The Mother Arm

Excerpts from the novel
Random and condensed unfinished segments that are in the works.

A story that unspools with the story-telling depth and casual cadence of *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* (at least, that was my hope), carrying through childhood and young adult of the narrator's life, setting in place an impending future that can't be avoided, for the narrator as well as those he touches.

Excerpts

an unknown aunt and uncle take my space

I don't remember a lot from early childhood in that tiny house. But it surprised me one day when two strangers showed up in our yard. It was a woman and a man. She wore a dress the color of a lime. It started at the top with thin straps over her shoulders and it ended as a skirt that was quite short. Across the middle of it was a glossy white belt that was very wide, and glossy white boots that were very tall. She radiated in color, standing there in the sun. The man hung thin and gangly inside a brown furry suit, though he was not wearing the top part but held it slung over a bony shoulder. He wore a tie but it was loose and looped very low down his chest. One of his front teeth was silver, and it flashed when he smiled. They had two huge, fuzzy brown suitcases with a slick black band around the middle. They sat at their feet like big leashed dogs.

Everyone was smiling. Everything sparkled and chirped with joy. I could feel it bloomed open there on the front sidewalk, everyone a thin-necked daisy in a field of sun.

"Well, this must be the little man," the glowing lime woman said to me. Her hair curved out into sweeping points on both sides of her head like angel wings.

I backed up behind the parental legs. She was too bright. And, at her feet, the suitcases were too dark, rooted on the sidewalk as if they would growl if I approached them. Even though everyone was beaming with joy, the beams came at disorienting angles.

"This is your aunt and uncle," my father said. "Aunt Betty and Uncle Wyatt. He just got back from the service. They'll be staying with us for a while. They're family."

This was the first I had heard of them or their names. I hadn't known they existed and suddenly here they were on the front walk, bluntly dropped and painted…

My parents showed them to my room, apologizing for the smallness of it. In they came, the glorious lime-green angel aunt, the brown uncle with the silver tooth, and the suitcases, heeling by their feet. I did not like how readily the dogs took the space.

##########

the slow flow of basement dark

During my early nights in the basement, I did not sleep. The darkness was too active. I could feel the furnace presence. It did not seem pleased at the sharing of space and as the nights deepened, the furnace sounds and shadows grew within it, as though the furnace itself were slowly moving closer, dragging up near my feeble cot. It felt like I was floating on air, on the thin suspended sheet of a bed that offered no protection at all. The cold leached up from below. There was nothing to separate us.

Early on, there was fear. I was certain of the menace in the dark. I could sense it getting bolder. The ticking, like cold toenails across the concrete floor, would come slowly but assuredly, one steady step at a time. Darkness was tangible and the flesh of it hovered inches from my skin. I could feel it on me like cold breath. I longed for something soft, for an escape from the concrete floor and walls. I had an urgency for warmth and for light…

But in time, alone in the dark, I learned how to listen. I could read the dark not through seeing, but through how it sounded and how it felt. I knew where things were by the sense of nearness, by the cold, soaking feel of damp that chilled me when I neared an outer wall, by the thicker pall of silence that lays upon the skin of storage boxes. I learned how to navigate closeness without ever touching it. I learned the comfort of dark, as much as I feared it. I learned that when you put yourself into the deepest, darkest black hole of the dark, all else becomes less frightening.

You can avoid the dark if you become it.

##########

an injured motorcyclist bleeds on the Golden Sofa

Against the front wall was the masterpiece of the family room, The Golden Sofa. It arrived one day, replacing a vinyl-padded kitchen chair with metal legs that vainly tried to fill the empty space beneath the window. Two strong men in gray uniforms carried her tenderly through the front door, as if she were light as a queen, and set her in place. They removed protective clear plastic that trailed like a magical gown from her cushions. She seemed to own the entire wall. At least I remember her as being larger than life, but that might also have just been how I came to regard her sense of entitlement.

She was made of a rough, heavy golden-brown fabric with specks of gold woven through that seemed quite possibly real. Cushions were scalloped like sea waves along the top, but beckoned thick and hearty like life rafts where one sits. Limp and dainty white doilies edged with lace draped over the arms, to protect her from the dirt and grime of us. Two small square white pillows, too overstuffed to be useful, propped in each corner. They too had fancy lace edging sewn to it, and images of irises were stitched on their faces with colored threads of greens and purples. The pillows and the doilies were made, I was told, by a great-aunt and they were not to be soiled. The couch, likewise, was not to be jumped on, nor pressed into with one's knees, nor sat upon if wearing shoes. It was not to be eaten upon. It was, in fact, best not used by children. Thus, my position was on the floor in front of it, pressing my back against the face of it, feeling its immovable strength and the coarse hide of it warm against my neck, like an exotic tawny animal that we were fortunate enough to house and display…

In all its time, I only saw two people ever fully recline on it. One was the uncle with the silver tooth. The other, the motorcycle man.

