and now the moon was nearly full—it hardly set at all during the winter—so the stars were dim, and the wind pulled at their faces in gusts.

“Darn breezy out,” John said. “Smell the guff?” He liked to say it with the local accent. They moved side by side along the road, which had no shoulder but had no traffic either, as it ran near the ocean, which they could hear, a murmuring snore. The air felt wet and smelled salty. Crab grass grew alongside the road and
seagulls wallowed out near the rocky beach. It was a mile to the shack that sold ice cream.

“It sure feels like Sunday,” his father said. “I usually feel this way on Sunday afternoon.”

“F-feel what?”

“Feel good,” his father said. “Sunday is the day for it, but the ice cream shop is closed on Sundays. That is a paradox, I always thought.”

“A p-what?”

“A pair of docks: something you think should be one way but is another.”

“Like n-now,” Nick said. “W-we never get ice cream and tonight w-we are.”

“Not quite,” his father said. “What you mean is a dream come true.”

“Yup,” Nick said. “Though I never d-dream about ice cream.”

“A sweet dream it would be. Me, I wake up thinking about work. In the summer, every other morning I deliver ten or twelve crates of milk to Haskell’s shack. It’s homemade ice cream. I have a key to the shop, Nick. Did you know that? I go early and unlock the shack and put the milk in the big refrigerator. It’s a walk-in refrigerator. You could fit a cow in there and milk it fresh, if you wanted. You know, at five or six in the morning, when I’m alone in the shop, I’ve often thought how good it would be to scoop myself a cone.”

Nick smiled but then bunched up his face. “Isn’t that s-stealing?”
“Yes. It’s wrong to steal.” They walked a bit and then his father smiled and said, “Though I did steal ice cream once.”

“No really?” Nick felt his heart flip.

“Yes. I scooped a very good cone for myself, Nick. It was in the early morning, the July before you were born and before I was a minister, thank God. The sun was rising and I felt at that hour that everyone owns everything together. We all are God and yet we are made separately and somehow this allowed me the freedom to take a sugar cone and start with a scoop of peppermint, a scoop of chocolate, a scoop of coconut, and on top, a perfectly rounded scoop of vanilla. That cone was as tall as you. I walked outside with it very carefully, out to the beach, and do you know what? I couldn’t eat it. It began to melt. It was so beautiful. But I couldn’t eat it. I wasn’t hungry for it, though I liked holding it. Still, I felt responsible for that cone, you know? I licked what melted. It was all I could do. I wasn’t hungry for it, I think, because I felt guilty. The cone got soggy and I had to throw the whole thing into the tide. What a waste.”

At some point during the story Nick had taken hold of his father’s hand. Now he still had it but there was nothing to say, so they walked quietly and watched the waves come in. After a while Nick asked, “Did M-Mr. Haskell forgive you?”

“I never told him. Anyway, Mr. Haskell’s dead now. His son, Oscar, runs the shack.”
“There it is,” Nick said and pointed to a car with its headlights on, bearing
down on them.

His father picked Nick up by the armpits and stepped aside to let the car
pass.

“What are you glasses?” he said.

“I m-must have forgot them,” Nick said, and tapped his forehead with his
fingers and raised his eyebrows, as if the idea had slipped his mind. “I s-see well
enough.”

“I saw you take them off when you get the book out.”

“I l-l-look better without them.”

“I agree,” his father said. “But you need them to see. When you’re with
the book you just imagine things.”

Nick let go of his father’s hand.

“But you do, Nick, and that is fine enough for a boy. But soon you will
have to give it up and use your eyes to see what the world looks like.”

“I can s-see good enough,” Nick said, and kicked the sand on the road and
grabbed at a clump of grass. “I d-don’t want ice cream anymore.”

“Well I do. I want to get you a four-scoop just like the one I told you
about. And we’ll bring a scoop in a box back for your mother even though she
doesn’t need it.”

“You’re s-s-stubborn,” Nick said. “I k-know what it means, and you’re it.”
"A parent can’t always be a friend," his father said. “But look, we’re going out to buy ice cream. That’s not so stubborn.”

“I don’t want it!” Nick slapped his father’s dangling left hand and stopped walking.

“But here we are,” his father said. “Now come on, Nick. Let’s at least go inside.”

“I don’t see it?” Nick said. “You’re l-lying.”

“Well it’s right here,” his father pointed out. “The sign is right there. Oh, well the light above it has burned out, that’s why. I’ll tell Oscar he needs to fix his light because Nick Monforte can’t see it.”

