

Fingerstyle Folk and Blues

A Collection of Five Short Fiction
Pieces

by Fred Royall

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The Holding Pattern

So here I sit. Waiting.

Ha ha. I wish you could see me here. What must you think? Christ.

“Waiting for what?” you might ask.

Well, that’s a good one. I have a solid sense of it in my gut. Have had for some time. The Zen monks talk about the “red-hot iron ball” that sits nestled in their bellies, scorching them for years, decades, even a lifetime. And perhaps it is a kind of enlightenment I seek. That siren song. Sung in primitive societies and chiming through cyberspace.

But first perhaps some background is in order.

I am a Texan, born and raised. I guess you might say further that I’m an American success story. So maybe that will do your heart some good. If I can share a positive vibe with you then I’ll feel like I’ve done a little good in the world. I think it’s important to do good. There are moral imperatives in life, like Kant said, and I’m gratified if you walk away with a note of inspiration.

I love my family, and they love me. But that’s not as straight forward as it sounds. It’s been a process. Let me explain.

My parents were born in Mexico. They came to California to work in the fields. You’ve heard the stories of such people. But for them it was no story. There was no dramatic arc. Only biography, written in the muscles of their backs and the tan on their arms. My mother and father never completed grammar school, but they were hungry. They came to the promised land with little but dreams and the willingness to stoop in the hot sun and help feed the most powerful and prosperous nation in the history of the world. I’m proud of their hands-on, tangible contribution to the life and blood of the country.

My father was versatile and talented. Sharp witted and determined. He picked up various trades by his wits, eventually getting into construction. Our family migrated east and we ended up in Houston. The family took a home they could afford in a neighborhood I came to appreciate with childish innocence. I would later learn the opinion of others about the place where I grew up. How they thought it was rough. How they feared it. This place tempered my character. Maybe I’m a little tougher than you. I don’t know for sure. But you need not fear me. I was raised to mean well, and I think I always have.

I grew up bi-lingual and was taught to be proud of my Mexican heritage. But to tell you the truth, whenever we visited the homeland I was disappointed to find the people made fun of the way I spoke and behaved. Frankly I felt betrayed. They made me want to say, “Fuck this. I’m an American.” In adolescence, plagued with questions, I didn’t know what I was. At home my family was close knit, emotional, and spoke Spanish. But out in the world I was treading in the American melting pot, steaming,

redolent and alive. And the lingua franca of this grand experiment was English.

I coasted through high school. Maybe I squandered my time. I was smart and able to pass everything with a middling grade through little effort. I figured it was good enough. College in the liberal arts model seemed like a load – impractical and effete. More European than American. I had watched my family struggle with money. I knew what I wanted out of my post-secondary education. I wanted a pay check. A fat one. I enrolled in a technical college and studied computers. To my surprise I had a natural aptitude. I made the effort, acquired the skills to be a technical professional and graduated. I had done better than my parents. I had bitten off my little corner of the dream. Now it was time to savor it on my tongue and see what it really tasted like.

Sweet holy mother of Christ. From the very first day work was a hellish scenario of crushing boredom. No one in technical school had warned me of the reality of employment. And friends? Who could relate to these people? All at once I was isolated. Alone in the crowd. My skills were put to some modicum of use, but the tasks were so easy and took so little time. I wasn't challenged or invigorated. I was enveloped by slow, damning routine, swallowed whole like Jonah, left to light a candle in the belly of the whale and smell the rotting fish that lay piled up to my knees. The dream? Surely this was closer to a nightmare. One from which I wished to awaken.

At this vulnerable time I discovered the life and work of an old man from California. He's a man I think you should know about. He's a kind man, though he had a reputation as a brawler. I'll admit he was a drunk, but he was inspired in his madness. He had lived a hard life of dull, menial labor, much of it sorting mail in the post office in Los Angeles. But he'd taken a gamble and he'd called on a natural talent. A strong, true stream that ran through him, that gave him heart. And I'll tell you what he did. In rooming houses in the poorest parts of east LA he sat with jugs of rot-gut port wine and cheap cigars and he hit the keys of a manual typewriter, one he'd gotten from a hock shop. He started at the top left of the page and he made his way with vernacular American honesty to the bottom right. And then took a swig, a drag, and he rolled in a fresh page. Against all odds this man in his middle age began to write poems about the underbelly, began to capture the truth about his everyday life. These early days are now the stuff of myth, and this man who would rock the Los Angeles underground became a kind of legend. This brave soul was Charles Bukowski, and on a fateful day in my life, I found him. I can feel the gooseflesh rising at the memory. For he changed me.

At this time there bloomed in my life a lurid, stinking blossom set up in the middle of my private garden. And this was anxiety. This was fear. Though a young man I felt inexplicably haunted by the specter of death. Horrified, scandalized at my own mortality. And naked, lacking when I

stared into the yawning maw of posterity. What was to be my contribution? I wondered. What was I to leave to the world, to my children, to let them know that I had been here, that I had drawn breath, known joy and pain, had labored, survived, lived? I thought of my work and I could only spit into the dirt.

No. It was not work. It was instead this man. This ugly, drunken gambler and womanizer. This misanthrope. This steppenwolf with his tireless, late-night output. He held the secret. Against Sartre, this man was my exit. I had a way out. I needed to take the horns of my life in my own hands, my real quotidian tedium, and I had to render it, through luck, alchemy and balls, into art. To hallow the everyday. To craft salvation for my mortal flesh. To stand on feet of clay and touch the vault of heaven. I had to write. To ignite the magic of sublimation. This solitary pilgrimage. All at once I was a mendicant. And like all common religious I had been called. I had a vocation. Bukowski had been crucified to save doomed souls like mine. I silently thanked the man, took out a pad and pen and began to jot notes.

How many years ago did my quest and devotion begin? I am older now. In the intervening years I had to struggle with my family. Struggle to free myself from them. At first to separate. But then to return, on new terms, terms of compromise, terms that demanded they respect me and my purposes. Why couldn't I have a higher purpose? Yes, higher. Was this reserved only for the privileged in our society? Was not a higher calling a valid part of the dream?

I did as I was supposed to, as my brother soberly advised me. I kept my job, always made a living. But when I've had the time, and when that fickle beauty has moved me, I've muscled prose from my days, my soul, my fingertips. I forced myself to write a novel. And truth be told, the first chapter wasn't so bad. But the rest was dreck. Hell, I don't even know where I put it. May it never see the light of day. Still I struggle.

