2006

Writing with Faith

Charles M. McLean

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Charles M. McLean Jr, B.A.

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

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ABSTRACT

Faith is the belief in something larger than oneself. It is not provable; it is not necessarily logical. It is a feeling, an intuition. Faith can be a belief in a god or a set of ideals, but the important part is the believing. If a person is without faith, that person is lost and remains so until such time a belief is born again.

This culminating project strives to look at faith through essay and short fiction. A preface essay speaks to what I think faith is and why every human being requires it. The introduction has three purposes. First, it introduces me and tells how I lost my faith in writing. Second, it discusses the authors who have influenced my writing. Third, it discusses each story in this collection and their connections to the theme.

The body of this project is made up of four pieces of short fiction, each tackling a facet of faith. The first, "Wrong Side Up," tells of a man whose faith is so strong even natural disaster and family tragedy doesn't break his belief. "The Meek One" is a story about a young man who creates a false-faith and his eventual fall from grace. The third piece, "Death and Life," is about a tragedy that makes a man lose all faith and his spiral down to a personal hell, until he is able to save himself. The last story of the collection, "To Have Faith is to be a Mockingbird." addresses the question of what happens to a man who has no faith, yet everyone he cares about has complete faith in a gift he doesn't believe

he possesses. His need for understanding sends him on a quest to save his sister and maybe himself.

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COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor Michael Castro, Chairperson and Advisor

Assistant Professor Beth Mead

DEDICATION

To my father who led by example. He was the first in the family to graduate from college, at the age of 44.

To my mother who let him.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This project was only possible through the professionalism and positive atmosphere created by the Lindenwood University LCIE faculty. I thank each of them, especially Professor Michael Castro, for their mentoring and support. I also don't think I could have done this without the support and genuine friendship of my fellow M.F.A. students. I wish good luck to them all.

June 15, 2006

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Preface

O Lord, if there is a Lord, Save my soul, if I have a soul.
-- Ernest Renan

Faith is a set of principles or beliefs. It is conviction in something larger than oneself. The belief doesn't rest on logic; empiricism is its source. It is a feeling, an intuition not easily explainable. Faith is a loyalty and an allegiance to something higher. That something can be a god, a religion, or a set of ideals. A person can have faith in love or faith in the Universe itself. I don't care. The important point is faith requires believing in something that transcends humankind. The important point is the believing.

But faith has a quirk, a caveat. It also requires the possibility of being wrong. A person may have faith that the sun will rise tomorrow, but the truth will not be known until after sunrise. Belief is a scale, a prorated standard of perfection, not perfection itself. Faith can be strong, containing only a tiny crack, or it can be fragile like dominos standing on a shaky table. That prospect of mistakenness is the difference between being Job and being Noah.

Faith requires no proof. It is in fact anti-proof. If Jesus or Vishnu or Buddha or Zeus or any other deity appeared tomorrow and warned mankind that we had better start believing or else, what would be the point in then becoming a Christian or a Hindu or Buddhist or whatever? Without the faith and belief required before the earthly visit, joining a religion wouldn't amount to

more than a gym membership. With answers scribbled on the arm of the student, a test is no longer a test.

When faith is mistaken for truth, a person mutates into a true-believer where feelings and intuition are no longer required. Absolutes reign and minds close. Faith without hope is not faith. It is perversion, a distortion of earnest. Fundamentalists are true-believers and they are as much lost as the faithless. With no room for error, with no fear of perhaps being wrong, there is no room for growth, only obstinacy and intolerance.

Martin Kellman writes in *The Humanist* about a philosophy professor trying to explain the argument from design,

> [He]...used the example of a deck of cards. The odds were astronomical that the cards would fall in the order that they did but were even that they would fall in some order. A student burst into tears and screamed, "You mean it's all meaningless?" He attempted to comfort her. "Suppose," he said, "you had been attending concerts for years, thinking there was a coded message in the music. Now you are told there is no such message. If the music is nice, don't stop listening." Her sobbing intensified. (46)

Without faith, a person is lost. With no possibilities there are no realities, there is no hope. There doesn't have to be coded messages in the music. Faith only requires someone *believe* that there is.

All humanists are atheists, but not all atheists are humanists. Atheists reject only religious dogma and all deities. They are capable of spiritual enlightenment and many have faith in something larger. The humanist shuns all

spirituality, an empty shell left to decompose into base elements. I think the worst thing one could be is a humanist, a fence-sitter who chooses to contemplate, experiment and graze for answers, but never make up a mind. It is one thing to seek answers, but quite another to never decide on any, leaving all possibilities open. A humanist would call it open-mindedness. I would call it faithlessness.

Believe in something.

Introduction

Paths can be funny things. Some are broad and stand out like approach lights lining runways. Others are barely discernable, not much more than a few broken twigs and stepped-on ground cover. So, how do we know which to take? How do we know which are right? Do we really need "the road less traveled" or is the freeway of life better?

I have believed for a long time that this decision making process is the crux of life. Everyday, we make many choices. Some are simple, like what to have for breakfast and others are difficult, like deciding to remove a mother's feeding tube. These choices piggy-back, interlock at right angles to form a structure, building on top of one another. Similar to a log cabin, once a log is set and other logs added, a lower one cannot move without affecting each one stacked above it. Earlier decisions that cannot be undone trap us. Some paths remain blocked. Others corral us. We must dismantle or destroy the structure to begin again.

In the tenth grade, I had English Literature class. The teacher was a tall, severe woman with flaming red hair and pancake makeup named Miss McKinney. I don't remember much about the semester, but I do remember one assignment to write a short story. Being an avid reader interested in writing, I dove into the assignment head first. I wrote an epic of Science Fiction, my favorite genre at that time. It was a complicated story of survival after a shuttle

crew returned to the planet to find a tragedy occurred, with most of their fellow men destroyed or morphed into zombie-radioactive-mutants. The story was a conglomeration of my favorite Science Fiction themes from the past couple year's readings. It was nearly thirty-five typed pages long, not bad for a fifteen year old.

I was proud of it. I felt this was a defining moment in my young life, one that might put me on an important path. The rest of the students turned in stories only a few pages long. Mine was special, or so I believed and was sure of my reward. In my opinion, the effort alone was worthy of an A, even if the story wasn't. I envisioned Miss McKinney singling me out or commenting on where my future needed to head.

When Miss McKinney returned my story, it had a large, red C+ circled on the front. A hand written note from her in the same bloody scrawl said to the effect (I will not attempt to quote from so long ago), "Too long – I didn't even finish it."

I was devastated. From that moment on, I remember nothing of that class. Not just that day, but also the rest of the semester. Upon arriving home, I stared at the title page again and then dropped the story into the trash. I don't remember writing creatively again for nearly twenty years. I had lost my faith and without faith I was lost. I made a choice to move away from writing.

My writing started in second grade with a teacher named Miss Curly. She said I had a knack for story writing, though I can't imagine in second grade that meant much more than writing complete sentences about one thought. But I

believed her. I had faith. So, I wrote her stories, which she compiled into a little book my mother still has to this day. Miss Curly planted a seed that lay dormant for many years and when it germinated in the tenth grade, Miss McKinney pulled it like a weed.

Paths can be funny things. Paths can be precarious things.

I came to Lindenwood to finish a Bachelor's degree. Any degree. It wasn't important. I had hundreds of hours across different disciplines and it was time to make them mean something. I didn't like any of the degree majors at first, but I chose Communications because the writing clusters looked like something I could if not enjoy, at least make it through. I did make it through and by the end, the new M.F.A. Creative Writing program had started. Another path stood conspicuously before me. I began to believe that I might be capable of writing creatively again.

Paths can be funny things. Paths can be illuminating things.

I think writers draw influence in two ways. The first is from authors who stir imagination and quench the writer's thirst for good stories. The other is from authors who contribute to a writer's technique or influence the way the writer structures work. The former is more prevalent. Writers read diverse authors, so it is a logical assumption that most reading is pleasure reading, done for enjoyment of a good story and to satiate the writer's crave of well-written material. The latter, the author's who actually influence technique, may be a smaller number,

but are extremely important to a writer's evolution as creator. Whether direct or indirect, whether conscious or unconscious, this second influence is the important one, but the first must never be ignored.

When I started reading for pleasure as a young teen, I discovered Edgar Rice Burroughs, specifically, *Tarzan of the Apes*. This character, this writing was like nothing else I had experienced. It wasn't a children's reader or a book written for children. This was an adult story, written in an adult way, yet still understandable by an eleven year old. *Tarzan* is an epic tale about far-away places, amazing adventures, and heroic deeds. What was not to fall in love with at eleven? It was as if a secret door opened. It was passages like this from Tarzan's fight with the gorilla, Bolgani, which grabbed my young attention:

> In fact he met the brute midway in its charge, striking its huge body with his closed fists and as futilely as he had been a fly attacking an elephant. But in one hand he still clutched the knife he had found in the cabin of his father, and as the brute, striking and biting, closed upon him the boy accidentally turned the point toward the hairy breast. As it sank deep into the body of him the gorilla shrieked in pain and rage. (70)

This certainly wasn't Pooh or Silverstein or the Hardy brothers. I was hooked.

Over the next decade I continued to read Burroughs, but added Poul Anderson, Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert, and many more. These science fiction and adventure writers stoked my imagination until it was a burning furnace. For the most part I touched no true literature. Occasionally, I read some Jack London

or a wee bit of Robert Frost, but a perquisite was it must be about nature. During these years my imagination was a sponge. The stranger, the better; the more possibilities there were to mull over. Those years between about eleven and twenty-one were decisive. I was searching and I craved potentialities. These authors, these stories that most arguably didn't rise to the level of literature, molded my mind, my philosophy that all was possible. Though I feel no compulsion to write like Burroughs or Philip José Farmer, I give them credit for keeping me interested and excavating an enormous pool that one day I'd use to draw inspiration.

Eventually, literature did interest me. I began attending college in 1985 after a stint in the military. Humanities & arts were some of my favorite electives when I couldn't fit any more science into my schedule. It was there I re-discovered Shakespeare. I suddenly got him and understood the power of dialogue to tell a story. Eventually, authors like Hemingway and Carver would reinforce this point. To this day I can remember my favorite lines from my favorite play, Richard II. They appear in Act IV, Scene I. They are spoken by Richard to Bullingbrook as Richard is forced to give up his crown, "You may my glories and my state depose/But not my griefs; still am I king of those (Riverside 829). The power of dialogue to tell a story is no more evident than in play form and in Shakespeare's work, though four hundred years old, I found was still the best place to learn that.

Some of the fiction writers who influence my writing, that is my technique, or at least they influence me because when I read them I say to myself, "I wished I did it that way," are Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and D.H. Lawrence. But there are also poets who enlighten me as a fiction writer and the important ones are Raymond Carver, Wislawa Szymborska, and a number of 8th & 9th century Chinese poets.

Raymond Carver may very well be a better poet than a fiction writer. That is for others and time to decide, but there exist similarities between his prose and verse. Carver writes about simple, mundane things and elevates them to something important. His language is terse and oblique, not giving too much away. Carver himself, in his essay "On Writing" that appeared in Fires, sees this as important to writing in general:

> It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using common-place but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power. (24)

The idea that value lives in the smallest, seemingly insignificant things is an idea I attempt to keep close when I write. Carver shows it well in his poem, "The Window":

> A storm blew in last night and knocked out
> the electricity. When I looked
> through the window, the trees were translucent.
> Bent and covered with rime.

A vast calm lay over the countryside.
I knew better. But at the moment
I felt I'd never in my life made any
false promises, nor committed
so much as one indecent act. My thoughts
were virtuous. Later on that morning,
of course, electricity was restored.
The sun moved from behind the clouds,
melting the hoarfrost.
And things stood as they had before. (All of Us 211)

There are no big words in this poem, only big ideas. The language is simple, yet his point is profound. Carver's poetry is also narrative; stories told are alluded to or implied. This view that less is more I agree is a good template to emulate.

Wislawa Szymborska impresses me for her gift of understatement and like Carver, her good use of plain language and the idea that everything has value. Items seemingly insignificant have the potential to add reason to life. Her poems are about stones, a telephone ringing in an empty art gallery, a grain of sand, or a simple list. Szymborska gives importance to what most see as unimportant and she does all this in the form of philosophical reflection, like thinking aloud while sitting under a tree.

Chinese poets like Li Po, Chang Chi, Po Chü-I, Wang Wei, Wang Chien, and Tu Fu teach me that imagery can be strong even in small packages. In Tu Fu's poem, "Travelling Northward" in a few lines of vivid imagery, the reader is transported to the place described:

Screech owls moan in the yellowing
Mulberry trees. Field mice scurry,

Preparing their holes for winter.
Midnight, we cross an old battlefield.
The moonlight shines cold on white bones.

In the four line poem, "The New Wife," Wang Chien conveys a complex relationship in a small space:

On the third day she went down to the kitchen,
Washed her hands, prepared the broth.
Still unaware of her new mother's likings,
She asks her sister to taste.

This emphasis on imagery and complexity in short verse translates well to short fiction. A good image in a line or two in the right place of a story adds depth and layers. I try to use this technique in my short fiction.

Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Principle (that seven-eighths of a narrative takes place beneath the surface of a text) and his related Theory of Omission (a writer may omit things and if the writer is writing truthfully, the reader will in fact pick up on the omission) has guided many a writer. I also trust them and see them work in Hemingway's and Carver's stories. I attempt to write fiction in the same manner, especially during editing.

Hemingway created contemporary short fiction. After him, florid, Victorian prose was gone. His terse structure, lean stories aren't weighted by reflection. They center on action and dialogue, giving a sense of now. His style insinuates much in subtext. There is always more than written. In the beginning of his story, "The Capital of the World," young Paco is described:

> He was a well built boy with very black, rather curly hair, good teeth and a skin that his sisters envied, and he had a ready and unpuzzled smile. He was fast on his feet and did his work well and he loved his sisters, who seemed beautiful and sophisticated; he loved Madrid, which was still an unbelievable place, and he loved his work which, done under bright lights, with clean linen, the wearing of evening clothes, and abundant food in the kitchen, seemed romantically beautiful. (29)

The paragraph contains simple language, but structurally it isn't simple. The paragraph is only two sentences long. On the surface, the paragraph describes Paco, which it does, but the reader knows much more about Paco than what is on the page. Paco is innocent, a dreamer, a young man with little experience. Smoking hasn't yellowed his teeth; his skin isn't wrinkled or darkened from time in the sun. Even his sisters aren't as perfect as Paco believes because they "seemed beautiful and sophisticated."

