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Cold Drinks in the Hour of Chaos

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Cold Drinks in the Hour of Chaos

Matt Boerner, B.S.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of Graduate
School of Lindenwood University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Writing

ABSTRACT

This creative writing thesis follows two characters on a difficult, snow covered journey through the heart of the country. They don't know it, but they are on a voyage of self discovery and both of their lives will be changed forever by the conclusion of the text. It is a story about how fate can transform lives in an instant. I liken their journey to two asteroids colliding in space. It is a highly unlikely occurrence with devastating results.

The characters Arlen and Edmund were partially based on people have become familiar with a great deal of exaggeration and various fabrications. One is a man having trouble hanging on and the other is a man desperate for an escape, literally.

By utilizing classic elements of suspense and a high school brand of humor this piece

stands apart from the atypical format of this genre. It moves quickly and can almost be divided into two sections due to the level of story progression.

Told in third person narration through 97% of the story, the narration has no bias towards the characters and the horrible things that they may have done. As a result the reader is left with an uneasy feeling of awkward tension and impending doom.

The piece is written by a fictional reporter who transcribes a few of Arlen's scribbled notebooks and must have had some detailed conversations with a serial killer. The result is a fast moving synopsis of one mans descent into utter lunacy.

Cold Drinks in the Hour of Chaos

Matt Boerner, B.S.

An Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty
of Graduate School of Lindenwood University in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Writing

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Associate Professor Michael Castro

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Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	3
	Writers Era.....	3
	The Writing Process.....	6
	Cold Drinks on the Hour of Chaos	
	Review.....	12
II.	Cold Drinks in the Hour of Chaos.....	16
	The Passage of Arlen Stout.....	16
	Edmund Wilson.....	17
	Arlen	20
	Stacy Gordon.....	26
	Little Green Men.....	33
	Into the Cold, Cold Night he went.....	39
	A Moment of Clarity.....	46
	Survival of the Fittest.....	54
	Ghosts.....	61
	The Helbert Family Gas N' Go.....	65
	Reptiles and Flowers.....	68
	Grinding Metal and the Birth of Arlen	
	Stout.....	79
	Birds in the Grave Yard.....	82
III.	Vita Auctores	89

INTRODUCTION

I was born into the first generation that was defined by having no definition. We were all lost; post Vietnam War babies, born with no sense of urgency, no view of how the world could be better or when the country was great. Our view was completely shaped by the New Media and having everything we need at the push of a button. Our parents were disenfranchised, once polarized now homogenized, being torn in half by drafts and racists. Forgive my stating of these opinions in absolutes.

Before we knew it the cold war was over; but we were too young to even know the fear associated with it. Racism certainly hadn't ended but most of us didn't care about it one way or another. It was something horrible our parents did. Computers fueled our imaginations and gave us hope for the future. Then our identity became defined by the information coming through them.

Video and internet technology exploded. Everything you needed was at your fingertips. I've heard us referred to as the Doom Generation. I don't know what that means, and I would make the assumption that the drunken guy at the bar that told it to me did not either, but the point he made was valid. We don't know what to do with our history and we are doomed to struggle to find identity.

With our generation, on the surface, the country had healed. There was no evil, there was no blackness, there was no good there was no divine. There was only the grey area around the edges where most of us sat and smoked cigarettes and ate McDonalds hamburger and played our Sony Playstations, not knowing the Doom to come. We were given drugs before we were old enough to find them ourselves.

As we grew older most of us became rabid consumers, filling our bellies and living in excess, while we preached rebellion and free thought all the while balancing our portfolios and checking our stock quotes. There were no questions of morality or pride or greed or

wealth. We became consumed with ourselves before the age of ten. As adults we are pacified.

Now we run the new media, or our generation does anyway. The new media is so proficient at making money no one can tell it what to feel or what to do. It breathes a life of its own and claws and pecks at us. Everyone is a star, everyone has an opinion. The new media is as volatile as the ocean, changing and bending, sometimes crushing in its wake. If you don't believe me type anything you want into a search engine and see if you can find it. It's all there at the push of a button.

Our kids have even shorter attention spans than we do, so we toil to give into their ravenous hunger for entertainment. Lost kids are flushed clean with more information blown into their eyes before they are old enough to understand any of it. They are isolationist, slightly removed from the wake of the Doom Generation but not entirely free of it. They are able, weave in and out of reality anytime they choose.

So there will be no next influx of great novelists. It wouldn't make any sense for there to be a resurgence in the art form. Media is changing too rapidly for it to hang on.

Great books will indeed be written and through them great writers will emerge, but our collective soul and spirit to seek collective truth is no longer a fascination. It is just a hobby. It's all on TV anyway. I missed television too; I was born too late to appreciate it for all it is worth. Maybe that is why I write, no one else wants to.

So what does it take to be a writer? Following is a detailed journal of my creative process for this particular piece *Cold Drinks in the Hour of Chaos*. This particular story is an evolution of a number of things. It was conceived in the parking lot of a Walgreen's during a terrible snow storm. It started as a few lines scribbled in a 3" black notebook that I keep in the panel of my car in case a moment of inspiration strikes. I never meant for the entire story to be more than ten pages or so.

First it was 0 pages with the intentions of being 10 pages; before I knew it, it was 89 pages flirting dangerously close to someday becoming 189 pages. Then I realized there were 54 pages or so that I didn't like so I discarded them and replaced them with 60 pages, most of which I was repulsed by.

I destroyed a town in the wake of my indecision. I leveled it flat and erased it from existence. Then I killed several of my main characters, most of which did nothing to deserve it. Then I felt bad for them and resurrected them. Then I realized they were only words on a page so I killed them again. I changed their names so I could kill and not feel entirely like it was my fault. Then I erased their friends. Then I gave them families just so I could kill them. Then I brought them back just so I had someone to feel bad when I killed their loved ones.

Then I stopped writing because I began to hate it. Then I convinced myself that only losers would sit in front of a computer all day typing while other people were out doing

something with their lives. Then I started watching tremendous amounts of television and playing guitar. I tried to start a band name Broccoli but quickly realized I wasn't very good at that either.

Then I went back to my computer because I realized that I didn't think writers were losers, and I was only wasting time watching hours and hours of television, and that I am really not that fond of television. I still had questions about writing that I never really answered but then realized that everyone who writes most likely asked themselves the same type of questions everyday of their lives at least 700 times.

I decided the reason I wasn't having any fun writing is because I was sick of killing my characters all day. Then I killed my main character just because I wanted to prove I could write a story without one. Then I realized you can't kill the main character because then you don't have a story, so I brought him back. Then I decided I needed an outside opinion. I gave it to my dad to read for a weekend. He didn't like

it and I haven't spoken to him since. Then I realized he was most likely right in his criticism and got depressed.

I became too depressed about the whole mess to write anymore. I started playing guitar again but refused to watch television because I still thought it was a waste of time. I slowly began to realize that I had way too much time on my hands and started reading to relieve boredom. Ironically I read a book called *You Suck* by Christopher Moore. As a direct result of coming across a series of missing punctuation marks I decided that I am probably no worse off than most of the other writers out there and decided that playing guitar was even more of a waste of time than television.

Then I realized that I was feeling sorry for myself and I was complaining way too much and I got to work again. Then I decided to kill everyone in the story and start a new story with characters that were similar but that didn't whine quite as much. Then I realized I hated all of my new characters too. So I killed them by throwing them into the recycling bin on my

computer and I resurrected all of the old characters that I thought I hated and realized that they were all right people I just wasn't giving them the proper guidance.

Then I bought a new computer and convinced myself it was hindering my creativity and refused to work until I figured out why. Then my fiancé shed light on the fact that I have said that about every computer that I have ever owned and that and if I didn't stop crying about everything all the time that I would never get it done. She was right. I quickly got back to work out of the fear that she would make more valid points that I wasn't prepared to deal with.

After a while I noticed that some of the pieces were starting to come together in my original story. It was like I was putting together a puzzle and I could finally see the shape on the outside of the box taking form.

I decided not to kill anymore characters than I had to and never to write about anyone ever dying in a lighthearted way again. I figured they had been through way too much. The story was finally starting to take shape, and

then I realized there was still something missing. It was like the puzzle I put together needed to have the pieces smoothed out before they would fit properly.

So I edited, for a long, long, long time. Then I realized the more correction I made the more there was wrong with the whole mess. Luckily by this time Broccoli had broken up so I had no need to play guitar anymore. I spent many cold nights shut in my room staring into a computer screen, trying to think of myself as a reader. What do I look for from a good story? Do any of my jokes make sense? Do the characters, while absurd, seem like they could be real? These are questions that are not easily answered.

Finally I stopped writing the story. I turned the final copy into my Lindenwood liaisons. I suddenly got a terrible feeling of dread. What if I had glazed over some simple fixes that would have made my piece sparkle instead of wither in the sun.

So I sat down with my little red pen and started marking spelling and grammatical errors.

Before long my entire paper was red. I hated writing all over again but by that point I had already sworn off procrastination. I changed everything one last time. Then I changed it again. Then I did it again. Then it started becoming something else. Then I gave it to my dad. He actually didn't hate it, which was somewhat encouraging because he hates almost everything. Then I turned in my final, final draft. Then I sat down to read it again and before I knew it the entire paper was red all over again. Slowly it began to get closer to being readable. Then finally I was marginally proud of it, then I marked it with more red ink.