Some people might think it romantic to grow up in a bi-lingual home. Look at the effort people put into learning second languages, most of them failing. Bi-lingualism was my birth right. But I'll tell you a dirty little secret about the cleft that develops in a life lived in two cultures. When I feel the calling, when I know the conviction that it's time for me to put words on the page, when I attend to my vocation in my monastic quarters by candle light, I feel distracted by my second tongue. I hear a static in my mind, a buffer that keeps from me jealously the proper English words, the turns of phrase, just so and with precious perfection, to capture and cage the mood thoroughly and with frisson. My muse lilts and drifts in a gentle wind and I contemplate her. But when I reach for her, to innocently caress her contours, she eludes me, and I hear instead the chatter of an everyday Spanish household, attending to chores, sharing a meal. It is my mastery, my mastery that is wanting. I must discipline my devotion. Redouble my

care, craft and skill. It has been years that I have generated content and have yet to feel the bracing satisfaction of a story rendered honestly and with devastating truth. A truth that will cut you off at the knees. A truth that will change you. That will make you better for having read me.

It sits in my gut, an undigested mass of fiber. I am waiting for it to dissolve and pass. I am waiting to break through. For the light to warm my face and shoulders. I make my efforts. I have ideas. I leave pieces in a disassembled state and come back to them. I've read Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. The genius of the precocious young doctor is enviable. Would that life, authentic life could course through my creations. I would never betray them, as the young doctor does. I would share them, articulate their virtues, pluck notes of change in the heartstrings of readers.

I don't doubt my calling. I am still young. Bukowski knew success only in his later years. I am naturally patient. I attend to my duty. And I wait. Some day you will hear from me. And I want to warn you. I will draw blood. So prepare yourself. Keep an ear out and be ready. Like the sun hidden just below the horizon, the red-hot iron ball is burning.

Turning Your Face to the Light

You didn't know what it was about yourself. You were a barber. A forty-year old man in an old-fashioned profession. You made three dollars tips. You knew your customers, asked about their families. You were well liked. You were content – and yet your life was punctuated by these rare occasions of extreme and consequential drama.

Take your wife. You went on lunch one day and walked to the deli at the back of the little market. You got the chicken salad. You walked up to the register and got a look at the checker. She was new. You saw her face in profile and with sudden electrocution you fell hopelessly in love with her. It was one of those phenomenal things that made life a mystery that is unfathomable to science or philosophy. You gasped and panicked.

Weeks of distant fascination passed before you managed to develop a casual familiarity with her. You were both local business folks in good standing so you had something in common. You were achingly infatuated with this woman's natural charm and stood almost swooning as you exchanged pleasantries. This yearning animated your life for months.

And then your chance came one day when you ran into her standing on a median strip waiting to cross. You greeted her, said it was nice to see her, and then offered, "You know I just bought a new place. In the Pleasant Court condos." You gestured, tilting your head. "I'm kind of showing it off if you have time to take a look." When she smiled excitedly and agreed to walk with you, you were delirious with disbelief.

When she walked across the threshold of your place you felt a crashing wave of destiny. After admiring the condo you had a long talk about your lives. You sat rapt with every word she spoke. When she said she had to go you confessed that you'd really loved talking with her and would love to have coffee sometime. She agreed. A year and a half later you were married. And when you took your vow of devotion during the ceremony your sincerity was absolutely pure. You loved your wife madly. You were a neighborhood barber, and yet this extraordinary romance had happened to you.

Certainly such a thing would never happen again. You were blissful. And yet there came an afternoon when you found a space in your heart that needed filling. Who would have imagined that the heart of a humble barber could be so expansive? And yet there was this episode of strangeness, of the uncanny that descended upon you. The way your life together developed you never would have seen it coming.

After you married she sold her place and moved in with you. She was quite ambitious and took out a loan and bought the grocery for her own. You were proud of her. She had the place closed for remodeling and then

reopened to good wishes from everyone. She was an exceptionally pleasant, well-liked figure in the community.

In the morning you would walk together holding hands until you reached the grocery. You would kiss her and then you would carry on to the shop. Then at quitting time you would swing by and stick your head in the door. She worked a longer day than you so it was just a quick greeting and then you were off to home. You would start dinner and she would come in around 6:30. You would enjoy a meal together and then would snuggle on the couch. The routine was delightful.

You talked about kids but you were putting it off for a while so you could have a social life together. And that was how it happened—in your explorations around the city together on a day off. You noticed one Friday that there was an exhibit of American urban photography at the Terra Museum. This was the kind of thing that the two of you encouraged one another to seek out. Something different than your working-class worlds. She thought it sounded nice. And so on Saturday morning you got on the Metra and went downtown.

You got off the train and walked across the river to the museum. You paid your admission and walked up the spiraling staircase that led to the exhibition. She walked ahead of you and you touched her back lightly in anticipation of your aesthetic pleasure together. When you reached the displays you began walking contemplatively from picture to picture. A barber and a grocer come to appreciate the arts.

After about twenty minutes of viewing you felt strange. You told yourself that this was art, and yet the photographs of urban settings could only be thought of as realistic depictions. How was this art, you wondered, if it was a representation of simple reality? Then it occurred to you in a nagging sense that this wasn't exactly right. That these pictures were somehow more real than real. You questioned the paradox. How can you represent a reality that is greater than one hundred percent?

And then with a sudden punch you found this effect disagreeable. You didn't like any of these scenes. They were all bleak and ugly, brutal, inhumane. Why were cities like this? Wasn't America a hopeful place? How could its cities be so disheartening? Wasn't the modern age bright? And yet these cityscapes made you understand suicide. The dirty streets and fences and facades made you imagine razor blades and revolvers in night stands. A woman in a slip drinking a bottle of iodine, collapsing next to her unmade bed.

You looked at your wife. She had the neutral expression of an educated lay person in the presence of art. She was appreciative and open. You worried for her. Was it safe for her to be open to this work? Would she think differently of her store after looking at these pictures? Reconsider your happiness in an urban setting?

You were about to speak when you came to a shot that froze you. It was a photo of a busy street. There were a mother and daughter in the foreground and judging from their coats the weather was cool. The mother was leading the child by the hand and the child was trailing behind her, pulling her mother's arm and her own arm to their full extensions. So far it was a scene like all the others. But then you noticed that the child's face was tilted upward. And shining on her in a focused spot was a warm glow of timeless sunshine. The skin of her face threw a glimmer to the camera. Her face appeared surrounded with a holy-seeming halo. She appeared transported by the illumination. Despite the fact that she was in the middle of a busy street she seemed to want to remain there, delivered from hectic, urban brutality into this little gift of warm heaven. She had stopped walking and had dug her legs in for just a moment to preserve that sensation. Surely her salvation lasted only a second before she was tugged away.

Your wife made to move on to the next photograph but you grabbed her. "Look at that girl's face," you said.

Your wife looked. "Isn't she cute?"