“There are no l-lights on in the shack, either,” Nick said. “The p-place is closed.” Nick scuffed his shoes on the parking lot and chewed on his lips. He squinted in the dark. He couldn’t see much. “Dad?” he said. “Dad? W-where are you?” Suddenly, the lights from the shack blinded him. He saw nothing at all but a grand blur, a ball of light, as if the sun were shack-sized and stood before him now, a mile from his house.

“Right here, Nick, at the front door!” His father voice beckoned him and Nick followed it into the brightness.

“Can you see, okay?” His father waggled his hands in front of Nick’s purblind eyes. “How many fingers am I holding up?” He held up none.

“Four!” Nick said.
“That’s right! Well, I need to run around outside to the bathroom. Oscar is inside—he has a cold though, so don’t be alarmed if his voice is a little horse, okay? Order me a four-scooper.” John stuffed a wad of money into Nick’s hand and dashed around back.

Nick pushed on the door, a bell jangled. On the door a sign was taped that said, “Closed for the Season.”

“H-hello?” Nick said. His heart whirred with fear. He didn’t hear anything. But he went up to the counter, beneath which the ice cream lay in tubs. The tubs all looked brown. Nick knocked on the glass. “H-hello?”

Suddenly, a tall thin figure appeared behind the counter. “Hello, Nick!”

the man said in a gruff but welcoming voice.


“Is your father here?” the man asked, “Or did you come alone?”

“H-he’s s-seeing a man about a horse.”

“Ah! I hope the horse holds still. Let me wash my hands. I was in the back room making a new kind of ice cream. How’s school going?”

Nick fidgeted with the collar of his shirt and then ran his hand through his hair to try and cover over the red spot, which was very small but so tender it seemed large. He planted his hands against the glass.

“U-um. I g-got into a f-fight today. B-but I lived.”
“I can see that. You may not be the biggest boy but you’re tough aren’t you?” the man said. He’d finished washing his hands and was looking out the window for any passing cars.

“Tough as n-nails.” Nick said. “I-I can run fast too.”

“That’s right. You look fast to me. Your father used to get in fights too, you know. I remember it, and he was pretty fast too. He got picked on.”

“My f-father was b-born in Minnesota.” Nick said. “H-how do you k-know J-john Monforte?”

“Well I’ve been friends with him for a long time. He told me, Nick, how he used to be very shy. He was made fun of for being slow-witted you see, but, he just wanted to get things right and saw things in a way that others didn’t. He didn’t think anyone understood him. And he wore thick glasses, as thick as Wonder Bread. Do you wear glasses, Nick?”

“No.”

“Well that’s fine, as long as you can see what’s coming.”

“I c-can. I have s-surprising eyesight.”

“Yes. I bet you do,” the man said. “Now, what kind of ice cream would you like? I should warn you though. We have all new flavors this month.”

Nick strained to peer into the glass case. He couldn’t tell chocolate from vanilla. “W-what kind is this?” he said and tapped the glass above strawberry.

“Oh, I forget. We made that yesterday. What does it say on the sign there?”
“Um …” Nick began to sweat. “L-lots of s-something. I c-can’t…”

“Oh, sure. Lots of Something. It’s a lot like strawberry. What’s that one next to it? The very plain one. I don’t have my glasses on.”

“Uh. Oh, that k-kind of t-typical one?”

“Kind of Typical, that’s it. Everyone gets that one. I think it’s boring, but lots of people swear by it. I like to be a little different. What’s the one beside Kind of Typical. Is that Everything You Ever Wanted?”

“I think so. W-what’s in it?”

“Well, just what it says, I guess.”

“But, is it c-c-chocolate?”

“Oh, sure. It’s gotta be.”

“Oh. I’ll take a s-scoop of it, then. T-two scoops, please.”

“Coming right up. And I’ll get a four-scooper for your father. I know he likes those. Fours scoops of A Bit of Everything.”

Nick fussed around with the money in his hands. He was sweating through his shirt and felt dizzy. Maybe it is a paradox that an ice cream shop is hot, he thought. He would like to tell that to his father. He walked over to where the glass case ended and there was a flat counter space where he put the dollars down. He turned around and looked outside. His father sure was taking a long time. Maybe dinner had turned on him. Nick squinted and saw some lights advance, probably a car. It slowed, crept closer, and then sped away.

“Phew! Nature sure has a hold on your father,” the man said.
Nick giggled. “S-sometimes he has to t-take the B-bible with him.”