It is the story of a series of mishaps, maybe fate, maybe divine intervention that bring two people together, who are both hiding terrible secrets. These two people meet out of necessity and soon after they shape each other's entire existence. In a matter of a few hours both left an impression on the other so deep they will be forever entwined in folklore. Most of the people we meet don't have any consequence on our lives.

They come and they go. Some of them we may have known for years.

Some people shape who we are in a moment's time.

Arlen is a tragic character, intentionally ambiguous to the reader, and not quite sure what is happening to himself. This story revolves around the growth of Arlen. He is a sad character in the sense that he seems to be going through changes he can't identify, for reasons that he doesn't understand. He, however, is not so far gone insane that he has lost all contact with reality. On the contrary he is able at times to separate his realities. Furthermore, although teetering on the edge, he seems to have a clear sense of morality. In the end his madness ends up being his saving grace.

Edmund knows exactly what he is. He just does not know why he does the things he does. He has no boundaries governing right or wrong. He sees himself as an artist. He had been successful in his professional life. He is charismatic, charming, young and good looking. Professionally he is the antithesis of Arlen. He could have had everything he wanted. Arlen never

had made it and is getting to the age where a performer can't lie to himself about it. Ironically, in many ways Edmund is more together than Arlen.

Edmund has an unnatural fascination with religion, which is a constant theme throughout the piece and, given his disturbing tendencies, should be included in any discussion of rebirth. The story focuses on Arlen's self discovery; something terrible has awoken in him. In any narrative the protagonist has to go through a change, there must be a point of no return. For whatever reason, fate put them on the same road. His mental illness not only eventually ends up saving his life, but countless others whom Edmund may have killed. He is a hero, but an unintentional hero. And a true hero never takes credit upon himself.

He seeks out answers through many different channels, and by the end even considers giving himself to God, a subject he's not even capable of discussing without making a joke. In a sense this is a story of rebirth. By the end Arlen is

literally left with nothing and doesn't have anywhere to go but home to his mother.

I play with the idea that maybe Edmund is all in Arlen's mind which would make sense in some respects but ultimately would have made the entire piece way too dark for what I wanted to do with it. Besides that has been done in way too many movies recently.

If the world is only what you perceive it than it's a much smaller place than I imagine it to be. Dante, Chaucer, Thompson, Picasso, Daffy and Bugs they all sought answers to life great mysteries. Maybe Arlen is looking in the same directions. As a matter of fact maybe Arlen is still out there, looking for answers.

COLD DRINKS IN THE HOUR OF CHAOS

THE PASSAGE OF ARLEN STOUT

You may not know the name Arlen Stout. Not many people do. Outside the old wives tales, spoken in dimly lit diners, sewing groups and school yards along highway 55, his name is not spoken much. Some call him a hero; others a mad man. There maybe a bit of truth no matter which spin you hear of the tale.

This document is the most reliable ledger on the last nights of Arlen. Most of it was pieced together from a loose leaf notebook found in an old trunk at a cabin located somewhere in the boot heel of Missouri. Arlen may have spent a few nights holed up at the abandoned structure writing, smoking cigarettes and trying to get his wits about him.

It is speculated that Arlen suffered from obsessive compulsive disorder, dementia, psychosis and schizophrenia amongst other minor physical ailments. He wrote down everything he ever did, felt, or even thought about for more than a few seconds. After the nights these pages recount he wasn't seen or heard from. It was only by accident that his journals were

discovered by a couple of high school kids looking to get drunk in a shabby, old cabin in the woods.

Maybe he meant them to be a type of confession after he was gone, like a time capsule that you bury in grade school.

Most of his notes were sparse with details and difficult to understand, thus adding to the legend of the events that brought down a killer fiercer than the BTK and more cunning than Ted Bundy.

One thing is known for certain; Arlen is a hero by mishap, but a hero for sure, and not forgotten within these few pages. As unbelievable as this tale may seem, I have no reason to believe that Arlen's version of it is not of truth, or at least the truth from his perspective.

EDMUND WILSON

The storm came quickly and hit harder than anyone expected. It was a blinding snow, catching quickly over the frigid ground. But, It was a forgiving storm compared to the freezing rain that had passed a few hours earlier.

At mile marker 27, on the Oklahoma-Missouri border, on the side of the highway, Edmund was forced to think about survival. He was young, and his legs were strong, but he could feel the icy winter air searing into him like he was a tender piece of beef on a grill.

His car had stalled about a quarter of a mile up the road. There was nothing for 50 miles in either direction. He wasn't worried about the car. It wasn't his to begin with.

He checked his wrist watch, wiping the melting snowflakes away from the timepiece with his other hand. It was close to 8:30. He couldn't imagine that anyone would brave the snow on such a desolate stretch of highway. There was nothing but flat plains and glazed over corn fields.

He had stolen the car in New Mexico. He had hitchhiked from Seattle to Colorado to Maine to New Hampshire. He went anywhere he thought someone might give him a place to crash for a few days or weeks or whatever. He had been on the road for more days than he could remember.

On the horizon the snow showed no signs of slowing. His cheeks ached from being beaten by the

wind. He couldn't even remember where he was headed, if anywhere at all, maybe Florida. His head felt like it was split into a million pieces since he pulled off the road choking on black smoke. It made him think, "If God can't kill me, no one can."

It had been weeks since he hit the road, Timberland knapsack over his shoulder. The weight of the bag made his legs burn but in it was his work, his art. He had toiled, planned and schemed to create it and wasn't about to leave it for some backwoods redneck to stumble across. He was a craftsman, an artist.

Edmund lit a cigarette and waited. Time passed slowly in the cold snow. In the dark it seemed like anything could break the cold air and drag him into the woods. There seemed to be a set of eyes behind every dark tree, in every ravine, always just over his shoulder. Visions of wolves tearing him to pieces danced through his head.

He took a long drag from his cigarette. A pair of headlights peeked just over the hill. He held his thumb high. "Please god, don't let me freeze out here," he mumbled to himself.

Up ahead the vehicle danced between lines on the slender, two-lane highway. It was a small car, a Toyota, far too small to be driving in a blizzard. The driver was having a hard time keeping it on the road.

He noticed the wipers were covered in ice as they slid across the windshield. He watched as the car came to a sliding halt. The window came down.

ARLEN

In a yellow Impala, Arlen hit the road hard. He wanted to forget Cedar Creek. Only dark memories lay in his wake there; memories of a bungled stage show and an angry mob. Fortunately, his memories were already fading into one another like the road signs that were ripping by through the snowy night.

He was fighting the wind with all of the strength in his left hand as he juggled through some numbers on his cell phone in his right. Before he found the number he wanted the phone sent a high pitch squeal, his ring. He clicked the receive button.

"Hello," said a voice on the other end.

"Don't you hello me! What the fuck is the matter with you? I heard you were all over the map talking about Ted Bundy like he's your brother, complaining about...well talking crazy. Aren't you supposed to be a comedian? Where the fuck is the comedy?"

"Look I know," said Arlen pointedly.

"This kinda shit gets around you know? Before long you'll be lucky to be working at the meat packing plant or sucking cock for a living."

"I know."

"All right you bastard, get yourself together, go get some sleep, and I'll do some damage control. I swear you're like the client from hell. One guest spot on some piece of shit, late night television show and you guys turn into uppity cock suckers."

Arlen's phone beeped as the line was disconnected. His agent was right. He knew he would never work in Cedar Creek again. There were a lot of towns he would never work again but that thought didn't seem to be too much of a cause of concern.

Arlen positioned the mirror to get a clear view of his own face. The mirror was not kind. He blinked thinking...hoping his eyes were playing tricks on him. His face bore signs of aging far beyond his years.

Every wrinkle seemed deep, every patch of grey fuller. His skin looked lifeless like baked molding clay. His eyes reddened, with neatly formed rings blackening his complexion. He looked like shit had a baby.

He tried to remember the last time he slept and couldn't recall. Everything seemed glazed over; like he had just photo copied someone else's homework that he was trying to pass off as his own. It felt like he was living in a dream inside of a dream. He didn't like what his mind was doing when he let himself drift for long enough.

He turned the mirror away. His suit was old and ratty. Moths had eaten through the lining. He poked his finger through the sleeve and left it as if it were a glove.

Arlen had spent twenty-five years drinking himself drunk, in and out of third rate bars and local diners, in any dive that would throw a few dollars his way. With the mirror his only witness he knew that it had taken its toll.

He left Cedar Creek hoping to beat the storm but now found himself in its hands, bending to its will. His head was starting to clear of the booze. He needed to be sober. His brain was operating without

anyone at the wheel. He could feel himself bursting at the seams.

He angled the driver's mirror upward to get a view of the top of his head. In his hairline he ran his fingers where a wound crusted leaving a crimson ring around the large gash. It was tender and starting to swell. He ran his fingertips across the abrasion, careful not to apply much pressure. He winced in pain as he realized just how lonely the highway was. He didn't have anyone to complain to.