"Yes, she is cute," you said. "But look at how she's holding her face. Her eyes are closed and her face is bathed in light. Look at her legs. She's stopped walking. She wants to remain there in the light."

"It must have been warm."

"But there's something more," you insisted. "There's something important about that girl's attitude. It's a corrective to everything we've looked at. It's as though she's offering herself to the light. She's giving up on her mother. She's saying to the light, 'Take me. I am yours.'"

"Wow," she said. "You've found one you like." She smiled then inched away from you but you tugged her back.

"Look. I'm sorry," you said, "but I need you to listen to me."

"What's the matter with you?" she asked.

"There's something going on," you said. "Something about our lives. I've got to solve this. Can't you see what I mean? It's important to me that you see it."

"Do you want to sit down?" she asked, gesturing to the padded benches.

"No," you said. "I don't want to leave the picture. I so understand that girl's sentiment. I so need what she has there. Her desire to give herself to the light. I mean look at all these photos. Aren't they depressing?"

"Well, they're stark," she said. "Urban grittiness. Isn't that what you expected?"

"No, it's not what I expected," you said. "Shit," you swore loudly. She put a hand on your shoulder.

"Take it easy," she said.

"I'm sorry," you said quietly. "It's just that I'm suddenly shocked to find that there's something missing from my life. This god damn picture."

You hesitated. “What I want, what I really want is what that girl enjoyed there for that fleeting moment. I want that light.” You sighed.

“I think we better go,” your wife said.

“I don’t know if I can,” you said.

“Honey, I think you’re upset,” she said. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about but I think it’s best if we get some air.”

“How can it all come to ruin?” you wondered aloud. “This picture has ruined some part of me. Some foundation that I had has collapsed.”

“Let’s go look for a print of this, okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, okay.” You knew she was right.

“Come on,” your wife said firmly, wrapping an arm around your waist. “We’re getting out of here right now.” You went with her and she led you to the stairwell. As the two of you descended your senses settled back to normal. When you reached the lobby she asked you about the print but you waved and walked to the door.

Outside you paused. “Look,” you said. “What happened in there....”

“It’s okay,” she said.

“I just like to think that we’re so happy, and yet that girl’s face, that god damn picture. It made me feel as though I’ve been missing the whole point.”

“Do you still love me?” she asked. “Do you want to go home with me?”

This crushed you. You embraced her. “Of course I do,” you said. “But I think I’ve begun some kind of,” you were suddenly embarrassed. “You’ll laugh.”

“What?” she asked.

“I think I have to find something. I think I’ve started on some kind of quest. There’s an emptiness.” You began walking south.

“You know it reminds me of the first time I saw you,” you said. “I knew somehow that my life would never be the same.”

“I tell people that there’s a lot more to you,” she said. “You come off as a nice guy but kind of bland and devoted.”

“I think I am bland. And I’m certainly devoted,” you said, squeezing her to you. “It’s just that sometimes lightning strikes and my life takes a new direction.”

“Well try to keep me posted. I want to be with you in your new direction.”

“You’ll be there,” you said. “I think you were my first hint of the light. Now this is just the next step.”

“Well take it carefully,” she said.

“I’ll have to take it as it comes,” you said.

When you returned to work on Monday the scales had fallen from your eyes. Each customer was a new soul you queried for clues. You felt as insubstantial as a scarecrow. You came to understand that you were fallen.

But there was a road and you were on it. You learned that Somerset Maugham had called this the razor's edge. And a chill ran across you at the possibility of bringing that picture to life, of the heavens opening to accommodate your enraptured face, of what could only be called salvation.

Trekking the Dark Continent

She was smiling in profile the first time I noticed her on the shuttle. That shrewd smile coupled with her sleek sunglasses and the years of experience on her face told me that she was interesting. Her hair was almost white, and she was tan and lithe, her figure svelte in her simple dress that showed off her shoulders, back and thin arms. Her legs were long with lean, defined muscles. She put me in mind of an African lioness moving through the grasses on the plain in the hot morning.

I stole a long look at her face that evening as she walked down the aisle. I couldn't tell how old she was. She could have been anywhere from an experienced 34 to a young 52. She seemed reserved and comfortable with herself, almost to the point of being reticent. That quality of subtle reluctance made her desirable.

The weekend came and she followed me into my dreams. Approaching me in the desert, she was covered in sweat. She had been walking a long time and her legs and feet were sore. Her face was relieved to see me. She opened her arms and I received her onto my shoulder. I bolstered her up and began carrying her. I rubbed her back and reassured her.

We came to a canal with a dock. There were long, narrow boats for rent. I produced some local currency. The bills were rose red. I handed them to the attendant and he gestured toward a boat. I stepped aboard and then kneeled, gently peeling her body down. "Where?" she asked. "It's all right," I said. The attendant handed me a pole and I pushed off into the current. Thick vegetation overhung the canal and shaded us. She fell asleep and I watched her chest rise and fall. I felt confident.

I woke, but the dream lingered thickly in my mind.

I spent the weekend drinking wine at a local café. I crossed my legs and looked idly at the pedestrian traffic. There were a lot of good looking women, many of them quite young, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

On Monday she got on late and stopped right next to me. The bus was full and she would have to stand. I got up and offered her my seat. She thanked me and sat down elegantly. Her voice was like a touch of velvet on my skin. I looked down at the left side of her face. She had the refreshed aspect of a person renewed from the weekend and ready to begin her livelihood anew. A smell wafted up from her, but it seemed natural, like the odor of her skin and hair. Again I thought of the proud lioness idly waving her tail as her cubs tussled in the dust.

When the bus reached her stop she rose and turned her face to me briefly. She smiled that thin, oh-so clever smile and thanked me again. I stood there dumbly. "You're welcome," I said to her back as she moved down the aisle. I watched her again through the window. She walked up hill

in sandals and her calves strained with definition. I didn't so much lust after her as ache for her. I sat in her residual scent as the bus pulled away.

That evening she smiled at me and during the week she acknowledged me a couple of more times. I concluded that she wasn't attached. Friday came but I still didn't know her name.

I stepped out that Saturday morning and found that a chain was around the entrance to the pool. A portion of the brick stairs had broken away. There were other pools in the complex so I set off to find the nearest one.

I passed the mail room and pulled the door open. I knew her back at once. I was startled. "Oh," the syllable erupted. She turned. Then she smiled. A large fishing hook secured itself in the meat of my heart. "How are you?" she asked, then she looked down casually at the envelopes in her hand. "Actually," I said, "I'm trying to find a pool. How's the one near you?" I asked.

"The pool? Oh, it's nice," she said.

"I don't know where it is," I said. "Can you show me?"

"Don't you want to check your mail first?" she asked.

