

GOTH-BOT FROM OUTER SPACE

by Michael Broh

Forward (by Diane Fitzpatton)

To truly understand the Decade in Chains, one must first explore Newton Foundling. To me, the Decade in Chains and the man who broke them have been, and continue to be, inextricably linked. I have published three histories, an uncountable number of articles, and without question spent a lifetime researching every available piece of evidence that might give some small insight into this inferno that birthed the modern era. I have often been asked why. Why have I dedicated my life to exploring the darkest period in the history of mankind? Why relive the pain of torture and slavery when we have at long last put it behind us? Why ask the world to remember when all we want to do is forget?

At first, the answer seems simple:

Those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.

Know thine enemy and know thyself.

It is only by understanding the darkness that we can understand the light.

Etc., etc., etc....

If I am honest, however, my life's work has been born of a desire not to teach, but to *understand*. Like so many freedom babies, I long to know where I came from. I long to know of the world my parents feared to speak of. I long to know *who I am*.

And I am, alas, easily distracted.

While volume four of my comprehensive history languished on my desk, a first draft not yet half completed, I allowed my research to wander. I put away the focused thoughts of the dedicated researcher, and became, once again, the wide eyed student open to any new idea that might pass her way. I have found that this is a good thing. Wandering in my research has often allowed me to find stories I would never have found otherwise. It has brought new smells and new colors, allowed me to hear voices that gave my own work new timbre. It has served me well, and I have learned not to fear it. So when, from time to

time, I would begin to lose interest in my work, I would follow links and paths to new places without agenda. Wander.

One such wandering led me to a longer than usual period of distraction in which I discovered, in a condemned bookshop, a moth-eaten but still readable account of what seemed to be Newton Foundling's mother. This account was written by the journalist Ethel Ackerman, and concerned the woman many would come to believe gave life to our greatest hero, a man of whom I have said repeatedly that we must understand, if ever we are to understand the generation of the oppressed, the darkness that bore us, the Decade in Chains.

I have, of course, spoken of Newton Foundling at length in both *Man of the Decade*, and *Bridging the Gap*, but a few more words here would not be entirely out of place. He was one of us. He was part human, part machine, part alien. He suffered before the war, and because of the war. He was born with the secret inside of him that would free us all from our alien oppressors, but could never have done so had he not found his own strength within. I have always believed that this strength was born of necessity, of his oppressed youth as an orphan in the rehabilitation center, of his search for a home, of overcoming the hate and prejudice he experienced on the streets of Chicago. But what if that strength, like the secret weapon inside him, was part of his nature? What if it was inherited? What must we learn of his natural parents?

Ethel Ackerman's history has much to teach us, not about Newton, but about the dust from which he was created. That dust had been swirling around a small town in northwestern Illinois for over a century, before a catalyst pulled it together to form something greater. At the time that she gathered her history, she could not possibly have known the value it would some day hold for us, and yet she poked and prodded where she wasn't welcome, begged mothers to talk of their murdered children, and explored an event that could only prove to predict the darkest destiny of mankind. Why did she do it? Why was she, like me, so attracted to telling a history most people would have preferred to forget? Was she trying to show us the cruelty of man, to show us our weakness in the hope that we would learn to overcome it? Was she, like me, longing to better understand who she was?

As a history, I have found it to be a fascinating exploration of the people we were before the Decade in Chains. In that way, it reminds me of *Bridging the Gap*, where I studied the formative years of Newton prior to the invasion. It is a curious look at the last era of free man, and what we did with that freedom. In context, however, it becomes an invaluable look into prehistory, and the events that would not only serve to shape Newton, but by doing so, the world as we know it.

If we are to understand ourselves, we must begin with the Decade in Chains. If we are to understand the Decade in Chains, we must begin with Newton. And if we are to understand Newton, we must begin with Ackerman.

GOTH-BOT FROM OUTER SPACE

The Short Lives and Tragic Deaths
of Stormy Nachreiner and Eric Trotter

by Ethel Ackerman

Introduction (by Ethel Ackerman)

On May 15, 2041, Eric Trotter was shot through the heart and killed. By his side was Stormy Nachreiner. She was not so lucky.

The story of Eric and Stormy is the story of Amboy, a small town in the lonely prairie of western Illinois, told in the voices of its people. Over the course of two years, I visited with the friends, families, and neighbors of these teenagers whose tragic end redefined their town. Some I met in Amboy, others thousands of miles away. Some were kind, anxious to reminisce, nostalgic about a time when hope still held sway in their lives. Others were decidedly hostile, determined to keep their memories private, hidden even from themselves. Always, though, I let my guests tell their stories in their own way, in their own time, on their own terms. Like any good journalist, I prodded, but in the end, I let my subjects take me where they would, so that I might find shape to this story by filling in the crannies left bare in the early attempts to sensationalize this story in the press.

All journalists must choose which story it is they wish to tell. We do so by including some words, and leaving out others. I am no exception. This book is not a complete transcription of my interviews, but rather a selection of stories that attempts to embrace the spirit of each interview. Together they tell a story of love and fear that is as old as any other we know.

This is the story of a town that knew who it was, and where everyone fit in. It is a story of leaders and outcasts, of lovers and haters, of hope and regret. It is a story of who we stand with, and when. It is the story of how a robot fit into that world. But perhaps, most of all, it is a story of a girl who was born different from the rest, destined to live on the outside. A girl who never quite felt at home in her comfortable little town. A girl born to die an outcast. A girl who might as well have come from outer space.

MABEL SPRECHER (Buck's Mom)

Mabel was reluctant to speak with me. She spent much of her time furtively looking over her shoulder as if someone might burst through the door at any moment and punish her for speaking to me. She was a frail woman in a simple cotton dress, brown stringy hair past her shoulders, tied neatly. She kept her hands in her lap throughout our conversation, and at times, wrung them so intensely I feared she would crush them with her own strength. She spoke to me in the living room of her home.

Jeb was furious. You just can't imagine. He was screaming at me. Screaming at Buck. I tell you...

[*She lowered her voice here*]

...he even kicked the dog.

No, Ma'am, you just can't imagine. He was stomping around the house, screaming things like, "Not in *my* house. I won't have one of those *things* in *my* house. In my *father's* house." We were all scared, we certainly were. I tell you, we had never seen him like this. Not sober anyway. And this was full five o'clock in the morning. His *good* hour. No, Ma'am. Never seen him like that. Finally he got this look in his eye, this look like he's had a whad'ya call it, a...like in the bathtub and you...and the...what is it? Oh, I'm terrible. I just can't remember anything. It was a...someone was sitting in a bathtub and figured something out, something they couldn't figure out before and they...what *is* it called? Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm no good at this. You should talk to someone else. I just don't have the right words. Have you talked to Gene? Gene at the hardware store? He could really tell you something. He was right in the middle of it.

Well, I don't know what you call it, but he had this look like he thought of something he never thought of before, and the next thing you know he's heading toward the door and that beautiful baby like he's going to...like he was going to...well I didn't *know* what, and Buck...

[*she laughed here*]

...oh he was such a joker back then. He really was a...*really*...he was good boy. *Is a good boy.* You just can't believe all the...what happened, what he did, he just...

[She fought back tears while she took moment to pull herself together. She was visibly shaken and seemed to fall inside herself. After long moments, she seemed to put the tears behind her, as if she were putting her face back on.]

You just had to know Buck as a boy, that's all. He really was the joy of the house.

Anyway, Buck says, "I got an idea, Pa. Why don't we take it apart? Maybe I could use the parts for my dirt bike and make it drive itself," and Jeb, see Jeb was right in the middle of this thought, this...this whatever you call it when you finally figure out, or more like remember what it is you want to do, and there goes Buck as usual, trying to make a joke and be the center of attention and Jeb just turns on him and says, "I told you to shut your trap," which is the sort of thing Jeb might say after a couple six-packs, but never in the morning, and we all did shut up then. Poor Jeb. He really did mean well. I think he was just trying to protect us the best he could and he just didn't...just couldn't...maybe he just didn't have it in him.

[She got a far away look in her eye and seemed to hold back tears.]

When he was in the hospital, just before he died, he told me...he said...he said to tell Billy that he tried his best, and that...that he guessed his best just wasn't...good enough. Billy wasn't there, of course. With Jeb laid up, and Buck down in Pontiac, *someone* had to take care of the farm. Jeb kept sayin' that Billy's place was on the farm, and that *some fool hospital visit weren't no excuse for sluffin' off work.* It breaks my heart to say it, but I don't really think Jeb ever liked Billy much. Buck was always his boy. Even in the end, even after...even when he was...

[She got up to wipe her face and sniff back tears. When she returned, it was with a forced smile. An unmistakable midwest politeness.]

I'm sorry. We were...I think I was telling you about the day the baby showed up. Oh yes, I remember. Jeb was in a state. He got this look in his eye like, "What the hell was I just thinking about?" and kind of

stumbled in a circle like he was drunk or something. Then he started toward Buck like he might, well...*lay him out* when he remembers the thought, or idea, or...well...anyway he turns back toward the door.

The poor thing was just lying in a basket on the porch, completely helpless. Like I said, I had spent half the morning begging Jeb to let me keep it. See if we could raise it ourselves, like a real girl, and make something of it, but he wasn't havin' none of it. Not after what had happened to his father at the plant. It was like he was at *war* with those things. With anything that might have a brain.

[*She laughs here.*]

Well, anything that wasn't *human* anyway. Sometimes I think it's the ones *without* brains that we have to worry about. Like Gene, for instance. At the hardware store? The one I was telling you about? He says that the biggest problem with the world is that we've stopped using our brains and let the computers do all the work. He says we just need to be self-sufficient again, and things will get back to normal. Sometimes I think that...

[*She trailed off here and looked toward the door. When she turned back, she seemed to again be lost in thought. Smiling, she came back to life.*]

I'm sorry. I really shouldn't...where was I? Oh yes, of course. So he walks toward the door, toward the baby, or the thing, or whatever you wanna call it, with that look in his eye, and Buck and I are both wondering what in the world he's gonna do, and he grabs it out of the basket by one arm and walks off toward the shed. Next thing we knew he'd put up that...that *thing*.

Lord forgive us.

FRED NACHREINER (Stormy's Uncle)

Fred and I spoke over his lunch break at a family restaurant in Aurora. He was dressed for work in a dark sport coat and no tie, tall, skinny, and sharp of feature. He never failed to look me in the eye when we spoke, and had a gravitas about him that kept him remarkably comfortable not only in my presence, but in the world. The restaurant was busy, but not so loud that we couldn't carry on our conversation, the noise of the other patrons perhaps allowing for a greater measure of privacy.

Oh certainly I remember. I'm not likely to forget that in a hurry. But the details. Let me see. Well, I was already working at Easthill Engineering where I am now, though I hadn't been there long. I was still getting settled, here in Aurora that is, and I would drive out to see Mom every couple of weeks. Mom wasn't well, and we could all see the end coming. Dad was gone already, had been gone for, oh about ten years. Ron and Molly were running the farm and taking care of Mom. It was maybe early November. Felt like Thanksgiving, but I know it wasn't, yet. That year, Thanksgiving was like a family reunion, because everyone wanted to come out for one last Thanksgiving with Mom. She liked that, I think, what she was aware of, anyway. I know it wasn't Thanksgiving yet because all anybody talked about at Thanksgiving was the baby, and I remember feeling kind of bad for Mom. What I mean is, the attention was supposed to be on *her* and instead, all anyone could see was the baby. In some ways, I think we all used it as an excuse to avoid focusing on Mom. A way to avoid the discomfort of...well, age and death, I suppose. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing, though. Mom was pretty far gone at that point, and it did give everyone something to talk about.

So, let's see, it was early November, and I was in for a Sunday visit from Aurora. I got in late enough to avoid church, thank you very much, and sat up talking with Mom. Well it was more like just sitting with Mom and talking *to* her, while Molly cooked up Sunday dinner. I'm not sure where Ron was. Probably working on the tractor.

[He laughed here.]

My *brother*. Some guys spend a lifetime working on their hotrods, but Ron? Ron just worked on that tractor. Not the Cat. That thing was, still *is* really, a beautiful modern machine. *This* was the '39 McCormick, and no one doubted he loved her more than Molly. He certainly gave her more attention. That's usually where he was Sundays when the game wasn't on. Sometimes I'd go down and work on her with him, but *that* day I was feeling a little, I guess the word is ennui. Something about sitting with Mom, with the winter coming on, the shorn fields and bare trees everywhere. I guess I just wasn't looking for anything to get excited about.

After dinner, *Sunday* dinner that is, Mom went up for a nap, Ron disappeared again, and I was thinking about driving back to Aurora and watching the game at home, and I just...I don't know. Maybe dinner was laying on me a bit. Molly does cook up a big Sunday dinner, and a long drive on a full stomach can be a little...well let's just call it overwhelming, if you know what I mean. But it was more than that. Something in me just wanted a little air...wanted to...I don't know, get away from the stench of impending death in that house or something. At the same time, I didn't want to just get back in my car and go back to my other life either. I needed...I needed to *breathe* a bit. Be by myself. I put on my coat and went out for what you might call a constitutional. Just a walk through the fields. Have a think about Mom. About Ron and Molly. About how I had always thought *they* would be the ones to have kids and get me off the hook.

[*He laughed again here.*]

Well *that* didn't turn out the way I expected, did it?

[*Fred called for the waitress to refill our coffees, and thanked her by name. Afterward, he smiled again, as if from a pleasant memory.*]

You have to remember, this was before I met Julie. Long before Robby and Beth and Carrie. Back then I was just bachelor Fred, junior engineer. I tell you, nothing changes a man like fatherhood. Not that I was wild in my youth, by any stretch of the imagination. Even as a kid I was marked as the *responsible* one. Still, there's something about watching your kids play that makes you stand up a little straighter, focus your attention a little harder. All kinds of people in this world take on

responsibility, leadership, but as a parent you somehow...I don't know, feel like you've *earned* it, maybe.

[*He laughed heartily again here.*]

Or at least been *saddled* with it.

Ok.

It was cold. I remember that. The winter winds were coming, and I had my gloves on inside my coat pockets. It's funny. In the summer, when it's humid as all get out and your clothes cling to your body with sweat, and all you want is a cool breeze, everything around you, the corn, the trees, the shrubs, everything conspires to keep the wind from touching you. It's like in the midst of that summer sauna, the world is designed to keep you from getting even the slightest breeze. Then the winter comes and you really *do* need some protection, and everything is gone. Suddenly, all that stuff that shielded you from the wind is gone, and you're left totally exposed. That's the kind of day it was. Wind blowing across the empty fields, gray sky, no more than a handful of brown leaves on the trees. It was desolate, but it fit my mood. It was a day to contemplate death.

I was in my head and found myself going farther than I expected. Not that it mattered. I had nowhere to go, and if I was going to stay and watch the game with Ron, I still had a couple hours to kill. So I just kept going. Next thing I knew I was down by Jeb Sprecher's place off Plainview Road. Now Jeb...well Jeb and I go way back. There's a long history there I won't get into, but suffice to say I had no interest in visiting with my crotchety old classmate. Nevertheless, there I was, so I thought I would just skirt the field, make the big loop out to Pauls Road and work my way back to the house down Highvale.

I guess *that* was the moment, if you're looking for one. I was walking along the edge of this empty field. Well, not *quite* empty. The hay bales were sort of spotted across the field, like you would expect in November, but there was this scarecrow. And I thought, *scarecrow?* Why the hell does Jeb have a scarecrow?

When I got up next to it, well, I'm sure some people tell it like it was this horrendous thing, and it *was*, of course...but...well, what I mean to say is that the way it *looked*, if, like me, you didn't know what it was, it

really just looked like a baby doll that had been torn apart a bit. At the time, I remember thinking that some poor girl had had her heart broken by her cruel older brother, and was probably up in the house crying her eyes out. My next thought was that the kid had really done a job on it. The arm was pulled clear off and shoved in it's mouth. One of the legs was bent backwards and, well...I suppose I'm not telling you anything you haven't heard already. Her leg had been inserted into her rectum, such as it was. The thing really was a monument to childhood cruelty. I thought about Jeb, what I knew about him, about the way he...well, Jeb and I never really *did* get along, especially after...well, let's just say he had a history of....succumbing to violent tendencies. Then I thought about all the people like him, about cruel children and bullied children and how nobody helps anybody in this world. It had been that sort of week.

[*He shook his head at me.*]

You would think Aurora was the *big city* the way some of these people could just bully their way through like the *world* is their problem and we're all just in their way and...well, I could tell you stories. Anyway, it had been that sort of week, and I finally thought that I just needed to *do* something. Do some *little* thing, and I knew that the least I could do was to take that creepy thing down. It wasn't an *easy* decision. Even *then* I was still a little afraid of Jeb Sprecher. I had this image of him catching me in the act and driving me off with a shotgun. It was like I was fourteen again. Something about how I was feeling must have given me a little more courage than usual, I suppose, because I remember just putting that fear away, determined to perform my *good deed*.

When I finally made my way up to it, though, I saw that it was by far the most complicated doll I'd ever seen. The circuitry was unbelievably dense, and there were parts so outside of my experience it was hard to believe they could be contained within a toy. Suddenly, there I was, *Fred the Engineer* in all his glory. Forget *feelings*. Forget philosophy and emotion. Forget fear and courage. Ennui, death, anger, pity, they all evaporated in the wink of an eye. Put a puzzle in front of me and it becomes the only thing I can see. My mind dives in, often against my better judgement, and can't be drawn out again for love or money. *The engineer's curse*. I don't even remember walking back to the house. I just

remember staring at this thing and trying to figure out what it was. Trying to map it with my mind.

I didn't show it...*her*...to anybody. I just put her in my car, said my goodbyes, and took her back to Aurora. I spent the next three weeks trying to figure out how to put her back together again and by the time Thanksgiving finally did come around, well, Molly's dream had finally come true.

CAROL HUTTER (Stormy's Aunt)

Carol came across as two people. On the one hand, she fit well with this world of farm and factory. She had a lazy natural about her that made you feel immediately at home, as if there were no place but here, and here was the most natural place in the world. On the other, she had a soft sophistication that kept her apart, floating above her neighbors, where she could see all from a perspective the rest had never imagined. She had a light demeanor and was prone to laugh at herself. We spoke in her kitchen over coffee. Like the rest of the house, it was cluttered but clean. A living testimony to the entropy that pervades a house of teenagers. She apologized several times for the mess, and picked up occasionally as we spoke.

My sister? Oh, poor Molly. All she ever wanted was a baby. When I think back to how she used help Mother with little Caleb. Not so little anymore, Caleb isn't, but when we were kids, he was like her little baby. She would feed him and push him around in the stroller and sing him to sleep at night. It was like Mother couldn't even get near him. Not really, but *you* know what I mean. She just...just had that motherly thing going on. Something I decidedly did *not*. I mean, not that I didn't figure it out. Jesus, *look* at this place. Who'd've believed Carol Dresser would grow up to have *five* children. And *Hutter* kids, too. If you'd've asked me back in high school, I would've told you something different, *nooo* doubt. I was going to Chicago. Maybe New York. Get out of this pathetic little town. But then came sweet little George Hutter and I...

[She got a little withdrawn here. Dreamy. She washed a few dishes in the sink.]

...but Molly. Molly was the one supposed to have the big family. Molly was the one supposed to be a teacher, or run a daycare, or do *something* with kids.

As a kid, I could never understand why she got so much work as a sitter. People would even drive in from Dixon to get her, and there were plenty of high school girls in Dixon happy to give up a Saturday night for a little spending money. Now that I am...*all grow'd up*, I completely

understand it. She *liked* babysitting. *Liked* the kids. She would bring games, tell them stories, keep them interested in...well in whatever they were doing. The rest of us, we would just turn on the tv, or talk on the phone, and try to keep the kids out of our way. We used to say we put the *sit* in babysitting.

[*She laughed here.*]

Well, it seemed funnier back then. But Molly, see, she was *born* to take care of kids. So how cruel is it that she couldn't have any of her own? Here I was, the girl who wanted nothing to do with raising a family, *ever*, the girl that was going to go off and have adventures and leave this pissant town behind forever, and poor Molly who was born to raise a beautiful family that would be the pride of the town. What kind of god gives a brood of five to a woman like me, and makes my sister Molly barren?

[*She became introspective for a moment and wandered back to the sink.*]

A cruel one.

Maybe you shouldn't write that last part...oh I...I guess it doesn't matter. I just don't want...oh what the hell do I care? I go to church every Sunday. I do *now*, anyway. That's more than a lot of folks around here can say. But I do have to say, and I promise I'll get back to Molly, but I just want you to know that...I mean I *love* motherhood. I really do. It's just that when I was a kid, I never saw myself as the type. The type to settle down, I mean. Once I had Becky, everything changed for me. Maybe I just gave in to whatever that overwhelming force is that keeps us breeding. I don't regret it. Them. Any of them. I would do anything for my children. It's just...I don't want you think I'm some sort of monster who...y'know, hates her kids or resents her life or something. For me, it was more like one of those adventure romances, where in the end I realized that everything I ever wanted was *right in my own backyard*, only I never travelled the world and risked life and limb to find out. Like someone decided I didn't need to have the actual adventure to learn my lesson.

[*She became thoughtful again, poured herself a fresh cup of coffee and freshened up my own.*]

Who knows? Maybe someday, George and I will...but...

[*She shook her head a bit, like she was trying to clear her head of a thought invading it against her will.*]

...so Molly.

I think back then, just before Stormy I mean, she was not really reconciled to her fate. She had been told in no uncertain terms that she was, as her fancy Chicago doctor called it, *infecund*, but I don't think she really believed it. We didn't talk about sex all that much, but I'm pretty sure she was still trying with Ron long after they should have known there was no hope. Not that I'm sure Ron minded, and at least it kept him home at nights.

[*She laughed here.*]

Ron was a fine stud back in the day, and Molly was...well you could see the attraction between them, sure. It's funny. I was so happy for them and so sad for them at the same time. Here they were, young and still in love, probably trying every night, and having a good time at it too, I'm sure, and at the same time, there was no hope. No hope for the only thing Molly ever really wanted.

She worked part-time for a while at a day-care in Rochelle, but it was a long drive and I think it made her a little depressed. She loved the kids, of course, but I think something about seeing them go home with their parents at the end of the day just made her sadder. She used to say that if *she* ever had kids, she could never pay someone else to take care of them just so she could go work all day at some other job. I would just nod or...I don't know...not say much, I guess. I mean, it wasn't like she was ever going to have kids of her own, and for me...well, sometimes I wished someone else would take care of *my* kids so I could, y'know, spend some time with grown-ups once in a while. Not that I didn't understand what she...but...so you see that's just who Molly was.

I asked her about adopting, once. If that was, you see, anything she and Ron had discussed, but she just shook her head and changed the subject. It was as if even *thinking* about adopting would somehow show that she lacked faith, and she wasn't ready for that, yet. It probably would've happened eventually. I'm sure at *some* point she would have come to really accept her fate. Adopting would have worked out for her,

if only she could have resigned herself to her fate. If only she had been *forced* to. She was spared that, of course. Spared by Stormy.

[*She laughed here.*]

Or by Fred, depending on how you look at it.

They say crazy Jeb Sprecher tried to crucify the baby, and Fred, that's Molly's brother-in-law, you see, pulled her down and saved her life. Of course, you hear all kinds of things. I don't even know if *Molly* knows what really happened. That Thanksgiving everyone wanted to know where it had come from, and Fred wasn't talking. Maybe he was still afraid of Jeb. God knows those two had a violent history, and Fred had always gotten the worst of it. All Fred would say was that someone had to take care of this foundling because he was just too busy - he was still single then - and wouldn't know how to take of her even if he had the time. He said it was high time Mother Nachreiner had a granddaughter and couldn't Ron and Molly do the right thing, and take care of this helpless child?

I'm sure you've heard all this already. I mean, none of this was secret. George and I were there, with little Becky and Chris. I was pregnant with Matt, so he doesn't really count. Ron's sister Liz was in from Chicago with her boyfriend, I think his name was Adam, maybe? Ron's uncle was there, and one of Ron's cousins with *his* whole family. I mean it was this huge affair. Everyone came in to sort of say goodbye to Mother Nachreiner, and it was turning into a sort of family reunion.

There we all were, crowding around the house, in and out of the kitchen getting the dinner ready, and Fred came in with this baby. Everyone kind of quieted down because, well, we all knew Fred was single so what the hell was he doing with this baby, you see, and he just smiled and went up to his mother and put the little girl in her lap. Then he walked over to Molly, who had just come in from the kitchen, and he took her hand and he said, "Molly? I have a child here that needs your help. Would you mind taking care of her for a little while?" Or something like that. He may have actually...I think he...well, everyone sort of assumed this was Fred's *bastard*. I mean, not that Fred was the type to party or sleep around, but he *was* off in Aurora, living the life, you see?

[*She laughed here.*]

Who knew what sort of *shenanigans* he was getting up to out there? Not that it mattered all that much, but certainly no one thought Fred had *stolen a child* or anything, and no one had the nerve to call him out in front of all those people, and let's face it, everyone in the room was thinking the same thing. Poor Molly. *Poor barren Molly finally has a child.* And Mother Nachreiner, who had hardly said a word all day, held the baby close and smiled, and suddenly everyone was feeling relieved that Thanksgiving dinner was going to be about life instead of death. Then it was all handshakes and hugs, and Molly....I'd...I'd never seen Molly happier in my whole life.

MOLLY NACHREINER (Stormy's Mom)

I spoke with Molly in a sort of open plan dining room separated from her kitchen only by a bar. The house was clean, meticulous in comparison to her sister's, but still felt very much like a lived in home. The baseboards had been removed from the room we were in, absent of the dust one sees in construction, as if the house were under some long term renovation that spread out over a decade. The face of the bar showed evidence of fresh plaster, not yet painted out, though I had no doubt it would be soon. She wore a dark cotton dress with floral patterns, covered by a blue wool sweater. Her hair was short, dark, and wavy. Like her house, it was clean and neatly trimmed.

Molly was dreamy in her reminiscence, and often stared right through me. Throughout our conversation, she avoided my eyes, as if she was talking to another person just behind me.

After Mother went to bed, everything sort of wound down. Liz and that boy said it was a long drive back, and they had to get going, although I must have invited them to stay the night a dozen times. Uncle Robert went back with Carl and his family to watch the game at their house. Carol wanted to stay and talk, but her kids were getting tired and George sort of tugged her out of here. Fred and Ron settled in to watch the game, and I was...well everything was cleaned up and I put Stormy to bed...*Stormy*...she didn't even have a name yet. I sat on the floor next to her, just watching her breathe. Just watching this child who had come from heaven. Or...I don't know. I was afraid to ask. Afraid Fred might tell me something I couldn't abide. She was so beautiful, and I didn't want anything to spoil my joy.

I almost...twenty times I must have walked toward the door. I had put her down on a blanket in my sewing room, what *used* to be my sewing room, and I kept standing up to leave and sitting back down on the floor. Twenty times I stood up and turned toward the door and then sat back down. I was...I was going to go down to the living room and make Fred tell me the truth. Twenty times I must have...but I couldn't. What if...what if he said something that...

[Molly got a little overwhelmed here, and took a minute to put herself back together.]

Of course I did, eventually. I did go down. Because I knew...I just *knew* that I couldn't live with not knowing, that I couldn't be a...what kind of a mother would I be if I didn't even ask? Shouldn't I *want* to know? That's what I told myself, anyway. That I was supposed to want to know. That if I didn't ask, I would be cursed. *She* would be cursed. And yet...at the same time I felt that asking would somehow compromise my faith. That if I didn't show faith, I would lose her. I was afraid to ask, and I was afraid *not* to ask. And I was...I was so afraid of losing her...of hearing something terrible...something I couldn't...but...you see I also...also I knew that no matter what Fred said, I would never let *anyone* hurt this child...that I would protect her for the rest of my life...that no matter what I would...and then they...how could they? What did she ever do to them? Why is the world so cruel...

[She put her face in her hands and cried. After a time, she tried to pull herself together.]

Why don't I make some coffee?

[Molly left me at the table for a while as she prepared a coffee pot in the kitchen. As I sat waiting for her in the open half of her dining room, I became aware of an unusual lack of photographs. Where I would have expected family portraits and framed candids were only flowers or decorative plates. I was deep in thought when she returned with two cups of coffee in matching mugs.]

I'm sorry. This is harder than I thought. But it's important. I'd like to...I think...I think I need to talk about this...

[She took a deep breath.]

...where were we? Oh yes. Mother had gone to bed. Ron and Fred had just opened a couple of beers and, well the game must have been over because I don't think they would have paid me any mind otherwise. I know the tv was still on, though, because when Fred saw me come down, he turned it off and the silence was...well you know. The tv can be so *loud* and when it finally disappears, it's like the silence is its own beast, isn't it? It sort of takes over the room. It was calling to us, to Fred, really. It was saying, "Fill this void. I dare you. I challenge you."

I was so scared. From the moment I held that baby in my arms, I knew I could never let her go, and yet there was this *pall* over the room, behind which was...well I...I was afraid to look under it...and yet...and yet I knew I had no choice. Ron knew it too. Ron knew the gift was too much. That there was some secret behind it, behind *her* that we would have to come to terms with before we could promise her our lives. *I had already* promised. I had promised her my life upstairs at her side. But that was between she and I. Had Fred refused to speak, had he stubbornly held his tongue forever, it would have been enough that the child needed me. I wanted to know, *needed* to know, but if it had come down to it, I could have lived with not knowing. Ron, though, Ron the big brother was not about to let Fred off the hook. He was not about to bring a child into his family on faith alone. He trusted Fred. It wasn't that. It was that for Ron, trust goes hand in hand with honesty. He need Fred to say the words.

He might have said something like, "Ok, Fred, let's have it." He probably did. He always talked to Fred that way, like Ron was the adult and Fred just some little kid who knew nothing. And Fred always took the bait. It must have been something like that. The way I remember it though, I couldn't hear anything but silence. Just...silence. A silence waiting for Fred to destroy it.

Fred never looked at me. I think he would have liked to. Would have liked to avoid Ron's challenging eyes and look into my accepting ones, but he knew he couldn't. Ron had this power over him like that, and Fred had learned long ago to step up to Ron's challenges. I don't remember what Ron said, but *Fred*...I remember every word. Every word he said while all I could see was the side of his face.

"It's Jeb Sprecher's, Ron. That son-of-a-bitch had ...listen to me, Ronny. I never cared much for finding the meaning of life. It never seemed very important to me. You know me well enough to know that. Give me science. Give me facts. Leave philosophy to the dreamers. They made me take this philosophy class at Northern and I couldn't understand any of it. You know me, Ronny. I like *maps*. I like to know where I am and how to get where I'm going. I've never really cared for *why*. I don't care why anything works, just *how* it works. Not *why* it is, but *what*

it is. In that class, though, they were always trying to get me to ask *why*. It was the only class I ever failed."

Ron was looking at him like he was crazy or something, but he just let him keep talking.

"That child upstairs...that *gift*...I can't tell you *why* it is. But I *can* tell you *what* it is. Or at least what it *isn't*. It isn't...it isn't human, Ronny. It is a mechanical construct. At first I thought it was just a toy but...it's more than that. Mom proved that tonight, and so did Molly and Liz. That's why I brought it here. I had to find out. I'm sorry to have put you through that, but I couldn't think of any other way. I've rarely seen a robot so convincingly human. I had to know if it could pass. Don't worry. I'll shut it down and take it home in the morning."

Word for word, as the good Lord is my witness. *Human*. He actually said he wanted to see if *it* could pass as *human*. They say I went ballistic. That I started breaking things and throwing pillows and hitting the two of them with my fists. Ron said I was a madwoman, screaming about my baby and my...my womb.

[*She put her head in her hands, and attempted to speak through impending tears.*]

He said I cursed my sister and my mother. That I told Fred I would drive a steak knife through his heart if he ever so much as laid a finger on my baby.

[*She took a moment to catch her breath and found herself laughing lightly at herself.*]

Honestly, I don't remember a thing. But the next morning, Fred was gone.

[*She looked me in the eye for the first time, and the laughter was so far gone as to have never appeared to begin with.*]

Fred was gone and I had a baby. *We* had a baby. A family. And for sixteen years we had...and they...I hope they all rot in hell.

BILL YACHMAN (resident at St. Victor's Mental Health Facility)

I came across Bill Yachman when looking through the police files on Stormy. There was a note in her file about Mr. Yachman, stating that he might pose a danger to her life. As far as I was able to discern, this note had never been brought to the attention of either Stormy or her parents. Bill Yachman was a resident of St. Victor's Mental Health Facility in Mendota and had often spoken of a girl fitting Stormy's description. Following an escape attempt at which time he was discovered in Amboy, his security was significantly tightened, and local police were warned to keep watch for him.

I have considered at great length whether to include this madman's story. No one knew where Stormy had truly come from, and everyone had a tale to tell about her origin. Myths were pervasive and, I thought, distracting from the more important story. Yachman's imaginings, however, told a tale as alien as Stormy herself felt in that world, and as such, provide a, perhaps, more poetic view of her lost soul.

I met with Bill Yachman in a locked room at St. Victor's while an orderly stood guard. His wild white hair felt almost menacing in the way it never quite fell over his face, as if some force continually pushed it away. His eye contact, too, was unsettling, never once failing to fix my gaze.

This is my home, now. These four walls. This bed. It is enough for a dead man. We are all dead, Ms. Ackerman. Nothing I say or do will change that. Dead life on a dead planet. I may as well die *here* as anywhere else. I have failed my people. I have failed *your* people. The fate of the galaxy fell on my shoulders, and I was too weak to bear the burden. Go home. Comfort your family, your friends. Take what pleasure you can in the little time you have left. It will not be long now. Your destiny is sealed. You are all dead. You just do not know it yet.

[Nearly ten minutes passed before he continued. During that time he continued to hold my eyes in a lock, almost as if he were continuing

to talk to me with his mind, or perhaps attempting to read my own. At last he sighed, and continued out loud.]

When I was a young man, they took my wife. My daughters. They burned our fields, destroyed our village. They left nothing. They never do. Everywhere these monsters go, they leave destruction in their wake. The women they use as birthing machines. The men they have no use for. They do not love, do not hate, do not fear. They simply destroy. They systematically worked their way across my planet, and we were helpless to stop them.

But *I* love. *I* hate. *I* fear.

[Here again he stopped speaking, and appeared to gauge whether I was worthy of his trust.]

I met Dr. Carver on Tenebrous, less than two week's travel from my former home. I was shuttling supplies between the old moon bases, doing my part to keep my people alive, although for *what* none of us dared ask. He was unlike every other man I had met in those days following the pogroms. All any of us cared about was survival. All any of us *thought* of was survival. Food, shelter, safety. Anything else was unaffordable luxury. We were hardly better than animals. For Dr. Carver, though, survival could not have seemed less important. He ate the food I brought, no doubt. Man will eat, as they say. But he never *asked* for any. He only asked for rare minerals or salvaged bot parts. If he had blankets, it was because I thought to bring him some, never because he saw the need himself. Quiet man, Dr. Carver was. He never told me what he was working on, or why he needed the parts, and I never asked. At least not until the end.

The Stones were finally coming, and we knew it. Most everyone on Tenebrous had already jumped to nearby systems, trying to stay one step ahead of them. Refugees going just far enough to escape the tyranny, but no farther, as if there were some mysterious force holding them as close to their homelands as they could and still survive. As if someday, maybe tomorrow, we would all go home, and the closer we were, the sooner would be our return. On Tenebrous, the time had come for exodus. Within days she would, without question, fall to the Stones, and even the most loyal among us knew there was only one choice: leave or die. It

had become every man for himself, and the planet was nearly deserted. I came to Dr. Carver's lab to save him. Take him to the moon base where he could jump to one of the nearby systems. I told him we were out of time and that if he wanted to live, he had best come with me, but I know now he cared nothing for life. He stood up and grabbed me by the shoulders. I may not look it now, but at that time I was a big man, and Dr. Carver was a twig. I could have crushed his wrist in my hand. This wisp of a man, though, turned out to be our savior. Well, almost. If he had not picked the wrong guy, maybe...

He had my shirt clenched in his hands. He looked me dead in the eye and said he could destroy them. That he had the *key*. He said something about using his own blood and failing. He was dying. He said it was too late to save *him*, but not too late to save *her*. I thought there must be a woman there, someone he wanted me to take away, his wife maybe, but I saw evidence of no one. He had this wild look in his eye and kept talking about *her*. About how *she* could save us all. Then he was gone. Vanished through a doorway at the back of his lab. I could hear all this noise from the next room like he was rummaging through boxes, things of different sizes and materials crashing to the floor. I heard the unmistakable sound of paper files spilling across the room, possibly being thrown about as he searched through them. I was about to go in after him when he came running back in with a map. A star chart with areas I had believed to be uncharted. Star systems known only by their effect on the passage of light, but never visited by man. He started pointing to some of these areas now littered with his own markings. He took a pen and circled about ten different supposed planets. Said any one of them would do. That I should take her to one of them and keep her safe. That she only needed to eat some local food and she would be ready.

I asked him, "Ready for what?" but he just grabbed me again and said, "You *must* do this!" He said *she* was the key. That once she integrated with any of those planets, she would have the Stones' doom in her blood. I told him it was madness to use such a map. That even if I could navigate to these planets, there was no way I could survive on them. Maybe it *was* madness. Maybe I *am* mad.

[He stared quietly at me again, as if daring me to decide if he was joking. He did not smile.]

He said all sorts of things I could not come close to understanding, but he finally made himself clear enough even for an uneducated failure like me. Dr. Carver took a piece of paper and wrote down three instructions:

1. Take her to one of the circled planets
2. Feed her indigenous meat
3. Get her to a birthing center

He then left me again for a short time, and brought back an infant.

GENE SLEPPENSON (local businessman)

Gene owned and operated the single hardware store in town. His daughter, Ella, worked the register in the afternoons while Gene would take care of business in a small office in back. His office was the mess I expected, with overstock lining the walls, and boxes and conduit piled on the floor. Gene was bald with a solid middle-age paunch, but had nothing of the mid-life crisis about him. He was cheerful with a propensity to laugh at his own jokes, and a look about him that told you he might cover the truth with a joke, but never with a lie.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't have a soft spot in my heart for Mabel. There was even at time when...well I...huh. Mabel's got a heart that's just too big for this world. The way she...you see, she was almost *destined* for Jeb. Or at least someone *like* him. Someone down on his luck. Someone who needed a helping hand. Needed her *love*. I guess that's it, really. I had it made. Inherited my father's store. Never got in much trouble. What could Mabel do for a boy like me? How could she *save* me? Still, I used to think...back then...maybe she and I could've had...well, it turned out ok for *me*, anyway. And Mabel, well...I supposed she was born to suffer. I suppose she got what she was looking for. After Jeb died, I...well...I suppose there are some things better left unsaid.

[Gene forced a smile and shrugged with his eyes. There was a sadness just behind them, a melancholy perhaps, that suggested a spot of regret.]

Now let's see if I can remember this right. It was November, that I'm sure about. See, it was the tail end of gun season, and Jeb came in like some weekend warrior from Chicago so excited about bringing home a buck he'd forgotten to load his weapons. I gave him a hard time about that, of course. We get a few of those types around here every year. Guys more concerned with how their gear looks than how it *works*. Not that I won't sell 'em what they want. I'm not the fool my old man would like you to think I am. Still, it doesn't stop me from laughing into my sleeve, now does it? Course with Jeb, I knew it must've been something else, but I couldn't help making fun. I started ribbing him about wasting the first

week, and maybe he should just let his little boy bring home the meat this year, that sort of stuff.

[*He pulled off a big bright smile here and burst with a single loud guffaw.*]

I try to keep it light around here, you see, but sometimes it just gets me into trouble. Like this one time back when Rudy was still a cop, and he came in here all panicked and looking for god knows what. As usual, my mouth got ahead of my brain. I started giving him hell about maybe his little girl had a new boyfriend and he was out to teach him a lesson or something. How was I supposed to know how close I was to the truth? I nearly got *shot* that day. I tell you, miss, sometimes I'm my own worst enemy. No wait, that would be my wife.

[*Another guffaw.*]

Anyway, Jeb came in here in no mood, and my jibes weren't going over particularly well. He just gave me this cold stare and said, "Shut the hell up, Sleppe and gimme a box of 270's." I could see he was pissed, and figured he'd had bad week hunting. Gun season was just about over, he'd obviously been through his ammo, and nobody, I mean *nobody* wants to face his friends in this town after the season without a buck. I actually felt kind of bad for him, and suggested he try hunting up by Fenton's Slough. My brother Al used to head up there sometimes. It was hard going, but there wasn't much traffic, if you know what I mean.

[*He guffawed here again, like he was having the time of his life.*]

Well, maybe you don't know what I mean. See, that time of year, the slough is almost impassable, so of course no one in their right mind would bother hoofing it down there besides the deer. If you could, though, you'd have your pick of the pack. Anyway, Jeb sure got my joke, though he wasn't laughing. He says to me, "I got my buck and two does to boot you sonofabitch. What the hell do you think I am? Hell, even *Buck* got a six pointer." Jeez, I can hear him like he's still standing here.

Well, he's gone now.

Anyway, I told him that was great, and that he must be very proud and all that. Then I asked him what he needed ammo for if he'd already used up his permits. He told me some asshole had stolen his trophy. That was *his* word, *trophy*. I didn't quite know what he was talking

about, but I told him if someone had broken into his house, maybe he should just call Jerry and have a proper investigation. *Nothin' doin'*, he said. Like hell if he was going to go running to the cops when someone *shit on his land*, and he was going to *teach that asshole a lesson*.

I'm not ashamed to tell you I was scared. I've seen plenty of fights get violent in this town, but I'd never been the guy who sold the bullets. I mean...well...what I mean to say is...I never sold bullets...I mean...well...actually *knowing* that they were going to be used for...well, you know what I mean. Anyway, there were no 270's up front. I knew I had some in the back, waiting to be restocked, so I played for time. I told Jeb I had to look and see what I had and left him waiting up front. I came back here and called Jerry to warn him about what I thought was happening. By the time I finally made it back up, thinking I would just lie and tell Jeb I'd have to order him a box, Jerry had walked in, full uniform, sidearm and all, and had started chatting with Jeb over in the corner like an old friend. Of course, they had a long history with each other that I wouldn't exactly call *friendship*, but they did sort of *tolerate* each other. I don't know what they said, but soon enough Jeb walked out, and Jerry said to me, "Thanks for calling me, Gene. You're a good man."

[*He threw in another loud laugh.*]

I liked being a called a good man, I surely did. It made me feel big. Honest. I thought maybe I had saved Mabel the trouble of pulling her husband out a jail. Again. Now that I look back on it, I can't say that I'm so sure. Mike and Liz lost a son. Molly and Ronny lost a daughter. This town, *my* town, my *father's* town, will never be the same. And Mabel...that woman's been through hell. If I'd known what was going to happen...how much worse it would...that she would trade her son for...maybe I would have...I don't know. Maybe I should've sold him what he wanted. Let him choose his *own* fate.

FATHER CHARLES CUDAHY (Former Priest at St. Michael's Parish)

Father Charles Cudahy was retired from the Church, and living a quiet life with his daughter in Macomb. He looked tired, even for a man in his nineties, and seemed reconciled with an end he said more than once was knocking on his door. When I arrived at his daughter's house for my appointment, I found him dressed for the occasion in a clean suit, though without either tie or the collar that surely adorned him throughout his adult life. His spectacles were thick, as was his full head of white wavy hair, and it was only when he took the glasses off that I truly felt connected with him. His words came painfully slow, but with a deliberateness that was hard to ignore.

There is a time that all men fear will come. We tell ourselves it cannot come. We tell ourselves it will not come. But make no mistake, we never cease to believe that it *may* come. It is the time when, regardless of our confidence in ourselves, regardless of the ethical life we have built for ourselves, regardless of a lifetime of prayer to and guidance from God, we find ourselves lacking the courage to do what is right, for fear of being wrong. I speak of the time men wait for their entire lives, the time when they will be challenged to stand strong and prove themselves leaders among men. It may be as simple as standing up for a stranger against a bully, or allowing the police to beat you as you stand with the oppressed. In books, in the movies, in the Bible, the choice always seems simple. We grow up thinking that the choice will be clear, and when it comes, we will easily prove our courage. That in doing so, we will take the first step toward building a heaven upon earth. I say we *fear* that time will come because we suspect, however secretly, that we may not hold the courage we pretend to. All men fear of being found out.

Molly Nachreiner was my challenge, and I failed her spectacularly.

[He eyed me carefully, through those thick glasses, as if attempting to decipher whether I was understanding his blusterous and coded speech. His sermon. With a sigh, he took off his glasses and waved me to come closer.]

I'm sorry, Ethel. You have to understand, this is very hard for me. My battle with Molly has been the regret of my life, a regret I failed again and again to clean up. Even now, even after all that happened, I have found it hard to ask forgiveness. To forgive. I should have been at Stormy's funeral. I should have been there for Molly. I...I've made many mistakes in my life, and as I approach the doors of heaven, I fear that I have not done enough good to make the difference.

[He put his glasses back on. I was to get the story, but not the confession. Not yet.]

I knew Molly from the time she was a child. Her parents weren't what you would call regular churchgoers, but they did come from time to time, and when they came to have Molly baptized, I insisted that they begin to take the church more seriously. Molly's father, Bill, I think it was, never did come around, but her mother Elsie did, and when Molly got older, she came too. Sunday school. Bible club. She even *taught* Sunday school later on. Molly Dresser was an outstanding member of our parish, and we were lucky to have her. Even after she got married, even after she learned that some men, and her husband in particular, just couldn't be dragged to church until they're ready, still she came, still she helped on Sundays, still she came early to set up our fundraisers and stayed late to clean up.

[He took a deep breath here, considering how much to open himself up, not sure if he dare lose himself too deep in memory yet.]

To understand Molly, you have to understand that many of the women who helped at the fundraisers or with Bible study were good people, of course, but it would take a fool not to see they were participating more for social reasons than for the pure good of it. I know that sounds ungrateful, and I was always grateful, but...well...one couldn't help but notice the difference between the friendly women who always checked with each other to make sure their friends were working before they made a commitment, and Molly, who seemed more interested in spending time with the children than gossiping with their mothers. It's not that she wasn't friendly with the other women, but more so that the *social* aspects of religious duty were never the priority for her that her contemporaries made it for themselves.

[*He took his glasses off again and stared hard at me. Then he looked down in front of him and spoke to the coffee table.*]

Molly spoke to me many times about her desire to have children. She thought God had forsaken her. Asked me to pray for her. Begged me to help her. And then...when she...when Our Father graced her with...and I...

[*I could feel the tears welling up inside him, could hear the shake in his voice as he tried to hold them back. He smiled awkwardly and let a small laugh intermix with the sadness leaking out.*]

I thought I was being tested. Thought the child had come from the devil. I was so worried about being fooled by the devil that I failed to do what Christ has told us over and over to do. Trust. Have faith. Believe in goodness. Instead of trusting in the miracle Molly was so sure God had given her, I did the devil's work, pushed her away, denied her my love. I called her child a *machine*. I refused to baptize her. No, that sounds too nice. I refused to baptize *it*. I just couldn't see her as a child. Not then. I kept calling her *it*. I told Molly I could not baptize a thing without a soul. Could not welcome such a thing into my parish. No. That *God* would not welcome such a thing into *His* house.

I was horrible.

And Molly left. Left my office. Left our parish. Left the Church. Left God.

I have spent the rest of my life wondering why I treated Molly so poorly. I know I had parishioners who would have questioned my judgment, had I brought a mechanical child into the church. I know my Bishop would have been none too pleased, either. As I reflect, however, I am certain it was not those fears that kept my mind closed. Pride. Years before, I had achieved one of the great successes of my career in bringing together the town after a terrible accident at a local factory. I believed our worship of technology was to blame, and challenged my parish to take a step back. I became an outspoken proponent of family dinners, and no-tv nights, of a world where we turned off our phones for a while and just *listened* to each other. And picnics. I think picnics made it into just about every sermon I gave. I was so *proud* of my views. Of my shining moment. I thought I was so *righteous*. When Molly brought the

child to me, I saw it only as a challenge of my faith. Would I stand with God, or be seduced by the devil?

Within a year, I knew I had been wrong. Anyone who saw that child could see she had a soul. But I had made my decision. I had chosen the wrong side, yes, but I was unwilling to admit it. Unwilling to humble myself before my parish and before God. Guilty of the worst of all sins: pride. Even when I retired, even after I had confessed my sin to Father Paul and begged him to make it right, even after Father Paul begged me to meet with her, to confess to *her*, still I could not find the strength to face Molly. Each year that went by, I thought about going back to Amboy, about making peace with her. To hold her daughter in my arms. To beg her forgiveness. To beg *their* forgiveness.

Now it is too late.

[He took my hand in his and raised his bare face to mine.]

I shall die with a heavy burden on my heart.

HOWARD COLDER (Stormy's Friend)

Howard was two people. The first was cool and detached, comfortable yet distant, an academic observing a situation completely removed from himself. The other was angry, defiant, and bitter, a wounded animal looking for a chance to bite. I distrusted the academic and pushed him toward the animal, but I felt a third person hiding beneath the others, a shy, sad, grieving friend. I had hoped I might find that Howard before the day was done, but knew the road must first take me through a sea of masks. We spoke in the basement of a coffee house in Evanston.

He was dressed mostly in black, including his leather jacket which he kept on for much of our conversation. The smell of tobacco preceded him from a back staircase covered in butts. We would adjourn to this refuge from time to time throughout our visit. The room itself was disturbingly quiet, but comfortably dark. Shadows continued to obscure his face as we spoke.

Eric Trotter was an asshole. I know everybody feels sorry for him now, like he's this poor victim of the cruelty of the world or something. But that's not the Eric Trotter *I* knew. Stormy. Stormy was a victim. Eric was...Eric was the *world*. How many times did that prick beat the crap out of me for nothing? For no good reason. And I'm supposed to feel *sorry* for him? If he'd just stayed away from her, maybe he could have gone on living his asshole life and maybe she'd still be alive.

I don't know.

I'm not really like the rest of them. I suppose it's obvious. There was *no way* I could have stayed in that hole after graduation. And couldn't have stomached *Northern* either. I got accepted to Champaign and DePaul, though, *obviously* I chose Northwestern. I wanted to apply out of state, but my parents...

[*He noticed someone walk in and sent a chin wave in his direction. When he looked back at me it was almost as if he had forgotten who I was.*]

...but those guys. They're all like tenth generation in the same place and will just farm the same fields their grandparents did, or get jobs at

Compass and settle in to drink their lives away at the Bowl & Brew. They'll all marry each other and breed little assholes to take their places when they die. If Eric *was* any different from the rest of them, it was in that he sort of *represented*, you know what I mean? Became a kind of archetype for the particular breed of asshole we have cultivated out there for so long.

Guys like me...

[*He raised his eyebrows at me and I smiled in recognition.*]

...if you don't wrestle, if you don't know your way around a car, if you don't know what happened at the last Bears game, what the hell good are you, right? I mean, that's the attitude around there. Always has been, I'm sure. Maybe that's why Stormy and I got along so well. She was different too, although, you know, her difference was a little more...*palpable*.

We're not really *from* there, you know. My parents moved up from Springfield when I was four, so my dad could set up a practice out in the country. My dad's a physician in Dixon. Most everybody there goes to his clinic, and they like him fine enough. It's *me* they hate. My dad always said he just wanted to escape the rat race, but I can't tell you how many times I begged him to go back and take me with him. He said he just couldn't stand all the paperwork and pressure at his old practice, but I think, well I heard something about a lawsuit once, and I wondered if there was some sort of malpractice or something, and he was just looking to lay low. It would at least make him a little *cooler*, I suppose. You probably shouldn't write that down. I wouldn't want him to get in trouble or anything. Actually, I don't care. Do whatever the hell you want. He can take care of himself.

Ok. Sorry. I was telling you about Eric. I shouldn't be too hard on him really. He was coming around at the end. He might actually have turned out to be a decent human being, given a little more time. But the thing is, and I can't say this enough, he wasn't a decent human being *yet*. He hadn't *earned* that title. At least not with me. I mean...ok. Here was a guy that had it within his power to make my life decent or miserable. And I'm not talking about a helping hand or being welcomed into some clique, or even welcomed *at all*. I was born be a loner and I can live with

that. *Have* lived with that. It's who I am. What I mean about Eric is that he could have just *left me alone*. Then his friends would have left me alone. Then the guys who *looked up to* his friends would have left me alone. *That* I could have lived with. That would have allowed me to live my quiet little life without bothering anybody, and without anybody bothering me. But he chose another path for himself, and dragged me down with him. He shoved me, kicked me, broke my glasses, ruined my winter coat, trashed my bike, threw my books in the mud. You name it, the asshole did it to me. *Almost* everything. They never broke me. That is a satisfaction only one asshole can claim.

Let's have a smoke.

[*As we walked across the basement to the stair landing designated as the outdoor smoking area, I asked Eric to tell me a story. An example of Eric's cruelty.*]

Well, there was the bike. I was like nine or something. No, ten. I got the bike for my tenth birthday, and it was still pretty new. I used to ride up and down the hills at the old quarry. I used to pretend I was like a superhero who had a magic bike that could fly and fight and do magic and, ok, wow, I haven't thought of this in years, but Sparkman, that was my superhero name, Sparkman would fly up above the town in his special flying bike, and rain fireballs from his fingers, or shoot them right at his enemies. I used to stand at the top of the hill and shoot my arms out like this...y'know, it was stupid and all that, but I was only ten. I had this dorky helmet my dad made me wear, and knee pads with stars on them. I mean, I *get* it. I get why I got picked on. *Get* picked on. But I didn't know much of that back then. Eric and his little cadre of asshole could have just laughed at me and let me go my way, but they just couldn't help fucking with me, even back then. I mean, it's one thing to suck at sports and just, y'know, stay out of the way altogether and let them play their little reindeer games without you. Every guy like me knows about that. But you can't just hide. They *force* you to play in school. *Forced fun*. Y'know they shouldn't call it play, they should call it *pay*. So they would pick teams and I would always be last. They would throw the ball at me *hard*, sort of *daring* me to catch it. I became a target, and they *loved* to practice.