He arrived in a flurry of footfalls, a hard and urgent drumming. I came up from my basement room in time to see Stan with his hands under a scruffy man's armpits, backing him in through the front door, across the small square of entry linoleum and into the family room. The man was slumped deeply into his arms and the two staggered together, the man's legs half dragging and sloppily taking backwards steps. His help was useless. Stan swung him onto the Golden Sofa as Shirley came in.

"He had a motorcycle accident. Right there on the corner. A car hit him."

They propped his head and shoulders with the white iris-embroidered pillows, then swung his legs up onto the couch so that he was lying on it full length on his back. The man wore black jeans, a black leather jacket and big scuffed black boots with a tarnished gold side buckle. He had a wildness to his long black hair and beard. Even his blood was black, a dark violet, as it leaked out of his forehead and hair, although the drops he'd splattered on the front linoleum were much lighter, blooming out of the gold squares like a scattering of bright red poppies.

Shirley knelt with a pan of warm water and, using one of her good rags, daubed his forehead. She wrung it into the pan. The water turned pink.

The man panted in a very doglike way. Then he started shaking, a whole-body shake in a way I had only seen when someone laughs really hard. For a moment I thought maybe he *was* laughing, sprawled out on the golden sofa, using the special pillows, his filthy black boots indented squarely on the cushion that I was not allowed to climb upon, even when I struggled up out of my basement fears, stricken and shaking. He looked comfortable, flat on his back, taking all the space he wanted. Perhaps he was laughing at his good fortune. Each time he convulsed, he dug the heels of his dirty boots even deeper into the fabric. I went downstairs to my cot and left him, with my parents, to bleed.

##########

the naming of Dick Little's son

One might think that this fate was bad enough for Richard, that he might have thought twice about naming his son in the same fashion. But name him thusly he did. So it came to be that what sprung from the loins of Dick Little was a Dick Little *Junior*, which is a little dick by half and twofold the punishment of puns.

This is why he became a Ricky…

He never talked about his father. Perhaps this was because Ricky killed him, although he was only three months old at the time. He killed him by shitting too much, at least that is what he was told by his mother.

##########

after the horse fiercely died of lockjaw

It began to drizzle, a sideways wet. At the very bottom, down near the muck of the creek, stood the Copelands and Doc, the local vet. Their faces faded in and out of the shadows of their raingear hoods in the gray, oily light. The rain tapped. Everywhere, there were ripped up branches and roots, churned mud, and silver puddles. Star, who hadn't been noticed in months, now had finally drawn an audience as he lay on his side, gasping and sweaty. Doc's hood was off, his gray hair plastered smooth as a mushroom to his head, his little round glasses spattered with rain, mud and blood. He ran his hands up and down the horse's neck and ribs. The mighty Star's glossy black skin was matted with mud and burs, and caked in white lather. His sides heaved with heavy desperate breathing. He was twisted in barbed wire, which had gashed slick red wounds into his sides and neck. The blood spilled brightly, the only color I can remember. Two wooden fence posts had pulled loose in whatever frenzy had occurred. They still hung in the roll of twisted wires, suspended in the air like a wave unable to fall. Perhaps he had run into the fence by accident. Or perhaps he had not. The posts hung, uprooted and stiff, floating in the falling sky. Star tried to get up but wrapped in the wires and too broken-bodied, fell back into the creek-side mud.

"He has a broken leg and internal injuries," Doc said. "He won't make it." Journey cried. She cried big tears over a horse that I was pretty sure she had completely forgotten she owned. But still, she was beautiful when she cried—especially when accentuated with drizzle. Ricky and I wished we could console her but instead stood in silence, our shoes squirming in the mud…

And then, the mighty Star was dead. Death, in the end, was much less discomfiting than life. It was the only time I saw him relaxed…

It was a blessing, Shirley said. "They should've never got that horse in the first place." She seemed satisfied. Things like that were always blessings.

Today, though, was not. Today was about to be God's will.

It started via the voice of Chance, who, as he always did when he came to find me, skipped knocking at the front door but instead came around the house to the side and called in through a screened window.

There came a slight scratching as his shadow appeared and he put his hands on the screen. I could hear his breathing. His outline was a ghost. Then came his voice.

"Your dog's on the highway," he said. "I think she's dead."