I waved it off. "Probably nothing," I said.

"Oh," she uttered and shrugged. She walked toward the door. "This way then," she said.

Outside I told her my name was Louis.

"Cherie," she said.

"Oh, that's pretty," I said lamely. "So you work in the medical center?"

"Don't we all?" she asked. "Texas Children's," she said. "And you?"

"UT Health Science Center," I said.

I followed her through an underpass and then into a hallway. "Just go to the end and turn left," she instructed. "Maybe I'll join you after a while."

"It's a good day for a swim," I said.

"It's Houston," she said dismissively, then put the key in the lock. She smiled at me one last time and I felt the hook tugging at my ventricles. She disappeared and the door closed.

I walked down to the pool and set my glasses and towel aside then got in. The water was warm and the hot sun shown down on my face and shoulders. I went under and swam to the opposite side. The weightlessness and momentum gave me a thrill.

I swam the length of the pool several times, then paced around, rubbing my hair back against my scalp. I heard the gate open and looked up. "Looks fun," I heard her say. Without my glasses I could make out a trim figure in a beige one-piece suit. "Can I join you?" she asked.

"It's your pool," I said, smiling.

She padded lady-like to the side and then sat down. She pushed herself off the edge.

"Do you know how to swim?" she asked me.

“I can make do,” I said.

“I swam in college,” she said. “I was pretty good. This is how you’re supposed to do it.”

She pushed off strongly from the side and her arms sliced through the water like swords. She glided quickly, kicking her feet in a constant splash. She turned her head to the side, breathing efficiently. I watched her do four effortless laps then she stood up. “You try it,” she said.

“I can’t breathe like that,” I said.

“You can learn,” she said.

I walked over beside her and my heart began to race. I kicked off and swam all the way to the other side without taking a breath. I got half way back to her when I had to breathe. I turned my head up and water spilled into my nose and mouth. I stopped paddling and stood up.

“I’m too old to learn,” I said.

“You’re not too old,” she said. “But I won’t make you if you don’t want to.” She laughed at me as though I were a child then she took off again and cut through the water like a well-trained athlete. I leaned my back against the side and kicked my legs idly as I watched her. I lost count but she must have done at least ten laps. She came to her feet and breathed deeply.

“You know I’ve been meaning to ask you,” she said, “are you some kind of artist?”

I laughed. “What makes you say that?”

“You seem preoccupied,” she said. “I’ve noticed it on the bus. I figured you must have some kind of secret life.”

“I write,” I said.

“Not married?” she asked.

“Never close,” I said dismissively.

She went under and swam toward me. She surfaced next to me.

“I have something to show you,” she said, brushing her hair back against her scalp. “I bet you’ll appreciate it. Have you had enough?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” I said. “I feel refreshed.”

“That’s good,” she said.

I followed her to the stairs. I watched the contours of her rear end and legs as she climbed the stairs. “Are we going somewhere?”

“To my place,” she said, grabbing her towel and rubbing her hair vigorously.

“But I’m wet,” I said.

“You can strip down and wear your towel,” she said, not looking at me.

I followed her through the gate and down the hall. We came to her door and she unlocked it. The cool air and a floral scent rushed out as she pushed the door open. “Just go in there,” she said, pointing to the side.

I walked into her bathroom. I stripped out of my wet gear. I toweled myself dry and then wrapped the long beach towel around my waist. It fell to my ankles but couldn't conceal the half-risen bulge at my crotch. I walked out barefoot.

She walked past me and stole a glance at my body. My brain swam with endorphins. She didn't close the door and I could hear her pulling herself free from her wet suit. I heard her towel rustling and then she walked out. Her towel was around her waist, not under her arms. Her nipples were hard and puckered in the cool air. "Come," she said simply, and took my arm.

We walked into the front room and I could see there were dried flowers covering the table tops, book cases and window sills. She gestured expansively. "Ikebana," she said. "I learned it from an old Japanese woman."

"Right," I said. "That reminds me. I once attended a tea ceremony in Chicago."

"Oh," she said with interest, "did you like it?"

"Surprisingly, I was absolutely captivated."

"See?" she asked. "I was right about you. So what do you think?"

I put my hand on hers and we toured all the arrangements. "I prefer the autumn colors," I said.

"Why not the spring?" she asked.

"Halloween is really my favorite holiday."

"So you're dark?" she asked me.

I didn't answer.

I noticed three pairs of expensive running shoes neatly arrayed in front of a book case. "Do you run?" I asked.

She nodded. "Five miles every morning. There's a trail next to Rice."

"I've heard about it," I said. "I've thought of getting a bike."

"Maybe you should," she said, and then she poked a finger into my belly. "Do you drink?" she asked me, smiling. She took her hand from me and walked to a cabinet.

"I suppose," I said. "Writers have a tendency." I watched her back and shoulders as she pulled open a door and removed a wooden box. It was quite ornate. She proffered it. "Do you like it?" she asked.

I looked from her nipples to the box and said, "Yes. It looks exotic."

"It's Indonesian," she said. She opened it and plucked out a bone-white joint. "Do you mind?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Hand me a pillow from the couch," she said. I reached over and grabbed a large, colorful pillow. I tossed it to the floor and she sat down on it. I took one for myself and did the same. I sat cross legged, and the towel was lifted up in the center. She pulled a glass lighter from the box and handed it to me with the joint.

I lit up and took a long toke. I handed the lit cigarette to her and she took it in her long, tapered fingers. She wore pearl-white nail polish, the same color as her prominent, even teeth.

She narrowed her mouth and took a drag as the cherry glowed. Her eye lids fell and she held her breath. She handed the joint back to me and then exhaled lustily. "So you're from Chicago?" she asked.

"Not originally," I said. "I went there to study divinity."

She snapped her fingers. "The secret life," she said. "So you're thinking about God when you're on the shuttle."

I exhaled and laughed. "Hardly," I said.

She pouted. I handed the joint back. "I wanted to hear some far-flung theological theory."

"I was more of an anthropologist," I said as she dragged, "interested in Taoism."

Her eyes widened. "Even better," she said. "You'll have to tell me about it some time." She clipped the remainder of the joint in a roach and wetted her fingertips. She pinched the cherry and snuffed it. She set it in the wooden box and then leaned back on her elbows. "If you want me," she said, seriously, "you'll have to wrestle me."

"Is that right?" I asked. I got up on my knees. She planted the balls of her feet into my chest and pushed me. I took my towel off and grabbed her ankles. I pulled her butt across the carpet toward me and spread her legs open. "No fair," she pouted.

I leaned forward between her thighs and she pushed the heels of her palms into my face. I grabbed her wrists and pinned her arms above her head. She licked her lips and rose toward me with an open mouth. I kissed her passionately and tasted the sweet pot smoke.