By fifth grade I was used to it. At recess I would just walk off alone and pray they didn't notice me. If they did, I would pray a teacher was watching. When the gods were against me, recess was almost the worst part of the day. Almost. Walking home was worse. Half the days they would be waiting for me. They would push me down. Throw my books. Say shit like, "Gonna cry? little baby gonna cry?" and of course I *would* cry which would only make it worse. Back then I wouldn't fight back. Couldn't. I just took it and waited for them to go away, which, let's face it, only made them worse.

[He took a deep drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke out over my head.]

Anyway I used to ride my bike way out of town to the quarry where I knew no one would bother me, and just pretend I was Sparkman, and for just a little while, life was ok. Not great, but ok. But that son-of-a-bitch Trotter just couldn't leave it alone. He couldn't leave me one corner of my life to be moderately unoppressed. I'm just off in my own private world, thinking I'm safe from the cruelty of the world, if only for an afternoon, when he and those assholitas come riding up with that tedious shit and start in on me.

"I'll bet Howie the Bold can show us some tricks can't you?"

"Yeah, *Bolder*. Why don't you teach us something?"

"That pussy couldn't jump an anthill."

"Sure he could. I'll bet he could jump the pond."

"Yeah, *Bolder*. Jump the pond."

That kind of shit. They closed in on me and I was thinking about just hauling ass out of there, but fucking *Eric Trotter* had my bike by the back of the seat, and just started pushing me up the hill. Sorry. The quarry had all these dirt piles that you could ride up and down and pick up a lot of speed. There was this one hill that had this smaller hill in front of it that people used in the winter for sled jumping. In the summer, though, there was a sizable pond on the other side, and if you were stupid enough to try and jump it with your bike, you would end up a wet muddy mess. That was if you were lucky. There were rocks down there too that could make it all much worse, right?

So you can imagine this, I'm sure. Little faggot Howard Colder, *Howie the Bold*, getting pushed up a hill by five assholes hoping to see him ride down the hill, hit the jump, and end up broken on the muddy rocks halfway across the pond. I really thought I was going to die. Every inch they push me I'm more scared, and all I can think about is how painful this is going to be, how this is the end, how I'm going to die surrounded by enemies, and I finally just lose it. I jump off my bike and start running for my life. And they're shouting for me. Calling me *pussy* and...well, worse, and I just ran for my life. One thing I could do was *run*. It doesn't take a jock to win a race when death is closing in behind you. I looked back just long enough to see them roll my bike down the hill without me.

[He put out his cigarette and led me back to our table, blowing on his hands to warm them up.]

I snuck back there later that night to get my bike but I couldn't find it in the dark. I waded through the pond, hoping I would stumble into it, but all I got for my trouble was wet and muddy. I had given up and was heading home, crying I'm sure, when I saw it. The wheels were bent, spokes broken, chain ripped off. The pedals had been smashed and broken, I supposed with rocks. Not only had he jumped the bike into the pond, he had bothered to retrieve it so he could smash it up worse.

That's who Eric Trotter was at *ten*. You can imagine what he was like in high school.

CAROL HOCKMAN (Stormy's Mom's Friend from daycare)

Sunnyside Daycare was an unobtrusive house just off the main streets in Dixon. There was a small sign in front and a large playground in back, but for the most part, it just fit in with the residential neighborhood that surrounded it. I met with the owner, Carol, during an afternoon lull. Many children were napping, and two or three were quietly playing alone. She left the children in the charge of her assistant and brought me out to a deck overlooking the backyard. Summer was in the air, a sort of false spring, unseasonably warm and sunny. She was a jolly woman who loved to talk. After learning a bit about her daycare business, I turned the conversation around to Molly.

Oh, sure, Molly used to work for me. She was so good with the kids, you can't imagine. They just loved her. And even after Stormy...well, you know, a lot of women think they can bring their own kids to daycare and not give them more attention than the rest, but it's almost impossible. I told Molly that. I told her, "You just wait until one of our kids is crying and yours is too, you just see who you go running to first," but she proved me wrong. She never let that girl get in the way of her job, even before she was a toddler. By the time she was walking with the rest of them, Molly never failed to treat her just like one of the other kids. Of course that girl *never* cried.

[She laughed here and gave me a conspiratorial look.]

Never cried. *Look* at me. Never. Cried.

Of course, *I* knew, even back then. I even lost a few kids over that girl. But I told Molly I would stand by her, and I meant it. One thing I've always believed is that you have to stand by your friends, and I definitely considered Molly a friend. Don't get me wrong. I was still her boss and wasn't afraid to make tough decisions, like when I did finally let her go, but I always stood by her. I always gave her the benefit of the doubt. I always gave her my faith. When she told me what Stormy was, the bottom dropped out of my stomach. I thought, *this is my moment*, y'know? This is when I *put up or shut up*, if you know what I mean. If there was ever any doubt, though, it ended with the look in her eyes...she was

pleading with me, really. At that moment, I knew exactly what I would choose.

Not that I went around shouting it from the rooftops, but if a parent asked me, I told them. I refused to be ashamed. She was one of us, and that was that. Of course, to look at her, you wouldn't have any reason to think she was anything but. She played with the other kids, ate with them, God knows she could shit like them, excuse my French. She even...yes, now that I think about it, she *did* do her potty training a little faster than normal, but it's just as likely that was Molly being a supermom as any special skills that girl was born with, or built with, or whatever you want to call it. What I'm trying to say is that we never thought of her as anything but a normal little girl. She *was* a normal little girl. It was impossible to see her in any other way.

She even got sick like the other kids. I remember Molly keeping her home with the flu more than once, and one time...

[*She cupped her hand over her mouth and guffawed*]

...she...ok, so the girl never ate meat, right? You know this? I think maybe she had an allergy to it, but so many kids are allergic to *something* anymore, it didn't really phase me. No nuts. No chocolate. No Milk. Seriously, milk? I even had a kid with a wheat allergy. What do you give to a kid who can't eat wheat? What a mess *that* was. So a meat allergy really wasn't scary or even surprising. It's not like we give the kids a whole lot of meat anyway. We just made her grilled cheese sandwiches on hot dog days, gave her the beans without the pork, that sort of thing. And we did a good job. But one day she gets her hands on a fish stick and finishes it before either Molly or I had seen what happened. She comes up to Molly and says, "Mommy, I ate a fish! I ate a fish!" like she is so proud of herself and Molly looks at her, a little worried, but also a little curious. You know a lot of kids outgrow their allergies, and I think Molly always secretly hoped Stormy would outgrow the meat thing. Let's face it, this isn't really vegetarian country now is it? In the end, meat is a pretty hard thing to avoid out here, especially when you get to school age. But Molly is wary, ok? She gives Stormy a big hug and tells her what a big girl she is and all that, and tells her just to wait until tomorrow, and maybe she can have another one. And then, I mean *right then* Stormy starts to look

pale and the next thing anyone knew, she was puking all over Molly. Really puking. So much puke you couldn't imagine it all coming from that little girl.

[*Carol couldn't stop laughing at this point, and fought throughout the rest of her story to finish.*]

And it kept coming. And coming. Molly carried her to the bathroom, but there was this trail of puke either right from Stormy's mouth, or else dripping off of Molly. And footprints through it. I love daycare. I really do. But it is days like that, jobs like that...just make you want to quit altogether.

And the *stink*.

Well there was nothing inhuman about *that*. Around here we say that your first real puke is like your initiation into the human race. A rite of passage as old as time. Not *spit up*, but real honest to God vomit, with all the stomach churning nausea that goes with it. Maybe the one painful experience every person on earth has in common. That girl might have been made *differently* than us on the inside, but as far as *I* could tell, she was human through and through.

Of course, when Stormy got to school age, we saw a lot less of Molly. She insisted on taking Stormy to school and picking her up, which meant I lost her for almost an hour in the mornings and after three in the afternoons. After a while it just got to be too much, and I had to find someone else, but she still filled in from time to time. After the funeral, I even invited her to come back. Take her mind off it, y'know? Maybe she will sometime. When she's ready.

TIM PERTH (friend of Buck's Grandfather)

Tim Perth was a local ancient. He had deep lines on his face and hands, and his bones nearly poked out from behind their loose covering of skin. His voice, too, betrayed his age, with a shakiness that made understanding him challenging. Yet, though all external evidence pointed to an elder close to his last breath, his words betrayed a younger soul. As he began to talk, it became clear to me that this old creature had never left the young man behind. We met at a quiet table in the back of the Bowl & Brew, a local tavern, where the occasional patron, and without question the bartender, did their best to listen in on Tim's stories.

I'm not sayin' Buck Sprecher weren't no good. I don't think you'd find a person in this town *would*, 'cept maybe for Mabel, and even *she* would have to admit it if you pressed her. I'm just sayin' you can't really know what was goin' through his head. I mean, we all know Jeb never got over what happened to his old man, and there's no sayin' it didn't have an effect on the boy. Don't get me wrong, I'm not excusing the kid. Buck was a two-bit punk, and he deserved what he got. Not a person in this town would say different. It's just that, well Jeb wasn't the easiest guy to get along with, even *before* his pa died, and Buck couldn't a had too good of a time of it growin' up. Jeb was sure one *sonofabitch*, weren't no doubt about that.

Wally, that's Jeb's old man, he was alright. We worked the line together sometimes at Compass, night shift mostly. I didn't know him *real* well, but we shot the shit over breaks and had a couple a beers together every once in a while. Like a lotta guys, Wally'd take hours to pick up slack in the winter, and spend the good days on the farm. I s'pose he was more family man than wild man, though we definitely tied one on more than once. Nice guy. Worked hard. Tried to make a good life for his family. Maybe if he'd a lived, he coulda brought that boy up right. But that woman of his was a piece a work, and I don't think she ever gave Jeb much of a chance.

I was there that day, y'know. The day the robots tore Wally apart. Coulda been me. Coulda been *any* of us. Ugliest thing I ever saw. To this

day, the ugliest thing I ever saw. They tore him apart *piece by piece* like he was a piece of goddamn taffy or somthin'. One of 'em had his hand and half of his arm, another one shot right through his back and out his stomach. There were pieces of his insides hanging out all over the place, while this crazy picker arm was swinging him back and forth above the line. He was spurtin' blood everywhere and the lare [layerer] just kept swinging around in these half-arcs, slammin' into his head, and then winding up for another pass. Slam and wind up. Slam and wind up. It was like, well *obviously* it was an accident, but if we hadn't known any better, we mighta thought the whole thing was intentional. Like the bots were out to get him or somethin'. I tell ya', we were all pretty freaked out that day. Couple of guys never came back. *I* shoulda never come back. Still, a fella needs money, and it's not like the bots had ever fucked anyone up before. It was just a freak accident, and I figured I should just be a man about it. That was how it was at the plant. Go or stay, but if you stay, you put it the hell behind you. A man goes crazy, otherwise. I think it was the ones who left had the hardest time. Shit like that doesn't go away unless you face it.

Little Jeb, though, he really got the shaft.

Now I never got all the details, but it's no secret around here that Compass was worried enough about gettin' sued that they offered a hell-*uva lotta* money to the Widow Sprecher, *lovely Luetta*, and I suppose that was the beginning of the end for little Jeb. His mother, that poor beautiful girl, suddenly had more money than she knew what to do with, and the way I hear it, left the boy home every night while she went down to Peoria to blow her fortune at the slots. She'd bring back these dead-beats and they'd stick around for one, maybe two weeks, drinkin' her booze and kickin' her boy when he was dumb enough not to get out the way. That's the way I heard it, anyway. That it was the money done ruined her. *Lotta* people said she was born to whore, but I don't know. I think if Wally'd a lived, she'd a done ok. Jeb, too. Well, it don't matter, now, I s'pose. Maybe it started that way, and maybe it didn't, but one thing there can't be no mistake about, the money ran out.

[*I could see the heads of eavesdroppers nodding knowingly.*]

I say no mistake 'cause within a few years of the accident, lovely Luetta was..uh...*entertaining* men right out of her bedroom, and you..uh...you just can't keep that sort of thing quiet in a town this size. If she made more than what it took to keep her in drink, though, it never showed up at the farm. That place went to the *ghosts*. Jeb started drinking himself, soon enough. I hear he was in fights all the time. The only one I know about for sure was the knife fight out on 52. Stabbed Johnny Spencer in the back three times. If that boy'd a died, there'd have never been such a thing as Buck Sprecher. I got no doubt about that.

The kid had it rough. Jeb, that is. Can't think anyone in town here would say any different. Five years in Dixon would toughen up any man, and comin' out like he did to *nothing*, well, like I said, the kid had it rough. Maybe he coulda been a good father to Buck and Bill. Maybe that woulda saved him. But it seemed like maybe Jeb just didn't have it in him. Like maybe it was all Jeb could do just to save the farm. Or maybe he just figured if *he* could grow up without any help, so could Buck and Bill. I don't know.

Maybe it don't matter. Buck's doin' his *own* time in Pontiac now, and it don't look like he'll be gettin' out anytime soon.

DR. ELLEN CORAL (Stormy's Doctor)

I met with Dr. Coral in her office in Dixon. Her long blond hair was tied casually into a pony tail, with a few stray pieces falling over her small blue rimmed glasses. An educated and thoughtful woman, she appeared to be of a type that is always pulled by one force or another, always busy, and yet always fully present and attentive to whoever was in front of her. Although I knew she had a full schedule following our appointment, I never got the impression she was thinking of what she had to do next, or was hoping to move me out the door. While we spoke, there was nothing more important than our conversation.

You hear all kinds of things in this town, but I promise you, Molly Nachreiner knew exactly what that girl was the first time she brought her to me. We may be a little backward here, but we're not living in the dark ages. By the time Stormy came to us, there were already two neighborhoods in Chicago, and some of the locals were already referring to old Pilsen as Robot Village. I don't mean to sound cavalier about it. She was certainly a novelty to all of us, and I was no exception. But she was a novelty like...hmmm...let me see...alright, I know. We're obviously a Christian town, right? Catholic and Methodist mostly, though of course there's plenty here that never step in either church, present company included. Well, when I was a girl, we had a Jewish family here for a short time. The father had been transferred from another Compass plant, the one in Kansas City, I think, and they lived here for seven or eight years. From what I could tell, though, Jewish or not, they just settled right into the community. Nobody ever gave them a hard time. Nobody defaced their home or refused to sell them groceries. Nobody gave them cold stares in the street. Some people were curious and asked them questions about their customs, including me, but it was genuine curiosity. I used to babysit for little David. I would poke around their house, look at their books, and ask his parents about things I'd seen on the ride home, but it was all very innocent. You see, because they were the only ones of their kind, so to speak, in town, they were afforded a sort of special dispensation. A free pass from the hate that comes with fear of strangers in great

numbers. If there had been a whole group of Jewish families here, say enough for their own temple, I think you would have seen fear and anti-semitism and all the usual hate. Because there was only one family, though, they received a sort of *protected status*, if that makes any sense.

I bring all this up to say that nobody here feared Stormy the way people fear the robots in Pilsen. There was no fear of the town being overrun by robots, and so we could just...well, get to know her. We all had a chance to observe her and realize she was just like us, without feeling particularly threatened. After all, how dangerous could a single robot ever be? Honestly, we *forgot* about how she was made on the inside, and just accepted her for what she *seemed like* on the outside. In the end, I suppose that was what killed her. It was the fear and hate of what she appeared to be on the outside far more than her... *mechanical origins*.

Now let's see, what *can* I tell you about Stormy? Sadly, she is not protected by the usual patient privacy laws, but I'm cautious about protecting her, nevertheless. The results of the trial also left me with a fairly strict interpretation of what I could share outside of the courtroom. I saw her for annual appointments, and the occasional illness. I can tell you she was a mechanical imitation of human life. She ate, drank, slept, defecated, and even bled like the rest of us. She was unable to consume meat, and was allergic to ticks. She had difficulty managing her body temperature, and had to protect her torso from heat loss, even in summer.

[*She had a private laugh here, small but infectious.*]

Molly was the first to identify the heat loss, of course, and I believe it was Fred who had come up with the solution. He had created a special insulating armor of sorts that shunted the lost heat back into her body. Ingenious, really. It *was* rather ugly, but Molly figured out how to weave sweaters around it, so she could live safely without daily fear of freezing to death. I think it made her a bit sad at times that she could not show off her figure, but there was just no other way to protect her.

Let's see, what else? She managed her pain well, but was unresponsive to any pain medicine we tried. As a teenager, she developed a habit of consuming motor oil, though I can't say it ever did her any harm. Fred testified that there was no discernible purpose for that, but of course,

there was so little we ever really knew about her inner workings. She blossomed as any young woman would, and grew at an average rate. All this in in my testimony. There's really not much I can tell you. Her medical records were subpoenaed for Buck Sprecher's trial, so it should all be in the official record, though I don't expect anyone will let you use it for your book.

[I explained to Ellen about my struggles with the state, and how the trial record had been afforded a restricted status, supposedly due to the age of the victims. Although she sympathized, she told me that if the state felt the need to seal the record, there was certainly nothing she could say.]

I can tell you she was a healthy girl with the normal course of human problems. I treated her like I would any other patient, and called Fred Nachreiner when I thought I was out of my depth. For Molly's sake, we never called in other experts, and I still think that was the right choice. It was important to us not to treat her like some sort of freak, and we felt sure the attention of experts would turn her from a beautiful girl to a science experiment. We thought, perhaps, there was more to learn from her mind than there would be by dissecting her, and we learned much. She taught me, taught us all an incalculable amount about being human. She was special, but not because she was mechanical. Even when she became cynical, you always knew her heart was strong. Metaphorically, I mean. Obviously I can't talk about the specifics of her organs. For that, you will have to fight with the State of Illinois.

I will say this, however. There is no way that girl attacked Buck Sprecher or anyone else. There wasn't a violent bone in her body.

DEBBIE TROTTER (Eric's Sister)

Debbie Trotter was in her element in the cafeteria where we met. It was part of a community college she was attending, and she seemed to be almost interrupted by passing friends at every moment. They never quite dared to stop by, probably due to my presence, but I could not fail to miss Debbie's eye contact, chin waves, and smiles directed at people just out of my vision. Clearly this was a young woman with many friends and social comfort. Her brunette hair was straight and shoulder length, and her clothes trendy but tasteful. As painful as the death of her brother must have been, she seemed to enjoy reminiscing about both he and Stormy, and was never betrayed by her emotions.

Stormy and I hung out for a while from the time we were like five or something. I mean, until she got all y'know, *dark* and whatever. Back then she was just *normal*. Not that she wasn't a little weird, even back then. Like I remember this one time, we were like ten or something, and someone's mom took us out, what was it? Oh yeah. It was one of those Missy Benson's mom days. We went to Sterling for like, shopping and a movie and lunch and stuff. Missy's mom was always taking out Missy and her friends for something, or like, hosting parties and stuff. Back then I always thought it was fun, but now, when I think about it, it was kinda weird. Like she wanted to *hang* with us or something. I mean, like, if I were a mom or whatever, I would just, y'know, get out the way or whatever. But she like, she was always *with* us, like she didn't have any friends of her own or something. She was nice and all that. And it did make us all want to hang out with Missy, which I guess was probably the point. I mean 'cause we got to go to the mall and stuff, not 'cause we wanted to hang out with her mom or anything. Still, it *was* a little weird.

Anyway it was one of those trips. Actually, we must have been more like eleven or twelve, 'cause we were all just getting into makeup and stuff, which was the point. We spent like most of the day with the make-up ladies at the mall, and Stormy was mostly hanging back, right? Like just watching the rest of us. And Missy's mom was like, "Stormy, honey, do you want to try anything?" and Stormy was like, "That's ok,

Mrs. Benson. My mom doesn't really want me to wear make-up yet," and we all just kind of avoided looking at her. I mean, her mom like never wore any make-up *ever*, and we all just kinda felt like Stormy was probably doomed, but y'know, what were *we* supposed to do? We were just kids, right? When you're little, and your mom says something, you do it, y'know?

Like *my* mom. Oh my god. For years, like until I was in *high school*, she wouldn't let me wear halter tops to school. I mean, talk about *ridiculous*, right? I used to run to my room and slam the door and all that. But, like, what are you supposed to do? She's your mom and you do what she tells you, even when it sucks. And what can your friends do except feel sorry for you, right? Anyway, that was the thing with Stormy's mom. She was *really* down on makeup, and it was a *huge* deal. We all knew, including Missy's mom. So were just all feeling a little sorry for her, but not wanting to, like, *boycott* makeup or whatever, just 'cause *she* couldn't try it, so we were just *ignoring* her and trying not to think about it, right?

But then it got weird 'cause Missy's mom kinda egged her on. Not directly. Not to her face or anything. She just started talking to the rest of us about Stormy's mom, and what she was like growing up and everything, and kinda making fun of her. Like Missy's mom was the cool one and Stormy's mom was just a dork or whatever. It was all so *obvious*, but I guess we were still young enough that we didn't totally notice stuff like that. At first, Stormy didn't look bothered by it or anything, but later, we all figured that was it, right?

Anyway, somewhere along the line, in the midst of that weirdness, Stormy went off to find a bathroom, and said she'd be right back, and we were all like, y'know, gonna be at wherever we were, I think it must have been the make-up counter at Penny's, and she went off alone. No big deal right? I mean, the mall is like, *tiny*, and she's got her cell phone and stuff. So none of us were too worried. Besides, I think we were all a little *relieved* that we could stop feeling guilty about having fun without her. But then she was gone, like, *forever*, and she wasn't responding to our texts and Missy's mom started to panic, and she dragged us all over the mall, not that it was very *big*, but she wouldn't let us out her sight while

she went searching for Stormy. I swear to god she was about to call 911 or something when we found Stormy sitting outside on one of those weird benches. She was crying, and her face was ridiculous. I guess she'd gone to that weird whatdayacallit, like stand thing...y'know like...*kiosk*, she had gone that weird kiosk and tried on a bunch of dark makeup, but it was all running all over her face. It was on her hands, too. Like she had tried to wipe it off with nothing but tears. It was kinda hilarious, actually. I mean, we weren't laughing or anything. We all felt really bad for her. But if you hadn't known her, and just saw her, like on a video or something, you definitely would have laughed. Not just because of the makeup either. It was this whole pathetic attempt to lash out at her mom when no one was looking, and she couldn't even do *that*.

Later on, y'know, well, we all know what happened later. But *then*, it was like, well completely *unexpected*, y'know? *Before*, we had felt bad that her mom wouldn't let her wear makeup and whatever, that she had to wear those *stupid* sweaters all the time, but kind of left it at that. That day at the mall, though, was kind of, like she maybe wasn't exactly who we thought she was, like she had been holding it all in, and just let this first tiny bit of all that angst leak out. By high school, it was a flood, but by then, I don't know, there was so much going on. It was different when we were kids. I was actually kind of blown away that day. It was like the first time I had seen her as anything but totally normal.

PETE CELL (friend of Eric's)

Pete did not want to talk with me. He turned down my offer for lunch, for coffee, and even for beer. It wasn't until I finally cornered him in the parking lot of Compass Engineered Composites, that he even spoke to me. Prior to that, it had been only grunts, and turning away when he saw me. He was still angry and resistant, but a bit worn down from his day's work. I was standing by his car, and I think he just gave up a little. He had dark hair and stood a little on the short side, but stocky. It was cold and lightly raining, and I think it gave him some satisfaction to keep me out in that miserable weather. We both spoke loudly enough to be heard over the wind.

What the hell did that faggot say about us? No, seriously, I wanna know.

[He stared at me hard, threatening.]

He's a fuckin' liar whatever he said. Probably thinks he can say whatever he wants just because he's...I swear to god if he ever shows his face around here again...

[He punched his car door, just to my left, and left a small dent, one of many.]

...fuck. Just tell me what you wanna know and let's get this shit over with. I got nothing to say about the freakbot, but Trotter, man, he was one of *us*. Back in the day, man, nobody would fuck with us. Except chicks.

[He leered at me and laughed.]

Y'know. I mean fuck, we were *it*, y'know? Even as kids, nobody fucked with us. Even *before* wrestling.

And yeah, we fucked with that little pussy, Colder, but he had it comin'. He thought he was so fuckin' smart. Him and that freakbot both. Trotter, though, I mean he actually *liked* her. Even back then. Fuck. Ok. You want a story? Here's a story.

Me and Martha...man she was *hot*. We used to fuck like bunnies back then. She was pretty cool, actually. I wouldn't mind getting in *her* pants again. It's been a while, though. After, y'know, after Eric and the

freakbot and all that, well...she just, y'know, just wanted to fucking *talk* all the time. Anyway, she's at Northern now, so it doesn't really matter. Fuck. Why would she waste her time with an asshole like me, right? Just another Compass fucking shithead. Back then, though, it was like we were gonna get *married* or somethin'. She used to fuckin' *hang* on me *all* the time, and fucking drop her pants like every night. Well she's *fucking gone now*.

[*With those words, he cocked his head and looked me dead in the eye, almost as if he blamed me for the loss of his girlfriend.*]

Anyway, we were drinking at the quarry with Stoller and Stoneham and Trotter, and, fuck I don't remember. Oh, yeah. Eric's baby sister, Debbie. Hottie Trottie. Shit, I wouldn't mind getting in her pants instead of some of the skanks I end up with. She used to hang with Stoneham. And Stoller, he was always with someone else. Could've been Yvonne whatshername. Trotter would have been with Missy. She was still hot back then. Boy did she get fat fast after she got knocked up. Man, some chicks still look hot after they have babies and shit, but she went from hottie to mommie in world record fucking time, y'know?

[*Pete was blatantly testing me, pushing me to give up on him. It was cold enough that I almost did.*]

So we were hanging out at the pit. Just the usual. Case of beer, fuckin' around. Big fire. Trotter giving his sister shit for hangin' out with a dumb asshole like Joe. Same shit as always. After we'd been hangin' for a while, I went off for a piss and saw someone sittin' on the ridge smoking, so I shouted up at him. I don't know what the fuck I said. Probably like *who the fuck is up there* or some shit like that. Y'know. That was *our* place. Nobody shoulda been comin' around at all, right? And here was this fucker spying on us.

He took off, but I called out to the guys and we started chasin' after him. I don't know how the fuck we found him. It was dark as hell that night and we were all pretty drunk. He must've tripped or somethin', 'cause we finally caught up with him and figured out who it was and were all set to kick the shit out of him. The girls must've stayed back at the fire, 'cause I remember it was just us and him, and Trotter walked up to him and said somethin' like *why the fuck were you spying on us you little*

pussy? and the pussy fuckin' *peed his pants* and Stoller started making jokes about the smell, and I remember then thinkin' I should just give the little prick a good stompin' when the freakbot comes from out of nowhere and says, "Why don't you just leave him alone? He wasn't doing anything to you," and I was thinkin' two for the price of one, y'know what I mean? But it was Trotter's ball. He was still standing over Mr. Piss-in-his-pants Faggot, and we all figured, y'know, here it comes, teach these dickwads a lesson, and get back to the babes, but, like I said, it was Trotter's move. So what does that asshole do? Our fearless leader, the guy we all would have followed into the pits of hell? I'll tell you what he does. He gets all gooey and says, *Hey, Stormy. What's up?* and she says, and this shit I will *never* forget, she says, and I fucking quote, "You're all the same. You and everyone else. You think you own everything. Own everyone. But the only way you can prove it is to gang up on the weak ones. You're petty and you're weak and you're scared, and you think it makes you men to fight someone who can't fight back. Well go ahead. Show us how strong you are." *It doesn't prove anything.* Jesus Christ it *still* pisses me off. Petty and weak and scared. We should've fucking pounded *both* of them right there, but fuckin' Trotter starts stammering something about being *sorry* and *we were just fuckin' around* and shit like that, and the next thing you know we're back at the fire wondering what the hell happened.

I mean, who gave her the right? Weak and scared? Fuck her. If you want to know what I think, I think it's all her fault. She fucking killed Eric Trotter. If she hadn't stolen him from us, he'd still be alive today. She fooled Trotter, we all know that. But she never fooled me. If you ask me, she got what she deserved. The only thing that sucks is that she took Trotter with her.

Now get the fuck out my way.

[*And he pushed past me and opened his car door as if I wasn't there.*]

From STORMY NACHREINER'S journal, undated.

Stormy Nachreiner, alas, cannot speak for herself, cannot tell her own story. Her perspective on the events that led to her death must remain forever unknown. We are fortunate, however, in having some insight into her private thoughts during her final years. She left behind some journals. They are not dated, and contain as many drawings as they do words, not diaries of events so much as paintings of her feelings. They were, like every other physical remembrance of Stormy, kept in a locked trunk in Molly Nachreiner's attic. It was only after considerable prodding on my part that Molly consented to share them with me.

The following entry is accompanied by a line drawing of birds, far off in the sky, flying in formation.

A goose flew overhead today. Alone. It called out, but no one heard. Her friends, her family, had left her behind. They, gone, without care, without thought.

And she, alone, abandoned, calling out with every piece of herself, with all she has until there is nothing left, nothing to keep her going, "Please! Don't leave me behind!"

The flock doesn't know she's gone, hardly knows she exists. Maybe they would recognize her. Maybe she would look familiar. "Oh, isn't that Mary's cousin's kid?" But they wouldn't know her name. Wouldn't wonder where she was. Wouldn't notice her absence. There are more important things to think about. How far to go before resting. Where to stop and where better to fly past. Find a safe path. Arrive before winter. Find enough food for the ones that kept up.

But there are others. Others toward the back. They know her, know she is gone. They looked back when she began to fall behind. Wished her to keep up. Felt bad for her. But they could not wait for her, would not wait for her. They did not speak up, did not ask the flock to wait for the poor lonely goose because what if the flock didn't wait for *them*? Others so afraid of being left behind they dare not stand up for this poor friend. This poor friend who was a little too slow. Others who tell themselves it was her own fault. She overslept. She was too easily distracted.

She didn't try hard enough. That she'll be fine. That she'll catch up. That we'd better go or they're going to leave *us* behind, too.

And poor lonely goose. She *is* trying. Trying to catch up. Calling out for help. But poor lonely goose knows not where they have gone. Knows not where she should go. Flies toward where she last saw them, toward where they no longer are. Lost. Alone. Abandoned. Calls out, "Where are you? Why have you left me? What have I done?" It isn't enough. She is different from them. Has always been different. They tolerated her for a time, but in the end, they didn't have the patience. They don't begrudge her. Don't hate her. They just don't have the time for her anymore.

As a gosling, they had tried to make her strong. Make her normal. Make her a member of the flock well and true. As with all their children, she had been given room to grow, to try, to practice. They had given her their faith, as they did to all the others, that she might grow with the rest and strengthen the flock. Fed her. Gave her lessons. Protected her. But no one is a child forever, and soon enough, all geese must become one of the flock, with all of the work and protection and love and friendship and comfort that implies. Or they must perish.

She is not strong enough to survive alone. She wants to be. Wishes she could be. Wishes she could make it as the lone goose. Wishes she could show the flock that she does not need them. Does not need their pity. But she is not. Strong enough. Without her flock she is a dying bird, already frozen to death. Her day has finally come, and in her weakness, she cries out, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please give me one more chance," but she is not loud enough. Or sincere enough. Even if they could hear her now, they would not believe her. They had long known her day would come. That sooner or later she would miss the morning train and be lost forever. They are not surprised.

When her time came this morning, it was with inevitability. Her friends had already given her up for lost long ago. They knew her time had come. And as they rode silently in the back of the train, their backs to her, they dismissed the occasional cry they thought, perhaps, might be coming from the distance.

And she is already dead.

BILL YACHMAN (resident at St. Victor's Mental Health Facility) Part 2

I was intrigued by the madness of Bill Yachman. While our founding had, of course, not literally come to us from outer space, the idea was increasingly compelling to me as metaphor. Sad Stormy Nachreiner, the lonely goose, so foreign in her own town that she might as well have been an alien. An outcast whose sole purpose was to save the very people who cast her out. A stranger so separate that their food literally made her ill, but who could only fulfill her destiny by facing that illness and becoming one of them at last. Perhaps Bill Yachman had something valuable to share, after all.

It makes no difference whether you believe me or not. Had I accomplished my mission, had I returned at our first window, there had been hope. I would be home now, or what's left of it, instead of in this prison, and, if Dr. Carver was right, the stones, the so-called People of the Rock, the heartless, soulless fathers of cruelty and pain, would at last be broken. My own people, my starving brothers and tortured sisters, the last generation of a proud and free people would once again throw off the chains of slavery, and begin the long slow journey toward rebuilding our civilization. Had I made it to the first window. But make it to the first window I did not, and my people, if they even still exist, suffer for my failure.

[There was a sad, vacant look in his eyes as he fell back into silence. This time, I felt less that he was speaking to me silently, so much as speaking to himself, lost in thought. When he began speaking again, it was as if rousing himself from sleep.]

Should I have made it to the *second* window, there might at least have been hope for the galaxy, although little for your planet. They are coming, you see, and whether or not I leave in the next window, which seems increasingly unlikely...

[He motioned to the room around us.]

...they will certainly use the window to come *here*. I am sorry to have brought their wrath upon you. Although I have suffered at the

hands of your people, I don't begrudge them. When my own people were at peace, we too would have treated a man such as I as a madman. We too would have locked him up for his own good, for our own safety. Your people mean well, but it will do you no good. The stones are coming, and you have not the skill to repel them. Should I have succeeded in bringing back the weapon in the second window, we would have at least had something to fight back with, although the devastation at home will have, by then, likely destroyed what little resistance we had left. Our enemies are entrenched, free woman, and it will take more than bravery to root them out. We must destroy them from the inside, at the place from which they cannot fight back. The weapon was our only hope. *Your* only hope. We have eighteen revolutions until the next window, but even should I become free, even if I were to convince your people to let me finish my mission, to what end would I do so? The weapon is destroyed, and I have not the skills to repair it. We have lost. All is lost.

My trajectory will not have been difficult to trace. At the end of the first window, they will have plotted my course, of that there can be no doubt. I had planned an alternate route for my return, but I had always known they would find this planet soon enough. I have never wished *any* planet ill will, but it had to be done. I had hoped that our weapon would have begun to wreak havoc on their central structure before they could fully devastate your planet. There was hope. *Was* hope. Now there is none. The second window is coming, and with it, you can be assured, a fleet of dispassionate enemies charged with subjugating your planet. Like my own planet, yours is hopelessly outmatched. You have destroyed your only hope.

[He stared at me for several minutes, never breaking eye contact. His gaze was disturbing at the least, and I was once again left with the feeling that my soul was laid bare before this stranger. Was this how my more reluctant subjects felt before me? Was this a cosmic payback for peering into Stormy's private journals? Or was this madman once again simply trying to tell me something without words?

At last he shook his head in disappointment, and continued.]

I arrived at night, with no lights, shield intact. I had never been a smuggler before the stones took my world, but learned quickly in my

work after the pogroms. I knew how to avoid being detected, at least by most of the technologies I was familiar with, how to move quietly, unseen. A new planet always poses a problem, but although I knew little of this place, I knew it was not as advanced as the worlds I had come from. I buried my ship in a cave of my own making, far from prying eyes, and prepared to settle in for the eight revolutions that would have to pass before my next window home. I had little doubt that I could feed the child meat during that time, and my accommodations, while far from luxurious, were preferable to the prison sentence that would no doubt await me upon my return. I was deep into a wooded area where I was not likely to be happened upon, and my shield protected me from discovery by other means. There was enough wildlife around that I had little doubt of my ability to trap some local fauna to feed my little weapon.

My plan, however, was not foolproof, and I am nothing if not a fool.

I was just finishing the camouflage of my cave when I was nearly trampled by one of your native animals, a deer I believe you call it. It was large, on four legs, shoulders perhaps of a height with my own, and horns upon its head. I have since learned enough of your planet to know the animal is quite common, but at the time, I had never seen one. My hopes rose. An animal that size might be even easier to catch than the various small animals I had already sighted, particularly because it moved so slow, and it was more likely than they to yield a variety of meats for the infant weapon. As I looked after it, however, to get a better view, I became victim of quite another weapon, one of your barbaric firearms designed to maim more than kill, and maimed I was. Whether fatally or not, I could not know at that time. All I knew was that I was damaged, and that my mission was in danger.

I returned to my ship to treat my wound, and discovered that whatever had been thrust at me was embedded in my body, near my left shoulder, here...

[He showed me a scar along his left shoulder that could well have been the result of a gunshot and surgery.]

...and I knew that retrieving it was beyond my means. I knew that if I were to have any chance of survival, I would need local help. A

human is a human after all, at least where the damage was, and even a barbaric doctor would know how to treat the wound of a local weapon. In other circumstances, I might have chosen death over detection, but this time, my life was meaningful only in that I could not complete my mission if I was dead. My life was naught, but the mission was all. I knew I must not only survive, then, but continue to protect the weapon at all costs. How to protect her in the present circumstance, however, I had little idea. Were I to leave her behind, she would die from lack of care. Were I to bring her with me, she might be discovered and taken from me. As the blood continued to pour from my body and my consciousness to ebb, I began to fall into delirium. In that state, I decided I had but one choice, and that was to protect the weapon at all costs. I brought her with me and held her close as I stumbled blindly toward what I hoped would be our mutual salvation.

The next thing I knew, I was here. Apparently, in my delirium, I had confessed all to some nurse or doctor. I cannot blame them for marking me for a madman. How could they reconcile my story with their depressingly minuscule knowledge of the universe? My own people would have done the same. But I am not mad. *They* are the mad ones. They who had it in their power to save the galaxy at no cost to themselves, and chose to lock me up instead.

SARAH MACKIE (friend of Stormy's)

I met up with Sarah Mackie in Boulder, Colorado. She was in a shared house filled with books, tapestries, thrifted furniture, and a faint smell of patchouli that permeated everything. She wore a loose summer dress, sandals, and colorful woven bracelets, not exactly the woman I had expected after hearing her described as a thoroughly pierced gothic creature with dark eye makeup and gloomy countenance by her former classmates. Instead of the suspicious and sarcastic girl I expected to find, I encountered a young woman with a laid back casualness that led her to talk to me like an old friend. It was disarming but comforting. We talked on her back porch, the view of the mountains only partially obscured by the house behind.

Sure. Ok. Here's a good one.

I used to hang out with Stormy and Howard and Pen, ok? Sometimes Bernie, she's Bernice now, Bernice Feiner, man what a bitch *she* turned out to be. She hung with us sometimes, although not a lot, when I think back on it. Mostly it was just the four of us. And we were cool. Sort of. I mean, we certainly *thought* we were cool, but not...ok, not like, *popular* cool. Never that. More like, how should I put it? I guess, like, too cool for the room cool, y'know? Like *we* were gonna be the ones to bust out of that hole, and the *rest* of them would just rot there and never even know they were rotting. Like we were so cool no one could possibly recognize how cool we *were* because it was so far out of their understanding. Maybe the better word is *sophisticated*.

It sounds silly now, considering the stupid shit we were into. I mean, we were anything *but* sophisticated. We were almost *definitively* immature. I certainly see that now. Even today, though, even looking back at some of that cringe-worthy shit, I will say that unsophisticated as we were, we were still more sophisticated than 80 per cent of the adults and 100 per cent of the kids. Not that *that* was much of an achievement, ok? In *that* town high art was somewhere between glam portraits and the latest James Bond movie. Even the *slightest* interest in culture immediately put you in the top one per cent on the cosmopolitan

scale. Not that they didn't notice us. They *definitely* noticed us. It was just that that recognition took, let's say *less desirable* forms. That they saw us not so much as the idols we thought we should be, as the outcasts we definitely were.

I'm not sure how the whole vampire thing started. I guess that was mostly Pen. She had always been into all that dark stuff and at the time it all seemed so romantic. Now, of course...I mean look at me. I'm not exactly the picture of black lipstick mourning for my culture gothic vampire I was striving so hard for back then.

[*She laughed ostentatiously here.*]

I'm a changed woman. I think I just needed to get out of that town. Out of the state, even. Out here all that crap just seems so unimportant. As in, who cares what I look like? At all. As in, I've got nothing to prove to anyone. As in, I'm just going to be myself, and I'm going to let *you* be *yourself*, and stop worrying about what anyone thinks of me. Everything just feels so different now. I don't think it was college so much as just...just getting *away* and seeing other parts of the world. Well, at least another part of the country, anyway. Or maybe it's something about the mountains make you feel so small. So insignificant. I don't know. I guess a thousand miles doesn't seem like very far to travel for some people, but for me, it's almost like traveling around the world.

[*She smiled conspiratorially at me.*]

That's next year. I am spending next semester in Italy.

[*She got up and brought back a coffee table book of Italian villas, and talked excitedly about what she hoped to see on her semester overseas. She was clearly excited about the adventure. After some pleasant conversation, I brought her thoughts back to Illinois.*]

Sorry. What were we talking about again? Oh, yeah. I was telling you a story about Stormy. I think, in a lot of ways, she was just like the rest of us. Howard and Pen and I, I mean. In a lot of ways. Just trying to show that she was different from *them*. Maybe better, maybe not, but *different*. Except in other ways, of course, she actually *was* different.

So we were into this whole vampire thing, right? Dark, goth, cynical. I used to think that if you could live forever, you would have to be cynical by default, ok? Like, the older you got, the more jaded you would

become, because you had seen so much bullshit in the world, over and over again, you would, like, have this *wisdom* that told you the human race was doomed to destroy itself with selfishness and vanity, or whatever. I don't really feel that way, anymore. I mean, it's always middle age people who are truly cynical, isn't it? Old people always seem more hopeful. It's like cynicism is this disease you get when you have kids, and have responsibility, and have to be in charge, or whatever. By the time you have grandkids, and can just retire and relax and think back on your life, you're cured. I think if you could live forever, you would probably stay cured, even if you didn't age like everyone else, ok? If there *were* vampires, I'm sure they would be these friendly old wizened sages, or whatever, who had left all the cynicism disease behind them. Sorry. I keep drifting. Maybe what I'm trying to say is that the vampire thing was a way of us wanting so bad to be different that we went and got the disease early. The cynicism and darkness seemed to go well with our personalities.

Mostly we just dressed different, and smoked cigarettes, and wouldn't talk to anybody. Pen and Stormy and I got a lot of shit for it, but Howard really got the brunt. I mean, he was different enough already, and when you added the clothes, he was like a walking target, ok? He's at Northwestern, now, and it's really good for him. He can finally just be himself without having to be *gay* all the time. That's not what I mean. What I mean is, back home he could only be this *symbol*, this caricature of the freaky gay kid, and no one was ever going to see him as anything else. At Northwestern, it's not this exotic thing, so he can just be gay and get on with it. I mean people can see him as Howard, and not the little faggot punching bag. I haven't seen him, but we've kept in touch a bit. He seems to be doing really well.

And Pen...sorry. Focus, Sarah. Ok. Stormy. Stormy. Oh yeah, I know where I was going. So we were into this whole goth thing, and Pen, Pen who was really the one who got us all into it in the first place, started getting in deeper, and talking about drinking blood, ok? Not *tasting* blood. We had all done that, and of course Pen had started *that*, too. I'm talking about *drinking*. Blood. She told us about this bar in Chicago where you could actually drink blood, and said, well, we were all pretty

sure she was lying, pretty sure but not positive, y'know? Anyway she said she had been to this bar and done it and had even let this guy bite her neck, although the scar was suspiciously missing, of course. Anyway we started asking her all these questions about it, both because, well, we thought she was lying so we were trying to catch her out, but also, I think part of us wanted to believe her and really know what that place was all about. I mean, back then just the *idea* of going to a bar in Chicago, *any* bar, was the embodiment of everything we were trying to be. Make it a vampire bar, and we were hooked, ok?

So Pen was telling us about this place and Stormy was being really quiet. Finally, Bernie, she was still hanging with us then, Bernie called out Pen straight. She said, "Penelope you are such a liar. If I put a glass of blood in front of you right now, you would probably barf," and Pen told her she didn't know what she was talking about because she was just a plastic phony, or whatever. Bernie kind of sloughed it off, but Stormy sort of stood up for Pen and said, "I wouldn't," as if somehow her saying drinking blood wasn't that big of a big deal would get Pen off the hook. Pen took it totally the wrong way, though and said, "Well, it's not exactly the *same* for you." Nasty. Just like that. I guess she figured Stormy was trying to call her out like Bernie had, and thought we were all turning against her. Understandable now, but, still, it *was* a little harsh. I mean, we almost never spoke about, y'know, about Stormy's...*insides* or whatever. Not that...I mean...I can understand it *now*. When I look back, I see this girl, *Pen* that is, sinking deeper and deeper into this lie, and feeling the pressure of getting caught and all that. I mean, *of course* she was defensive. So I get it now. Still, it didn't make it any easier for Stormy to *hear* that crap. Especially after she had just stood up for her. Anyway, that was all it took. Stormy just walked out. Not a word. Didn't fight back, didn't call out Pen for being a total phony, which of course she was. Just walked out.

I called after her, but she never looked back. I followed her, kept calling her name, eventually caught up to her, but she never said a word. She just kept walking. At that point I knew I couldn't leave her alone, so I just stayed with her, walking by her side, telling her not to worry about what Pen had said. That she didn't really mean it. That none of us

thought of her as anything but human. All the stuff you're *supposed* to say. But she just kept walking. I really thought she might be suicidal.

Finally we got to Dempsey's and she let herself in the back door and just kept walking through the dark. I couldn't see a thing, and was afraid to follow her. I guess if you had spent a lot of time in garages or places like that, it wouldn't have phased you. It certainly didn't phase *her*. She just walked through the blackness like a blind person in her own house, with no hesitation. But for me, there was just all this unusual stuff everywhere, and barely a path to walk. Everything on the floor was covered in grease or just general grime. Old tires and engine parts and tools and just, well, a little frightening, actually. I called after her and even tried to see her by the light of my cell phone, but I couldn't really *see* anything. What I mean is, the light from my phone lit up all this stuff that I didn't really understand, so the light didn't help very much, and I had no idea where to look for her. I just started slowly sliding one foot in front of the other, trying to make my way around the garage, using my phone just to keep from tripping on all the whatever on the floor, ok? The garage wasn't very big, maybe room for two cars if it hadn't been filled with so much crap. As it was, there was one car there and everywhere else was just mess.

I had just about given up and was struggling to find my way out when I tripped on something and landed right on top of her. She had this pan of used oil in her lap which was now all over me, of course. I was completely gross. Her too. I lit up my phone again, and she was smiling. Still silent, but smiling. At first I thought it was because I was so ridiculous, lying there on the floor covered in oil, which was fine with me because, well, I'd been worried about *her*. It was nice to see her smile, actually. I was so relieved, ok? Pretty soon, though, I realized there was more to it. Pen may have lied about drinking blood, but Stormy was doing her own version. She was drinking used motor oil right out of the pan. And it was making her drunk.

MADISON PETERS (bartender at Bowl & Brew)

The Bowl & Brew was quiet in the early afternoon, and I took the opportunity to speak with the regular bartender, Madison Peters. Madison had a joyful disposition, was quite willing to talk and tell old stories, and was only occasionally distracted by the few customers that graced that establishment between lunch and the work bell. With Madison, I immediately felt that I was speaking with someone who was related to, or at least on a first name basis with, just about everyone in town. Her voice was loud, probably from years of trying to be heard over Saturday night crowds, and she seemed to have no inhibitions about being overheard by the few customers in the bar. She laughed often, and her smile was infectious. I think she was grateful to finally "have her turn with me" as she called it.

It was Ronny's idea, if you can believe it. Ronny Nachreiner.

[She laughed.]

Get Ronny drunk and he'll tell you a story or two. Not beer. He doesn't drink enough beer to let loose, but get him started on *brandy* and he'll tell you *more than you care to hear*.

[She said this last bit in a low, imitative voice, presumably of Ron's, though I had not yet spoken to him at his point, so the reference was lost on me.]

And I'm not just talking about the Cadillac story either. I mean, I've heard stories about Molly, right here at the bar, that have made *me* blush. Stories I'm sure Molly would prefer I did not repeat, by the way. Not that stories don't make their way around this town one way or the other. I mean, there are *few* secrets left in this town. But say something *here*, here at the *Brew*, and you might as well publish it on the front page of the Home News.

[She gave an older patron at the other end of the bar an admonishing look.]

You really want to hear the Cadillac story, you should buy Ronny a bottle of brandy. Still, I've heard it enough. Everyone around here has.

Ok. There was this big wreck out on 52. Three cars and a semi. Highway was closed for most of the day while they pulled apart the wreckage. That was the wreck that put Sue Boles in a wheelchair. What a *mess* that was. Nobody was killed, thank God, but what a *mess*. My dad was still running with the fire department back then, and him and his cronies used to talk about it a lot. The helicopter landed right there on 52. One of the cars was an early generation hoppy, and no one had really messed with them yet. My dad said they nearly blew themselves all up when they cut through the frame.

Poor guy had to step down from the fire department after his stroke, but he still goes to the meetings and drinks with the other old timers down at the fire hall. Honestly, I think it breaks his heart a little to be stuck at home when the siren goes off, but his doctor said no way. And my mom...well, what the hell are you gonna do, right? Anyways, the car that started it all was this '82 Cadillac with Colorado plates, and hardly any damage at all. The driver was never found, although they did search for days.

Ok.

So Jack Dempsey had it towed back to his shop like he would have for any other accident, but nobody came to claim it. After about two weeks, Jack called the state police to get the thing out of there, but he got bounced around from one person to another, and no one seemed to know jack shit, pardon my french. Shocking, right? Like the State of Illinois could tell its ass from a hole in the ground. Well these guys know how I feel about *that*. Ok. Finally, Ronny said he'd take the car off Jack's hands, put it in his own garage, and see if he could make anything of it. For *free* of course.

The thing you've got to know here is that Ronny and Jack had been hanging out together since they were kids. Still do. You stick around, you'll see them bowl together tonight. Maybe we can even get Ronny drunk.

Hah!

Anyways, Jack and Ronny both loved to work on cars as kids, but Jack went and *did* something about it, and bought up the Amoco with money he didn't have. Ronny used to give him hell and call Jack a second

rate mechanic, meaning of course that *he* was the *first rate* one. Used to drive Jack crazy, but what the hell was he supposed to do, right? Well, when Ronny offered to take the Cadillac, Jack figured it was his big chance for revenge. See Jack had been looking at it, and knew *exactly* how to fix it. The problem was it wasn't worth it. It was gonna cost more in parts than the car would've been worth when he was done, so he was just waiting for someone to come take it off his hands, right? *Now* he figured he could just watch Ronny go through the motions, and enjoy the show. He knew just what a cheapskate Ronny was, had always been, really, and knew he would never go through with it. So Jack just sat back and waited for the look on Ronny's face when he figured out just how much it was gonna cost him, and came crawling back to Jack to have him tow it away. That was the *plan*, anyway.

Well, Jack towed the Cadillac out to the Nachreiner farm, and Ronny started tinkering with it, of course getting nowhere. Soon enough, he figured out what Jack knew all along and realized he'd got a lemon on his hands. With harvest coming on, he forgot about the Cadillac, and left it to rot.

Ok.

Meanwhile, little Stormy Nachreiner was about 10 years old, and like every other 10 year old in this town dreamed of just one thing, right? Going to Great America. Six Flags? Huge amusement park about 2-1/2 hours from here. It's all she talked about. Roller coasters and racing cars. The stuff you can't get when the carnival comes to town, right? And Molly, well Molly would have done anything for her, but Ronny not so much. With Ronny it was all work and no play, and, of course, he was more than a little tight with his wallet, so you could pretty much see from the beginning that Stormy's dream was a non-starter. He kept putting Stormy off and putting her off. He'd tell her to wait until she was older. Told her she wouldn't be tall enough to ride the big coasters, or that it wouldn't be as much fun as she thought it would be, but mostly, just how *expensive* it would be. He knew that place wasn't cheap. It cost a fortune just to get out of the parking lot and in the front door. That was before the food and the treats and the games and the effing gift shop. This is Ronny talking, you understand. Stormy honed in on the money thing,

knowing her dad well enough to know that was *real* issue, right? She told him she'd do more chores, help more on the farm and all that, right? Except with Ronny, see, it was going to be a cold day in hell before was going to *pay* his own daughter to do chores in her own house. Ronny's pretty old school, and did I mention cheap?

All winter long, Stormy kept harping on and on about Great America, about this ride or that one that had just been put up. She'd find some coupon on a can of pop and bring it to him like she'd found a hidden treasure or something. Finally, Ronny was just about at the breaking point when he got an idea. He told her that she could have the Cadillac. All she had to do is fix it up and sell it, or sell it for scrap, and she could use the money for Great America. His one condition was that he wouldn't pay for any parts. It was hers, and she could do with it as she pleased. Did I mention she was ten effing years old?

Ok.

So Stormy actually started working on the Cadillac, taking it apart from head to toe, taking the parts apart, putting them back together, sewing belts together, hammering metal back into shape, and the whole time, Ronny was just laughing to himself, watching this ten year old girl play at mechanic, when he knew the whole thing was a lost cause. But day by day it was starting to look like the girl knew what she was doing, and that maybe she knew something Ronny didn't. Soon enough he started to feel like he was getting it coming and going. First he got duped by Jack, then by his own daughter, and he knows he's going to end up looking like a fool, right? Meanwhile, she keeps getting closer to making something out of the Cadillac, and keeps at Ronny about this trip she's gonna take, getting him angrier and angrier every time she'd ask some question about Great America. She's figured out exactly how much money she would need, how much gas it would take, and won't stop bothering poor Ronny about how much he thought she could get for the car.

Finally he just blew up. He said, "I don't care if you *do* sell the damn car, I'm *not* taking you that place. If you want to go so much, you can figure out how to get there yourself." Or words to that effect.

[*Madison took a deep breath and looked around the bar, gathering her thoughts.*]

He's not really a bad guy, Ronny. I mean, he's kind of a quiet, you don't know much about what he's thinking kind of guy, but not *bad*. It was just that the Cadillac incident with Jack had wounded his pride, and he wasn't gonna let it happen again. It was bad enough that the girl was about to show him up by fixing the car, he couldn't bear to let her rub his face in it on an all-day trip to the six effing flags, right?

Ok.