##########

dying twice at the culvert

"GOD DON'T LET ME DIE GOD DON'T LET ME DIE GOD DON'T LET ME DIE," Ricky screamed. The words, muffled by his ample body that plugged the hole and flattened by the heavy concrete walls, blurred into hysteria, burying itself into the darkness and moss beneath the highway. Ricky was not about to go quietly into his grave… I dropped his legs. There was too much stuck Ricky for me to haul out by myself.

Perhaps, I thought, he was right. Maybe he *was* going to die…

Neighbors popped up like dandelions. Suddenly, there was Stan, pushing with fury through the hapless standersby. He looked side to side, then riveted his scorn on the flagging feet waving from the culvert hole. He grabbed one flailing leg of Ricky and jerked his head at Journey's boyfriend who, at first surprised to be nominated into action when his main intent was to enjoy the show and kiss the side of Journey's neck, accepted the role with honor and bravado. It was a slow and heavy extraction. Ricky, for his part, did nothing to help, but dangled like a dead fish, having already given up on life and seeming almost reluctant to want a dragging back into it…

He sat in the grass, rubbing his arms. His face was a puffy red mess, partly from the blood-flow of being hung upside down for so long, and partly from the bouts of hysterical sobbing. By rubbing his wet eyes and cheeks with hands covered with culvert soot, he had, unbeknownst to himself, painted his face to resemble a slumped and dazed raccoon. He sat there, stunned and blinking. He turned his hopeful lovestruck eyes upon Journey.

First came a trickling giggle of Journey, melodic up and down the scale like birdsong through the summer ditch. Then laughter, which spread through the relieved group of onlookers.

"He's one of my brother's little friends," she told her boyfriend. Then she put that mouth so Ricky-coveted upon the cheek of the man—a cheek that actually had facial hair—and kissed him. "He's lucky you were here! That was brave of you."

They laughed and ran off. Ricky stared after them with his deep raccoon eyes, unblinking. He sank deeper into his daze. Someone helped him up. He bulled through the crowd on unsteady feet and headed home. I tried to help him but he brushed me off with such an animal vigor that I knew it best to leave him be. I watched him retreat dark and wounded up the road under the bright and lovely sun.

For my part, my father was seething over the entire event. He did not know what in god's name I was thinking to let Ricky get into such a predicament. He pulled out a belt and had me lift my shirt. I got five red welts across my back: the first two for embarrassing him in front of the whole god damn neighborhood, and the next three because he could not stop.

##########

stolen beer and pissin' like a man

"Hey, I want to show you something."

Chance was at my elbow. He talked in a low voice. He jerked his head toward the driveway. We went into the dark far enough that the glow from the neighborhood garage party barely lit our clothes.

"Over here." He led me to a big rounded gooseberry bush, stems hairy with thorns and amid a cloud of tiny leaves like wrinkled clovers. He reached through an open space in the mess of branches, and gently pushed them apart so I could see into the dead hollow of it.

"Look." Nested in the center were six cans, nuzzled together like baby ducks.

"It's beer!" I said.

"Shhh. Don't say it out loud," he said.

"Where'd you get it?"

"From in there." He pointed at the garage lights.

"Let's go to my house. My parents'll be the last to leave," Chance said. He slid the beers out and set them in the grass. The cans caught silver fire in the faint light, glowing and screaming.

"Hey, there you are!" A voice rang out from right behind us.

"Shit!" Chance crouched over the cans like a mama raccoon and froze. I felt the bones drain out of me.

"Where you guys been. I was looking all over for you." It was Ricky, speaking in an overly loud voice, still all animated from the bash, for which he had slicked and combed his hair tightly to the side and had put on a dressy plaid shirt that was otherwise not worn except for church. We began to breathe again.

"Beer!" Ricky said loudly. "You guys got beer!"

"Shhh!" Chance hissed. "Be quiet!"..

We smuggled the cans up under our shirts and walked across the dark lawn as nonchalantly as possible while stiffly hunkered over with ice-cold forbidden alcohol clutched against our bellies. We went into Chance's garage.

"Here you go," he handed one to me. It felt cold yet hot as sin in my hand. It felt heavy. He opened another, handed it to Ricky. Ricky sniffed it.

"I don't like it," Ricky said. "It smells sour." He took a sip, puckered his face and set the can back down, regarding the label with confusion as if it was a foreign language.

"Drink it fast, then it's not so bad," Chance said. He demonstrated, pouring a liberal dose into his throat, then wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He looked eager and flushed. His knee began to bounce with energy.