"Do you mind?" she asked politely, and she pushed me downward. I crawled down her length and put my face in front of her hairy sex. I pressed my mouth against the warmth. She was copiously wet. I licked up the length of her lips, taking in the excess juice. Then I ground my chin into the hood and brought my mouth onto her nub. I bit it and she arched her back in ecstatic pain. I put my tongue inside her as far as it would go. She raised her legs and put her feet on my shoulders.

I worked on her until she released her hands and then I tugged myself back up. She reached down and put me inside her. "You're stiff," she said, looking at me as though surprised. I laughed. "Perceptive," I said. She closed her eyes and turned her head to the side. I kissed her cheek. She made a noise of pleasure like a baby. I stroked her in earnest, getting faster at her urging. I wondered again, how old is this woman? I looked deeply into her face in a state of rapturous wish fulfillment.

I was rocking her violently when she bunched her face up and appeared as though she were going to weep. She said something softly, privately. Then I saw a tear dribble out of her left eye. "Let me ...," she

said, pressing me up with her fingers. I lifted my weight and she tensed her entire lithe musculature. She vocalized like an animal and then a series of restrained screams came out of her throat in rhythm with my strokes. "Wait," she said, and I held still for a moment. "Wait. Thank you," she said. "I just ...," she trailed off.

After a minute she said, "Okay," and I slowly began pushing again. "Can you have another one?" I asked her.

I seemed to startle her out of a distracted state. "No," she said. "You. I want to feel it."

I looked at the side of her graceful face and suddenly realized I was fucking a girl I had dreamt about. I thought of her approaching me with open arms and a look of relief on her face. I felt her surrender her weight to me. I lifted her from the ground and propped her in my arms. I felt as though a mortar had been set off at the base of my brain and I sent hot jets into her womanhood. She sighed and then elegantly traced her fingertips down the length of my spine.

I laid on top of her and kissed her tanned cheek. I smelled the floral arrangements all around us. She opened her eyes from her private reverie and looked up at me as though surprised to see me there. "It's you," she said. "Who did you expect?" I asked. "I thought I was in Africa," she said. I started at this. "What made you think that?" I asked. "I guess it's just the dope," she said. I kissed her deeply and she rubbed her fingers through my hair. "Let me get up," she pressed her fingers against my shoulders. "I need to wash."

I lifted off of her and pulled out. I lay over on my side and watched her rise gracefully from the floor. I watched her legs as she walked toward the bathroom. I heard water running in the tub and then some splashing. After a minute the water stopped and I heard her toweling off. She came back into the room.

"So," she said, "I still think you live a secret life."

"Are you curious to learn about it?" I asked.

"You look quite young," she said. "Don't you wonder how old I am?"

"It's a bit of a mystery," I said. "But why don't we just let it go?"

"You made me think of Africa," she said.

"You make me think of Africa too," I said. "I guess that's just a thing between us."

"Are you going to drink tonight?" she asked.

"Probably," I said.

"I'm going out with friends," she said. "I really should get ready."

"Okay," I said, and I got up. I walked to the bathroom and put on my wet suit.

I walked toward her and put my arms around her. I kissed her lightly. She stepped away into the bathroom.

"Can I see you tomorrow?" I called.

“I don’t see why not,” she called back. The shower started running.

“Goodbye,” I called loudly.

“Okay. Bye,” she said.

I let myself out and walked down the hall. I walked to the small general store and bought a tall Heineken. I cracked the lid and sipped it as I walked back to my place. Like a poor-man’s Hemingway, I had enjoyed the safari.

Wait a Minute Baby, Stay with Me a While

Her name was Sarah, and she said it was an old name, a Jewish name and that it came from the Bible. She thought it made her special. I liked her face because it was not cherubic like the other girls. In retrospect I would say she looked like a budding hippie, a little trashy even, in her faded floral dresses and sandals. And her shoulder-length, straw-colored hair was hopelessly unkempt, as though she brushed it only at night then slept on it and just came to school like that. I wouldn't have known the word at the time, but she was bohemian, like a little gypsy. Her family owned a restaurant with a bar and the place was notoriously disreputable, filled every night with smoking, drinking rednecks from the south side of Richmond. She liked to say that she hung out there and overheard the conversations.

This made her more worldly than the rest of us in the seventh grade at a time when we all desperately wanted to be sophisticated and sexually knowing. Sarah was a virgin, but she was not an innocent. She was conniving in her clever, gypsy way, and something of a Steppenwolf, never hanging with a group of girlfriends. She often seemed to be scheming and at one point she claimed to be a witch. This seemed plausible to me. It was an open secret that she liked me and she told me once that she had cast a spell on me. I told her I could break it. Another girl whispered to me once that Sarah had made a love potion and was going to use it on me.

Her parents were hip and agreed to hold a boy/girl party with spin-the-bottle. My cousins told me that Sarah had asked them what I liked to eat and drink, so when I got to the party there were RC Cola and Goldfish crackers, my favorite snack. At one point Sarah picked up a cracker and flicked it in my face, laughing.

Tommy had the first Boston album and Frampton Comes Alive. He put these on the stereo and we sat on the floor playing the kissing game. One time the bottle landed on Sarah and she placed her hand at the back of my head and ran her fingers through my hair as she opened her mouth and explored me with her tongue. The crowd of kids started hooting and clapping.

I slow danced with Sarah and she moved me toward each lamp in the room, turning them off as she came to them. She pressed herself close to me in the dark and made little noises of appreciation. I thought she seemed more like an animal than a little girl. Her parents came into the darkened room and turned on all the lights. The couples broke their clenches in the harsh glare.

Word got around that Sarah and I were an item. This was an unlikely development, as I was boyish, and unlikely to attract affection. Sarah invited me to go see her favorite movie, *Gone with the Wind*, when it made a matinee showing at our neighborhood theater. I told my friend Paul and he punched me in the shoulder like I was a stud. Indeed, Sarah and I watched

little of the dull film, instead kissing with our braces-covered teeth and gazing meaningfully into one another's eyes.

We indulged our puppy love as we entered high school. I attended a Catholic military academy and Sarah attended the Catholic sister school a couple of blocks away. We took the same bus home together and sat next to one another.

When I turned 16 my father purchased a little used Fiat. My very own car. Sarah and I would go out to see movies and have pizza. She would steal bottles of rum from her parents' restaurant and we would mix it with Coke and drive recklessly along the twisted roads next to the James River. She would scream with delight and fear. Certainly my worst karma dates to those drunken drives. Only an angel saved me from killing us both or a car full of children.