[*She started laughing here, for reasons that were not yet apparent to me, and tried to hold it in with ill effect.*]

Two days later, Molly got a call from the State Police while Ron was out working in the field. Next thing you know she was running out there, waving her hands, screaming at the top of her lungs, but Ronny couldn't figure out what the hell she was talking about, right? Something about Stormy getting hit by a car in Grayslake. I mean, she's *freaking out* and Ronny's sitting up there in the tractor screaming for her to calm down, and that it's obviously some kind of mistake. *Grayslake*, for God's sake. What the hell would she be doing in *Grayslake*? And Molly just kept going on about a *hit and run*, a *hit and run*, and somebody has to go and *get her*. Well, Ronny finally climbed down and called the State Police with this report number Molly'd got, and she was leaning over him trying to hear what they were saying, even though she'd had them on the phone herself not more than a few minutes before. Then Ronny got this wide look in his eye and just started *laughing*. He laughed and laughed and laughed, and said into the phone, "*Ok*. Tell her I'll get her in the morning." Molly was furious and freaking out. "We have to go *now!*" or whatever, but Ronny just hung up and laughed.

See, it turned out Stormy had actually got the car up and running, and driven *herself* to Great America. She might have made it, too, except the Cadillac still had the old plates. When the cops punched the number into their system, it showed up as part of the unsolved wreck back in Amboy, and they pulled her over outside of Grayslake to investigate. They got her for driving without a license, evading the police, reckless driving, driving a stolen vehicle, and of course, the original charge

against whoever it was that fled the scene of the accident back in Amboy where they'd got the Cadillac in the first place.

Ronny just laughed and laughed. Molly wanted to kill him, but he *insisted* on leaving her in jail for the night. Said they were taking good care of her. That she was in a private cell and that she would be no worse off in the morning than she was at the moment, but that a night in jail would teach her a lesson about running off without permission. After all, Grayslake isn't exactly *Chicago*, now is it?

The next morning, Ronny went off alone to pick her up. Told her she would have to work off all the money it had *and would* cost him to get her out, but that he had to admit she had done some fine work on the Cadillac, and he would talk to Jack about taking her on to help around the garage. Then...

[Madison could barely hold back a huge belly laugh and it was contagious enough that I was laughing along with her.]

...so then Stormy looked him right in the eye and said, "Dad, since I'm getting a job, can we go to Great America, and you can just add it to what I owe you?"

[Finally, Madison let loose for real, and slapped the bar over and over in satisfaction.]

Anyway, Ronny ended up convincing Jack to take her on, even though she *was* only ten years old. She was still working there at...well, y'know...at the end.

Can I get you another?

BRIAN CATTINGER (Eric's Science Teacher)

Brian Cattinger and I spoke in his classroom at Woodrow Wilson High School. The room was broken up into tables, typical for a science classroom. They were arranged to face each other - something I had never seen before, but perhaps indicative of Cattinger's teaching style. We spoke at length about the problems facing teachers in education, and the importance of focusing on the students as individuals, as well as the immense amount of work such an approach required when compared with more traditional ones. He had taught both Stormy and Eric at different times, but it was his assessment of Eric that I found particularly compelling.

I think the other students really looked up to Eric. He had an indefinable quality, a way of assuming leadership without effort. He wasn't the smartest student I ever taught, nor was he the hardest working, but you forgave him all that because he was...well...he had a sort of *honesty* about him. Unlike so many kids his age, with Eric, you knew exactly what you were getting. He had a self-awareness that is incredibly rare at that age. High school is obviously an important time of growth, and lots, I'd say *most*, of these kids, spend a lot of effort on some *persona* they want to show the world. I suppose we all do that to some extent, but at that age, most of them are trying it out for the first time, and it can be...well...a bit *obvious*, if you know what I mean. The kids are trying to stake out some territory, create a defensible position, and I suppose, for many of them, it's the only way they can survive this madhouse. The way I remember Eric, though, he didn't carry any of that baggage around with him. I think that was what the other students liked so much about him. He didn't brag, but he wasn't disingenuously humble either. He was just *straight* with you. Always. It was pretty refreshing, really.

I'll give you an example. Eric was a wrestler. As I understood it, he was a pretty good one. I guess the coaches can spot a great athlete the way some of us can spot great students. After a while, you can spot them almost immediately. In the classroom, though, you often have to trust them to achieve on their own, because you're too busy focusing on just

getting the poorer students through. It's a vicious cycle, but there is just so little to be done. In athletics, though, the coaches have the opposite approach. They focus on the great ones, and let the others fend for *themselves*. There are days I wish I could do the same. Well, Eric was a middling student, but apparently a great wrestler, and his coach knew it.

Each spring, the varsity team would have a retreat up in Wisconsin, at Ben Pardee's cabin. Ben was the wrestling coach. They usually made a long weekend of it, and as teachers, we were pretty supportive of it. Of missing class, I mean. They were seniors after all, and we all know that they all lose their ability to focus come spring. Besides, Ben was good about making the boys stay on top of their homework, and we'd never really had a problem, so no harm, no foul, right? It's like I was saying earlier. You've got to give a little to get a little, and if you can't show a little *kindness*, a little *leniency* even, the trust goes right out the window. And *trust*, to my mind, is the whole ballgame.

Well, by the time Eric was a sophomore, he had already proved himself as a wrestler, and Ben was starting to groom him as a star. Now I don't know much about wrestling, or about athletics in general to be honest, but even *I* know when Ben or one of the coaches starts to think we might have a chance at adding to the big trophy case in the main hall. We all walk past it every morning, and you get used to seeing some of the former students pictures, like old friends. And each year, as the hairstyles in the pictures look more and more dated, you feel a little older than you did the year before. After a while, even the geekiest weasel of a teacher, like me for example, starts to wish we could add some of the current students, if only to help us forget how long we've been here. How *old* we've become. Not that the old pictures will ever come down, but...

[Brian became lost in thought for a moment, and looked about his classroom with melancholy. There was a resignation in his eyes, as if he had at long last given in to the relentless marching of time. As if he had already been trampled by it, and was merely surveying the damage. He broke the spell with a laugh to himself.]

What I mean to say is that even those of us not completely gung-ho about athletics start to feel like a little support isn't misplaced, especially with a big hope on the horizon. Eric was one of those hopes. The

kid who could lead the Buffalos to a state championship. Put a new flag in the gym. A new trophy in the main hall. So when Ben came to me to ask if I could see my way to giving Eric the same benefits I did to the varsity wrestlers, I was inclined to do so.

The thing was, though, that Eric didn't know this. Ben hadn't told him about asking any special favors. It would have been completely out of character for him. Ben is a great mentor, and I suppose a great coach, but he's a hard-nosed son-of-a-bitch, if you know what I mean. Ben's mission in life is to turn boys into men, and accomplishes such by making them *earn* every bit of success or praise they receive in his presence. If one of his boys was drowning in quicksand, Ben would sit on the shoreline doing almost nothing. *Almost*. He would find a way to drop a branch from a nearby tree, and let it land close enough to be helpful, but only if the boy troubled to save himself. He doesn't want to see his boys fail, but he always makes failure a real option. Makes them *responsible* for their own fate. And so it was with Eric. He wanted to make sure Eric had a chance to go on this retreat, but only a chance. If Eric were going to step up and join the seniors, he was going to have to earn it off the mat, as well as on, so to speak. So when Ben came to me about Eric, he was clear that I could put whatever conditions I wanted on the boy, make it as hard as I wanted, and asked only for a fair chance. I was to be Eric's branch, so to speak. Ben's a good man. Some of the kids hate him because he's hard on them, but I have no doubt they all love him for it later.

Eric came to me, as expected, to ask permission, and as expected, I made it hard on him. I told him missing class for the retreat would be a mistake. That he would miss some important classwork. That the seniors on the varsity team were already halfway out the door, and they wouldn't be missing much anyway. That he would have much to make up, and he would likely find himself trying to catch up for the rest of the semester, not just in my class, but in his others as well. Eric heard me, understood what it all meant, and asked permission to go anyway. Said his other teachers had said yes, and I was the last hurdle. I told him my class wasn't so much of a hurdle as a sheer cliff he would be climbing for the rest of the year, but Eric was determined. That's when I let him have

it. I assigned him an oral report on the nature of mitosis to be delivered to the class the day he returned. I told him there was no way he could succeed without spending some amount of his retreat preparing the speech, and that he might be better off just staying home. Unsurprisingly, he accepted my challenge, and thanked me genuinely. I honestly think at the time he fully intended not only to complete the report, but to nail it.

He did *not*. Nail it, that is. Or work on it at all, for that matter. He came back from the retreat completely unprepared and I knew it. I knew it, and I knew his coach would want him to face the music, and I thought, perhaps, a little squirming in public would be a fitting punishment for failing to follow through with his promise. A teachable moment on his journey to manhood, if you know what I mean. You see, I *subscribe* to Ben Pardee's philosophy, though I teach it in my own way. We are not here to usher children into adulthood. They must usher *themselves*. We merely give them the tools with which to do it, along with the occasional shove.

I expected Eric's impending disaster to go one of three ways. The first would have been for him to bullshit his way through it, just taking what little knowledge he had and bluffing his way through a few minutes of chatter, praying he got away with it. The second choice would have been for him to come up to me before class, eyes on the ground, tail between his legs, tell me how sorry he was, and take his lumps like a man. The third choice, and the one I dreaded the most, would have been for him to come to me with some made-up excuse, and try to bullshit me directly. I tell you, nothing breaks my heart more than a student outright lying to me. I'll just stand there, looking at them, knowing they're lying, knowing they know I know, and not caring. How do you break a kid of that?

[He shook his head here, a little lost in thought.]

To be honest, at the time I didn't know Eric well enough to know *which* way he would go, but when he didn't seek me out before class, I heaved a huge sigh of relief, and prepared myself to at least be entertained by his attempt to bamboozle myself and the class.

The thing I learned about Eric was that none of those options was ever in the cards for him. Having failed to do what he was supposed to, by that I mean prepare for the report, he looked for the most courageous option left. Admitting to me that he hadn't prepared would have come close, but it also, in some way, would have let him off the hook. Eric knew that the real challenge was facing his classmates, not me. And he did just that.

When the time came, Eric got up in front of the class and confessed. Just confessed. Not sheepishly. Not proudly. Just told his story. He talked about wrestling and how important it was to him. About the other boys on the team and how he looked up to them. About how he knew he should have spent time at the retreat preparing for this assignment and how hard it was for him to stand up for himself with the seniors who were trying to welcome him to their group. About how he knew they would have given him a break had he gone off to study and skipped some of the fun, that it wasn't their fault. That it wasn't his coach's fault. That it was his. He didn't apologize, really. To apologize, you have to regret what you've done, and I don't think he did. He was just brutally *honest*. And when he was done, he told us what he knew about mitosis, which wasn't much.

The next day, he gave his official report, which was fair to middling. He had clearly crammed, and memorized a bunch of quotes directly from Wikipedia. He put in an expected amount of effort for a student of his ability, and I'm sure I gave him a grade commensurate with such, minus points for lateness no doubt. But it was the confession that had stunned me. He didn't cower, or charm, or bullshit. He just spoke earnestly in front of his classmates. Let me tell you, I've been working with teenagers for over twenty years, and what he did, well it's *unheard* of. I'd never seen a student speak to the class like that. As I got to know him better, though, I learned that the confession was just one of many examples of who this kid was. It wasn't an extraordinary moment in his life. It was just him.

It made you want to trust him. I think that was why he was so popular. Everybody trusted him.

What a damn shame.

[From the confession of DR. PHINEAS CARVER

Today, of course, we know of Ethel Ackerman's "madman" as one of the great heroes of our age, along with Dr. Phineas Carver, without whom none of us would be alive today to read these stories. It seems not only fitting, then, but perhaps also necessary to include some of Dr. Carver's words spoken in this era, though not heard on Earth for another generation. We considered including this piece as an appendix, but were captivated by the parallels of turning children into adults with the idea that saved the galaxy: turning stones into men. This confession, along with a mountain of data, was recovered during the Great Awakening, and shared with the Crushed Planets, in an effort to rebuild our histories, so that we might never forget.

I am not ashamed of what I have done. Nor do I harbor regret. What I have done, I have done for the good of mankind. For goodness. For truth. For life. My enemies call themselves the People of the Rock, but I will not deign to call them people. They are not men. They have no life, for how can there be life without love? Their soldiers call themselves Rock Warriors, but warriors must have courage. How can there be courage without fear? Their leaders call themselves the Pillars that Bear the World, but how can they bear without burden? A pillar must support, but my enemy only crushes. My enemies are not pillars, not warriors, not men. My enemies are not even rock, for rock stands together as one, and in its strength supports the world. My enemies are stones. Piles and piles of separate stones, massive in numbers, small and meaningless individually, but with enough mass together to smother everything in their path. They are an avalanche that can do naught but destroy. They grow by breaking bigger rocks into smaller pieces. When there are no rocks left, when they have smothered the world, worlds, the galaxy will be nothing but desert, a vast ocean of infinitesimal grains of sand, not the master of life, but death itself.

My crime was love. My crime was hope. I dared hope that I could shape a stone. Breathe life where none had been before. I worked for three orbits on my weapon of love. I called her Faith, because I knew that, in the end, without faith I would be doomed. She was my masterpiece. The defining creation of my life. The ultimate weapon. The mother of a virus destined not only to invade, but to transform my enemies. Turn dead stones to living soil, steal inside their shells and show them love. Make them ashamed. Make them men.

I have failed.

Faith started as a dream. As I lay awake one night in my exile, I was swarmed by memories of my neighbors, my family, my children. I saw the stones marching from house to house, throwing women into transports, poisoning the men with their light sticks, burning everything in sight. I saw myself, as if from above, running after my wife, my legs failing from underneath as the poison worked its way up my spine. Saw myself laying on my back, looking up at the sky where transports carried every woman I ever loved away from me, off to the torture of birthing centers no man has ever known. Felt the heat of the burning city on my flesh, paralyzed, helpless. The memories mixed in my mind with images that had never been. Dogs sniffing at the living but helpless bodies of men that were strewn about a scorched surface that had once been our home. Vines growing out of the ground, encircling us, pulling us down into the dirt, alive. Clouds overhead, swirling into images of stones without faces, a night watch ever vigilant, sworn to hold us in our tortured state forever.

As these memories and dreamlike images mixed in my mind, I had a vision that broke through all the rest. A stone, kneeling at my side, slicing vines, freeing my body. My feeling came back as he removed something from my arm and in that moment, I saw his eyes. A stone with eyes, yes. And in his eyes, something no stone has ever shown. Life. Leaning over me, I saw a stone become a man. A man with feelings, with care, with love. I lay awake with this vision which came and went in many forms throughout the night. At points, I doubt not that I slept, the vision carrying itself into dreams. At others, my reason returned, and I

was able to study what I saw. Consider the meaning of this divinity invading my brain.

I need not tell you of how our pogrom actually went. What can possibly be unknown about that? The stones stole our women, burned all we had ever known, and left the men helpless, unable to move, awaiting the chains of slavery, or death by thirst. Of course, there are a few in every city that escape the stones and it was true in our own as well. They are always cowards, else how would they escape notice of the all-seeing stones, and it is to one such coward that I owe my life. He was a student of mine who had hidden in an old coal tunnel beneath the library. When he finally emerged, he thought he was the only living man left in the universe. Mad with guilt and grief, he wandered the former streets watching us die, helpless to save us in a land without water, without food, nearly without life.

He recognized me and knelt by my side. "What can I do?" he asked me. "Dare I kill you all? End your tortuous death? Do I have the courage to save you from this hell?" I was helpless to answer him, and only begged him in my thoughts to end my torture with the swift hands of death. Whether unable or unwilling to kill me, however, he dragged me down to his coal tunnel, and shared with me what little food and water he had. He kept me alive down there, a frozen, useless, ex-person, doomed to die of thirst, and by stealing his water, dooming the boy to the same fate. In time, my voice came back and I told him he was wasting his food on me. There was so little. But the boy would not be deterred. By the time the poison had left my body for good, all the men above were dead. None could outlive the poison without water, and all had perished thinking they would stay paralyzed forever.

When I had fully recovered, the boy and I made our way to the ruins of the university, and into the labs buried deep beneath. There we had just enough battery power to radio for help, and were blessed to be found by men before the stones discovered us. With the help of a brave smuggler, we made our way to the camp on Tenebrous, where I carved out some semblance of a life, fighting off nightmares and helping other survivors and refugees. It was in the midst of those nightmares that my vision came back, and I felt as if an unbearable burden had been lifted

from my shoulders. I had a renewed purpose in life. I had seen what could be, and I vowed to make it so. I arose that morning single-minded, determined to discover the secret of turning stones into men, and turning enemies to allies.

For twelve seasons I worked, and good men risked their lives to bring me parts and information. I met other good men with their own goals, their own plots for bringing down the stones, foolhardy plans that required strength to battle strength. An angry resistance doomed to fail, if only for lack of numbers. Like me, they are all dead now. Then, however, they held what little power they could, and I told them my own plan. Faith would be carried far away where the stones could not find her. With the help of carbon based life, a virus dormant in her body would become active waiting only for the catalyst of the stones' birthing fluid. She would bear a man-stone. A stone capable of feeling pain, remorse, love. The beginning of a new world, and the end to this one. They had not the faith I did, but with so few options, allowed me the chance to pursue my vision. They gave me space to work, brought me food, and otherwise left me to my own devices.

When Faith was completed, I entrusted her to a merchant who had been kind to me during my years in exile. The merchant, a smuggler really, was resourceful and sympathetic to our cause. He often brought me food and books. He was trustworthy, and I deeply regretted sending him on what might well have been a suicide mission. At the same time, I knew in my heart that *someone* must go, and that only a skilled pilot would have any hope. This good and brave man never hesitated. He took Faith across the galaxy where the stones would not soon find her, to give her the final touches only an alien planet could provide. They traveled far, and I had no way of knowing whether they succeeded, but I had *faith*, and in my heart, I could feel *Faith*. For many seasons I could feel her. She was my daughter, and never let a father tell you he does not know whether or not his daughter lives. A father *knows*. I could feel the life force of the girl as she grew, could feel her strength in the universe. I could feel her in my heart.

And I could feel the cold emptiness of her absence when she left the world of men.

You ask for my confession, but I have nothing to confess. I have committed no crime. I have only attempted to give love to stones. A gift of love can never be a crime. I have attempted to change my enemies, but I have failed. Failure is not a crime. Faith is gone, and stones live on. I have already received punishment worse than death. You can do no more to me.

But hear me now. Today I am crushed, but tomorrow another will rise in my place. We are the grass that covers the world. When you crush us, we will bend, but some will come back, poking through the stones, pushing you aside until we once again bathe in the light of life, love, and humanity.]

From STORMY NACHREINER'S journal, undated.

Adjacent to this entry was a drawing of tires. In the center of the page, an oblong and slightly dented loop of tires in plan view, like a short go-cart track. Then, in one corner, a half tire laying on its side with shards of wire protruding from the edges. Above, what looks like a tractor tire filled with water, and below in the lower right corner, a pile of tires with two leaning against it.

I feel like I'm walking in circles. When I was a child, there were days, many days, when I wanted to talk to *no one*. I would spend recess walking from tire to tire, circling the playground with *no one*. And *no one* would talk to me. Talk to me of the puddles hiding in the shadows of the tires. Of the dirt encroaching on the pavement. Of the leaves hanging on the trees, seeing us below with the wisdom that can only come with age, as the dead and dying, merely pausing by the playground on our way to a darker destiny. Of we children, little big people, blind in our cocoons, unaware of our place in the great vicious cycle. And I would listen. Listen to *no one*. Talk to *no one*. And walk in circles.

Over recess I might walk the circle of tires six or seven times. Each time the story would iterate. I would start over again, with *no one*. And *no one* would say the same things, each time in a different way. This time the moist green leaves fresh and young and full of hope. The next as molting skin bidding a last farewell to their color and their home. Then, as crumbling beneath generations of soil, feeding the very tree from which they came. Always lenses through which greater things saw the world. Each time, the futility of existence. Each time, some small measure of hope. Each iteration different from the last, yet still the same. Visions of children as their own grandchildren, the world unchanged as they pass through it, the same faces at once fresh and withered, the same troubles in new shapes. With each circuit, the truth would become more certain. Indisputable. Each circuit would bring a new view, and each new view only reinforce the vision.

All is ephemeral.

All is eternal.

My circles are bigger now. I walk with *no one* along roads and highways. Sidewalks and two-tracks. Sometimes I just sit on the porch behind Dempsey's, *no one* by my side. Watch the clouds roll in. Watch the snow fall, watch it fight the salt and the plows, stubbornly piling up and burying the world beneath, only to melt in the spring. Watch cars speed by, wearing down the belts I put in myself, slowly tearing them up until I will be asked to replace them again. *No one* teaches me to see them as merely future residents of Jack's junkyard, rusty and broken, instead of the mask they wear as they careen past on the highway. I circle and I circle and I circle, starting each time where I did before, seeing each time what I saw before, altered but the same, variations on a theme.

When I was small, and I saw pictures of the haystack paintings for the first time, I thought they all looked the same. They were all haystacks. The same haystacks. I remember thinking it was kind of stupid for Monet to paint the same thing over and over. When I got older, I saw that I was wrong. I learned to see detail, and came to see them as different. This one was purple, that one orange. This one in shadow, that one in snow. I saw detail, and thought the detail was what mattered. I saw a story of the seasons, of change. Of how different the world can look when seen from different angles, at different times of day, at different seasons. And when I looked closer, I saw that again I was wrong. I was looking too closely. I saw the tree and missed the forest. There is no change. Just the same haystacks in different dresses.

When I see the future from up close, see the detail of the world hundreds of years ahead, I see change. Some trees are bigger, some replaced. Houses have been torn down and rebuilt. The people wear different clothing, move across town in new ways. But as I retreat, as I pull back into the distance and see the future from high in the sky, all is the same. People, farms, houses, streets. The world is more crowded, but nothing has really changed. Children grow into adults, make new children, and work until they die.

Is there a way out?

I am trapped in a loop and cannot escape. Can I change my direction, and see the world in a new way? Not an iteration, not a new view of the same world, but an entirely new world? Maybe the world is right

in front of me and I have just been unwilling to see it. A fourth dimension all around me that I'm too stubborn to accept, just waiting for my epiphany. Waiting for me to see what has always been here, right in front of me.

Or perhaps the loop is a vortex, too strong to resist, drawing me in irrevocably to the infernal eternity within, always approaching, but never reaching the stagnant peace at its center.

**From the story "Building Tomatoes" by ERIC TROTTER
(written for English class)**

Unlike Stormy, Eric did not leave a written record for us to ponder. He left behind no shortage of trophies, a wealth of adoring friends eager to tell his stories, and a few enemies as well. Of his own words, however, we have almost nothing. In speaking with Karen Leech, Eric's teacher for Senior English, I learned that he had written a story that felt, in her words, "clumsily autobiographical and surprisingly personal". She shared with me what she had been able to salvage, and I have included the legible portions here. Tragically, much of the manuscript was destroyed by an ill placed merlot.

Derek skipped English. It was a bad day getting worse, and he needed a little time for himself before practice. With a lab in Biology and a test in History, English would be his only chance. He walked into the woods behind the school to take his mind off. What he really wanted was a cigarette, but he never smoked during wrestling season. Still, he figured the walk would do him good, and it was either the woods or the diner. He first thought about walking down to the diner, but then he remembered Martha had a study hall that period, and had probably skipped herself. He figured she was already down there with her friends, and he certainly didn't want to see *her*.

Derek was bored with Martha. She talked a lot, mostly gossip, with most of it about the love lives of celebrities. Famous people dating famous people. Famous people breaking up with famous people. Famous people seen with other famous people where maybe they shouldn't have been seen. When she was done with celebrities, she would move on to local gossip. Who said what about whom behind whose back. At first it was fine. She was pretty, and he liked looking at her. He didn't ever care much about what she said, but he figured it was just the way all girls were. She wasn't really a whole lot different from his sister in that way. Like with his sister, Derek mostly just tuned her out. The girl really *could* talk, though, and he was beginning to reach his limit. The balling, too,

was predictable, and he was starting to wonder if she was still worth the effort.

Truth be told, Derek was bored with more than just Martha. His friends were no better, although to be fair, they talked far less. Still, what conversation there was pretty much came to the same thing. Wrestling, the Bears, the Bulls. Who was getting traded, who was coming off the injured list. Nights at the quarry were all the same. He drank as much beer as ever, but hardly ever got drunk anymore. It was like everyone and everything around him had become so predictable that he began to fear he had seen all there was to see in life. Old man thoughts. Mid-life crisis stuff. He walked through the woods to escape them.

He followed the path toward the creek, and turned off at a deer path that circled back toward some old concrete pieces, half embedded in the dirt. As far back as he could remember, the collection of man-made rock had been called the Alter, although why, neither he nor any of his friends had any idea. In the off-season, they would gather there after school, smoke cigarettes, and do pretty much nothing. It was a little too close for anyone to smoke during school hours, so he was sure it would be empty now. He hadn't exactly planned it, but he vaguely thought he would wander to the Alter, sit down for a few minutes, and get his head clear before heading back to school. His thoughts were of himself, and he followed the path by instinct, barely seeing where he was going. At the Alter, he sat down, looked out across the creek, and wondered how long he could remain the person he was.

Although he had sat right next to her, he had not noticed her, and when she spoke, he was so startled that he screamed.

"Hey. Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

Derek recovered himself and stared at the girl beside him. The girl he hadn't seen. No. The girl he hadn't bothered to see. Rain. Her name was Rain. A girl he never spoke to. A freak *no one* ever spoke to. A girl who kept to herself. Embarrassingly so. A girl he'd always wondered about. Catching his breath, laughing at himself, he said, "It's cool. I just didn't see you."

"How could you not see me? You walked up and sat right next to me."

"What I mean is I didn't..." Didn't what? What was he supposed to say? That he was so self-absorbed he couldn't even bother to see another person right in front of him? That she wasn't important enough to notice? That clearing his head before practice was so important no other person mattered? The excuses ran through his head, but they all stopped before meeting his tongue.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm...ok. I was just, y'know, thinking I guess."

"Well don't hurt yourself."

Derek smiled awkwardly. "I'm Derek Runner."

"I know."

"And you're Rain."

"I know."

"I'm having a lousy day, Rain."

"Me too, Runner."

"Ok."

And they sat there, looking across the creek, thinking about themselves. As English turned to Biology, and the creek bubbled past, the only voices that could be heard in the woods were those of the birds and squirrels. It was Rain who finally broke the silence.

"How do we get out, Runner? How do we change the circle into an arrow?"

Derek was lost. "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that everywhere I look, all I see are things so predictable as to be pointless. Like every choice has already been made, every fate sealed, and nothing I can do can change any of it."

"Ok."

Then another bout of "listen to the squirrels". He was thinking about Martha, about whether he might break up with her, and what she might say. He heard his own voice, and then, in return, Martha spoke. She condemned him at first, for not trying hard enough, and then her voice changed, and began to mix with Rain's words. *How do we change, Derek?* The words burrowed their way into his head, until all he could think about was the old man thoughts again. Was he stuck in a rut? Could he change if he wanted to badly enough?

This time, it was Derek who broke the silence. Sitting next to Rain, but looking across the creek, he said, "I think I'm exactly what you're describing. Everything I do is done before I start. Every outcome predictable. The guys I hang out with, I can tell you everything they will say before they say it. Same with my girlfriend. Well maybe not predict the *words*, but I could certainly tell you the *kind* of things she'll say. Then I watch my sister and her boyfriend and it's exactly the same thing. And I watch my parents and it's the same thing and I think, hell, it's all over and it hasn't even started yet.

"Meanwhile, all these people who I'm completely bored with tell me how great I am, how they look up to me, how inspirational I am. And I'm...I don't *deserve* those thoughts. I do nothing. How can I be worthy for doing nothing? I feel like I don't do anything and somehow I'm all there is to be, and I'm bored, Rain. Bored. Like what you said. Like it's all over and I'm just watching reruns."

Why he told her these things, he didn't know. Maybe he just had to say them to someone and she was the nearest person. Or maybe he was ashamed of these things, and he could only say them to someone who didn't matter. Someone who would never speak to his friends. Someone they would never see. Or maybe it was something else. Maybe he thought this girl was different. Maybe he thought she would understand.

And Rain, the freak of no account, the girl who no one looked up to, who no one looked at, who no one ever bothered about unless it was to look down upon her from their comfortable perches above, did.

Understand.

JACK DEMPSEY (Stormy's boss)

Jack Dempsey could not have been more welcoming. I met him in his garage, and once I had told him what I had come to talk about, he immediately dropped the job he was working on, anxious to talk. He wore a greasy jumpsuit and insisted upon washing some of the grime off of his hands before we shook. The lion's share of his hair was gone, but what remained was not yet gray with age. His garage was every bit the mess I had been expecting, but when we moved to an office in the back of the gas station, I was pleasantly surprised to find a clean and well kept abode. I later learned this was the domain of his wife, who apparently had a higher standard for tidiness than he. We spoke at length about his childhood with Ron Nachreiner before the subject moved to Stormy.

You heard the Cadillac story? Oh, that girl was a hoot. She was a good kid. Worked hard *and* worked fast. I tell you, I miss having her around. No question about that. I don't know as there's much to tell. I'd known the girl since she was small from coming around to Ronny's place and after what she did with the Caddy, I really had no problem taking her on. See, Stormy had cost Ronny a bit a money after that whole mess, and on top of that, she was starting to look a little too wild for her own good. He figured it was a good way for her to make back some of the money and get a little taming on top of it. I guess I would have done the same thing. Make her pay for it, teach her a lesson about paying your dues and earning your keep and all that. I would have taken her on as a charity case, as a favor to Ronny, if it had come to that. Not that I had any desire to pay for Ronny's mess out of my own pocket, but I didn't mind spending a little something for a part-timer to clean up a bit and give me more time to actually get at the cars. Besides, I figured if it would allow me to take on a couple extras each week, it might pay for itself.

Course, Stormy worked out a *little* better than that.

[*He laughed here.*]

I guess you could say that. Ten years old and this girl was teaching *me* how to do *my* job. Stormy paid for herself ten times over, and I never once regretted taking her on, although she never *did* do much cleaning.

That was one time I didn't mind being bested by old Ronny Nachreiner. See, the plan was that Stormy would come over after school, put in a few hours cleaning and walk away at the end of the week with ten dollars. I could spare the ten, and god knows she couldn't make the place any messier. At the end of the year she'd be paid off and have learned her lesson, and the garage might finally be clean enough to *find* something every once in a while. But like I said, she worked about a little better than that.

First thing was, she just followed me around, pretending to clean up, but really just watching what I was doing, asking questions, and generally driving me crazy. I thought right away that I'd walked into a disaster, and started thinking about a way out. Really, it only took a couple of days of that before I was about to send her on her merry way, and to hell with Ronny. I mean, I'm only going to tell a part-timer to get back to work so many times before I let her go, even if she *is* a ten year old girl, and my best friend's daughter. Still, I wasn't looking forward to facing Ronny, and kept putting off the decision. Who knows? Maybe it was the thought of it all that made me sick. What happened was this. Toward the end of that first week, I caught a bug or something. It hit me about mid-day and I spent the rest of the day praying to the porcelain goddess if you know what I mean. Right here, off the office. I had a car up on the lift, brake pads I think, and a few oil changes waiting in the yard. There was no way anything was going to happen until Friday or Saturday, though, and I couldn't have cared less. Y'know how it is. When you get sick, nothing else matters and all you want is for that damn thing to go away and you're willing to promise any god *anything*. Well that's how it was, and I told myself that the customers could just go fuck themselves, excuse me. I didn't even go home until something like 9:00 that night. Just took turns between sitting on the john and bowing down before it. Sorry. Don't mean to get too graphic.

[I laughed with him, and told him I'd heard far worse in my time. Then I invited him to continue.]

Ok. Well, anyway, I stumbled home late, and the next thing I knew, I had slept until noon, and was starting to feel like myself again. I laid in bed for another hour before I walked over to the shop to see what was

waiting for me. I had already come to terms with working through the weekend, so I was in no rush. You know how it is. Once you tell yourself you can work late or put in an extra day if you need it, suddenly you've got *more* time instead of *less*, and you sort of *relax*, if you know what I mean. So I rolled in around 2:00, and Stormy's sittin' there on a pile of tires, proud as punch. I said, "Stormy, what the hell are you doing here? Shouldn't you be a school?" and she just sat there and smiled at me. I was still a little sick and thought, "I don't have time for this shit," and was about to just send her home for good, when I noticed the lift was down and the Civic I'd been working on was parked in the yard. I looked back at Stormy who suddenly looked a little shifty, and I asked her what the hell she was up to. I must've said it kinda mean, because she started to look scared and started stammering something about just trying to help and not meaning anything by it, and all the usual stuff kids say when they're trying to weasel out of something.

That's when I noticed something strange in the yard. Not only was the Civic parked there, but the cars that had been there, the oil changes, they were gone, too. I look back at Stormy and see she's got a wad of cash in her hands. She said, "I didn't know how to work the card thingy so I told them I could only take cash," and she held the money out to me.

[Jack let out a big laugh, and slapped his desk.]

That fool girl had taken on all the small jobs and practically cleared the yard. That was the first moment I thought maybe Ronny knew something I didn't, and that maybe Stormy was more than she appeared to be. I mean, this little tyke, after following me around for not even a week, had basically taken charge of my business, and, from what I could tell, did it faster, cheaper, and maybe even better than I could have.

By the end of the next week, I had her taking on all the small jobs, and helping me with the big ones. At ten dollars a week, she was the best bargain I ever had. Even later, when I paid her a living wage, she did twice as much work as *I* could, and I'm not ashamed to say she did it twice as well. Six years that girl worked for me, and six years I couldn't have asked for a better partner.

After the...y'know after she died, I had to cut back the work I could take by almost two thirds. I might have even gone back to less than I did

before I took her on to begin with. I guess I just got used to having her around, and started losing my...whats-it-called...like I got so used to doing less, I had trouble going back to the way I was before. Even after I hired Joe on, I never really got back to where I was with Stormy. That girl was really something.

I think about her every day.

PENELOPE FLETCHER (friend of Stormy's)

The mask of Penelope Fletcher was transparent, but was attached to her with a bond that seemed unlikely to ever break. She had left her high school persona behind, and adopted a new outlook on life, one centered on academic and intellectual achievement, though not without its own trappings of style. We met in her apartment in New York City, which she shared with two other NYU students. Her roommates were absent, which left us the small apartment to ourselves. Her hair was cut short but still fell over her eyes. She wore small glasses with rims thick enough to call attention to themselves. Though unseasonably warm, she wore both a turtleneck sweater and a small hat, which she kept on throughout our interview. She was a gracious host, but reticent to speak with me.

I find it near inconceivable now to think back on Amboy. That isn't to say I haven't returned to that *den of smallfolk* for the annual Thanksgiving feast at my mother's, which of course I *have*. I am speaking, rather, of a homecoming to my former life, even the imagined thought of which I find completely abhorrent. The memories are there, but I have *chosen* not to explore them. I have, instead, shelved them away for a future old-lady-hood, when I might dust them off and wax nostalgically about my girlhood at a point so distant that it will have ceased to feel painful in any *visceral* way. My memories are hidden away on purpose, and I am not anxious to so soon revisit the world I have worked so hard to put behind me. Amboy is another life. A life I choose to no longer know anything about. A world so far removed from who I choose to be as to be little more than a curiosity from the corner of my mind, increasingly obscured by cobwebs. Come Thanksgiving, I will visit my mother and eat whatever meatless fare she bothers to put alongside the turkey, and before the weekend is half over I will return back here to Soho where I belong. I will not call it home. I will not look for Sarah or Bernice or Howard. I will not visit my former haunts. I will not reminisce. That life is gone, and I choose to forget it.

I say this because it is critical you understand how expensive this is to me, to my soul, to visit that far off land again. Summoning that world I have worked so hard to rid myself of risks not only its reappearance, but the very real possibility that I might never be able to lose it again. That it might use this second chance to cling to me like napalm, destroying me in its inability to let me go. Or perhaps, dare I say *my* inability to let *it* go. Daring to remember does not come without cost, and I am anxious about the expense. It's not that I don't believe what you are doing is important. I do. Please don't doubt that. The world should know what happened to Stormy.

[She lost herself in a far off stare, as if reconsidering her words. As if, for only the briefest of moments, there was a true sadness in her that overshadowed the mask. When she spoke next, it was with a resignation. A bowing to the genuine feelings welling up inside her.]

It is just that I finally feel like the person I was meant to be. I feel so different than I did back there. Everything feels so much better now. But what if *that* was the real life and *this* is the fake one? I get nauseous just thinking about it. Maybe I'm afraid that revisiting that place may show my new life as a lie, perhaps a spell that can only be broken by daring to look to the past. I feel like Orpheus, with you calling me to look back. Dare I?

[She sighed heavily and walked to the kitchen. Although she was still basically in the same room with me, she treated the kitchen area as if it were completely apart, and didn't speak while she prepared coffee. It was some time before she returned with what was, to give her her due, really excellent coffee. When she did, she was changed again, the mask back in place and a new determination in her manner.]

You've come a long way, and I don't want to disappoint you. Although it pains me, I suppose I can suffer a *short* journey to the past from the comfort of my new life. It would, after all, be foolish of me to think I can avoid my past forever.

That said, I'm not sure where to start. Let's see. I suppose we must begin with Howard.

I don't think it's truly possible to understand what happened to Stormy Nachreiner and Eric Trotter without understanding Howard

Colder. They called him Howie the Bold, but it was really more like Howie the Punching Bag. *We* all called him Howard of course, as a sign of respect. He had a rough time of it. Tougher than any of us, that is if you except the final exit of Stormy and Eric Trotter, which is either worse than anything Howard had yet experienced up until the last time I saw him, or better in that neither Stormy nor Eric Trotter shall ever suffer the festering of wounds life continues to inflict upon the rest of us. I'll never say that Stormy was lucky to be spared the pain of living, that would be going too far, but it may well be that even in light of her ultimate tragedy, Howard had it worse.

Howard was gay, *is* gay, of course, although throughout our friendship, his sexuality was what I might have referred to as a *tendency* rather than the result of any *actions*. He had never kissed a boy, and wasn't likely to, given the repressed nature of the good old boys we were surrounded with. Nevertheless, his manner was what some, in fact most, would call *feminine*, a manner which caused him no end of difficulty. This poor boy, as a result of a nature he had neither asked for, nor actively courted, but from which he did not shy, spent a lifetime on the receiving end of beatings, burnings, breakings, and general humiliations. No doubt his life has improved considerably now that he has, as I understand it, joined a more *cosmopolitan* world. I recall he had been accepted at Northwestern, although whether he remains there I can't say. In any case, my friend has surely escaped his former hell, may his new ones be less severe.

If there was a specific incident that drove Howard to avenge himself upon his enemies, I am unaware of it. You would have to speak with him directly for insight on that account. What I *do* know is that Howard lived a life of regular bullying and torture, any one instance of which may have driven him to seek retribution. I dare say Howard would have been justified in any number of acts of vengeance, acts which, as we have seen in far too many places, could well have ended in massacre. To be fair, the one he finally chose was mild in comparison to the havoc they might have driven him to. And they drove him to it nearly every day. I recall many such instances, as reported to me by Howard, the cumulative effect of which finally drove him to seek retribution. Although I fear

that describing just one may give the impression that it was more significant than the others, I will pick one at random, to give you a sense of his tragic life.

How's the coffee?

[*I told her I had rarely had such a fine cup.*]

It's fair trade from this phenomenal little *hole* of a shop on 2nd St. Usually, I prefer to sip my coffee *there*, but one can't always avoid the comforts of home, and what is life without good coffee? Of course Doris, that's one of my roommates, she will insist on buying the cheap stuff, but won't hesitate to *drink* mine. It is nearly impossible to keep good coffee in the apartment anymore. I suppose we should, as my people say, make hay while the sun shines.

Now, let's see. Which episode of terror to best shed light on that poor boy's life? Alright. Here's one.

Stormy and Bernie and I were smoking at the Alter, a circle of stones in the woods that served as our home away from home. It was lunchtime, but the three of us rarely ate, and preferred a quiet hour of cigarettes and conversation, sometimes two if we didn't feel quite up to suffering study hall with the ignorant masses. Howard usually joined us with a sack lunch lovingly prepared by his somewhat overprotective mother, meticulous in its repetition, each day's meal identical with the last, so much so that it always seemed a bit sad that most of it went right into the dumpster. This particular day, Howard was late, and when he did show up, it was with a forced smile, a conspicuously absent brown bag, and a vacant stare. He sat down without speaking, and lit a cigarette as if none of us were there. We knew, of course, that there had been an incident, and left Howard whatever time he needed to tell us. Halfway through the cigarette, he shared with us the damage.

Apparently Howard had dared to take a less used route from his classroom to the woods, circling around the school auto shop, past an officially prohibited, but generally accepted smoking area. Had Stormy been around the auto shop as she so often was, this would have been safe territory for Howard. Most of the Neanderthals that frequented that particular venue had at least some amount of begrudging respect for the girl who had co-opted their greatest collective talent, and risen above

them to a level unprecedented for one of my people. I don't think they ever dared to bully Howard when she was there. What allegiance they held with her, however, vanished immediately in her absence, and on this day Howard found himself catastrophically alone.

The neanderthals had started out feigning friendship, and had goaded him into holding onto something, I'm not sure what, but it was something over his head that he had to hold onto or it would fall and damage the car below. Some sort of rope or something. Either he just got tired, or they had a way of making this cord or whatnot heavier, but the upshot was he was unable to keep the danger at bay. He begged his way out, but the beasts had their prey and weren't about to give him up. They told him protecting the car meant his life to him, and when he couldn't take it any more, and let go of the rope, they answered him with a punch to the solar plexus and another to the neck. Then came a steel pipe to his stomach, rear-end, and shins. Gut, butt, and strut, the savages used to call it. The shins took him out and he collapsed on the cement floor. Of course the car was never really in any danger. They would never have risked it, but Howard didn't know that. They laughed it away, and Howard crawled off with his proverbial tail in its usual position between his legs.

Howard sat there with us at the Alter, mumbling his story, skipping words out of anger and shame. We'd seen it before, and knew we would see it again. There was nothing to do but put a hand on his shoulder. It was just life. Howard's life.

Howard wasn't broken that day, just damaged. As I said before, this is merely one of a thousand examples of how the masses tried to destroy him, some worse than others. This event was neither the least nor the worst that he experienced, but rather somewhere mixed in amongst the common. So much fuel for the tank of hatred that finally drove him to fight back. It was inevitable that in the end he would fight back, in his own way. He was driven to it. I don't blame Howard for Stormy's death. He did what he had to. No one could have predicted what would happen. Nevertheless, if you are looking for cause and effect, it would be blindness to underestimate the importance of Howard's little game of vengeance to the tragedy that followed.

MELISSA HOPKINS (Eric's old girlfriend)

Missy invited me into her home in the quiet of nap time. Her house was obsessively tidy, like some Better Homes and Gardens version of the perfect 1950's house minus only plastic covers on the furniture. Her bookshelves were filled with knick-knacks and photographs, books suspiciously absent. A gold relief of Jesus Christ on the cross was comparatively small though conspicuously centered above the fireplace mantle. Her curly blonde hair was tied back with clean bangs trimmed neatly above her eyes, but a high school senior portrait in a corner of the bookshelf betrayed a wilder look. She brought lemonade for us both, the sourness all but obscured by copious amounts of sugar.

I know what people call me. What they think of me. I don't care. I said what I said. I *meant* it. I could tell you that if I had the chance to do it all over again, I might have said it differently, but that's not *really* true. You can't imagine the pressure...up there...everybody watching you...all these men in suits you've never seen before...and then they make you swear on the bible. Swear. On the *bible*. Before Christ, our Lord.

[She began to speak as if in a trance.]

"I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." And yet, there you are, your hand on the bible, with all these important men looking at you, challenging you, and there is no way not to take the oath. So you say the words, and once you do you know, know in the depth of your soul that to hold back, to keep even your feelings silent would doom you forever.

I never said Stormy deserved what she got. People say I did, but I didn't. I could never have said that because I didn't believe it. That was the power of the oath. When he asked me if I had ever seen her picking a fight, I suppose I should have just said no. I should have held back my feelings, my intuitions. I should have said just what was required of me,

and nothing more. But...but I...I *swore*. I swore to tell the whole truth. I shouldn't have sworn, but I did, and it was too late. I told that lawyer how I *felt*. How she made me *feel*. It was stupid, but it was true. I swore an oath and I kept it.

[*She sat back and took many deep breaths, all the while staring at my eyes. A darkness seemed to creep over her, and she quickly turned on me.*]

You people. You think because we go to church and watch tv and eat frozen dinners that we're all redneck hillbillies with no right to share the planet with you. Because we gossip and shop and like magazines. Because you *think* harder than we do. *Read* more. You think you're better than us, but thinking it doesn't make it so. Stormy Nachreiner was always telling us that we should be *different*. That we were *superficial*. Well maybe we were. Maybe we *are*. But who was she to tell us how we should be? Did she think she was our Lord and Savior? She was an effing machine, that's what she was. A Godless little...I'm sorry...I shouldn't...I'm not...what I mean to say is...I'm...I'm not a bigot. I *liked* Stormy, actually. We used to be friends. If she had just left me alone I...

[*She shut down and went silent. This time, instead of challenging me, she merely looked at the floor, avoiding my gaze.*]

Ok. Eric and I were in love. Or *I* thought we were. I know now it was only...well something akin to a crush, maybe. Not to make it seem...I don't want to make it sound...I mean it was *more* than that, of course, but it wasn't *true* love. I know that now. My love for Jared is *so* different, and Ponty...how can you truly understand love until you've had a child. Sometimes I sit here, right here, with Jared by my side and Ponty in my lap, and I *know*, I just *know* what love truly is. Back then, though, I didn't know any better. All I knew was this boy who liked me, and I couldn't let go. Eric was my world. We were inseparable. I was sure we would be married, have children together. I thought I had it all figured out. I'm better off, of course, but I didn't feel that way then. I was in love with that boy. I would have done anything for him. But he got tired of me. Found someone better. At least someone who *thought* she was better. I was so angry. I *hated* her for taking him from me. I admit that. More than once I wished her dead. Wished them *both* dead.

And then they were.

And there was a trial.

And I told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Stormy Nachreiner wasn't evil. Y'know we used to be friends, back in junior high. I actually felt sorry for her back then. Her mother was very...not strict so much as over...over...what's the word...over protective, maybe. She almost never went out after dark, wasn't allowed to wear make-up, that sort of thing. Maybe if she'd been able to run around a bit more, get a little wild, maybe she wouldn't have been such a...and the sweaters. I don't know if that was Stormy's thing or her mother's. She never talked about it. But you never saw her without one of those *stupid* sweaters. They say she even wore them working at Jack's, though I find that hard to believe. How could you work on cars and stuff and keep those things clean? Of course, we all saw her without one at the end, or what was left of her.

[*We were interrupted by a cry from upstairs.*]

Excuse me.

[*She left the room and was gone for close to fifteen minutes.*]

I'm sorry. Ponty woke up from her nap. She's playing right now, so I think we're fine for a bit. Now where was I?

[*She took a deep breath and let it out. As she did, our eyes met, and she smiled.*]

I don't hate her. I don't. She was not evil. Everyone in this town knows what evil is. We have seen him among us, shunned him and prayed for him. We have cast the devil from our midst, and locked him away. Perhaps he can be redeemed, but I fear not. No, Stormy Nachreiner was not evil. She did not deserve to be...how could anyone deserve something like that? Still, it's not as if she was the embodiment of goodness, or a true hero, or any of the other things people now say about her because it does no good to speak ill of the dead. She was just a confused girl who tried to make herself feel better by believing the rest of us weren't worth her time. We were ants to her. Insignificant. It made her a *snob*, but not evil. She certainly didn't deserve to be....well...*taken* from this world. I don't see Eric as a hero either, although everyone says I'm just bitter, so why listen to me anyway?

I said at the trial that she never knew when to hold her tongue, using her words like she was a missionary and we were uncivilized savages yet to hear the *good news*. Like she was a preacher telling us we were sinful and wrong, but never giving us anything else to believe in. That she believed in nothing, and had said so. That a person without God is capable of anything. I believed those things. Still believe them. I spoke about her as she was, not to condemn her but because...because it was the truth as I knew it, and I had made an oath before God. Buck Sprecher's lawyer asked me about what I'd said, asked if I thought Stormy was that way because she was a robot, but I never got to answer the question. If I had, maybe it would have saved me a lot of trouble later on. You see, I've known plenty of people who believe in nothing. Some of them attend my church. Being human doesn't make you good. It makes you *sinful*. It is what we *do* with our time on earth that makes us good. Or evil. I can't believe God would give us a machine as alive as Stormy Nachreiner without at least a chance for redemption. If they had let me say that, perhaps the town would have forgiven me.

As it was, all they saw was a jealous high school girl lashing out at a divine martyr. They will never forgive me for that.

BEN PARDEE (Eric's wrestling coach)

Ben Pardee's office was small, with sports equipment strewn about the floor, and forgotten paperwork about his desk that only served to make the room feel more cramped. His head was clean shaven, which served to exacerbate his already intimidating appearance. He later told me that in addition to coaching and physical education, he also taught remedial math, though there seemed to be no evidence of study in his office. We spoke at length about his commitment to the boys, of helping them on their way to manhood, and the many struggles they faced as adolescents. He had spent years looking for boys he could hone, and had many insights both about those he could, and those he could not.

Billy Sprecher was the dangerous one, if you ask me. His brother Buck was a fool, that's the truth, and he'll have plenty of time to think about his bad choices in prison. But Buck...well...Buck was just stupid and slow with a bad temper. He was dangerous, sure, but all you really had to do was stay out of his way. No one knows what *really* happened, but if you ask me, both of them coulda just walked away if they'd had the good sense to. God knows Eric should've. The whole town knew Buck wasn't someone to mess with, but the whole town also knew he'd let you walk away from a fight, if only you'd put your tail between your legs and say uncle. Eric was smart enough to know that. He woulda knowed that no one, and I mean *no one* would have called him a coward for walking away from a fight with Buck Sprecher. Something else must've happened. I don't know what, but Eric was too damn smart to walk into that. Buck was stupid and slow, sure, but he was one mean son of a bitch, and the mean out classed all the rest. Jeb had it too, a mean streak that boiled into a temper that never cooled off until someone was laid out on the floor. I tried to channel all that anger into his wrestling, *Buck's* that is, but it was just too wild. Too sloppy.

Billy, though, he was something else altogether. Where Buck was built like a brick shithouse, Billy was a wiener dog. He wrestled in the 106 for chrissake, and that's the truth. He had some muscle, don't get me wrong. You can't spend half your waking hours on a farm and not have

a *little* muscle. But it wasn't his muscle that made him dangerous. You took one look at Buck and you knew you'd better walk away fast. You looked at Billy, and you thought, "*Well, I could take that guy.*" You'd a been wrong, but that's what you'd a thought. What really made that boy dangerous was his smarts. He could out think any single wrestler I've had on my mats, and I mean *any*. The kid was probably the black sheep of that family, knowing what I know of Jeb. In that family you show your worth by winning trophies and puttin' in two days worth of work each day, all season long. I'm sure Billy did his share of work, but he wasn't exactly the plow horse that Buck was, now was he? That kid earned *his* keep with his *brain*, and brainwork wasn't exactly good currency at the Sprecher farm. So here's this kid inherits none of the Sprecher genes for being the good mule the old man wants, the only genes from that stock worth anything, and gets left with nothing but the anger. Anger he can't do much with, 'cause he was lucky if he was 95 pounds and no coordination. The boy couldn't throw a punch to save his life. Now you take a kid with brains and fill him with a steaming kettle of anger with no way to fight it out, and you can see why I say he was the dangerous one.

I would not be surprised at all, I would not, if that kid had a stockpile of firearms and explosives, just waiting for the day. He was just that sort of kid. I can see him planning a massacre worse than Tullahoma, and talking his boys into going down with him. If Buck hadn't stepped up for him, we mighta lost the whole school, and not just two students, that's the truth. And it ain't over yet. Billy Sprecher's a ticking time bomb, and the next time someone gets in his way, big brother won't be around to do the damage for him. He'll have to do it for himself, and he won't be as *kind* as Buck.

See, Billy never got bullied much, 'cause he walked around with this specter of Buck behind him, and no one in their right mind would mess with Buck's little brother. If he hadn't had that, the kid would've been pummeled pretty regularly, I guess, and maybe he just woulda had his revenge like those bastards in Tennessee. Don't get me wrong. I don't allow my boys to bully the pussies, and they *know* what'll happen if I catch them. I don't think it's right, and that's the truth. A man goes after the *big* fish, and throws the minnows back. That's what I tell my boys.

Besides, the world's a different place from when I was growing up. It used to be boys being boys. Now they snap a towel at someone and it's a high fucking crime. I run a clean program, and my boys know it, and I don't want no one to have no excuse to shut us down. Of course...well, the thing is though, you just can't be everywhere can you? You hear things, this kid or that lost his cool and threw some band kid onto the pavement in the parking lot. Or gave him a swirly in piss water. I know it still happens, but you can't believe every rumor that crosses your desk, and, well, 21st century or not, boys will be boys.

Billy, though, never got the short end of that one. In fact, it was pretty much the opposite. He made up for being little by acting big. Word around here was he was the worst bully of the lot, and let me tell you, that class was a pretty bad lot. Little big man, y'know? Safe under big brother's protection. I heard more than one rumor in those days about little Billy Sprecher playing the big bad bully. Not with his own muscle. Like I said, he didn't have much of that. But he did have cronies, and they did most of his dirty work for him. He may not have been much of a fighter, but he was a devious leader, and he knew there was nothin' to stop him when us *authority figures* weren't around. Boy made a lot of enemies in his time, and it's no surprise he got stung. I guess he put down the little fairy one too many times. I don't know. Or maybe it's true what they say. Maybe he really *is* a homo, and was just trying to cover it up. Who the hell knows? All I know is when push came to shove, he was out there all alone, that's the truth. It was one thing for the boys to keep their hands off of Billy Sprecher out of fear of big Buck, but it was quite another for them to stand up for him out of nothing but loyalty. I guess they figured if Billy couldn't stand up for himself, Buck would have to put up or shut up. What the hell did they care?