Raymond Carver has been described as the heir-apparent to Hemingway. It is hard to believe a reader who likes one doesn't like the other. They might not be twins, but it is possible they are first cousins. Carver uses the same oblique, terse style that relies heavy on dialogue. He leaves out things, things for the reader to fill in. He writes what seems simple, but the truth is something is hiding and it is important. Carver writes about this himself in Fires:

> I like it when there is some feeling of threat or sense of menace in short stories. I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation. There has to be tension, a sense that something is

> imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won't be a story. What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but some-times broken and unsettled) surface of things. (26)

Carver gets this menace "by leaving out, or by providing only clues to, crucial aspects of the story. Both character and reader sense that something dangerous or menacing is 'imminent' or 'submerged'... (Powell 647). The tension felt, but not read directly, is what makes Carver's fiction so appealing as a reader and a writer. The emulation in not wanting to write exactly like Carver, but to structure a story similar to Carver, using this "less is more" and "sense of menace."

> This state of menacing uncertainty is equally evident in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" when the quiet conversation suddenly becomes much, much quieter. "'Just shut up for once in your life,' Mel said very quietly. 'Will you do me a favor and do that for a minute?'" (What We Talk About 146) These sentences seem out of place in a conversation investigating love, so Mel's relationship to Terri is made ambiguous just when he is attempting to clarify it. Here, the first sentence is a harsh command, but the next is a request for a favor in the form of a question. The incongruity of tone confuses, contradicts, and, therefore, menaces. (Powell 647)

This tension is throughout all of Carver's fiction. I try to keep it in mind constantly as I write.

D.H. Lawrence's writing impresses me on many levels, but especially in one particular manner – his attention to detail when writing descriptive passages. He is a meticulous writer, but it never seems boring or wasteful. His descriptions are beautiful and poetic, filled with deeper meaning and importance, as this one in "Odour of Chrysanthemums":

> He was still warm, for the mine was hot where he had died. His mother had his face between her hands, and was murmuring incoherently. The old tears fell in succession as drops from wet leaves; the mother was not weeping, merely her tears flowed. Elizabeth embraced the body of her husband, with cheek and lips. She seemed to be listening, inquiring, trying to get some connection. But she could not. She was driven away. He was impregnable. (112)

Though I submit to wanting to write in the minimal styles of Hemingway and Carver, I also want to find places to write detailed, engrossing descriptions like Lawrence. My hope would be to find a middle ground, to come to some tactful arbitration that defines me as a writer.

The writers I have touched on are not the only that influence me. There are others. Gabriel Garcia Marquez teaches me a sense of wonder, John Steinbeck instructs me on realism, Jack London shows me morality discovered through nature, and Edward P. Jones writes ten thousand word short stories that read like hundred thousand word novels and every word is wonderful.

My collection of short fiction is about faith – the loss of faith, acquiring false faith, the rediscovery of faith, and never losing faith no matter the challenges. It is four stories that act as cornerstones to the tenet of faith and how having it or not having it changes the characters lives. These stories are certainly not the only stories told or that were ever told on the subject. Faith is a theme as old as Job and explored by many writers much better than myself. This small collection is my attempt to write about a subject I ponder often and continuously wonder if I understand at all.

The story "Wrong Side Up" is about Ignatius Stone, a man so faithful in what he believes even his name identifies him as a rock. As his life crumbles around him in the Dust Bowl of the 1930's and those nearest lose their faith or their lives, his faith never wavers. His faith in the land and what it provides and what he believes it will provide again, is untenable,

> "It's easy to forget the past when today is so bad, Ruth." He watched her sew on a pair of his coveralls. The light from the lantern lit her face and the scars shown fresh.
>
> "It's not just today. It's been four years. The land's raped of its good parts. Only the dirt's left, Ignatius. Only the mess is left behind."
>
> "Dirt is what I need. And a little rain and sun. I got the dirt and the sun. The rain will come back. It always does."
>
> "But what if it doesn't?"
>
> "I'm a farmer, Ruth, and I will farm."

Ignatius' faith originates with his upbringing. His tie to his farmland is the generations who farmed before him. He constantly repeats his daddy's colloquialisms until they are his devotions. That tie going back to his fathers strengthens his faith. Memories of a green land, reaping a harvest keeps him believing that paradise is worth some bad times.

As his son dies of pneumonia and his wife hates life on the failing farm more and more, Ignatius still won't contemplate leaving. After his son's death and his wife's fall into depression, his faith is still stronger than the idea of giving up,

> There it was. He had been waiting. "I'm staying, Ruth. This is where I belong. This is what I am. I'm not quitting. I won't be run off by a drought or by you."
>
> Now she looked up from her work and stared him down. Her voice never rose. He never heard her yell or scream at a person in anger. The voice was low and straightforward. It had a tone of importance when she was angry, like a judge passing sentence. He wished many times she would let loose and scream. He wouldn't feel so sorry for her then.
>
> "We don't always get what we want, right Ignatius? I could've been an artist, but I'm not. I didn't want to lose my son, but I did. I can't even have another child and I want one."
>
> He sighed and squatted beside her chair.
>
> "You are right. But you can't give up. You have to believe in something besides yourself. We all got to believe in more than just ourselves or we're just lost and looking to die."
>
> "What do you believe in, Ignatius?"
>
> "I believe in the land."

Dirt reoccurs throughout "Wrong Side Up." It is the dirt of the dust storms, the dirt of the land, and the dirt of sin. It piles up outside, covering the wheat. It blows with the least bit of wind, and it seeps into their home through any crack it can find. For Ruth the dirt is evil or the sin of her life. It seeped into her child's lungs and it is what she confronts and gives herself to in the end. For Ignatius the dirt is only dirt, the dust storms another hurdle in life, another test to pass to earn paradise. Dirt is what he needs as a farmer, so how can he rail against it? He knows he must get through the bad times and all will be right. Even at the end of the story, he couldn't hate the dirt:

> The wind was up the day he buried Ruth. He had to gingerly drop each shovelful of dirt to keep the dust down. Next to Ruth was Luke's grave and although Ignatius had tried many times, no grass grew over the boy. The mound of dirt had blown away and the spot was just a marked patch of dirt. He spread some shovelfuls from Ruth's hole over Luke's grave to add topsoil. He then reached into a bag and began throwing grass seed over both graves, laying it on thick. He soaked the seed from a watering can he had brought. Over the coming weeks, then months, he would return to add water and sometimes more seed, then more water. He did this because he knew one day grass would grow there again.

Ignatius' faith is tested the most not when he loses his son and not when he loses his wife, but when he hears that his fellow farmer, George Edwards, leaves Oklahoma like so many did in the 1930's. George felt the same about the land as Ignatius. Their families had farmed the land for generations and upon finding George left, Ignatius momentarily questions himself,

> Ignatius drank again, shook his head slowly, lost in thought. He started to pass the liquor and stopped, pulled it back and took another large swallow. It burned sliding down and he reluctantly gave the jar to Alvah.
>
> "Who's next?" Ignatius whispered, eyes glazed. The question sounded hollow like it slipped out and the other men exchanged glances.

"Wrong Side Up" is a story about faith tested to its limits and how strong a man truly believes in the structure of his world.

The story "The Meek One" originated from scripture. I disagree with the statement Jesus made at The Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth." I don't believe the meek will inherit anything but more pain. The history of mankind is clear and it is in history that the truth of mankind resides. The weak are beat down repeatedly. Even in the few recorded moments where the weak have beaten the strong, the victory is short-lived and the meek pay even worse.

The story centers on Simon, a boy who's been weak his entire life and defines meekness. His strong-willed mother, recognizing the boy's weakness, has told him of Christ's decree since he was young. Simon begins to believe it and it becomes his own personal religion. Instead of becoming faithless, he begins to believe he is special, a messiah of sort, the meekest of the meek. He believes he will in fact fulfill the prophesy:

> ...He was unnoticed by most of the others except for the strong; those that held power and liked it. They fed on Simon like hyenas on a fresh carcass. He survived. He survived with bruises, broken bones and deep humiliation. But that was all right; they were not going to inherit the earth, he concluded. He was sure he would. That was his purpose. He was the meekest of even the meek. He was special.

Simon's faith is strong, but misdirected. It is a false faith, destined for trouble. As his life becomes better, he believes more and more he is riding a wave of destiny. He changes inside and out; even his environment changes as his life improves:

> Things began to change. Simon had a few friends at school, but they were like him, the weakest, the ones with darting eyes, always on the alert. They flocked together with the other prey so as not to be picked off as easy. Walking down the hall, they seemed to draw courage from one another and group as a covey of quail or a herd of antelope. Strength didn't come in numbers, but a reduction of fear did.
>
> Now, other kids greeted him in the hall. The prey walking with him sensed the change, noticed Simon being noticed, and they fell back out of danger. Teachers called on Simon more often. In English class, a football player asked Simon if he could borrow a pencil instead of just taking the one out of Simon's hand. Almost overnight, it was as if he became a whole person, no longer transparent, seen by everyone and he began to believe his time was coming, as he always knew it would.

But in his messianic thoughts, Simon becomes prideful. He forgets what he was and where he came from. He crosses the line from being a humble messenger to being a messiah, so he must be humbled. He falls in love with

Carrie and his life seems perfect. He believes he has ascended to his throne and he is now beginning to reap his reward:

> "Well, I am going off to college in Rockford and you will be here at City College and working. How will we see each other?"
>
> "It will work itself out," he said smiling at her, "everything will work out." Something outside, probably a bird Simon thought crossed the light path and a dark shape caught his eye as it shot across the petals of the flower.
>
> "How can you be so sure, Simon?"
>
> "Because I know, that's all," he replied matter-of-factly.
>
> "How do you know? No one knows," Carrie replied.
>
> "I do, Carrie. I do. I have always known that if I kept my faith, I would be rewarded."
>
> "Faith in what? You don't go to church."
>
> "Faith doesn't fill churches, Carrie. Fear does."
>
> She sat up quickly, pushing his arm from across her breasts. She stared down at Simon, angered.
>
> "I have gone to church my whole life and I don't go because I am afraid."
>
> "Are you sure?" Simon asked, "Aren't you afraid of what would happen if you stopped going?"

A short time later, Simon and Carrie are attacked in an alley. Simon is pushed aside and he freezes up and becomes what he once was, what he had always been. A weakling. Carrie escapes, cursing at Simon for his cowardice and Simon is beat like he has never been beat before:

> She turned and ran, sobbing down the dark street. That was the last memory Simon had of her. He could do nothing but watch. He was stuck to the brick wall by some force that held him there as a magnet holds scrap iron. He watched the two men get up and eye Simon like wolves

> eyeing fresh meat in the middle of a bad winter. Suddenly, Simon's past came back to him and he knew this was going to hurt.

His epiphany comes with the beating. His life was a lie. He was never going to inherit anything. Simon is again broken, or he just realizes he is still broken. His faith meant nothing. It was a lie, everything he was told and everything he believed. His truth is he has nothing and will probably never have. Simon is faithless, always has been, which means he is lost.

The third story of the collection, "Death and Life," is told around Sebastian in the aftermath of a terrible accident that occurs on his charge. As a result of this tragedy, Sebastian loses all faith and his life spirals down until he hits bottom. He must find a purpose, a reason to believe he has worth, to have a chance at contentment.

Faith lost is a black hole with no bottom. To believe and then have that belief torn away leaves a void that is not refillable with anything other than faith once occupying that very space. When Sebastian's young godson drowns while Sebastian is babysitting for his closest friend, Tom, Sebastian is devastated. When Tom and the family lash out in grief, Sebastian's life begins to unravel as the guilt eats him up. Though warned away, he couldn't stay away from the funeral, so he watches from a distance and the weight is evident:

> Sebastian wanted to surrender to their pain and walk right across the sun-drenched pasture into their midst, offering himself. He wanted them to cleanse their anguish against him just as he hoped the sun's rays might cleanse his own. Instead, he looked at Tyler, whose head was down and whose shoulders heaved. He decided he would bring no more misery to the boy. He turned and disappeared into the shadows, stopping when his own grief and solitude became too much to bear. He broke down, stumbling to the soft ground, his fingertips clawing the earth. He sobbed uncontrollably. He couldn't stop. Every emotion he experienced since discovering Christopher dead disgorged from his body in giant convulsions of sobs, moans, wails, and shrieks. He beat and clawed the ground. He cursed God one second and prayed for help the next. He begged for forgiveness one moment and expounded his sins and unworthiness immediately after. He did this until spent, exhausted, and there he slept for the first time in days, his filthy hands lying in freshly dug divots.

His life continues to unravel while he looks for forgiveness from the dead Christopher and redemption for himself, but he has no luck. He sees the boy in every boy and can't focus his life. He loses jobs, his apartment, and the will to even live. He sees an adult Christopher in a reoccurring dream, standing next to a river. Anchored to the other side, fighting against the current is a boat. He has this conversation with Christopher:

> *"How are you going to get to the other side?" Sebastian asks.*
>
> *"I can't swim," answers Christopher.*
>
> *A pang of guilt cuts Sebastian. "That's my fault. I'm sorry." He turns and with his head down walks away.*
>
> *"Have you ever considered, Sebastian," he hears Christopher ask, "that I don't need to get to the other side?"*

Sebastian doesn't. His guilt won't allow him to see what the dream means. He is a broken man and he eventually loses jobs, his friends, everything. Feeling unworthy, he leaves Crystal City, completely lost and faithless. He finds a job in nearby Bitter Springs, working in a large crematorium burning the deceased. Sebastian sees it as a penance, "felt it was not only fitting, but also arranged by God. Or maybe God granted Christopher one last wish." Sebastian and two men, Harlan and Cletus, stand in a row in front of three cremation chambers shoving in boxes of bodies and shoveling out ashes. He figures he is truly in hell.

But Sebastian learns at the crematorium. He learns from all the ash that a body is just flesh. Watching them burn in the flames, layer by layer, Sebastian sees the body as parts only, not the real person. Grinding up the remains to break them up more, he begins to disassociate the body from the essence of a person. Harlan puts it in perspective, "It's just calcium. It's not important. It's nothing but calcium." He also sees the fire as cleansing, getting to the real part of man, the important part. Standing outside, watching the smoke rise above the crematorium, Sebastian begins to think larger and see life in broader terms:

> On breaks, Sebastian stepped outside to retreat from the heat. Sitting on a dumpster, he could see the Crematorium smoke rise and drift off. He knew the smoke was the real person, not what he boxed up inside. The flesh, the juices of life reduced and lifted, dissipated into the heavens and congregated again to be part of something

> larger. At these moments, Sebastian would fill his lungs and hold his breath, wondering who was in there.