Ricky doubted the taste would improve by consuming it with speed, but he did not like it going down slowly either. He braced himself, then took a big hoppy gulp. His face puckered and he labored to swallow, working the muscles in his throat. When he finally finished, it ended with a soft bubbly toad belch that didn't come out of his mouth as much as just fall apart in the back of his throat. With his next mouthful, the process was the same, including the burp from the very meek and soggy toad.

It did not take long for this sequence to escalate. The meek and soggy toad in the back of Ricky's throat gained confidence and began to show up whenever Ricky spoke. Ricky relished his new-found skill and began tossing a mouthful of beer down his throat, then speaking full sentences in hilarity, delivered by the amphibian. In the dull light of the garage, sitting on the concrete and drinking our stolen beers, he was pleased to be a leader.

"I know," Chance said. "Let's have a peeing contest." Having a fair amount of a full can of beer already coursing through my system, the idea seemed like a natural one and I could already feel my body preparing for the event.

"But nobody can pee until after we are done with our second beers," Chance said. "You only have one chance, so you have to make it good."

A contest, such as peeing, can be done crudely, with a line in the dirt and a best-estimate to determine a winner. But it can also become more complex and official, especially when fueled by a mild first-time intoxication. Chance decided that the most important thing in this contest, above all, was that it had to be fair, with complete equity in the urination.

The Copeland garage was a mélange of things that never happened. On a wall were empty hooks where the rakes and shovels, which didn't get used, also didn't get hung up. A dog house, that was brought inside for painting, now sat buried under boxes and toys. The dog was buried years ago, probably dying in want of a doghouse. Chance pawed through the garage treasury, and unearthed a square of plywood, about 3 feet square. One side of the board was stapled with shiny green indoor-outdoor carpeting, cut to fit. In the center was a hole slightly larger than a golf ball. This was the beginning of a backyard miniature golf setup that, like most things Copeland, did not make it to completion.

"Let's use this," Chance said. He pointed at the hole. "You can stick your dink through here."

The rules came quickly now, lubricated by the genius of beer. One by one, we were to line up with our toes against the crack where driveway met garage floor. No shoes, since it would be hard to judge where one's actual toes ended, perhaps providing a crucial inch or so advantage depending on the fit of the sneaker. Two of us would hold the board straight on the line to prevent leaning or cheating and the competitor would pop his dink through it. There would be no thrusting.

"I'll go first," Chance said. He removed his shoes and socks and threw them to the side. He unzipped his pants, and held his wiener in his palm.

"OK, give me the board."

Ricky and I looked at each other, uncertain how to mount the board on him, exactly.

"Which side out," I asked.

"Board side in," he said. "That's more fair. Put the grass on the outside."

We flipped the board, then approached him, trying to align the hole in the center with the dink that he held pointed out between his fingers.

"Higher up!" Chance said. "And don't tilt the board. You're tilting it!"

Awkwardly, we guided the board into position and, like leading a thoroughbred into the starting gates, Chance walked up to it and poked his penis through. He gripped the sides of the board with his hands.

"Just don't move the board," he said. "And Jesus Christ, don't drop it. I will fucking kill you if you drop the board and cut off my dick."

The cusswords slid with ease off his beer-slicked tongue and he had a taste for them.

"We're not going to drop it," I said. "Go ahead and pee."

Ricky refocused and gripped the board more tightly as he realized the gravity of the situation. Chance stared with dreamy fixation at the inky trees in the distant dark.

"Go ahead and pee," I said.

"Shut up," he said. "I need to fucking concentrate."

Chance leaned back, trying to better position himself and improve his angle, although there was little leaning to be done because of the rigidity of the plywood board. Then he took a breath, closed his eyes, set his jaw, and there came the sound of splattering onto the dark, night pavement. He had excellent velocity, enhanced by the two beers, and a fine arc rose like a silver rainbow from the little bald gun amid the fake green grass. We waited until he slowed to a sprinkle and was done. He popped out of the board and enthusiastically tucked himself back in.

"That's gonna be fucking good!" he said. He was elated. We set the board down to go look at his work. He had created a dark puddle roughly the shape of Wisconsin, which was now running sideways toward the yard.

"There," he said. He pointed at the farthest reach of the pool. "There's mine." He marked it with a grease pencil.

"OK, who's next?" he said.

"I want to be last," Ricky said. He fuzzy-burped again.

I took off my shoes, unzipped, and got the board placed upon me. We set up a little to the left of where Chance had been so that I had dry, clean concrete stretching out before me and couldn't use his work as advantage. I waddled cautiously into starting position and was excruciatingly aware that if either of my trustworthy counterparts were to drop the board, surely the weight of the plywood would be enough to unman me as cleanly and swiftly as a guillotine.