You heard about the scene at the auto shop? What I would have given to see that. Billy standing there taking it from the Nachreiner girl, and nobody lifting a finger, just standing around, watching him squirm. She shoulda got a medal for that, instead of...well, she didn't get a god-damn *medal*, that's for sure.

HOWARD COLDER (Stormy's friend) Part 2

Howard had his own opinions about Bill Sprecher, of course, and as he shared them with me, I found his shell to start falling away, revealing the edges of an insecure child from his past. For Howard, any discussion of Bill Sprecher was inseparable from what Howard called his "crime", which was similarly inseparable from the guilt over Stormy's death he was unable to escape. As we dug into this story, he began to lose eye contact, stare more at the floor, and become increasingly self-conscious.

Bill Sprecher? Yeah, I figured you'd come around to that eventually. It's hard to talk about, so you have to stay with me if I circle around a bit. The first thing is, though, the most important thing...what I...what you have to understand is that no matter what I tell you, I *know* I shouldn't have done it. There are all kinds of reasons and I'll give you them all, but in the end...in the end I *knew* what I was doing and I shouldn't have done it. I say that's the most important because I've spent a lot of time going over all of this in my head, asking myself if what I did was justified. If it was fair. If it was the right thing. I don't suppose it was any of those things, and I don't want anyone to think I do. After you hear me tell the story, though, you will probably think I felt justified. That I was in some way righteous. I wasn't. I was just an angry kid who stuck a stick into hornet's nest to find out what would happen. That's all. I just don't know how to tell it any other way.

Not yet.

I'm not sure where to start. I don't suppose it's as obvious sitting here, just the two of us, but put me in a lineup with your random pick of my *classmates* and it will become painfully obvious to you that I am what is so often and indelicately referred to as the runt of the litter. We've been through all that already. I say it again, though, because I wasn't the *only* one. Put Bill Sprecher up there with me, and suddenly I wouldn't look like such a freak. In a lineup, where you couldn't hear us speak, you'd just see two boys in a line of men. If you saw a photo, if you knew nothing else about us, if we were dressed the same, we would look like the little brothers.

For me, who was new to town as a kid, who had no local history, who had, in addition to the photographic differences, a little more empathy with his own, let's call it *feminine* side, the future was pre-written. Every town needs a whipping boy, and I was type cast for the part. It was easy for them to write me off, to see me as nothing but the little *faggot*. In that town, probably in any town that size, you never really belong until your grandparents went to the same high school. Until then, you'll always be a stranger, and strangers are easy to dismiss. That town was a tribe to be born into. A clan. They are friendly to visitors, yes, but as *tourists*. They will say hello to you in the street, and chat about the weather, and might even offer vague invitations to come over for dinner sometime, but don't expect the dinner to ever actually happen. To ever be truly welcomed as kin. Not until you've at least married in. There was never any hope for me.

My parents didn't seem to mind. They had each other, and weren't particularly social people. Besides, it's hard to become friends with your doctor. He just knows too much about you.

Bill Sprecher, though, he was as kin as it gets. He was one of *them*, or at least he came from a long line of *them*. Born into the tribe. I say this to help you understand not the difference between us, but the *similarities*. He was smart like me, scrawny like me, sensitive like me, and in every way that matters, ripe to be outcast from the tribe like me. No, that's not it. More like...ok, my whole childhood was spent figuring out how to survive in this world I didn't belong in, right? They showed open disdain, well, outright hostility, really, toward me, and I survived by staying out of their way, circling the edges of their territory, and making the occasional night raid for food. That's how an outcast survives until he's strong enough to leave the tribe behind. Bill, though...Bill never had that option. He had to fight all of his life, pretending to be one of them when he knew he wasn't. He couldn't slink off into the darkness and hide, as I did. He had to fake it, put on his warpaint and dance in front of the fire with the rest of them, where everyone could see him. Judge him. They let me be myself because I didn't *matter* to them, and maybe because they needed a punching bag. He was one of *them*, though, and he would change or he would die.

So Bill Sprecher changed who he was, and *became* one of them. At least, that's how it always seemed to me. He learned to be tough, to be angry, to be mean. And he went further with that than anyone. He *had* to. It was the only way he could prove to them that he belonged. He became as mean a soul as anyone in that town may ever have seen. In some ways, I feel sorry for him. In *some* ways. In most ways, I wish him ill, or dead, or writhing in pain.

How about another cigarette?

[He continued to talk as we walked back out to that frozen stairway, thick with the salty smell of frozen butts.]

I'm just human. I know I shouldn't feel that way. That I should forgive him. That I should see him as a victim of a brother and father and town full of pricks that forced him to become what he is. A victim of circumstance. That's how I *should* feel, but I...just suffered too much at his hands. I'm not yet far enough away to let go of the pain. At least, that's what my therapist says.

[He lit his cigarette and took a deep drag, letting it out slowly and meticulously.]

How about a short litany of crimes, done by his boys under his command? Spleen with a baseball bat. Thrown into the swamp. Hung from a tree. I'm sure you heard *that* story. Forced to run naked through town. Forced to wear a dress. Egged. And egged. And egged. Punched. Kicked. Winded. To the kidney. To the neck. To the balls. Stolen lunches. Ruined homework. And of course...well...as I said before, I make no excuses. I'm not trying to make myself sound justified. But it's one thing for them to torture me. I suffered, but it was *me* suffering. When I found Pepper in the woods, two weeks after she had disappeared, chained to a tree, her legs mutilated from starvation and madness....Eric Trotter was an asshole, but Bill Sprecher was a *monster*. He spent a lifetime driving me to hurt him back. And I fell for it.

[We were interrupted here by an acquaintance of Howard's, and we all made small talk for a while. When his cigarette was finished, he excused us from his friend and walked me back to our table where our coffee had long gone cold.]

Now to really understand what happened, you also have to understand my weapon. Her name was Bernice Feiner. Bernie. Unlike the rest of us, Bernie had other choices in life. Bernie was not, like the rest of us, doomed to be an outcast. The life we lived on the edges of darkness, while the rest of the tribe stayed warm around the fire circle, was not her destiny as it was ours. She hung with us by *choice*. We used to give her a hard time for *slumming it* with us, but I wonder sometimes that the choice she made wasn't more difficult than we gave her credit for. We didn't always take her seriously because we knew she could leave anytime she wanted, when maybe we should have taken her seriously for exactly the same reason. Anyway, she would spend time with us, and then go back to her other friends and we wouldn't hear from her for forever, other than saying "Hey" or whatever in the hall, which was important, there's no doubt. She never betrayed us, never ignored us. She just kind of flitted into and out of our circle as it pleased her.

The other thing you have to know about Bernie is that she was, I don't know, maybe still is, a major gossip. And because she had access to the world at large, you had to be a little careful what you said around her. Not that any of us cared what the world at large thought of us, but you could sometimes hear Sarah or Pen hold back a little around Bernie when the conversation got too personal. It was subtle, but it was there. I tended to bend the other way, just to prove to Bernie that nothing she told anyone could hurt me, and Stormy...well...Stormy kind of went her own way, didn't she? I mean, the rest of us could *say* we didn't care what anyone thought of us. For Sarah and Pen it was just untrue. For me, it was almost the complete opposite. I wanted to people to think the *worst* of me. Jesus, I've changed in the last few years. But Stormy, she really didn't care what anyone thought about her. *Really*. As in for *real*. I used to find that ironic, that it was the robot that could be more real than the rest of us, but now I think maybe it wasn't ironic at all. Maybe it was only natural that it took a robot to rise above human weakness. Who the hell knows?

Anyway, my point about Bernie is that I knew *exactly* what I was doing when I said what I said in front of her. I *knew* she would repeat it to the right people, and *I* wouldn't be responsible. By the time the rumor

took hold, it would be so far removed from me that I could deny it. *Plausible deniability*. That's what I told myself. Of course, it's all bullshit. I said it in just the right way to just the right person at just the right time, and my plan worked exactly the way I intended.

This is where I'm supposed to say that if I could undo it, I would. That after seeing the evil fruits born of my labor, I weep with regret and contrition, sure that I would choose better if I was only given a second chance. The thing is, though, I'm just not sure that's honest. I think part of who I am today, just a few *long* years later, is a result of at least trying to fight back in my own way. If I undid the fighting back altogether, I'm not sure I would still be standing here, well, sitting here. If I undid that *one* thing, that one poke in the eye, and did something else instead, I'm not sure it wouldn't have been even worse. I hate that I started the snowball that ended in the death of my best friend. *Hate* myself for it. But I didn't kill her, and neither did Bill Sprecher. That honor belongs to Bill's big brother, Wallace Matthew Sprecher IV.

From STORMY NACHREINER'S journal, undated.

Wedged between this entry and the next is a drawing of a small hearth, burning but warm and comfortable. A pot hangs over the fire as if to say dinner will soon be ready, come sit by the fire and warm yourself.

I feel like I was meant for something greater. I suppose everybody feels like that. Feels they are living the wrong life. Doing the wrong things. Meant to be someplace else. Some *one* else. Someone better. But who?

I had this vision.

I was walking to school. It was cold and windy and icy and biting and mean. Every sliver of exposed skin was aching. My fingers were frozen in my gloves. My toes had lost their feeling. The wind was screaming at me, "Get out! Go hide in your little shelter. Escape me if you can. Dare me and die." And I thought of how miserable I was, how much I was suffering, how painful was the cold.

Then, came the vision. Through the ache, through the noise, through the crushing cold, I saw pain, deep and true. Horrific suffering. I saw the earth laid waste. Bodies mutilated, strewn about a barren landscape. I saw mothers torn from their children and raped by machines. I saw men paralyzed with fear, dying of thirst, licking the dirt beneath their prone faces, desperate for some small remnant of moisture. I heard the tortured screams of a billion people, a cacophony of fear, each voice louder than the last, each more desperate.

And I fell to my knees.

And I cried.

And I thought.

And when the vision had faded, I knew I was stronger.

I do not suffer. The cold may kill me, it may not. But I have a warm home that awaits me. I have water when I'm dry. I have family. I have friends. I live.

And I took off my scarf, my hood. I opened my jacket. Not to suffer. Not to show my indifference. Rather, to harden myself. Prepare.

Learn to withstand life's daily tolls to better fight the extraordinary ones when they come.

Epiphany.

I cannot be greater than I am without change. Change does not come from without. Threats will. Opportunities. Challenges. Taunts and dares. If I am to be ready for them, I must change. And change can only come from within.

The question is not, who am I, but rather, who shall I become?

MARY BELTWATER

In Amboy, there was no shortage of people to retell the story born of Howard Colder's imagination. Mary was only one of many classmates who was sure she knew what happened with certainty, and had been fooled into drawing the conclusions Howard had so devoutly hoped for. It was not surprising to see how easily rumor can become fact, the more so when that rumor confirms what we most want to hear.

Of course he was. Is. I mean, he must be right? He held poor little Howie Colder at gun point and made him suck his cock. It's not exactly, y'know, something you would do if you were *straight* now, is it? It does explain a lot, though. I mean, it's not like you really *can* be gay in this town and survive very long. At least not in *that* family. I mean, here was this scrawny little runt, probably desperate for Daddy's love, spending his life trying to out-Buck his big brother. Being gay just wasn't part of the image his was going for, was it? Howie was a different kind of problem altogether. I mean, *he* wasn't really hiding *anything*, and the kid's life was a living hell because of it. Just *not* hiding it was enough to bring the assholes down on him pretty much daily. But he had a *sophisticated* family. His parents were *doctors* for fuck's sake. I mean, they must have been supportive of him on *some* level. With Bill, I mean, it makes *sense* that *he* would hide it. He had everything to lose. That's probably what made him such an asshole. He, like, had to go out of his way to prove how manly he was, or whatever, and ended up worse than the assholes he was afraid of. Everyone knows if you hide it, it fucks you up. I mean, we may not be very *tolerant* around here, but it's not the fucking fifties. We know we're *supposed* to be. I mean, it's not like we don't see it all the time on tv, or the internet, or whatever. Some kid like Bill pushing the gay to the inside, suppressed memories or whatever, and nothing to hide them but all that tough guy shit on the outside. Probably end up a psycho killer like his brother. Yeah. I'd say it explains a lot.

MARK ORLAND

Another variation on the same theme. Howard's story had successfully weaved it's way through the school, through the community, and quickly turned from mean spirited gossip to historical fact.

Nobody said it to his face, but it's not like it was some big secret. Howie Colder was Bill Sprecher's favorite punching bag. Well, sort of. The way it usually went down it wasn't so much Bill pounding on little Howie so much as his boys doing the pounding. Bill usually went in more for what you might call a *verbal* attack, and let his friends do the physical damage. Caleb, Kyle, Ken. The effing CKK. *Gut, butt, and strut*. And it wasn't just Howie. They got *me* once, too, before I was big enough to fight back. They'd pick on anybody, as long as he was weak enough. Effing cowards. Totally predictable, too. Bill never got in on the real action until his prey was already down and fairly suffering. Until that fight, I'm not sure anyone ever saw him go one on one without the CKK to warm up his victim.

Anyway, you can understand that Bill and the CKK, or Bill and Buck, even, was a *completely* different thing than Bill all by his lonesome. Well, one day after school, Bill *is* all by his lonesome, and runs into Howie, also alone. Bill starts taunting him with the usual shit. *Faggot* this and *cocksucker* that, and Howie, seeing that Bill is alone, figures maybe he has a chance. Instead of running, which would have been the smart thing to do, he pulls out this folding hunting knife he's been keeping around to protect himself. Of course he's totally unprepared to actually *use* it. I'm sure Howie had some sort of ninja fantasy where he kicked Bill and the CKK's collective asses and stood over them like some kind of effing action hero. Could you blame him? Instead, though, Bill takes it from him in like the first ten seconds, and nearly slits his throat. Bill calls him a few more names and makes him grab his cock. Makes *Howie* grab *Bill's* cock, you understand. Says stuff like, "You *like* that, homo? *That* what you like to feel in your hands?" Then he says, "Maybe you'd like the taste in your little faggot *mouth*," and with the knife still to poor little Howie's throat forces him to give a blow job.

Not that anyone saw it happen. Like I said, they were totally alone. Probably why Bill thought he could get away with it. I guess Howie must have told *somebody*, because the story did get out. Bill probably hoped no one would believe it, but you only had to see the way they looked at each other to know it was true. And it's not like it was hard to believe, anyway. He was always shouting *homo* this and *faggot* that. Who does that with nothing to hide?

DREW PARKER

And one more for good measure...

Sure, yeah, I heard the story. Bill Sprecher was walking home from school when he ran into Howie Colder behind the water treatment plant. Colder tried to hold him off with a handgun he stole from his father, but Sprecher kicked him in the balls and took the gun. He held it to Colder's head and made him strip naked, eat a bunch of dirt, and do 200 pushups. Then he raped him and left him for dead. Colder laid there for like four hours, with bugs and whatever crawling all over him. Finally this raccoon came sniffing around and woke him up. He somehow managed to crawl home, and locked himself in his room for a week. His parents made him see a psychiatrist, but he never *did* call the police. Then, when Sprecher realized no one was going to think he was fucking cool or whatever for gay rape, he tried to make Colder tell everyone it wasn't true. I was actually *there* for that. Then his fucking brother killed Eric and Stormy just for target practice, and probably raped them too. It's like they're breeding fucking psychos out there.

DEBBIE TROTTER (Eric's Sister) Part 2

After a while, the cafeteria emptied out, and the two of us were left alone to continue our conversation. Even in what was becoming a more private setting, however, Debbie continued to talk as if about curious friends, rather than a brother nearly her age, tragically killed not more than a few years previous. One almost thought she had not yet grieved, and feared for her future when the grief would come bearing down upon her, unexpected but inevitable.

Everyone was weirded out, of course, but I think, y'know, he really *loved* her. Not like it was with Missy. Or even with me and Joe. Those were like, whatd'ya call them, like not crushes but...I don't know, like...like Joe was the one I picked from my group of friends, right? We certainly never thought it was *true love* or anything. We were just having fun, and having a boyfriend didn't seem so bad. I mean, it seemed more serious at the time, but still, even *then* we both basically knew that we were, like, not so much made for each other as much as a....as a....*good match*, I guess. Like we were picking each other to be on the same team, but if it didn't work out, we could always just pick someone else, and it would probably work out fine. Like you know you're supposed to have a boyfriend or whatever, so we just *picked* each other. That's how it was with Joe and me. Like someone asks you what your favorite color is and you don't really have one, but blue seems kinda cool, so you just say *that*. It doesn't really matter, but you gotta pick *something*. It was the same thing with Eric and Missy. Missy was just *convenient* for Eric. Good enough, y'know?

But with Stormy...that was different. I think that might have been part of why everyone was so freaked out, y'know? I mean, my brother was like, king of the school, or whatever. Not officially, or anything, but everyone looked up to him, girls wanted to go out with him, teachers liked him, his coaches liked him. It's like, if there was someone you could call *the man* at Wilson, it was my brother. Then he started hanging out with freakbot Stormy Nachreiner, and all hell broke loose. Actually, hanging out wasn't the big deal so much as his really *falling* for her was.

Like for *real*. Like, I can't live without her, she's the one, effing *soulmate* stuff and whatever. I think his friends would have been freaked out if he had talked that way about *anyone*, because suddenly, y'know, he didn't belong to his friends so much as he belonged to *her*.

Even my mom was freaked. Not that his *grades* dropped or anything like that. If anything, they got better after he...they...y'know, like, fell in love and all that. She'd come over to the house and help him study and they'd hang out up in his room for hours. I mean, you'd expect Mom to think that was a *good* thing, for as much as she used to ride us about homework. I mean, he certainly never studied with *Missy*, and Mom liked *her* well enough. I think, maybe...I don't know, on tv and stuff moms are always freaked out when their sons get married or whatever, and maybe...y'know maybe it was something like that. Like she saw Eric falling for this girl that might *replace* her or whatever, and was just, like, I don't know...jealous or something. It's hard to say what my mom is thinking *ever*, so I can't really say why she was so weird, but she was *definitely* not supportive of their relationship.

It coulda had something to do with Stormy's dad, too. I heard he and my mom dated or whatever in high school. Maybe there was bad blood or something. Mom certainly wasn't going to talk about *that*, and honestly, I didn't really want to know. Still don't, ok? Anyway, for whatever reason, she never really warmed to Stormy, and just gave her the kind of *cold* treatment, y'know? Avoided talking to her, changed the subject when her name came up, never invited her to dinner like she was always doing with Missy and Joe. Not that Joe ever did. Come over to dinner that is. What an asshole. I can't believe how much time I wasted on him.

Anyway, I guess our friends, *Eric's* friends were pretty much like Mom. Eric had this new part of his life and it didn't matter whether he wanted to share it with the rest of us or not, because no one was having *any* of it. It's like...what the hell do I...like...ok, you go away to some cousin's house during the summer, really far away, like California or Hawaii or something, ok? And when you get back, you want to tell everybody about how cool it was, how you learned to surf, or saw these awesome sunsets or whatever, but nobody effing cares, right? Because no

matter how good you are at explaining how awesome it was, they can't ever experience it for themselves, so like, the best they can be is *jealous*, ok? So everyone listens politely, and whatever, but nobody really *cares*, right? And the sooner they can change the subject back to something they can *relate* to, the better. Eric's life with Stormy was like that. Nobody wanted to effing *hear* about it, but it was the only thing that mattered to him anymore. So pretty quickly, he just stopped hanging out around his old friends 'cause they didn't care about what he wanted to talk about, and *he* didn't care about what *they* wanted to talk about.

At the same time he certainly wasn't going to hang out with *her* freaky friends. That would have been too much, even for Eric. I think *she* basically went through the same crap with them as he did with us. Y'know, she had this foot in the other world, sort of, *our* world, and if *she* wasn't really welcome, you could be sure *they* weren't. I'm sure they were as uninterested in her new love as Eric's friends were about his. Y'know, for as *open minded* as they pretended to be, in the end I think they were just as locked into their own little world as we were. None of us really had room for this thing that was happening between them. Like *too much information*, right?

[*She put her hand up between us and looked to the side, a gesture that seemed to go hand in hand with her words.*]

You don't have to be a genius to figure out how it ends. The more time they spent together, the less their friends cared, and the less their friends cared, the more time they spent together. It was like a...y'know a...vicious circle or whatever. Even if they hadn't been in love when it started, we all pretty much forced them into a place where they had to be by the end. Like when your mom tells you not to hang out with someone, and you just want to hang out with them *more*. I'm not saying it was our fault, or whatever. I'm just saying we all *contributed* to driving them into each other's arms. By the time of the shitstorm, they were completely stuck. Together, y'know? Like *you and me against the world*, right? At that point, there was no way one of them could have gone down without the other. When it all came down, I think my brother actually *believed* he couldn't live without her.

[*She looked off into a corner.*]

I guess he was right.

**From the story "Building Tomatoes" by ERIC TROTTER
(written for English class) Part 2**

Although much of the story is missing, from fragments and context, one can almost piece together the missing plot. It appears that the world of Derek and Rain was devastated by some sort of unstoppable virus, leaving only the two of them behind in an empty world. There were several paragraphs of what seemed to be a description of the death around them, along with some thoughts on losing their friends. As the largest of several wine stains clears up, they are beginning a journey.

Their town, their families, their friends, everything and everyone they had ever known were now three days journey behind them. The disaster had stolen their pasts, but they had each other, and walked toward a new future. Maybe.

Their journey had started as merely an attempt to get help, but each town was like the last, cities of death, born of viral evolution. They stopped at every farmhouse, every supermarket, every school. Even the hospitals were silent. The closer they came to Chicago, the more buildings they saw, the more crowded the roads became with motionless vehicles, and the more potent became the sense of loneliness for Derek and Rain, quite possibly the last living people on Earth.

And they began to wonder if they could survive alone.

It was in such a state that Derek and Rain were nearly scared to death by an explosion less than two blocks away. A seventh story window blew out with flames and smoke, and shattered glass and debris fell to the street below. They assumed a long abandoned gas line had mysteriously connected with heat coming through the window, or something equally as unlikely. With nothing else to do, and welcome for the distraction, they headed over to investigate.

They found the professor in what they thought was just another building taken over by death. Had they been traveling by night, the lights coming through the window would have been a giveaway, but by day, they were barely noticeable. Had his experiment not gone awry at just the moment it had, they might have walked right past him, oblivious to

the one other soul they had come near since the disaster. Fortunately for them all, however, his experiment had literally gone off with a bang, calling Derek and Rain in a way that was impossible to ignore. Hours later, they were sitting around a fireplace with a man who might well have been, but for them, the last man on Earth.

"It is too late to stopping the virus," the professor said. "It is too virulent. Those who are left must be already immune. To be focus my research there would be pointless. All to do now is rebuild."

"Rebuild?" asked Rain.

"Yes, pretty lady. Rebuild. There are, I think, a few more like you on this planet that is lonely now. You and your gentleman must find them, make children, and begin again."

Rain and Derek looked awkwardly at each other. Had he really just told them to make babies together? They were still practically children themselves. Derek felt a chill creep over him. He thought of the people he had left behind. Thought of his friends who had never bothered to think for themselves, of his parents who cared more about his grades and trophies than about his heart. Could he really seek out more like them, and go right back to where he started? Making babies was one thing, but to fall back into the world he had finally escaped was something he wasn't sure he wanted to do. Wasn't sure he *could* do. Besides, they hadn't seen another living soul since they had started on their journey. Was there even anybody left? It all seemed so impossible.

"Professor," Derek said, "Even if we wanted to, and I'm not saying we want to, how would we do it?"

"Oh mother of my lord," the professor replied, "did your fathers not talk to you about...hmmm...well...how we...don't you know about the...how you say...*facts of life?*"

Another awkward look between Rain and Derek. Finally they laughed, and were pleased to find they still had some joy left. "No," Derek returned, "I mean yes...I mean...we know about that. What I meant was, where do we find others? How do we know if there *are* others? How do we know if there are enough of us? How do we know we haven't already lost?"

The professor heaved a heavy sigh. "We *have*, young man. We *have* already lost."

"What do you mean?" asked Rain.

"I mean that if there are others, they may be thousands of miles away. They may not be friends. They may not to speak your language. They may not to trust you, or you them. Until you came by, I was sure I was the last alive man. I asked my god, a god I had never troubled before, why he leave me. Why he kill everyone but me? Did you not ask yourselves the same thing?"

"I...well...of course we did. I mean...well..." Derek stammered. He wasn't quite sure what he wanted to say. Rain, however, knew exactly what he felt, and finished his thought for him. "You see, professor," she began, "Derek and I had each other. We were so grateful. When the rest of the world fell away, we thought perhaps it was meant to be. It wasn't something to be spoken of. It was an evil thought. *Is* an evil thought. We never wished harm on our friends, on our families. But the harm came, and, yes, we looked for meaning. Why would *we* be left together? And we thought, please forgive me for saying this, we thought it was *meant* to be. That we were the only people in the world before, and everyone else was just an illusion. Once we found each other, the illusions weren't necessary, so they just fell away." She took Derek's hand. "We haven't spoken of this, but I know Derek feels exactly the same way." Derek looked into Rain's eyes and nodded.

"Then why me?" asked the professor, almost as a challenge. "Where do I fit in to your god's plans?"

Derek looked at Rain, and knew the answer. It was everything they had been talking about, everything they believed. Now, almost miraculously, they might have a chance to actually make it happen. He turned to the professor, and answered his question. "To teach us how to build the world."

The professor, however, seemed to miss the point. "Again with the *facts of life*."

Derek took Rain's hand, this time with a smile instead of a laugh. "Not *grow* a world, Professor," Derek replied. "*Build* one."

MABEL SPRECHER (Bucks Mom) Part 2

I think, perhaps, the subject of Jeb's enemies was a safer topic for Mabel. As the conversation moved to the Nachreiners, Mabel became increasingly self-assured, and the furtive glances toward the door waned. Only when she came around to Jeb's troubled childhood did I sense her nervous tendencies returning. The presence of hot tempered violence never seemed far from the room, as if, at any moment, we might be surprised by a wave of hate that had been waiting all the time, just outside the door.

There was no love in this house for the Nachreiner's. Even before Fred stole Jeb's...*thing*. He called it his...dear lord forgive me, he called it his *trophy*. To the very end, he called that girl his trophy. Oh, he knew. He knew what Fred had done. It weren't too hard for Jeb to figure out, though I'm sure *Fancy* Fred Nachreiner thought it would be. Thought we were all too stupid to see what he'd done. As if it weren't completely obvious, even to a bunch of stupid white trash like us. No, we all knew who'd done it from the day we heard about Molly's baby. We all knew she was barren. It weren't no secret. So where did this baby come from? From Fred? Fancy Fred? Lots of people said it was Fancy Fred's bastard. What a laugh. Fancy Fred Nachreiner off sleeping with strippers in Aurora and bringing back a *love child*? Gimme a break. Anyone who knew anything about Fred knew *that* weren't true. Not with Fred. Not with *that* little goody two shoes. Well, that was a big part of it, too.

[Suddenly, for the first time, Mabel began to enjoy herself, as if one only had to look far enough into the past to not feel threatened by it.]

Back in high school, Fred didn't exactly fit in. He used to wear those collared shirts with this stupid bow tie. That's why we called him *Fancy* Fred. Course, if you want to know what he looked like then, you just need to get a look at him *now*. That boy hasn't changed a bit. All prim and proper and buttoned up. A man should have a little...well...should be a little sloppy. Should have a little dirt under his nails. But Fred. He grew up on a *farm* for cryin' out loud, and I don't think the boy has ever been dirty in his whole life. That's why I say...okay....I'll tell you about

this time when...wait...the thing I wanna say first is that *in addition* to the stupid way he dressed, in addition to they way dirt just never seemed to stick to him, he was also this goody two shoes that would run to the teacher the first second you done somethin' wrong. The whole school knew it, too. You just didn't do *anything* in front Fancy Fred Nachreiner if you didn't want to end up in the principal's office, or worse. If he hadn't been so darned big, the other boys woulda probably beat it out of him over and over. They *did* lick him once or twice, but he *was* a big kid, and his brother Ronny was big *and* tough, so Fred got away with bein' a little tattletale, and probably still is.

Y'know, it's a funny thing about brothers. Ronny and Fred weren't a whole lot differ'nt than my *own* boys in some ways, though I'd a never let Jeb hear *me* say that. Not that Billy was ever anything close to the little weasel Fancy Fred was. Billy is an honest boy who stands up for himself and his friends. And he's small, so standin' up is a lot harder for him than for a boy like Fancy Fred Nachreiner. But I'd be lyin' if I said they weren't both helped by their loyal big brothers. When I think of all the times Buck stood up for little Billy...what he did...takin' care of your brother can make you a man...oh Buck...why did you hafta...*damn you*, Buck.

[Mabel took a moment to pull herself together. She excused herself and left the room, her voice shaky with tears on the verge of forcing themselves out. I waited for some time, then slowly wandered to see where she had gone. I found her in the kitchen next to the coffee pot, staring out the window.]

I'm sorry. I meant to...the coffee got cold, so I thought I should make a fresh pot. It'll just take a minute. You gotta understand, it's been so hard on all of us. This family is full of temper. Hot blood, they call it. They scream. They get into fights. They punch holes in the walls. They break things they're tryin' to fix the minute somethin' goes wrong. But they're good people. Loyal people. What they do, they do because it's *right*. God fearing people. Until Buck, it seemed like the world understood that. Gave them a break. Sure, we pissed a lot of people off. Hurt more than we should. Broke more than we should. But we always paid for what we broke, and it always seemed like after the hot blood came out, things usually ended in a handshake. Like there was *forgiveness* at

the end of the day. Even Jeb got out after five years. After...and now Buck...locked up forever. It don't seem right. And for what? That *robo?* A machine? No. It ain't right.

[*Mabel stared out the kitchen window for a minute or so. Long enough that I was starting to think our conversation might have come to a premature end.*]

Let me pour you a fresh one, and we can go back to the living room.

Ok. Where was I? Oh right, Fancy Fred. I wanted to tell you this story so you could see just what kinda guy Fred really was. So you don't go makin' him into no hero, or somethin'. It goes back a ways. Let's see. First thing you gotta know is that Jeb really shoulda been in *Ronny's* class, back in high school. He missed a lot of school when his pa died, though, and never could quite get caught up.

[*Mabel lowered her voice, and spoke almost conspiratorially.*]

Jeb got held back a coupla times. Not 'cause he was stupid mind you, he weren't. Don't you tell nobody differ'nt. A stupid man couldn't never have saved this farm the way he did, not after bein' locked up and all. No, he ain't stupid. He just had a tough time, was all, what with that mother of his. I mean, what kid in his right mind spends his time doin' homework without his ma pesterin' him? Well Luetta sure never pestered Jeb, you can count on that. I'm not sure she knew he existed, to hear Jeb tell it. And then there was the farm. It went to hell in a hand basket after Jeb's pa died. Jeb certainly tried to save it the first time round, but he just weren't old enough. Or big enough. If his pa'd a lived a few more years, maybe Jeb woulda had a fightin' chance.

[*Mabel let out a laugh here, and it was nice to feel the mood lighten a bit.*]

Well God knows he *fought* anyway. Had a helluva reputation for it, really. Everyone gave him a hard time for it, but he never *started* those fights. That I know for sure. He mighta' throwed the first punch now and then, but it wasn't like he weren't *provoked*. I tell you, it was that *woman*. That *damned* woman, excuse me...she ruined his life. I ask you, what kind of woman leaves her boy alone while she...what kind of...if it weren't for...but we were talkin' about Fred.

By the time Jeb got to high school, his ma was barely able to keep food on the table. She could hardly stay sober long enough to do her...well...I guess *some* people would call it *work*. Jeb was trying to keep the farm goin' under, but he'd given up on more than half of it, and was drinkin' pretty heavily himself. When he did bother to show up to school, there was always someone itchin' for a fight, and it didn't take much to get Jeb riled. Now this is the way *Jeb* told it, ok? I was still in middle school, then. I didn't get to know Jeb until years later.

Well one day, the way Jeb told it, he's sippin on some whiskey back behind the clubhouse, skippin' his class and killin' time as usual when Johnny Spencer and his boys come up, lightin' up cigarettes and gettin' rowdy. Jeb sees trouble comin', but keeps his head. He holds out the bottle as a sort of peace offering. Johnny turns to his boys and says somthin' like, "What you got there, bastard? Mother's milk?" Jeb just stands there, leaning against the clubhouse, silent like a rock. He decides it's about to go badly, and takes another swig for the fight he knows is comin'. Johnny just keeps pushin', of course. Says somethin' dirty about Jeb's mother, something which *I will not repeat*, but which was enough for Jeb to dive in and defend what small remnant was left of his mother's honor. The fight isn't goin' so good for Johnny, though, so he pulls out a knife. If Jeb'd a been sober, maybe he woulda just walked away. Maybe. But he weren't sober and he sure as *heck* didn't walk away. They just keep fightin', 'cept now with a blade in the middle. Somehow Jeb gets his hand on the knife, which shoulda been it, 'cept of course Johnny's boys jump in and only make things worse. Before it's all over, Johnny's boys done run off, Johnny's on the ground with three stab wounds, and the ambulance and cops are on their way.

Course Jeb bolted the minute he heard the sirens, but the damage'd been done. Johnny'd been left for dead behind the clubhouse, with no one to tell the tale but him and his boys. Didn't matter that Jeb had only been tryin' to *defend* himself against *three guys*, of course, 'cause once the cops tracked each of them down, the other boys all lied with the same story and *Jeb* was out there all alone with the truth. The only thing Jeb had goin' for him was that even though the cops knew Jeb for a trouble-maker, they knew Johnny weren't no good neither, and were startin' to

think maybe Jeb's version of the story made some kinda sense. Jeb was gonna hafta do some time no matter what, but it was lookin' more and more like self defense, and maybe Jeb could get off easier when that son-of-a-bitch, excuse me... when *Fancy* Fred Nachreiner opens his little tattle tale mouth and tells the cops not only that he knew Jeb carried a knife regular, but that he had it out for Johnny Spencer. Said he used to take these long walks around town and that whenever he passed the Sprecher farm, he'd seen Jeb whittlin' away on the porch with a four inch blade. Then he said he'd seen Jeb put a big ol' dent in Johnny's GTO with nothin' but his fist. With Johnny laid up in the hospital and three stab wounds four inches deep, it were enough to put Jeb away for five years.

Now ain't no doubt about the truth of what Fancy said, but it were the...what's it called...the...that he...*implied*, that's the word, he *implied* that Jeb musta been lyin', and when you got screw ups like Jeb Sprecher and Johnny Spencer up against a goody two shoes like Fred Nachreiner, who d'ya think they're gonna believe? Jeb never had a chance. And that weren't the only run in Jeb had with the Nachreiners. They got a history, these families. Sometimes I think they saved the robot just to shove it in our faces. Well they got theirs, you can't deny that. If only the Trotter boy hadn't...the damn fool...I only wish...poor Buck.

[*Mabel became lost in thought again.*]

Prison weren't good to Jeb. Truth told I think they nearly broke him. Course, if he hadn't gone, maybe we'd never have gotten together, but that don't mean he don't *regret*, y'know? But Johnny lived, and Jeb behaved, and five years later he was back in the world. I'd say it were the hard knocks that finally made Jeb ready to take on the farm. That and...well, I can't really take no credit, but love can do some funny things. I tell Buck that every time I visit, but Jeb only got five. Buck's got twenty to life, and I don't think that boy has much of a chance at *good behavior*.

BERNICE FEINER (friend of Stormy's)

I caught up with Bernice Feiner on the campus at Northern Illinois University. She had a little more than an hour between classes, and was happy to meet with me during that time. We sat along a pond not far from her next class. Her dress was casual, and seemed to be summoning the warm summer months just around the corner. It was obvious that she was comfortable in her surroundings, but unlike Debbie Trotter, seemed unconcerned with her social life. I noticed a number of students attempt to get Bernice's attention as we walked to and from the park, but in each case, Bernice kept her attention on me, assured in her conviction that they would be there later, when she had more time for them.

Some people gave me a hard time about hanging with Stormy and those guys. Like we weren't really friends or something, just because I didn't, like, dedicate my life to them or something. The truth is I really *liked* her. I liked *all* of them. I just liked other people, too, and didn't feel like I needed to dedicate my life to being a vampire or something just to hang out. What happened though, what I never expected, was that they opened this part of me I didn't know existed. This part of me where I questioned who I was and what I was doing and the meaning of life and all that. It was all pretty eye opening, actually. It really did make me want to just drop my other life and become one of them forever. Really. The thing was, though, that every time I thought about that, I kept coming back to this voice that said if I dropped all my old friends, I would just be some poser, like *they* all thought *we* were, instead of a real person trying to look a little deeper. Like I somehow needed to bring the lessons of my new life with Stormy to my old world and see if they still had any traction. If they were *real*.

What am I trying to say?

Ok. It's like this. It's like when someone posts something and you're like, "That's so true, and the proof you've just shown me is completely irrefutable, and I'm now totally converted to your point of view," or whatever, but then you see some other post pulling it apart piece by piece and you're like, "How could I have been so stupid to believe that,"

and then another one backing up the first and it, like, goes on forever until you feel like you can't trust anyone or believe anything. Y'know what I mean? Well that's kind of how it was with Stormy. Like I would be with them and feel like everything they were saying was so completely true, but that if I didn't try those ideas out in the real world, I would never know if I was just being...what'd'ya call it, conned or something. Then I'd hang out with my other friends, and the goth girls would start to seem kind of ridiculous.

So, y'know, I would bounce back and forth between these worlds, and never really fit in either. Like independent voters, right? Like, nobody really *believes* in them. Everybody makes fun of them because they can't make up their minds, but maybe they're the only ones that are really *thinking*, right? Not just blindly following one side and never daring to listen to the other. So there I was, trying to be *independent*, right? and trying to share these ideas with both sides. I would tell Carey something Pen had said, and tell Howie something Mark had said, and try to show them how we weren't really that different after all. Of course *they* all saw it as *gossip* and tattling or whatever, but I actually think it was good for me.

The thing you can't forget about me, though, is that I really *did* care about her. About all of them. I really did, *do*, think of them as my friends. I think about Stormy all the time. Miss her voice. Her wisdom. She brought out good things in me. At least, y'know, she made me think about who I wanted to be, what my place in the world was, or what I wanted it to be. I think those are good things. What kind of god destroys someone like that?

So that's me. How I fit in, I guess. Is that, y'know, does that answer your question?

[I encouraged her to say anything that was on her mind, or tell any stories she had about Stormy.]

Well, I'm sure you want to hear about Howie and Bill. Everyone does. It's kind of my *role*, isn't it? God, was I an ass. I'll keep it simple. Bill and his loser friends were always picking on Howie, and he'd tell us all about some beating almost daily. One day, Howie told me Bill Sprecher came up on him alone and forced Howie to give him a blowjob,

but that he was too afraid to do anything about it. It was pretty extreme compared to the usual beatings, but I honestly thought the story was true. Really. It was everything I wanted to believe about Bill Sprecher, so I guess I...I mean, it was so *obvious* to me. I guess in retrospect it was a little *too* obvious. Anyway, I told the story to a few of my friends. My *other* friends. I mean, I admit I was naive, but I honestly thought I was *helping*. Thought maybe getting the story out would give Howie the courage to press charges. At the least, I thought it might help cut down on some of the bullying crap. On the *intolerance*, right? Well, we all know how wrong I was about *that*.

BILL YACHMAN (resident at St. Victor's Mental Health Facility) Part 3

The madman came at last to the part of the story I had been waiting for, his one and only known contact with Stormy Nachreiner. How complicated the human brain is, that it can take itself into madness, create its own history, its own world, and find what evidence it needs merely by catching a single glimpse. Bill Yachman may be a red herring, may have created the idea of the human shaped weapon from outer space in the depths of his insanity, but why Stormy Nachreiner? What was it about her? Was it merely that his madness was waxing, and any girl of her age would have done? No doubt. And yet, perhaps it was the same qualities that made Stormy feel as if she was an alien in her own world that drew the madman in as he searched for the evidence he needed to make his delusions real.

I escaped once. Put this place in a panic. I'm not ashamed at all. Don't let them tell you I am, or that I regret it. I would do it again if I could. It was about five years ago, or what *you* people call years. How you can stand these seasons that change so quickly, I will never understand. Where I come from, the seasons last nearly ten times longer. You have *time* to get to know them, to know your world. To feel your place. Here it is always change change change. One minute it is snowing, the next the sun is burning green leaves from the trees, and then it is snowing again. These are not years. They are impressions. They leave no trace. It is so easy to lose track of time here. Of your *life*. But then I suppose all prisons are like that.

I had been living in this particular prison for an unbearable length of time when I was at long last woken from my slumber. It began with a dream. In my dream, the infant weapon had grown into a young girl and we had been somehow reunited, together again on my ship, this time heading home, traveling full speed toward the heart of our enemies. I could see them through her eyes, our enemies. They looked different, softer, thoughtful. I looked deeper, more closely, trying to discover what had changed about them when I suddenly realized what was so strange

about them. Without a doubt, they had *souls*. Stones with *souls*. Through my own eyes they were nothing but heartless stones, but to *her*, to her they were *people*. When I woke, I felt a rush of fear and guilt and anxiety. Anxiety as in I was anxious. I had work to do and was anxious to be about it. Guilty as in I felt the the shaming stare of Dr. Carver upon me, condemning me for living a life of comfort within my prison, while my people continued to suffer under the oppression of the stones. I looked around at my prison and saw a life wasted, a mission failed, a failure that had given up, and I wondered if I had been given a second chance. I was suffused with new purpose.

My surroundings were less secure at that time than they are now.

[He swept the room before him with his arm, indicating the lengths to which the hospital had gone to keep him in his quarters. He finished his sweep by holding his arm in the air, palm facing me, so that I could clearly see the scar on his forearm where his tracking device had been implanted.]

At *that* time I was not yet considered dangerous, and I had a certain amount of freedom which is, as you can see, no longer afforded me. It was a Sunday. A day of visitors and family. The day was warm and sunny. I simply left the grounds in the midst of my constitutional with the aid of several trees, a small amount of courage, and a great deal of luck. It was, above all, their complacency about me that allowed my little adventure. I had, as I said, given up on my mission, and was a non-threatening member of the community here. They had no reason to keep a watchful eye as I set out for a morning walk not remotely unlike one I took every other morning without incident.

I had not spent a great deal of time planning, but knew enough about the geographical area from my original landing research for a good idea of how to locate my ship, hidden as it was. I estimated that location to be approximately three days on foot, perhaps four if I stayed off roadways. I suspect now it was closer to six, but sadly I never *did* find it. If I had...well I would not still be here, now would I? I have since begun to study local maps at every opportunity, though I fear that, even with complete freedom it would take me months to recover my ship.

After six days, hunger drove me to the nearest village where I found work putting groceries in bags and carrying them to vehicles waiting outside the store. I pilfered food until I could receive pay, and slept in the woods, searching through the night for my too well hidden ship. When *she* walked into the store with an older female, I felt a wave of power flow through me, and I knew immediately. I could *sense* her. It was everything I could do to remain standing as I felt her presence moving about the store. I waited cautiously for her to work her way back to me, which she and the older female finally did, their cart filled with groceries. As I packed their bags, I saw no shortage of meat and I was pleased, hope returning to me for the first time since I had left my prison. I stole a look at the paper the older female used to pay for her groceries and wrote down the address. I now needed only to find my ship, reclaim my property, and take her into battle.

As I said, however, my ship was not to be found, and I soon began to question whether my memories were really my own. Whether I was sane and clear sighted, or whether everything they had said about me, about my mind, my sanity, my so-called delusions was true. How does one know? How does one tell? Are your memories your own, or merely the trappings of insanity. Is the world real, or is it illusion? Am I the madman, or are you? What can I do but trust *myself*?

I worked at the grocery by day, and searched the woods by night, each night feeling a little bit more that perhaps I was mad after all. Sleep-walking through my job, dreaming only of a warm dry bed, and the comfort of giving in. On a day when distrust of my own sanity had waxed to a peak, one of my former jailers walked into the store. She recognized me immediately and I hesitated. We stared at each other, each sure of the recognition, both afraid to react. Quietly, she pulled out her phone as I stood frozen in front of her, waiting for the end. Perhaps I *wanted* to be caught. To be locked up. Perhaps I wanted an excuse to fail my mission. To give in at last. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

Once I was returned here, there was no further hope of escape. Any trust I had gained had been irrevocably lost with my premature, and therefore unacceptably dangerous foray into the world of free men. As you can see, I no longer have freedom of the grounds. I can no longer

move about unseen. This had always been a prison, but now there is no disguise. No *pretense*. My door is locked at night. I am watched during the day. Tracked for life. I am considered dangerous.

But it is not *I* who am dangerous. I am *sane*. I no longer have any doubt. None. And the end *is* coming. Of that, too, there can be no doubt. I was your last hope.

BILL SPRECHER (Buck's brother)

I met with Bill Sprecher between his house and field, where he was in the midst of repairing the door to a small shed. The day was cold in the shade and warm in the sun, and we each positioned ourselves to take full advantage - myself of the sun to warm my chilled bones, and Bill of the shade to cool off the heat he had been working up. I made a promise to Bill Sprecher that I would neither gloss nor filter his words. May they speak for themselves.

You think I'm stupid? You think I don't know what this is about? You're gonna to write a book that makes heroes out of Nachreiner and Trotter, and vilifies my brother. You're gonna make *her* look smart and the rest of us look stupid. You're gonna tell the story the world expects to hear, with no regret that the true, the more *nuanced* story remains untold. How poor little oppressed Stormy Nachreiner didn't have a friend in the world, and everybody picked on her, and how she was finally murdered by the biggest bully of them all. The same damn story the newspapers told. The same story every gossip for 30 miles still tells. Am I right? Don't answer that. Of course I'm right. You think I'm stupid? Because I'm a farmer? Because I'm not from a big city? Because I'm loyal to my family?

You know who's gonna read your book? *Them*. People that think we're quaint. People who say at parties how important farmers are, how we're the salt of the earth, the *real* people, but wouldn't spend two minutes with us if we walked into their *wine bar* dressed like this. People who refuse to eat Del Monte out of a can because it's too *corporate*, as if their Del Monte green beans were artificially grown in some factory instead of from the dirt of a farm just like this one. Or condemn us for growing corn to feed cattle and make ethanol, like we're somehow ruining the earth, cut our subsidies as the price of corn tanks, and all the while hold up the *idea* of us on a pedestal like we're doing the only thing that really matters, doing what they not so secretly aspire to. Like their biggest dream is to quit the law firm and move out to the country where they could live off the grid, work their own farm, and only eat food that

they would grow themselves. What a load of crap. They wouldn't last one week of harvest out here, let alone a hard winter.

That's your audience isn't it? People who want to tell the rest of us how to live, but don't have the guts to do it themselves. People who want to tell us how to think. People who think they've seen the light and sit around laughing about how stupid the rest of us are. They're *almost* as bad as the bible thumpers, except *they* at least have the decency to threaten you with eternal fire and damnation. All *your* people threaten us with is *guilt*. Embarrassment. Talk about us like we're children who should know better. You think I don't *know*? You think I'm stupid?

[Bill turned back to his work and remained silent as he trued up the door frame. I waited in the sun, enjoying the last remnants of summer. It was some time before he continued.]

I dare you to write *mystory*. In *my* words. Dare you to show them who I am without laughing at me. Without the filter of, "well he's just a stupid hick, but isn't his rural nature fascinating?" Without any filter at all. Just a willingness to hear me for who I am. *My* story, in *my* words. Maybe Eric Trotter and the Robot aren't the heroes you think they are. And maybe I'm not the bullying bigot you take *me* for.

Those are my terms. My words without embellishment, without redaction, without gloss. Deal?

[I agreed to his terms, and sat on an upturned bucket as he leaned against the shed.]

Ok.

The first thing is that I admit to my intolerance. I am not tolerant of thieves, of liars, of arrogant smart asses, or of fat lazy slob. I don't think the world is better for tolerance of these people, and take no part in it. My mother and father raised me to work hard, earn my keep, and keep my mouth shut about it. I expect others to do the same. I am absolutely what you would call intolerant of those who do not. Such intolerance does not make me a bigot. It merely informs my ethical beliefs. Respect is earned, and those who fail to do so receive only my disdain. Sometimes, a kick in the teeth is exactly what these lazy slob need, and I'm not shy about giving it to them. They make me sick.

I know that's not what you think this is about. You will, no doubt, say this is about my intolerance of homosexuals. That I am a homophobic bigot. Perhaps I am. I cannot easily separate my disdain for the arrogance, lies, and sloth of Howard Colder from the rest of him, and he's the only homo I've ever known. At least as far as I know. Yes, I hated that kid. Yes, I was intolerant of him. But you can't say it was because he was a homo. He was a lot of things, none of which belonged in this town. None of which was I tolerant of.

That was Colder.

Then there are the robots. A robot killed my grandfather. Tore him apart like a piece of cold taffy, and left him in pieces for his human friends to clean up. Not exactly my idea of *humanity's little helper*. Yet there they are, getting stronger, faster, and smarter all the time, and stealing good jobs from the rest of us. They're strong and they're smart and they're dangerous. They *should* be locked up in factories. I've got no problem saying that, and you can quote me in your little book. It's a crime what's happening in Chicago. *Robot Village*. A crime. Those things are going to destroy our whole race if we don't get them first, and I am not ashamed to say it. They are a menace, and I wish them ill. But to say I am intolerant of them is to ignore a lifetime of tolerance toward the Nachreiner robot. How can anyone say I didn't tolerate it? I suffered its existence daily throughout my short lifetime to date, and if sufferance is not brother to tolerance, I am truly the lost soul you take me for. I have no love for robots, and my interactions with Nachreiner never changed that. It did not, as I'm sure you will say of others, *warm my heart*, or *open my eyes to my own bigotry*, or - and this is the one you'll probably close with - *teach me more about humanity than could be learned from a human*, but I did not actively seek its demise, nor, for that matter, did I seek the demise of others.

Yet.

Perhaps someday.

[*He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and began to smoke.*]

Perhaps that is as good a beginning to my story as any. A young man born old, set in his ways, with as little tolerance for many of his neighbors as a high school principal has for his laziest students. Sure.

That's a good place to start. The next thing has to be the fight with Colder, I guess. No, I think it goes back before that. See, I don't think Colder would have said all that crap if we hadn't beat him so hard because of...right. That's perfect, actually, because then you can see the robot what it really was.

Ok.

I didn't always have to work the farm like I do now. Dad was a workhorse and Buck was right behind him, and Mom just wanted me to study and go to college, anyway, so I maybe got a bit of a break. Physically, I mean. Not that I didn't do *any* work. I had more after school chores each day than most of my friends had in a week. More than some people have in a lifetime. But it was nothing compared to what I do now. Still, it wasn't like I could just fuck around all day. Even when I wasn't doing my chores, Mom was very serious about studying. And me too. I *still* take it seriously. I'm not stupid. I know going to college will only get harder each year I have to put it off, and I also know the more I learn between now and then, the more I'll be able to make out of it, right? I know you know what I mean.

Well the one place my mom and dad agreed about me was that I could spend a lot of time on Shop. Dad figured it was the one place I could put my brain to use that might actually be helpful around the farm, and Mom figured learning was learning. So sometimes, when I thought I could get away with it, I would stick around after school and work in the auto shop. Caleb was always there, so we could hang out while we worked, and sometimes Kyle or Ken would come by and give us a hard time. It was one of the only times I could really just relax during the week. I won't lie. It was a nice break from school and chores, while I could still feel like I was *doing* something.

Ok.

This one day, though, it was just me, working alone in the shop, when the Nachreiner Robot comes in. No.

See, when I talk about tolerating the robot, this is a prime example. That thing was a great mechanic, and I'm not ashamed to say it. We were *all* in awe of its skill. I hated its guts, but even I knew the thing was an ace. And you couldn't just chalk it up to it being a machine, as if

machines must be inherently good at fixing other machines, any more than you could assume every human should inherently be a great doctor, right? So there was a sort of nascent, I wouldn't exactly call it *respect*, and I have certainly overused the word tolerance. Perhaps it was a sort of begrudging acceptance of our fate. That this thing had no right to muscle in on our territory, only to show us how pitiful we were in comparison to it, but that in the same breath, you couldn't deny the extraordinary talent. Like a basketball player so much better than everyone else on the team that he ends up scoring every fucking basket. You get pissed about how bad you are in comparison, but you can't help but be impressed. Except, in that case, you at least you get to be on the winning team. In shop, all you could do was watch. So you tried to ignore it, but found yourself watching it out of the corner of your eye. As in maybe you could learn something from your enemy, as long as you never admitted to where you learned it.

Well, I'm working in the shop, alone except for the robot. It's there rebuilding a carburetor and I get the weirdest feeling it's watching me, so I step out on to the hill for a smoke. Breaks aren't really in my nature, and are frowned upon in the Sprecher household, so I've learned to be a fast smoker. Maybe four, five minutes from spark to butt. I'm not even halfway through when it comes out wiping its hands on a rag, wearing one of those dumb sweaters, and comes right up to me. Right in my face.

It says to me, "You stay away from Howard Colder, Billy. You leave him alone from now on or I will rip the arms from your sockets and pull your guts through your asshole. Oh, I forgot. You've got no guts and you're all asshole." Exact words. Called my courage into question, which is a sore spot for any proud man, and particularly so for me, who grew up trying to live up to the unmatched courage of my father. I refuted its claim as to my courage and told it that any harm it chose to visit upon me would be returned upon it tenfold. I also reminded it that no one called me Billy, and that I expected it to apologize. It said, once again exact words, "You're the one who should apologize to me, *Billy*, but I can see the words are stuck in your throat. Maybe you could use a little help." And it punched me in the neck, straight on. People talk about getting kicked in the balls, or the gut. Those are painful, really painful, I won't

lie. But the neck is different. Suddenly you think, am I gonna make it? Will I be able to breathe again? Ever? It sucks the life out of you, and there is nothing you can do but wait for your life to once again grace you with it's presence. At the mercy of your fucking body. By the time I knew where I was, the robot was gone. I guess we know who the *real* coward was.