In the old days it might have been a lot worse. The comedy club owner might have made sure of it. Worse than the gash, his brain wasn't putting words together correctly. It was telling him to say awful things. He had no control; like he was watching himself from a rooftop, trying desperately to get his own attention. Weaving words was his bread and butter.

He drove on, white knuckled, fighting the wind and ice for what seemed like hours, replaying the scene to himself when his mind would allow him. He brushed over the events in his head like it was happening over and over:

On the stage lights flickered and danced nightmares in his head. His brain was struck with a swirl of whiskey. The crowd rumbled as, for a second it looked as though he might collapse on the neatly polished, green linoleum floor. They gasped as he caught himself with the microphone stand.

No matter which way he focused his thoughts no words would take form in the bramble of his thoughts. He started mumbling whatever came into his mind first.

"Has anyone ever seen a dead body before?" there was laughter...or was there? The walls shifted. He could feel 300 hardened stares.

"Fuck," he said oblivious to the crowd.

The ceiling suddenly seemed to collapse a few inches over his head and the stage beneath his feet felt like cotton candy. Nothing seemed right. His eyes widened and his pupils dilated.

"Have you lost your fucking mind? You're coming apart at the hinges." He thought to himself. Then he realized that he said it out loud.

He clenched his jaw. He looked down at his hands slowly shifting his gaze from palm to palm. The crowd sat silent. He looked up from his palms.

"I think I might have found out the meaning of life," he said as a tear rolled down his face.

"Hello little ghost, little ghost." He uttered a few more words but couldn't remember them. He might as well have been standing in a room by himself. His thoughts cleared, briefly.

"I'm sorry. Maybe if I could just get some water?" A haze of conversation brushed over the crowd. A busboy promptly brought Stout water. He felt the world slipping away from him. Arlen sipped and swished the cold water on his tongue. He tried to focus on anything tangible: an ugly lady in the front row, the stage lights, his palms. Nothing seemed to come into focus.

"I feel like Jack the Ripper. Now there was motivated guy."

He suddenly felt like the smoke filled stage was his home, like his mother's womb. The lights weren't burning his eyes anymore, instead they felt like a warm ray of sunlight.

"This place is like my home," he said, "look at all this stuff." Shapes did not seem to take form. Colors were dancing from one object to the next and then back.

The crowd shifted nervously in their seats. Then there was silence. Then there was conversation. Then there was boos. Then his knees felt weak. Then Arlen's head hit the floor like a sack of potatoes. Then the stage was covered in blood, which has a surprisingly calming glitter under hot stage lights. Suddenly the road drew back into focus.

"I just need a place to think," he said to himself. Off the highway, through the snow, a billboard caught his eye.

The Lizard City Diner

Open Twenty Something Hours Daily

The snow covered world was becoming a replica of itself. He thought of the diners back home, and hoped this one could match up. His stomach began to howl.

STACY GORDON

A tingle went down Edmund's spine as the small car rolled to an icy stop a few feet away. He took a step and hunched his back, peering into the window as

if his eyes could melt the frost. It was only a thin layer of ice but it was enough to obscure the slender figure behind the wheel.

Edmund was always a cautious and well prepared traveler. He carried extra cans of food, a lighter, a sleeping bag, and most importantly a large trench knife which he now had his hand tightly wrapped around. The figure leaned over and the window rolled slowly down.

"Hey mister, I saw your car up the road. Do you need a lift somewhere? Are you from around here? Maybe you could give me some directions. I'm kinda lost anyway," said a young girl out of her window. Framing her blue eyes he could see delicate blond hair tucked neatly behind her ears. She was definitely no threat. Her name was Stacy Gordon. She was a 23-year-old college student on her way home to see her single father for the holiday break. Edmund loosened his grip on the knife and smiled as he blew his hands and jogged to the car window. He was like an eager school kid waiting for his lunch.

"Thank you maam. I don't know what I would have done if you wouldn't have stopped. I just might have

frozen out here," Edmund said as he opened the car door.

"Wait a minute. You're sane right? You look harmless enough. But what does that mean nowadays," she said as she looked into his eyes. He was younger than she expected and quite a bit more attractive. His olive skin and deep brown eyes she found alluring.

"I'm as sane as the next guy," he said.

His face was tender to the touch, but started to thaw as soon as he hit the passenger seat and had a steady stream of heat hitting against it. He hadn't realized how heavily he was breathing until he was comfortable. The car was dirty and ragged and he hated clutter. He shifted his feet trying to avoid stepping on one of the soda cans or empty fast food bags.

A little embarrassed, she smiled as she gently hit the gas. She took notice of his hands. They were large and strong but delicate and soft. His fingernails were neatly groomed and manicured. She wondered how such a rugged man managed to keep his hands so gentle.

"I'm Stacy," she said biting her lip.

"Edmund. It's nice to meet you," his voice was deep and confident.

"So where are you from Edmund?" She said making as much eye contact as she could without swerving off the road.

"Um, Babylon," he said without changing expression. He was caught off guard. He wasn't prepared to lie and just then and said the first thing that came to mind, no matter how ridiculous.

"Oh really? I think I may have been there once. Is that in New Mexico?" said Stacy innocently.

"Yeah," he said with a timid smile. "It's close. Hey, really thanks for picking me up. With weather like this I could have been lost until next summer."

"It's no problem. I'd hope that if I were stranded on the side of the road in the freezing snow that someone might stop and pick me up," she said laughing.

"I'm sure a girl like you wouldn't have much of a problem finding a ride," he said with a coy smirk. For the first time he made direct eye contact. Stacy blushed.

"With my luck I would end up with some psycho," she said.

"Yeah," he said. She looked on nervously as he let the words hang there for an icy moment. It was an awkward silence only broken in steady intervals by the ice covered wipers ripping across the windshield. Meeting someone new can bring out all of your insecurities.

"I don't think I asked you where you're headed," she asked finally.

"I met a young girl who gave me a rainbow..." the radio whistled.

"As far as you can take me," he said.

"You're an easy man to please," she said. Edmund smiled and slowly reached his hand toward the radio and turned the volume to a soft hum.

"What are you doing? I like that song," snapped Stacy with a giggle.

"Sorry. My head just feels like someone is driving a jack hammer into it." He reached and turned the radio back up. Stacy reached over and turned it back down.

"Don't worry honey. I was only kidding. It's the only CD I have. I've been listening to it through three states. I think...yes, I hate Bob Dylan," Stacy said with a laugh.

Edmund unzipped his coat.

"Man as cold as I was out there I can't believe that I'm sweating now."

"You complain a lot. Maybe I should put you back out in the snow."

"I'm sorry."

"Calm down. I'm just kidding," Stacy said as she took a cigarette out of the pack, popped it in her mouth and offered one to Edmund. He reached into his front jacket pocket and took out his lighter. He lit the cigarettes, as the cabin filled with smoke Stacy seemed a little less tense; perhaps it was the nicotine.

"So what is it that you do Edmund? Or do you just hitchhike around the country waiting for strange girls to pick you up?"

"This is what I do. You're a good judge of character," he said with a smile.

"Really. I had you pegged as the type. You know, the wandering vagrant, rebel without a cause type."

"Actually, I'm an artist."

"Really, wow, that was my first major in college. I used to make these cute little sculptures that

looked not entirely like woodland creatures. I realized that I probably would never make very much money with it so I switched to public relations. Turns out I'm not very good at that either. What kind of art do you do?"

"It's well...kind of complicated," he wasn't even good at lying when he wasn't lying.

"Try me."

"Oh...well, actually I'd have to show you...in a bit, when I can get it out of my bag."

"Eww, it's a secret."

The storm worsened with every inch of ground they passed. Stacy was spending a good deal of effort trying to keep her car on the road. The wheels churned hard through the snow.

Edmund was charming. As they rode, Stacy twirled her hair as she tried to pry information from him, laughing hard at his jokes that were only marginally funny. At times, her timid voice was scarcely audible above the hum of the heater.

"I hope I can make it home for Christmas," she said, "I've been away at school for so long...well I just can't wait to see my dog. Do you have a family?"

"No."

"Oh...well that's too bad," she said nervously, "that's so sad."

"Not really. It's another long story."

Stacy could sense that it wasn't a good idea to press the subject.

LITTLE GREEN MEN

Arlen dragged his worn body through the door and slung himself into an empty booth in the corner. The diner was an ugly, dimly lit place that smelled like truckers and trucker wives. His mind was on such a live wire he didn't feel capable of actually resting.

The diner's decorum wasn't helping. There were stuffed, dead animals on every wall. He quickly realized he was seated in the sightline of a glazed over squirrel, baring its teeth. It looked like it was having fun being dead.

Arlen looked deep into the squirrel's glass eyes. He could faintly make out his own reflection in the slightly less than authentic replica of the animal's actually eyes. Its full coat was grayed and lifeless. "Why in the hell would someone put this God damned

thing here? Who the hell would want to look at a God damned squirrel corpse while they are eating?"

"You don't like the squirrel Mac," said a voice booming from above. Startled, Arlen quickly turned his attention away from the squirrel. A slender, red haired waitress, pen and notebook in hand, stood a few feet from the table. Her name tag said her name was Nancy.

"It's a bit unsettling," Arlen replied scrambling for words that might be relevant, "I've never been that fond of squirrels. I like dead ones even less."