Ricky yelled out, "C'mon. Pee like you mean it," most of the sentence being spoken via soft toad belch. This caused him to giggle, which caused a shaking of the board. It did little to sustain my confidence in having the fate of my doink dangling in their drunken hands...

##########

Dog

A boy never forgets his first true dog. I kept the blood-crusted shirt in a box under my bed. At least, until one day when I came home and the shirt was in my dresser drawer, washed and the stains were removed.

##########

fire and the holy acolytes

My acolyte partner was Luke. In between the two holy acts of acolyting, we had a long downtime of nothing to do. We sat in a backroom behind plate glass and raised hell…

"Watch this," Luke said. He lit his acolyte candle and picked up a sermon bulletin. "Let's see who can get the closest to it without it catching fire."

He held the flyer close to the flame, a couple times teasing so close to the fire that it bent toward the paper. Suddenly, the church bulletin imploded with a "whoomph," just like the burning bush. The paper, having popped into white fire, settled into a nice orange burn as the mouth of the blaze slowly blackened the program and ate its way through the sermon that was happening outside our window. I wondered if I should thank god that the people sitting just outside the window never, in all our years, turned around to witness the happenings behind the plate glass.

Luke slowly turned the paper as the orange and black embers ate their way across.

"It's best if it burns completely, that way there's no evidence," he said. I do not know how many times Luke had lit fires in the church, but he spoke with such total calm and expertise that I believed it must have been a great many.

The fire consumed the religious parchment until it was down to a piece pinched between his fingers that was becoming too small to hold without the flame moving onto his skin. Luke dropped the burning embers onto a table, the fire perking up at the freedom to take the last bite, but before it could do so, Luke grabbed a heavy hymnal, and smashed it down on top of the glowing, ashen mess.

"There, that should put it out."

A little trail of smoke wept out from under the book and drifted heavenward. Luke pressed it down firmly for another moment, making sure it was dead. The last wisps of smoke gave up and all was still. He picked up the song book. The paper was smudged and gone, ground into the rough hardcover of the book. And there on the back of the burgundy hymnal, a black and sooty scorch mark.

Luke stared at it.

"Jesus Christ!" he said. "Look. It's Jesus."

I saw it. Immediately, once he said it, I saw it distinctly. He was right. Luke had burned the face of the Savior into the hardcover back of the hymnal. The smudges and black ashes clearly outlined the shape of his uplifted head, his earnest face, the blur of a beard. The halo was questionable, but it mattered not. It was another work of Luke.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "How about that."

The potency of the miracle did not last long, however, as Luke brushed the dust chars of the incident off the table and into the hymnal open to a random pair of hymns, snapped it closed, and tossed the book onto the table, Jesus-face down.

"I know," he said. "Let's see how many words we can come up with for tits."

##########

stones

Some skip their stones across the water. Some skip them into the dark. I skip mine into the dark. How far they go is as far as you want them to.

##########

a hobby among the fallen

Ricky believed he could sense good carving wood, like a divination of fallen trees. He learned that the best was not found on easy ground, but was deeper down into the ravines. Ravines, especially the intensive ones such as those that often rose and fell before us through our younger years, have a tangible pull from the bottom. Standing at the crest of the decline, you can feel it lapping around your ankles, tugging on your cuffs. You can see it in the way the trees hope and struggle against it.

A forest rises from the bottom up and it is how the dark comes. It pulls a boy in and it was here that Ricky was happiest, hunting with his carving knife for the perfect piece of tree…

The soft flesh is what weathers away. The knots and imperfections remain. In time, a tree erodes down to its weathered core, the shape of its true self, after the wind and rain and all of life's beatings upon it.

"They speak to me," he said. "The perfect pieces. They speak to me."

We clambered through the decay of falling logs, searching. We were looking for the perfect erosion.

"It's like I know what is in its soul. Like a tree soul. When it decays all the way down so that all that's left is one little bit, that's the piece that holds it all. Every tree has one, has that special piece. Sometimes I can find it, but most of the time, they never give it up."

If there was a religion in the woods, Ricky had found his. It was in the dead and the fallen…

##########

Arise! the mighty apostle's peter

The youth choir traditionally sat in rows at the front of the church, but for this performance, Mr. Remington was placing us in the balconies at the side that hung in swooping fashion in front of massive stained-glass windows. We were to sing *Arise! My Soul, Arise!* with Mr. Remington carrying the solo front and center, and when we reached the chorus, the girls were to sing an inspired Arise! from the balcony on the left with the boys responding with an impassioned Arise! from the balcony on the right. The performance was destined to be spectacular…

We waited in the balcony while Mr. Remington practiced his solo. Luke grew fidgety. He ran his hands over the stained-glass, feeling the texture.