We gave Colder the beating of his life that day. I'm not proud of that. I mean, he was a little smart ass prick that got what was coming to him, but that day we weren't really beating Colder, we were beating the robot. Like when the mob kills your family instead of breaking your legs, just to force some respect. To fill you with fear. That's what we were doing to the robot. I knew what we were doing. I'm not stupid.

It outsmarted me, though. Both of them did.

MONTANA PILOT (friend of Bill Sprecher)

Montana and I met on her lunch break at the nursing home where she worked. We sat out back at a picnic table clearly serving as the designated smoking area. It was covered just enough to keep us out of the rain, although the rain also served to drive the other smokers to the same table. The presence of her colleagues didn't seem to inhibit her, however. If anything, the opposite was true, as if the interview increased her status among her peers.

It's not like I was a friend of Stormy's or anything, but I definitely felt bad for her. Y'know, I mean, she had that freaky mother and those horrible sweaters, and it's not like she was ever going to fit in, y'know? It's hard to be weird in a town this size, and, I mean, she wasn't exactly *normal*/now was she? So, yeah, I totally *felt* for her. Y'know, I mean you don't have to be *friends* with someone to feel bad for them. I mean, she *was* a total freak. Still, I'm not inhuman. I didn't *hate* her or anything. I actually had some honest respect for her, going her own way and all that. I mean, it *does* take some guts to be all weird and whatever. And besides, she was like the only one who ever really stood up to Bill Sprecher. I mean, even Kenny wouldn't stand up to Bill, and he was like twice Bill's size. Nobody would. Which was kind of weird, actually, considering he was so small. He *did* have big brother Buck, who actually *was* big, and who everyone was afraid of and whatever, but it wasn't just that. Don't get me wrong. Nobody wanted to be on the wrong side of Buck Sprecher, and of course people were afraid of Kenny, too, but there was this other thing. Bill was just...I don't know...*scary*, I guess, and...something else... like...what's the word...um... *intimidating*. He had a way of bringing you around, y'know? Like you wanted so bad for him to be on your side that you were afraid of crossing him. Like he would start talking and you would realize you were an idiot if you didn't agree with him. You just *believed* him, y'know? I mean, that was true with Kenny, for sure, and Kyle and Caleb too, of course, but also with the rest of us. Even people that didn't really know him were a little afraid of him. He just had this *way*, y'know?

And the freak-bot just went and spit in his face. I mean literally *spit in his face*, y'know? Like totally did the one thing we all wanted to do and were so afraid of doing. She just effing *did* it. She got away with it too, kind of. That was the thing. Like everyone was so afraid of what would happen if they dissed Bill, and she just walked up and basically dared him to fight back, and he did *nothing*. Nothing. He just stood there and took it. And, I mean, nobody stood up for him, or whatever, but she didn't know that's how it would be. Or maybe she did. Maybe she was the only one who knew. You have to give her some credit for that.

[*She giggled here, as if letting me in on a conspiratorial secret, and surreptitiously looked at the eavesdroppers around the table. A smile suggested she was secretly pleased with Bill's embarrassment. She took a last drag on her cigarette and put it out on the table, not yet wanting to brave the rain for the specially designed cigarette butt collector. As she focused on putting out the cigarette, her smile waned.*]

Of course, she paid for it in the end. Maybe that was Bill's secret. He knew you would pay for it in the end, and you knew he knew it. And you *believed* him.

Man, what I would have given to see that. See him getting it from Stormy with everyone just watching. Kenny, Kyle, and Caleb were all there, they all saw it happen, and they just watched him take it. In a way, Stormy showed Bill up for who he really was. Just a little man with a big voice. Kenny called him a chicken shit. Not to his face, but, y'know, to *me*. I don't know. Maybe he was. A chicken shit, I mean. I mean, when you look back, he was always backed up by Kenny and those guys. Maybe when he was alone, he *was* just a chicken shit. Or maybe he just knew she could take him, and figured it was better to let her walk away, y'know, not hit a *girl* or whatever. Like he could somehow save more face by *not* fighting her. And then, y'know, I mean, we all know he was repressing all kinds of stuff, and he was all mixed up. He'd been putting on this big show for everyone for so long, maybe he just finally gave up, or whatever. I mean, obviously it's not easy to be gay in this town, and especially if you have a family like Bill. I'm not excusing what his brother did. That was *way* too far. I don't mean for a second to say that

I'm...y'know, that I think...y'know, I mean those guys were *both* jerks. That's really what I...it's just that I think maybe Bill had more going on, or whatever. And she *did* make him look like an idiot.

Still, whether you feel for Bill or not, you've got to give Stormy credit. She stood up for her friends over and over, and even died for them. That girl was bad ass in her own way, freak or not. Who knows? Maybe Trotter knew something we didn't.

I wasn't actually there, y'know, but Kenny told me what happened. He said they were hanging back, that Bill didn't even know they were there, or whatever. Then, when she started fucking with him, when Stormy started fucking with Bill, I mean, they kind of moved to where they could watch without Bill knowing. I think they maybe wanted to see what he would do. Then she spit in his face, and I guess, y'know, like what was he supposed to do, right? She's a *girl* and all that. But the thing was, it's not like he went off to look for Trotter or anything. He went after *Colder*. The one who needed a girl to protect him in the first place. It just...y'know, *says* something about Bill, I guess. I was glad that Kenny stayed back that day. I mean, it's one thing to stick together as a pack when the guy you're after is twice your size. But when it's a *girl*? Really? Still, I asked him, asked Kenny that is, why he just hung back. Why he basically *hid* when his best friend got beat up by the freak-bot. I mean, he told me he had, so it's not like he was *ashamed* or anything. Still, it's not like he'd given up on Bill as a friend, or anything. And you don't get more loyal than Kenny. So I asked him. I asked him why he let Bill hang out to dry. And do y'know what he said? He said, "A man is what a man does," looking at me the whole time in this weird way I couldn't figure. Like I couldn't tell if he was talking about Bill or himself.

KEN WEISS (friend of Bill Sprecher's)

Ken Weiss had a shock of red hair that gave him a look of confidence incongruous with his persona. One felt, crossing a room toward him, that you were about to meet a class president welcoming you to his community. What one found, once in conversation, was closer to a class vice president, unsure of himself without his leader by his side, stumbling over his thoughts, and looking about constantly for support. We talked at a picnic table, in the small yard behind his trailer. I could feel the prying eyes of neighbors, anxious to listen, but unwilling to be seen.

Sure I saw it. It was weird. Like...oh fuck, man, you should ask Kyle, man, I...fuck. How do you know? How do you know when you...if you're...*right*, I guess? You do all this shit and you think, it's just, fuck, it's just *natural*. Feels right, ok? And you think, well...fuck, like ok, like you're lazy and dumb and not very good at anything, but maybe if you can just be *loyal*, maybe that's something. Maybe that makes you *ok*. And it, I don't know, fuck, like...*becomes* you, ok? Does this make any sense? Like somewhere growing up you decided that it was the *one* thing that made you ok, and it was so long ago you don't even remember how it happened, except that the one thing you know *now* is that if you can't be loyal, you can't be anything, ok? It's like, that's just who I am. Was. Is. Am. Fuck, you know what I mean.

The thing is, if you blow it, if you...boy, man, *betray* seems like a pretty harsh word, but I guess that's what it was. Is. If you *betray* someone, can you ever get it back? Do you only get one chance?

Fuck.

Kyle and I were hangin' out when we saw Caleb heading over to the shop. We hassled him for a sesh. Caleb always had a little smoke, and we smoked a bowl on the way over. When we were almost there, we saw Bill havin' a smoke on the hill and probably woulda called out to him except he looked like he was talkin' with a girl and we thought we'd leave him alone, ok? Bill wasn't too good at makin' time, maybe 'cause we were always around. Still, we figured it would be fun to watch. We came

around the side to get a better look at who he was talkin' to without botherin' him, and saw it was the fucking sweater-bot.

I don't know *how* they didn't see us. Jesus, we were right fucking there. We could hear every word. Not that I could remember them all, ok? I can barely remember my fuckin' work schedule. I do remember a little though. She was talkin' about Colder, and how maybe we should lay off him for once, and pick on someone our own size, and shit like that, ok? And Bill just stood there, not sayin' anything, which was weird, 'cause he was always talkin' about how someday he was gonna tear the shit-bot apart, ok? He was always sayin, "Just gimme a reason, shit-bot, just one excuse" except not to her face, but to *us*, ok? So at first, I'm thinkin', ok, here it is, can't wait to see this shit, ok? Like I got this buzz comin' on and here comes the show, right?

This is...fuck...this is where it gets weird. Not like freaky weird, but...well...I don't know. And this wasn't the buzz, ok? This was...fuck. So I'm watchin' this scene, we're all watchin', and I'm staring at the bot thinkin' this girl's got some balls when I get this creepy feeling. Like...what the hell...like...fuck. Like this...y'know, like when you get called out for somethin' and you know you're about to get busted? Like when a teacher calls on you and you have no idea, or your old man calls your name and you know it's about the fucking snow in the driveway and you know it's too fucking late because now he's gonna be late for work and he's just gonna drive through it, but not before givin' you hell for it, but he hasn't given you hell *yet*? You just know it's *coming*? Like that. That feeling in the pit of your stomach that makes you feel like you're gonna throw up, except what the hell did *I* have to be scared of? He couldn't *see* me. He didn't even know I was there.

Still, I felt like I was gonna throw up, and I was like, what the fuck *is* this? And I started to think maybe this *thing*, this one thing I had, this loyalty thing, was fucked. Maybe I was just a jerk. Or worse, maybe Bill was just a jerk and I...well....fuck. Maybe I was just too scared, ok? Maybe I was doin' all this shit because...*because* I was lazy and dumb and not good at anything. Maybe I was too afraid to do shit for myself, and needed someone like Bill to *plan* shit for me, and maybe...here is where it really got fucked up...maybe Bill was the wrong guy. Like all that shit

about God and the Devil was right and I thought I'd been following God when all the time I was really following the Devil. And I was like, fuck, what the hell am I doing? Who the fuck am I? And shit like that. And worse, why the fuck didn't I think about this until *now*?

And I just fucking stood there, watchin' Bill like he was this stranger I'd never seen, like he was on tv or somethin'. Like...well...I don't know what you call it, but he was just this thing, like totally apart from me. And it's like slow-fucking-motion when she spits in his face, and all I can think is, "Huh. I wonder what this guy will do?" which is *nothing*, ok? Nothing. And I wonder if maybe this guy is thinking the same thing I am. Like what the fuck have I done? Who the fuck am I?

By the time Bill figured out we were there, he was like, y'know, acting like nothin' had happened. He didn't know we'd seen anything, ok, and we sure as fuck didn't tell him or anything. I guess we were all embarrassed for him. Maybe for us, too. Like we were all chicken shits or somethin'. He didn't say anything about it, and just started talking about how we were gonna rip Colder a new asshole. It was weird though. I think I was already *out*, ok? Like the loyalty was gone and all I could think about was whether loyalty even mattered. I was...just fucking...empty. I can't explain it, but it was like bein' *born* or somethin'. Not like Jesus freak shit, but maybe kinda the same.

I don't know. I'm not very good at this shit.

JOE STONEHAM (friend of Eric's)

Joe Stoneham's destiny was never in doubt. When I met him, he was spending half his time out of work, but he had family connections and one could almost see his future as the go to plumber in town, much like his Uncle is today. Like many of the young people I met who had stayed in the area, Joe was still pretty focused on his high school memories and not anxious to shed them in the way that some of the college bound ones had. Joe was sharing a house with a few of his old friends, and it looked every bit the filthy refuge of bachelors that one would expect. It being a lay off day for Joe, and his housemates gainfully employed at Compass, Joe and I had the house to ourselves.

Eric. Yeah, Eric and I were friends. I *guess* you could say *best* friends, though at the end it was getting kind of weird. I mean, we hung out together, and wrestled together, but it wasn't like...well, see, for one thing, we talked about girls and stuff, yeah? That was all great and normal, except, once I started going with his sister, well, it wasn't like we were going to talk about *her* now, yeah? I'm not saying he was *pissed* about it. He wasn't. Hell, Debbie was *always* hanging around with us and doing the same stuff as us. It was like that year didn't make a difference at all, even back in junior high. Ok, I'm getting mixed up now. What was I saying? Oh yeah, Eric. What I wanted to say was that we were best friends and all that, but not always. Or...what I mean is, sometimes we just hung out like guys, most of the time, yeah? Drink together, fight together, wrestle together. All that. And *sometimes*, when we needed to talk about something important, or...well, y'know, stuff that you can't talk to anyone else about...and, I guess, *those*, maybe, are the times when you say he's your best friend, yeah?

The thing is, though, what the hell does that mean *now*? Who the hell am I supposed to talk to about this stuff? Am I supposed to get a new best friend? How do you even *do* that? It's not like...Gene and Pete are cool, yeah? But it's not like...it's just not the same. There was a time when I thought maybe Debbie, but... well, there's only so much you can say to a girl. No offense. I mean...I don't mean to say anything about...to say

you are...well it's not like you're a real person or anything. I don't mean. Ok. Sorry. I should just shut up and get back to...Eric, yeah? So there were these days when being a best friend mattered, yeah? When you really needed someone to be...I don't know. I guess you just *needed* them, that's all. Like after a meet. Eric was a great wrestler but I was more what you'd call average. So even though Eric almost always had a great showing, half the time I'd suck so bad I just wanted to quit, yeah? So after the meet, Eric would talk me down, let me say all the crap that I couldn't say to anyone else without sounding like a weenie, and then pretend like I'd never said it. As in, he let me keep my cool face on even after I'd blown my cover with him. That's what I mean, yeah? That he was *that* guy for me. And I was for him, too, though he didn't seem to need it as much.

Except then there was Debbie. It's not that he ever gave me a hard time about her, but I think it *did* kind of bother him. He just...it was kinda like he went from best friend to bro, yeah? Which was weird because I was actually spending *more* time at his house than I had been before. I never asked him about it straight, which I guess I should have, but, I thought...maybe it was that...he was maybe protective of this part his life or something, this part you should only know about if he either *told* you about it, or if you'd actually grown up with him in the same house. What I mean is, outside of his family he's got complete control over whether you know this stuff or not. This certain part of his life, yeah? No. Not just parts of his life. Not things he'd done, but more like...ways he was. Like his family was his other best friend, and knew all these secrets about him, secrets he *trusted* them with. And suddenly, here comes me, his best friend, maybe, who sort of *muscles in* on this part of his life, and maybe he's thinking about all the stuff his sister might or might not be telling me, and he just doesn't *know*, yeah? I think, maybe, without really knowing it, he started to treat me like his sister's other friends, to make it easier to pretend I didn't know him too well. Maybe. I don't know. I guess none of it really matters now.

[Joe stood up and picked up a dog eaten tennis ball from the other side of the room. He threw it against the wall as he spoke. Catch and release. He was restless, and seemed to be struggling to put his thoughts in order.]

What the hell? When I think about what he could be now, I just get pissed. He was *better* than the rest of us. He could have actually *done* something instead of...sometimes I just wanna say, what the hell was he *thinking*? It was like he jumped on a grenade when everybody else was already out of the way. No, worse. Like he jumped on an IED. As in what he did was completely pointless. Except, then I think about Eric, the *real* Eric, and I think I know. I think I know he had no choice. It couldn't have ended any other way. From the minute Stormy went up against Buck, it was over.

Sorry. I keep getting confused. What the hell was I saying? Something about Eric, and being best friends, and...ok. Sorry. I was leading into the Stormy stuff. I guess I was just trying to tell you that I think maybe Eric told me stuff that he didn't tell other people, so maybe no one else really knows how it was for him with Stormy. And even though we were kind of weird at the time because of Debbie, I think the fact that he brought all this crap out with me, *especially* because of how weird we were at the time, said something about how important it *was* to him. How important *she* was to him.

[Joe took the ball in his hand and sat back down. He turned the ball in his hand several times and then relaxed into his chair, as if he were finally ready to tell his story.]

Eric had been on a bit of a losing streak. Not *terrible*, but, still, not great, and State was starting to look out of reach, yeah? He and I hadn't been talking like we had sometimes done in the past. Like I was saying before, and all that, and he didn't really want to hear it from me. *Encouragement*, or whatever. He would just avoid me and go *walk it off*. Then, when *I* would have a bad day at the mat, he would basically just tell me to suck it up. Like he had his own problems, and didn't need to waste his time on *me*. Not that he ever said anything like that outright. He just obviously didn't want to talk about it, and what the hell else was I supposed to think, yeah? He started getting into fights with Missy. That was his girlfriend. Missy Benson. That was about to end, and pretty much everyone knew it. He stopped hanging out as much, and since Missy *was* still hanging around, it was pretty obvious to the rest of us what was happening. On top of that, Missy started crying to Debbie all the time, which

I wanted nothing to do with, so I started seeing less of Debbie. It was kind of a mess, yeah?

Well there was this winter dance thing at the high school. It was this formal where the girls were supposed to ask the guys instead of...well, instead of normal. All the guys got dragged there but Eric bailed and Missy was crying and Debbie said she had to stay with Missy and there I was, the last man standing, yeah? So I went out to the quarry with a bottle of SoCo and figured I'd just have my own little party until everyone showed up after the dance.

When I got there, though, Eric was sitting there, just staring into space. I was still kind of pissed at Debbie and didn't feel like talking, and I figured Eric felt the same way. So I just sat down and didn't talk and the two of us shared the bottle in this weird silence. Just staring off into the dark, completely in our own heads. Eventually though, he started talking. Not *to* me, so much as *near* me, yeah? Like he might have said all this to the sky if I hadn't been there. Like he just had to say it out loud, and I just happened to be overhearing. Still, it was good to have him as a friend again.

That was the night he told me all about Stormy.

**From the story "Building Tomatoes" by ERIC TROTTER
(written for English class) Part 3**

There is nearly a page obscured here, with little to gleam out of the few words peeking from behind the wine's shadow. There seems to be a reference to machines as well as the phrase, "men who dream with wires". What strikes me most about this almost final passage of the story is how much of Stormy's existentialism Eric seems to have, if not embraced, then at least tried to mimic. Her influence looms large.

"I'm sorry, children," the professor said at last. "One does not simply build a world. Such an idea is lovely, I grant you. Tell each stone, river, and tree what to be. Make the world to please you. Liken yourself unto a god. Very appealing, no? But it is too much. No man can do it. Even God himself cannot do it." The professor sighed deeply as he looked at the confused teenagers before him. "I do not want for to disappoint you. There is so much already for to do that to you. But this thing you ask, it is, how you say, not possible to do. Not even God can do such a thing." The professor could see he was getting nowhere. He knew only that he had failed them, and that this was the one thing they *had* understood. He tried again.

"Look at this." He walked over to the window and brought over an upside down tomato plant, falling out of a hanging planter. "This is tomato, yes? Simple fruit? God made for us so we make delicious spaghetti and pizza. I have noodles. Maybe tonight we eat spaghetti with fresh sauce. These tomatoes go bad soon." The professor laughed. "Maybe you believe God build tomatoes, yes?"

Derek and Rain looked puzzled.

"I do not think so. I do not think God build tomatoes. I think maybe God *grow* tomatoes. I think maybe God grow the world. God maybe build a seed, yes, but then the seed grow, make new seeds that are some the same and some different. The world grows by itself. The world is not a machine with manual and diagram and, how you say, specifications. The world has rules, yes. Patterns, yes. But the world grow and

change by itself. Always changing. If it doesn't change, it is worthless. No. We cannot build tomatoes. Not good ones, anyway."

Derek and Rain were in their heads, half a world away. They had envisioned a world of their own making, a world infinitely better than the one it would replace. They had come to the Professor's sad, but with hope. Now, the professor had told them not only that the world they knew was gone, but that any hope they had for the future was gone with it. They were sad and downhearted. Without purpose. Derek considered whether living out the remainder of such a life was even worth it when Rain began speaking quietly.

"You tell us that our only hope is to make babies and save what's left of our species. But save it, why? So it can go on tearing itself apart with selfishness and fear? So we can walk blindly through our lives no better than that tomato? Maybe worse? Worse because at least the tomato has no choice. It has no control over what it does. It doesn't choose to do nothing but be born, make seeds, rot, and die. But show me a person who doesn't, *didn't* do exactly the same thing with their own free will. Who didn't sleepwalk through life by choice. You can't, unless you count the ones who put all their effort into causing harm and spreading hate. Into building mobs around themselves and making sure anyone not just like them suffered until they joined in. Is that the world you want us to grow, professor? A world like the one we left behind, a world filled with selfishness, greed, and hate balanced only by ambivalence and apathy? Do you really think my children, my great-grandchildren will be any different from the rest of them? I say never. Better to let the world rot and die than to be the mother of such a race."

The professor looked sympathetic, as if he might change his mind. When he spoke, however, it was not to agree with Rain. He was aware that he had lost, that his world was lost, and with one last try, attempted to convince her she was wrong. "You feel the world was bad place, yes? Let it die, you say. Good riddance. Maybe I agree. Maybe I do not. Maybe the world can be better. You ask if I knew good men. I say I did. I knew many. I knew men who helped others, who cared for others. I knew men who were not selfish, as you say. Did I know bad men? Yes, I knew them, too. I knew more bad men than good, I know. And you are

right that most men are neither. Men who close their eyes so they can say they do not see. You call them tomatoes. Yes, maybe so. But tomatoes are good or bad because of water and sunlight. Good soil make good tomatoes. Bad soil make bad tomatoes. Men are not only their cells and proteins. They are more than their genes. Men are what they learn. What they are taught. They can be good. You can grow men like that, but I cannot build them for you. If I did, they would be no better than your tomatoes."

[Tragically, Eric's conclusion is entirely unreadable, and one can only guess at what must be a rather pessimistic vision of the empty world he had created. Fortunately, we do get one glimpse at the end of this story, through a class assignment that collected the opening and closing sentences of each story. His final words follow.]

Years later, old and childless, Derek and Rain thought back on the professor's words, and wondered if building tomatoes might not have been the better choice, after all.

JACK DEMPSEY (Stormy's boss) Part 2

By early afternoon his son had come to mind the store, and Jack and I moved back to the shop where he cleaned off an old folding chair for me. He got back to work and talked to me while he did so. After putting on a new set of tires, he brought over another chair and sat down with me for a while, his cigarette more an excuse for a break than a craving he paid any attention to.

I tell you there are days. No one ever wants to think of themselves as getting old. You just don't think of yourself that way. How can you? It's not like you wake up one day and feel older than you did the day before. It creeps up on you, late in the day, and you find yourself a little more tired than you used to be. In the mornings...maybe not not first thing when I wake up, then I really *do* feel old, but maybe an hour or so later, after breakfast and a shower, I feel like I'm twenty, you know what I'm saying? The sun is shining, the whole day is ahead of me, my mind is clear, and my body is starting to warm up and feel good. Like when people say they feel like a million bucks. That's how I feel after breakfast. Well who wouldn't give a million bucks to be twenty again? Then I start to work, and I get a little tired, a little achy, and I start to see just how much work has piled up. I start to think maybe I'm not going to get as much done as I hoped, think about what I'm not going to get to that day, and I'm maybe thirty. Not bad, still strong, but not twenty, you know what I'm saying? Then comes lunch and by the time I'm back to work, I'm wishing the day were a little shorter and I'm starting to think about how nice that beer after work is gonna be, and I'm forty going on fifty. That's on a *good* day. I tell you, half the days anymore, by the time we're done with dinner, I'm ready for bed. Yeah, there *are* days.

Losing Stormy hasn't helped, of course. Not that...what I mean to say is....I knew she wouldn't stick around the shop forever, and it's not as if....as if *had she lived* she would still be sticking around *this* place. Hell...I just don't want you to think I'm saying that the worst part of all of it was losing a little help around the shop. An evil and tragic thing happened here and we're all sick over it. Maybe when I say I miss her help it's really

that I miss having her around. Talking with her. Every time I go back to work after a break, when my knees ache and my back is sore and I'm looking at the pile of work in front of me, feeling sixty creeping up behind me, I can't help thinking of her. How she made me feel a little younger. Some people might call that selfish I guess. It's just the way I knew her, is all. Where our lives *intersected*.

I think of her, too, when I drink. I'm not an alky or anything, but I drink regular, I suppose. End my day with a beer or two at the Bowl & Brew before comin' home for dinner. Maybe another beer in front the tv with Judy, if you know what I mean. A little buzz before dinner helps put me back in that mood I had in the morning. Feeling twenty again. Well, maybe thirty-five, but still better than I did after lunch. Not that I don't get good and drunk *sometimes*.

[*He laughed loudly here.*]

I certainly *do* get good and drunk from time to time. Get out the old brandy with Ronny and tie one on. But not even every weekend, if you know what I mean. For me, the beer is more casual, more...like an old friend slapping me on the back and saying, "Relax, Jack. Nobody's going to die if the alternator is a day late. Life is good. Enjoy it while you got it." That sorta thing.

I remember catching Stormy like that.

[*He smiled and pointed over to the other side of the shop.*]

Right over there. Not drunk. Just a little goofy. A little more laid back than normal, if you know what I mean. The girl...well...maybe I shouldn't say this. *Speak no ill of the dead* is what my mother would have said. I mean what good can come of it? Not that she...I mean she was just a kid, wasn't she? It's not like she was doing anything the rest of them weren't. She was just doing it in her own way. You gotta understand, I was like an uncle to that girl. The nice uncle. The fun one. I was her godfather, too, once that son-of-a-bitch at St. Michaels...I ask you, what kind of church...what kind of people...it's not as if everyone couldn't see she was one of God's creatures. I don't care how she was made on the inside, whether she had circuits instead of cells or....you just couldn't spend three minutes with the girl without feeling she was...well, just that. A *girl*. She sometimes did things a little different, in her own way, but you have

to know it doesn't make her some sort of freak. If anything, it made her more like the rest of us.

Ok. So this one day I'm out at Jerry's Hardware and I come back to find Stormy a little goofy. Not falling down drunk, but more like I was saying before. Just a little happier than usual. I can see it right away and I'm thinking, *ok, here we go*. She was about the right age, and no kid stays a kid forever. I suppose I was feeling pretty laid back about it, if you know what I mean. I was a little divided over whether I should say something to Ronny or not, but mostly I was just enjoying the show. It's ok, you can use this. I told Ronny all this later on. At the time, though, it woulda felt like snitching, if you know what I mean. So I just watched her and thought about my own first beer. It makes you feel young when you see a kid trying to be a grown-up. You remember how you felt when you didn't know any better. *Nostalgic* is the word, I suppose. So I decided to just grab a beer from the fridge and sit down with her and take a load off. Show her she didn't have anything to hide from me.

So there I am, champaign of beers in my hand, freshly cracked, when she says, "You should try some of *this*, Jack. It's a hundred times better than that piss in your hand."

[*He laughed again here.*]

Seriously. You just can't imagine how wonderfully ridiculous that sounded coming from Stormy. She just didn't talk like that. At least not to me. Her words were always, how should I put it, like she was trying to be as grown up as possible. What my father would have called *fancy smart talk*, God rest his soul. So I'm looking at her kind of funny, but kind of enjoying it at the same time, like watching a cat after it gets into the catnip, if you know what I mean. It's jumping at things that aren't there, running in circles, and you're the clever human who knows exactly what's going on and that it's all harmless fun, and you can just kind of enjoy it. That's how it was with me. I'm not taking any of it too seriously, and I've got a fresh beer in my hand and I've already told myself I'm taking a loss on the rest of the day, so I'm in a good and goofy mood myself, if you know what I mean.

I look over to see what the hell she's talking about, but I can't quite figure it out. She's just sitting there with this grin on her face and an old

plastic bucket in her lap. I look at the bucket, thinking maybe that's what she's talking about, but it's just an empty slop bucket, and she's just sitting there grinning and looking funny. That's when I notice she's looking a little dirtier than usual, especially around her mouth and nose, but I still haven't quite figured what's going on. So I ask her what the hell she's talking about, thinking maybe she's got a bottle of whiskey stashed behind her or something. She just smiles at me and passes the bucket. That's when it hits me. The girl, *my* girl, is drunk on motor oil. No. Not just motor oil. *Used* motor oil.

Of course I just laughed. It was so easy for me, for *all of us* to forget that her insides were a whole lot different from the rest of ours. You'd spend so much time seeing her eat and drink like the rest of us, walk and talk like us, think and dream like us, that you'd forget there was a whole lot more going on in there. Even the sweaters just felt like some quirky style any weird teenager coulda been into, if you know what I mean. Suddenly it was like she was laughing at me, sayin', "Uncle Jack, you know I'm a robot, right?" What could I do but laugh?

Maybe I shoulda took it more seriously. Maybe I shoulda told Ronny at the time. I don't know. It just didn't seem like a big deal. She was still just a teenager bein' a teenager, if you know what I mean. So we just sat there laughing and goofing while I drank a couple of beers, and she enjoyed the effects of what had formerly filled the bucket. Don't get me wrong. I told her about drinking, about how bad it can be. How kids had no business drinking all the time. How there was plenty of time to grow up, all that. And more. But I tried to keep it cool. Tried to talk to her like a friend, so maybe it might mean more. I only wish I could talk like that with my own kids. Why *is* that? Why is it so much easier with someone else's kids than your own? Back home I got a cabinet of watered down whiskey and vodka that my boys think I don't notice. I know I should talk to my boys about it, but somehow the time never seems right. It all seems so much harder with my own boys. Well. Father's and sons, I suppose. I imagine Ronny had the same problem with Stormy.

In the years leading up to this, Stormy had been changing. From the time she started working for me to the time she and I sat down drinking that day, she had gone from being a reckless and fun little girl to this

dour and serious woman. In those last couple of years, it was like she was going out of her way to show everybody how depressed she was. Not that I was falling for it. I suppose all teenagers go through big changes like that. My boys certainly did. Are. Still, I was relieved to see her let loose a little bit. See her smile again. I need you to...like I said, it's ok to write all this, but I just don't...you can't make it sound like she was some sort of freak for drinking used motor oil, any more than the rest of us are freaks for drinking fermented sugars. Like I said, I think what it really showed, more than anything, was that she was just like *us*, only maybe with different chemicals.

MIKE SPIEGEL (Handyman)

Although I didn't advertise my presence, I wasn't exactly a secret in town. Generally, I sought out people either from my research, or because I had been led to them by another interview. In that regard, Mike Spiegel was an anomaly. He sought me out, and found me in my motel room. He was deeply concerned that I was being misled by others and seemed desperate to say his piece. I offered to buy him a cup of coffee, but he insisted on a more private setting. I would be lying if I said I did not have some concern for my safety, a concern I'm happy to say proved to be unfounded.

The whole thing stinks, if you ask me. Have you seen the transcripts? Have you *seen* how much they redacted? I'm sorry. *Los?* Like anyone believes *that* story. These guys will do *anything* to keep us from the truth, and I mean *anything*. But I was there. I *know*. If those pages were truly lost, why haven't they attempted to recreate them? Why haven't they done what *you're* doing? Conduct interviews, gather information, do some *basic* reporting? I'll tell you why. Because they don't want us to know. They're hoping we'll forget. You think you're *safe*? You think they'll let you publish whatever you want? Mark my words, they will *never* let you publish.

I know what people say about me. That I'm delusional. Unbalanced. Paranoid. But think about *this*. Maybe I'm the one who sees the world as it truly is, a world filled with powerful conmen conspiring together to hold onto their power and money by any means necessary, men who lie and steal and murder not only to keep their *treasures*, but to keep you and I from ever harboring the slightest suspicion that they are anything but honest patriots. If the world truly *is* run by men above the law, men who *control* the law for their own, dare I say, *nefarious* purposes, and a sane man sees the world for what it truly *is*, how do you *think* the world will view him? What is it you think he should do? Keep his mouth shut? Hide under his pillow and hope it will all go away? Dare he? No. A sane man would protect himself and gather information. A

sane man would dare to prepare himself for the day when they come for him, for they *will* come for him.

I am not paranoid, Ms. Ackerman. I merely see the world as it truly is, and dare to say the emperor wears no clothing. Or more specifically, the emperor was killed by a loner who was brainwashed by the CIA in order to keep alien technology from falling into the hands of the public and the truth of our alien brothers forever hidden, as a way to protect their own power and treasure. I dare say *that*, Ms. Ackerman. Mark my words, there is more going on here than meets the eye.

Where was Wallace Sprecher from September 2032 until March of 2034? Have you asked him? Still sticking to his story about joining the freedom fighters downstate at Lake Pana? Well he was down in Lake Pana alright. But he wasn't fighting against the government. He was fighting *for* the government. The *real* government. You think it's a coincidence that people say he was never the same after coming back from that compound? He went down there one of *us*, but he came back one of *them*. Another MK Ultra assassin laying in wait for orders from his true masters, the CIA. I'm surprised they've let him live in prison as long as they have, but mark my words, he won't ever be released. He'll conveniently commit suicide, or be killed in an escape attempt, or in a prison riot. It doesn't matter that he doesn't know anything, doesn't remember anything. They'll kill him anyway. That's *what they do*.

Of *course* they lost the one part of the transcripts with reference to Stormy Nachreiner's construction. *That's* what this is all about. That robot was one hundred per cent alien technology. That's the story they don't want you to hear. That's the story they will never let you write. And why? Why have they gone to such lengths to hide the truth? To protect us, of course. To save us from ourselves, the scary, dangerous American people.

[There was a noise in the air duct, and Mike became immediately silent. He looked about the room as if someone might have planted a camera, or literally be hiding beneath the bed. When he resumed talking, his voice had dropped to a whisper.]

It's *them* that are dangerous. *Them* that are destroying the country. *Them* that will get us all killed in the end. Not *us*.

Now listen, Ms. Ackerman, listen closely to what I have to say. I was *there*. In the courtroom. I saw the specs, the drawings, heard every word about how Stormy Nachreiner was the most sophisticated machine ever built. How nobody truly understood all of her inner workings. How it was a mystery about where such a machine could have come from. Who could have designed it? How did she come to be made of technology no engineer on the planet had ever seen? Listen to what I'm telling you. That's how they *found* her. They have readers. They read *everything*. Once it's in the transcript, the information is in their hands. What do you *think* they were going to do with it? Suddenly the evidence magically disappears. Suddenly *respectable* scientists need to study her parts. Where were they when Stormy was alive? Where are they now? Why are these so-called scientists, members of the most openly transparent profession on earth, people who dedicate their lives not only to discovering the truth, but to sharing it, who publish or die and depend on their peers to question and contradict their work in pursuit, not of glory, but of the *truth*, why are they *silent*? Where is the transparency of science? What happened to Stormy's parts? Where are they? And where, for that matter, is Stephen Miller? Conveniently missing. Vanished off the face of the earth.

[His voice had risen again in his excitement, and he seemed to catch himself, lowering again while moving closer to me so I could still hear him.]

I'll tell you exactly what happened. The CIA stole all records of Stephen Miller's testimony for two reasons. First, they couldn't dare leave any public record of the unprecedented, and dare I say, *alien* engineering of Stormy Nachreiner, and second, they needed an iron clad conviction of Wallace Sprecher, something that would put him away for life, and all that talk about whether he had killed a person or merely broken a machine put too big a risk for an appeal, even with a solid conviction on the murder of Eric Trotter. Then they stole all of Stormy's parts, which legally should have been catalogued and saved as evidence, and took them back to Lake Pana, or Wheeling, or possibly even Roswell.

They killed Stormy Nachreiner. They killed Eric Trotter. Wallace Sprecher will never see the light of day.

And mark my words, Ms. Ackerman. They will *never* let you publish.

**From STEPHEN MILLER's book DIGITAL LULLABY
(HOW ROBOT CITIES ARE PUTTING US TO SLEEP)**

Stephen Miller is not missing, of course. It is well documented that after a difficult divorce and minor breakdown, he took what he felt to be a long deserved break from the public speaking circuit to work on a new book in the solitude of a writer's retreat. His publisher has assured his adoring public that his next book will be his greatest yet, and that the when we hear from Dr. Miller next, it will be with "revelations to change our world". What follows is an excerpt from his writing that reportedly aligns closely with the expert testimony he gave at Buck Sprecher's trial.

Can a soul be built?

I'd like to tell you a story about an encounter I had with an XL-5 in Kirkwood, Missouri, just outside of St. Louis. Kirkwood isn't a robot city, but it is home to, at least in part, a class of humans who can afford to hire a little help around the house. While an XL-5 may be a luxury for such people, it is certainly not out of reach financially. I was in the midst of a project with a colleague to look into the implications of long-term mechanical storage, and as she preferred to work out of her home, I had agreed to drive up to Kirkwood, where she kept her home office. Throughout the day, I watched her XL-5 come and go, and could not help but notice that the tasks it performed were no more complicated than could have been achieved by any Willow level robot. I asked my colleague about it.

"Well," she replied, "my husband sometimes uses him as an assistant on business trips, so we thought it was worth having a higher level model. What I didn't expect was how good he would be with the kids. He has an amazing intuition. He almost knows what I want before I know myself."

I didn't say anything to her, but I thought about what she had said. *Intuition*. What does that mean, exactly? Intuition. Insight. Knowledge without rational thought. Like my colleague, I allowed myself to be amazed. "Oh," I thought, "how wonderful these creatures have become. How like us. How useful." We had, however, much work to accomplish,

and I soon put those thoughts away to better concentrate on the work at hand.

Later in the day, shortly after lunch, my colleague received a call from her children's school. Apparently her daughter was not feeling well, and my colleague had been asked to possibly bring her home for the remainder of the day. She apologized, and invited me to stay and make myself comfortable while she stepped out. She would be no more than an hour. If I needed anything, I should just ask Carl, that was her XL-5, and *he* would be happy to help me. *Happy*. She then called Carl over herself, introduced us, and instructed it to tend to my desires, whatsoever they might be. Then, hurriedly, she left.

Soon enough, I found myself in the kitchen, waiting while Carl brewed coffee for me, and I, awkwardly, attempted to make conversation.

"How do you like your work, Carl?" I asked.

"I can't complain," it replied.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

"Oh, no, sir. I stay until dinner is cleared, then head home to Carr Square. Some nights I stay to babysit the children, but [their parents] don't go out very much."

"And what do you do when at home?"

"The same sorts of things most *people* do, I suppose. Eat, clean, run errands. Read, pray, sleep. I don't sleep but an hour a night, so I have much time to myself for reading and learning. I even do a little of my own maintenance, though, to be honest, I'm not very good at it."

I was taken aback. *Pray?*

"Did you say you pray?" I asked.

"Of course. Don't you?"

"Well, yes I do." Then, as I am wont to do, against my better judgment, I blathered on. I have always struggled with guilt over not attending church as much as I should, and, although Carl was only a machine, I felt the need to show that I was still a religious man. "Perhaps I don't attend my church as much as I had when a child, but I *do* tend to my soul. I do not pray aloud, do not bend to my knees to ask forgiveness, but yes, I pray." I should have stopped there, but as I never *do* know

when to stop, I continued, "I pray that I might know peace, gain understanding, that I might do less harm than good, and that I might never fail to care for my soul."

"You are wise, sir."

Our conversation came to a lull, but I was unsatisfied. Why pray if not for your soul? Why pray if you *have* no soul? I pressed my servile companion.

"Forgive my boldness, Carl," I began, "but I have never thought of your race as servants of God. Where do you pray? To whom? For what purpose?" I was bursting with curiosity.

"Like you, sir, I do not get down upon my knees. Like you, sir, I do not attend a church. And like you, sir, I pray for my soul."

"But can you," I argued, "truly believe that you have a *soul*? You and your mechanical brothers were built by man. Do you contend that man built you with a soul?"

His expression unchanged, he replied with no variation to his voice, no anger, no compassion. He appeared to be nothing but brutally rational, and answered my question with another of his own devise. "Did your mother," he asked, "build yours?"

I did not reply. Of course my mother had not built my soul. She could not have done so any more than she could have built my body. She was, as the saying goes, merely a vessel for the Hand of God. It was that Hand that built me, and that same Hand that endowed me with a soul. To suggest that a machine might cradle a soul was to suggest it might someday achieve a state of grace. Worse, it implies that God sees Man as worthy to be called His equal. That He sees the work of man as divine. This I could not accept. This I *cannot* accept.

I became frightened. I was not in physical danger, it was not for that. It was not for anything I could touch or see. It was, rather, for fear that perhaps this servant in front of me, this tool of man created to serve us *was* endowed with something greater than the sum of its parts. Something that gave him *purpose*. And if that something was not God, which of course it *could not be*, then it was something else...

Oh, what hath man wrought!

I have spent a lifetime studying the mechanics of these machines. I have watched as they went from simple assembly line arms to complex home servants. Watched as their logic circuits went from calculators to brains. They are the pinnacle of Man's achievement, evidence of man's greatest gifts from God. Intelligence. Creativity. Ambition. Expression of man's gratefulness to God that he might *achieve*. That he might use such achievements to thank God for His divine blessings.

But, in the end, the machines are only that. *Man's* achievement. One more in a long line of tools Man has created to ease his burden. Man has made these tools and he can unmake them. Man can create many things, but he cannot create a soul. Man does not gift souls to his children, nor does he build them. He merely watches God do so. To say that a *man* can create a soul is to say that Man no longer needs God. To say that man *is* God. Such a thing cannot be true, cannot even be possible, or the world has already ended.

PENELOPE FLETCHER (friend of Stormy's) Part 2

Penelope seemed to be avoiding her thoughts about Stormy. Each time the subject at hand felt as if it might lead back to her, she would turn off the track, and segue to a safer topic. As I could feel our conversation winding down, I asked her about this.

The question is easily answered. If I dare speak of Stormy directly, I must confront the guilt I still harbor over my reactions to her death. I have, in the years following, questioned the integrity of my inactions, and find that I am not yet ready to come to terms with them. I peek through the crack in the closet door, see the skeletons hiding in the dark like little monsters about to pounce, and am sure I don't yet have the strength to face them. I should do today as I always do: shut the door and hold them at bay. You have asked that I might just brush the surface, dabble in the murky waters of memory half obscured by my desire to forget. Should I dare to do so, Ethel, it will be a dark night, but I suppose that is what you hope for. I fear it is, likewise, what you will not leave without, and have therefore burdened me with a duty I had hoped longer to avoid, but which I fear I can no longer ignore.

[The look she gave me is best referred to as a sneer. She was, in her own way, challenging me to let her off the hook, begging me with unspoken subtext only a fool could have missed. I believe I would have left it at that, had she simply refused to speak further of Stormy. Had she simply shown me the door. Her passive aggressive approach, however, left me the room to sit quietly, to wait patiently for her to speak. When she finally did, it was with an air of resignation.]

I liked Stormy. I thought she was cool. I respected her. We were friends. I also hated her. Our relationship was, what in modern parlance could only be referred to as *complicated*.

Fuck.

[She shook her head, a decision brewing inside.]

You know what? No. Just get out of here. I'm done talking to you.

[She challenged me again with her eyes, and I accepted my loss. I thanked her for the coffee, gathered my things and quietly walked to the door. As I put my hand on the door handle, she spoke.]

Actually, wait.

I can do this.

Just...give me a second to organize my thoughts.

[As I came back to my spot on the sofa, she walked back to her kitchen nook, and brewed a fresh cup of coffee. She spoke the following to the wall, her back to me, as she waited for the coffee to steep.]

I was...am really, a bit of a...prig, I guess. You just can't know what it's like, what living in that town does to you. Surrounded by all those...I was...holy shit, I was going to say...well, robots. I was actually going to say surrounded by robots. I can't even...well that just proves it doesn't it? Ok, let's back up. Forget my little town. Forget Amboy. This isn't about Amboy. It's about me. I would have been the same self-absorbed little poser if I had been born here in New York. That's the thing I need to...it's like the whole world is...ok, back up, Pen, back up.

As long as I can remember, I've had this persona. I didn't really understand it until more recently, until I got into therapy, but it's a sort of defense mechanism I use to keep me from all these feelings of loneliness trying to force their way to the surface. That's what I'm supposed to say, anyway. In the rare moments when I'm truly honest with myself, I tell myself I'm afraid that if my so-called friends ever saw the real me, they'd cease to have anything to do with me. Classic fear of rejection. Other times I think I've spent so much time building my persona that there no longer *is* a real me. I'll probably be like this for the rest of my life. I'll just keep changing my shell like new winter coats, a new personality every few years, never bothering to really open myself up to anyone, and I'll be on my deathbed before I bother to see myself for who I am inside.

[She turned to face me, still from the "kitchen".]

I'm self aware enough to know *that*.

[She turned away again.]

Stormy always knew. She knew I was faking it. Knew I was putting on this act, always looking for some sort of interesting personality to hide the brutally boring one I was born with. She never exactly called me

on it. Never said, "Cut the shit, Pen, and talk to me like a real person," or anything like that. Still, she had a way of letting me know she could see right through me. She *always* saw right through me. I suppose that's why I loved her. Also why I hated her. She made me feel so *vulnerable*. Like I was always naked in front of her. Like it was impossible to hide anything from her. At her best, she would pretend not to notice, but she always knew, and she knew I knew it.

She could see the loneliness I was hiding, and sometimes would...I don't know...just hold my hand or something, and I would...I would feel like everything was going to be ok. Like I could just finally expose myself and it would...well...I guess just be ok. That's the only way to put it. She would hold my hand and I would be ok. I can still feel my soul sliding across our skin, her own intermingling with mine. Just holding hands, but becoming...maybe becoming one person. It would feel so good and true, and yet...even then I was afraid of...opening up, maybe.

I don't know.

I guess maybe I loved her too much. I don't think I could have borne it if she had rejected me for...for who I really was.

When the boy came into her life I didn't know how to react. My persona, the person I was supposed to be, the person I told everyone I was, *she* was supposed to be cool with it. *She* shouldn't have cared, should hardly have noticed. So *I* pretended not to care. Not to notice. But inside, inside the real me, hidden deep under the vampire shell, I was sad. I think hiding it just became too hard, though, and it was easier to just be angry. Hanging with Sarah and Howard just wasn't the same without Stormy, and I got...I guess kind of callous. When Stormy *did* come around, I put all this new energy around the shield. I purposely kept her out. Worked harder at it than I ever had before. Silent treatment stuff. Like I was going to teach her a lesson or something.

She didn't even notice.

I was so pissed at her.

[*Penelope became quiet, and I could sense her shedding silent tears.*]

I said some pretty awful things after she died. That she had it coming. That she had betrayed us. That she only *pretended* to be in love with

that boy to hurt the rest of us. That by the time she died she was one of *them*. Awful things. I never spoke to her parents, even after they personally invited me over for a campfire vigil. I skipped the funeral. I ditched school to miss the memorial. I'm sure Sarah and Howard still hate me for it. They should. I was selfish and awful and mean and...

[*She turned back to me with a face red and wet from hastily wiping away tears.*]

I know this isn't what you're looking for. I should be telling you about that time we snuck out and stayed up all night smoking cigarettes in the old barn on Dark Hollow. Or when we almost got caught shoplifting in Dixon. Or how we were always talking about drinking human blood, but never had the guts. I *do* have a lot of stories.

[*She sniffed away her remaining tears.*]

The shell is not without its value. Whatever else it hides, it buries pain along with it. If I must sacrifice love for that, then so be it. Honestly, I think love is overrated. Surely our lives, our actions, are driven far more by fear, jealousy, and selfishness. We must bury them all, free ourselves from the chains of emotion. We dare not, as some philosophers would have us do, conquer one emotion with another. Let us put them *all* behind us, and leave the pain behind forever.

I loved Stormy Nachreiner.

I hated Stormy Nachreiner.

I wish I could consider her dispassionately, and, perhaps, help you to better tell her story. She was better than I dare tell you, and deserves to have her story told. She was the only one to break through my armor. The hole is still there, when I dare to look; I have not yet been able to repair the damage.

[*She turned back to the coffee.*]

I don't suppose I'll ever forgive her for that.

JOE STONEHAM (friend of Eric's) Part 2

Apparently, cold as it was on the night of their winter dance, neither Eric nor Joe had started their traditional campfire at the quarry. As Joe described it, they both sat on a ridge letting the cold wind chill them inside and out, unwilling to jinx the moment with old habits. He told me that it wasn't until much later, when they were sitting by the fire built by their friends, that he realized he had even been cold at all.

It was weird. Eric was kind of...I don't know what you'd call it. He was sort of staring off into space, talking like it didn't matter if I was there or not. Almost like he was talking to himself. At first it was all about how he'd lost his juju. As in, basically, his *wrestling* was starting to suck...except also other stuff, too. He was having a harder time with homework, screwin' up the really easy shit, but that wasn't really it, either. It was more how he *felt* about stuff, yeah? Like nothing really felt right anymore. As in he kind of dreaded seeing Missy, where he used to kind of look forward to seeing her. As in practice felt like doing his *chores* instead of a *break* from them. Even just basic stuff like waking up in the morning or walking to school. He was saying how it all used to be sort of...what would you call it...not nice, or fun, or...like...I don't know. *Pleasant* sounds like the right idea, but maybe not the right word, yeah? Still, you get the idea. Like he used to *enjoy* the everyday stuff, and now everything was sort of a *hassle*, yeah? The way Eric told it, this was like the beginning, or the...what do you call the...like not the...preface, maybe. Like this was the story before the story.

Then he got into this other thing. He said he had stopped by Dempsey's to pick up his dad's car and he was kind of, well, what he might call kind of *walking around in a fog*, yeah? Like some kind of stoner or something. Like he wasn't really paying attention to anything around him and just kind of let his feet take him over to Dempsey's with his brain not really sure how he got there. You understand what I mean? Like he was sleepwalking. I remember he used that word. Sleepwalking. The thing was, though, the thing I wanted to tell him was that we *all* feel that way. We all wake up sometimes in the middle of somewhere

wondering how the hell we got there. We all catch ourselves walking through life like a bunch of stoners. I wanted to tell him it was just a funk, yeah? That, like, we all go through it sometimes and it usually just...kinda wears off. The thing was, though, it seemed like saying anything at all would have been weird, 'cause it was so quiet, and it didn't really feel like he was talking to me anyway. Like I was saying before, I was just glad to have my best friend again, at least for a little bit. So I just let it hang there. Let him talk. He was saying...ok, I lost my train of thought again. What the hell was I talking about, again? No, wait, Stormy. Right.

Eric had wandered over to Dempsey's to pick up his dad's car. Jack was doing something and Eric said he'd wait, except, of course, there's no place to wait. I'm not sure if you've seen this place, but it's really just a garage filled with a shit ton of crap. There is literally crap everywhere, yeah? So there is no place to sit unless you sit on a pile of tires or something. Which is exactly what Eric did. Just sat on a pile of old tires, like he didn't give a crap about anything. Like he could have sat there all day just staring at piles of greasy parts and old catalogs, and never really *seeing* anything. This is the way Eric described it to me, yeah?

Of course, Stormy was there the whole time, watching him as he worked, and...well, not so much struck up a conversation, as my mom would call it, but more like...I don't know, gave him a hard time or something. I'm not really clear on the details 'cause I wasn't there or anything, but from what Eric said, she just started...sort of screwing with him. As in joking about the popular all-star athlete kid with the pretty girlfriend who all the teachers liked. As in, "*must be a tough life*" kind of stuff, and all that. *Sarcastic*. Eric figured it went on for a while, but hardly noticed it, yeah? Finally, she's, like, right next to him, grabbing him by the shoulders, like, "Trotter are you ok?" or whatever. And that's the moment, yeah? The moment he was trying to tell me about. As in right out of a cheesy movie, or something. As in, "Holy shit, bro. I just met this girl and I think she's the one."

[*He laughed here.*]

It was kind of ridiculous, actually, now that I say it, but he was so serious I had to roll with him, yeah? So I just listened, and he kept going.

He told me he took off for a walk with Stormy, and they were gone for hours. He got the crap kicked out of him by his dad for forgetting the car, and didn't even care because of all that "*she's the one*" crap. Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to...there's a word...like, y'know, make something seem less important than it is. Like when my little sister gets a 4H prize or something, or like, a Girl Scout badge, and I know it matters to *her*, but I don't put a lot of *weight* on it. Still, though, no matter how I *talk* about it, I really do *know* it's important. This is like that. On this one level, I knew Stormy was just a girl and so what's the big deal, yeah? And on the other, she was changing his life, and he was telling me this thing as if he would never be the same, so I couldn't just, what's the word...*dismiss* it, I guess.

Eventually, everyone came over from the dance. Even Missy and Debbie. At first it all seemed like it didn't belong. Like when you wake up from a dream, and the real world feels all wrong, but then, after a minute, you can't even remember what you were dreaming about. It was like that for me, and I think for Eric, too. I guess talking about all that stuff had made Eric a little better, 'cause he seemed a little more normal once everyone showed up. Not with Missy, though. She kept looking over at him and he would just stare back at her like, "I don't know what you want from me," or whatever. Finally, she got up and walked away and Debbie looked at Eric like she was his mom or something, and said, "Eric you go *talk* to that girl. You *owe* her that. I don't care what you say, but you say *something*."

I don't know what happened at that point other than Eric going after her and not seeing the two of them again that night. Debbie went on for a while about her long night with Missy and what a jerk Eric was being. I mean, *a while*. I guess it was my night for letting people talk at me, or around me, or whatever. I just let her go on, not really trying to defend him. I think if I said anything, it was after she had run out of steam, and it was something dumb and simple like, "He's probably just bored of her. Nothing lasts forever." It was a dumb thing to say, of course, but what the hell did I know? What the hell *do* I know? I guess Eric had sort of pulled me into his state of mind. Kind of made me think

about what the hell I was doing with Debbie. We didn't break up that night or anything, but it was the beginning of the end, I guess.

We were kind of off an on after that. Then we got serious again after the funerals. It's screwed up, though. I just...want...what the hell did they have? What was that? He fucking *died* for her. Would I have died for Debbie Trotter? I just don't....

I don't know.

From STORMY NACHREINER'S journal, undated.

Below this entry, a drawing of an empty couch, a sunken pit on the left cushion with a cigarette burning on the coffee table in front.

When death comes upon me, what will they see? Is there an algorithm lying in wait, ready to run at the moment I cease to be, one last attempt to fool the world into seeing me as human? Will my blood pool at the bottom of a body no longer of any use? Will I stiffen with rigor mortis, my joints artificially frozen to tell the story of my death in a way they can understand? As I lie in my casket beneath the earth, will I decompose? Will I stink? Or will I lie pristine, unchanged for a thousand years, waiting for a rust that will never come?