His epiphany comes in the Urn Garden, where he meets a mother who is finally putting her son's urn to rest after years of sitting on her dresser. It had been her daily, stark reminder of the moment when she turned away and her son fell down stairs. Like Sebastian, she too had been lost and faithless for a long time, but understanding finally came:

> "What made you finally bring the urn here?" Sebastian asked the question hesitantly, trying to mask his anticipation.
>
> "When I realized I wasn't grounded anymore and I was drifting. I thought the urn was my mooring to Jacob and our life together, but it wasn't. I had lost my mooring. His remains were a constant reminder of my mistake and the reason I couldn't accept forgiveness."
>
> "Forgiveness from yourself?"
>
> "No. That's not possible. We don't have that right. We must be forgiven."
>
> "By who? Who will forgive?" Sebastian blurted with such emotion, she turned to look into his eyes. She saw herself reflected and she took his hand.
>
> "In time, everyone forgave me. What I lost was the faith that I was worth forgiving."

With that, he understands the dream and the next time he has it, changes it and is set free. He can return to Christopher's grave, cleansed by fire, forgiven by the boy.

"Death and Life" is about not only Christopher's death, but Sebastian's too. It is also about Sebastian's life after his "death" of faith. It is about finding faith again in the aftermath of forgiveness.

The last piece of fiction in this collection is entitled "To Have Faith is to be a Mockingbird." It tries to answer a question that I pondered while writing this project – How does a person with no faith function if the most important people in his life have absolute faith in this person?

Benedict Rhodes' teenage sister, Tessa, is dying waiting for a liver. Since the parents' murder, Ben has raised Tessa. In the hospital with only days to live, Tessa tells her brother, "You'll save me, Ben. Not the doctors. You."

Ben is falling apart. His sister is all he has left and the supposed "gift" his family claims is his for saving people, Ben thinks is a crock. He believes that the past incidents were accidents, nothing more than serendipity and the pressure is getting to Ben:

> Instead, Tessa lay dying. It was all he could do not to stand up and scream. He felt the shakes come on, but willed them back. He swallowed hard, looking up at the large crucifix hung over her hospital bed. Jesus' bowed head had a chunk missing. Ben felt alone.

His journey to answers takes place in the hospital as he talks to staff, patients, and a priest, all the while trying to find himself and something to believe. Tessa's nurse and doctor are clinical and honest. Tessa may live and

Tessa may die. It is out of their hands. They witness death daily. She will be saved or she won't, that is the best they can give. As the nurse, Sarah, puts it, "Sorry, Ben, but that's the way it is. If you want Tessa to live, you have to want someone else to die. There are no miracles." Dr. Thandh puts it similar, "This is a transplant hospital. All here are dying." Even Ben.

As Tessa's condition worsens, Ben heads to the hospital arboretum located at the top of the hospital. It is a garden, a retreat, a paradise for those sick and those lost to find comfort. The keeper, or gardener of this place, who always seems to be there, is Max, a man of no-age with white hair and beard so unkept it "was not so much part of the head as it hovered around the head, full of static electricity."

Max is imperfect; he is flawed. He has a limp, but mostly stands out because of Tourette Syndrome, which causes him to periodically blurt out animal sounds. Ben instantly bonds with Max and unburdens himself. After telling Max about an incident where an unintended outburst by Ben saved his parents, Max hints that maybe things work at a higher level:

> "But your outburst did save them, right?" Max inquired.
>
> "Technically, yes, but I had no part in it. It wasn't conscious. It wasn't planned."
>
> "Maybe it doesn't have to be. Maybe it shouldn't be."

Faith isn't definable. Its basis is not science or even proof. Ben can't make the connection that just because he didn't mean to save his loved ones doesn't mean he didn't. He is incapable of a leap in faith.

Later, Ben treks to the opposite end of hospital. Deep in the bowels is the chapel, "an afterthought by the designers." It is candlelit and cave-like, but beautiful and gothic. Statues of saints decorate it and it appears almost gaudy. This is a place of connotations, images of worship yet not a place of peace or harmony. There are contradictions between what is seen and what is expected, which may very well define organized religion:

> The altar was golden, sitting on a mahogany stage covered mostly with a scarlet rug. Strategically around the altar stood statues of saints, some golden and some obsidian, arranged alternately like set-up chess pieces. Golden columns rose on each side, framing the large relief of a crucified Christ. Dozens of candles at the rear and sides of the altar gave off an eerie, moving light making it appear that Jesus burned at the stake.

Ben also unburdens himself on Father Theodocius, but to an opposite outcome than Max. He leaves the chapel more lost than ever and time running out for his sister:

> "I'm sorry for you, Ben. Your family never should have put all that on you. There is only one Savior," he said pointing to the crucified Christ, "and he will decide if Tessa gets a liver. You are right about all those incidents. They mean nothing. They were only coincidences, just luck."
>
> "No chance I was guided then?"

> "Ben, if you were so special, why didn't you stop your parents' murder?"
>
> Ben wanted to say something, but couldn't get the words out.
>
> "Make your sister comfortable and pray hard," Father Theodocius advised, "I will also pray for you. Maybe the Lord will listen."
>
> As Ben exited the chapel, a fresh breeze greeted him in the hallway. He felt more confused than ever.

Ben's search for faith and inability to cope with Tessa's last hours takes him back to the arboretum where on the way he meets a patient, Spencer, slogging to the same place. Ben pushes Spencer's wheelchair and the two speak. Spencer could also be seen as a lost soul, a faithless person who has come to the end of his life, bitter about things past and believing in very little – an example of where Ben could end up. The chance encounter affects both men, but especially Spencer who seems to find a peace he didn't have before.

By a nearby grotto, Ben and Max talk again. After he is told of the priest's words, Max explains faith to Ben:

> ..."Faith is hard, Ben. It's a belief in something intangible, something blurry when others think you're fatuous."
>
> "And Father Theodocius doesn't have faith?"
>
> "He's a parrot, not a mockingbird. A parrot copies, it mimics. Mockingbirds take a song and change it; they mold it into their own then have the conviction to use it to better their lives. To have faith is to be a Mockingbird."

Ben again unburdens himself, explaining the details of his parent's murder, admitting he knew it was going to happen, but because he didn't believe, he did

nothing. His epiphany comes here when he must admit he does have a gift, but faith in it is part of the bargain. When Max asks what he thinks is going to happen with Tessa, Ben answers immediately, "She's going to get her liver."

The story ends with Sarah, the pragmatic nurse, making a leap of faith to join Ben in urging Tessa to hold on and to believe a liver is coming. Ben and Sarah become mockingbirds not parrots. The story also ends in such a way that the reader must make a leap of faith. Does Tessa get the liver or not? I think readers who have faith, who believe in something larger will say yes and those less given to faithful things may not know for sure if she gets a liver. Either way is okay by me, but maybe a good read should tell more than a good story; maybe it should say something about the one reading it, too.

Wrong Side Up

Faith is the art of holding on to things your reason
once accepted, despite your changing moods
-- C.S. Lewis

The Black Blizzard rolled in like a mass of sin. Two miles high, twenty miles wide, it was hoof dust kicked up by the Four Horsemen. The sun retreated. A tidal wave of dirt, the dust storm was a moving mountain rolling across the plains, swallowing everything. It lived, a dark, undulating organism surging over tiny, insignificant things. Some said it was like a thick smoke, billowing and rolling. But smoke had gaps. It was vaporous. Dust storms were moving walls. It was as if the darkest, most menacing thunderheads sunk to the earth and tumbled across the land. Only dirtier.

Ignatius Stone was dirty. Not just his clothes were dirt-caked, but also his arms and his face looked tanned. So normal had it become to feel the sheen of dirt over his flesh and smell the coarse earth on his body that when clean he sensed a weight removed, a burden lifted. He coughed violently and spit dirt back into dirt, returning more moisture than he got. He removed his worn hat, exposing his crown with close-cropped hair that shone like a halo next to his dirty skin. Reaching up reflexively, he wiped away the sweat and the halo disappeared, becoming just another dirty place in a dirty world.

"It's got to get better," he said aloud to no one in particular, "It certainly can't get no worse." He said this often and knew one day it would be true.

The wind was up. The damned wind was always up, he thought, and then he put that negative thought from his mind as quick as it jumped in. He loved this land. Even when it hurt him he loved it.

"Life is hard, Ignatius," he said aloud, repeating what his father often told him, "Some times is hard and some times is worse. Get on with it." He smiled at his daddy's words.

Ignatius stood in his field; the same field that was his daddy's and the same field that was his granddaddy's and the same field that was part of the claim his great-granddaddy came West to stake as his own. The original house still stood, barely. He could see its three slat-covered rooms and small porch had turned gray with wear. Time and the wind, always the wind, had sucked life from it until what stood left looked like a scar of what Ignatius remembered. Its skin matched the skin of his grandfather then his father and now his own, dry as kindling and weather-beaten. No one lived in the shack. It held tools and implements the barn couldn't hold. He needed to tear it down, but couldn't. He figured it wouldn't be long until the wind took it down anyway like it did everything else.

He lived in the house his daddy had built. He had helped his daddy build it, though he was young and his father and his uncles did most of the work. It was a fine two-story place with five gables. It was painted white originally, but the wind and dust had beaten it to a pale, sickly version of itself. But as he

looked at it he decided it would be a fine place to die when the time came. It was his place.

He walked his field looking at the failed wheat, whatever had not blown away or been dirt covered. The storm that had passed through four days before was already the tenth of the season and the season had just begun. Thirty-two storms last year, twenty-seven the year before, and nineteen the year before that, there seemed to be no good news on the horizon.

He should be stepping through an ocean of green rising past his hips. Four years ago the wind would be welcome as it blew across the plain that lay out in front of Ignatius as far as he could see. The green would have looked alive, undulating as if the plain was the belly of some great animal stroked into pleasure. The blue sky, the farmhouses within site, the emerald green painted against the blue hue would look like a painting or an unforgettable memory.

Not now, though. This was the fourth year the wheat had failed. The drought and the dirt storms combined to gut the land. As Ignatius looked over the same valley that teemed with life only a few years ago, he now saw apocalypse. No birds flew in the spring sky, though three crows stood in the field, alternately pecking at something. The trees were bare as if November and the air with its permanent haze, filtered the browns down to one brown shade, a faded brown like the lives of those left. The farmhouses and fences and barns and equipment strewn through the valley appeared more like relics of an ancient civilization unearthed. His tiller, setting against the barn wall, lay half-covered in

dirt from the drifts. The fence between his and Elmer's place was low enough to step over. Tumbleweeds blew against it, acted as a screen to the dirt that followed, and drifts several feet high grew and smoothed out. The mounded fencerow was now a dried weal, a sore that wouldn't heal. He coughed and spat again. His mucus looked like tobacco juice.

Walking back to the house, Ignatius could only think that this was another day in Cimarron County.

Cimarron County was the end of the Oklahoma panhandle. It sat at the posterior of the state like a rattle on a snake. Just a few miles wide, Texans arrived in southern Colorado before they realized they had even driven through Oklahoma. Some locals figured the panhandle was an afterthought thrown in with the rest. Or maybe, as some said, a man of importance lived in Cimarron when it became a state. Still others believed plans existed to make it a rail hub since it was worthless anyway. The truth was that it was thousands of square miles of grasslands in the 1850's. That made it ideal for grazing and for homesteading. That gave it potential and that was enough. While Europe fought the First World War, the whole region transformed into wheat fields. New technologies allowed one farmer to do the work of many. Plenty of farmers existed. They needed land. So, millions of acres of native grasslands disappeared under the plow and with it the land's natural ability to hold water. In less than twenty years, a drought dried out a soil that was so rich it looked like chocolate and the wind blew it away.

He stepped through the back door and the ritual began. Ruth insisted on it. As he removed his clothes, the dirt gathered at his feet. First, it dusted the floor as he removed his boots and socks. The more he moved and the more he removed, the more dirt fell. There was a brush Ignatius once used to shine his shoes lying in the corner. He brushed his body down, adding to the growing pile of dirt until he stood in his underwear on a brown silting that covered the kitchen floor. When he stepped away, a neat outline of his feet was in the dirt.

"Wipe the mustache off," Ruth said. She sat at the table reading scripture. She stood, tossed him a wet dish towel that lay across her shoulder and continued to a counter where a pile of mustard greens laid. She picked up a knife and began cutting.

The mustache wasn't a real mustache. It was a glob of lard spread thick across his upper lip and caked with dirt. It helped keep some of the dirt out of the lungs. On the worst days, he wore a gauze mask. Ignatius didn't think much about his lungs until after Luke died. Now, he rarely went out to work the farm without plastering lard under his nose. The smell of the thick fat no longer registered. He wiped it away, looked at it on the off-white towel, a heavy brown stain like dried blood, and then tossed the rag on top of his clothes.

"God bless it!" Ruth exclaimed. She dropped the knife and stuck a finger in her mouth.

"You all right, honey?"

"Yes. My mind was somewhere else. God's giving me a nudge," she said while leaning over the sink, "It's okay. Get dressed, Ignatius. Supper will be soon."

He walked through the darkened front room. The only light came from candle glow, a small beacon centered above the fireplace where two candles illuminated a picture of Luke and a small portrait of Jesus, who held a lamb in his arms and knelt beside a child. Ruth lit the candles each morning before dressing.

All the rooms were darkened from the sheets covering the windows. Ruth brushed them periodically with water to catch the dust as it oozed and blew through cracks. The sheets darkened the longer they stayed up. They came down on Saturdays. By Thursday, sunrise never happened inside the house. It could have been an arctic winter. Ignatius tried to block the cracks the best he could, but the dirt was a wraith slithering through any slit. He knew this life was difficult on Ruth, especially since Luke. She worked hard, but fighting the dirt was the same as fighting a bad memory. It just wouldn't let go.

They ate cabbage, greens and corn mush. Ruth scraped the flour bin dry making biscuits. Ignatius thought he might get more Sunday if he collected enough eggs from the hen house to trade Brother Sem. There was always plenty of milk. Since the drought came, Ignatius increased the number of cows. The cream brought a good price and the skim milk stretched the limited chicken feed. Cows ate corn shoveled from the bottom of silos when available or thistles

harvested from around the dead fields. Occasionally, he could afford to buy a few bails of alfalfa to mix into the feed. Ignatius once even dug up soap weed and cut it by hand to feed to the cows. It took two backbreaking days to get enough to feed them for less than a week. If it needed done, it got done Ignatius liked to think.

"Too much dirt is getting into Luke's room again," she said.

He gently laid his hand over hers, "I'll look after dinner. I'll fix it."