"Hey Ricky, you got your knife?"

Ricky immediately shook his head no.

"Hand it over." Luke waggled his fingers. The warbly swale of Mr. Remington's solo bumped through the rafters like an enormous pigeon. Reluctantly, Ricky handed Luke the knife. Luke clicked the blade open.

"I'm going to do my initials," he said. Luke turned to the wall of colored glass and he began to scratch.

"Jesus Christ, this is hard," he said. Each stroke of blasphemous knife blade scritching against the beauty of god was like a rasp sanding off part of our souls. *Scritch*. That much closer to hell. *Scritch*. Another step. *Scritch.* Surely we were starting to burn by now and Luke would not fucking stop. Our nerves fell to their knees…

"Damn it!," Luke said. His scratchings had done little against the tempered glass. He moved to a darker area in which a scratch might more readily reveal itself. For that, he chose a plum-clad disciple, or, if not a disciple, a red-cheeked bearded man wearing a plum-color hooded robe knotted about the waist with a rope. The man was reaching out to another bearded man standing before him, holding him by the shoulders in an earnest and an obvious beseeching.

The disciple proved no easier to trespass. Luke worked Ricky's knife upon the holy glass passionately until, at long last, a line did ensue and there was great rejoicing. And then, as Luke worked vigorously at developing the scratch with the choir of boys flocked nervously around him, a miracle come forth from the shadowy recesses of the plum-clad disciple in robe and rope. It came forth and pointed heavenward, and we were so moved.

At first Luke seemed unaware of what he had wrought, but then, he too, saw. Deep in the midst of the holy folds of cloth there stood a distinct white gash positioned just so, glimmering in a partially but not fully uplifted spirit. There was no mistaking it.

"It's a peter," Luke said as matter-of-factly as if reading Deuteronomy.

It *was* a peter. It was a peter in all its glory. And the shape of it emerging from the holy folds gave a whole new aura to the scene of beseechment. We interpreted upon it with eyes of awe.

"Arise, my soul arise!" sang the warbling forte voice from our choir director somewhere below us.

Luke handed the knife back to Ricky.

"Here, you can have it back."…

For years, when the morning sun rose at a slant and hit the glass just right, it would set the colors afire, the golds would sheen, the greens glimmer and the plum-color beseeching disciple would come to lustrous life over all the bowed and obedient heads. I must say that this, even though such a simple stroke, was some of Luke's best work.

############

great-grandmother Rosalyn pretty in the casket

Laid out in the coffin, she looked better, more creamy, than in real life. I had only known her from the nursing home, disinfected and decaying out of her white cotton nursing home gown. Today she wore a pretty satin black dress with purple flower heads and white lace mesh at the cuffs and neck. A row of pearl buttons ran up the front of her like a dotted line marking her in half. She wore burgundy lipstick—I had never seen her with lipstick nor, for that matter, hair that wasn't madly matted and insane—and her face did not seem so bitterly boned. A pearl necklace hung about her strands of neck. She held a rose bouquet in her hands, holding it flat upon her chest. Her hands had always frightened me, how they had withered away to all but the finger bones and joints that I could clearly see through the thin wrap of skin. Thick blue veins roped the joints together. Her hands always frightened me. But now they did not. The paleness was a nice soft accoutrement to her dark funeral dress and the severity of the bones clutching her flowers made it seem like that grip would last forever. It gave me comfort.

She looked happy, I think, in death and she made a pretty corpse. I wanted to kiss her, just a kiss on the cold powder of the cheek, to wish her well and to let her know I loved her although, until that moment, I don't think I ever had.

##########

demise of the associate pastor

His purple and gold silk pastoral scarf was still neatly bound around his neck, but the foam ceiling tiles had come down like heavenly clouds and dust, where the weight of him had bent the metal framework loose. And as he dropped, his head hit the corner of his desk and burst. That was just like the Associate Pastor. Even in going to his death, he was the type to die from a head wound while trying to hang himself.

##########

after smoking pot at a church group

Eric and Alice White welcomed the guest speaker to our teen church group, hosted in their house.

"Children, this is our very special guest, officer... Tully. He is here to teach you about drugs. Drugs are bad," said Eric White in a very dramatic way. "Make sure you pay attention and listen to officer Tully."

J.D. Tully did not smile at them. He did not smile at us. His head was very large and square. He pulled out a sealed plastic bag with something in it. He held it up high.

“Anybody know what this is?” J.D. Tully asked. He looked around the room. He still did not smile at us. But he did smile, briefly, just at the ends of his mouth, when he looked at the little baggie held in his fingers. It looked like lawn clippings.