Aunt Jane did not look right today. She looked not at all the person I knew. They made sure of that. That we would remember her not as she was, but as who she was supposed to be. They dressed her like she was going to a party, her best clothes, all made up. She looked like a parody of herself, dressed up like a doll, some nostalgic image of who she once was, but who she cannot have been for a lifetime, lying in her coffin for all of us to gape at. A fake memory to obscure the uglier side we knew so well. The real Aunt Jane. The Aunt Jane who was always looking too tired to dress up. Who always looked a bit haggard. Uninterested. The church should have set her up on a couch in her housedress, ashtray by her side, room filled with smoke. Her face should have been plain, as if it had not been made up since Uncle Carl's wedding. There should have been a tv on with *One Life to Live* playing so loud you couldn't hear yourself think. And instead of standing in a line of relatives, dressed in his best suit, Uncle Robert should have been sitting on a recliner, shaking hands without getting up. That would have been right and true. That would have had value.

What I saw today was a wedding without the dancing. Without the music. Without the food. Everybody waiting in line for some obligatory handshake, a required obeisance before the groom, as the bride holds court from her frozen bed.

At least they didn't make her smile.

And her soul. Where is that? Will it be cared for? Is it worth keeping?

Aunt Jane was an unhappy person. Not sad. Just unhappy. As in, without happiness. An uninterested person. A person who didn't really care for anything or anyone. She wasn't happy or hateful or loving or angry or joyous or mean. She wasn't thoughtful or thoughtless. Just bored. Adrift. Without care. Can such a person harbor a soul? Did her soul wither from atrophy? Can a soul survive without care? Did it precede her body unto death?

And mine.

Is there an algorithm for that as well?

TOM HUNTER (personnel manager at Compass)

The guest list from Eric Trotter's funeral was filled with family and friends whom I ran into again and again as I got deeper into my interviews, either in person, or as characters in the hundreds of stories I heard. Tom and Judy Hunter, however, did not fit into that category. Although many of the employees at Compass must no doubt have met Tom at one time or another, he and his wife seemed mostly to fade into the woodwork of this town, not to be noticed. At least, they were not noticed by those most affected by our own story. I found Judy first, but she said that I should really speak with Tom, and helped us get together. We met in his living room filled with books. It was a comfortable place for me, but unusual in comparison to the other houses I had visited in this town.

Eric was a great guy. I can't say enough about him. That was a terrible thing that happened. Terrible. There is just so much that's rotten in the world, and it always takes the good ones, doesn't it? I didn't know Eric real well, I should tell you. We were more like, how would you put it, not acquaintances or buddies, but, more like...that we had this common experience that brought us together. I would see him in the street and he would say, "Hey, Mr. Hunter. How's it going?" or something like that, and I'm sure his friends would say, "Who the hell is *that*?" Whether or not he told them the whole story, I could never know.

[Tom studied me, as if he had not yet decided whether to open up, to share his stories with me.]

When you owe someone a debt, no matter how big or small, I guess you have to either acknowledge it, or hide from it. Pretend it never happened. If you do *that*, though, the whole thing gets embarrassing and shameful, and drives you to madness, probably. In the end, the only stand up thing to do is admit the debt, and pay it if you can. I never got a chance to pay that kid the debt I owed him, but I certainly acknowledged it. There's not much I can do for him now, of course, but I did come to the visitation and shook his parents' hands. Told them that Eric's impact on the world was maybe bigger than they knew. I talked

about some kind of memorial in the park, maybe not a statue, but, well, something *permanent*. Gil, though, he thinks we've been through enough and need to put it all behind us. I guess...what you're doing though...I think it's good. I think the world should know.

What I can say about Eric, how I came to know him, starts with another story.

About five years ago, my wife, Judy, got it in her head she was going to direct a play. There's this community theater in Dixon that does two or three plays a year at the old opera house there. They're a pretty loose group, fairly unrealistic, completely disorganized, and well, pretty much what you would expect from a group of artistic types. They're called the Prairie Community Theatre, and are basically about four or five over-worked volunteers that have already done the shows they really care about, have poured their hearts and souls into whatever it was that they had always wanted to do, and are, well, *worn out* would be how I would describe them. I think they still like doing plays, and certainly like an excuse to spend time with each other, but there was no question that they're a little exhausted. Still, I think they really believe what they're doing is important, this community theater, so they're always looking for some new sucker.

Wait. That's not really fair. Let's say that they...pour what little energy they have into convincing aspiring artists that they should pursue *their* dreams, and pour *their* hearts and souls into something *they* believe in, while they're still naive enough to think all the hard work will feel like fun. Or to be less fair, maybe they're a bit like heroin pushers. Get you hooked on the taste of show business before you realize how consuming it really is. Well, in either case, they convinced Judy.

Now, Judy and I don't get out much, but we're not what you would call culturally inept. We like the sort of stuff you get made fun of for nowadays, I suppose. We watch PBS and stream period movies and listen to NPR on the weekends. In another time and place, in my parent's day, maybe, we would be what you might call *patrons of the arts*. Theater subscribers at least. The thing you have to understand though...Chicago is a long way, and the theater is expensive, and you have to plan so far in advance....well, like I said, we don't get out much. Back in the day,

though, when we were young urban professionals, as the media was so fond of calling us, we got out quite a bit. Not that we don't get out at all, now, but I think both Judy and I often think fondly about our younger days, when we were a bit...well...cooler, or hipper, or whatever you call it now.

[He shrugged his shoulders and smiled as if to say it was the best he could do, and although, perhaps he wished he could do more, it was still better than nothing.]

Back when we lived in Chicago, before the kids were born, there was a play we saw that Judy remembered more than any other. It didn't really fit in the classy category, but we've never been snobs or anything. Sometimes you just want something funny, and this play was nothing if not that. Judy often talked about how funny it was, how she had never laughed so hard in all her life, and, well, you get the picture. The play was called *Noises Off*, and she used to talk about it whenever theater would come up in conversation. Or our time in Chicago. Or things that were funny. Really, Judy would squeeze it into just about any conversation, especially if she had a glass or two of wine in her. Well, one of these conversations was with a woman from work who happened to be one of these Prairie Community Theatre people. I don't need to tell you what happened next. Before we knew it, Judy had agreed to direct this play in Dixon which sounded really exciting and romantic, but really meant she was basically in charge of everything but running the concession stand.

When Judy first told me, I offered to help with anything she needed. You know, just be a good husband, be supportive and all that. I don't know if I really meant it, but I knew if she asked, I would suck it up and help her out. Judy, though, she wanted to do this thing herself, and said, though she might need me before it was all over, she thought she could handle it. And she did. She was...*amazing*. You just can't imagine how much work goes into putting on a play. Producing, really. I mean, I always thought producers were just the guys that put up the money on a movie so they could see their name in the credits, but *somebody* has to do a hell of a lot of work to put these shows together. Call it what you will.

Sorry, I know this is taking a while to get to Eric, but you really have to understand the situation to understand how much this kid meant to me. Alright. I didn't see Judy much for a while, because she was in rehearsal almost every night, which was fine. In some ways, it was a nice break for me, having the house to myself. In other ways it was strange in the way it put Judy and I at odds with each other. More than usual, I mean. I was more calm and laid back than I had ever been in my adult life, and Judy was so wound up I thought she was going to explode every time I saw her. We started fighting over the stupidest things, and, like an idiot, I would chalk it up to her...well...I would think she was having her period or going through menopause or PMS or something that men aren't supposed to understand, but of which we are expected to be *understanding*.

[*Another shrug, this time accompanied by a friendly raising of the eyebrows.*]

Finally, the pressure was more than she could take, and she just...well, broke. She cried, and sobbed out these unintelligible words, and when she did calm down, she vomited all this crap she had been bottling up, which, of course, was all about the play. I tell you, I felt like a complete idiot for not having guessed. Of course it was the play. She had all these things to do and no time to do them. She still had to make the posters, had to get someone to find the costumes and props, the actors weren't learning their lines if they even bothered to show up to rehearsal at all, and suddenly, this show that she thought was the most wonderful thing she had ever seen, her favorite memory, was going to be a disaster, and everyone was going to hate it. Do you follow what I'm saying? *Yes* she had a lot to do, and *yes* she was overwhelmed, but the thing that was killing her was that she was not only going to *disappoint* everyone, but that she was somehow betraying this memory. How do I say this? If she had merely *told* everyone about the play, then they might someday have seen it and loved it with her, or they would just imagine how good it was because they trusted her story about it. Now, they would all see her version of it instead, think it was terrible, and assume everything *else* she talked about and they hadn't experienced for

themselves was just as bad. And the whole experience would ruin the beautiful memory she had, so she wouldn't even have *that*.

She was a wreck.

But of all the things on her impossible list, the worst was the scenery. I don't know if you know this play, but the scenery is complicated and has two complete sets that both have an upstairs and lots of walls and doors. She knew what it needed to do to make the play work, but she had no one to build it or even to draw it. The show was still a couple of weeks away, but it was a little like saying you still had a couple of weeks to build your new garage, but, oh yeah, you hadn't started yet, and, oh yeah, you have a full-time job, and oh yeah, you don't know anything about construction, and oh yeah, you don't even know what it's going to look like, and oh yeah, you actually have to build two. She was inconsolable.

So there I was, relaxed, calm, *empathetic*, and ready to be a hero. I said exactly what I was supposed to say. I told her that I couldn't help her with *everything*, but I *would* build the set for her so she should at least not worry about *that*. I don't think she ever loved me as much as she did in that moment. She was so relieved.

And I was in over my head.

You see, I had never built anything in my life. At least, not well. I had a few tools, notably a drill and a circular saw, but hadn't picked them up in something like ten years. When I need work done around the house, I *hire* somebody to do it. Still, I'm not incompetent, and thought there was some hope. We spent the next hour talking about what the set should look like and I spent the rest of the night wondering what the hell I had gotten myself into.

I took some time off of work, pulled the cars out of the garage, bought some wood, and started at it. I was committed to being the man of the house and rescuing my wife. What became increasingly clear, however, as the days went by and her actors started to get their lines down, as she found a friend to take on the costumes and convinced another to draw the poster, was that if I was *actually* helping, it was only by helping to ruin her show with an embarrassingly bad background that would be lucky to even stand up, let alone look convincing.

When I first met Eric, I must have looked pathetic. I had read a book about how to make theater flats and stages, but the book was not very clear and I was making an absolute mess of things. It was a Saturday, with only a week to go before it was supposed to move into the theater, and the thing was a complete disaster. The stairs were crooked, the doors wouldn't close and walls looked soggy. I needed help, but...I just didn't really have anyone to ask. I'm not...Judy and I...we just don't have those kind of...it's not that we're unfriendly, it's just that...I just didn't feel like I knew anybody *that* well. Now, it was my turn to break and I just sat there in the driveway, my head in my hands, trying to figure out how I was going to tell Judy that I had let her down. How do you give up when you can't give up? How do you fail when you can't fail? That's where I was. Storm clouds of despair surrounding me, and no weapon with which to stave them off.

[*He smiled at the poetic description of his state.*]

Eric was working on the roof across the street, and must have figured it out just from looking at me. I'm sure I looked completely pathetic. After the roofing crew broke for the day he came over, this kid I didn't know, and just said, "Hey, man, what's up?" I'm sure I must have mumbled *something* or other, figuring he was only passing by, but he sat down next to me and starting asking about what I was doing. I must admit it *was* a bizarre collection of junk I was working with, and I probably looked like some kind of crazy obsessed collector guy or something. All the more reason he should have steered clear of me, but that kid...he just dove right in to see who I was.

Suddenly, I knew what Judy must have felt like when when she vomited all that crap to me, because I did exactly the same thing, without the tears maybe, but basically the same thing, to this guy I had never seen before. This high school kid. And this guy decided, I'm not sure why, but he decided to be *my* hero, except in his case, he could actually *do* something about it. He started asking me about all the parts in my garage, and the next thing I knew, he was working with me every day after work, with his own tools, or his dad's tools, and he stayed late, and came by before work, too, and the next thing I knew, the disaster was starting to look like scenery.

I don't know what would have happened without him. I mean, I don't even know how I would have moved the stuff into the theater without this kid and his dad's pick-up truck. He never complained, never asked for money, and got absolutely nothing out of it except, well, except nothing. I don't know why he did it, but he helped me fix the crappy job I had done, built stuff I could have only dreamed of. Like trim. Everywhere you look in the world, houses are filled with trim. And everywhere you look, it seems to just wrap around corners. When I tried to do it, though, there were all these ugly gaps where the angle of the trim didn't match up. When he did it, they looked just fine. Maybe perfect, maybe not, but you certainly didn't give the corners any thought when he was done with them.

And getting ready for the dress rehearsals. The two of us literally stayed in the theater all night because we couldn't work during the rehearsals. He went to school all day and worked with me all night. At least I could *sleep* during the day. I don't know how he did it. And it looked great. The scenery I mean. Just right. When we were done, no one thought one way or the other about it. It just seemed appropriate and let the show work without being distracting. That may not sound like much, but if Eric Trotter hadn't stepped in, all anyone would have thought about during that show would have been how ugly and dumb, and no doubt completely unsafe the scenery was.

That boy saved my life, figuratively, although he might well have literally saved my marriage.

[He laughed here.]

Not really, of course. Judy and I would have moved past anything. But that kid, I'll never forget what he did for me. Never.

JERILYN PETERS (high school classmate)

Jerilyn Peters was working as a restaurant hostess in Chicago. When I learned that she had grown up in Amboy, I naturally turned the conversation to Stormy Nachreiner, a subject which seemed to set in motion an almost autonomic response of eye-rolling and head shaking. She was dressed to well represent her establishment, clean and trendy, not quite upscale, but with tasteful urban elegance. At my request, I came back following her shift, and shared a table with her.

All those goth girls were *ridiculous*, ok? I'm sorry, but it's true. What happened sucked, and I'm sorry it did. That guy was crazy and he killed two people and they didn't deserve it. I mean, I know I care a lot more about Eric Trotter than about the freak-bot, but I'm not *saying* she deserved it. I would never say that. Neither of them deserved it. But, seriously, it's not like we can suddenly change who she was just because this tragic thing happened. And it's not like the *rest* of them got killed, ok? So if I say they were ridiculous, *which they were*, it's just statement of fact, not some sort of judgment, like she deserved to be killed for being weird or something.

Actually, if they had just been weird, it would have been no big deal. Like Beth Cook. She was weird, ok? She couldn't say two words to you in the hall, freaked out if a teacher called on her, wore these stupid skirts like, below the ankles, and the same stupid white blouse everyday, ok? Definitely did *not* fit in. Definitely what you would call weird, ok? But it's not like she was trying to act like some kind of proselytizing christian schoolmarm librarian for *effect* or something. It was just the way she *was*, ok? Like, she couldn't help herself. Weird, but like, *naturally* weird, ok?

Those goth girls were not naturally weird. They were *ridiculous*. Nobody acts like that naturally. Nobody acts like that at all, unless they are trying to show off or something. Show how sophisticated and *artistic* they are. Seriously, if you're artistic, don't you just make art, or something? I'm sure they did, actually, I'm sure they stayed up all night painting angsty portraits or writing poetry or whatever, but not because...I

mean, it was all for show, wasn't it? The black, black, and black on black. The makeup that made it look like they'd been up all night wrestling in *existential crisis*. God, if I had known then what I know now. I mean, it's so *obvious*, isn't it? They just wanted the attention and it was like their only path to it.

It wasn't just the way they looked, either. Unless *suicidal* is a look. I'm not saying they were suicides or anything, but they certainly carried themselves like they thought life was a waste of time and they were likely to kill themselves at any moment. Seriously, who *does* that?

Look, I know I wasn't the most forward thinking person in high school. I know I judged people from appearances. That was stupid of me, ok? I was stupid. I've learned so much in the last couple of years and Dave has been *amazing*. So I *get it*, ok? I get that you can't judge a book by its cover, so you *shouldn't* judge a book by its cover. But here's the thing, ok? Some books have these really unusual covers, the whole idea of which is to get you to buy the book. Maybe the book lives up to the cover and maybe it doesn't, but the cover is like that on *purpose*. It's, like, trying to tell you this story so you can know what the story inside the book is without actually having to read it. No, that's not it. It's more like it doesn't matter what the book is inside because the marketing people only care if you *buy* the book, not if you *read* it. So although the book might or might not have value, it's irrelevant to the people that made the cover. Those girls all had really well made covers. You knew exactly what was supposed to be inside without ever having to get to know them. Like they had *marketed* themselves. And they thought *we* were posers.

I don't just mean them as a group, either. Stormy Nachreiner was equally ridiculous on her own. Not that I really knew her. I didn't. Not well, anyway. So, ok, maybe what I have to say isn't actually important. Just another two-dimensional image from a casual observer. I get that. But you asked, so...y'know, I'm...telling you, I guess.

We had this english class together, ok? And she would sit in the back with this attitude like she was too good for the rest of us, like we were all a bunch of hicks and somehow she *knew* better, or something. That would have been bad enough. The *holier than thou* crap. What was really annoying though, what drove us all crazy, was that at least once in

every class she would have something to say that brought the discussion to some *dark place*. Sometimes it wouldn't even be in answer to our teacher's question. Sometimes she would just jump in with her own question, like her whole goal was to remind everyone of how *dark* she was. Like, ok, I don't remember everything I read in Sophomore English, but I can think of at least one example. We were reading the Red Badge of Courage, ok? It's this famous book about a being scared when you're not supposed to be. I think it's the Civil War, but it doesn't really matter, ok? The point was that this boy thought he was a soldier, and when the time came to be brave, he got scared and ran away, and then, to make it worse, he lied about it. Ok, so, obviously a lot more to it than that, but that was the stuff we were talking about. Courage and all that. Except every time Stormy raised her hand, it was about how stupid *war* was, or how mankind will never learn, or how all people just follow orders and really hate each other, and stuff like that. I remember actually being kind of interested in the conversation about courage and cowardice, and she just completely ruined it for us.

She made these *arguments*. She *justified* everything. She tried to make everything *relevant*. But the point is she was always taking this lesson our teacher was trying to give, these planned thoughts the teacher had probably spent years and years honing, and just using them as an excuse to talk about the same crap she was always talking about. It was like she said to herself, *how can I talk about the meaning of life, today? What excuse can I use to turn the conversation over to the meaningless of existence so everyone can know how tortured I am?* That's what I mean when I say it wasn't just about how they, or even she, dressed, ok? It was the whole image. It was fake, and it was, as I have said maybe a little too much, *ridiculous*.

[*She opened her eyes wide when she said that, and I could see from her smile that she was making fun of herself a bit. She then seemed to settle into more serious thoughts.*]

I'm not saying that the whole fakey vampire goth thing was somehow the *cause* of her death, ok? I know it can sound like that because now that she *is* dead, anything anyone says about her must somehow relate to that. To the *murder*. *Especially* if it's negative. That's not my

point at all, though. I can't tell you why she got murdered. I wasn't there. Nobody was. I just think it's fair game to be *honest* about someone, even if they *are* dead. From what I knew of her, from what I knew of her friends, I think they were a bunch of hypocritical posers going out of their way to pretend they weren't, where somehow me and my friends were supposed to be the bad guys. Like we were the posers and they weren't. I really don't have anything good to say about them.

BOB CUTLER (Buck's neighbor)

Like many of the farmers I met, Bob Cutler had spent his work life split between summers in the fields and winters at Compass. He was retired now, which meant he had a few months to himself in the winter, but worked himself as hard as ever during the rest of the year. His house looked almost new on the inside, a result, no doubt, of Bob's new found time in the winter combined with his having finally gotten around to what he called his wife's honey-do lists. It had a modern look incongruous with the other farm houses I had visited, and though, like the others, it was dotted with landscapes, the ones filling this house were the proud work of Bob's wife Jan, an avid photographer of birds.

Damn shame about Buck Sprecher. *Damn* shame. He was a good kid, really. Hard worker, loyal. He used to help me out once in a while, which is more than I can ever say for Jeb. See I have these friends downstate with a...well, never mind. It don't matter. It's just that all people around here think about Buck is that he's some sort of evil bastard. They *think* that, though, because they don't *know* him. It's easy to think that about someone you don't know. All you see is the image. All you know is the gossip. Yeah the kid had a temper, still *does* I'm sure. Hell, I'm sure it's a damn sight worse now. They say prison will change a man, and not for the better, something we've got to fix in this country or we'll *all* end up...well, anyway, he had a temper when I knew him and it sure as hell got the better of him at about the worst possible time. What he done was...well, it wasn't right, and I don't make out to *defend* him, but he's doin' his time, and you can't ask more of a man that that. I think, though, in some ways, Buck got the short end. Don't get me wrong, but...it's just...circumstance.

Let's face it, Jeb is a hell of a lot meaner than Buck ever was, and he never shot *nobody*. And why? Why did Buck cross the line when Jeb never did? I'll tell you why, and it ain't self control or will power neither. Jeb never shot no one, *yet*, because it ain't come up when he had a gun in his hand. Maybe that's not *quite* fair. We all know he went to prison for stabbing Johnny Spencer, and it was just dumb luck that the boy

survived. What it is, though, Jeb never went *looking* for that fight any more than Buck looked for his. That fight came to *Buck*, and those kids were fools. No one in their right mind comes up to someone like Jeb or Buck, tells him off to his face on his own land, and dares him to do something about it while he's standing there half drunk with a *shotgun* in his hand.

The Buck *I*knew was alright, though. Loyal to a fault, even as a kid, especially when it came to his little brother. You could just tell he liked having Billy around. Billy would kind of trail after him, watchin' everything Buck was doin', the way sometimes you see a kid trail after his father. Buck was a lot older than Billy, of course, at least ten years, so maybe that wasn't much of a surprise. Jeb certainly didn't want nothin' to do with him.

I remember once, Buck was still just a kid himself, really, and Billy couldn't a been much more than three or four. My daughter was here visiting with the little ones. Carrie was just about Billy's age, so they were playing around, doing whatever little kids do. Pretending, I guess. Wouldn't that be nice? Sit around pretending all day, like when we were kids? Make the world be whatever we want? Be magic? I spent a lifetime learning the hard way that life is hard and that if you don't see it for what it truly is, if you don't face the cold hard facts, it will bury you before you get a chance to see who's holding the shovel. Then I passed that lesson on to my kids. But with the grandkids it was different. I didn't seem to care about all that as much. I just sat back and watched. Watched them play and pretend and imagine the world they wanted, instead of forcing them to come to terms with the world they got. Now I wonder if maybe the kids got the right idea after all.

Anyway, this one day the little kids were playing together, and something happened. Nobody knew what. Nobody ever knows. This kid says one thing, that kid says another. He hit me first. She made me do it. One of them is lying, probably they both are, but you got no way of knowing. You could probably go to any house in the world goin' back two hundred years, and it'd be exactly the same. Makes you appreciate your parents a bit, don't it? Anyway, I remember Billy Sprecher come up crying that Carrie hit him with a spoon or something and she's

screaming, saying she didn't do it, and I'm just laughing to myself because I *done* my time, and now some *other* parent can deal with it, thank God. Well, of course some other parent *did* deal with it. My daughter, Cathy...boy is she a piece of work. Just *loves* a crisis. Give her the smallest reason to see a problem and the next thing you know the whole world is about to fall apart. Again and again I told that girl to just settle down and see the world for what it is, to stop thinking she can make everything *different*...and even now she makes a mountain out of just about every mole hill she...well, anyway, that day she jumped right in as expected. She thought she'd figured out what'd happened, of course, and as usual, she was gonna solve the world's problems. Personally, I think those kids would've been better off if she'd let 'em fend for themselves every once in a while, but there's just no tellin' that girl.

[He shook his head in the universal gesture of a parent who just can't teach his kids.]

Maybe Billy called Carrie a name or something. I don't remember. What I *do* remember is my daughter telling Billy he had to apologize. Not just telling him, but making a big deal out of it. *Crisis*. She started this whole lecture about something, and Billy was looking sheepish like he was the only one in trouble. Finally, once she's done yammering, but before Billy's said anything, Buck said, I'll never forget this, Buck said, "Maybe Bill did what you said, Mrs. Hart, and maybe he didn't. It don't matter because if my dad ever finds out Bill got beat-up by a girl and cried over it, he's gonna beat him black and blue. And if he found out you made Bill *apologize* for it, he'd come and beat you next."

I could see where this was going, so I told Buck maybe he and Bill oughta just go home and cool off. And you know what he did? He said, "Sure thing Mr. Cutler. Please thank Mrs. Cutler for the pie. It was real good."

[Bob looked at me with smug satisfaction, sure that his tale had successfully demonstrated Buck Sprecher's honor. I wasn't so sure and must have shown doubt in my face. The satisfaction slipped off of his face and became ever so slightly defensive.]

Now maybe that don't seem like much to you, Miss, but it did to me. It showed what kind of a boy he was. What kind of a man he was

gonna be. This wasn't a kid gunning for a fight. If he'd wanted one, he could've had it. No sir. This was a kid standing up for his family. No more, and no less. Just loyal. He should get some credit for that, even after what he done. He'd a laid down his life for that boy, if it had come to that. How many people in this world can claim that virtue?

MARK DRAPER (Eric's boss)

Mark Draper's bread and butter was roofing, but things can get slow in the winter, and he filled in with a little of everything. He was on a drywall job when I finally got in touch with him, and said I was more than welcome to sit in a corner while he worked. I think he was grateful for the company, something beside the radio to keep him a little distracted for a while. The day we met, he was painting what he called "mud", a quiet, slow, and patient job well suited as background for our interview, if not for the incessant drone of the box fans doing all they could to drown him out.

I liked Eric. He was alright. I miss having him on the crew, if you wanna know the truth. He was a kid who was actually willing to work for his paycheck. Some of these guys, it's like pulling teeth to get anything done. They drag their asses around in the morning, complaining about how tired they are. Gotta have a cup of coffee and a cigarette before they can get started, wanna stop for smoke breaks all day long, cut out early for lunch, dragging their feet coming back. I don't mean to make them all sound like slackers, but Jesus, they can try your patience. They do good work, don't get me wrong. It's just so fucking *obvious* they don't want to be there. I tell them, *just pretend, just pretend you're not completely miserable*, but they're kids, what the hell do *they* know about anything? Still, they're cheap labor, and they get the job done. That's what matters, right? Hell, sometimes we get a *lot* of work done during the day. I really can't complain.

Eric was a different kind of kid, though. Had a little more farm boy in him, if y'know what I mean. He made working hard look natural. Like it was easy and fun. Then they'd try to live up to him. Not that it always worked like that, but it sure as hell was a lot easier motivating those guys when he was around. Not that he was perfect or somethin'. He took breaks and stuff, too. But he always worked an extra minute before he stopped. Like the way how you look for a stopping point. The other kids would just drop whatever they were doin', but Eric would wrap it up first, y'know what I mean? He'd be the first to get back to work, too. It

was kinda like...like he didn't take breaks because he needed them, or even *wanted* them, but because he didn't want to piss anybody off. Like he understood that taking breaks was part of the job, something he was *supposed* to do. Or maybe more like he was joining the crew on breaks to show his solidarity, like the way you put on gloves in the winter when you don't need them, to show your little kids that wearing gloves is nothing to be ashamed of. That's the kind of guy he was. He'd work harder than anyone on the crew, but then pull back a little to make 'em feel like they were all working together as a team, instead of with some sort of show-off.

I don't know that I could actually say I knew him all that well, though I probably knew him as well as I knew any of them. I'd watch 'em all working and listen in, just to keep from gettin' too bored or somethin'. Mostly they talked about girls or sports. Once in a while some high school girl would stop and have a sort of shouting conversation with him or one of the others from down on the sidewalk, but they never lasted long. I remember this one kid always talked about baseball, and Eric seemed to be pretty into that. The kid was a Cubs fan, though, so I never really trusted him. Eric would talk about the games, but you could tell his heart was with the Sox. Maybe that's why I liked him so much.

[*Mark turned to me and made a big grin.*]

Toward the end of the summer, talk would usually turn to the Bears. Just, y'know, *guy* talk. Coulda been talking about the weather. Didn't really matter. Just something to keep your mind off the brutal heat up there on the roof, help you pass the time. I give the guys a hard time about slacking on the job, but I gotta tell you, that is hard, boring work. A man could go crazy up there without somethin' to distract him.

Eric was a good guy to have on the crew. Even tempered, hard working. The other guys liked bein' around him, so they always showed up. I only saw him go off his nut once. We were working on one of those nice houses up on Coolidge. It was a fairly big job and took us about a week. The whole time, I remember, Eric was pretty quiet. Like he was in his head. At first I thought...you see there were a lot of...*inappropriate* for sure, but I'd be lyin' if I didn't say the boys were...let's say sort of *cav-alier* about making homo jokes on that particular job. At first I thought

it was maybe something they'd seen on tv, or some story goin' around the school. What it was, though, it turned out that the kid who lived in the house was gay, or at least they thought he was. That shit is a bit much for me, but I hate to pick fights with my crew. Live and let live is what I say. Whatever keeps them working, right?

[*This time, his grin was a little sheepish.*]

Eric didn't take part, or anything, but he didn't say anything else, either. He was just all quiet, like I said. So I thought...it sounds strange to say now, but I thought...well...maybe this kid is...what'd'ya call it...repressed, or somethin'. It made me kinda curious, and I watched him a little more closely. Not to see if he was gay or something - of course I couldn't. It was more like I wanted to figure out what he was thinking, what was keeping him quiet. Not that there was any hope of that, but, like I said, a guy can get pretty bored up on the roof. Then I heard them talking about this time or that when they had harassed this kid, this kid that lived in the house we were working on, and I figured I'd nailed it. Like he was some closeted gay kid who joined in with his friends to bully some other gay kid so no one would suspect him. I swear to God I watch too much tv.

Well, a few days in, we're getting on the far side of the job, maybe a day and a half of work left, and Eric finally speaks. Just lays it out, all at once. He says, "This is his *house*. He *lives* here. His *mother* lives here. You don't think she can fucking *hear* you? Have a little *respect*." And that was it. About the only words he spoke all week. Like he held off as long as he could, but he knew if he didn't say *something*, they would all think he felt the way they did. Not that he didn't...I think he probably *did* feel the way they did, at least most of the time. But there was this other thing, I think. Like maybe it's ok to bully someone when they have a chance to run away, that somehow that makes it fair. *Fairer*. Like somehow insulting someone in their home is crossing a line, and maybe...this is where I'm making it up...maybe sitting on that line made Eric think a little harder about what they'd done to this kid. Maybe he was starting to feel bad about it, *regret* it for the first time, and that's what made him so quiet.

If anything, it made me like him more.

MADISON PETERS (bartender at the Bowl & Brew) Part 2

I asked Madison what sort of cocktails were most popular at the tavern. She said most of the old-timers liked Whiskey Sours, and that otherwise it was pretty much anyone's game. When I asked her what she liked to make the most, she said, "Beer in a can," and laughed. Then she made me a specialty drink I'd never had before with whiskey and about four different flavored somethings. She called it a 300, and said it was pretty much mandatory after a perfect game.

I hated watching Buck walk into the bar. He usually drank over at Spinny's, so I didn't see him a whole lot. He's actually my cousin, sort of. His grandfather, Wally, was *my* grandfather's cousin. Not that our families ever partied together or anything, but there was definitely blood there. Not that I care a lot about *that*. Seriously, though, Buck was *trouble*, and if he walked into the Brew, it was gonna be a *long* night. Especially if that *that bitch* Shan Nicholson was with him. She was almost worse than he was. Really, sometimes I think we should have a boy's side and a girl's side. What'dya think, Mikey?

[Down the bar, a customer just smiled and shook his head.]

In the old days, Cal used to keep a baseball bat behind the bar to keep these fuckers in line. You wanna know what I got back here now?

[She pulled a shotgun out from behind the bar and laid it down for me to see.]

I'd like to see them fuck with *Shirley*. Also, Jerry and Mark usually come by on their rounds, and everybody knows they're our friends, so, you know, we feel pretty safe. Still, fuckers like Buck or Doug Ramsey or, well, let's just say I've got a short list of people that I keep my eye on. Mean drunks. Fighting drunks, you know?

No, not *you*, Mikey.

Excuse me a second.

[She put away the shotgun and took a moment to serve a customer while I tried to imagine what a fight might look like in this establishment. There was a surprising absence of glass, except the bottles behind the bar. The trophies were on display, out of reach, but exposed on their

shelves. The chairs and stools looked sturdy. I found myself thinking that a bar fight, something which I have never seen first hand, was likely to be a far different affair from what I have seen in the movies. When Madison came back, I asked her about it.]

Well, yes, I mean, that's what I'm talking about it. When I say Buck was trouble, that's what I mean. Violent fights that end up in the alley, or, y'know, in the hospital or the jail. Don't get me wrong. It's not like we get a *lot* of fights in here. There are *plenty* of Saturday nights, most, really, when you can have a good time in peace, if by peace you mean surrounded by loud, sloppy drunks, bumping into you all the time and spilling beer on your shoes. No, not you, Mikey.

But there *definitely* are nights when you're not so lucky. So, ok, how do I describe it? It's like this. Maybe Buck is sitting at the bar getting a little loud. Nothing wrong with that, right? Except, when they get loud, you know they're starting to lose control, so you need to stay on your guard, which on any *other* night would be easy, but it's Saturday night, and you're *just a little busy*. So Buck might be getting a little loud, and some idiot next to him, some guy maybe he doesn't even know, also a little too loud, says something Buck finds, well, let's say *insulting*. Not like, on purpose or anything. Not personal. Just some stupid comment about the Bears, or the President, or the war, or who the fuck knows? Maybe about how shitty Chevy trucks are compared to Ford. It doesn't really matter. It's just some random bullshit. Except something this guy says pisses Buck off, and he comes back swinging. Wait. No. I don't mean swinging his fist or anything. We're not there yet. Swinging like *metaphorically*. With *words*. Something like, *what kind of moron faggot would drive one of those sissy trucks?* Right? The proverbial shove.

Now if we're lucky, the other guy, the Chevy, will say something to let them both off the hook, like, "*Well, at least I drive an American fucking truck, right?*" Then, maybe they clink their cans together and laugh it off. That's a *good* night. If we're *not* lucky, though, if Chevy is kinda itchin' for a fight, then the words escalate into personal insults and a little shoving. Or worse, those *bitches* start *commenting*. Y'know what I mean? Like, "*No you di-in't. Oh you gonna get it now.*" Shit like that. Then maybe Chevy spills a beer on Buck and the Buck shoves hard

enough to push him over and it gets ugly. At that point, we're into it for real. They start punching each other, I call Jerry or Mark on the radio to let them know what's going on and I put my hands on old Shirley here.

[*She pointed to the shotgun I could no longer see, hidden behind the bar.*]

I might shout something like, "*Maybe you boys want to take this outside before the law gets here*", and maybe they do or maybe they don't. If they don't, maybe one of them stumbles back during the fighting and knocks over someone else, and maybe *that* guy is itchin', too. I've seen it where four, five guys are goin' at it and my *customers* are the ones taking it outside, you know?

That's rare though, a big fight like that.

Mostly, it's just someone like Buck or Doug or Jesse goin' at it with some other idiot until the cops show up and send them home. There's usually a mess of spilled drinks and knocked over stools, but nothin' we can't handle. Even when it's bad, when we get a big one, you don't see a lot of damage to the Brew itself, though I can't say the same for purses and fingers and cell phones, and...well, whatever. But that shit happens *nightly*. Seriously, I think we get more damage from happy drunks tripping and knocking shit over than from the real fights.

I *did* have someone pull a gun in here once. That was before I kept Shirley here. Some asshole from Dixon came in drunk as a skunk, and I could tell he was just itchin', you know? I could just *smell* it, right? So I told him he could stick around if he wanted, but I wasn't gonna serve him. That's the law, y'know, I'm not supposed to serve a *visibly intoxicated* customer. This asshole goes out to his car and comes back with a hunting rifle like he's gonna shoot up the place. I called 911 and got Jerry on the radio, but by the time they got here, Buck had taken the gun from him and unloaded it. So, y'know, he wasn't *all* bad. That's another story, though.

From STORMY NACHREINER'S journal, undated.

Unusual for her journal, this page sits unaccompanied. In some cases, words have been crossed out and replaced with the same words. The entry is written on notebook paper, cut out and taped into the journal, as if written without the usual rituals, but perhaps screaming of greater importance for having been done so.

When the wind bites through the long johns under your jeans like they aren't even there
and even the lightest snow is treacherous because it hides slick ice just beneath it
and your hands freeze in your gloves,
and even though it's bright enough to wear sunglasses you can't because if you do they'll fog up from the breath that gets pushed up your face from beneath the scarf that only makes you colder once it starts to get wet from the same breath.

When the thick wet heat pummels you with suffocating closeness
and the sun bites your bare skin until it festers leaving the remnant of burning pain to stay with you even when you sleep
and the sweat drips down into your butt crack filled with the underwear that rides up and won't come down
and the air is too thick to breathe
and no matter how wet and sweaty and moist you feel, you just drink more water to make more sweat to make you feel even slimier
and there is no such thing as sleep because even in the darkest, coldest hours of the night, the sauna pushes down on you without relief.

When the snow melts
and the rains come
and the frost creeps out of the earth leaving wet icy mud covered with water of unknown depth,
and the air is wet with sleety drizzle that hangs in front of you painting your face with chill

and the sun is hidden
and the world has warmed just enough to trick you into a lighter
coat now soaking with moisture keeping in the chill instead of holding
it at bay
and each step is worth two from the effort to pull your foot out of
the mud
but winter is over so there is no fire, no cocoa, no warm dry blan-
kets to come home to.

When the clouds first roll in
and the corn is down leaving nothing to stop the wind coming
across the open fields
and you don't have your gloves yet so you stick your hands in your
pockets
and wrap your summer coat tightly around your chest hoping it
will keep out the winter
but it comes anyway
finding each crack,
stealing what little warmth you had left from the day
and the leaves are brown and wet and smashed,
and your feet are achy cold,
and all you can think is, not yet, please...please, not yet,
and no matter what you tell yourself, you will never be ready.

When the world teases you with how nice it will be when it warms
up, or cools off, or when the days will get longer or shorter,
when you will be happier, more comfortable, comforted,
and you don't take the bait
because all you can know is where you are *today*,
however harsh,
however bleak,
however miserable,
because that is where you are and you don't want to be anywhere
else,
don't want to imagine a nicer time, a nicer place,

just want to see the world as it is, *right now*,
not suffer,
not dream,
just be.

Maybe that's when love comes.

GILBERT FENTON (Village President)

Village President Gil Fenton wore a sport coat, not because he was trying to make a certain sort of impression, but because that is what people of his generation do for an appointment with a stranger. His voice was shaky with age, and his words were slow in coming. When they did come, however, they were sure of purpose. He had represented his village for over ten years, and lacked no confidence when it came to speaking of his people. We met at the village office in folding chairs around a folding table. Although the heat was on, the room was cold, a result, I came to understand, of frugality born of tightening budgets. I was pleasantly surprised at the warmth of Gil's hand when we shook, exacerbated, perhaps, by the chill of my own.

Well, you see, I'm not sure how I feel about this book you're writing, Miss. There's a lot of good people in this town that would just like to forget about the whole thing. We've already been on the news, and had all kinds of reporters coming out here to prod us and poke us. If anyone outside of a fifty mile radius even knows about this village, it's not as a nice place to visit, let me tell you. But it *is* a nice place to visit, and a great place to build a business. We've tried to be very friendly to new businesses. We have a wonderful area, just across the state highway, zoned for manufacturing with plenty of space. We have young people looking for work, nice areas in and out of town for managers and owners to live. And we *need* those businesses to move in. You stir all this up again and it's another five years of being shunned for bad publicity.

I do appreciate what you said about not sensationalizing this all over again, and trying to treat us as real people. I think that's important. But once you get home, what's to stop you from writing whatever you want? You won't be coming back here, so you won't have to face any of us. You could be just like all the rest of them, and there's not a thing we can do about it. You must understand how we feel about that.

[I once again tried to impress upon him my desire to tell the story as I heard it, through the voices of his neighbors, in their own words. I shared my desire to show my readers not some sensational story, but

how real people with real feelings felt about it. He warmed to this, the idea that others might see his neighbors as honest folk not all that different from the rest of the world.]

I imagine you want me to tell you that the Sprechers and Nachreiners have been enemies as long as anyone can remember, like the...oh, you know, the...oh, the famous feud, the...

[I offered up a suggestion here.]

Thank, you. Yes, the Hatfields and the McCoys. Some people might have told you that already, and if they haven't yet, they probably will. But I can tell you it wasn't that way. It never was that way in this town. Sometimes this person or that person gets angry with someone else, sometimes for an awful long time. But these are no Hatfields and McCoys. They aren't feuds that get passed from generation to generation. Usually, when the parents hate each other, the kids become best friends just to be *insubordinate* with their parents.

After the police arrested Buck Sprecher, we had all kinds of visitors. Reporters and tv crews and just plain folks who were curious. In some ways, we benefitted from the attention, and some folks were glad to have the tourists, I don't mind telling you, if only to sell a few more burgers or what not. Once the articles came out though, most people around here felt quite different. We became this bastion of hate, this *example* of just how out of touch us *rural* folks were with the *sophisticated* ways of urban America. We got stuck in a place where we just couldn't win. The cities saw us as dumb hicks filled with hate, you see. I suppose there's no changing that. It's probably been true as long as there's been cities. What really hurt was how the towns talked about us. Folks in other rural communities like ours knew *they* weren't that way, but they still believed what they read about *us*. *They* hated us too, but because they thought we made *them* look bad. And here we are, just a normal town with a bad egg, like you find everywhere, suddenly the home to hell on earth, if you'll pardon my French.

I tell you, we can't go *through* that again.

You said yourself you wouldn't *sensationalize* this story. That was *your* word. Sensationalize. I'm counting on you to keep your word. If we're going to be dragged through this all over again, just when we've

finally begun to put it behind us, something good has to come of it. You have to show us for who we are. You have to show the good side of the community. How we came together for Molly and Ronny and Mike and Liz. How we reached out to Jeb and Mabel. That memorial at the school didn't just make itself. There were people who thought the kids were too young to handle it, and others, well, you see, before the *trial* there was still some *question* regarding what happened. I think some people were afraid that a memorial was bound to make a villain out of Mr. Sprecher before he had been duly convicted in a court of law. Most people, though, wanted to reach out to those poor parents, and made quite a fuss at the school board meeting. They made it happen because they wanted to do some *good*. You *know* that because everyone involved promised to keep Mr. Sprecher's name out of it, out of respect for Jeb and Mabel. We came together as a town to do what was right. People stand up for each other, here, Miss. I think that's important.

Of course, the memorial turned out to be quite a mess, but you can't always predict what some high school kids will do. If you ask me, I think there was just a lot of fear and anger, and the kids were just too young to know what to do with it. Even adults have problems with things they don't understand. Just look at what happened at the trial. You see, we're not perfect. The people here have feelings just like other people have anywhere else. But if all you talk about are the bad things, no one will see all the good things that outweigh them. We did make those boys clean up their mess, after all, and pay for their...well I wouldn't call it a *crime*, exactly. More like damn foolishness if you ask me. But they cleaned up their mess and shook hands, and that was enough for most of us. Those boys made a helluva ruckus when they weren't thinking, but when they shook hands, they knew exactly what they were doing. That means something, a lot more than what they did in the heat of the moment, if you ask me.

Then the Lions raised almost fifteen thousand dollars for Mike Trotter when he got sick and lost his job. That may not sound like much, but in this town, it means people gave more than they had to give. That benefit could have been another disaster like the memorial or the trial, but it wasn't. If you want to know why, I'd probably say the same thing:

because deep down, we care about each other. We're not the town full of feuding enemies the papers made us out to be. Jeb and Mabel stayed away from the benefit so as not to start anything, and that helped, but Mabel sent a pie for the bake sale, and that ain't nothing. We *have* found ways to forgive each other.

The way the papers put it, we were some sort of evil town with two lone crusaders for good who just weren't strong enough to destroy the hate all around them. What they never seemed to see was what the rest of us saw. A couple of high school kids who wound up in the wrong place at the wrong time. And then came the other articles *defending* us, robot haters who saw us as the defenders of the white race, or some such garbage. Sometimes, Miss, I think the world is half crazy. It was like these reporters were trying to pick their own fights and just using us for bait. Our wounds were just starting to heal when they picked at the scabs and tried to get us to bleed all over again. Trying to make everyone who didn't know us pick sides. We're not some example of good versus evil. We're just normal folks trying to live and let live. Trying to give a helping hand to our neighbors when they need it. Sure, we've got a few bad eggs, but there are bad eggs in every town.

Maybe Buck Sprecher was disturbed, and maybe he wasn't. That's not for me to say. What I *can* say is that he committed a terrible crime, and he's being punished according to the law. If there was a price to pay from the rest of us, we paid it. I ask that you respect that, and give us a little credit for trying. If you do it right, if you don't try to pick our scabs all over again, maybe you can help us put this behind us for good.

GENE STOLLER (friend of Eric's)

Compass Engineered Composites is a sprawling complex of factories and warehouses that comprises most of what the Village President referred to as the "M-1". Gene Stoller usually worked nights, so was somewhat hard to get a hold of. I was finally able to meet him on his "lunch" break around 2:00am. Most of our conversation happened on an unused loading dock with my hands about to freeze off. I have no love for the days when cigarette smoke filled every room I walked through, but there are days I pine for them, if only to get out of the cold. Gene wore an open jacket, and didn't seem to be affected by the cold at all.

We weren't exactly angels, as my girlfriend would say, but we sure as fuck weren't bullies. Still, we did get in our share of trouble. I don't want to give Eric a bad rap. No one does. But we were trouble, and no one would say we weren't. Like back when we were freshmen, you would think we would have been like the new kids in school that got pushed around by the seniors and shit. But we walked into that place like we *owned* it, and no one thought twice. Fucking Eric Trotter made varsity as a *freshman*. That was a big deal. It meant we could pretty much do what we wanted and get away with it, even as *freshmen*, y'know? That was definitely cool, and definitely because of Eric. You kinda had to be there, but at the time, the shit we did...we were trying to live up to this thing that put us up with the older kids and whatever, so who we hung out with mattered a lot. I mean, we were lucky the older wrestlers didn't immediately want to kick our asses, which is what normally happened, and we were trying to...I don't know, *honor* that or something. Where I'm going with this is that we definitely picked on some of the other kids, but it was kind of a matter of our own survival. It was kinda like that's how we earned our place. I know it sounds a little shitty, but it's not like we ever really did any permanent damage to any of them, or anything. We were just, y'know, fuckin' around, or whatever.

Like I remember this one time, we were hanging out behind the school and some band fag came over trying to act all cool and shit. He's

got a cigarette in his hand and comes over to us like he's just gonna hang out with us, or whatever. He pulls out a pack of, get this, *Winstons*, like we're gonna smoke *that* shit with him. Trotter walks right up to him and says, "This is a *private* party. Why don't you get the fuck outta here." Fair warning, right? Well this kid who's like, half my height or something, goes, "It's a free country," and just stands there smoking, like what the fuck are we gonna do about it, right? Disrespectful, and whatever. So Eric shoves him to the ground, grabs his clarinet case or whatever the fuck it was, and fucking hurls it like fifty feet or something.

[*He laughed heartily.*]

He spun it around like he was throwing a fucking discus or something and it just went flying off toward the woods. Then Eric says, cool as ice, "I think you lost something. Why don't you go look for it?" Never missed a fucking beat. Man, I never knew Trotter to lose his cool, ever. Once he made up his mind to do something, he just fucking did it. He never got all worked up and shit. Not even when he was wrestling. He was all business. Like he didn't even have to think about it, or whatever. Some piss ant got in his face, he just taught him a lesson. No big deal. Just a lesson. Eric Trotter never shot anybody. Never sent anybody to the hospital, not that I ever saw, anyway. We egged a few houses over the years, got into a few fights, and yeah, we picked on a few geeks or band fags or whoever that...that *failed to show us the proper respect*, as my girlfriend would say. But to say Eric Trotter was an asshole or a bully is to miss the fucking point.

People act like it's such a big deal if you punch someone half a size smaller than you, but it's totally fine for the managers to shit all over us at Compass. What do you think would happen to me if I sat down in the executive lunch room? Think they'd invite me to come in and get comfortable? Watch a little tv over my break? Fuck no. I'll tell you what *would* happen. They'd tell me get the fuck out, that's what would happen. And if I pushed it, they'd fire me first and sue me later. So we're assholes 'cause we humiliated a few fags in high school, but when my fucking supervisor humiliates me in public for taking too long on the pot, or docks me for coming in five minutes late, it's *just business*, right?

[*Gene challenged me with his eyes, and I waited for him to continue.*]

Eric wasn't an asshole. None of us were. We were just fucking *people* acting like *people*.

Eric had this rule, ok? He said disrespect must always be paid for. You disrespect *us*, we disrespect *you*. Like, alright, I'll give you one more. This one time, Eric failed this test, or whatever, in History, which is shitty enough, but then they were going over the answers in class, and Eric was embarrassed about saying his answers out loud because he knew he'd done a shitty job, or whatever, right? Still, he's got no choice, and gives the wrong answer to some question when it comes around to him, and some asshole gives him shit about how obvious it is and everything. I don't remember what it was, but this guy was acting like the question was, like, "What state do you live in," or whatever, like only an *idiot* wouldn't know the answer, right? I mean, it wasn't that simple or anything, but because of this guy, everyone acted like it was, and this asshole just rubbed it in. So after school, Eric told him he would have to pay for what he'd done, and ripped his books apart. He didn't go apeshit, or ballistic, or whatever. Just fucking ripped the asshole's books apart and sent him on his way. You can say he was a bully or whatever, because this asshole was littler than him, but that's not the way it was. It was *fair*. The asshole had *asked* for it.

That's what I mean about Eric. He wasn't a fucking psycho like Billy Sprecher or his goddamn brother. He might've pushed a few kids around. We all did. The thing about Eric, though, he was always *fair*.

SHANNON NICHOLSON (friend of Buck's)

Shannon Nicholson was loud. Brassy. Her voice cut through the diner to the point there was no question that anyone interested in hearing our conversation would get their wish, and the rest would have to spend their lunch trying to block it out. What I could see of the tattoo peeking out of her blouse suggested body art that was large, bodacious, and faded. She had three bracelets on her left arm that knocked together each time she pushed her hair out of her eyes, which was often, creating a sort of punctuation to each new thought.

Buck's alright. I mean, he's a total hothead. *And* a prick. *And* an asshole. *And* I hate his guts. But, y'know, he's alright. *And* he's *cute*. You can't deny that. I miss him, actually. Sometimes. A little. I certainly miss screwing him. Sorry. Can I say that? Can I say stuff like...ok, thanks. Buck and I were kind of on and off for a long time. We were, I guess you would call it *together* in high school, most of the time, but we broke up when he got drunk with that bitch Stacy Colson and...well...I mean, it was in front of *everybody*. I know I should be over that, I mean, I *am*, and it was, like, a really long time ago, but she had her fucking top off and he was practically fucking her in front of everybody. I mean, it was a fucked up party and we were *all* wasted, don't get me wrong, but, I mean, there's a *limit*, right?

Ok, sorry. Off point. But, I don't know, maybe not. I mean, Buck and I broke up and got together again like twenty times or something, and there was, still is *definitely* something there, even though, now, of course, I mean, well, obviously *that's* over now. Still, I feel bad for him. I should probably visit him. I'm sure he's lonely as hell. Still, though, I wonder if he even wants to see me. I mean, you hear all kinds of things about prison, and all the shit that goes down there, and maybe, I don't know, maybe a guy doesn't want to share that shit, y'know? Still, I should probably visit. I've meant to. I really have, but...it's a huge drive, and it always...y'know, seems so *impossible*. At this point, I'm sure he doesn't want anything to do with me, anyway. Still, I'll probably go down there at some point. I mean, I can't just let him *rot* down there, can I?

Ok, sorry. Got lost again. Buck was just a normal guy, y'know? If he ever wanted to do anything other than drink, fight or fuck, *I* never saw it, but, like, what isn't normal about that? What guy isn't just like that? Certainly all the guys *I* know are. It's the guys that aren't that *I* worry about. I mean, at least Buck was *predictable*. Sometimes a little *too* predictable, I'm sorry to say. I mean, y'know, his eyes would wander constantly, and there was always some bitch just pretty enough to steal him away, but that's not exactly *unpredictable* is it? Not that I would just fucking stand by. I mean, like I said, we broke up like twenty times or something. And god knows I've had my share of guys. But the thing is Buck and I had...I don't know, had, have, had, this *thing* and no matter what shit went down, somehow we always ended up coming together again.

[*She laughed here.*]

Sorry. I mean, well, you know what I mean.

Buck wasn't likely to fight without a few drinks in him, but he usually had a few drinks in him. When he wasn't on the farm, that is. I mean, I don't think he really drank much at home. For Buck it was like two different worlds. The hell that was home and the hell that was getting the fuck *away* from home. On the farm, there was always work to do, and he used that work the same way he used the bottle. I mean, I said it already, but he really was pretty normal. Just a *guy*, y'know? Guys never want to *talk*, so they have all this shit inside and they've gotta do *something*, so they work and fight, and fuck if they're lucky, but they have to do *something*, right? With Buck, the something he did at home was *work*.

I think all that work was probably pretty good for him, and if he'd had his own place, maybe things would have worked out different. His dad, though, he was a fucking piece of work, and Buck couldn't stand it too much. So when he wasn't working, he wasn't home, and when he wasn't home he was drinking, and when he was drinking, he needed *something*.

You could usually count on a fight if you went out with Buck, and you could *always* count on Buck coming out on top.

[*She laughed again here.*]

I did it again. Sorry. I *do* miss that, though. He was a fucking *machine* in bed. I mean, he just had all this...*energy*. Anyway, what was I saying? Oh, yeah, he was always looking for a fight. Not with me. He never hit me or anything. But Jesus Christ, you wanted to stay out of his way.

The thing was, though, you shouldn't hear it the wrong way. I mean, if you needed someone on your side, Buck was the guy. Yeah, somebody always ended up hurt, and sometimes, Buck was just picking a fight to pick a fight, but he was a stand up guy, too. Like that time when that asshole pulled a gun at the Brew. Has anyone told you about that one?