My senior year I was a staff officer and Sarah was my sponsor. Sponsors had various girlish responsibilities like decorating for dances or making cookies for the troops. Sarah had a developed sense of irony and looked down upon all of this. She appeared with me at formations and sometimes all the officers would kiss their sponsors in unison, to great applause from the corps. This exhibitionism pleased Sarah to no end and she would make out with me like a ten-dollar hooker.

When we graduated Sarah applied to Smith and was thrilled when she was admitted. I was valedictorian and got into Harvard, but for financial reasons I went to UVA and stayed close to home.

The college years were strange. I fooled around and I guessed that Sarah did also. But when the summers came we arrived back home and both worked at the local theater. Sarah's parents tolerated my staying over night at their house and I assumed they knew we were making love in her bedroom. My own parents let this pass, thinking that we were as good as married any way. They liked Sarah and were frankly relieved that their sensitive, straight-A son had a regular girl and wasn't a queer. Sarah and I never questioned one another about our sex lives during the academic year. We just seemed to accept infidelity as a part of maturation.

We were both intellectuals and enjoyed the expansion of our minds by the liberal arts. Sarah concentrated in English and could discourse in passionate detail about fiction. I became fascinated by the world's religions and introduced Sarah to the basic teachings of the Buddha and Mohammed, and the wild, sensual conflation of Hinduism. We were both solid students and appreciated one another's maturing intellects. Looking back I have to credit us with being a class act.

College didn't seem like four distinct years but rather just a single ordeal that transpired like a necessary rite of passage. We endured it, we bolstered one another, and we graduated, authentic adults ready to embrace our futures.

We lived with our parents as we first started working. And it was the bathetic banality of work that led us to the altar. We both temped down town and we found the work so unchallenging and degrading that we came to take desperate, at times furious refuge in one another. We knew that the only way we would survive the insults of bourgeois consumerist culture was to embrace and whisper reassurances. I eagerly proposed to Sarah and she graciously accepted. We were married in a Catholic ceremony and her parents threw quite a fete at their restaurant afterwards. For our honeymoon we went to San Francisco, making memorable pilgrimages to City Lights where we bought touchstone books that would remind us of our love.

Strangely we had both been fascinated in childhood by the same red-brick apartment building in our neighborhood, an anomaly in a community that was 95% homes. We had wondered who lived in this exotic place and what their lives were like. We laughed and embraced after signing a lease for a first-floor, one-bedroom that looked out on the steep hill that ran up New Kent Avenue.

During the week we would wait together for the bus down town, husband and young wife. At night we would make a light dinner and then would read to one another as we sipped wine at the kitchen table. On weekends we rose late and lingered in The Forest café over bottomless cups of coffee where we would scratch out prose poems and five-page stories, reading them to one another and registering a gentle thrill, each at the other's skill.

As I recall these delightful memories, three years have passed and I am laying next to Sarah in bed on a Sunday morning looking out the window. We have Irish coffees and the practiced silence of one another's company. But I am a haunted man. And as I look through the screen to the asphalt rise outside I see the ghost that I often see. The ghost is a male child, maybe nine years old. And on his back is a heavy pack loaded with a text book from every subject in the school's curriculum. The boy is sweating under the weight of his pack. On his face is a grave expression and in his mind is anxiety of a degree that would lead a psychiatrist to diagnose emotional illness.

The ghost is me, of course, and this is who I was before I met Sarah and before she freed me from my obsessive, self-imposed burdens. The other children used to call me Damien, after the devil child in *The Omen*. I was so severe that I warranted this label. And then my sweet, dancing gypsy freed me from the devil and I became loose, happy and sensual. I pity the poor ghost child and then I turn away.

I look at Sarah's face, her hair as unkempt as a dozen years earlier. I lean into her and peck her whiskey-flavored, savory lips. The kiss is bliss.

When I awoke I stank of sweat and my back throbbed with pain. I groaned and shifted, the misalignment of my spine punishing me with bolts of lightning that shot down into my thighs. I sat up and found myself on the

ratty futon that I had bought when I first arrived in Chicago seven years earlier. I raised my hands to my face and rubbed away the oil. “My God,” I thought. “Sarah.”

I rose from the dream and my head swam with phantom sensations and a blossoming stench of regret. I was not in Richmond, not with Sarah. Only one truth survived the dream. I was still Damien, still the devil’s child. The bracing truth rushed me in a gestalt wave. I had rejected Sarah’s advances because she frightened me. I had been repulsed by her attempted French kiss. I had refused her invitation to see *Gone with the Wind*. I had never seen her after the eighth grade.

In college I became obsessed with the study of religion and pursued it impractically into graduate school in Chicago. Seven years in a doctoral program and I was rudderless and exhausted. Two years earlier my advisor had secured from me a promise of a publishable paper. In the intervening time I had acquired a drinking habit. On this summer Sunday morning I was on the cusp of utter failure. And my despairing psyche had conjured for me this enchanting fantasy of deliverance.

I knew that it was over for me, and I had come to favor a pet term for my future prospects. It was a term in which I took a morbid, dramatic pleasure. That term was “oblivion.”

Sadly, I had spoken the truth, all those years earlier. I had broken Sarah’s spell. Indeed, I was a gifted warlock, as was only befitting the devil’s son.

Romance, a ruinous siren’s song lingered in my brain as I pulled the stopper off a bottle of brandy. I shuffled through my records and found the Fleetwood Mac album that had that song on it. I put it on and my flesh crawled at the canted poetry. “And when you build your house, then call me, home.”

Sarah – you’re the poet in my heart.

Awake and Recalling the Illusion

He woke at 2:00 and opened his eyes knowing that he would not get back to sleep before sun up. Without disturbing his wife he slipped out from the covers and walked to the refrigerator where he grabbed a Miller Lite. He took a cigarette and lighter from the end table and stepped outside to smoke next to the pool. The water was still, the night was quiet and he felt safe.

As he dragged on the cigarette his thoughts turned to his step son. He was fourteen and would need some advice about life, about women, about working, about manhood. Fred had mulled this over in his head a number of times and his wife had nudged him about it more than once. Fred's own father had offered nothing in the way of worldly wisdom and Fred had made one catastrophic mistake after another between 18 and 30. It was a wonder he was alive, sane and free of sexually-transmitted diseases. He wanted better for Jeffrey, wanted him to date and enjoy romance and sex, and to drink a little, maybe even hit on a joint, but to be safe. How could a parent find the right balance and not be a hypocrite?

Over the past seven years Fred had taught Jeffrey how to play the guitar and how to keep a journal, sharing his practiced strengths with the boy. He had also ridden him like a horse to excel in classes and Jeffrey had proven able and resilient, once taught the rigors of self-discipline. If he could stay the course Jeffrey could very well graduate as valedictorian. Jeffrey had accepted Fred as his mother's companion and as an authority figure and fixture in his life. There had been only occasional hostility. The love thing was up in the air, but Fred knew that the kid would value anything he offered in terms of perspective. He had to choose his words well.