"You'll try," she countered, then softened, "You'll try hard. I know, but you won't stop it. You can never stop it. It's our penance."

He removed his hand from atop hers, "But I'll never stop trying." Ruth smiled at this, but the smile didn't look joyful.

"I know."

He entered Luke's room after dinner and quickly shut the door. It was the cleanest place in the house, maybe the cleanest place in Cimarron Country. It smelled clean, but more than that, the air felt clean when inhaled. Ignatius liked to sit on the bed sometimes, not to remember his son, but to feel the clean air in his lungs. Ruth didn't know that and he would never tell her he came to the room more often to breathe then to mourn.

The room faced southwest, so the wind lashed it more than other rooms. Even now, Ignatius heard it blowing outside and below that sound, a low, soft rush of something different that he knew to be a million particles of dirt hitting the walls like atom-sized cannonballs. Elmer, an educated man, said once in

Zeb's it was the sound of a billion dirty sperm trying to breach the walls of the only pure places left.

"And we all know," he philosophized, "given enough time, those little bastards get what they're after."

Ruth's despair and Ignatius' toil (done because he loved his wife) kept the room clean. Canvas stretched tight over a wooden frame and nailed to the wall blocked the window. Ignatius used paraffin, all important paraffin, to seal the small window and Ruth painted a scene on the canvas. It was a view through a window to an idyllic spring day. A small, rocky stream flowed across the canvas and a buck drank from its edge. Near the painted window stood a large oak blocking the sun's rays. A woodpecker hung from the bark, a squirrel poked its head from an upper branch. The grass was green and the field on the opposite side of the stream swathed in a mixture of golden, red, and white wildflowers, offsetting the brilliant blue sky, where a flock of birds soared in formation. Beyond the field was a large stand of forest. And in the corner of that flowered field, near the forest, almost indiscernible to someone who hasn't stared at the painting for hours, was a cross with a person crucified on it. Ignatius wanted to believe it was Christ, but he wasn't sure. The painting's truth swept passed Ignatius. He only knew that Ruth was a fine artist, too fine to be a farmer's wife.

Ignatius inspected the room until he discovered a small pile of dirt along the wall behind the dresser. Looking more closely, he saw (and felt) a passage. He walked to the kitchen and retrieved an old iron pan of paraffin wax that was

simmering on the stove. He sat the pan on the floor and went to the closet, bringing out a small box of old rags torn into strips and an old pair of Ruth's mending shears. The work was methodical, but Ignatius liked it in the quiet room with the clean air. He had spent scores of hours since Luke's death patching rifts, battling the dirt and the wind. It was important to Ruth. He cut the cloth to size, soaked it in the paraffin and using his pocketknife, pushed the cloth into the crack. When satisfied he had stopped another leak, he moved on, inspecting for more. Over the next hour, he repaired four more spots. Ignatius didn't understand how he could continue to find more breaches every time Ruth sent him in the room. He only knew that was the way it was and the way it was going to be. No sense in trying to figure it out.

"No point in thinking," his daddy said constantly, "when you should be doing."

Near the end of his chore, he felt her presence. He turned and she stood in the doorway holding a broom, signaling it was time to quit. Her small, wiry frame looked more haggard than Ignatius remembered, at least since Luke's death. Her dark hair fell to her shoulders. Her hair and her ample breasts he thought were her best attributes. She had thin lips and high cheekbones showing the Indian somewhere in her past. Her eyes were dark, mostly empty now and they had the pitiful look of someone staring at an over-packed mule nearing its end. The most noticeable trait was her pox-marked face from a childhood

disease, which didn't cover her beauty, it only slanted it into something one had to look at twice to make sure what one thought was there was there.

Dirt Pneumonia killed Luke the previous summer. Dirt Pneumonia didn't exist outside of mines until the Dust Bowl Days and then it sprouted like a noxious weed. The children were supposed to wear their gauze masks when outside, but children don't always do as told. Their faith was pure and their faith was bottomless. Dust storms and blowing dirt didn't scare Luke or most other children. It was all an adventure, whether they stayed to fight the dirt or left everything to go to West.

Luke began to cough and wheeze. It started summer of 1933 right before the 4th of July. He had been getting breathless for weeks. Ignatius and Ruth kept asking if he was wearing his mask. The lanky, sandy-haired boy smiled, showed the perfect dimples on his cheeks, and said he was. They believed him. Luke was nine and the only child the two parents could have. Ruth didn't do well when pregnant and spent the last month in bed. Luke was born early. Doc Blackwell, who had delivered Ignatius and all his siblings plus Ruth and all hers, didn't think the infant would last, but he did. Ignatius was proud of the boy for that and knew then he truly belonged to the Stone line. Doc Blackwell told Ruth she couldn't have any more children and shouldn't even try. She accepted God's will while fawning over the baby, lost in the newness of motherhood, a moment she thought would last forever. Ignatius accepted it because that was the way it was.

A few years later when the boy didn't need her as before, it hit Ruth that she couldn't have another baby and her life hollowed. She didn't know what to do with all the empty space. Luke went off to school and Ruth could only think what might have been had she not been born to a farmer in the Oklahoma Panhandle in a time without a Depression. The drought and dust storms seemed manifestations of her psyche let loose on the poor souls of Cimarron County. They were only going to get worse, she thought.

Doc Blackwell listened to the boy's chest. He listened to the cough. He had Luke open wide and cough while he sniffed at the boy's mouth. Ruth worried. She had never heard of that before. Doc gave a small cotton bag to Luke and told him to put it over his mouth while he lay on his stomach. Doc Simpson began to beat on the boy's back and Luke coughed hard repeatedly into the bag. The old doctor sent the boy to the waiting room with a piece of hard candy then talked to Ruth.

"He's all filled with dirt," Doc Blackwell said while looking into the bag. He held it open for Ruth to peer into and she saw fine particles, clearly dark brown, peppering the cotton cloth.

The prognosis wasn't good. No cure existed for Dirt Pneumonia. There was no way to clear it from the lungs. It settled there, piling up like it did on fence rows until it covered everything, even the sacs needed to breathe. She pleaded with Ignatius to go out West where the air was clean. Maybe that would save Luke.

"You heard the Doc, Ruth. It's too late. Clean air won't matter now. At the most, it gets him a few weeks. It's the way it is for a reason."

She accepted it at first, accepted His will, but Ruth had another reason to hate the dirt. It was now going to take her only son, her only child. How long until it took her too?

Her grief became immeasurable and inconsolable after the boy's death. She screamed and wailed uncontrollably. She attempted to hurt herself. She pounded on walls; she cut herself with knives. Ignatius had to strap her down to the bed to keep her safe. Finally, Doc Simpson came and gave her morphine. He left plenty with Ignatius.

"Give her enough to still grieve, but not enough to forget," the doctor said.

Later, after cleaning Luke's room, Ignatius decided to head to Zeb's.

"I need to get some more paraffin and beans to plant."

"How can you keep doing it, Ignatius?" Ruth asked in a low, far-off voice. She sat near the fireplace sewing by the light of a lantern set low. Her whole body leaned into the light as if gravity was pulling her there.

He knew what she meant. "I'm a farmer, Ruth."

"Everything you plant dies. Why keep on?" She continued to keep her eyes on her sewing.

"It's all I know. There are good times and there are bad times. Things are bad now, they were good a few years ago, remember?"

"I don't recall those times."

"It's easy to forget the past when today is so bad, Ruth." He watched her sew on a pair of his coveralls. The light from the lantern lit her face and the scars shown fresh.

"It's not just today. It's been four years. The land's raped of its good parts. Only the dirt's left, Ignatius. Only the mess is left behind."

"Dirt is what I need. And a little rain and sun. I got the dirt and the sun. The rain will come back. It always does."

"But what if it doesn't?"

"I'm a farmer, Ruth, and I will farm."

"You can do something else. You're good with your hands and you're smart."

"There's no work here."

"It doesn't have to be here."

There it was. He had been waiting. "I'm staying, Ruth. This is where I belong. This is what I am. I'm not quitting. I won't be run off by a drought or by you."

Now she looked up from her work and stared him down. Her voice never rose. He never heard her yell or scream at a person in anger. The voice was low and straight forward. It had a tone of importance when she was angry, like a

judge passing sentence. He wished many times she would let loose and scream. He wouldn't feel so sorry for her then.

"We don't always get what we want, right Ignatius? I could've been an artist, but I'm not. I didn't want to lose my son, but I did. I can't even have another child and I want one."

He sighed and squatted beside her chair.

"You are right. But you can't give up. You have to believe in something besides yourself. We all got to believe in more than just ourselves or we're just lost and looking to die."

"What do you believe in, Ignatius?"

"I believe in the land."

She smiled, but like at the dinner table, it wasn't a joyful smile. It was one of resignation, a defeated smile of one who understood their lot. Ruth touched his face and she looked at him like she had years before. Before the drought, before the dirt, before the death.

"You're a good man. I'm just not as faithful as you."

Victory was halfway between Felt and Wheeless, which meant nothing to anyone not acquainted with Cimarron County and near nothing to those that were. Victory wasn't a place searched for, it was a place a few people were from like, "Beulah's from over near Felt, some place called Victory" or a locale a trucker would mention to let one know he was lost, "Go north off fifty-six. If you

get as far as Victory, you've gone too far." It was only a town to those that lived around it. Then it was a place to go to church, to gather at Zeb's store or to drop wheat into the Cooperatives' silos. People in Cimarron didn't leave the farm very often, except in Dust Bowl days. Then, they left for good.

Ignatius drove the dirt road toward Victory. The wind rested which made the night surprisingly clear. The moon waned to a large sliver. It looked like a slit cut into the black sky and he could only think it was a breach for dirt to get through once the wind came up again. He shook his head to clear his mind of the negative image. It was a flawless night. Driving down the road, it was simple to believe the fields on both sides held a bounty of wheat turning into gold. A few years ago Cimarron County was part of the most prosperous farming area in the country. It was going to feed a nation. Ignatius remembered how proud he was; more proud than soldering in the Great War. As a farmer he created from dirt and supplied life, which was much more important than warring. In the clear dark, he could imagine the sounds made by a billion wheat stalks together whispering their message of bounty. He could smell the chlorophyll-dense air of healthy fields laden with growth. He could imagine all his friends and fellow farmers gathered in their homes, families about them, listening to the radio or reading and mothers sewing with daughters or families sitting at table playing cards. It seemed simple in the clear, dark night air with a moon promising so much to think the last four years didn't exist and tomorrow Ignatius would awake and it would all be green and healthy and back to normal.

As he turned a bend, the headlights caught bright, white bones sticking out carcasses of a half-dozen steer. He stopped, headlights illuminating the decomposing animals. This was Ira's place. At least it was until he left a few weeks ago. These must be his herd. They had been lying long enough in the dry air that the insides decomposed and all that remained was hide covering bones, an empty costume discarded on the ground. Where bones poked through, the wind and dirt sandblasted them bleach white, like pieces of ivory brought back from Africa. One of the carcasses appeared to move and Ignatius started until a lone, scrawny coyote emerged, eyes glowing green in the lights. It stood longer than Ignatius thought it should then it bolted over the downed fence. The rest of the drive to Victory was solemn. The wind seemed to pick up or Ignatius noticed the tires throwing more dirt. Dust dunes lined the fencerows and the headlights illuminated a desert.

Ignatius doubted Zeb's Feed & Seed changed much since his granddaddy's day. Zebulon Polk had come to Victory after the Civil War, a nineteen-year old boy who had seen too much and lost half a leg seeing it. Zeb was near ninety and Zeb Junior ran the place, but the old man spent most of his time sitting around an old iron stove holding court with locals. Zeb's had become the place to get the county news and a good cup of free coffee. To those remaining since the drought, Zeb's became a private club for the hardy ones with time on their hands and a need to vent. Home-made Sour mash passed from hand to hand while the men spoke of things not spoken at home or in church.

The old door creaked, announcing his entrance. The first to greet Ignatius was Gus, Zeb's mongrel dog. Like the old man, the dog also lacked an appendage. Unlike Zeb, Gus lacked two, both on his right side, a result of a lost argument with a combine. Old Zeb wouldn't hear of shooting the poor dog.

"Ratio-wise," he argued, "me and him lost the same amount of legs and no one wanted to shoot me."

He told the dog's owner he would take him. So, they braced two broomsticks to the stumps and Gus got around all right, though not without problems. Icy winters were an issue and chasing bitches in heat became out of the question. Ignatius respected both for their ability to persevere.

"Hello, old fella," Ignatius said to Gus, rubbing behind the dogs ears. The dog's tail wagged hard and his whole body rocked back and forth.

"Zeb, it's time to put new legs on Gus. He's out of balance again."

Old Zeb, sitting in his rocker next to the stove, leaned forward and smiled big. Behind him was a counter and Zeb Jr. filled jars that sat across the top. The old man's hair was uncombed and white. It stood out in the dimmed store light and every time he bent down to add wood to the fire, the fear was one of those shocks would burst into flame. At nearly ninety, he was still a large man, even with the missing leg. He filled up the chair and more, but his frail body seemed to mold to every curve and dip in the piece of furniture until he almost looked a part of it. Anyone looking at the old man now would first wonder just how large he was sixty years ago.

"I noticed that when he was out pissing this afternoon. He lifted his sticks and damn near fell over." Alvah and Ben, who sat in nearby chairs, laughed at this, but the laugh was subdued, forced, and Ignatius immediately knew there was bad news. Old Zeb handed a mason jar to Ignatius, who took a long pull before speaking.

"What's new?" he asked the group.

The men looked at one another, eyes glassy, before answering, silently voting amongst themselves. Zeb Jr. walked from behind the wooden counter and spoke as he took a chair.

"George pulled out this morning."

Ignatius stood stunned, "George Edwards?"

The three younger men nodded their heads. Old Zeb just kept his down.

Ignatius sat, taking in the information. He still held the jar and drank again. George Edwards was one of the men he thought would never leave. George and Ignatius were alike. His great grandfather came West with Ignatius' great grandfather. The land meant everything to him, or so Ignatius thought. George always spoke upbeat, never seemed to get down. He said that the drought was just a bad patch to get over, a test to pass. He even described the dust storms as beautiful creations showing the power of the Lord. His positive attitude irritated some. Others thought him touched.

"Think about it," he once explained to an unconvinced group at Zeb's, "a wall of dirt two miles high and twenty miles wide bringing red soil from Texas

faster than any truck could. All that power like the Red Sea parted and all it does is throws some dirt around. It's a message to us to change our ways. It could be much worse. Much worse."