"We get that a lot. Cletus, he owns the place, he says it is some kind of microcosm of the nature of the universe. You know, survival of the fittest and whatnot," then she leaned in close to Arlen and spoke in a softer voice, "I just think it is ugly." Arlen laughed at her candor.

"Well then he might have a point. Nature is ugly," he said.

"Whatever you say Mac. Wow that's a nice gash you got there on your head 'ey mac," said Nancy.

"Oh, this? I tripped in the shower," he said with a laugh.

The waitress left and came back with coffee. Nancy was older for sure, but it was hard to judge to what degree, because her skin was badly damaged from the sun. She might and been 40; she might have been 70. In any case, she was hardly one to cast judgment on Arlen's appearance.

"How old are they?" asked Arlen.

"How old are who? My breast!"

"Them." Arlen pointed to a picture button on the breast pocket of her powder blue uniform. A couple of red haired faces were smiling in front of a fire place.

"Oh golly, I had no idea what you meant. They're 3 and 5. Cody and Bryan."

Maybe she's younger than I am he thought.

"Cute kids. There is nothing more gratifying to a kid than his mother's affection," he said.

"I'm hoping they say that when they're a little older," she said with a coy, waitressey smile.

"I'm sure you'll make a great mother," he said.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I...what," he didn't realize it meant anything besides he didn't know how to make small talk.

"I'll go see where your food is," she said as she stormed off in a huff.

As he was sitting patiently waiting for his eggs Arlen was slowly starting to realize that he was deeply, severely and irreversibly disturbed. Arlen watched his coffee very intently. The steam rose and the cream swirled counter clockwise, he took special note of the direction. He touched the outside of his mug. He felt his hand was burning and he wondered why his brain hadn't sent a message to it to recoil in pain.

Maybe his brain had other things to worry about as he looked deep into his coffee. He could faintly hear the old television on the wall; some news program flashed a few graphics with revenue figures and overhead charts. He was trying to avoid looking at them for fear that it might cause his headache to split open.

As the cream swirled and the sugar mixed in his mug he noticed something that seemed slightly out of place. It started small, almost too small to see, then grew quickly. A bubble rose to the top and seemed to be nursing something of an oddity for his beverage. It was a simple, smooth, green mass and

what looked like a head of cabbage. Arlen's heart began to race as the bubble burst and the little green thing began to sprout arms and legs. It grabbed the side of his coffee cup and climbed over the side of the glass and shook itself on the table. Arlen recoiled in fear. He thought to touch it, and made several attempts before recoiling in fear.

"What the hell are you?" Arlen asked finally, not even sure if the creature could speak.

"Arlen I know this is a bit shocking but we can be friends," it said. The creature had surprisingly good articulation.

"How can we be friends? You just ruined my coffee."

"Who cares about the coffee Arlen? This is important."

He began to repeat what the little green man said:

"Everyone is talking about you."

"Everyone is talking..."

"None of them are real."

"None of them are real."

"Kill them all."

"Kill them all...wait, no I am not killing anyone,"

"Oh well, I didn't mean anything by it. I just wanted to see if you were paying attention. You look dreadful."

"That's not a very funny joke." Arlen replied.

"How would you know?"

Arlen was amazed. The little green man wasn't quite done growing. He had a penis that was now hanging to his ankles. A voice came over Arlen's shoulder. He nearly jumped out of his seat.

"Are you all right buddy?" The waitress had been standing over him watching him talk to his coffee.

"You look like you just saw an alien."

"What?"

"I said, 'are you ALRIGHT?'" she said. Arlen looked down at the table. The green man, and everything about him, was gone.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine I was... meditating," he said decisively. He was splitting the world in two, trying to figure out what was real.

The waitress laid the bill on the table, "all right Mac, whatever you say. Listen Mac, you look like you should get some sleep. We got a hotel right over the hill, right over there ya see." She pointing through the open shades. "I don't think anybody

should be out in this weather and you don't look like you got a lot left in the tank."

"All right. I'll think about it." He had no intentions of going to any motel, much less one where he might very well be raped repeatedly.

"Good."

"Hey Nancy I've got this idea for a joke, I'm a comedian. Would you mind if I tried it on you?" He wanted to make sure he wasn't losing his mind completely.

"Sure, I guess."

Arlen was poking around in his own head, testing himself.

"I can't think of a single god damn joke right now," he said.

Nancy Laughed, "go get some sleep buddy and whatever you do don't quit your day job.

"That is my day job damn it."

Nancy left to go tend to some other customers. Arlen left a few bills on the table and exited through the front door and fired up his Impala, shooting thick, black smoke into the atmosphere.

INTO THE COLD, COLD NIGHT HE WENT

Stacy flipped through the radio dial. It was mostly static. Every so often she would come across something that seemed a bit like music but she didn't know the song and before long it would fade back into static.

"Damn it," she said, "I hate being in the country."

"Then what are you doing out here?" asked Edmund.

"To be honest I don't know. I should have taken a plane. I wanted to see my dad for Christmas. Ever since my mom died he's been all alone. I thought this would be cheaper and, well, I guess I'm a little scared of planes."

"Me too."

"Good, then we have something in common."

Stacy continued to flip through the dial. The static was searing into Edmund's patience. He was becoming increasingly annoyed as if someone was tearing their finger nails across a chalk board. He drew a stick of gum from his coat pocket and did the normal business with it. The sugar made his head ache. He realized it had been a while since his last

meal. The air grew thick and the windows were filling with fog. He traced a heart on the window with his middle finger.

"So what's your story? As I said, I usually wouldn't pick up a hitchhiker you know?"

"Then why did you?" He replied as stiffly as possible.

"I just got done reading that book by Jack Kerouac," she laughed. "No really, I just saw your car up the road and couldn't leave you out here to freeze to death."

"That's a good one."

"The joke?"

"No, the book. I read it in college. I never really thought I'd be one of the characters though."

Stacy laughed. The car rolled on and the snow became fiercer. They came upon a sign for Ashwood. Stacy said it sounded like a nice place then Edmund made a joke that if you didn't know any better Deliverance would have sounded like a good movie. He was a good natured enough fellow. They joked for a while and talked about the government. In college Edmund worked for the Democratic National Convention. Most of his professors in college thought he might

someday go into politics himself. He was as charismatic, and more likable, than any senator in the union.

"This is an urgent bulletin for all motorists. Police are asking to be on the lookout for any..." the radio cut back to static. Edmund's heart beat a little faster. He knew somehow that his avenues were closing up. He was under suspicion for four murders and a dozen more currently listed as "missing persons." He had taken an opportunity to escape capture by squeezing through a bathroom window.

"I hope there is someplace that can help with your car in Ashwood."

"Don't worry about the car," he said. His eyebrows pointed downward to his nose. His jaw clinched tight. He obviously did not like being questioned.

"Why don't you want your car?" she said becoming increasingly weary.

"It's not mine."

"Whose is it?"

"I don't know. I stole it. Right before I cut that bitch's eyes and ears off."

Even if he wanted to Edmund couldn't describe the feeling of rage that washed over his body before he killed someone. It flowed into his fingers and toes like a shot of heroine. He couldn't even tell you why he did it. He knew it was wrong, but he liked it.

Stacy didn't have time to breathe much less fight. He took the long, neatly polished trench knife out of his knapsack and drove it into Stacy's pale, tender neck. This was the only time he felt alive. Stacy was delicate, pure. He needed to destroy that, he *had* to destroy that.

The car spun out of control. Blood sprayed in all directions. Edmund tried to grab the wheel but as he reached for it Stacy kicked violently. She hit the brake and swung the steering wheel hard to the right.

Edmund was a born killer, if there is such a thing. His mother had not shown him emotion, positive or negative, but she didn't deserve the monster, bastard son she was cursed with.

The seconds passed like hours as the car flipped, door handle to door handle, across the pavement. Edmund could taste the Stacy's blood on his lips. Hatred was the only thing he felt.

He had heard people talk about how he wasn't wired with a soul, how no one could do the things he had done. He had never had a choice. It was the blood that ran through his veins that made him kill.

It was dogs and cats when he was younger. He would take them from people's houses and hit them in the head with a bat or electrocute them. He would take his time and make them suffer.

It took everything he had to kill his first person, a young college age girl living in Vineyard Park. He planned for months, stalking her, growing increasingly bold as the weeks passed. For months he was a viper waiting in the darkness, ready to strike.

First had he followed her from school, always cautious enough to follow just out of sight. When he had gained the nerve he picked the coldest night of the year and sat outside her window. He watched her work on her house, talk on the phone, pet her cat and finally, change into her night clothes. Then he walked in the front door and bludgeoned that poor girl with a lead pipe.

Over the next few years he got better. He honed his craft. He killed anyone that struck him the right way. He picked on small girls, far too attractive for

him to ever get a date with. They made him the angriest.

In his world he thought of one thing. I kill people. You don't. I am a god. He found himself taking less time between kills. He would spend every minute thinking about his next or his last. He thought about them like most people would think about a sexual conquest or a good date. He lived through it. It defined him. Two emotions he knew well, the will to live and the will to kill.