After ten minutes of reflection Fred returned inside and walked to the bathroom where he tossed his butt in the commode. He flushed it and washed the stale smoke smell off his fingers. When he turned to leave he was surprised to see Jeffrey standing in the doorway looking sleepy.

"Hey kiddo," Fred said. "You okay?"

"I heard you get up," Jeffrey said. "I've got to pee."

"Pee away my boy," Fred said, stepping past him and into the dining room. He walked to the fridge and got another beer. On the dining room table were his writing pad and favorite pen. He sat down before them intending to gather his thoughts about happiness and growing up.

When Jeffrey came out of the bathroom he did not go back to bed but sat across from Fred at the dining room table. The two of them looked at one another.

Fred proffered his can. "Want to split a beer with the old man?" he asked.

Jeffrey waved it away. "Nah," he said. "I don't like the way it tastes."

"Well I suppose that's good," Fred said.

“You drink every night,” Jeffrey said. “I can’t picture you at this table without a beer can.”

“That’s true, my boy,” Fred replied. “I started drinking when I was about your age and I don’t think there’s been a week in my life that I have not drunk alcohol. That’s more than thirty years straight.” He paused. “It’s a funny thing, you know, because my whole family was teetotalers. My father might have drunk when he was in the service, but not at all once he became a father. Does it bother you? I’ve hovered over you with beer breath watching you do your homework for seven years. Has that been unpleasant?”

“I’m used to it,” Jeffrey said. “I just wonder about it. What you get out of it. I hear the older kids at school and all they talk about is getting wasted.”

“Yeah, well you’re at the age where you’ll be wondering about things like that. I think an important thing for you to consider is moderation and safety. You’re going to be in situations to try different things and I think that’s okay. I would be a hypocrite if I said other wise. But you have to always remember that your mother dearly loves you, and you know I love you too. We don’t want you to hurt yourself or spoil your future. One unlucky night in a car full of drunks can change your life forever. I know you have good judgment, and you’ll have to use it well when you pick your friends.”

“I have good friends I think. Everybody really digs it when I play the guitar. I remember you telling me when I was seven that it would be like that. You were right.”

“You put in a lot of hard work. I’m proud of you. You’re talented. You should put together an electric band and play dances. That would be fun.”

Jeffrey brushed the bangs from his forehead. “Nah,” he said. “I like the acoustic stuff. It mellows people out. Alma just looks at me with these huge eyes.” Jeffrey opened his eyes wide in imitation.

“Ha ha. Alma is cute,” Fred said. “You might want to keep her around for a while.”

“I like her,” Jeffrey said. “Yeah, I like her. I mean she’s pretty and all. I don’t know if she’s my girlfriend or anything. Did you have a girlfriend when you were my age?”

“I was what they call a late bloomer,” Fred said. “You wouldn’t know it from looking at me now, but when I was younger I never looked my age. At 18 I looked like a grammar school kid. The girls didn’t like me. You’re lucky. You’re tall and you’ve got your mother’s color. You’re going to have better luck than I did.”

Jeffrey looked down at his hands. “Well, I mean, thanks for teaching me is what I want to say. You were real patient.”

“Oh, well, thanks for thanks. It was my pleasure. You were a good student. I always wanted to be a teacher like your mother any way.”

“You know the right way to study. You make it seem so easy.”

“There are tricks to it. You just have to tell yourself that there’s no good reason why you can’t get all the answers right. School isn’t hard until college. You’re on a good track.”

“Can I read that book you wrote?” Jeffrey asked.

“My novel? Oh, your mother would kill me.”

“I’m just curious. I’m thinking of writing one too. What’s it about?”

“To tell you the truth, I think the content is a little rough for you. I’ve got other things you can read. The novel covers a kind of dark period in my life. I did some things that weren’t safe.”

“Did you take drugs?”

“Well, I’ll let you read it when you go off to college. You can take it with you then we can talk about it.”

“What made your life dark? Were you sad?”

Fred took a long pull from his beer, set it down, then tipped it up again. He swallowed. “That’s a funny question, Jeff. You know I hope I haven’t been a bad influence on you, drinking and smoking the way I do. They’re just habits that I picked up. Your mother tries to cure me. Maybe one day she will.”

“You made me a straight-A student and a musician,” Jeffrey said. “I would just be a nobody if you hadn’t pressured me. Like my friend Louis. He worries so much. All the time he complains. He never smiles. He gets poor grades and that makes him feel even worse. I just come home, knock out my homework and practice. I don’t see what all the fuss is about.”

Fred sat up straight. “That’s a good one, Jeff. I’m glad to hear you say that. ‘All the fuss’ indeed. Kids your age they do get involved in ‘all the fuss.’ I got so deep into it I almost never made my way out.”

“What were you so worried about?”

“You know I used to live in Chicago,” Fred said. “I’ve told you about that. I lived there for a long time. Almost twenty years. It was a strange, lost time in my life. I hope I can explain this to you. There’s a funny illusion that overtakes some young people. Certainly child psychiatrists must have written books about this. But I want to emphasize that it’s an illusion, a harmful mirage, and that there’s no truth to it. Some young people, despite growing up in the privilege and freedom of this country, they come to think that the society around them is hostile to them and is vacant of any moral worth. They become angry, and in their anger they think that they can look through false facades and see the true emptiness that is modern America.

“Look at me, for example. I can see you finishing college and embarking seamlessly on a good career. But for me I was absolutely mortified at the prospect of work. And I can’t explain where this feeling came from. I felt I was far too young and unprepared to enter the work

place. And so, like a coward, I hid out in graduate school until I was almost thirty years old. Those were the Chicago years.”

“But I thought you wanted to be a professor,” Jeffrey said.

“The truth about that, Jeff, is that I knew in my gut from day one that that was bullshit. I can only say this in retrospect and could never have admitted it to myself at the time. The bottom would’ve fallen out from beneath me and I would’ve dropped into despair. It was an illusion, the same illusion of the angry middle-class teenager. The fear, the terror frankly, that the world around you has nothing whatsoever to offer you. That you are completely stranded, without family, without friends, without money, without prospects. You feel isolated and it makes you hateful of other people. That’s really the worst part of it. The misanthropy. Do you know that word?”

“I think I’ve heard it.”

“It means you hate everybody. And that’s what I fell into.” Fred finished the remainder of his beer and got up. He walked to the fridge. “It was draining,” he called back to Jeffrey. “I remember I never had any energy. It would all just be burned up in this hatred. Pointless hatred.” He popped the beer and walked back to the table.