While Ignatius didn't go as far as seeing the storms as beautiful, he and George did agree that the land was worth the bad times. It wouldn't stay this way forever. A man only had to stand up for what was his and take a few knocks to keep it.

Ignatius drank again, shook his head slowly, lost in thought. He started to pass the liquor and stopped, pulled it back and took another large swallow. It burned sliding down and he reluctantly gave the jar to Alvah.

"Who's next?" Ignatius whispered, eyes glazed. The question sounded hollow like it slipped out and the men other exchanged glances.

"He said he had enough. This last crop failure did it," Ben explained, "He's got six kids and they're always hungry, he said. He said he has to try California."

"I think he was ashamed to tell you himself, Ignatius," Alvah added, "He knows how you feel. His boy Marcus was close to Luke and Birdie was close with Ruth."

The men sat silent, each wondering. Zeb Jr. cracked the seal on another mason jar. Ignatius didn't disrespect George or any other who left. They had to make their own way. He was in no position to judge.

"Each man's path is different. None are better than any others," his daddy said. Ignatius believed that. Life was difficult enough. But life was a test and sometimes the Almighty might want his students to stick around to check their answers. George wasn't the first to leave, George was the closest to Ignatius and to find out George gave up worried Ignatius more the others.

He looked at Old Zeb, slumped forward and petting Gus' head.

"What are you thinking about old man?"

"I was thinking about Johnny Two Horses."

"Who's he?" Zeb Jr. asked, "I've never heard you mention him."

"Johnny Two Horses was a Cherokee that lived here twenty years ago. It was at the peak when farmers came replacing ranchers. As far as the eye could see, land was under the plow. Johnny came by to get a few things on his way out of town. I asked him why he was leaving and he pointed out the door and said, 'Wrong side up.' I hadn't really thought about it again until now."

The men sat in silence, taking in the words.

"Wrong side up," Ignatius repeated, looking at the other men, whose eyes showed a crossing from confusion to amused inevitability. Ignatius was the first to let out a nervous laugh or a drunken giggle. Then all four men were giggling like prepubescent boys seeing their first photo of a naked woman, the amused realization that they all had it wrong, but they all had it partly right too. The laughter, helped along by the mash, triggered a release of something tangible, something pent up inside like bad constipation that in one spasmodic

moment deep in the bowels everything seemed cleared. In some strange, simple, give-me-three-words-that-explains-why-our-lives-are-so-fucked-up way "wrong side up" did just that. Ben slapped his thigh, old Zeb laughed until he choked and even Gus joined in by standing and barking with the delirious men whose lives were so full of tragedy and suffering and loss. Ignatius wiped away tears, wondering why it wasn't that easy to get water to the ground. Around here, all he would have to do is assemble everyone in the fields and have them think about their lives and the moisture would fall like never before.

He left Zeb's that night more resolved than ever to the land. He wasn't going anywhere.

The drive home was slower and more solemn. The wind picked up and dirt made visibility shrink. Locusts and grasshoppers jumped through headlights in between the dust. No longer did the moon shine. Dirt blew as snow does during a storm. This usually meant a dust storm by morning. Ignatius worried about Ruth. He would have to tell her about George and Birdie. They had been friends a long time. Though it was upsetting that George's left without saying anything, he understood it and could forgive it because he wasn't so sure he wouldn't have done the same. But Ignatius knew enough about women to know Ruth wouldn't understand it and she would hurt.

Two bats swooped into the headlights, startling Ignatius, who swerved the wheel instinctively left when the animals appeared from the right. Looping back again he realized they were detecting insects drawn to the headlights. His

slow movement made it perfect for the night hunters. Soon, a half-dozen more bats appeared, and then dozens more materialized from the darkness. They couldn't have been much bigger than a wren, but flew more acrobatic, more brazen, seemingly without fear. He wondered if being blind allowed the bats to live with certain abandonment, never having to see what was in front of them. Never having to see their own end.

An open Bible sat on Ruth's lap. She wasn't reading. She stared into the fire, lost in thought. Tears rolled down her cheeks. The noise of the wind covered his entrance and he had been quiet in case she slept. He found himself caught in one of those uncomfortable moments. Did he startle her by saying something or did he try to get back to the kitchen and make some noise? Before he could act, she turned and greeted him like she knew he was there the whole time.

"Another storm's coming isn't it?" she asked while wiping away the tears. She set the opened Bible on the table and rose.

"It looks like it. Probably by daybreak. No sense in getting up early." She noticed a tone in his voice.

"What is it?" she spoke monotone.

He told her about George and Birdie. He told her slow, easy-like so it would sink into her sad head. She took it all in without a word or even an emotion, the same she did when Luke died. But when Luke died, the whirlwind eventually came.

"I'll miss her, but we all have to do what's right for ourselves and ours."

She said she was going to bed and walked away. When she reached the hall separating Luke's room, her bedroom and the spare room, she hesitated, and turned back toward Ignatius, a confused look on her face, like she wasn't sure of something she'd done or was about to do. This passed and she turned and disappeared into the bedroom.

Ignatius drank some milk and listened to the gathering wind. He went to snuff the fire and noticed the open Bible. It was open to the Book of Job. He remembered from Bible study that Job meant "hostility" in Hebrew and that Job was unhappy with his suffering. The Bible's pages showed wear, but the corners of Job looked ragged, even crumpled. He sat down and scanned the open pages. Underlined was the passage:

> *And why dost thou not pardon my transgression, and take away my iniquity? For now shall I sleep in the dust; and thou shalt seek me in the morning, but I shall not be.*

Rereading the passage, he sighed and wondered if he had done it wrong. He closed the book and went to bed.

He awoke first at dawn as he always did, but the dust storm raged. Little light entered the window and what did filtered through fine dust floating in the room. The sound of thousands of fists throwing dirt against the walls simultaneously was the only thing heard except the howl of the wind. There was

no need to get up. They would be stuck in the house for at least a day. Ruth's slept next to him, her breathing shallow. He went back to sleep.

Later, he awoke to the storm turned vicious like a freshly fed beast. The wind howled and the dirt sandblasted the outside of the house. He figured it for late morning, though the dimmed room gave nothing away. Ruth wasn't beside him. On her pillow, the dust had made a perfect outline of her head. The air was heavy with it. Ignatius slept with his face covered for this reason. Ruth said she couldn't do that. It was too confining. He got up and washed his face in the basin. He put on his robe and went to find Ruth. He noticed none of the sheets hanging in front of windows had been wetted down. This was odd. Ruth hated the dirt. She wet them a couple times a day, but during a storm, she continuously brushed the sheets. The air throughout the house was murky like an old attic. Ignatius noticed The Bible was now open and lying on the kitchen table. Opened to Job again except for a page hastily torn out, leaving an angled bottom edge. Circled on the open page was Chapter 34, Verse 15, which read: *All flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust.*

Ignatius didn't like this. He went to Luke's room, hoping to find her cleaning up, but upon opening the door, he found the room empty. The only change was the set of paints sitting out on the dresser. He hadn't seen them since she painted the window painting. He walked cautiously to the covered window and peered at the painting, but he could see nothing in the mostly darkness. He quickly returned with a lantern, holding it up to the painting, searching for clues.

Something inside steered his eyes to the corner of the field where the crucified body stood. To his horror, a second cross stood next to the first and crucified on it was a woman.

Frantically, Ignatius searched the house, calling Ruth's name. He ran to the bedroom and dressed. He sprinted to the front door and was about to open it when he changed his mind and ran to the kitchen and opened the back door. The blowing dirt hit him like water escaping a fire hose, pushing him back into the kitchen. The noise level increased tenfold and he covered his eyes with his forearm and forced his way outside. He screamed her name, but could barely hear his own voice. His mouth filled with dirt and he coughed and spat. Within ten feet, blowing dirt blinded his eyes. He ran back inside, washed his eyes and found a pair of goggles. Back outside, he quickly understood the futility of what he was attempting. Even with the goggles, he couldn't see fifteen feet and would never find Ruth if she was outside. He could only hope she hunkered down somewhere to ride out the storm, but the pit of his stomach told him otherwise. She had given up.

They found her body three days later. Ignatius had given up looking by himself and went for help. The storm was a bad one, one of the worst anyone remembered. At first, the searchers looked near the buildings, figuring she couldn't have made it far before taking cover. But the digging found nothing and the search extended to any cover beyond the house: large trees, rock outcroppings, ruts, any place a person could find some cover. They found

nothing. Some began to talk that maybe she left early, before the storm peaked, got a ride and wasn't around at all, but Ignatius knew better. She was there, somewhere, and he told them he appreciated their help and they were welcomed to leave. No one left. Taking a break, Ignatius looked in the distance at a junction of trees and saw a familiar corner. He cried out to the others and rushed toward the spot. None understood what he meant, but they followed.

She lay on her back, arms outstretched, near the corner of the field. The storm covered most of her and her outline showed like a shallow grave or the bones under decomposing hide. She wore only her night gown. Her right hand clutched at something. Ignatius knelt down to see a crumpled piece of paper in her grasp. Even in death, she wouldn't release it. He pried her hands open and removed it. Unfolding it he realized it was the torn page from Job. Circled was the passage: *Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*

She laid a good three-quarter of a mile from home. No one could believe she made it this far, unprotected. Except Ignatius. He may not have understood giving up, but he understood the power of belief.

The wind was up the day he buried Ruth. He had to gingerly drop each shovelful of dirt to keep the dust down. Next to Ruth was Luke's grave and although Ignatius had tried many times, no grass grew over the boy. The mound of dirt had blown away and the spot was just a marked patch of dirt. He spread some shovelfuls from Ruth's hole over Luke's grave to add topsoil. He then

reached into a bag and began throwing grass seed over both graves, laying it on thick. He soaked the seed from a watering can he had brought. Over the coming weeks, then months, he would return to add water and sometimes more seed, then more water. He did this because he knew one day grass would grow there again.

The Meek One

We have unmistakable proof that throughout all past time there has been a ceaseless devouring of the weak by the strong.
-- Herbert Spencer, First Principles

Simon had always known he was weak. His body was weak, his mind weak and even his soul was weak. His mother, who was not weak in any way, told him over and over that it was okay.

"Christ has a special place in his heart for the weak, Simon," she told him one time when he was nine. She said it as she applied mercurochrome to the scrapes on his face put there in the latest incident.

Simon stood at the bathroom sink, eyeing his reflection. His lower lip swollen, he had a scrape on his forehead and another on his left cheek that ran lengthwise across the bone to the slope of his nose. With the mercurochrome, the streaks looked like Indian war paint. He picked up the abandoned cotton ball and slowly made a similar mark on the right cheek. He thought that he now looked like a Sioux on the warpath.

"Simon, are you listening to me?" his mother softly asked as she sat back down on the toilet next to the sink. Her hand rested lightly on his small, naked shoulder as she spoke.

"Yes, mommy," he answered, "Christ says I'm weak."

His mother smiled. "No, Simon. What I said is that Christ has a special place in his heart for weak, the timid like you."

"Why?"

"Because the meek will inherit the earth, Simon. That is what He said. The meek will inherit the earth."

Simon stared at the Indian looking back at him and wondered when this would occur.

Simon was born small and he was born in violence. The birth was difficult, painful and dangerous to his mother. Born a month early and in one of the most un-meek moments of his life, Simon seemed to demand to be left in the warm, dark, wet place where he had resided since his creation. The mother's womb jolted and jerked with power that astounded even the doctors. She screamed and beat on the mattress, pleading for them to get the thing out of her, but the thing refused. Nature said yes, but Simon said no. After nineteen hours of labor, the mother nearing death and the fetus strong, the doctors agreed Simon must be brought into the world whether he wanted to join it or not.

Since cut violently from that sanctuary, Simon had been mostly docile. It was as if he lost the initial great battle and was forever beaten. There had been a few exceptions, moments when Simon found the reinforcements to stand ground and do battle, only to be beaten again. Each of these defeats made him weaker and he resolved that there was no benefit to fighting back, only pain and humiliation. So he decided at a young age to be invisible. He thought it couldn't be hard; a small, timid boy could certainly disappear in the background of the

world, lost in the noise of others. He had faith that he could hide and wait until the meek inherited the earth.

He was wrong, though. The meanness of the world, a sharp wind that circles the globe, sought him out as if he oozed pheromones announcing his docile state. Fear shown as a neon sign, a stink recognized as easy as rotting flesh. Simon was singled out, picked on and beaten down more and more until he wasn't a person anymore, only a human shape that took up space, a wraith, a vision, noticed mostly by the vile.

The mother wasn't even sure who the father was until Simon was past his second year. In her occupation, an unwanted pregnancy was common and an abortion soon after nearly as sure. Although she hadn't been in a church since the Sunday before she ran away at fifteen, she was raised in a strict Protestant family and wasn't about to bring down God's wrath for destroying a child. So, she decided to sin no more, found a job as a stripper until she began to show, finally settling as a waitress.

A few months after his second birthday, she discovered the father's identity. Simon played in the kitchen, climbing on the countertops; something his mother continuously told him not to do. She knew he was a sensitive boy, not tough like her, and she also knew she could never make him what he wasn't. His timid nature was in his genes like the color of his eyes and all the toughness she could muster would do nothing but make Simon retract like a tortoise in his shell. She tried never to yell at him, but on this particular day, she did. She

snapped and screamed at the boy to get down. Simon was in the fetal position before even hitting the floor, eyes wide and staring at the source of all that power, the look of fear like a small animal about to be eaten by a very large bear.

At that moment, his mother, looking at her nearly catatonic son, knew who the father was. Her thoughts jerked back to a night nearly three years before. Walking home, she had heard a squeak-like noise emanating from a passing alley. More curious than concerned, she walked toward the noise to find a small man cowered at the corner of a dumpster and brick wall, obviously beaten, staring at her exactly the way Simon stared. It was more than fear, it was as if confronting evil eye to eye and staring into its catacombs.

She could never explain it, perhaps it was a moment of pity or her first act of penance, but she took the man home. It felt right; she believed she was supposed to do it as if it had already happened and she was playing her part. She washed his rigid body, dressed his wounds and lay down with him, holding him close, wrapped around his smallish frame like a body pillow. She held him tight, trying to transmit the strength he would need the next day to survive in the bad world. Hours later, she awoke to his touch as he traced the outline of her breast. Men touched her breasts nightly, but this was different; want and trepidation at the same time, a wise mouse sniffing a piece of cheese on the trigger of a trap. She felt his hardness against her and something in her stirred. She guided him through the ritual, quietly whispering instructions in his ear. He never spoke and

in the morning, she dismissed him with a small smile, a touch on his cheek, and a light push out the door.