“You gonna be out in the world, you gotta know what this stuff is.” He held the baggie up, watching the light from a lamp fall through it. He seemed mesmerized.

“That’s right. Drugs are bad!” Eric White scolded from off to the side. Alice White nervously sidled closer to her husband.

J.D. Tully pulled out some of the lawn fragments, rolled them into a piece of paper on the end table, and clamped a clothes pin to hold it together. He clicked a lighter and lit the end of the homemade cigarette. He held it delicately in his big hands.

“Marijuana… It smells sweet. It smells nice, don’t it? But it's a drug. Don’t fall for it. That’s your lesson. You find any of this stuff, you turn it in. You turn it in to me.”

“Drugs are bad,” piped in Eric White again, though less boldly.

J.D. Tully took a long deep pull on the reefer. For some time, he seemed to roll the smoke around in his mouth, cheek to cheek, pushing it like a ball with his tongue, then released the cloud into the air.

“You need to know what it is.” He took another pull, then handed the reefer to the circle of youth. “Pass it around. Remember it.”

Instantly, Luke stood up, pretending to be woozy, even though he was easily four people away from getting a hit.

“Hey man, look, I’m a fucking pothead.” He staggered like a death scene, and fell into an end table. Smiling ceramics of aproned girls and big-trousered boys clattered and fell. The end of a shepherds staff broke off, though even chipped and on his back, the painted shepherd boy with perfect childlike obedience still smiled heavenward.

“Luke!” Alice White nearly shrieked. This was only the 4th time Eric and Alice White had hosted the Christian youth group, and the first time with Luke and drugs. Even though they did not yet have children of their own or even been around kids much, they felt it was their calling to bring children closer to the lord. Teach them love. Beauty. Obedience. They felt their mission glow special and warm in their clean and holy breasts.

Instead, we were smoking pot in their family room, broke their Hummels, and Luke just fucking cussed.

We passed the joint around a couple of times, to make sure we all knew what it was we were to avoid. Then the deputy kept it for himself.

“That’s enough. This isn’t for fun. This is important.” He took another deep pull. “I know how to handle this, so I will take care of the rest. You all remember what this drug is, and stay away from it!”

I looked at his big jaw and shaved head and he no longer looked ferocious. He looked softer. Friendly. I wanted to give him a hug. It shows how one’s perception can change when someone really takes the time to care for you.

The deputy carefully packed up the baggies and the other educational drug paraphernalia and put it into his case. This saddened us. We still wanted to learn. He got up to leave.

“Remember, drugs are bad,” J.D. Tully said softly. He was a very good and very thorough teacher. “Now you know what pot looks like and smells like. If you find any of this stuff around, make sure you don’t use it. Call the sheriff. Or, better yet, call me. I’ll

take care of it for you." He smiled his first smile, a languid dreamy one. He went out the door.

He seemed like a rather nice cop.

We followed him out. Ricky and I could feel the earth turning. No matter which way we stepped, the lawn seemed to slope down and away from us. We breathed in the night-dew air of clover, swimming in the refreshment of the outdoors and the heavens. We put our arms out and walked slowly, eyes closed, breathing it in, turning around, and suckling the sweet night nectar right from the air. It was glorious.

Ricky stumbled sideways for some distance then went all the way down in a slow fall. I joined him, relaxing on the sweet, sweet grass. We sat and, for awhile, just breathed.

We looked at the immensity of stars in the slow-swaying hammock of sky. They were big and there were hundreds of stars sagging through the net. I could feel the weight of the 1000 next and the ones behind that. Layers and layers of stars pressed down through the night. I was about to be buried by them, prickled to death with joy. Many already filtered down, all the way down to touch the earth. They landed like little white torches, flickering in the distances, caught in the trees, pulsing in the houses and the distant streetlights. Everywhere, there were stars in a slow white burn. I had never seen so many stars or been such a part of them.

Ricky rolled onto his stomach. He breathed of the lusciousness of the ground, his nose deep into the lawn. He curled up into it as though trying to snuggle under its covers.

"I love you, earth," Ricky whispered, hugging it, pressing his face to it, his fingers entwining like a lover's in the grassy locks.

And there, in the middle of the White's front yard—me face up, he cheek to earth—we wept at the beauty of it all. We wept to the immensity of stars and the broken moon. We wept at how we'd become so small yet so wonderfully alive that we could float into the sky. And we wept at the sweetness of night-dew clover and how beautiful it would be to sink into that luscious grass, to sink sink down into it, beneath it, and be at peace forever.

##########

god

"I found god," he said. "I found god. I am going to be a pastor."