Now, on the run on highway 55, he was nothing but a butcher. His art was back in Vineyard Park, Seattle. Now there is nothing but rage. He wanted to stop but he couldn't. He had driven the knife into Stacy as deeply as he could, as many times as his muscles would allow.

The vehicle hit the ditch and flipped several more times before coming to a complete stop in a gully 20 yards off the road. The sound of steel bending, glass crashing echoed through the otherwise silent night.

As smoke filled his eyes Edmund checked his body as he struggled to breathe. He thought for a second that he may have broken a few of his ribs but that

pain subsided quickly. He thought blood was running from his nose but only grabbed a handful of snot when he reached to gauge his wound.

Edmund was a man of his word. He unlatched his seat belt and collected Stacy's ears and eyes.

A MOMENT OF CLARITY

The clouds on the eastern sea board rolled like elephants over the slate colored water. The waves crashed and the sea gulls danced and sang along the shore. Arlen was a small boy, ten years old.

"Arlen why don't you go for a swim dear?" spoke a soft and forgiving voice.

"Mom? I haven't seen you since..." young Arlen spoke.

"Oh honey we don't need to talk about that now. Just go play and I'll come get you when lunch is ready."

His mother kissed him. He ran towards the waves, and dove head first into the foaming sea. Arlen was a skinny kid with golden blond hair and a bronze tan. In the water a rush of warmth covered his body. He

stroked the water a meters from the shore. Two dolphins jumped over his head.

Arlen glanced back at his mother. She was standing near an old rain rotten picnic table. She waved at him with a grin that would have made an angel cry.

"Go on honey you'll be just fine," she yelled to him.

He swam with all of his might, deep off the coast. He swam until his muscles bounced like Jell-O. He looked back at the shore. Everything seemed so small. He felt the prick of soft bubbles bursting against his skin like like he was sitting in a glass of champagne. Suddenly the water was a brilliant shade of pink. He stopped treading. He could float with no effort. A gentle breeze carried a rainbow.

For a few minutes he drifted until suddenly the sky darkened as a rain cloud moved overhead. He lost focus while his eyes adjusted. He scooped a handful of water as it turned from pink to black, and ran like oil down his arm. The bubbles suddenly felt like a million icy needles were poking him in the back. His body twisted and contorted.

His eyes slowly opened and a room that looked like a meat locker came into focus. Arlen thought for a second that maybe he had died. He could feel that his head was wrapped tightly. Voices were chattering indiscernible banter. His mother's head took form in the clouds above him.

"Wake up sweetie!"

"What?"

"I said wake up MOTHER FUCKER!"

Arlen looked down at the road.

"What the fuck are you doing?!!!"

The road came into focus as Arlen gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles. The car spun out of control. Arlen thought he was going to die. He screamed for god. Maybe God answered as the car came to rest in the embankment just off the highway. He wondered how much more he could take.

He put the car into park and stepped onto the ground. His breath hit the cold air in heavy bursts. Sweat dripped down his forehead and froze before it hit the ground. He took a few steps for the tree line hoping the cold air would send a shock to his brain and tell his body to wake. His legs were weak and his knees buckled as he tumbled to the ground. From his

back he looked into the clouds as snow was swirling from some beautifully defined Nimbus clouds. He felt his face, then his ribs. He thought for certain he was dead and in some state of ghostly denial. He looked for the light. He found none. He also found his limbs intact.

As the adrenaline fled from his blood he felt a warm wave of euphoria rush over his body. He drew the cold night air into his lungs and released a wolf's howl into the night followed by a whooping and growling.

He laughed into the night. A deep laugh that you can only muster right after you think you are going to die and you don't. After a few seconds he couldn't remember if he was laughing or crying. He made a snow angel, flailing his arms until his muscles burnt and his limbs felt like ice.

The hum of the engine purred gently against the screams of the night wind. The tail lights shot a red streak across the road. Arlen sat up with straight legs, hands draped at his sides like limp pieces of meat.

"I should write a joke about this," he said as if he were speaking to someone who was intently hanging

on every word, "screw it. I probably won't be able to remember it anyway."

"What the hell am I doing out here," he said.

He stared into the sky, happy to be alive.

"At least I got a little sleep."

He sat up and wondered why his body hadn't told him to feel cold yet. Then the earth seemed to shift beneath him. The feeling was becoming as familiar as drawing a breath. Only now he was sure that the scene before him was not tangible. He saw what seemed to be a million glowing red eyes piercing into his skull from just inside the tree line. The eyes seemed to belong to dense tree line and resembled a pack of white wolves staking their claim to a horse. Then he realized it was just his taillights reflecting off the falling snow.

He gently bit his tongue and rolled it around his mouth until he had feeling in his lips again. His mouth was dry and the sweat that was racing down his back now made his shirt stiff and frigid. Arlen was getting accustomed to sorting between reality and delusion.

Nothing made any sense to him. He was certainly manic. He wanted to turn himself off, like a robot, right in the middle of the lonely highway.

Several little men came over to him with pitch forks. Some of them were red. Some were blue. They were no bigger than the size of his shoe.

"Go away. I'm not in the mood right now." They screamed and melted into the snow.

"What the hell is matter with you? You're going to freeze out here," said the officer. Arlen was staring into business end of a Maglite. The policeman shined the light on the car from bumper to bumper. He was apparently watching Arlen for quite some time and was looking at Arlen's car for damage. Arlen focused on the cop boots as they crushed the snow beneath them. The little men were gone but red and blue lights still danced over the snow.

"Were you in some kind of an accident or something? You got a mighty big gash on your forehead there."

"I popped a zit," said Arlen trying to avoid having to tell the dreadful story of collapsing on the stage at Cedar Creek.

"Really? That must have been a huge zit," said the policeman laden with sarcasm. "Can I ask you why you were in the middle of a blizzard doing snow angels in the highway?"

"Oh well, I guess that would seem a bit strange wouldn't it but there's a perfectly reasonable explanation..." he stopped himself suddenly realizing that falling asleep at the wheel wasn't exactly reasonable. The policeman shined the light on Arlen's license plate.

"What would that be?"

"What would what be?"

"Your perfectly reasonable explanation for acting like a completely irrational lunatic," said the increasingly annoyed policeman.

"Oh well I, there was this wolf and ah, he had this rabbit in his teeth, grrr, and he ran in front of my car. I'm not really mad at him. He doesn't know any better. He's just a wolf..."

"Look look look. Of course I don't believe you. Please stand up."

Arlen brought himself to his feet. His legs could barely support him. The policeman took a few massive strides towards Arlen. Arlen could see his

reflection in the cop's badge. The policeman asked Arlen to take a few steps and answer a few questions. Arlen pulled himself together. The last thing he needed was to spend the night in jail. He had to be at his next gig in 37 hours and didn't have much time to rest in between. Arlen never missed a gig. The cop took Arlen's license and went back to his car. Standing by himself Arlen realized just exactly how cold it was. His body was finally telling him to recoil before hypothermia killed him. He was convinced the only way out might be to let the cop rape him but he didn't want to be the first one to bring it up.

"Look buddy. I don't think you're drunk. I can't take your license away for being a lunatic, and not all that bright. Just do me a favor. Go get some sleep. You look like you haven't slept in a month. Are you listening to me? It's too cold out here for this shit."

Arlen was checking his pockets for his keys, paying the policeman no mind.

"They are in you car dip shit," said the policeman.

"Who is in my car?"

"Your keys. The fucking thing is still running. What the fuck is the matter with you?"

"Oh, thanks."

"Get the fuck out of here."

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

If you are ever traveling in the mid country on foot it is important to be humble. The highway can eat a man alive. Edmund Wilson was not a humble man but while he was staring at the open highway he acted the part. Even a killer has things to fear on the highway.

Although, for the moment, the storm looked like it had passed, he could feel the wind chilling him to the bone, snow was surely just over the horizon.

Edmund spent the day under an overpass. It was cold and wet but he managed to get a couple hours of sleep behind a few snow covered bushes. Stacy had twenty six dollars in her purse, which Edmund now had in his travel pack. Night was drawing near. Edmund's stomach was turning and growling at him, sending sharp pains to the rest of his limbs.

He felt like he was made out of mud. He looked down at his clothes. He needed to find a place to change. His clothes were baring the wear of the road. Running from the law has proven to be more difficult than he imagined. He didn't want the snow to stop. This snow seemed to clear out the highway. The law wouldn't be as effective. Even though he was 500 miles away he didn't know if he had made the news, and he didn't want to find out the hard way. Stacy's car would stay hidden off the side of the road deep into the tree line as long as the snow kept up. The cops might think it was a simple case of a motorist going off the road either way.

After a decent day's hike up the road the sun had set again. He briefly stopped at a rest stop to wash up and take a nap in an unused janitor's closet.

He had luck not running across any state troopers but he had none finding someone to stop and pick him up. He worried that maybe there was an all points bulletin with a warning about picking up hitchhikers but figured it was pointless to think about it now. He'd freeze if he didn't find a ride before the night storm crashed down on him.

Up the road, the wind whipped and howled as the snow pummeled Arlen's '86 Impala. The spectral glaze on the highway made it difficult to see the lines. Arlen leaned forward; his eyes drew narrow and focused on the road. There was a Molly Hatchet tune playing on the radio, not that Arlen was paying any attention to it.