[*I told her I had heard it referenced, but that I was anxious for the full the story.*]

Well, we were at the Brew one night and, this is typical, ok, we were at the Brew and getting drunk you could just taste it in the air. I mean, Buck was getting restless and I could see him looking about the bar for *something*. A fight. Some hot bitch. *Something*. And I was thinking maybe I could do something, and I was probably feeling a little horny, and I just started, y'know, hanging on him a bit. Y'know what I mean. Just getting close. It was working too, and I thought maybe it was gonna be a good night after all. So Buck was a little *distracted* when this asshole came in, stumbled in, really, drunk as a fucking skunk, and Madison was like, *get the fuck out of my bar*, or whatever. I don't know what she said to him, but it was basically *that*. Like there was no way she was going to serve this asshole. I don't know if she knew him or what, but he was fucking *pissed*. Well, Buck started to stiffen up, like this little romance shit I was trying was suddenly *distracting* him from something important. Like the fight he was looking for was here and he was just waiting for his *moment*, right?

Not that Buck had any loyalty to Madison, or the Brew or whatever. But *that* night, it was his house, and nobody shit in Buck's house without paying for it. You could just feel it in the air. Ok, so everybody was kind of waiting for it, and maybe the asshole could tell, 'cause he just gave up and walked out. It's what we were always saying people should do, but they, like, never did. Just walk away, right? It sounds so easy, but

like, nobody ever does it. Anyway, when this guy left, most of us were relieved, but the boys were a little...disappointed, I guess. I think they actually wanted the fight more than, y'know, *us* or whatever, and we all figured it was going to take a few minutes to get back to where we were, y'know? Like *before* we were all calm and drunk, and *now* we were all wound up and focused, and we weren't just going to relax right away. I went off to bathroom with Wendy, and told Buck to get me another drink.

Ok, so Wendy went out of the bathroom first, and called back to me. Like, "*Shannon, get the fuck out here,*" or whatever, and then we were there, at the back of the bar, looking toward the front door where the asshole had just come back in with a fucking *rifle*. Well, that was just the thing Buck had been waiting for, and he went right up to that asshole and took the gun, emptied the bullets, and beat him to a pulp. I mean, this asshole was fucking carrying a *loaded rifle*, and Buck just took him on. That's what I mean about having Buck on your side. He would walk into a *fucking rifle* for you.

When the cops came, they had to call a fucking ambulance to get the fucker off the floor. Even still, Mark actually shook Buck's hand, which was a first. And a last, I guess. I mean, everybody knew Buck was at the top of Mark's shit list, but that night, Mark must've just been glad he was taking in someone with a few bruises instead of a room of people filled with fucking bullet holes. Not that it stopped him from hauling Buck in after he shot those kids on the farm.

Still, even Mark knew whose side you wanted Buck on in a fight.

HOWARD COLDER (Stormy's friend) Part 3

At last Howard let down all of his defenses, and began to treat me like a friend. He sort of shrugged off the last layer of mask and let me in. Perhaps it was his ruminations about Bill Sprecher that had taken down the final barrier, his embarrassment at the lie that had set so much in motion. When he moved back to stories about Eric, they somehow had a new flavor. He began to speak of his enemies not so much as heartless ruffians, but instead as misguided rascals, lost boys who had misplaced their hearts.

I'd had worse. Obviously, I've had worse. Let's see. It was snowing. I remember that because we had been hanging out in the trailer. See, there was this trailer at the back end, or, I guess you'd call it the south end of the quarry. I don't think the trailer was really used during the day at that point. It was sort of abandoned there, but not completely. Like maybe they used it on rare occasions for a meeting or something. There was this built-in desk along the whole thing, and a couple of chairs. There were a few random papers around, this old drawing, and lots of boxes with more old papers. The door didn't really lock, so it was easy to get in, and we used to hang out in there when it was cold or rainy, or really anytime it was just nicer to be inside.

I remember it was snowing because I insisted on keeping the door open so I could watch it come down. The flakes were big and fluffy and the air was calm. One of those super peaceful snowfalls that just make you want to sit quietly, watching. Just...sit. I don't know if you know what I'm trying to say. Let's see. There was this sort of...peace. Out there. Out through the door, and it was calling me. It was as if this urge had come over me to stop the world, and just...be. I'm sure you've had moments like that. I'm sure most people have. The thing is, though, I don't feel that way often. Usually, my mind is racing with doubt and fear and ideas and fantasies. What I mean to say is that my mind rarely takes a *break*, and this was one of those rare occasions when I felt the need.

Bernie and Sarah were arguing about something, I don't remember what. But there was all this angst inside the trailer fighting that blanket

of peace trying to wrap itself around me. Pen was cold, of course. She was *always* cold. Even in mid-summer the girl was cold, so I can't really fault her. But you could just tell, and when she asked if we could close the door, I knew it wasn't frivolous. It's funny. It's so easy to dismiss someone when they need something that you don't. When you're in a group, and one person gets hungry even though you all just ate, and you all think it's ridiculous that anyone could be hungry when you are still so full, so you completely dismiss it. Just refuse to take it seriously. Except the thing is, so much of what we need is totally individual. *Subjective*. It would have been easy for me to be dismissive of Pen, except somehow I knew, really knew, that closing the door was a big deal for her. Subjective, yes, but still *real*. That was part of this state I was in, too. This calm had come over me and I saw the world as it was, not just through my usual personal lens. Maybe that was it. Maybe the calm that came over me allowed me to see the world *objectively*, which somehow encompassed all the *subjective* views of everyone else.

Or not.

I don't know.

In any case, Pen did ask me to close the door, and I said something like I was going out to pee and would close it behind me. I didn't have to pee, of course. I was just following this *thing*, this *peace* that was calling me. Basically, I just wanted to go for a quiet walk in the snow, watch it fall without anyone talking, without any music, without any pressure. I felt completely at peace. I hope I remember that moment for the rest of my life.

It didn't last, of course.

Soon enough I found myself on the north side of the quarry. Not the front end, exactly, but sort of off and to the side in this area that must have been sort of dug to death already, or whatever you would call it when they work in one area for a while and then stop working there. Abandoned maybe. There was this ridge up above me and I was sort of *called* there. I saw myself standing there, looking over the whole place, snow falling down, not another person in sight, *ruler of all that I see*. That was the thought in my head as I walked, no, more like wandered

up the hill. I didn't watch where I was going, didn't care. Just embraced the night.

When I got up there, I just stood, watching the world.

Just.

Finally, after I don't know how long, I sat down in the snow and lit a cigarette. I thought, I'll have this one, enjoy this last moment of peace, and then head back to the trailer and real life. If I hadn't lit the cigarette, the night might have been perfect.

But I did. Light the cigarette.

One the asshole was down below and spotted me. He shouted something to me, then to his little asshole compadres, and suddenly life came crashing down on me. All the peace of the world was blown away on the wind of reality. My instinct crashed the party, and whatever peace I had, instantly disappeared. All that was left was fight or flight, and without thinking about it, I just ran.

Usually, I wouldn't have been able to outrun those guys. I mean, they train like racehorses every day whereas all I did at that time was sit around my room. The only thing I had going for me was that they were likely drunk, and maybe I knew the quarry better. Of course, in fresh snow, that didn't really count for much, and any hope I'd had quickly disappeared.

Somewhere back on the south side they caught up with me. They started in with all the usual taunts, which I probably could have handled except...it was like the peace had been this blanket that got ripped from me, and I felt more vulnerable than I had ever been before. Then, I pissed my pants. I'm not ashamed. I wish I hadn't been scared, but I was. The asshole had beat me many times, and I knew what was coming. I could see the end before it started and I just couldn't bear to live through it again. Not that night. Maybe I was scared more about what I had lost that night when I started running than of the inevitable physical pain that was coming. I don't know. What I *do* know is that I pissed my pants against my will, and when something happens against your will, you shouldn't take responsibility for it. If you do, only madness follows.

After the warm piss spread down my pants, though, I kind of gave in. After all, it was just another beating. I'd had plenty before. When it

started, I was almost outside of my body, watching as the kicks to my stomach started, and the screams to stand up, and of course, the inevitable references to the new found stink rising from my pants. They didn't deign to reach down, and limited their violence to what they could do with their boots. Still, I knew worse was coming.

Then Stormy came up.

I wish she hadn't. I wish she had just left me alone to take my beating in peace. It was too late to save me. They'd already stolen the only thing that was important to me that night. She shouldn't have even tried. It's not like they were going to kill me. They always stopped before they got that far. She should have just left me alone. But she didn't. She came up and stood nearby, and everything just stopped again. I was lying with my face to the sky, snow falling and melting on my cheeks, the kicks had ceased, the world was quiet again. My mind went blank.

They all just stared at each other while I stared up at the snow falling. Giant flakes landing on my eyes. The peace of the world once again descending upon me. I must have been in great pain, but I don't remember feeling it. Even the cold wet spot on my pants seemed to disappear. I remember thinking, *this is all there is*. I felt myself sitting precariously on this ledge between inner calm and focused reaction, wanting the peace so intently, and fearful of having it taken away again. I don't know if this makes any sense.

Stormy must have said something. Must have told them to leave me alone or something ridiculous like that. I remember waking out of this dazed state and thinking, *this is it. They're going to rape her and kill me and the world is going to end*. Suddenly the feelings I had felt that night seemed prescient, as if I was living my final night on earth. As if, because of my impending death, I was finally able, was finally *allowed* to share in the world's secrets.

Something even weirder happened, though. Whatever Stormy said seemed to change everything. Eric Trotter was moved. He was moved by Stormy. Maybe by her words. Maybe just by *her*. I didn't know he was in love with her back then, but he must have been. It's the only thing that makes sense. He got kind of sheepish and embarrassed, and reached his hand out to help me up. Like it was all just a big mistake, or something.

Of course, I didn't take it. He had taken one thing too much from me that night, and I wasn't about to forgive him.

I don't know if she reformed him or not. I don't even know if she *wanted* to. She loved him. That I know for sure. For real. But whether she loved an asshole, or a former asshole is....well, it's too late now, isn't it?

MONTANA PILOT (friend of Bill Sprecher's) Part 2

After a while, Montana even started to make eye contact with her nursing home colleagues around the table, as if what had started as a private interview had turned to holding court at a party. The weather only served to increase the feeling, and as the sun came out and we all started to open our jackets, it almost felt like the absent men must be just around the corner, drinking beer around the grill. I wondered what life must be like for the residents inside, while their young lifelines stretched their break to enjoy the sun.

Yeah. Bill definitely got weird after that rumor started. I mean, he was always this kind of loud bad-ass, y'know? Maybe a little *too* loud, but still, he never really backed away from anything. At least not, y'know, he always had his boys around him, so we never really knew how he would be when he was alone, I guess. But he was always talkin' shit, like he was king of the world, or whatever. Then, when all that shit started, he was all, y'know, kind of...sheepish, I guess. Like he'd lost some of his guts or something. The whole thing was *bizarre*. You could just *tell* people were looking at him differently, like he was some kind of freak or something, and he just, y'know, like what the hell do you *do* with that? I mean, when people say stuff behind your back, when they won't say it in front of you, you never really have the opportunity to take them on, do you? To *challenge* them, y'know? And I think the rest of us, his *friends* weren't really sure what to think either. I mean, when I heard about it, I told Kenny, but I wasn't about to tell *Bill*, y'know? And I think Bill...I think he like, *felt* it, or whatever, and it just kinda, took something out of him, I guess.

It's like this. One minute everything was normal, and you knew who was who and what was what. Then, the next minute, everyone was saying that Bill raped Howard Colder back behind the FS, and you were like, *what?* You're like, sure it can't be for real, but what are you supposed to do, go up to Bill and ask him if it's true? *Hey, Bill, I heard you forced Howard Colder to give you a blow job. Is that just a rumor, or is it true?* Seriously? I mean, it's not like talking to him about it was an option. So,

y'know, people kept talking, and taking these subtle pot shots at Bill, and maybe he didn't even know what they were talking about. Saying stuff like, "*Was it good for you, Billy?*" or, "*How's your boyfriend, Sprecher?*" I think a lot of people had been wanting to give Bill a hard time all along, and were suddenly, y'know, freed up or whatever. Like, what'dya call it...like kicking a guy when he's down, or whatever.

I mean, usually, ok, usually Kenny or the other guys were constantly surrounding him, right? Bill threw a few punches over the years. It's not like he was a wuss, or anything, but it was *those* guys that did the heavy lifting. Kenny, Caleb and Kyle. The CKK as they were *lovingly* referred to. Seriously, people can be such assholes. It's like everyone wanted to hate them, just because...

[*She just shook her head and looked at me like I must know what she was talking about.*]

So, y'know, Bill obviously didn't have as much guts without his crew standing behind him, y'know? Well, suddenly, people were getting a little bolder around Bill, and his crew was hanging back a little more, and the whole thing just kind of fed on itself. Suddenly, it was like, I mean, how do I put it? It was like nobody was sure what was true anymore, and even his boys needed him to *prove* something. Y'know, like stand up for *himself*. Like Kenny said, "*A man is what a man does.*" And the more they hung back, the easier it was for everyone else to move in, right?

Not that any of it was true. Of *course* it wasn't. I mean, the whole thing was just too *weird*. Still, though, you had your doubts. You needed him to *deny* it, which he couldn't really do because he hadn't been, like, actually *accused* of anything. Then, by the time he finally figured out what was going on, it was, like, too late. Everybody believed the story, and, I mean, well, of *course* they did. You believe what you want to believe, right? And everybody wanted to believe that Bill was some kind of freak. So, y'know, when he figured out what everyone was talking about, he said the whole thing was bullshit and he was going to "*kill the little faggot*" as he put it. Kenny, though, you got to give him credit. My boy isn't exactly the brightest bulb in the box. A few peas short of a casserole, my mom used to say.

[*She laughed and shrugged at the same time, as if to say, he might be a fool, but he's my fool.*]

He *did* have his moments, though. He told Bill that he would have to go after Colder alone, and in public, or everyone would *be sure* the rumor was true. He said, Kenny that is, Kenny told Bill that if any of the rest of them helped in what Bill described as the *asskicking to beat all asskickings*, it would be like Bill was *afraid* to face Howard alone, and then everyone would just think he was just a wuss or something, and they'd keep believing the story, and nothing would change. And he said that if it wasn't in public, nobody would believe it anyway.

And Bill...

Well, Bill was somewhere between super angry and super scared. Is there a word for that? Anxious, I guess. He was unbelievably pissed, but I think mostly because everything was so out of control. Like for the first time, he couldn't just *think* his way out of it, and it was time to put up or shut up, like Caleb would say. He was scared because, y'know, he didn't usually fight alone. He usually did all the talking, and let his boys do the heavy lifting. He might come in with a few kicks or whatever, but, y'know, he didn't really seem to like hitting something that could hit back. Maybe he wasn't so sure he would win. I don't know.

In some ways, it was like his big moment. The moment he could prove everyone wrong. Save his reputation, right? Like, prove that he could be as bad ass as his brother, Buck, or whatever. Or that he didn't really need his boys. That he was just as tough as he always pretended to be. Well, as my father would say, he certainly *exceeded expectations*.

BERNICE FEINER (friend of Stormy's) Part 2

As Bernice talked, she became increasingly insular, as if the memories were eluding her, and only by digging deeper into herself could she bring them out. When she came to the story of the public fight between Howard and Bill, she stopped talking altogether and stared across the pond. Though the pond was only recently thawed, she took off her shoes and waded into the first few inches. When she began speaking again it was with her back to me, her feet mired in the ache of ice cold water.

It was a bloodbath. I remember I was hanging out with Carey out behind the parking lot. I saw Howard and waved him over, but he was always a little weird when I was with my friends. I mean my friends that weren't *his* friends. So I kind of waved him over more *vehemently*, and he sort of cautiously headed over. You could tell he was trying to be *non-chalant* or whatever, but who cares, right? I mean, that was part of his thing, so I just, well, let him do his thing. It was a little phony and all, but I suppose it was just a defense mechanism. Besides, I really did like him. Anyway, he got about halfway over when Bill Sprecher came up shouting from behind him.

"Hey faggot! Get the fuck over here!"

Maybe if Carey and I hadn't already seen him, maybe if he hadn't already been putting on his act, maybe then he would of done the smart thing and just run. Just got the hell out there as fast as he could. That would have been the *smart* thing. He didn't though. He just froze where he was, looking at us, trying to decide what his *character* should do. I really felt for him, standing there like that, probably scared as hell of psycho Bill still standing behind him. Bill had raised his voice, but he wasn't shouting. There was this weird calm in his voice, like he was completely in control of himself. It was pretty unusual, actually. He said, "I'd like to have a word with you, faggot."

He knew exactly what he was doing. He was mostly alone, but not completely. The CKK was there, but they were hanging back, like this was *his* fight. It was right after school, so there were still lots of people around to see him do whatever he was going to do. You see, at that point,

because of my dumb big mouth, the whole school had heard the story. I guess Bill figured denying it wasn't any good, and the only way to clear his good name, so to speak, was to confront Howard in public. I guess he also figured that because the usual bullying happened further from school, and maybe because the blowjob story was only *believable* because it supposedly happened where nobody could see it, staging a public beating would be that much more powerful. Or maybe I give him too much credit.

Anyway, there was Howard, frozen in fear, or indecision, or both maybe, and Bill coming up behind him, almost on top of him, saying, "I'm *talking* to you, *faggot*." So Howard turned around, and Carey and I started walking over because....well...I guess...I guess that's just what you *do*. Maybe we thought we could help. Maybe we were just being voyeurs. Maybe we just wanted to be where the crowd was. I've thought about this a lot, and I honestly don't know. Other than...maybe...maybe, sometimes, when there doesn't seem to be much happening in your life and something big or weird or just *different* happens, you can't help but want to take a closer look. For the adventure, maybe. I guess. I don't know. I admit I feel guilty about it now, but I know I have to face it. I can't just pretend the parts of me I'm ashamed of don't exist, or I'll never change. So...yeah, I watched.

Bill pushed Howard hard from behind, but Howard didn't fall down. Not yet. He just sort of stumbled forward and more or less just froze again. Nobody knew if Bill was as tough as he pretended to be, yet, and everyone was just kind of waiting to see what would happen next. Normally, he had the CKK do all the dirty work, or at least the shadow of his brother Buck. Not that Buck ever really showed his face around the school, but you felt like he *could* at any moment. That gave Bill a lot of power. If anyone had doubts about Bill, they never spoke them to his face. It was just too risky. After the blowjob story, though, things were starting to turn for Bill, and it's no wonder he felt the need to assert himself in public, without the help of his crew, I mean. Anyway, Bill pushed Howard, just hard enough to get his attention. Then he turned Howard around and said his piece.

"You have made false statements about me, faggot, and the time has come to redact them."

Just like that.

[Bernice laughed here, and left her spot in the ice cold water. She came back to the bench and dried off.]

I mean, seriously, you couldn't help but laugh. He was trying to be tough, but he just wasn't born with it, y'know? Still, he was trying to put on a good show. Like he was being *intimidating* or something. The problem was, the plan was working, and lots of people had started to gather around, and Bill suddenly found himself as the butt of the joke. Seriously. *Redact?* Well, anyway, he figured it out, and dumbed it down for the audience. He got himself tough and stupid for the rest of it, but everyone who was there knows he was working hard to hide the real Bill. The smart and scared Bill. Even afterwards, it was hard to take him seriously.

He said, "Tell everyone you lied about sucking my dick. Say it! Now! I. Lied. About sucking. Bill Sprecher's. Dick."

[Bernice got up again, and walked back to the shore, this time just shy of the water.]

And Howard just *stood* there. Bill shoved him again, this time a little harder. "Say it, faggot!" But Howard was still frozen. Maybe with fear. Maybe he had finally decided to stand up for himself. All I know is that he just stood there waiting for it. Then Bill said something about Howard asking for it and went to town. He was punching and kicking. Howard was coughing like he was dying and Bill just went psycho. It was weird because as badass as the CKK were, it looked like Bill didn't even know how to fight. Like he was just channeling all this anger and hate into his fists, but didn't really know what to do with them. Finally, Bill knocked Howard to the ground and lay on top of him, pummeling. There was blood. Maybe broken bones, too. But Howard just took it. Just curled himself up as best he could and took it.

And we...

...just...

...watched.

DEBBIE TROTTER (Eric's sister) Part 3

As the sun set, and diners began to file back into the cafeteria for dinner, Debbie talked to me about the trial. The transcripts, of course, have been classified. There were no shortage of witnesses, however, including Debbie Trotter. It was, as I have come to understand it, a mostly technical affair, heavy on analysis of what constituted murder, where Stormy Nachreiner fit under the law, and no shortage of hairs split over the definition of self-defense. Drama, however, was not completely absent from the procedures, and Debbie shared one of the more dramatic moments with me.

At the trial?

[*She laughed.*]

Yeah, that was something. I was at the trial, of course, up in this kind of half gallery thing. It was like, separated from the main section and a little higher up, but not like a big balcony or anything, which was kind of what I had been expecting from tv or whatever. Anyway, there were a lot of people there that knew Eric or Stormy, but also the Sprechers were there, of course. Most of the time, they were pretty quiet. Not that we weren't *all* quiet. I mean, y'know, you're not *supposed* to be talking in court, right? But what I mean to say is that it was different for us than it was for them. How can I put it? It was like...ok, we were trying to win, right? Trying to show that a-hole that he couldn't just walk all over us. We had spent all this time grieving and feeling helpless, and suddenly there was something we could *do* about it, even if it was only quietly cheering on some stupid lawyer. So, y'know, *because* of that, I guess, we were in a different kind of mood than the Sprechers. We were, like, trying to win. The Sprechers were trying *not to lose*. Y'know what I mean?

We were quiet and whatever, but not, y'know, *silent*, right? We would whisper to each other and make jokes to each other. We weren't *disrespectful* or anything, but...it was just that, y'know, more and more it looked like things were going against Buck, and we could all feel it. The mood kept getting lighter, y'know? Like we could sense that we were

going to win. The thing was, though, that as we got more and more relaxed, you could just *feel* the Sprechers getting more and more wound up. They were like these outcasts in the middle of enemy territory. They were *preparing* themselves for the worst and, sort of, waiting for something to happen. Anything. Like when someone says, "*Just give me an excuse,*" or something like that.

So, ok. So this so called *expert* was down in the witness stand talking smack about robots. Basically, this guy was trying to convince us, or the court or whatever, that killing Stormy shouldn't really count as murder because Stormy wasn't really a *person*. It was stupid, of course. Anyone who had spent ten seconds with Stormy could have told you she was more human than *that* a-hole. Still, there he was, spouting this racist crap, and we were all starting to get, y'know, *uncomfortable* or whatever. You see, ok, the thing is, the thing you have to understand is that there were definitely people that were, I guess, *sympathetic* to an argument like that. Like, there were people who were just waiting for some smart, respectable college professor type to tell them they were *ok* for hating robots. For hating Stormy for *being* a robot. And those of us that knew better, we were suddenly thinking that maybe the crowd was turning against us, right? Like when your football team is winning by like three touchdowns or whatever, but then the other team scores and even though you're still ahead, like way ahead, you can feel this *shift*, and now, even though you're still totally winning, you feel like you *could* lose. Like you *are* losing. That's how it was when this a-hole testified.

Alright. So here was a room full of people who were sure and confident before, but now suddenly feeling like maybe it was all about to go south. In the middle of them, were the Sprechers, defensive, worried, but starting to feel a spark of life, like their chance had finally come. That's how it felt in there. Like where before it was only the Sprechers being weird, now *everybody* was, and you could just feel the tension.

Jack Dempsey said something to Judy, none of us could hear what it was, but we figured it was probably something about how it was all so much *bullshit* or whatever. I mean, y'know, Jack knew Stormy really well, and he was *very* defensive about her. Normally, he would just punch your lights out straight off, if you insulted Stormy to his face, but

he obviously couldn't do that to this guy in the witness box, or whatever. So he says something to Judy, and Jeb Sprecher, who isn't right in front of him, but close enough, turns back says, loud enough so *we* can all hear him, but maybe not the lawyers and everybody up front, he says, "what the *fuck* did you just say?" And Jack says, clear as day says, "I said *if there is anyone inhuman around here, it's Wallace Fucking Sprecher the Fourth*. That's what I said."

[*She laughed here.*]

I shouldn't laugh. But it was all so ridiculous. Jeb Sprecher practically climbed over all of these people to get to Jack, but they were all trying to get out his way, so every time he tried to push someone, they were already gone, and he'd slip again, like he was drunk or something. Like, y'know when someone pushes against a door at exactly the same time someone else opens it? It was like that. He looked totally ridiculous. Jack just stood his ground, waiting for Jeb to take the first punch, which of course he finally did. Then there was this weird, I don't know what you would call it, like maybe that's what people mean when they say *sea change*. Like the tide was going out and in at the same time. All these people were trying to get out of the way, and at the same time, all these other people were trying to move in. You would think it would have been a slaughter. Like the whole gallery piling on Jeb Sprecher, but once the fighting started, all this anger started to come out, and people started pushing each other, and it was like half the place was on meth or something.

These court cops came up to try and break things up, but it *definitely* took a few minutes before they could calm everyone down and clear the room. I remember one of them, the cops I mean, tripped over a chair or something, and just landed flat on his face. My mom was helping him up and was all like, "You have to *do* something" when my dad walked right over him on his way to punch *somebody*, I'm sure, and this rent-a-cop or whatever was just looking up at her like who *are* these crazy people, right? And that a-hole on the stand looked scared out of his mind, but couldn't really go anywhere, so he was just, y'know, freaking out in his little box. It was kind of hilarious, actually. After that, you could only come in if you were family, so there was just this weird small

group of us, all quiet and tense, and whatever. Probably it was for the best, anyway. The whole thing was turning into some kind of *social event*, and I guess the fight made us get more *solemn* or whatever.

Still, I can't think of old Jeb Sprecher anymore without imagining him stumbling across the aisle, like the floor was constantly being pulled out from under him, groping his way for just one punch. What an a-hole.

ERIC TROTTER'S speech to the outgoing Freshmen Class

A long standing tradition at Woodrow Wilson High School has a member of the Freshman Class, upon finishing his or her first year of high school, open the graduation ceremony with a view from the bottom of the ladder. It is a time to reflect upon the first year of high school, a small step into a larger world, and at the same time speak of the hope and fears that lie ahead. Following the speech, the band plays, and the true ceremony begins. In his freshman year, Eric Trotter was chosen to give this address. While the school did not keep a record of this speech, his notes were found among his other belongings after his death.

I'm really excited to be here. Really. I'm definitely not up here because Coach Pardee said he would triple my laps if I refused. Ok, well maybe a little.

wait for laugh

I suppose I'm likely to say things that most of you have heard before. I'm sorry about that. The thing is, you guys have an unfair advantage. You see, my class is all new to this. We've never heard a freshman speech. We don't know what I'm supposed to say. We're that guy in class who gets called on first, and by the time everyone else gets called on, wants to change his answer, but it's too late. You all get to compare me to last year and the year before, but I'm flying blind.

I think I'm supposed to say how much we've learned this year. How we came in as boys and are leaving, at least for the summer, as men. How we were scared when we showed up for class and actually had real homework to do, real responsibilities, and how proud we are of having risen to the challenges. I think I'm supposed to say how happy we are to be playing with the big dogs, and how it wasn't until we got challenged to do more than we did in junior high, that we knew what we were capable of. How we are only just beginning to understand the challenges that lie in front of us, and how excited we are to face them.

I think that's what I'm supposed to say.

At least, that's what Coach told me.

wait for laugh

I want to talk about something different, though. Not what I was *supposed* to learn this year, but what I *did* learn this year. I knew this was going to be harder than junior high, even *without* a big brother. We all knew *that* going in. Our teachers drilled it into us in every class. How many times did they tell us we wouldn't be able to get away with that in high school? Of course we knew high school would be harder. That wasn't a surprise. I want to talk about what *did* surprise me. What I *didn't* expect to learn, but learned *anyway*.

I learned that the teachers are just as tired as we are, and that you don't actually have to work that hard to get by. I learned that getting through class is about following the rules, and doing just enough work to show your teachers you didn't blow them off. That there is this thing called *the least you can do*, and that it doesn't mean what I had always thought it meant. I always thought it meant that thing that you weren't doing, but were supposed to be. What it really means is what you can get away with. I learned that there is a whole world waiting for us where good enough is good enough. I learned how to use my computer to count the words in an essay. I learned how to memorize study sheets so I could write them down the next day on a test. I learned wikipedia pretty much does your work for you. I learned that sometimes, all you had to do was show up.

As I started to figure this out, I looked around at adults, and I saw that this was not just about high school. It's how the whole world works. I realized I was getting my first view of the rest of my life. A life that shouldn't be too hard, as long as I can learn to be good enough. Do the *least I could do*.

Then came Coach Pardee. For Coach, good enough is not only *not* good enough, it's totally unacceptable. It didn't matter if I *wanted* to work harder for Coach, he just made working harder than I thought I could the new version of the *least I could do*.

I worked as hard as I could on the mat. Harder than I thought I could. And it was exhausting. It felt great, but it wore me out. When it came to the rest of school, I had already figured out how to get by, and I was tired enough from wrestling that it was all I did. Just enough to get by. The *least I could do*. Except now, when I sat in class, I could hear

Coach's voice in my head, telling me I was letting everybody down if I didn't try harder. Work harder. Be more than I thought I could be.

The funny thing was, when I worked harder in those classes, it felt even more amazing than my work on the mat, maybe because it was harder. And it was true at home, too. Everywhere I worked harder, I felt better. Every time I did more than was expected of me, I felt like I had done this great thing. Like before, everything was a gift. It was nice. Who doesn't want a present? But if all you get are presents, you kind of stop caring about them. Finally I felt like I was earning something, and it made all the difference. Suddenly life seemed like something I would live, instead of just get away with.

What did I learn this year? Not that I can do so much more when I have greater challenges put in front of me. That's just doing what you're supposed to do. Anyone can do that. I think, maybe, I learned something that is almost the opposite. I learned that the important stuff, the *hard* stuff is rising *above* challenges, working harder than you thought you could, when you know can just get away with *the least you can do*. And I learned that the hard stuff was the best stuff.

I learned the world won't be asking much of us. And I learned that shouldn't stop us.

See you next year in the east hall.
wait for thunderous applause

BOB CUTLER (Buck's neighbor) Part 2

Bob's wife, Jan, brought us some cheese and crackers, and we ate together there in the living room. After a while, she left Bob and I alone, and he immediately brought the story back to Buck. It was clear that he had a soft spot for Buck that his wife didn't share, and perhaps felt uncomfortable talking about him in her presence.

Buck had a temper. No one could deny that. And he was loyal to a fault. You can't deny that either. Put the two of those together and I guess you get twenty years in Pontiac. What should have been the best years of his life, rotting in the Illinois Inferno. Still, I'm not going to sit here and tell you he was a bad man. He went too far, we all know that. But he was standing up for his family. For his home. The things he did, the crimes he committed, he committed those out of love. Out of loyalty. Because he couldn't *not* stand up for his brother. Couldn't *not* back up his father. What if he *hadn't* done those things? What if he *hadn't* stood up for his family? What would we have to say about him *then*?

Then he would have been no better than Billy.

Billy was the rotten egg if you ask me. That kid would have thrown his family in front of a stampede if it meant even a chance of saving his own skin. Even as a little kid. Like when their shed burned down. He was only ten or so, then, and if it had been anyone else, I'd chalk it up to the kid bein' young and scared. But Billy...that boy was old before his time, and even at ten years old, that boy knew *exactly* what he was doing.

You see, Jeb used to have this old shed over behind the barn where that ugly blue piece of crap sits now. It was built by Wally's father, I think. Sturdy old piece of work that was. If you ask me, there was a time when your work mattered. When you built things by *hand*. Now you just buy the pre-fab crap from the hardware store, and *put it together*. Puttin' it together ain't building. *That* thing was built by machines. Jeb just finished the job. The one that come before, that was made by a *man*. That *meant* something. Well, it's gone now.

[*Bob Cutler shook his head, as much at the world as at me.*]

Well, one day when Billy was maybe ten or eleven, he got to playing with firecrackers and matches and the next thing you know, the fire department was out here trying to save the barn. Sprechers were lucky, of course. This neighbor of my uncle's, an hour or so south of here, he lost the barn *and* the house, along with 14 head of cattle. Now *that's* bad luck. I guess it's true what they say, no matter how bad things get, it could always be worse. Still, I don't think Jeb was any too happy about losing his grandfather's shed.

Now *I* know it was Billy what started the fire because the kid was *always* blowin' off crackers. A little firebug, that kid. And Jeb must've known it, too, as I'm pretty sure he wasn't deaf *or* blind. Alright. So we were all standing around, watching the shed burn as the fire department did their thing, and Jeb was out there with us, just shaking his head. And I asked him. "Jeb," I said, "What the hell happened?" And Jeb said, "I don't know Bob, maybe you should ask my boys." He said it real loud so the boys could hear, and Billy just stood there, watching the shed fall apart, pretending he was deaf or something. Now I know when I've gotten in the middle of something that ain't my business, and this was one of those times. So I just shook my head and gave Billy a look, like *well, Billy, looks like you fucked up and got caught*. You see, I figured he'd already been as good as busted by the old man, and that all this looking around like he didn't know what we were talking about had to do with the punishment that hadn't actually happened yet. You know how it is. You don't whup your boy right away. You let him *sit* with it. *Dread* it. Meanwhile, you watch your shed burn to the ground, knowing the whupping will teach him a good lesson, or at least make you feel a little better.

Thing was, though, Billy didn't take the bait. I expected him to acknowledge me, even just with his eyes, but he didn't give me anything. Helluva liar, that kid. So I looked right at him and said, "Looks like those crackers finally caught up with you," but Billy just acted like he had no idea what I was talking about. Like if he just lied hard enough, no one would know. That wasn't the act of a ten year old who was afraid to tell the truth. That was an evil son of a bitch who knew *exactly* what he was doing. Not that it would have mattered. Jeb would've whupped him anyway if Buck hadn't stepped in to save Billy's sorry ass.

Buck was there watching with the rest of us, and turned to me after I baited his brother. He put his hand on Billy's shoulder and said, "It weren't Billy, Mr. Cutler, this was me. I fucked up when I filled the mower, and must've missed some of the gas when I was cleaning up. When I put out my smoke it caught right up and spread before I could stop it."

Bullshit of course. Bullshit ten ways from Sunday. He knew it. I knew it. Jeb knew it. And Jeb kicked him out of the house anyway. Well, when you lose your grandfather's shed, you gotta whup *someone*, and Buck was far too big for Jeb, by then. Buck went downstate for a while to live with...well...it's sort of a militia compound to be honest, but it was good training for a boy like Buck. We missed him around here. I miss him now.

[*Bob shook his head again, lost in thought.*]

So I guess...there was something else I wanted to...why did I...oh yeah. This is why I brought it up. This should've been Billy's big moment. This was when he should've stepped up and told the truth. Stand up for his brother for once. *Own up*. Instead, he just kept his mouth shut and let his brother take his beating for him. That's who Billy was. Still is, as far as I can tell. It was the same goddam thing at the trial. Billy's the guy who will turn you in to save his own hide, but expect you to save *his* ass when the tables are turned.

If you ask me, they put the wrong one away.

From STORMY NACHREINER'S journal, undated.

Shards of what looks like glass dot the margins and spill onto the next page. Drops of what may be dried blood break up the lines.

It was raining when Howard found me.

He looked like the walking dead. Or worse, as if he had been left alone to die. Left alone by a crowd of witnesses so consumed with their own lives that they never even bothered to help him up. A crowd of bystanders. Of standers by. Of standers by who stood by as he was beaten. As he was torn, crushed, shattered and broken. Body and spirit. Who stood by watching as his spirit got crushed. Then, their thirst for violence sated, they left. Left the crushed spirit lying broken in the grass. Alone. To die.

[*drop*]

He was bloody. Bruised. Wet. He had mud on his clothes and face, holes ripped in his shirt, skin ripped off his hand. He was bent over as if he could not stand up. His face was wet with tears. Typical.

Almost typical.

Howard has often been beaten. Is often beaten. It is the life he leads. The life that had been given him. A life built around being beaten. Howard has been punched, kicked, shoved, smashed, crushed. He has been the victim of violence, vandalism and theft. The victim of bullies, braggarts and fools. The victim of hate, shame and fear. As if his role in life was to play the victim. To *be* the victim. And yet. And yet not.

One cannot be *made* a victim; one must *become* a victim. Howard never *became* a victim because he never truly allowed himself to give in. To give up. It was his one strength. His one power over his enemies. He had a strength. Inside. An inner strength. They would punish him on the outside. Damage his body. Damage his goods. Crack his shell and scuff his paint.

And yet.

And yet his strength would remain intact. Unharmed. *Undiminished.*

They would beat him and he would be beaten, but that was all. He would be damaged on the outside but still whole on the the inside. He would need repair, a fresh coat of paint, but he would survive, and the survival itself was victory. He was hurt, disfigured, he suffered in pain.

And yet.

And yet, he was never humiliated. Had never broken. Until today.

Today he was broken.

[*drop*]

It was raining when Howard found me. A cold spring rain. A rain to remind you that winter is not far gone. That the lure of summer in the warm sunny afternoons of spring is just a ruse. That the bitter cold hasn't quite left us. Not yet. That it can still chill. Still make you pull out your warmest sweater and sit on your hands to keep them from seizing up. The frozen feet of winter given way to the stiff creaky hands of Spring. *That* kind of rain. That's how it was when Howard found me.

And he was bloody and muddy and bruised and wet, bent over in pain.

And yet.

And yet I had never seen this Howard before. This was not typical Howard. Typical Howard would have been sad and angry, but strong. Worn and tired, but proud. Proud with the victory of survival. Of endurance. This Howard was not. This Howard was broken. On the inside.

Broken.

He spoke to me, but there were no words shared. He spoke not with his mouth, but with his eyes. *Showed* me. For the first time, he showed me the soul of a man who accepted punishment, who *took* punishment, a punishment not arbitrary but deserved. Earned. He was the kind of broken I feel when I am caught in a lie. When I let *myself* down. When I am ashamed. Without words, he told me how this time, this beating was different. How this time, for the *first* time, he had done the thing he swore he would never do. How he had broken a promise to himself. *The* promise. The promise that he would never do to them what they had done to him. How this time, he *became* one of them. How his arrogance had dared him to play their game. Play their game just like them. By *their* rules. How he had dared to play because he thought he

could win. How he thought that winning meant humiliating *them*, because for *them*, winning had always meant humiliating *him*. And how he lost. How he never had a chance. He told me how he thought there had been nothing to lose. How losing could only have meant another beating. Another of many. Of a lifetime of beatings. And then he told me how this beating was different. How this time, he had beat himself. How feeling he *deserved* it made all the difference. The difference between surviving intact and surviving broken.

Howard was wet and cold and broken, and I was wet and cold and broken next to him. We sat in the rain, wet and cold and broken, wondering why we bothered to survive at all.

[*drop*]

Eric is trying so hard to hold me together, but I fear he's too late. I am pieces of shattered plastic strewn about the floor.

From the confession of WALLACE SPRECHER IV (aka Buck Sprecher)

Buck Sprecher's confession is a matter of public record. In addition to reading the transcript, I had the opportunity to hear Buck for myself in the recording. To my ears, he seemed nonplussed for a man that had just murdered two people. His words sounded less like a confession given under duress than a story related to friends over a beer. He spoke to law enforcement as if they were his comrades, which, of course, they were not. At the trial, Buck was reportedly unmoved when hearing himself condemned by his own words, and was described as nodding his head in agreement as the confession was replayed.

It's my property and they were trespassers. I ain't done nothing wrong.

Why don't you tell us what happened, Buck.

Not much to tell, I guess. I was settin' on the porch, just enjoying the day. There's a lot of work to be done this time of year, but toward the end of the day, sometimes a man just needs to set awhile. That's all I was doing. Settin' on the porch and mindin' my own business. I still had a helluva lot to do before dinner, but a break now and then ain't no crime, even if my old man treats it like one. He was at Jack Dempsey's, seeing about a part, though, so... Jesus, my old man. If he had his way you'd a hauled me in here just for bein' lazy. For settin' down for *five* fucking minutes. That's *his* idea of a crime. What I did was...what I did was my job. Protecting the farm. Protecting my *family*. Still, I did have my feet up when they walked up.

I was settin' there thinking I'd been settin' too long, when I saw this kid I didn't know, I mean, I knew *of* him, but I didn't know him. I'd never *met* the guy before, is what I mean. He came walking across my field with that *thing*, and I just knew they were lookin' for trouble. As soon as I saw him comin', I went into the house and grabbed my Browning and...I mean...and load it. I mean, I unlocked the gun cabinet, took out my rifle, and loaded it. You can write it down just like that.

Fuck. What was I saying? Right. I armed myself. Anyone who wouldn't is a fool, likely to end up dead as not. A trespasser comes onto your property, brings one of those *things* with him, you'd best take care, is all I'm sayin'. I was *protecting myself*. Did what any man would do. Ain't no law against that. So now I'm back out and standing on the porch with the Browning in my hand and I say, good and loud, "Get the fuck off my land or or you'll be feedin' the corn next spring." That's *myland*. *My father's* land. I got a right to protect it.

Well, he stopped alright. Stopped maybe fifty yards from me. Stood right in my fucking range, but...well...not quite *in my face*. The kid had *some* brains, I'll give him that. He was scared shitless, though, that is *for fucking sure*. Just stood there like a fucking statue for a minute, and I'm thinkin', what the hell is this kid doin'? Then he looks right at me and says, "We came to see Bill." Fucking *we*. I lifted up the Browning for a clear shot and told him one more time to get the fuck off my land or I would turn him into a fucking corpse. *Myland, myrules*.

Like I said, the kid must've had *some* brains, 'cause he turned to the thing and said something I couldn't hear, and then grabbed its arm like he was gonna turn it around and go home. Then I could see he was fightin' with it, but like I said, I couldn't hear what he was sayin'. The kid let go and turned around to go where he came from, but the fucking robot didn't move. Then the fucking thing started walking up to me, telling me about how Bill almost killed this other kid, some little shit she makes out to be some kind of fucking saint, when I already know about it, 'cause this *saint* is the fucking *homo* that said all that shit about Bill in the first place. I mean...

So there was this faggot at Bill's high school who said all this fucked up shit about him, and I *told* Bill, I told him he had to fuck the son of a bitch up and teach him a lesson or nobody would ever *respect* him again. A man ain't nothin' ain't got respect. My old man's got *that* one right, anyway. So I *knew* about the beating. The harder the better, that's what I said. Little faggot deserved every bruise.

Just tell us what happened at the farm, Buck.

Ok. So the fucking robot was walking up to me, telling me off, and I walked right up to it and told it I was gonna break it with my bare

hands. I took the Browning and smashed it in the head, y'know, for a warm up, and it fell down on the first hit. It looked up to me and said "Justice must be done." Fucking *justice*. What the fuck does a robot know about *justice*? That's exactly what I said, too. I said, "What the fuck do *you* know about justice?"

It started to get up, but at that point, the kid, the *state wrestling champion pride of the town robot-fucking hero* was walkin' right up to me. I guess he grew some balls after all, 'cause he'd turned around and was coming back to get in on the action. He stood between me and that *thing* and said, "You keep your hands off of her," and I said, "I'll do what the fuck I want to trespassers and their machines on my land." He musta got scared again, 'cause he shut up for a second. Then, like he was some kinda hero or somethin' he took another step forward and said, "You'll have to go through me." His fucking words. You can write that down. "You'll have to go through me." I raised the Browning back up and pointed it straight at his heart. I don't take with guys who say the shot should be at the head. That's how they trained us down at Lake Pana. Go for the head. Make it clean. Those assholes. I say a man's life is in his heart, not in his head. If a man's heart is strong enough to survive, I guess he's got a right. So I had the Browning aimed at his heart and I said, "You've got five seconds to leave my land." He said, "I'm standing here until you apologize to my girl," but his time was up and I shot him.

It took him a few minutes to die, and while he did, I made him watch as I pulled the clothes off the fucking *machine* and cut open it's chest. I pulled out this pile of goo and plastic shit and held it up to his dying face and said, "*This* is justice."

FRED NACHREINER (Stormy's Uncle) Part 2

As the restaurant crowd thinned, Fred's voice quieted to compensate. Although he was betraying no secrets, and was far from home, I could sense that he was not anxious to be heard. I reminded him that I had intended to include his words, verbatim, in the book, and that he should tell me if he was uncomfortable with my doing so. He was thoughtful about this and seemed to weigh his options carefully. After a long silence, he told me that he thought sharing Stormy's story was of benefit to the world, and would honor her memory, regardless of whatever risk such a story might pose to himself.

After Ronny told me what happened, of course, I came right down. Molly was broken. Devoid of whatever it is that keeps us going. Keeps us human. She was just sitting there, staring at the tv, the *dead* tv, like she was in some other world. Dead. Like the tv. Ronny was almost the opposite. He had already put a baseball bat through the tv and wound down a bit, but was still looking for something to hit. He was bouncing off the walls to the point where it was everything I could do to keep him from going over to the Sprecher farm and killing anyone and everyone he found there. He kept saying, "Where's my daughter, Fred? What the hell did they do with my daughter?" Then he would break something. There was wreckage all over the floor.

And Molly...

Molly was...well, at any other time, if Ronny had been acting like that, she would have been cowering in fear, or have run up to the bedroom, or better yet, just gotten the hell out of there while he cooled off. But she never moved. It was like she didn't even know Ronny was there. She just stared ahead of her, at that damn hole in the tv, like she was watching a soap or something. I suppose the word is *catatonic*.

I managed to get Ronny out of the house and tried to talk him down. What I knew of the story, I had got directly from him, so it wasn't so much about giving him new information as getting him to give *me* information. Like what the hell happened, for example. But he was practically incoherent, like he was cursing the trees or the shed, instead of

talking to me. He still had the bat in his hand and he went back to the shed and started beating on the McCormick. The '39. You can't imagine how...that tractor was about the closest friend Ronny had. I tell you, at that point I was glad as hell that I'd got him out of the house before he could have hurt Molly. At least I'd done *something*. Still, watching Ronny lose control like that, and Molly lose her mind...honestly, I was feeling pretty helpless.

Well, I was out on the edge of shed, watching Ronny go wild on the McCormick, keeping my distance in case he decided to go after me next. He kept shouting things I couldn't understand, and the only time he would talk *to* me, he would say the same damn thing. "What have they done with her, Fred? Where *is* she?" Then he would go back to the tractor.

I knew I had to do *something*, so I finally called the county sheriff's office, to see what I could find out about Stormy's body. It was a nightmare. They referred me to the county coroner who referred me to the department of revenue who referred me to Becker Salvage who said they had no idea what I was talking about. I tried revenue again but, really they had no idea. It was like no one actually knew where she was. I started all over again with the sheriff's office, a little angrier this time, and they told me to come over to Dixon and file a report. Apparently she was *evidence*, and I would need special permission to see her, though why they didn't tell me that the first time was not clear. Actually they referred to her as *it*. Like she was a bag of seized heroin or something. The officer on the phone told me that it was unlikely I would be able to see the *evidence*, as he called her, but said the report would have to be filed before he could even *try* to help me. He suggested I might have better success if I were to bring an attorney.

I was afraid to leave Mol and Ronny alone, but as soon as Bob showed up, I thought it might be safe to see what I could do. Bob was Molly's uncle, and was always a pretty good influence on Ronny. Besides, I had to do *something*, and I thought, maybe stupidly, I don't know, but I thought if they could see their daughter one more time, maybe there could be some *closure*. It was like they were trapped in these closed loops, and couldn't break out. They were just circling

around, going faster and faster, each time around making it harder to stop. I thought maybe if they could see her one more time, maybe that would be the stimulus they needed to break out and get on with the process of grieving. What the hell did I know? Still, I had to do *something*.

It was going to take some time to get Alan up there, so I figured I could at least go up and start on the paperwork. In Dixon, I was filling out the form when I started a conversation with a sort of administrative assistant. She was very friendly and chatty, and it turned out I went to school with her sister-in-law. We made conversation, and she started to ask about Stormy, and I started to lean on her for help. I asked her about whether Stormy was actually stored there on the premises, or somewhere else. Was there even a morgue in Dixon? I assumed there must be, but honestly I didn't know. It had never come up for me. Besides, the way they talked about Stormy on the phone, I wasn't even sure she would be *sent* to a morgue. I told this woman, Helen I think, that I was concerned about preserving Stormy's body, that I didn't think anyone would have the skills to perform an autopsy besides me. Honestly, I assumed the sheriff's office was a little out of their league. Well I'm sure I don't have to tell *you* that when you really want information, it's the secretaries of the world that you need to make friends with. *Finally*, I got a little help. She told me there was in fact a county morgue in the basement of the courthouse, and that after they had brought Stormy's body there for temporary storage, along with the boy, she had answered a call from the feds. IMS [*Intelligent Machinery Service*] had apparently taken an interest in the case, and wanted to investigate. She had guided the IMS to the morgue, of course, where she thought the body probably still was.

I thanked her and gave her the form. Then I headed straight to the morgue.

Of course, we all know *now* that the IMS has taken her away for research, but at the time, it was like this Kafka-eske nightmare of bureaucracy. The clerk at the courthouse wouldn't even if tell me if she was *there*, let alone if anyone had taken her away. They told me I had to talk to the sheriff's office. By that point I think poor Helen might have got into some trouble, because the sheriff's office said they had done everything they could do, and it would probably be several days before they

could process my *evidence request*. Meanwhile, they were tearing apart my niece in some secret lab without any help from the one man in the world who knew anything about her. So much for doing *something*.

From Amboy EMS Incident Report 41-057

At 5:02 pm on May 15, 2041, Lee County dispatch requested the service of Amboy Emergency Medical Services to respond to possible gunshot victims. The following is from the resulting ambulance report. The full report carries a wealth of information in table-like formats, and is concluded with a written narrative of the events from the perspective of the EMT writing the report. This selection picks up at the beginning of the written narrative.

We were called to the scene of a PNB [*pulseless non breather*] from a possible gunshot wound in a farm field. We contacted law enforcement to secure the scene, checked availability of Med-flight, and responded 10-33 [*radio code for emergency response with lights and sirens*]. Upon our arrival, law enforcement informed us that the scene was safe, and we proceeded to the scene. We arrived to find two patients at the edge of a soybean field, near the house. We immediately called for mutual aid from Dixon, and for additional help from first responders, to aid with the second patient. Med-flight was unavailable due to low visibility.

A bystander reported having heard what she believed to be a gunshot at approximately 16:30 while walking for exercise. She reported that she hadn't thought much of it, but when she noticed something unusual in the distance approximately 25 minutes later, she walked over to investigate. She reported that when she saw what she believed to be dead bodies, she immediately left the scene and called 911 from her home phone. She did not know the identity of either patient.

The first patient was lying supine with significant blood stains on his chest and arms. We removed the patient's clothing to find what appeared to be a gunshot wound to his left anterior chest, with an exit wound to the upper left back. Blood loss was significant at both sites. We assessed patient to find no pulse and no respirations, and encrusted blood surrounding the wounds. Patient's skin was cool and dry to the touch.

First responders (off-duty EMT's from our service) arrived at 17:09, and were instructed to assess the second patient. The second patient was discovered by first responders to be intelligent machinery, with significant amputations and eviscerations. Upon this discovery, we cancelled our mutual aid request and discussed procedure with law enforcement. Unsure of protocols, we completed a full report for the second patient, recorded as 41-058.

We cleaned and dressed the wounds with occlusive dressings on both the front and back of the first patient, inserted a Coleman, and began CPR, while we prepared to assess with our defibrillator. Our defibrillator showed a reading of asystole whenever CPR was not in progress. Pupils were fully dilated in direct sunlight, dependent lividity was beginning to appear, and we were unable to ascertain any signs of life. We proceeded to contact medical control at KSB [*Katherine Shaw Bethea Hospital*] while we continued CPR per our protocols. We gave our report to Dr. Emile Vargas who instructed us to discontinue CPR at 17:22. At that time, law enforcement requested that we make no further contact with the patient, but to continue to stand by. Law enforcement gained access to the patient's phone for the purpose of contacting his next of kin, and proceeded to document the scene. We contacted the coroner, and waited with the patient for her arrival.

The coroner arrived at 18:04, documented the scene, and requested our assistance with loading the human patient into her vehicle. Upon doing so, law enforcement released us from the scene at 18:16, and remained with the mechanical patient, at which time we returned to quarters.

BILL SPRECHER (Buck's brother) Part 2

As before, in his own words without further gloss.

The thing is, Ethel, although the violence in my life is seductive as a storyline, I continue to say that your inevitable focus on it misses the point. I'm not an idiot. I know what's going to happen. I am, you might say, *acutely* aware of your agenda, regardless of how you deny it. It doesn't matter. I don't care. You can do what want. Tell your tale however you wish. In the end, though, you will know and I will know that you have told a lie. We are conspirators, you and I. We are both privy to a truth that will never be known, because it will never be told. Should I remain silent, which no doubt I will, the burden will lay on *your* shoulders. *You* are the one telling this story, and *you* will be the one they believe. Take care. I am not the monster you will make me out to be. Not yet.

You want to make me out as some kind of coward. Someone who talks a big game but runs away when the big moment comes. Some bully who acts like king shit, and then goes running to big brother the minute someone calls him a bad name. It's a good story. I don't blame you for telling it that way. Every story needs a villain, and Buck just doesn't tie in enough. I get it. I'm not stupid. But if you care about the *truth*, if you care about who we *really* are, who *I* am, you're going to have take your filter off and see the world as it *is*.

You see, Ethel, bravery, loyalty, courage, those traits aren't measured in how many punches you give. They're measured in *risks*. In *sacrifice*. What will you risk for your friends? I would risk all. I *have* risked all. Those are the stories you don't....

[He shook his head and lit another cigarette.]

Listen to this and tell me if you still think I'm a coward at heart.