That man was Simon's father. She knew that now, staring at a miniature version of the terrified creature on the floor of her kitchen. It explained much about the boy and she would never raise her voice to him again. She knew that his life was going to be bad enough.

When Simon was eleven, two older boys chased him home from school. Attempting to throw them off, he cut down an alley onto Oliver Street. His senses honed from years of chases, he could feel them gaining. As he ran by the large, ornate door of St. Matthew Church, a man exited. The dark interior looked inviting and like somewhere Simon could hide. He dashed into the church, under the exiting man's arm, and nearly knocked another man down.

"Slow down, son," the man said smiling at the boy, "The Lord is always here. There's no need to run."

Simon, instinctively looking over his shoulder out the closing door, drew the man's eye and the man caught a glimpse of the two boys running past the church. Chased more than once as a child himself, Father David instantly understood and though he later discovered Simon was not of his faith, invited him to the church whenever the boy wanted. He looked as if he could use all the help offered.

That was nearly a year ago and St. Matthew's Church became the only place Simon felt safe and whole. He would visit after middle school every Friday afternoon. The church's darkness comforted him, along with the echo of each step, like a heartbeat. Inching his way to the second pew, he always sat at its end near the confessionals. There he could watch men and women, heads always down, duck into the booth and a few minutes later come out looking different. Their step was lighter and their faces seemed to hold less weight. It appeared they were not as weak coming out as they were going inside. That intrigued Simon.

Eventually, Father David emerged from his booth, eyes exactly focused where Simon sat, and with genuine joy, he would greet the boy.

"Good day, Simon," he said with a smile.

For almost a year, the clergyman had greeted Simon the same way, but he knew very little about the smallish boy sitting in the pew. And that made him to want more. Simon spoke only when spoken to and responses were the minimum required to address a question. His eyes would always drift toward the confessionals, but come back when the priest spoke. Father David knew he had problems and he wanted to ask, but couldn't push. Each Friday, he sat next to Simon, asked him about his week and hoped one day he might open up.

When that day arrived, the priest was not ready.

"What do people do in the box, Father?"

Caught completely off guard, Father David froze. So ecstatic that the boy initiated the conversation, his mind blanked. The boy fidgeted, uncomfortable at the silence. A look of alarm rose on his face, as if he had spoken out of turn and expected punishment for his transgression. Father David couldn't think and decided to start with the basics.

"The box is called a confessional."

"What is that?" Simon asked.

"It is a place where a priest hears confessions of a person's sins."

"What is a sin?"

"A sin is disobedience to the will of God."

Simon turned his head toward the confessional, and looked back at Father David, brow furrowed in thought. The priest bit his tongue, not wanting to force, feeling something important was occurring. Simon stared in the direction of the altar and continued his deliberation. Another minute passed. Father David thought he had lost him when Simon spoke again.

"So, it is a sin to go in the box?"

The priest straightened, caught himself and relaxed.

"A sin? Why would you think that, Simon?"

"When people go in they look scared and frail. They look like, like –" he said, then hesitated.

"They look like what?" David gently prodded.

Simon's head was down. When he spoke, his voice was a whisper and as the words reached Father David, he could never be sure they came from the boy's mouth.

"They look like me."

Father David tried controlling himself. He had waited for this moment since the boy ran, terrified, into the church. It was easy to see that Simon was diffident, completely reserved and lacked self-confidence. It was as if he had already given up, completely, on everything, accepting his feebleness as unchangeable. Father David understood some children were shy, but Simon was beyond shy, he was indifferent. He almost wasn't there. In the darkness of the church's corner, the boy seemed to dematerialize into the blackness, like the white spot on the screen of his family's old television when shut off. Father David wondered if he didn't keep him talking, would Simon just fade away. So, he prodded a bit.

"And what do you look like?" the Father asked.

"A weakling. Timid. Frightened. Meek." replied Simon, in what Father David thought was the most confident tone he had ever heard from the boy.

"But they don't look like that when they come out," continued Simon.

"What do they look like when they come out?"

"Strong and happier," Simon said, staring at the crucifix behind the altar, "Their heads are up; eyes shine even in the dim light. Their footsteps are louder and fewer than when they walked to the box."

Father David felt this was all leading to a breakthrough, but he couldn't help but wonder if there was selfishness on his part. He had desired this for so long. He had wanted inside Simon's head and now that he had slipped in, he didn't want out. There was too much to see. A locked box sitting in full view finally opened and he didn't want to leave until every last item inside was held for an accounting.

"What does that tell you, Simon?"

"Something happens in there. Them on one side. You on the other. They come and go. You stay. You do something," Simon challenged, looking at the priest, "You change them. You make them less meek."

The last sentence seemed almost accusing to Father David. Concern crept inside the priest like a chill up an open sleeve. Abruptly, he thought about stopping. He could stand and feign a forgotten task, but he was unable to walk away.

"And that is a bad thing? To make people less meek?"

"Is it true that Jesus holds a special place in his heart for the meek?" Simon asked, looking intently at the priest.

"Well, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did say that the meek will inherit the earth. So, yes, I would say that he holds a special place in his heart for the meek of this world," he answered, but could not help wondering if he had done so too quickly.

Simon thought again, staring at the altar. When he spoke, he spoke confidently.

"So, if the meek are to inherit the earth then why do they want to be changed? Why do you change them? If a sin is disobedience to the will of God and the will of God is that the meek will inherit the earth, then aren't you committing sin?"

Simon was standing, pointing at the shocked priest, no anger in his voice, only sadness.

"Simon, please…come into the confessional, Simon. Tell me everything. Tell God everything. He will forgive you…he forgives us all," the Father whispered, but knew it was too late. He had sinned. He wanted too much. That was a sin.

"I have to go. I don't need the confessional, Father. My faith is strong, stronger than yours is. I know what I am," Simon stated quietly as he walked towards the door, his back to the priest, "I know I have a purpose" were the last words Father David ever heard Simon utter.

As he stepped out the door of St. Matthew's church and walked into the days fading light, Simon knew he could never come back here again. Simon wanted to inherit the earth.

Simon's life continued. Middle school led to High school, but nothing changed. He was unnoticed by most of the others except for the strong; those

that held power and liked it. They fed on Simon like hyenas on a fresh carcass. He survived. He survived with bruises, broken bones and deep humiliation. But that was all right; they were not going to inherit the earth, he concluded. He was sure he would. That was his purpose. He was the meekest of even the meek. He was special.

In a junior year Biology class, the bell rang, dismissing the students. Simon, sitting on the aisle nearest the door, stood to leave. Behind him, a boy shoved Simon out of his way because he was in a hurry to meet his girlfriend between classes and it was, after all, just that wimp Simon. Caught off balance in the motion of standing, Simon fell, and instinctively reached out his right hand, which crashed through a small fish tank sitting on a counter, cutting his palm in the process.

The water rushed out on the floor, along with the three thumb-sized angelfish, which began to flop and suffocate in the spill. Students panicked, a couple let out small screams, but mostly they watched the fish dying. The teacher searched in vain for a container, but Simon knew she wouldn't find one in time, so he picked up the three angelfish and placed them in his cupped left hand. He walked to the sink, turned the water to a light stream, and placed his two cupped hands together. Under the flow of water, he created a miniature lake so the fish could breathe. The blood from the cut on his hand made the water burgundy colored, but the fish didn't seem to mind. Eventually, the teacher found another suitable container for the saved angelfish.

"Thank you again for saving the fish," she later offered as she inspected and cleaned the cut on his hand, "Your quick thinking is the reason they're still alive."

"It was no big deal."

"Yes it was Simon," she said, "Only you were calm enough to see what to do. And you did it with your hand cut, too. Your blood saved the fish. Your blood carried the oxygen they needed to live."

Simon felt embarrassed, but he felt something else too. He felt pride and he liked the feeling.

At his locker the next morning, a girl from the science class stopped. It wasn't just any girl; it was Carrie, a smart, quiet, friendly girl that everyone liked. This had never happened before. Ones like her didn't notice him.

"You did a good thing yesterday, Simon," she said, smiling shyly. His whole body flushed and a feeling of ecstasy overcame him. His body seemed to glow the rest of the day.

Things began to change. Simon had a few friends at school, but they were like him, the weakest, the ones with the darting eyes, always on the alert. They flocked together with the other prey so as not to be picked off as easy. Walking down the hall, they seemed to draw courage from one another and group as a covey of quail or a herd of antelope. Strength didn't come in numbers, but a reduction of fear did.

Now, other kids greeted him in the hall. The prey walking with him sensed the change, noticed Simon being noticed, and they fell back out of danger. Teachers called on Simon more often. In English class, a football player asked Simon if he could borrow a pencil instead of just taking the one out of Simon's hand. Almost overnight, it was as if he became a whole person, no longer transparent, seen by everyone and he began to believe his time was coming, as he always knew it would.

By the time senior year was half over, Simon had been elevated from the status of being a prey animal noticed only by the carnivores to being one of the many, an average person, liked by some and disliked by others. Most important, the bullies who required daily blood to survive, no longer hunted him. Some even talked to him.

Simon also became aware that he no longer noticed the ones who were like he used to be, the meekest. One day they were there and then the next they were not. They seemed to have disappeared as if the molecules of their bodies hummed at a different frequency than everyone else. Simon knew there must be an explanation for this, but before long, he had forgotten about the meek ones.

Carrie began talking to him in Biology class. Then they became lab partners. Simon began having lunch with Carrie at her table with her friends. A few weeks later, they were having lunch together, sitting at a table alone, near one corner of the cafeteria, where large potted plants obstructed the view. They sat near one another, heads tilted in, as they quietly conversed.

The two studied together in the library. They sat next to each other during school assemblies. They worked as partners when they volunteered for the school's blood drive. One Friday night, they met at a school basketball game, sat side by side, and their thighs touched the whole time. As perplexing as it was at first to Simon, Carrie had become his girlfriend.

As their senior year continued, the two became inseparable. They dated with friends of Carrie's, who became friends of Simon's. It was like a dream. He never believed life could be this beautiful. He had friends and he had love. Most of all, he existed. No one picked on him anymore. No one chased him or hurt him because they could and had nothing better to do at the time.

Simon could only explain his meteoric rise as being part of his inheritance. His long wait at being meek was beginning to reap the promised rewards. What else could it be, Simon thought. *The meek will inherit the earth* is what Jesus said. Wasn't that just what was happening to him; what other explanation could there be for an invisible weakling to suddenly have everything, he surmised. Simon also wondered what Father David would have to say now.

"What are we going to do after the summer is over?" Carrie asked while lying together in Simon's bed. His mother was working late and on the hot July night all the windows in Simon's room were wide open, letting in the noise of the streets. Blues riffs drifted from Sammy's Bar between car engines, occasional raised voices, and the other sounds of a city's ecosystem. Light that bounced off

the billboard down the block diffused into his room like the petals of a daisy. Simon thought they were like two bees at the stigma of a flower, sucking down the nectar.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I am going off to college in Rockford and you will be here at City College and working. How will we see each other?"

"It will work itself out," he said smiling at her, "everything will work out." Something outside, probably a bird Simon thought crossed the light path and a dark shape caught his eye as it shot across the petals of the flower.

"How can you be so sure, Simon?"

"Because I know, that's all," he replied matter-of-factly.

"How do you know? No one knows," Carrie replied.

"I do, Carrie. I do. I have always known that if I kept my faith, I would be rewarded."

"Faith in what? You don't go to church."

"Faith doesn't fill churches, Carrie. Fear does."

She sat up quickly, pushing his arm from across her breasts. She stared down at Simon, angered.

"I have gone to church my whole life and I don't go because I am afraid."

"Are you sure?" Simon asked, "Aren't you afraid of what would happen if you stopped going?"

Carrie stood up and began to dress.

"You are starting to piss me off, Simon."

A half hour later, Simon was walking Carrie home. Hands not touching, they didn't talk. Simon didn't feel the need to explain about his meekness and the promise he believed. She wouldn't understand it anyway, he thought. She didn't live his life. How could she possibly understand?

He didn't notice the two men standing at the alley, one leaning on the building edge, mostly concealed in darkness. The streetlamp had not worked here in years as far as Simon knew. This made the alley even darker, like the entrance to a basement or a long hallway in a horror film. Carrie suddenly came closer to him and he thought she wasn't mad anymore. Then they were at the mouth of the alley and it was too late.

One approached them from each side, sliding their arms around the backs of the two teenagers, quickly guiding them into the darkness before they could react. Simon reeled at the stale, liquor breath of the man on his side mixed with a sulfurous smell of one that practices no oral hygiene. His face stayed mostly hidden by darkness, except for its outline and the stubble of an unshaven jaw. His head was shaved, but patches showed like it was done with a sharp implement instead of shears. His smile was missing at least two teeth. The other man next to Carrie had long hair, tied into a pony tail that stuck out the back of his dirty, stained cap. The word "SHINE" or something close to that appeared embossed on the front. He was a wide man, large-framed and heavy set, but not

fat and the sweat was evident in his heavy-hanging dark shirt. His smile was nice, his teeth perfect.

Simon became petrified and offered no resistance. It was if he had stepped out of his body and watched it all from another perspective. The big man pushed him hard into the alley where he came to a stop on the opposite wall. The two men turned their attentions to Carrie. Simon could only watch as if it was a dream.

"Hey chica, your boyfriend got any money?" Ponytail asked.

"No, he doesn't," Carrie said. Simon only stared, unable to say or do anything. Fear gripped him. He thought Carrie didn't sound so scared, though.

"That's too bad," Ponytail said, "Someone's got to pay the toll."

"We don't have any money, do we Simon? Simon...a little help here." Simon just stared like he was watching it on a screen. Carrie's voice was still strong, but Simon noticed it began to break a little.

"What can you give us then, chica?" Ponytail asked as he ran his dirty hand down the side of her head. The other man giggled quietly.

"Nothing," Carrie said, voice breaking, "Simon, do something. You can't just stand there and watch. Help me!" she yelled and cried at the same time. Simon knew he should do something, but he couldn't.

Ponytail smiled after looking at Simon cowered against the wall. Ponytail thought against the brick Simon seemed to fade into the darkness. "I don't think your boyfriend will do a thing, chica, no matter what happens."

"Simon!" Carrie screamed in anger while tears flowed down here cheeks. She lashed out and kicked Ponytail as hard as she could in the shin. He went down squalling, shrieking obscenities. Simon watched.

"You son-of-a-bitch, Simon! What kind of man are you?" Carrie yelled as she attacked the second, stunned man. Her fingernails dug into the flesh of his face and a finger caught an eye. He went down with a yelp; both hands covered his bloody cheeks.

Carrie backed out the alley as she howled at Simon.