The lights on the dash glowed and flickered briefly but were mute compared to the difficulty he was having keeping the car on the road. Arlen had just blown past mile marker 157 on the Oklahoma freeway. Arlen needed sleep. He had driven through the night and could feel his body giving out and his mind drifting.

It started with a gentle beat of his engine. Then he focused on the hum of wheels trying to match beats with the grinding of his windshield wipers. His madness usually started with something small that caught him in just the right way. He tried to ignore it but that made him focus on it, before too long he was consumed.

Arlen realized he was paying attention to everything but the road. Fatigue was catching up to him. He adjusted the rearview mirror and looked at the gash in his head. It was clean but still throbbing. He was hoping that it wasn't infected.

He set the mirror back in place sure he wasn't going to make it another mile before his body collapsed. He wasn't sure what was happening to him. He thought maybe it was lack of sleep, depression, or too much booze, maybe all of the above. He even thought that maybe he was having drug flashbacks from his short time at BU in the mid 70's.

"I have got to figure this out," he said to himself. He knew it was only a matter of time before his body would shut down if he couldn't figure a way to get some rest.

"Maybe I should write a joke about not being able to sleep," he said again as if there was someone listening.

As Arlen pondered these things, he saw a speck on the side of the highway. As he focused the shape began to look erect, then almost human and it had a thumb extended toward the sky.

"Thank you fate," he said still talking to himself. "I don't know what I would do without you." Someone else in the car might help him focus he thought. Arlen pulled the car to the side of the road and cranked the window down.

Edmund looked worn but his face was still soft; the last thing you would suspect him of was being a killer. Arlen wondered how long he had been out in the bitter snow. Edmund was breathing heavily over a plaid scarf that was draped around his neck like a noose.

"Hey buddy you want a lift. If you help me stay awake I'll take you as far as Hog's Hallow."

"Sure, thanks man you're really saving me. Hog's Hallow, I ain't never been there."

Edmund was still dizzy. He thought maybe he had a concussion but realized it was most likely hunger. He only knew one the- he needed a car. This time he would be coy and well planned.

Edmund opened the car and and coolly looked Arlen in the eyes. The sun set over the horizon as the car crushed through the snow and the wheels were grinding the highway.

"So mister why you headed to Hog's Hallow? As I said, I never heard of the place and I've been all over."

"Work," said Arlen trying to avoid the question.

"What kind of work?"

"I'm a comedian," said Arlen with considerable hesitation.

Edmund loosened the grip on his trench knife, "Well then, it looks like we have a little something in common. You're a man that knows about art. I fancy myself as something of an artist," said Edmund.

"I don't know about art. I'm not sure I know about much anything at this point," said Arlen.

"I find that a little hard to believe. Men can find art in all kinds of savagery," said Edmund.

"Savagery? What are you talking about? I tell jokes for drunkards who like to throw things. I wasn't hunting elephants or killing a baby seals."

"Who said anything about killing baby seals? I was just making a point. Art is everywhere."

"No it's not. I met a guy in Edgewood, Montana he had one tooth and smelt like a hippo's cunt. I actually stayed with him for a few nights while I was held over between shows. It was a low point. Don't

ask. Anyway, he thought he was some type of painter or something. He would take handfuls of cow manure and throw it against these really old canvasses and color it with acrylic paint when it dried. Art was in no way near him."

Edmund didn't know how to accept the information coming at him. Arlen had a strange charisma that made everything he said almost laughable. So Edmund laughed.

"So because of him you don't believe in art anymore?"

"Yes."

"Well that's sad."

"Not really. If you think about it. Its inspirational. I'm a man that spent most of his life doing something he completely hated for no reason than he has nothing else to do with his time and no other marketable skills."

"You must have thought what you are doing was novel at some point. You must have seen some art in it."

"I considered myself an artist of sorts at one point, I guess, but not anymore. I guess I would consider myself more of a roaming...well, bad tempered

alcoholic with a receding hairline. Where is the art in that? Art is for people without ears and look, I still have both my ears."

"Some people say that you have to live it until it becomes a part of you."

"I lived it all right, and then I flushed it right down the toilet," said Arlen.

Edmund laughed. Arlen's appearance baffled him. He had only killed one man, a cop in the bay area whom he thought recognized his face. It wasn't what he liked to do but, at this point, it was all about survival.

GHOSTS

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Edmund said as he looked Arlen in the eyes. Edmund's hand caressed the bulge in his knapsack, tracing his fingers along the ridges of his unsheathed trench knife.

"No. I don't even believe in God," Arlen hated conversations about theology but he could tell that the conversation was headed down that path at some point. He just figured he would help it along. He noticed himself antagonizing a bit without realizing

he was doing it and he couldn't figure out how to stop.

"So you're a godless man? Well I'd have to advise against that," said Edmund. "A man without God is a man without purpose. You don't think this all just happened by accident do you?"

"I'll believe in God when gravity stops working. Then at least I will have a reason. Maybe then I'll believe in ghosts too," Arlen said.

"You're definitely a funny man," said Edmund, "I believe in God."

"I thought you said you were an artist," said Arlen.

"I am," said Edmund.

"You know what, I get it. I get it."

"Get what?"

Arlen wasn't paying any attention and didn't realize he had been asked a question. Instead he began to think of a movie he saw once where a guy was going crazy and didn't know it. The main character met this guy who turned out to be a figment of his own dementia And ended up doing all sorts of crazy things when he wasn't paying attention. He looked at Edmund and realized that his hair seemed to be a bit too

perfect and his skin was unnaturally tan for the season. He thought, *what the hell would anyone who had any kind of a brain be doing walking in the worst snow storm in history?* He thought to reach out and touch Edmund's face but was sure Edmund would object, real or not, so he tried the direct approach.

"Are you real?" said Arlen doubting his own perception.

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm sorry I just thought that...well I've just had a rough couple of nights. Do you know who Tyler Durden is?"

Arlen's radio dial suddenly drew his interest. He couldn't figure out what was happening with the lights. The dial was wild with a life of its own. It was flashing symbols at Arlen, many of which he had never seen. Arlen reached for the knob then recoiled when a greeting took form in front of his eyes.

"Hello Arlen. Why are you so glum?" Arlen read the cool, blue letters on the display. Arlen pulled his hand away from it like he had just touched a scalding hot coffee mug, or would if his brain was working correctly. Edmund caught the sudden movement out of the corner of his eye.

Edmund's thought it best to keep the conversation moving, but his words flowed aimlessly through the night, as a sound penetrated Arlen's ear drums which he found heinous and deeply disturbing, as if Edmund's philosophy wasn't painful enough.

It was a gentle tap. Then it was another. Tap, tap, tap. He felt like someone was using a bull horn to scream in his ears. He looked at Edmund's long boney finger rapping on the dashboard. He saw the sound coming at him in pulses, not as a sound but as an object being thrust at him, just stopping short of striking him.

"Don't trust him," the radio instructed him in cool blue letters, not that the radio had any insight that Arlen did not. The moon turned blood red. Arlen shrunk in his seat, gripped in fear. Edmund observed Arlen from the corner of his eye. He also shifted uneasily in his seat. Did Arlen know who he was? A drop of sweat traced a path from Arlen's hairline into the collar of his shirt.

Arlen reached a finger towards the dial and flipped it to a different channel. As he did so a gentle hum flowed into the canals of his ears. It was warm, as if the sun had peeked through the clouds.

The edge of the sea rolled up to his feet. His mother was standing with her arms crossed. The little green man from the diner, now stood two feet tall and was pulling at her pant leg.

"Hello dear. It's nice to see you again," his mother said.

"Fuck you," said the green man. The gremlin jumped from his mothers shoulder and stripped his mother of her pants.

"Stop that you little ass hole," said Arlen.

"Stop what?" said Edmund.

"Oh honey, don't be such a prude. It's just sex."

The green man then had sex with his mother. Arlen closed his eyes tightly for a few seconds then opened them quickly. Was he dreaming?

"Listen, would you mind driving for a few miles? I feel like I need to force myself to sleep. I think I either nodded off or mother just got humped by a hairless, green monkey."

THE HELBERT FAMILY GAS N' GO

After a few hours on the road Edmund felt like he could relax. Arlen was fast asleep in the passenger seat. He looked like a baby with a line of drool running from his lip to his rugged, leather bomber jacket and down the edge of his shoulder.

Edmund drew the knife from his travel sack. The blade reflected the light from the radio wildly all over the car, dancing and jumping in an ominous aqua glow. He ran the edge of the blade against Arlen's neck, careful to not cut into the fragile piece of flesh. He sneered under his breath at how easy it would be to drive it into the bone.

Something restrained him. Arlen was not his type. He was a man. He wanted to toy with him a bit longer. There was something about Arlen that intrigued him like Arlen was a puppet Edmund could play with.

Edmund put the knife into his beltline. "Stupid bastard," he mumbled to himself. Who would trust a complete stranger with their life? Only a crazy person. Edmund didn't know what was wrong with him or why he killed but he was sure he wasn't crazy.

On the horizon Edmund saw a few lights which he strained to draw into focus. His stomach was still growling. He hadn't eaten in nearly 22 hours. Before long the lights began to take shape.