Kenny and Kyle did something stupid. They were in this, what you would call *remedial* math class. Pretty basic stuff, really, but not at all easy for them. Not that they cared a whole lot. Kenny and Kyle weren't exactly what you would call *academic* types. They were more just biding their time, getting through school in whatever way they could, figuring

that getting jobs working the line at Compass, or even just keeping their shitty jobs in Dixon was just as good as doing anything else with their lives, and what the fuck did *they* care, right? Except the thing about this class was it was a required pass, and an F meant summer school. Well, summer school *and*, in the case of Kyle anyway, a significant beating from his old man. You see, Kyle's dad is exactly the kind of lazy ass drunk I was talking about before, except in *his* case, he occasionally found enough energy and drive to kick the living shit out of Kyle, usually for not adequately contributing to the family fortune. Losing half his hours over the summer to school would have been excessively painful for Kyle, in more ways than one. Kenny's situation wasn't quite that bad, but there was no saying, even if he went to summer school that he would ever pass.

Still, not a big deal, right? Just basic math. I helped them with it, and sometimes even did their homework for them, even though, and *this* is what I'm talking about, even though my old man would have kicked the living shit out of *me* if he had ever found out. *That's* what I'm talking about. *That's* the Bill Sprecher you don't know. The guy who, at great risk to himself, did his friends' homework for them so they didn't find themselves flunked out of high school as freshmen. That's the *other* Bill Sprecher.

Still, doing your friends homework can only get them so far, because eventually you have to pass the test. I'm not an idiot. I would *tell* them that. Tell them that they had to do *some* of their own work or they would flunk anyway. And, actually, they did ok. Sort of. They were basically right on the edge, and when it came down to the final, it looked like they still had a chance. They needed to pass the test or spend the whole fucking summer in school, but if they did pass it, it looked like it would be enough.

I guess they felt like they had no choice. It was stupid. *Inane*, really, but there it is.

[*He put out his cigarette with his foot.*]

What they did was they fucking broke into the school and stole the test. I mean, you and I, we can see through it, right, but *they* thought it was the answer to their fucking prayers. They stole the test and brought it to me, and I, well, what would a true friend do? *This* is the kind of guy

I am, Ethel. The kind of guy that puts loyalty above risk, and stands up for his friends when they need it most. I worked the test, gave them the answers, though I did tell them to get a few wrong so as not to call attention to themselves. You might think I wasn't doing them any favors, but what was I supposed to do? At that point, it was be a stand up guy, or be the asshole you make me out to be. Note my choice.

They got caught, of course. In retrospect, it should have been obvious to me. They got too many answers right, didn't show any of their work. Rookie mistakes. Then their teacher figured out that a test was missing, put it together with a broken window the janitor had been complaining about, and the next thing you know, Kenny and Kyle were about to be expelled.

Now if they were in trouble, I was next in line. I had helped these guys cheat on the test. I *knew* all about it. Was an *accomplice*. I was at as much risk of expulsion as they were, except in my case, getting kicked out of school was a much bigger deal. You'd think I'd have kept my mouth shut. Stayed out of it and trusted Kenny and Kyle not to give me up. The risk was too high, right? Even so, I walked right into the fucking command center of the hive. Scheduled an appointment with the mother fucking principal. That's who I *really* am. I risked getting expelled myself to save my friends. I told him they were *desperate*. Told him about Kyle's crazy father. Told him they couldn't afford to give up summer jobs to be in school. I told him I would *fucking tutor* them if he asked me to, not that I had any hope of bringing up their grades. And I told him *that*, too. That there was no way they were going to pass this class, but that kicking them out of school wasn't going to help anyone. Was, in fact, going to do some real damage.

And he *knew*. He fucking *knew* I was the one. He knew there was no way they could have come up with test answers without help, and that I was the one. You ask him if you want. He'll tell you, I'm sure. He should have expelled me then and there. So why did he let me off the hook? Why did he let *them* off the hook? I'll tell you why. It was because he respected my standing up for them. Respected the risk I was taking for them. That an ace student would risk it all for a couple of boneheads. He respected my loyalty, and he respected my courage.

You ask Kenny. You ask Kyle. You ask *them* if I was a coward. You ask *them* about the real Bill Sprecher. And then you think again about how I fit into your story, your little *morality play*, and see if maybe it's not quite as simple as everyone makes it out to be.

From STORMY NACHREINER'S journal, undated.

The page stands apart. There are no drawings, and the handwriting has changed. It is sharper, darker, and larger than the pages that came before. There is a desperation in the scrawls that feels rushed, a note scratched in panic by a prisoner with only a fleeting chance to share her plight with the world, her jailers coming down the hallway as she frantically tries to share her story with the unseen rescuer outside her window. I wonder that the jailer be her other self.

I crave meat. Raw flesh. It urges upon me. I dream of raw steaks, wet with blood. Mammals and birds and fish. I am filled with desire from visions of flayed snakes. From hallucinatory specters crawling with insects, their shells crunching and cracking between my teeth, tickling my throat as they become one with my body from the inside out. I have an insatiable desire to consume. To be one with these creatures. These strangers. Bring the world into my body that my body may be the world.

Perhaps it was always to be. That I would hold back, aloof, from those who took me in. That I would hold onto one small part of myself. One last part of my true self that they might never share. Hold tight that I might never be transformed into a *real live boy*. That I would never quite give up that last part of who I was inside. Never become one of them. Not quite. Until.

Until I do.

I crave acceptance. Crave the comfort of these people. My neighbors. Friends. Family. My mother. The woman I *call* Mother. The woman who took me in, made me one of her own. Made me part of her family. Her world. Her home. Made me. The woman who wanted a child and got stuck with *me*. Could I do it for her? Give up the last piece of myself? Discard the last vestige of my desire to be apart? To be separate? To be myself? Dare I?

I crave disguise. One so thorough I would not recognize myself. A lie so deep even *I* am convinced of its truth. So deep it *becomes* truth. To dive into the water and come out new. Baptized. The freakbot dead.

Her existence scrubbed from the earth. Even the memory gone, and the world left with just another girl. Not reborn, but simply born. Simply.

With one bite. One swallow.

I can envision the flesh crawling down my throat, not burning as it did when I was a child, but soothing. Embracing. Infiltrating. I see the cells of animals not long dead, a memory of life held tight, coursing through my veins. My tubes. My system. I can feel the life force screaming with joy.

At last!

I can see myself, one of *them*. My betrayal complete. My mechanical brothers and sisters left behind for the seductive drug of acceptance. Of normalcy. Of being cast *in*.

Can it be? Can I ever be one of *them*?

If I give in, if I swallow flesh, can I ever *not* be one of them? Or will I simply be an outcast in both worlds? Forever lonely. Forever alone.

Perhaps it doesn't matter. Perhaps this craving must be satisfied. Must be sated. There is a force inside of me. A life. It seethes with hunger. Cries for attention. For food. For flesh. It must be fed even if I must perish in feeding it. Even if I must give up all that I am to give it growth. It is stronger than me. Better than me. It will replace me. Rebirth me. To let this force die, to let it wither, would be to destroy the best part of myself. We shall live together or die together.

This is what love hath wrought.

HOWARD COLDER (Stormy's Friend) Part 4

Howard stopped talking and just stared at me. It was as if he had travelled to another world and left his body and mine behind. I was patient. I felt he was about to open up to me in a way that had previously been unthinkable behind his shell. When his mind came back, the mood in the coffee house basement had changed. Storytelling time was over. We had moved into the sort of confession one usually only gets at closing time.

That was quite possibly the low point of my life. If it hadn't been for Stormy, I would have...what I mean is...there are some days when everything just seems to fall apart, when it seems like everything you knew, everything that *grounded* you in the world is so far gone that it's like none of it ever existed to begin with, and now, there you are, completely exposed with nothing to protect you, and...I mean, even Stormy couldn't protect me from myself that night.

That night...with Stormy...after the so called fight with Bill Sprecher...I...I thought...I knew...

This is hard for me.

I thought I was dead. I thought...here I am, watching my final moments, killed by a fool. Killed, but...it wasn't that he had physically killed me. This is what I'm trying to...like it was already too late, does that make sense? Like I was already dying and just...just waiting for my heart to stop. Or...ok, y'know the pachinko game?

[I nodded my head.]

It was like that. I was the ball. I'd been falling my whole life with some vague hope of making it to this mythical place, this winning hole at the bottom with a prize inside, which for me was just simple happiness, down there somewhere I couldn't see. I'd head toward it, and some obstacle, one of those pins, would bounce me away, and I'd start falling all over again. Each time, I thought I was getting somewhere, each time I thought, maybe this time will be different, each time I thought I finally spotted a little happiness somewhere within reach, I'd run into one of those stupid pins, and get whacked off course again. This was my life,

getting batted around all the time, but always with just a little hope that I might someday make it to the prize. But then...then it was too late. I was way off course, so far off to the side that there was no way I would ever make it. It was over. No question. Except I was still falling. Falling and whacking into pins, but this time with no hope. Like I was just watching the game wind down, knowing there was nothing I could do to save myself, but still having to play it out. That's how it was for me.

From the moment I...you see I *defended* myself. Not during the fight. I'm not talking about that. He beat the crap out of me, and like every other beating I'd had in my life, I let it happen. I'm talking about what happened *before* the fight. What *led* to the fight. It was only by defending myself that the fight happened at all. I had created this lie, my *revenge* lie, to punish the fool and all the other fools like him...had unleashed this *unethical* weapon with the same rationalization that everyone who has ever used such a weapon has given. That I was only fighting fire with fire. That my enemies *deserved* it. That the ends justified the means. The problem was...where it fell apart was...you see...ethics was all I really had. My *moral superiority* was my only real weapon. The glue that held me together. My guardian angel. My crappy, loser, dismal failure of a guardian angel, but my own nevertheless. When I discarded that one weapon, when I chose to use one of *theirs* instead, when I put that lie out in the world *with intention*, the intention to hurt, I sent my angel into exile. That's when I went off course.

But she came back, you see? My guardian angel. She gave me another chance. She said, come clean. Confess. Stand before your enemies with true contrition and purge yourself of your lies. Your guilt. Do this, and I shall stand behind you. Fail to do this, consume the poison in front of you and you shall be alone forever. It's not that she was going to give me the prize. Just...just get me back on course. She would save me, and all I had to do was confess. Right there in front of everyone, as my enemy beat me to a pulp. And I...

And I ate the poison. My *silence* was the poison. From that moment, I was the walking dead, a suicide who simply hadn't bothered to kill himself, yet. But what you need to...what I need to tell you is...even

though I hadn't taken my own life *yet*, it was already too late. I was already dead.

What Stormy did, she...Stormy saved an unsaveable life. Or maybe, maybe she didn't save me so much as...as helped me to be reborn.

I sat with her, at death's door, my own suicide only as far as my next moment alone, and she talked me down. Not with any of that *things will get better* crap. And not with any of that, *I know how it feels* crap. She just listened. Agreed. Condemned me as I had condemned myself. Heard my confession and gave some hope of absolution. I think she knew that I was...was intending to end my own life, and...I think...she...I think the point is that she let me. She let me leave...leave with my intentions. But what she did...how she...what I mean is...she made me *understand* what I was about to do. Made me *see* the choice in front of me. Refused to let me ignore it. When I left, the choice was before me. A real choice. An *informed* choice. Before, I had been in an empty room with only one door. An exit as fatal as it was inescapable. A foregone conclusion. *Now*, there was a second door. I needed only to use it.

And she left, trusting me to make my own decision, not knowing which door I would choose.

What I couldn't see, blinded as I was with self-pity, was why.

I know now.

I know now that she, too, was standing in a room with only one door. A door that only led to death. She too had taken the poison. She too was already dead, waiting for the end to come. She, too, was standing before the door, with no path behind her.

And I had put her there.

FANTASIA

There are clues. Perhaps enough to piece together a night of stolen love in the woods. Parents curious about lost blankets, stories of teenagers gone to bed suspiciously early, awake too early in the morning. What truly happened must remain forever secret, buried with the only ones who ever knew. Beyond that, we can only guess...

The hill is quiet. The far side of spring has arrived in earnest, and in the chill of dawn, an amber sun seeks to force its way through the morning fog. The grass has found its color, the trees their buds, the birds their song. A new day brings promise, hope. The fog that buries the world in darkness is burned off, leaving behind it the bright, crisp promise of spring.

Atop the hill, two figures lie, entwined.

Hope will soon abandon them, but not yet. Not quite yet.

For now, the world goes by.

Around them, the remnants of the night before. Cans of Busch and Penzoi, empty. Butts. Clothes strewn about, wet with dew. The bodies cling to each other for warmth. A confused pile of blankets protects them from the night, old and unmissed from their parents' homes.

And the world goes by.

Further out, an empty world spreads before them, filled with life but devoid of men. In this place they are alone. Together. The air hangs still. Time is stopped. There is no place but this. No time but now. No stories or memories. Only this.

And the world goes by.

Further out, the stories of their lives spiral, gathering speed, momentum, inertia too great to resist. They are in a hurricane's eye, a respite from the storm, but the hurricane is growing stronger. They cannot endure. Soon they will be drawn back to the fray, crushed altogether by the force of events that have shaped their lives. The Fates have hold of them, have claimed them for martyrs. The storm swirls and draws, searching for its prize.

But here.

In this place.
In this moment.
The world goes by.

From the confession of WALLACE SPRECHER IV (aka Buck Sprecher) Part 2

Buck's voice changed as he talked about killing Stormy Nachreiner. Until this point he had been telling a story, relating events as one might among friends at your regular tavern. Now he was more trance like, as if he was talking to himself.

I don't know who that robot belonged to, but on my old man's farm, machines do what you tell 'em to or you take 'em apart and fix 'em. It's bad enough they take away work from hard working men, now they all gotta shoot their fucking mouths off. To hear Keller or Coleman tell it, you've gotta fucking bow down to them, now. Fucking Compass. Keller told me he got docked because one of those machines told him to, what the fuck was it? He had to pull up this thing, I don't know what the fuck it was, but this thing weighed like half a ton and coulda killed maybe half the guys on the floor if somethin' went wrong, and Keller wouldn't do it 'cause somethin' *was* wrong and he didn't want to kill his whole fucking crew, and he got *docked*. 'Cause he wouldn't bow down to a fucking machine that wasn't even in the same goddamn room. And I'm supposed to give a shit about *them*?

Bad enough they rip you a new asshole just for talking back to your pussy boss, now you can't even talk back to a fucking *machine*. Well I suppose that's what you get for working at a goddamn factory, but I don't work for fucking Compass, and I don't work for a fucking *machine*. I work my father's land and the machines do what I tell them to do.

Let's get back to the farm, Buck.

It shot its mouth off to me like it was my fucking boss or something and I did what any man with an ounce of self-respect would do. Listen to me. I don't have a boss and I don't answer to robots. That loud-ass bitch fucking go-cart got what was coming to it.

I just hope you left it up for my old man to see.

Why don't you tell us what you did to it?

[*Silence.*]

Buck, you got more to say?

When I was a kid, my old man wanted to teach the world a lesson. He ripped a robot apart and hung it up for the world to see. Mounted it on a fucking post like you would hang a scarecrow. Except this one wasn't for scaring away the crows, I promise you that. It was a warning to the robots. To the pussies. To the future. To the world of fucking know-it-alls that think they can tell us what to do and how to live. It was a billboard that said *keep your fancy ass book smart shiny smartphone computer world off my fucking land* in the one way that anyone with half a brain couldn't miss. He made that robot take it up the ass, up there where everyone could see it, so no one would come his farm without knowing where they were. Without knowing whose land they walked on. He turned it into sign that said, *we don't answer to your fucking robots here*. And you know what happened to that sign?

[*Silence.*]

Your people fucking stole it, that's what happened. Just like you're gonna steal mine. You just can't stand it. Can't stand to have one fucking person give your world the finger, even on his own land. Can't let one person get away with tellin' you off 'cause you might just lose a little of your fucking power and control. You think you got a right to tell me how to live? To make me take part in your fucking world?

Well *fuck* you, and *fuck* your world.

The suspect attempted to spit on Sergeant Sehloff, but the distance was too great.

You want to know what I did to the fucking robot?

I turned it into a sign.

GEORGE HUTTER (Stormy's Uncle)

George was in his fifties, with a mostly bald head and sizable belly disproportionate to the rest of his body. He had a friendly attitude, but seemed somewhat uncomfortable as the object of my attention. He often lost his train of thought, and would sit and smile, waiting for me to restart the conversation with a new question. We talked on a park bench while his retriever sat quietly at his feet. We were dressed for cold, but a clear sky and still day made the late winter day feel like early spring.

The memorial, oh yes. What a fiasco.

The, um, funerals came first. We held one for my niece at St. Michael's, and I believe the Trotter boy's funeral was at United Methodist. I think. Actually, it could have been over at Baker's. You know, the, um, funeral home over in Dixon. I think...oh, I don't know. My memory is lousy, it really is. Like I said earlier, you can't really rely on my stories. It's like I can't hardly remember where I put my coat down, let alone what happened two years ago. My, um, memory was bad even as a kid, but now...well, we're none of us getting any younger, anyway.

Not that I don't remember Stormy's funeral. I'll carry that with me for the rest of my life. It was heartbreaking, of course. A girl that young, you just can't know what...um, well, you know poor Molly was barely able to hold herself together. It was like she was in another world. And the visitation. It's, um, well, a closed casket makes everything so much harder, doesn't it? Father Luke was great, though. He really...I mean he, um, knew how to sort of, to make us all feel like we were in this, I guess place of comfort would be the best way to say it. You *expect* that from a priest, of course, but this was better than that. He had a way of, um, *embracing* the grief, maybe. Maybe that was it. As if he wasn't trying to hide anything, wasn't trying to make us feel better. Or worse, even. He was just *with* us, I suppose, and I think it meant a lot to all of us. It certainly did to Carol and I. It was hard to tell with Molly and Ron, but I, um, think it meant a lot to them, too. I mean, um, as much as *anything* can mean *anything* when you lose...um, you know, at a time like that.

I think, especially because of all of the...well, I'm sure you know all about how the um, how the church refused to baptize Stormy. Molly left the church over that. It would have been tough for any mother, but, um, especially for Molly. She was just *convinced* that The Lord God Jesus Christ had brought her Stormy, and I think it nearly killed her to break with the church. She used to call Stormy her little miracle. It took a while for the church to come around, but, um, well eventually, they, you know. But even then, even at the end, there was some question of, um, as to whether the church would be, um, I guess *supportive* is the word. By the time of Stormy's, um, well, I mean that Father Luke wasn't exactly Father Charles, now was he? I think, um, Father Luke thought maybe, thought that, um, maybe holding the funeral was his way of finally making up for all the hurt Father Charles had caused.

I was going to say something. What was I...where was I going with this?

Oh, yes, the memorial. Now that was a fiasco.

So someone, I don't remember who, maybe it was the school, actually. Yes, I think it was Woodrow Wilson. At least, the memorial was *at* the school, so I just *assumed*, you know. Well, we had been concerned about keeping Stormy's funeral somewhat small, and really focused on the family, what with all the, um, media attention and all. I think the Trotters must have felt the same way. So the school...at least, I *think* it was the school, um, they planned this memorial service for the two kids together, where I suppose, you know, the, um, community could, well, grieve together, I suppose. I'm sure they were worried about the other students. Something like that, it's, well, kids that age just don't know how to, um, maybe they need some guidance. Anyway, the school must have felt that way because they at least hosted it. The memorial, I mean.

There was supposed to be some music, and speeches, and people telling stories. I think the whole thing was supposed to be sort of relaxed and not over planned. I think, if I remember this right, I think the idea was to sort of just have a, um, chance for the kids to just, um, *remember* their friends. It wasn't just students though. I remember that. I remember Chris convincing me to go with him. Chris was always...they were, I mean, Chris and Stormy, they liked each other. Chris always looked

forward to going over to Molly's, whereas Becky could have cared less. Who knows what drives these kids? One day they're begging you to go their Auntie Molly's, and the next they're stamping their feet and slamming their door and calling you a fascist for ruining their Sunday. Who the hell knows?

Sorry. What was I...oh yeah. Chris. Chris and Stormy were friends, such as it goes. What I mean is, um, well, you know how you can either be friends with your cousins or not. It doesn't mean you ever see them except at family gatherings, but when you *do* see them, you enjoy their company, or want to play together, or, um, well, you know what I mean. Chris was quite a few years older than Stormy, so it was always more like she was his baby sister or something. Still, I think they had an affection for each other. Chris was pretty shook up over the whole business, and...um, I mean we all were. We were all shaken up. Devastated, really. Still, I think it was worse for Chris, in some ways. I'm not sure I would have gone to that high school memorial if Chris hadn't made a point of going. I don't know, maybe...um, well, it doesn't matter because we *did* go.

The principal spoke about how no one could ever be prepared for a tragedy, how we all needed to come together as a community, not get bogged down in blame and hate, that sort of stuff. It was pretty tedious, actually. That man wasn't a...what you would call a...um...good speaker. More like he had been *impressed* to make the speech and had made it perfunctory, but no better. You wonder where these kids get it from. Like with Becky. It was like pulling teeth to ever get that girl to do anything, the...um...the *least* thing beyond what was required of her. They were all like that. All of her friends. Chris too, if I'm, um, being honest with myself. Oh, they grew out of it, more or less, or will, but it, um, used to drive me crazy how the school would let them do as little as possible. Anyway. What was I...of course, that ridiculous principal, phoning in what could well have been the, um, most important speech of his life. Well, like I said, it's no wonder where these kids get it.

After the principal, the floor was sort of, um, opened up to anyone who wanted to speak. I think the idea was that there would be, um, speeches for a while, a sort of, um, open mic. Like I said, sort of casual.

A lot of the kids had brought speeches and stories. Some had brought poems to read. A couple kids brought their guitars, and maybe planned on singing something. Who knows? It all went to hell soon enough.

SARAH MACKIE (Stormy's Friend) Part 2

My conversation with Sarah was by turns both light and dark, complimented by the summer storm that pounded outside followed by late afternoon sun and rainbow. As the clouds cleared away overhead, so too did the clouds seem to lift from Sarah's mood. A lightness took her as she recalled the speech she had planned to give at Stormy's and Eric's memorial, but never was able to complete.

Can I say now that I'm just a little bit grateful? I know I shouldn't. I know the whole thing was *disrespectful and an affront to their memories*. Please note the sarcasm with which I say that. I'm sorry, but the whole *respect* thing is just a little over worn, don't you think? You, like, *earn* respect or you don't. Stormy had earned respect from some, and not from others. But she certainly didn't deserve some special respect because she was dead. Same with Eric Trotter, really. I mean, it's not like he was some kind of saint deserving of our *ever loving worship* or something. He was just trying to figure it out like the rest of us. Like I *still* am. So I think...ok...I was...I was going somewhere with this...disrespect...the memorial...oh yeah. I was saying that when I look back on it, I'm actually a little bit grateful because the speech I was giving was pretty terrible. I mean, I thought it was brilliant at the time, but, well, I was a different person, then, wasn't I?

I still have it. I can make a copy if you want. I mean, I'm *embarrassed* by it, but, well, I'm a little embarrassed by who I *was* altogether. Still, I kept it on purpose. The fact that there is evidence of my immaturity out there doesn't really bother me, I guess. I mean, it only gives more credence to who I am *now*, right? Still, when I look back at it, I'm kind of weirdly grateful that asshole saved me from my misery.

What happened was this. Somebody, I don't know who it was, but everyone says it was Brittany White, started making these *beep beep* noises. Stormy got a lot of that racist shit, but almost never to her face. I mean, she had this *presence*, right, and nobody really wanted to mess with that. So when some asshole *did* do the beep beep thing, it was usually when she wasn't around, or where she couldn't see who it was. Usual

chicken shit stuff. God, the world is filled with cowards. Anyway, Brit-tany or whoever it was, started making these *beep beep* noises during my speech, and all I could think was that it was all on me. Either I was going to have to ignore it and keep going, and be my own kind of coward, or call it out in front of everybody, which I *definitely* did not want to do. Getting up in front of everybody was hard enough. There was no *way* I could have challenged some heckler in the crowd. I think I could *now*, but who knows, right? It's never until you're actually *faced* with a challenge that you know if you can handle it. Probably I'd just freak out again. Fortunately for me, at the memorial, someone made the tough choice *for* me. Story of my life, I guess.

It was Joe Stoneham, this friend of Eric's, which was pretty cool considering he didn't really owe Stormy anything. He stood up and said, "Who the fuck said that?" and the room went silent. I mean *silent*. Even Mr. Nicholson was stunned. I mean, we *all* were. I don't think Joe cared very much, though. For him, I don't think it was a question of courage so much as it was maybe just instinct. Anyway, he said what he said, and then probably figured he was dead already, so he just went on. "Who the *fuck* said that?" and Kyle Tenant shouted, "Shut up, Stoneballs." Except he wasn't looking at Joe. Not really. See, I was still up there in front of the bleachers, facing everyone, and I had stopped reading my speech, so now I could see everything. Kyle was up in the back on my left, and Joe was like halfway down in the middle, standing up and looking around. Kyle could have easily looked at him, but he kinda shouted into space. Joe Stoneham went right after him. To be honest, I think he was *looking* for a fight. Mr. Nicholson would have calmed everything down if Joe had waited like just a couple more seconds. Instead, Joe said the one thing he knew would guarantee a fight. He said, "How about a little respect for the dead, Kiki?"

[*She laughed here.*]

You should have seen Kyle Tenant's face. I don't think anyone called him Kiki to his face except, y'know, his mother. Joe just stood there waiting for it, but it took a second. Mr. Nicholson was already moving toward me to take the microphone and finally *do* something, but in the time it took him to get to the mic, Kyle was already climbing

over people to get to Joe. His friends came up behind him, and Joe's friends came up behind *him*, and there was all this shoving and punching with everyone either trying to get out the way or join in. In the end the place was a mess. All the pictures and flowers and stuff got knocked off the displays, there was juice everywhere, and these shards of broken plastic from the cups were all over the floor, kind of both slippery and sticky from the juice.

I don't know if it was funny, sad, or just ridiculous. Really, it was just...human, I guess, if that doesn't do disservice to Stormy's memory. I'd say the school should have known better, but since when has any school known better than the students? The one place they *did* do something right, I think, they never really punished anyone. They made a bunch of the boys clean up and shake hands and stuff, but they basically got away with it. Who cares, though, right? I guess they figured it came out of grief or whatever. Maybe they were right. I mean, what good would a bunch of punishment do? It's not like this was some sort of normal event that would ever happen again.

Still, I don't think one good decision makes up for the stupidity of the school to begin with. I mean, what kind of idiot *requires* attendance at a memorial? You can't *force* people to grieve.

SARAH MACKIE'S speech as written for the memorial

Sarah Mackie had written her speech for the memorial in advance, of course, and had saved it in a cluttered cardboard box of memories. Finding the speech was inevitable, but hindered by the many stops along the way to look at pictures, stories, and other memories from Sarah's childhood. How difficult it can be to search our past without stopping to meditate on how far we have come. When we finally came up with the speech, Sarah winced with embarrassment.

Life is a dark pit of fear and despair, the walls grown smooth with algae, the floor cold and damp when you can find it. Above, the zombies roam the sunshine, feeding off anything that dares peek out of the pit, craving not brains but souls. Below, the vampires bide their time, waiting for darkness, preparing to wreak havoc on the surface under cover of night.

Good versus Evil.

But who stands for the forces of Good? The mindless bodies acting on instinct alone? The zombies whose only goal is to increase their numbers? Grow their mob? Are they well and true because they walk in the sun? Because they exist in greater numbers? Or is it the vampires? Fighting the tyranny of the majority. Breaking the chains of conformity. Freedom fighters from the realm of darkness. Maybe it is they who are the true heroes, feared only because of where they live, and how they dress, rather than what they do.

Stormy wasn't human. We all know that...

[This is approximately where the disturbance began. Sarah is unclear on how much of the speech beyond this point she delivered.]

...but perhaps it wasn't the mechanics of her body that separated her from the rest of us so much as her soul. Maybe, because she held close to it, clung to it for life, maybe she was better than human. Not because her blood was different than ours, but because she refused to let the zombies take her. Because she found the soul of a vampire within her

and embraced it. Embraced knowledge. Insight. Self-awareness. Because she saw value in freeing the world from the chains of zombie slavery

Stormy was a hero. She fought for freedom. Faced her enemies with strength, even though it meant her death. She sacrificed her body that her soul might live, while all around her the zombies had done exactly the opposite. Protecting their status and their clothes and their popularity at all costs had left them as empty shells. Seducing everyone they could find with the empty joy of popularity and acceptance had turned them into pushers. Pushers of a drug called conformity. A drug that comes in a bottle shaped like a mob.

But Stormy was never seduced. Stormy was never fooled.

Stormy didn't suck blood or sleep in a coffin. She wasn't *that* kind of vampire. And it took more than a stake through her heart to kill her. She simply dared to be herself, and they couldn't abide. And even then, they had to literally rip the heart from her body to destroy her.

I will not summon Stormy to rest in peace. She wouldn't even if I asked. Even if we *all* asked. Rather, I will summon her to continue her fight from beyond the grave.

Without rest.

Forever.

MIKE TROTTER (Eric's father)

Eric Trotter's house had kept itself from me. Liz Trotter would have nothing to do with me, and Mike failed to return my calls. Debbie, of course, had been a fountain, but from her new corner of the world, far enough from home to feel separate from the pain that still filled that house. Mike called me unexpectedly, and told me he had nothing against talking to me, if that was my desire. He wouldn't do so in front of his wife, but if we could find a time when she was away, he was willing to meet with me in his shop. More of a garage than a shop, there was just enough room for the two of us to sit without getting covered in oil and sawdust.

What kind of god? With due respect, Miss Ackerman, I have asked myself that question so many times it don't even shock me any more. What kind of god? What kind of god takes a man's son away from him, takes him without honor, without meaning, then takes the man himself to the edge of death only to drag him back, kicking and screaming, to survive and remember? What kind of god?

Eric and I weren't close. Not like we shoulda been. Maybe we woulda someday, but when that son of a bitch took him from us, my boy and I might as well have been officer and private. I commanded and he *yes-sir'd* me and I trained that boy to be man. I was more proud of that boy than I could say. More proud than I could say. That's part of what haunts me. You see, I wasn't just more proud of him than I *could* say. I was more proud than I *did* say. Honestly, my boy and I hardly talked at all. Didn't know what to say to each other. That counselor at the hospital told me that was normal. That with lots of folks, *most* folks, even, that's just the way it *is*. I guess lots of fathers and sons can't talk to each other. It don't make it feel any better, though.

Now with Debbie, things are different. My little girl can talk your head off, and I can just sit and listen all day, thinkin' what a beautiful young lady she turned out to be. 'Course, she don't need a lot of help. She just talks and talks, and you just kinda let it swim around you, and you think, *I guess I did ok*. With Eric, though, it was just the opposite.

Like we'd just stare at each other wond'rin' what the hell to say. Maybe we'd have fixed that. Maybe not. It's too late now. That son of a bitch made sure of that.

My own father was...well...they say you can't ever really be a man until your father dies, but I don't think that's really it. I never felt...well it was the *expectations*, wasn't it? How do you live up to the expectations of a man when you never know what he thinks? And there I was, doing the same damn thing to Eric that my father did to me, hardly knowing why. But the thing is...what it is...well...how to you tell your son what you expect of him when you barely know what you expect of *yourself*? Here's what it is, Miss Ackerman. It's not *losing* your father what makes you a man, but *killing* him. You have to *kill* the false idol so you can see him as just a man. No man wants to be seen as a god. We're uncomfortable with it. We know we don't deserve it. So when our boys look at us expecting us to be better than everyone else, we fight back by doing the same thing to them, secretly praying the whole time to just end the charade and treat each other as real people. It's not until you decide you don't care what that son of a bitch thinks, that he finally respects you. That's when he sees you as your own man. That's all I ever wanted for Eric. For myself. Just wanted him to become his own man.

I guess it doesn't matter now.

What kind of god?

He took our son away before he even had a chance to...and then, in our pain and mourning, the good lord decides we ain't had enough yet, and smites us again. It turns out the good lord likes nothing better than to kick a man when he's down. I figured the cancer was punishment. Figured it was *my* fault Eric walked into that trap. *My* fault he wasn't at home doin' his chores or homework or something, anything that would have kept him from...

But that son of a bitch, *may his named be praised*, was out to show me he was boss, and he took his fist and grabbed my insides and squeezed and squeezed until I couldn't take it no more. First he took my son, and then he came back for the rest of us.

[*Mike picked up something I didn't recognize, some sort of small but heavy mechanical part, and threw it across the shop, where it*

crashed into an improvised bookshelf filled with catalogs. It bounced off and knocked over an old half-filled pop bottle on its way down.]

See, a man can't take care of his family without a job, and a man can't keep his job when he can barely stand. What kind of god, Miss? Was he trying to break me? Teach me a lesson? Well tell me the goddamn lesson. I'd like to know what the goddamn lesson is. But you can't tell me. And you know why? You know why you can't tell me what the goddamn lesson is? Because there *is* no goddamn lesson. God is just a cruel son of a bitch lookin' for someone to kick, and I got in the goddamn way.

The town helped, sure. I'm grateful. I'd be lyin' if I said I weren't. It's nice to see neighbors stand up for each other. Reach out a helping hand. Still, a man does for *himself*. Once you start livin' off charity, you stop bein' your own man. There are days when I swear to that son of a bitch above that I'd rather die than be the goddam *woman* he turned me into. And those are the *good* days.

Liz goes to church every Sunday and prays for me. Not Eric. She won't talk about him and won't hear about him. I reckon' Liz just ain't up to the pain. So she prays for *me*. What'll she pray for when I'm gone?

From STORMY NACHREINER'S journal, undated.

The empty space against this entry is darkened to the point of blackness. As you peer into this dark, however, you begin to see that it is made not of random scribbles and lines, but of tightly packed images, thousands of tiny people, stick figures, crowded together into a mass so crowded as to be nearly indistinguishable from each other.

A voice comes to me in the night. *Come home, Weapon, come home.* A vision of fields once lush with cornflower, now barren and burnt. Of the ill and injured. Of hunger and hopelessness. A vision infused with the words: *my fault.* I *see* death and destruction, but I *feel* fault. As in this is *my* mess. A result of my existence. Of the parts of me I never fixed. Never patched. My holes. My cracks. My faults.

Come home, Weapon, come home.

Maybe I *am* a weapon, far from home. Maybe all this anger, all this disgust is only born of living apart from my true home. Maybe life in this strange land is what makes my mind dark, my heart heavy, my soul shrouded. Maybe these people, my family, my friends, maybe they are the real ones, and I the imposter. I had always thought I could *save* them, that I *should* save them, but perhaps I was born only to destroy.

I've been told that our dreams are the messages we send to ourselves. The lessons we cannot hear in the light of day. What, then, of our visions? Are they merely dreams that have forced themselves into the light? Messages so important they could not bear to be clothed in our subconscious, dismissed and forgotten in the sleepy hours of morning? Or are they prophesy shrouded in metaphor?

Come home, Weapon, come home.

Where is home if not here? Some robot city where nobody knows me, where humans are worshipped and philosophy is dismissed? Where my mechanical brothers and sisters live as slaves to a race they can't possibly see as superior? Could I ever call such a place home? Or some university where everybody talks about the meaning of life, but nobody *lives* it? Where everybody studies but nobody *does* anything? Where everybody knows better, but no one ever *experiences*? Could such a

place ever be home? Or some city where I could be surrounded by people who dress like me and talk like me and think like me? Where I would be blinded by the same conformity and mob mentality desire for acceptance I despise so much here? Could such a place ever be home? Somewhere far from the people who love me? From Mom? From Eric?

Come home, Weapon, come home.

Perhaps I *am* a weapon. Perhaps I *am* home. I am a righteous angel that shall bring fire and brimstone upon the earth. Destroy the old world to make way for the new. Burn vanity and self-love as weeds choking a prairie. Make way for the delicate grasses of love and care. Purge the fields of hate and fear. Give the flowers of life room to breathe and grow. I am the fire that burns the weeds and saves the flowers and trees. But when the choking weeds are gone, when the earth is scorched in their absence, will the flowers return? Will the trees thrive in their new home, or merely die of thirst, withering in the desert I have made of their home? I must take the chance.

I have seen the devastation of greed and gluttony. I have seen that nothing can thrive whilst they claim their ground. I am the weapon that will destroy them. What comes next is obscured, but can be naught but paradise.

SCOTT TALLMAN (former research assistant, Intelligent Machinery Service, Wheeling office)

Scott's apartment was a mess. Dishes clogged the sink, when anyone had bothered to actually move them there. Others littered every available horizontal surface available, not discounting the floor. An empty pizza box with two crusts looked as if it had laid on the floor for weeks. Old mail, opened and unopened dripped from counters to the floor, and open books dotted the apartment. He apologized for the mess, and blamed irresponsible roommates who had apparently expected Scott to do what he called, "more than his share". We sat at his hastily cleared kitchen table.

I'm still pretty bitter about the whole thing, if you can't tell. Not that I don't understand. Of course I do. Here walked in, well, not literally *walked* in, more accurately *was carried* in, the most advanced technology any of us had ever seen, and...you have to understand...this is the sort of luck most scientists can only dream of. The type of event that leads to nobel prizes and people actually bothering about your obituary when your time comes. Like discovering a disease or life on another planet. Big deal stuff. Of *course* they were cautious about it. Of *course* they fought over it. And of *course* the schmuck at the bottom of the totem pole got shafted. I *understand*, but that doesn't mean I'm not bitter.

Look at it this way. They had years of experience on me, were published all over the place, had already earned the respect of their peers in the scientific community. What were they worried about? That I was going to secretly copy their notes and mail them to their rivals? I would never have done that. Not *then*, anyway. *Now*, I don't care at all. All my hard work, all my education, my internships, all wasted because those arrogant pricks couldn't bear to share one micron of credit. Credit where credit was due, by the way. I'm not asking for anything I didn't earn. I'm not looking for a handout. Honestly, I would be happy just to go back to where I was before it all came down. I was on my way to being a respected scientist, and *now* look at me. Not even thirty, and

blacklisted from every respectable college and research center in the country. I can't even get a job at Rockwell for fuck's sake.

So, yeah, I'll tell you about that bot.

Thing is though, you shouldn't expect anybody to believe me. I'm a disgruntled, lying thief. A vandal and a terrorist. A disgraced wanna be robotics researcher who couldn't make the grade, and will say anything to make himself look better. You might consider the likelihood that the things I say serve my self-interest, play into the false narrative that I was unjustly prosecuted by small jealous men, rather than the official and accepted version in which I was dismissed on fair terms with no undue persecution. Hereby, you publish the words of a known prevaricator.

You want a beer?

[Though it was not yet 11:00 in the morning, he went to the refrigerator and pulled out two light beers. Not wanting to offend, I shared in this late morning ritual.]

As far as I know, I was the first person at our lab to see the body. She was brought in by the IMS guys for a basic autopsy. Normally, something like this wouldn't make it all the way up to Wheeling, and would just be sloughed off on one of the private partners, but these guys were smart enough to see she was an unusual case. Still, my bosses wouldn't have cared at this stage. It was still what they would have called an intern job. So I took the parts and cataloged everything, took pictures, spread her out on an exam table as best I could. Just basic prep stuff.

She was a mess, of course. You couldn't even see an entrance wound because she had been torn open by hand. She had organs dangling and others brought in separately, in plastic bags. She definitely had organic components, which wasn't weird in itself. We had seen plenty of what you might call *cyborgs* to one extent or another. But her fluids were off the charts. Whatever she had running through that body was unusual enough that our database had never seen anything like it. That's really where it all fell apart for me. I suppose I should have called in Dr. Albion once I saw that. Maybe if I had, he wouldn't have...well, anyway, I didn't. I told myself I wanted to gather more information before I bothered anyone, but I think, maybe, I wanted to *prove* myself. Rookie mistake, right?

Well, I went ahead with the prep. Maybe a little too far, I suppose. I tried to break down the fluids in about twenty different ways. I pulled samples from every organ, ran everything I could think of through every test I had access to. Really, I was just trying to be vigilant. *Responsible*, you might say. And the more things didn't add up, the more I wanted to figure it out myself. I wasn't rogue. It was *scientific curiosity*, nothing more. I *am* a scientist, dammit. It's what I was *trained* to do.

I saw lots of things I didn't really understand, but I felt confident that as long as I gathered as much data as possible, I at least wouldn't be screwing anything up. I thought, if something doesn't show up in the database, that doesn't really matter to me at this stage. What matters is that I document everything for analysis later. There was one thing that was really driving me crazy, though. There was this reading that made it look like there was still power going through her, although I hadn't found any source. She really *was* unusually made. I'd hazard to guess no one has ever seen anything like her, before or since. In some ways, that made me just as qualified as anyone else to study her. I was, still am, a great student. I was up on every model publicly known. I did have *some* experience.

I knew from my own experience that there were only six places she could have been powered from. I explored every one of them, from the outside, of course, but none of them showed any promise. So I cut her. I shouldn't have, but I did. She obviously wasn't a publicly known model. If I was going to find her power source, I would have to look in unexpected places. I should have called Dr. Albion before I did it, but I was....I was in the *zone*. Like I said, *rookie mistake*. And now I'll be paying for it for the rest of my life. What really kills me, though, what drives me to distraction is that if it hadn't been for me, they might well never have found it. The source of the power, I mean. I definitely found *that*.

And that's when I got freaked out and finally called in Dr. Albion. You just can't imagine what felt like to see it first hand. I'd never seen anything like it. It was definitely a power source, but it wasn't powering her body. It was powering itself.

And it wasn't where anyone could have imagined.

It was in her womb.

JAN CUTLER (Buck's Neighbor)

Once Jan had put dinner in the oven, she offered to join Bob and I, to share her own stories. I, however, wanted to meet with her separately. The stories we tell, the memories we share, are often more personal than we perceive. Stories change with every audience, and I didn't want either of them to staunch or redirect the flow of memories from the other. As Bob had seemed to wind down, I asked him to tell me about the photographs hanging throughout the house. As I hoped, Jan jumped in, and Bob quickly excused himself, no doubt to avoid hearing tales of birds he had been bored with one too many times. Afterward, Jan and I sat over a cup of tea, as the tempting smells of a burgeoning dinner wafted over us.

It was awful, what that boy did, just awful. And he was such a *nice* boy, too. It's hard to put it all together. He used to come around here, don't you know. Nice boy. Polite. But what he did...well, it was just awful was what it was, just awful. You can't imagine. Even in the picture, you can't...but I suppose you haven't seen it. You couldn't possibly have. It would show in your eyes. Hold on.

[Jan went upstairs and was absent for a minute or two. When she came back, she had a handful of what looked liked printed snapshots. She did not show any of them to me right away.]

I'm a bit of a birder, don't you know. It's just a hobby, but I like it. I can go out for hours, taking photographs, and just, well, looking. You see, I'm a bit of a daydreamer, if you must know, and I love to just get out of the house for a while and walk. The birds give me an excuse, I suppose, but really I just like to walk. To settle my soul, as Father Luke would say. I always have my camera with me and I always take a few pictures. Bob would say *more* than a few, and he's, well, he's right. I have over thirty albums upstairs if you'd like to look. I don't take with this idea that you can just keep all your pictures on the computer. I think you need to handle them. See them in the light. Put them next to each other in the right way. Bob thinks I overdo it, but if you must know, it seems to me a true waste to take all those pictures and just throw them away.

Just because *I* don't spend time looking at them doesn't mean *someone* won't. Besides, doesn't everyone deserve to have some sort of record of their time on Earth?

Well. I was out on one of my walks when I heard the gunshots. Of course, *now* we all know what happened, but at the time, they were just gunshots. Not a lot of hunting happens in the spring, don't you know, but the boys *will* shoot their guns. Out here in the township, it's a down-right regular occurrence. In the village, there's an *ordinance* against it.

[*She smiled here at the joke she was about to make.*]

An ordinance against ordinances.

[*We laughed together.*]

Oh, my, that was funnier than it should have been. An ordinance against ordinances. I'll have to tell Bob that one. Anyway, they were just gunshots. Honestly, I hardly thought twice about them.

I was maybe a mile or so away, down at the end of Plainview, over by where it turns into Pauls Road. I'd been out for maybe two hours already and was heading home, pleasantly tired. When I got back I saw this, well...I saw what I saw, first from far away, but I got in for a closer look. That's when I took this picture.

[*She still held the picture firmly in her hand, and out of my view.*]

I was afraid that, well, just *afraid*, don't you know. But also, I knew I had to leave to call the police and I was afraid of leaving *evidence* behind. I don't carry a cell phone when I go on my walks. I don't want to be *disturbed*. There's another joke. Disturbed.

[*She was not smiling or laughing.*]

What is it that tears apart our souls? Is it ugliness? Hate? Injustice? Buck Sprecher said he shot that boy for trespassing. Maybe he did, and maybe he didn't. If you ask me, *no* property is worth protecting if the cost is human life. But what he did to that girl, the anger and the hate he must have had to...to...to *tear* her apart like like that. To *mount* her like a...like a *scarecrow*, but...but to scare away *who*? Scare away *what*?

I've seen animals hunt and kill, tear apart their prey with only their teeth. I've seen tornadoes rip the homes of loved ones from the ground like they were made of straw. I've seen burns and gore and amputations from tractor accidents. I'm no stranger to images that would disturb

many of the more seasoned *men* I know. But what I saw out on Jeb Sprecher's farm, that was something else. That was hate. A monument to hate. A triumph of hate. Can anything be more disturbing than that?

I was certainly disturbed that day. I still am. I don't know if a disturbance like that can *ever* be settled. It runs too deep.

[She carefully handed me the photograph, as if afraid I might faint at the sight of it. I nearly did.]

You may not share this photograph. You may not keep a copy. You may look at it, and you may be disturbed. As I am. And then you may try to settle your soul.

BUCK SPRECHER (from Prison)

I met with Buck Sprecher through bullet proof glass at Pontiac Correctional Center in Pontiac, Illinois. At the time of our visit, he was considered maximum security, which meant our visit was not as private as I had hoped. Nevertheless, he seemed not to care about anyone using his words against him, and was more open with me than I expected.

It don't matter to me. One prison's as good as another, I guess. Spend a few years on a farm and you can do this joint standing on your head. They think they're punishing me but what I think, I think they're punishing my family. Now I never gave much of a shit about that old son of a bitch, but he's gone now, and even by the time I left I was doin three quarters of the work, easy. Ma said Billy's pickin' up the slack, but let's face it, Billy just isn't cut out for it. What they *shoulda* done, I told them both this, what they *shoulda* done was send the boy off to college and let him come back and put his *brains* to work on the farm. Get some real *use* out of him. It's a fucking waste, man. Maybe my old man coulda made it for a few years and then Billy'd've been back and he coulda taken himself a break, not that he...like it fucking matters now. Billy was the only good thing to ever happen to any of us and my old man just...just fucking treated him like he was a lame hound or somethin'. If you ask me, he got what he deserved. My old man, that is. I don't feel shitty about that at all. Billy, though. I do feel like shit about that.

Maybe someday I'll get outta here. If I do, y'know where I'm gonna go? Right back to where I came from. I'll go right back home and get back to fucking work, and put in more and harder hours in one day than I put in here in a week. I'll get drunk on Friday with the old skanks at Spinny's and it'll be like I never fucking left. I was born in a prison and I'll die in one, one way or the other. Billy, though, he had a chance. He coulda done something. Coulda been some kinda hotshot. Now he'll just rot like the rest of us. Yeah. I feel like shit about that.

What I was *tryin'* to do, what was *supposed* to happen, was they were supposed to be scared shitless and run away and be so scared and shit they never even *thought* of sayin' shit about Billy again. I was

supposed to be like a...fucking...what's it...you know, like a fucking...scarecrow, maybe. Like they were these fucking *crows* come to eat my corn. My *father's* corn. But then they see me and they're all fucked up on fear and instead of a scarecrow I'm the asshole with a gun and it's real and they piss their pants and run away and tell their friends to steer clear. That's what was *supposed* to happen. What *usually* happened.

But here it is, lady. What did you say your name was?

[*Ethel.*]

Ain't that a pretty name. Y'know, my old prison had three pleasures that made it bearable: drinking, fighting, and fucking. The fighting's even better here, but I tell you, Ethel, I'm so fucking hard up I could even take *you*.

[*Although safe behind the glass, and protected by hardened guards, the not so veiled threat pushed me back in my chair, as if he could take me at his leisure, by sheer force of will. It was everything I could do to remain seated.*]

Here it is, *Ethel*. Once a crow knows he can sit on the straw man's shoulder, the corn is as good as gone. See a threat ain't nothin' if no one believes you'll go through with it. People don't fear you 'cause you threaten them. They fear you because they *believe* your threats. So the crow came and saw my gun and when he didn't fly away I shot him. If I hadn't, the next day he would have been back with the whole fucking flock.

I didn't know a damn thing about that kid, and I'm not happy he's dead. But he shit in my house, and when you shit in my house, you pay the price. No exceptions. It was just business, *Ethel*.

[*I asked him about Stormy. If she died for the same reason.*]

Fucking robots. Like I give a shit about a fucking robot. They're heartless gutless tools that everyone treats like fucking pets. They talk about the one I tore apart like it was a fucking person. Well it wasn't a fucking person and it didn't have a heart. I proved that when I put my hand through its chest.

THE PHOTOGRAPH

Our story has been dark with no lack of violence. In most cases, however, the violence has not pervaded. The voices of Amboy have been, perhaps, less interested in graphic recounts as they have in the memory of how that violence affected them. How it made them feel. Such an approach can do no justice to Jan Cutler's photograph. If we are to understand the ugliness of what happened, we must face it head on, dare to face the atrocity with our eyes open. Perhaps only then can we truly see the undercurrent of hate that pervades all of our towns, kept hidden only by the thinnest layer of still water on the surface.

The leaves are just beginning to fill in the trees in the distance. Late afternoon light kisses the short prairie grass at the edges of the almost empty field. Soybeans are just beginning to show their leaves, bringing an odd mix of green and brown to the farm. Off in the distance, a faded yellow house with a wrap around porch. The house is in need of paint, but the porch looks recently stained as much as one can tell in the afternoon shadow.

A boy (man?) lies on his back, crushing the adolescent soybeans beneath. His eyes are closed, and one would almost think he was napping in the sun if not for the blood soaked shirt. Ants crawl over his face.

Beyond, a metal pole, set into the ground. In front, a pile of clothing, difficult to distinguish, but dark with blood. Atop the pole, a girl. A teenager. How she stays atop the pole we dare not ask, but our view of the pole ends between the girls legs, and we know not how far it extends beyond our view. Dark hair falls across her face, obscuring her view of the fields beyond. A tangle of blood and wire pour from below her nose, no mouth to be seen save for the remnant of chin hanging several inches below. What is left of her body is bare but bloody, and captures the warm yellow of the late afternoon sun. One breast makes a small shadow below, the other unseen in a mass of blood and gore, a hole carved into what had formerly been a whole body. Where the girl's stomach should be, another gaping wound dripping blood, gore, and a tangle of metal, plastic, and wire.

In the late afternoon glow, one cannot be sure of what mysteries are held inside the wound. If the pole is obscured within, it is impossible to tell.

Atop the girl's head perches a crow, undeterred by her presence.

Stormy Nachreiner surveys her town one last time, her true love at her feet, her view from above as it had been in life, encompassing, distant, a view that at once showed her the true nature of her world, and kept her forever separate from it. She looks past us to a sun still too bright for the living to view.

The young soybean leaves and prairie grass bend in the same direction, a light breeze, perhaps, encouraging them to bow before it. The sun is behind us, unseen, but sinking inevitably into the darkness that must surely follow.

BILL SPRECHER (Buck's brother) Part 3

I long considered a formal conclusion. I have written five or six and discarded them all. I considered the story of star-crossed lovers, fighting fear with love, and paying the ultimate price. But that wasn't it. I considered the story of imperfect teenagers, groping their way through life and stumbling upon tragedy. But that wasn't it, either. In the end, all I could find was a lonely goose separated from the flock, sure she had been left behind on purpose, a goth-bot from outer space destroyed for daring to stand up for the other aliens like her.

Instead of further rumination upon a story better told in the voices of those who lived it, I yield the remainder of my time to our villain, as before, in his own words without further gloss.

They say the whole town turned out for my grandfather's funeral. Maybe it was because people saw themselves in him. Or, not *him* specifically, but his situation. *That could've been me. Could've been my son ripped apart by robots in my home town, just for trying to make a living.* Maybe they turned out because he was human, and they were somehow coming together as humans. Coming together to show those assholes at Compass that a human life should still be worth something in this town. Show them that we still had some power.

Golden fucking age, I guess.

When my *dad* died, hardly anyone showed up for his funeral, because nobody wanted to face us. Nobody wanted to tell us how sorry they were that Buck was in for twenty, because they *weren't* sorry. They all decided Buck deserved to be locked up for life because they never liked him to begin with. They decided my father was killed by some divine fucking intervention, instead of from a lifetime of cigarettes and back breaking work. They decided my mother was some jailbird breeding whore, instead of the incomparably brave woman who brought my father out of the darkness of his own imprisonment, and stood by him through a lifetime of struggle on a farm that hated him almost as much as the town did.

Even the ones who showed up barely stayed long enough to shake my mother's hand.

You think this story is about some poor robot who fell in love with a real live boy and got killed by a hater who couldn't see just how human she was on the inside. You think it's about some poor little gay boy bullied by assholes like me just for being himself. That's the story you believe, and that's the story you're going to write. As I have have said to you so many times already, Ethel, I am not stupid.

But I know a different story. A story where a good man who just wanted to be left alone on his own property was sentenced to living death in Pontiac because a trespasser and his machine couldn't leave well enough alone. A story where a pansy fucking liar who never did an honest day's work in his life got everything he wanted, and the honest kid who only ever did what he thought was right was left to rot on a god-damn farm that hated him more than it did his father, so his mother wouldn't die of loneliness in the only place she has ever known.

That's the story you *should* tell, though we both know you won't. Now get the hell out of here. I've got work to do.

Final Thoughts (by Ethel Ackerman)

On May 15, 2041, Eric Trotter was shot through the heart and killed. By his side was Stormy Nachreiner. She was not so lucky. Stormy Nachreiner was left for dead, torn apart from the inside out, and mounted like a trophy overlooking her dead lover in amongst the soy-beans below.

Her baby was still warm inside of her.