The man laughed, heartily. He laughed so hard that he had to bend onto the counter. Nick tensed up at the familiar sound of the baritone. Was the man laughing his father? Now that it occurred to him he saw it was so. The height of the figure, the rangy movement of the man’s arms, the sharpness of the chin and nose.

“Oh, don’t worry about the cost,” the man said. “For twelve years your father’s been charging me below the wholesale price of milk. I don’t know why. You wouldn’t happen to know why, would you?”

Nick shook his head. Should he tell his father that he knew? “I c-couldn’t say, sir.”

“Well you keep the money, Nick. Tell your father I’ll see him on Sunday. Good night now, Nick. Stay alive, son.”

“T-thanks.” Nick took the cones from the man. One was twice as heavy and tall as the other, but to his squinched eyes they looked like the same types of ice cream. He walked out very carefully then turned around and backed out the door. The tall cone wavered, but he balanced it. Walk as if on a wire, he thought. Once he was outside the lights suddenly went off and everything was dark. It scared him and he backed up again toward the door but it was locked now. In the moonlight, if he really tried, he could see a bit of detail on the ice cream. He read, letter by letter, the sign on the door. He knew they had broken in.
Nick walked into the middle of the dirt parking lot. The wind was cool, the ocean slurped on the rocks, and through the gray sky the wavering streaks of moonlight reached down at him. “Dad?”

“Be right there, Nick,” his father yelled from behind the shack.

Nick licked his ice cream. “Now that’s Everything I E-ever Wanted,” he said. Then he licked his father’s and it tasted about the same, but with nuts. “A B-bit of Everything,” he said. “N-not bad either.”

His father ran up from the ocean. “Sorry about that. Looks like Oscar closed up right after you left. My goodness, you bought me a big cone.”

“A Bit of Everything,” Nick said and handed it to him.

“It sure looks like it. Thank you. Any change?”

Nick pawed at his coat for a moment. “N-no. It was all n-new ice cream and very expensive.”

“Oh. Really? Well, I bet.” They both licked their cones and began the long walk back home. “Stay on the road, Nick,” his father said. “Stay on the hard surface and I’ll tell you if a car comes. You’ll probably hear a car before I see it.”

They walked a bit, and his father threw in a swing dance rock step every few paces. “Oh, did you happen to get a scoop for your mother?”


“Well good, because I caught Oscar at the back door and he gave me a scoop of Forgiveness, for free!”

“F-forgiveness. Oh, s-sounds good. Probably v-vanilla.”
In front of Nick was a pile of blown sand that he didn’t see and he tripped over it, and his father grabbed him by the arm and hoisted him up. They went on for a few more steps when Nick said, “Oscar’s a g-good person.”

“He sure is,” his father said. “He likes you too. He told me when I saw him back there. He said you’re smart as hell.”

“Oh?” Nick raised his eyebrows and licked his ice cream so hard it almost fell off the cone. As they walked, with his free hand Nick groped the bills in his pocket.

“I d-didn’t tell him what you d-did,” Nick said.

“It was wrong,” his father said, “but we learn from our mistakes.”

Nick nodded in aggressive agreement.

When they got home they were abuzz with sugar. His father had thrown the last half of his cone into the ocean. At home, Margaret was asleep, and they slipped her ice cream in the freezer. “She’ll have a treat tomorrow,” his father said. And then, as if a curtain had come down on a festive performance, they were deathly tired. They said goodnight and went off to bed.

The next morning the temperature was already high enough to break records. John slipped out of the house at five a.m. as usual and when he came home midway from his delivery at six, and went to Nick’s bedroom to wake him, Nick wasn’t there.

John was feeling magnanimous and was going to offer that Nick skip school and join him for a day. Why, he was proud of his son for stealing the ice
cream money! They would have a father and son day out. He checked in the
bathroom and though the tub was wet, Nick wasn’t in it. He looked all over the
house and then took off his glasses to clean them. “Until the light blinds me,” he
said, and laughed at himself, and then out the kitchen window something caught
his eye. He put his glasses on. It was Margaret, standing on the flagstones in the
backyard with Nick at her side. They were both fully dressed for the day, and she
was pointing from orchid to orchid, smiling and gesturing like a dancer, as Nick
held a water jar and eyedropper and nodded along and questioned her, like any
good student. Then, Nick laughed at something and turned to see his father
peering at them through the kitchen window. He made a big googly-eyed face to
his father as if to say, “I know it’s you!”