It was just an old gas station which looked badly in need of renovation, complete with chipped paint and rusted window sills. The florescent lamps barely spewed enough light to cover the pump station. He pulled around the corner and threw the car into park, just out of the sightline of the clerk, a slender woman named Joy. Her children were playing with toy cars in the backroom.

I won't go into details. The massacre at the Helbert family owned gas station has been well reported upon since. It was even turned into a made for television movie. They neglected to mention Arlen passed out in the passenger seat of his own car only of dozen or so feet from where three college-age girls were killed and dismembered, and the children...well that's another story.

Edmund packed his clothes neatly into a garbage bag and put them in the trunk of his car. Arlen woke as Edmund slammed the trunk shut and was still in a

daze when the driver's door opened and Edmund took his place in the driver's seat.

"What the fuck? Did I sleep? Thank God," Arlen looked out the window at the small age torn city. "Did I sleep through a nuclear holocaust or something? This place looks like a hooker's ass hole."

"Hey relax buddy. I got you some beef jerky," said Edmund with a smile.

"I think I want to drive," said Arlen. Edmund was shocked as Arlen was clearly in no shape to drive.

"Fine but don't drive like a maniac. I have a feeling if this snow doesn't let up this is going to be a long night."

REPTILES AND FLOWERS

"Did you change clothes?" Arlen asked innocently looking over from the drivers seat.

"No," replied Edmund as he was shifting his collar.

Arlen was sure that Edmund was wearing a different shirt and the one he had on looked a few sizes too small for him. He was a strong man, but little man and the flannel shirt made him look like a

body builder. Edmund began to think maybe Arlen had seen something. It was a fun bit of amateur psychology talking to Arlen but the last thing he needed was to let Arlen stroll to a payphone and make a call to the cops.

The truth is Arlen couldn't have cared less about the shirt but couldn't help himself. Now that he was sure Edmund wasn't some psychological hiccup screwing with him was all the more fun.

"Are you sure?" he said. "The other shirt you had on actually fit you."

"No, it's the same shirt," said Edmund.

"Are you absolutely sure? I have this thing about flannel, you see. I love it. It is my second favorite fabric. If you were wearing flannel I would have almost certainly have made a mental note of it. Almost 70 percent of everything I own is made of flannel, all of it plaid. I have other thing about plaid."

"What are you talking about?" Arlen could sense Edmund was growing uneasy.

"Look I'm sorry. I'm just playing around. I don't care if you changed your shirt or not."

Edmund loosened the grip on his blade. He watched as Arlen's eyes danced from the radio dial, to the road, to the floor board, to the backs of his hands, back to the road again. He seemed anxious but almost totally oblivious to Edmund. He watched him like a scientist in an animal reserve.

As the car rolled on the couple became increasingly distant. Arlen, while driving, was wrapped in his own things. Edmund rested his hand on the butt of his knife. Arlen seemed harmless enough. They drove into the night, burning the cold ground as they went. Edmund watched the moon as it would peek through the clouds every dozen or so miles, through a clearing in the snow clouds.

When Arlen Finally spoke it was awkward. He was agitated to have to speak to anyone, which made Edmund wonder why Arlen had decided to pick him up in the first place. Edmund was just happy to have something to cut the silence.

"Do you ever think that maybe you were put on earth for one thing and what you are actually doing is completely wrong?" said Arlen.

"No."

"Well I do. What the hell was I thinking all these years? I spent years making everyone else laugh, I'm thinking maybe I should have just worked in insurance and had some type of family or something. What I'm trying to say is that there is a chance that I've driven myself mental."

"Why would you want that?"

"I didn't mean to go mental! No one means to go mental! One day you're on the Tonight Show the next your mental. I didn't put it on my itinerary one afternoon and then put a check next to it when it finally happened."

"No I meant have a family."

"Oh, that, good question my friend. It seems like the thing to do."

"It's overrated. I haven't spoken to my wife in a few months. We had a couple of lifestyle issue."

Arlen again was not listening and instead waiting to speak. "What would you say if I told you that you looked like a giant cartoon duck since you stepped into the car and everything else seems a little off as well?" It wasn't true but Arlen didn't think it was out of the question that it could have very well been the case.

"I'd say you were insane."

"Oh."

"Maybe you should think about finding something to believe in," Edmund took a small book from his knapsack. "I've read this cover to cover. I read it every chance I get. I would have gone insane a long time ago without it."

"What is it?"

"A bible."

"I've heard of that. It's a best seller. You should see some of the book groups I've been to. People are mental about it."

"You're a funny man."

The highway spun and narrowed, lights became sparse and the earth seemed desolate. Arlen just wanted the snow to end. He was joking about Edmund looking like a duck, but he was still having his problems.

They talked about their lives. Edmund dodged most of the questions about himself, engaging only those which pertained to his professional life, pre-maniac. For instance he had been a political worker, a Republican, and very successful. He left out the part about, being wanted for murder, escaping justice,

leaving town shortly after his candidate won the Gubernatorial election in Washington state.

He felt human for the first time in months. He had led a double life for years. On the outside he had been a flashy family man with a fast moving career. On the inside he was a killer, cold blooded, hard living. Even his wife had no idea to his true being.

Like any killer was caught by the law and the walls crumbled. Before his escape there were no masks to wear. He was just a killer. With Arlen, for the time being, he could at least act the part of a good citizen. But any wall built so shabbily is bound to fall.

There still hangs a sign near mile marker three just outside of the Oklahoma border. It reads, "For information leading to the capture of the man suspected in the vigilante capture of Edmund Wilson please contact the Springfield County Police Department- Reward \$10,000."

They still get a few calls a year. Most of which are drunken college kids or fame seekers looking more for the recognition than the money. The department still keeps a file on Arlen; some don't even believe that to be his real name.

Only two people really know what happened in the bucket seats of that old Chevy Impala. Most of this section is recreated from an old notebook I found in the rafters of that old cabin in the mountains.

Around 2:33 in the morning they rolled into Springfield County, sheer dumb luck would make legends of local police enforcement, immortalizing them as the men who claimed capture of the I-55 killer.

Not that Edmund and Arlen would have known where they were, the snow was blinding. Edmund couldn't see more than a dozen or so feet from the car. He was wondering how Arlen kept the car on the road at all.

They would have surely found a place to rest if they weren't a madman and a serial killer. Edmund kept thinking of the moon going crazy behind the clouds. He was losing his patience, Arlen was losing his novelty. Edmund wanted to be behind the wheel.

"You said earlier you don't believe in ghosts. I believe in ghosts," said Edmund as he gripped his knife in his pack.

"I'm so hot," Arlen said, "I can't believe how hot it is in here. Arlen unzipped his bomber jacket and unbuttoned his shirt. He turned the heater off and cracked his window. For the moment he forgot he had a passenger.

"Is everything all right bub? You look sick or something."

"No I'm fine. I've just been feeling a little under the weather," said Arlen.

Edmund pulled his shoulders back to let the tension flow from his neck with a few cracks of his spinal column.

"Maybe I should find a hospital?"

"You'll be all right. Maybe I should drive?"

"I met a cop earlier who said I should get some rest. We should find him and ask him why? I must be falling apart at the hinges. I'm fucking worried that I look like shit. Fuck, it's so fucking hot."

Edmund decided it was time to end the conversation. Edmund nervously extended a finger towards the radio. He liked to hear every sound.

When he killed he felt like Picasso standing over Starry Night, stoking violently yet with delicate precision.

"I hate comedians," said Edmund. These few words hit Arlen's ears like a ton of bricks.

"What?" Arlen turned to look Edmund in the eyes. He wasn't sure if he had imagined those words or if they really came out of Edmund's mouth. Edmund's eyes turned red like they had been forged in hell.

Suddenly, to Arlen, the steering wheel looked like two great, slick serpents, each baring fangs, ravenous for blood. He recoiled in fear as the beasts lunged for him. Edmund pushed his feet against the floor board expecting a strike but receiving nothing more than a surprised glance.

In Arlen's eyes, the snow coming down now looked like hyacinth, each pastel petal a lasting ray of light. Arlen jerked his hands off the wheel. The snake's stone gaze was fixed on him, studying his every move. The car began to shift violently on the highway.

"What the hell are you crazy or something," screamed Edmund in a dead panic. He grabbed the wheel. His knife was safely in his belt line.

"Don't touch it," said Arlen. Arlen panicked. He bit into Edmund's hand like it was a piece of chewy beef jerky. Edmund shrieked in pain and clasped his hands together to stop the bleeding.

"God damn it. I'm going to cut your fucking eyes out you fucking freak," screamed Edmund.

"I'm sorry. I was just trying to help you," said Arlen, "unless you really said you wanted to eat my brains."

Edmund's hand bore deep, well defined bite marks with blood gushing from each neatly formed indentation. His thumb was numb. He reached for the knife and ripped it loose. Blood splashed against the windshield and dash board. As he tried to clench the knife a sharp pain shot from his thumb up his forearm. He couldn't tighten his hand around the handle.

Arlen was dodging strikes from the snake and trying to keep the car on the road with his finger tip. The car passed under a streetlight. The glimmer of the knife caught Arlen's eye. Arlen saw the bite marks that he left on Edmund's hand. He drove the gas pedal deep onto the floor board.