"You are nothing, Simon, NOTHING. Not a man, not a person. You are a coward, worthless, NOTHING and I never want to see you again."

She turned and ran, sobbing down the dark street. That was the last memory Simon had of her. He could do nothing but watch. He was stuck to the brick wall by some force that held him there as a magnet holds scrap iron. He watched the two men get up and eye Simon like wolves eyeing fresh meat in the middle of a bad winter. Suddenly, Simon's past came back to him and he knew this was going to hurt.

They beat Simon like he had never been beat before. They used their fists at first, then their feet and finally whatever they could pick up in the alley and they pummeled him like an inanimate object having neither feeling nor soft parts. Like most beatings, the pain didn't last long. Simon knew that would come later. All he could do was try to cover his head and face, praying for it to end. As the blows rained down on his body, flashes of light washed across his closed

eyes. Losing consciousness more than once, he saw more lights and in the lights he saw truth flicker across his mind's eye like moments caught in a strobe light or reflections in a room. So struck by his epiphany he didn't notice the men had tired of the beating and walked off breathing hard, sweating in the July night.

Simon drifted in and out of consciousness, throbbing pain his only peer. His body was wet from the blood flowing from numerous wounds. The brick against his head was cool like an open window or the mouth of a cave in summer. Another time it would have been inviting, but now it only drew his attention away from the blackness he wanted to make his cocoon. Life kept pulling him back. Sounds penetrated his safe place, called to him, making him go where he didn't want. He craved isolation in a dark place that felt safe. But the noises kept calling him back.

"Damn them! Damn Him! DAMN YOU!" Simon roared and he knew it was all a lie. Everything. His whole life. Everything he believed.

Jesus lied.

"LIAR!" he bellowed to the dark sky, "YOU LIED TO ME!" Simon choked up and began to weep quietly, whispering to the air between sobs.

"The meek will never inherit the earth. They will never inherit anything except more humiliation and suffering. You got it wrong. The meek…WE…are too weak, too scared. *They* are too powerful, always there to knock us down. You lied to all of us. You lied to me."

When Simon's tears were gone and he could stand with the aid of the brick wall, he limped from the alley onto the dark, empty street. He knew everything had changed or everything was the same as it had always been. And it would always be. Under the darkened street lamp, Simon hobbled toward home, shoulders drooped, head down, in a moonless night.

Death and Life

Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.
-- Rabindranath Tagore

Sebastian gazed at the large, ornate goblet. Its ruddy, gold complexion looked tarnished, as if recently unearthed, brushed off, and displayed before a proper cleaning. Spoke wheels circled the goblet's surface. Symbols, one similar to an "A" and the other a horseshoe-shape, appeared between the spokes. Sebastian had no idea what the symbols meant nor did he even care at this moment. His brain was numb. He had sat on the same sofa countless times glancing at the goblet in a glass case and wondered what Mae liked about it.

Movement appeared and Sebastian's paralyzed mind snapped back to place and time. He turned his head toward the dining room.

Two policemen.

One on a phone.

The other kneeling, speaking to Tyler.

Tyler, eyes swollen, chest heaving as if he couldn't breathe.

Sebastian's hearing wasn't right. The sounds entering his ears muted as if they came across a piece of string into a tin can held to the side of his head. There was a lapse between the movement of lips and buzzing voices exiting mouths. Time had slowed, the tape on half-speed, forcing every millisecond into Sebastian's brain like a slow drill bit. What was going on again? Why were these people here, he thought. A spot behind his eyes ached to make it all clear.

An EMT walked into the room, stared at Sebastian, then leaned in to speak to an officer. Who was hurt, Sebastian wondered, looking around the room. Maybe it was me, he thought, maybe I am damaged. The policeman nodded after the EMT spoke and he slowly stepped toward the couch. In his mental fog, Sebastian wondered why it was taking so long for the policeman to make it twelve feet. Hurry up man he wanted to scream. It didn't help.

The heads of the two policemen, the EMT, and Tyler simultaneously turned before he heard the muffled scream emanating from the hall.

"Christopher!" Mae wailed.

Sebastian blinked hard. Something clicked. Mae's voice slammed reality to the curb. Reality then got out and proceeded to kick the shit out of Sebastian as he loitered lost in thought. Memories came back like blows: Christopher floating facedown in the hot tub, giving him mouth to mouth, Tyler screaming upon seeing his little brother, and the limp body. The last one kept repeating. He saw the red flesh in his hands, no more structure to it than an octopus out of water, trying to seep between his fingers. The boy's skin slowly drained of all color as the last filaments of life spilled out with the water from his inert little lungs.

Sebastian stood to face the entering Mae and Tom. Tears began to pour from his eyes like overflow from a breached levee. Mae's short frame and straight, dark hair lost focus through the fluid, but the low, guttural sound remained as she stepped closer. He couldn't find his voice. What could he say anyway? He heaved great gulps of air and expelled only a weak sound. How

could she understand that he only turned away for an instant? His jaw quivered. It wouldn't stop. What good would it do to explain the moment when his attention pulled elsewhere? Tyler saw his parents enter and he wailed in loss and want for comfort. Sebastian could only stand unprotected when Mae attacked.

He never raised his hands. The blows struck rapidly. Each one was a surge, a crashing wave releasing it energy. White light flashed. He felt blood running. There was no physical pain. He remained a stoic and pliable material for her grief and his guilt. Silently, he begged for more. The tears kept coming, his, hers, landing like raindrops. Keep pounding, he thought, in the rising fog. Maybe if she beat hard and long enough, the sorrow might fly from him like the dust from a hung rug.

No such luck. The policeman and Tom grabbed Mae, dragging her away. Both large men, they strained pulling Mae back. She dug in, all five foot three of her, all one hundred seven pounds. She growled and spit. Teeth flashed, no less vicious than wolf protecting turf. Her legs lifted, lashing out at the killer. Her words spewed unconsciously, uncontrollably, incoherently in the tongues of grief. Clear words weren't necessary to understand Mae at this moment. Sebastian knew he deserved every bit of it. And more.

"Just get out, Sebastian," Tom spit.

Sebastian and Tom had been best friends since thirteen years old. They met in Miss Hormel's Geography class where they sat side by side. Her breasts

were uneven. The left one sat a bit higher than the right. Her large nipples stood out and the one on the left, that's her left, didn't point out. It pointed up, a fingertip-sized bud sprouting toward the sun. It was the first time they had seen, or maybe noticed, such a thing. This intriguing anomaly in the otherwise perfect Miss Hormel became the spark to their first conversation.

"It's just the way her bra fits. They can't be different," the logical Tom remarked.

"Who says so?" Sebastian questioned, as he always questioned, "My cousin's dog had puppies and her tits were different sizes and shapes."

"Miss Hormel's not a dog. Human beings aren't animals."

"Maybe they are the same size, but that one nipple grew out the top, not straight out."

"Then it would be a wart, not a nipple," Tom answered and the two found that hilarious, cracking up until Miss Hormel asked if there was something they wanted to share with the class. They exchanged a smile, said, "No, Ma'am," and as a secret shared will sometimes do, the two became best friends.

Both Christopher's grandmothers telephoned to let Sebastian know he wasn't welcomed at the wake or the funeral. Eileen, Tom's mother, was at least amicable. Sebastian felt Eileen was a second mother to him. He certainly loved her as much. A heavy-set woman with premature silver hair that glowed like a

halo when the light hit it just right, Eileen hugged a person as if it each time was the last. Sebastian recalled how beautiful her hugs were, a nook of warmth and sanctuary. Time stopped and all was right. There was nothing he wouldn't believe while in her embrace.

"We all think it is best that you stay away," she said softly. Her voice had ice in it, but Sebastian could tell she was trying to hold back a cry.

"I understand," he squeaked, longing for her arms to engulf him, knowing that it would fix everything.

"Time, maybe with time we can...," she trailed off.

"I understand." And he did. He could face none of them. Not with what he had done. Talking to Eileen made him feel like Christopher died again.

She choked, "Why, Sebastian? Why did you let it happen? He was just two years old. Why didn't you watch him better?" She sobbed and he could hear Tom's father comforting her.

He said nothing. There was nothing to say. How could she care that he was sure he had latched the door? How could the million times he had been a good shepherd to the boys be an excuse for one mistake? He had failed them all.

Mae's mother, on the other hand, spoke direct. This didn't surprise Sebastian. In fact, any other reaction by Mae's mother would have confused him. He didn't know Mae's mother very well and liked her less. She had two children. One was Mae and the other Mae's older sister, Sue. To the mother, Sue was

everything Mae wasn't and Sebastian saw Mae reminded of it every time the mother was around.

In the short telephone call, for one instant, he thought he felt pleased he had caused the woman some pain. Then the notion was gone and he wasn't quite sure he had it at all. He hoped not, that would only make him worse than he already was.

"I'm calling for Mae," she immediately said when the receiver touched his ear, even before he spoke a greeting. "Murderer's aren't welcomed. Don't try to show up or I'll..." He set the receiver down. He didn't hang up. He didn't have that right. He just laid the receiver down and her epithets vomited from the speaker. Sebastian thought he could actually smell them.

He couldn't stay away. The morning of the burial was the type of June day that made one forget that the muggy, suffering, Midwest summer was close. It was a perfect day when promises made were seldom kept, but somehow it didn't matter. The promise was the important part.

Sebastian needed to see Christopher laid to rest. He must witness the boy lowered into a hole for no other reason than to recertify what he already knew, to verify his sin. He parked away from the others and approached the gravesite carefully, keeping a small stand of trees as his cover. Leaning against an oak, far enough away he was sure he remained unnoticed, he witnessed the solemn gathering for which he was responsible.

He stood atop a small rise underneath the oak's canopy. The gravesite stood on an equal rise in the distance. In between, the ground sloped and rose again in a swell of perfect emerald grass, occasionally spotted with white marble markers. It smelled of fresh mowing and when he closed his eyes and let his sleep-deprived mind drift, he caught a scent of a simpler time before he had responsibility. The sunlight shone fierce in the cut between Sebastian and Christopher, the contrast nearly obliterating the graveside party in the shade. A bluebird landed in a floral display on a nearby stone, eating seeds from the dried flowers. A light wind passed from his back, whispering, nudging him to the open, sunlit ground that spoke to him. He took tentative steps toward the warmth, but stopped just shy of the shadow line. He looked down. He could go no further and he backed up to the security of the oak's cover.

Thirty people stood as the small casket sank into the earth. He could hear the mourners weep, a reduced wail at the distance, but still shrill like a banshee across a stretch of moorland. Sebastian spied Tyler, leaning against Tom's leg, arms encircling his thighs. Tom held Mae up on the other side with the help of another man Sebastian didn't recognize. It was probably her father, he thought, because next to him, standing straight, arms at her side, was Mae's mother.

Soon the gravesite held only the immediate family. Sebastian decided he'd wait until everyone left then make his way to Christopher to say goodbye. But he never got the chance. As the family walked away with Mae being half-dragged, half-lifted from her youngest son, Tyler looked across the sunlit

expanse and pointed at Sebastian. All heads turned his way, but Sebastian saw only one. In a burst of strength, Mae broke free and came toward him, screaming. Tom gave chase. Mae waved her arms, cursing in the sunlight. Her black dress glistened like feathers on a crow. The bluebird bolted from the flowers. Mae's cries fought against the wind. The words had wings and the words had talons.

"You bastard! You killed him. You killed my baby. I hope you burn in hell." She collapsed to her knees as Tom caught up.

"Leave us alone, Sebastian," Tom yelled as he lifted Mae, his voice breaking with grief, "You've done enough."

Sebastian wanted to surrender to their pain and walk right across the sun-drenched pasture into their midst, offering himself. He wanted them to cleanse their anguish against him just as he hoped the sun's rays might cleanse his own. Instead, he looked at Tyler, whose head was down and whose shoulders heaved. He decided he would bring no more misery to the boy. He turned and disappeared into the shadows, stopping when his own grief and solitude became too much to bear. He broke down, stumbling to the soft ground, his fingertips clawing the earth. He sobbed uncontrollably. He couldn't stop. Every emotion he experienced since discovering Christopher dead disgorged from his body in giant convulsions of sobs, moans, wails, and shrieks. He beat and clawed the ground. He cursed God one second and prayed for help the next. He begged for forgiveness one moment and expounded his sins and

unworthiness immediately after. He did this until spent, exhausted, and there he slept for the first time in days, his filthy hands lying in freshly dug divots.

Two months after graduation Sebastian and Tom paddled a canoe on Shadow Lake. Since they met at age twelve, the days they didn't spend at least one hour together summed less than the fingers on two human hands and just over the number of girlfriends they together had. The pair defined inseparable. Most school classes they had shared, they both were on the swim team and during their junior year they dated the Hayner twins because it seemed such a perfectly reasonable thing to do. But things were changing. College was near and they were traveling separate ways; Tom to Purdue to study Chemistry and Sebastian to Iowa State to study engineering. The last summer together hadn't been the adventure they had planned. The knowledge that the end of something was near and the unknown was a solitary trip, tempered the two's enthusiasm for summer, though they covered it well. Nearly every day in June and July had a plan. This was the last trip before family and college preparation took center stage. They paddled into a clouded western sky, heading toward the shore where the truck sat to take them home. The oars that had six days before cut crisp slices into the still water like a blade into soft cheese were now off-sync, off-centered and dipped rough into the choppy lake.

What at first looked to be a stump floated toward them. In the front of the canoe Tom was the first to notice the object wasn't a log, but an animal carcass.

So shocked by what it was, he couldn't speak, but stopped paddling in mid-stroke, the wet wood glistening, water dripping from its blade edge looking like tears falling from a hovering, blond eye.

"It's a fucking monkey," Sebastian said in awe. He stopped paddling, too, and the canoe slowed, heading on a collision course with the carcass.

It floated on its back, long arms and curled legs sprawled. Its fleshy, pinkish ears stuck out like steering planes and its large, dark eyes, surrounded by the pale mask of its face, were wide-opened, pointed at the sky, empty like two pieces of polished onyx.

"It's a chimpanzee, a young one," Tom intoned.

The dead chimp floated toward the canoe and the two met with a muffled thud. The body slowly slid along the left side of the craft as if Universal Laws attracted monkey flesh and aluminum. Both boys stared transfixed.

"How the hell did it get out here?" wondered Sebastian, "It's a monkey for God's sake."

"Who knows, a pet that got loose? A circus in the area? There are a million other impossible possibilities that end in a chimpanzee floating dead in an Illinois lake."

"But what are the odds?"

"You just have to accept it, Sebastian. Don't try to figure it out. If it could happen, it will happen. Sometimes there's not a why."