And all I could wonder was why did Ricky have to find god. Why hadn't god found Ricky.

##########

hobbled to the music of his chains

The school play would be performed in the county court house, and we were allowed one dress rehearsal in the courtroom before two weekend performances. My part was to be a father who was testifying, even though not only did I lack facial hair but was 2 inches shorter than my "daughter" and somewhat less developed.

The director, Mr. J, tried to age me by putting me into an old-fashioned sport coat with tweed and patches on the elbows, but it did little other than bury me as it sloped off my shoulders and overran my hands.

He shook a jar of white baby powder into my hair.

"This will make you look older."

I do not know if it did, but it made me smell sweet.

We waited in the heavy marble of the courthouse hall for the courtroom to become available. A scruffy prisoner in an orange jumpsuit, hands cuffed behind his back, was led roughly by a massive cop that seemed cut from the same cold marble as the courthouse. He shoved the prisoner down at the other end of the bench I was on.

I did not look over.

For a while there was stone silence. Then "hey," someone said. It came from the prisoner.

Our acting troupe, including the teacher, exchanged worried glances, but none of us dared look up enough to engage the prisoner.

"Hey," he said again. "That you, Johnny?"

The eyes of my classmates grew huge, but still would not look up. My stomach tightened in fear. An ocean roared in my ears. Slowly, I looked over, scraping my eyes along the bench, slowly to the orange of the prison jumpsuit, then eventually braving their way up to the prisoner's face. He smiled, at least tightly.

"The fuck you doing here?" he said.

It was Nick. It took me a minute to recognize him. He looked 20 years older now, although it had only been what? Guiltily, I realized I didn't even know. Nick was like that. He could be in and out of school and no one would even notice. I felt badly that I had been no better after I'd promised I would. That I would be different. But Nick didn't seem to mind.

"A play," I said, composing myself. "We're doing a play. In the courtroom."

"Hey, I'm going in there too." He gave a tight-lip grin at his joke. "Got my sentencing. Stole a car again." He shrugged, as though stealing a car was as happenstance as misplacing your reading glasses.

He shrugged. He looked me over with amusement: the suitcoat hanging well beyond my fingertips, the white powder clouding off my head when I moved as though I had small fires about to catch. But he didn't judge. Even if I was still a stupid little shit and he didn't understand me in the least, he let it be. That was the thing about Nick. He lived what was.

It was the same Nick, but it wasn't. He looked thinner and harder, all sinew and veins. His arms looked like rattlesnakes. One had a sword tattooed along the inside. He had cuffs around his ankles too, but didn't seem to notice. Even outfitted and made-up as I was to resemble an old man, I had no doubt that my classmate still appeared much older. His age came from the inside out.

I sat beside him, full of baby powder and regret. Had I even thought about him in the past two years that he'd been gone? Or three? How long had he been gone, actually? I had forgotten to notice. Or to care.

We watched the time pass in big slow steps down the dead marble hall.

"So," he said. "How are you, really?"

It was not the type of question he'd ever asked before. It had a bit of simple honesty in it that he usually kept well wrapped up behind bravado and knuckles to the throat. And I had no answer. I was feeling ashamed. Ashamed of my successes. Ashamed of my role-playing his life. Ashamed I had forgotten him. Again.

He toyed with a silver cuff absent-mindedly. He seemed very familiar with them. There we sat, two boys waiting their turns in the courtroom, one in steel cuffs on his wrists and the other with baby powder in his hair, pretending.

The burly officer returned.

"Get up."

Nick did not move. "Johnny," he said to me in a casual tone of voice. "This here is Ray." The bull named Ray yanked him by the arm, hauling him to his feet. One of Nick's shoulders was hiked up higher than his ear from the officer's grip. Nick was unrattled. He kept talking, calmly.

"This is my friend, Johnny," Nick said to officer Ray. "Tell him hi." It was the first time I'd ever heard Nick call me his friend. He said it naturally. Ray glared at me, a heavily jowled dog. He didn't like me. He frightened me. The officer hoisted Nick's arm higher.

"This is my *friend*, Johnny," Nick said again, louder. "Tell him hi." The cop paused. He looked at me again, appraising me a little longer. Then he gave a curt nod in acknowledgement. Nick smiled, satisfied. A real smile. It was the first real smile I'd ever seen.

It was the last time I saw him.

As the officer led him off, Nick turned.

"Hey," he rasped. "Good luck with the play." The deputy, with a fist in Nick's lower back, plowed him through the oaken doors, Nick hobbled to the music of his chains. We waited for them to finish with him so we could use the room to rehearse. He was sentenced to two years and dead within three.

I never did answer his question. And I never did bother to ask him the same.