The car made a quick jerk as Arlen was trying to dodge the snake. Edmund made a feeble attempt to

clench the knife but it slipped out of his hand and fell, handle first, onto Arlen lap.

"What the hell is that?" asked Arlen. He thought for a moment that God had sent him the blade. He picked it up and jabbed it into the steering wheel, not quite sure what to believe was real.

Edmund reached across Arlen's face, extending his hand towards the blade. Arlen's head whipped around. Suddenly, Arlen realized that Edmund was going to take the knife and most likely stab him in the ear. He centered the bite marks, lunged and clenched his jaw tightly. The flesh tore away from the bone with ease.

Edmund let a scream that could have brought a banshee to its knees. He fought violently to remove his hand from Arlen's mouth. Arlen loosened his jaws as Edmund buried his fist in the stomach of his jacket as blood flowed freely from the wound. Arlen reached over Edmund and in one motion opened the door and shoved him into the snow. Edmund rolled out of control creating a beautiful burst of red and white.

Luckily for Edmund the snow was deep enough to break his fall. He hit hard. Arlen sped down the highway. He was frantically trying to steer the car and avoid the wrath of the reptile.

Edmund was face down in the snow for quite some time. The next ride he would get was to the hospital where an orderly would make a rather disturbing discovery in his knapsack.

A jaw imprint taken from the bite marks in his hand would go unclaimed. A reward would go up. For years people would turn in their dental records in hopes that they would be mistaken as the man who stopped the I-55 killer.

GRINDING METAL AND THE BIRTH OF ARLEN STOUT

For some time, for Arlen, death always seemed the next logical step, if not intentionally surely by some unfortunate accident.

Arlen knew it. He spent considerable effort trying to craft a suitable note. Then again he had always spent time crafting various notes on all types of subjects. It was the first page in his first notebook that I found in that shabby cabin in the Woods. The cover just read, "Arlen Stout's MANIFESTO." It read:

To Whom It May Concern:

If you are reading this I know what you are thinking. You are wrong. I really, really didn't mean to do this. I just happen to really, really like being alive, or I did anyway. Please make sure my underwear is clean before you call my mother. She always told me that I should wear clean underwear in case I ever died. To make a long story short, sorry about in trouble.

Best Regards,

Arlen Stout

Arlen never killed a man and it disturbed him that he might now be a killer whether justified or not. As the clouds broke overhead these things rolled, loosely in his mind. Arlen's thoughts drifted from the death note to his mother, then quickly to the telephone pole and the metal crushing around him. His car quickly caught fire.

Arlen inhaled black smoke and coughed as he tried to fight his way out of the car. He ripped the door

and broke it off in his hand. He threw it on the floorboard as he grabbed the knob for the window and rolled it down violently.

Arlen stuck his head out the window and sucked air into with lungs as hard as nature would allow. He struggled from the car and landed head first in the snow. The sun was coming over the horizon.

The car exploded into flames and ignited into a golden orange halo of light that looked like it had been sent from heaven. Arlen looked at his car burning and realized that things couldn't get much worse.

He knew that no help was coming. It had been hours since he had seen another car. The truth most of the cars had stopped up the road upon the discovery of Edmund's limp body. Arlen felt his legs burn as he set his course through the snow, his feet stomped through the soft surface. He pushed to get to the highway.

He walked until he felt his legs felt ready to give out and then he walked harder. His toes and fingers went numb. Snot traced down his face, around his mouth. He was too cold to care. He turned to see his car blazing in the morning sun. Everything he

owned was in the Impala: a comb, a book about Einstein that he never got a chance to read, six unopened Budweiser cans, two changes of clothes including one of his two favorite bomber jackets, and a bloody suit jacket with matching tie.

"Oh well. I'm sick of that piece of shit anyway," he said to himself.

He started playing games in his head to keep his mind off the frigid air but couldn't take his mind off of Edmund laying face down in the snow. He had never killed anyone before. It didn't feel pleasant.

BIRDS IN THE GRAVEYARD

No one knows why he was there, 30 miles away from the crash, but from behind his dark biker sunglasses Arlen gazed at the steeple, jettisoned into the grey sky. It was every bit as old as it was intimidating. The stained glass windows reflected the morning sun which lit the ground below. Deep shades of blue and purple danced in his eyes. It was on the edge of town as if to tell all comers not to sin in the alleys of Hog's Hallow.

Arlen opened a rickety gate that was guarding an old graveyard. If there was another way to enter the church he didn't see it. He giggled at the irony as strolled through looking at some of the names on the weathered headstones. Gloom rushed through him when he thought of the finality of death. It occurred to him that every tombstone used to live and breathe just as he did.

The church was beautiful, but the brick was old and worn and the tip of the cross seemed to touch the clouds. Arlen's were the only set of footprints on the new snow. As he walked he was looking into the eyes of a giant gargoyle hanging from a sturdy oak door. He felt like he was getting ready to meet one of the Knights of the Round Table. He pulled back on the knocker. His muscles gave to the weight of the heavy piece of iron. As he beat it against the solid oak he could hear it echo through the cathedral.

He heard footsteps. The door handle slowly turned. Arlen could hear a man grunting and struggling to open the heavy door. A little old man popped his head out of the door. The priest's eyes briefly looked familiar.

"Do I know you?" said Arlen.

"I don't think so," replied the priest.

"Ah, oh, hello father, ah, I don't really know where to begin, I guess I'm lost," said Arlen.

"Come now, my son only Jesus can help light your way," said the old man warmly.

"No I mean I'm really lost. I am trying to find Hog's Hallow,"

"You're in luck. Hog's Hallow is just over ridge hill. I didn't think you looked familiar. You don't look like a reporter. What is your name?" the old man fought to get the door open so his whole body could fit through the tiny crack.

"Arlen, Arlen Stout."

"Oh really, it's a pleasure to meet you my son. Are you here for the fair? Are you a reporter? As I said you look nobler than that."

"Why in the hell would you think I am a reporter? Is everyone that comes here a reporter? I really don't have a profession. Well, I used to anyway. I'm a comedian but I'm quitting. I realize that life is no joke. You know the whole universe is greater than the sum of its parts kind of thing."

"My son, I don't know if you are feeling all right but I can say you must do what is in your

heart," said the priest. "God only helps those who ask for it." Arlen's was sure that his heart was pumping pure petroleum jelly.

"What about the universe? As far as I can see it's all too fucking confusing, sorry for being frank father. I have been thinking about God and the nature of everything. Is it possible to know, I mean really know? Maybe if I really knew what I was supposed to be I could hold things together."

"My son God has a plan for all living creatures. It is up to you to find out what that plan is. Some people send their whole lives searching." The priest's eyes rolled and the whites turned to black. Arlen thought he could see the universe passing through them.

"Could I ask you a question?" said Arlen with the wind starting to whip through the courtyard.

"Sure, you can ask me anything you want."

"How does a man know when it's time to walk a different path? I think I am ready to give this whole fate thing a try. Could you help me out?"

"It doesn't quite work like that my son. Do you believe in our heavenly father Jesus Christ?"

"No."

For some reason the priest giggled. No one is usually honest with a priest, not even during a confession. Arlen seemed almost as serious as Bugs Bunny right before he dropped an anvil on Elmer Fudd.

"What's so funny?" asked Arlen innocently.

"Oh nothing, you're a funny man but you are truly lost. The path to true enlightenment comes from Jesus' teachings. The Shepherd will guide the meek to the Promised Land. Have faith and you will find your way."

"But what about fate? At this point I'm ready to believe just about anything."

"I don't know about fate. I always believed that if the Lord wants you to do something or be somewhere there will be a sign," said the priest. His eyes shifted and glowed bright red. Arlen ignored them.

"What kind of a sign?"

"You'll know it when it comes around. It could be something as simple as a bird singing outside your window or as bold as something falling from heaven."

"A bird? What kind of a bird?"

"That was just an example my son."

"I'll bet it's a bird. I love birds. My mother owns a yellow parakeet. Are you saying I should go visit my mother or something?"

"Well maybe," said the priest with a giggle, "but I was just using that as an example."

Arlen thanked the Father and turned and walked into the snow. Within a few seconds he had disappeared over the ridge.

And that was the last anyone around here saw or spoke to Arlen Stout. Arlen never showed in Hog's Hallow to perform. As far as I know he never showed anywhere. Every so often a story would pop up about seeing Arlen in a super market or in a hotel window but they were usually found to be as justified as an Elvis sighting.

I was working at the reception desk of St. Vincent Hospital at the time, writing stories in my spare time. Edmund was wheeled in, half dead from hypothermia.

He was mumbling stories about the man he met in the snow. He became a star as well. He was executed a few years later. I was there as well, this time covering it as a freelance writer for the Oklahoma Free Press.

He would talk about his art with anyone who would listen. I sat down with him a number of times. He was engaging, a bit friendly. But, as well as he hid it, you could always see the killer behind the eyes. I found myself looking at Arlen's jaw imprint for time to time.

"What happened to the man who gave you that?" I'd ask.

"Don't know."

"What was he like? Did you kill him?"

"He was crazy. I didn't kill him."

"Some people would say that about you know? That you're crazy."

"Yes. They're wrong. I just had hobbies that most people wouldn't agree with."