“In Chicago there’s this yuppie area called the northside. It’s where any young, single, professional person would choose to live in Chicago. You meet lots of dates and there are plenty of restaurants and bars. But where I lived by the university was on the southside. As you may know, the southside of Chicago is one of the largest ghettos in the country.

“Well I used to leave there on the weekends and go up north to clear my head. All the material I was reading for school was so remote from my real life. I can still sense the rattling sound that it made in my head. Just useless scholastic knowledge that would never benefit me. My head was stuffed with it. Ached with it. So I would go up north.

“And there’s a feeling that you’ll hear people talk about as you get older and into college. In fact it’s what ‘all the fuss,’ as you put it, is about. It’s a very tired notion that was discussed throughout the 20th century, but it still gets rehashed, generation after generation. It’s what people call alienation. The feeling of being a stranger in a strange land, disoriented and unaccepted. And I’ve never in my life been so beset by alienation as I was when I would walk around on the northside.

“It was supposed to be a thriving, prosperous, happy place. But it just made me feel miserable. I was unaccepted. I was poor. I was homely. Everyone around me was so hip and fashionable. I imagined them all hopping from club to club having the time of their lives drinking, doing coke and falling in the sack together while I was sitting alone in my basement apartment gorging and choking myself desperately with canned soup and useless information.”

“When you told me about Buddhism, I thought that was interesting,” Jeffrey said. “I tell my friends that same rap. They think it’s really cool.”

“Yeah, shit, Jeff. I know what you mean. I’m not saying there was no attraction there. But it was just on the surface.

“The thing is, kid, my father never talked to me. He never put my head on straight about a livelihood and the struggle to make it in the world. I want things to be different between you and me. In fact, that’s just what I was thinking about when I went outside to smoke. And incidentally, don’t ever smoke because it’s a bitch to quit and your mother would kill you.

“You’ve got to understand. It’s not that the subject matter was without merit. Instead, my motivations were rotten. Literally stinking and rotten. I was quaking in my boots at the thought of my future. I could never have been a professor. That was all a snipe hunt. I was just a victim of the illusion. It overtook me completely. I felt that America had absolutely nothing whatsoever to offer me. And that was just a lie. It’s such an evil, harmful notion that it almost makes me believe in the devil. The lives, the young lives that it ruins. All that potential wasted on drugs and boredom. Punk kids begging in the streets for beer money. It’s pathetic. Although I was a doctoral student and technically had some credibility, it was all just a façade, and I was no better, no braver than a heroin addict.”

“But I’ve heard mom say you worked really hard. Didn’t you study Chinese or something?”

Fred sipped at his beer and considered. “Maybe I’m overplaying it,” he said. “You’ve gotten me really worked up, kid. Are you sure you don’t want to go back to bed?”

“I’m okay,” Jeffrey said.

“I want to emphasize something with you. I think we’re pretty good friends and I think you’re going to have a lot of questions over the next five years or so. It’s important to me that you know you can ask me anything and that we can have a discussion about anything. In fact I look forward to many discussions with you about your life and future. I don’t want you to fall into the illusion. I never want you to feel like you have to run and hide from life or that America is a bad place with no moral worth. I want you to feel like the world welcomes your talent and input and that there’s a place out there that’s tailor-made for you and that you’re going to find it. Teenagers are all moody to some extent, so I don’t mean that you can’t get a little depressed now and again. But there are degrees. And there is the illusion. Other than some kind of serious health problem I think the illusion that American ideals are vacant is one of the worst things that can happen to a young person. You know I’m more conservative than your mother and that we vote differently. But when I was in my twenties I was an angry, confused, long-haired freak, and I hated what I was. The dirty secret about misanthropists is, they hate themselves most of all.”

“You don’t hate people now, do you?”

“Oh, Jesus, Jeffrey. My life with your mother and you ...,” he hesitated. “It’s literally a whole world away from the person I used to be. I don’t mean to scare you because I don’t think you’re going to have the problems that I did. I was stranded in the big city with no advice and no one to turn to. You will always have your mother and me any time you feel confused. I like to talk about life and happiness. I want you to pursue happiness. That’s what Americans are supposed to do. That’s what the country offers. But kids in the illusion, although it sounds perverse, they pursue misery instead of happiness. They bring it all on themselves, just heap it on. I hope your friend Louis isn’t falling into that. If you want the three of us to sit down sometime you let me know.”

“I think I can talk him out of it,” Jeffrey said. “He listens to me.”

“Well good. I think you can help him.”

“People listen to me I think. It’s kind of funny. Sometimes I feel like they expect too much from me. Like I’m supposed to have the answers.”

“That’s interesting to hear you say, Jeff. I think that just means you’re a together kid and that other kids are needy. I think that’s probably a good sign.”

The two of them sat in silence for half a minute, each digesting what the other had said.

“So you want to start a novel?” Fred asked.

Jeffrey shrugged. “I’m just thinking about it.”

“Well I think you should dig in. Just crank it out. The first one is never any good any way.”

“Do you think I’m too happy to be an artist? I mean don’t artists have to suffer? Like your dark time?”

“Anyone who lives suffers, Jeff. You’re going to fight with friends and experience heart break. You’re going to be insulted and disrespected. You’re going to fail at times and be disappointed with yourself. I think you’ll have plenty of angst to draw from. Do you know angst?”

“Like worrying?”

“Yeah. We all have occasion to worry. You’ll have plenty of pain to work your way through. I don’t think you need a dark period, and in fact I don’t want you to have one. I want you to embrace a practical career and make money and have healthy relationships with your girlfriends. I think you can have all that if we go slowly and really jaw with one another. I don’t want you to brood. I want you to tell me what’s on your mind. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jeffrey said. He reached across the table and touched Fred’s hand. “And you can tell me what’s on your mind too.”

“Ha ha. Well I’ll do that. I can bend your ear, huh?”

“Any time old man.”

“Thanks kiddo.”

Jeffrey rose from his seat and yawned. “I’ll take you up on the beer some time. Just not now.”

“You know what’s best,” Fred said.

“Good night, Fred. I hope you get back to sleep,” Jeffrey sad, walking back to his room.

“Good night, Jeffrey. I think I’m up for the day so I’m just going to jot some thoughts.”

Jeffrey padded off through his bedroom door and slipped into bed.

Fred got up from the table and took another smoke from the end table. He walked outside and stood next to the pool. In his heart he felt a vibrant, swelling hope and he cursed the devil and his lies.

Thanks much for reading. The author welcomes comments and questions at dukeroyall@yahoo.com. “Duke” is the author’s embarrassing southern childhood nickname which his mother still insists on using. You can call him Fred.