The chimp's body floated by, a surreal event that ended in contemplation for both young men. They didn't begin paddling again. They just sat, staring between the chimp heading to open water and the shoreline darkened by overhead clouds. Suddenly, they were both afraid of what awaited them on dry land.

The months after Christopher's death blurred like a long illness. Sebastian rarely slept. That night's tape kept playing, overlaying other thoughts. Christopher's body floated everywhere, in Sebastian's bathtub or his sink. He couldn't drive by a pond or lake without eyeing the mop of blond hair spread like a golden aura, or a life-force escaping its shell. He entered work through a side entrance because the boy sometimes floated in the fountain outside the main entrance, arms wide, ready to grab. Every blond two-year old became Christopher returned. Sebastian started walking with his head down. Eventually, he only went out when he must. If seeing Christopher wasn't bad enough, Sebastian feared seeing the boy's family more. Every young, dark-haired woman morphed into Mae. Every seven-year old became Tyler, staring accusingly at the killer of his baby brother.

The phone calls didn't make it any easier. They came in the night. No one spoke on the other end. Sebastian would say hello repeatedly, but he heard nothing, not even breathing, as if the person just wanted to make sure Sebastian was still with the living.

He ate little; his psyche so preoccupied with his remorse that he forgot to eat and only remembered when the pain came. He rarely shaved or combed his hair with more than his fingers. He did bathe often. He felt dirty. His appearance grew disheveled His clothes didn't match. In a few months, Sebastian's exterior didn't so much as evolve as it decayed much like perennials approaching autumn. He considered killing himself, but couldn't face the prospect of Christopher waiting on the other side. He also figured living was a much worse punishment in the end. God or Christopher couldn't forgive him if he stayed alive.

When Sebastian does sleep, Christopher comes to him. Not the two-year old Christopher, but an adult Christopher, tall, square-jawed and blond-shocked like his father. He has Mae's green eyes and a smile that holds Sebastian's hand. The dream takes place in the same location, every time. Sebastian walks to a river's edge where Christopher stands and stares into the fierce, swirling water sprinting past. On the opposite bank, bouncing in the rapids is a small dinghy, held by a large, heavy anchor partially buried in the shore. The boat seems to fight for its freedom, tugging at the taut rope attached to the great anchor. Further back on the land, silhouetted by a falling sun, is a row of grapevine with fruit so ripe, so succulent that the globes are transparent orbs bending light like a crystal. Sebastian's mouth waters. He aches to press a bunch to his mouth while the sweet juice dries sticky on his neck and chest.

"How are you going to get to the other side?" Sebastian asks.

"I can't swim," answers Christopher.

A pang of guilt cuts Sebastian. "That's my fault. I'm sorry." He turns and with his head down walks away.

"Have you ever considered, Sebastian," he hears Christopher ask, "that I don't need to get to the other side?"

Then the dream ends.

Sebastian lost his electrical engineering job four months after Christopher's death. His attendance was sporadic and his enthusiasm waned. He took sick days and personal days excessively. His spirit disappeared. One woman told him it was as if he was an empty vessel. Project managers complained of uncompleted work and a lack of motivation. He rarely spoke unless spoken to and fellow employees avoided him. The talk was Sebastian had changed into something scary. His eyes dulled to opaque. They knew what had happened and sympathized, but after the firing, most coworkers were satisfied. They didn't want his bad luck rubbing off onto their lives. Sebastian didn't seem to care one way or another.

He sold the house he could no longer afford. He moved to a comfortable two-bedroom apartment and found a job at the local cable company installing fiber optic lines. He worked in a four-man team, mostly outdoors, and though the other three thought Sebastian was a little strange and closed off, they figured they could have done worse. After all, he volunteered for the high work and

seemed to actually relish in it. On these days Sebastian was cordial, almost content. Alone, high in a basket or belted into a harness he took his time, not for safety reasons, but the longer he stayed aloft, the closer he felt to Christopher and farther from the troubles below. Many times while working, he would stop, look up and talk to the boy, apologizing. He stared hard into the sky, hoping to glimpse a sign that Christopher heard and forgave him. Usually, a terse voice on the hand-held broke up these moments.

The cable company fired him three months later on the day he ran fiber optic cables at the Westland Bank building. He leaned over the edge of the twenty-story building, firing anchors into the brick, but the thickness of the ledge made it difficult. So, he climbed up on the ledge and leaned over. The harness cradled him and he hovered on the edge of nothingness. In this position he stared down at the gathering crowd and had an idea. He turned over, placed his feet on the edge and leaned back. The harness held him at a forty-five degree angle, over nothing but a city street two hundred feet down. Sebastian stuck out his arms and leaned his head back, staring into the clouds. A voice screamed on the handheld and another yelled at him from the rooftop, but he blocked them out, lost in the heavens. The blood rushed into his brain, his inner ear tumbled into disarray and his vision clouded. He became euphoric, lost his body and for one moment, believed a part of him could soar up to Christopher. One voice, however, pierced the crowd and block he created.

"Jump, jump you murdering bastard. Jump!" It was Mae's mother, her voice rising clearly from the crowd below. He hadn't heard the voice in months, but there wasn't any doubt. That whiny, nasal shriek cut through him. Sebastian stared up into the light pleading for Christopher's help. His hand went to the safety latch and he thought how easy it would be to give her what she wanted, what she and the others deserved. One quick pull, the tension would break and his release would occur.

He made the local paper with that stunt. Mae's mother provided background and then no one wanted to hire him in Crystal City. He gave up the apartment he could no longer afford and moved ten miles down Route 86 to Bitter Springs. He found a job as an Assistant Crematorium Technician at the Bitter Valley Crematorium, a large operation supporting most of the county. He burned dead bodies for seven-fifty an hour then processed the remains into neat packages. Sebastian felt it was not only fitting, but also arranged by God. Or maybe God granted Christopher one last wish.

His training consisted of a half-hour Power Point presentation and a couple days on-the-job training with Senior Technician Harlan Lee, a forty-something, rail-thin, anemic. He had a bad smoker's cough and Sebastian wondered how long it would be until Harlan needed a cremation chamber. He also wondered how long it would be until he was Harlan.

The job was mundane. He never saw the bodies. They came to him pre-boxed. Some caskets were ornate and expensive. Others looked like wooden

crates assembled behind the building. Sebastian manned chamber number three. He was the junior man. Harlan operated number one and between the two was Cletus Simpson.

To say Cletus was a big man was to underestimate by at least one man. He was a huge man. He wasn't that circus-freaky huge that people paid money to see, nor was he Mr. Universe-cartoonish huge that horrified and awed at the same time. He appeared dilated or resized through a giant magnifying glass. Arms thick and legs the size of fence posts, his head appeared out of proportion with the rest of him, which he tried to make up for by letting his hair grow wild. His chest swelled as if he always held his breath. As large as he was, his hands stood out. They were enormous and when closed, his fists were 20 lb. sledge hammerheads. He looked like he could pulverize the bodies into dust.

When the caskets arrived at his station, Sebastian removed any handles, rails or other ornamentations not burnable. Most of the time, handles and other metal pieces didn't exist or were made of burnable plastics, unless it was the most expensive type. Cletus told him that families liked to view their loved ones in elegance as they rolled away, ignorant as the chop-shop in the back stripped the good parts. All metal removed was tossed into a pre-labeled box matching the model number and promptly returned to the manufacturer via UPS. Bitter Valley received a reduced price on the replacements as an incentive to recycle hardware.

Once stripped of its value, the box and its contents entered the upper chamber lined with fire brick. Rows of large holes peppered the surface so the remains could drop to the collection chamber below. Sebastian sealed the door then turned on the fire and the sixteen hundred degree flame began to eat.

He was shocked that it took nearly two hours. Sebastian thought sixteen hundred degrees would perform its job in minutes. Sometimes it took up to three hours if the person was obese. Sebastian watched the first few closely, his face as close to the chamber's window as he could stand. The casket disappeared quick, leaving the body to burn alone. Immediately, the hair and skin torched. Organs took a bit longer. The abdomen rose like a muffin. Then it split. As the liquid evaporated, things popped and crackled like a pig at a luau. The flames changed color; yellow, blue, green, orange light shows sparkled from the body's chemical discharges. The brain bubbled through the eye sockets like spaghetti sauce forgot on the high setting.

Soon, only the skeleton remained and this took the longest. It glowed like white phosphorus. As the joints melted, the limbs dropped off and the ribs collapsed into the center. The skull separated from the neck and nearly always rolled to one side. Harlan and Cletus would bet a soda on which way the skull would roll. Harlan won most of the time. He claimed he could tell because he had burnt nearly fifteen thousand corpses in his eighteen years of crematory work. Sebastian didn't doubt it and never bet. It felt wrong.

Many times they had a dud – a body that wouldn't burn down without help. With the chamber turned off, a metal rake inserted broke up and rearranged the bone. Then the burn continued. At first, Sebastian didn't like this part of the work. He was hesitant, reserved about desecrating the remains.

"Pound that bone, man," Cletus teased, "You're not going to hurt it. Pretend it's your Pa." Sebastian ignored him. Harlan came over, shuffling weakly and pallid.

"It's just calcium. It's not important. It's nothing anymore but calcium." He gently took the rake from Sebastian and turned to Cletus.

"Show him Cletus."

Cletus smiled and took the rake. It looked like a toy in his paws. Reaching into the chamber, he began to crush the bones with short, powerful, precise strokes that sent pieces rifling off the brick. He raked the remains back and forth to allow the smaller pieces to fall into the collection chamber below. Cletus laughed. His eyes glowed and sweat shone on his face. He liked to break them up.

"We're just gardeners of death," Cletus intoned while raking, "Rakers for the Divine."

After the burn and a cooling, the remains were raked and swept from the lower chamber into a squat, metal pan. Sebastian had to feed them through a grinder because some pieces were still identifiable. The result was a more fine, even, attractive product. Lastly, a magnet searched for shrapnel, screws, and

surgical pins. No one wished for the family to open an urn to discover prosthesis or an old bullet.

"Remember that time you found all those matchbox cars?" Cletus asked Harlan, "There must have been twenty of them."

"Yeah, the guy had some kind of mental illness. He liked to swallow things. Apparently, he liked to eat his little boy's toy cars. Poor kid. Always looking for his damn cars and the whole time his dad was swallowing them. Then he swallowed too many and the boy lost his cars and his dad. Sad story."

The only ones Sebastian couldn't burn were the small caskets. He retreated from them as if radioactive. He refused to burn them, once even challenging Harlan to fire him if he didn't like it. Harlan looked at Sebastian closely, his droopy eyes sad with contemplation, and understood. He laid his hand on Sebastian's shoulder. Cletus looked away, rubbing the back of his giant hand across his forehead. Sebastian thought it looked like the end of an oar or a flipper attached to a seal.

"It's okay Sebastian. We're all in Bitter Springs for a reason."

He never asked Sebastian to burn another. Harlan or Cletus took care of the small ones. Cletus never even teased him. If a small coffin came, Cletus grabbed it in both hands and would say, "I've got this one. I got nothing to do anyway," even if he did.

On breaks, Sebastian stepped outside to retreat from the heat. Sitting on a dumpster, he could see the Crematorium smoke rise and drift off. He knew the

smoke was the real person, not what he boxed up inside. The flesh, the juices of life reduced and lifted, dissipated into the heavens and congregated again to be part of something larger. At these moments, Sebastian would fill his lungs and hold his breath, wondering who was in there.

Fourteen months after Christopher's death, six months since coming to Bitter Springs, Sebastian remembered it was the boy's birthday. Upset all day, tears falling at times, he burnt bodies and didn't like it. But he owed God the bodies. He must help clean up the mess. Harlan watched him, not knowing why but understanding the day held significance to Sebastian. After lunch, he made a suggestion.

"Take a walk in the Urn Garden. You need to see some life." Sebastian did.

After cremation comes internment, a place for remains to rest. Sebastian had been in Bitter Valley's columbarium, but interring the remains in stacked niches looked too much like a giant safe deposit box. There was also a Garden of Remembrance. This garden had open spaces to spread the ashes of loved ones. Sebastian didn't like this either. He had seen crows picking over the small bone fragments searching for gizzard stones. Some mourners took the remains home to set the urns on mantles or tables to feel closer to the dead. Sebastian didn't approve of this. People moved and people died. Urns and ashes needed a place to rest, like souls.

Near the crematorium was the Urn Garden and Sebastian saw this as the best place to inter remains. About ten acres in size, the garden was lush with a winding brick path that forked into many, shorter dead end paths ending in small, private alcoves. The grass was even and perfect, perennials abounded, and ornamental trees, many bearing fruit, stood in small patches. Trellises covered in ivy or rose or grape spotted the paths. Birdbaths and benches were numerous. Throughout the garden were compact columbarium built of stacked stone. Some held as few as four urns, the largest held twenty. Once filled, the recess was stoned over and a small, marble plaque set on the front identifying the remains. Loved ones wandered, searched until they found a special spot. Sebastian imagined it a comforting feeling.

He strolled through the garden heading for his favorite spot. The blue Coral Bells bloomed perfect next to the pink False Spirea. Hostas hugged the shade below flowering plums. Goldenrod mixed with Salvia in sunny spots, sparkling with an impressionist hue. He neared the end of his favorite path. A rough oak bench sat under a trellis of grapevine, flanked by moss-covered columbarium. Across from the bench stood a birdbath set as a centerpiece to a small, tiered garden filled with deep blue False Indigo. A wall of Angel's Trumpets grew on both sides, the long yellowish trumpet-shaped flowers hung like remembrance bells. A dense, semicircular stand of Weeping Willow shaded the natural alcove, making it appear to be a private nook.

At the back end of the alcove sat another stone columbarium set against, and nearly under, the waterfall of willow branches. Standing in front, setting an urn into the top row was a woman. Sebastian stood in front of the bench, watched the woman place the urn in the recess and withdrew a metal tab that Sebastian knew would tell the management the location. Later, an employee would come to this spot and wall up the hole.

The woman turned and was startled upon seeing Sebastian.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to intrude." She was young, late-thirties with a full face and high cheekbones. Her chin was delicate and transitioned to a thin neck. Her hair was past her shoulders and the color of the willow bark. Sebastian noticed for a moment her eyes looked like Mae's then they cleared and she smiled, brushing hair out of her face.

"It's alright. I didn't hear you there."

There was an awkward pause as the two stared and wondered what could and should be said.

"I was putting my son's remains to rest. It is beautiful here."

"This is my favorite spot in the garden. You chose well."

"It only took me ten years," she said as she walked toward Sebastian. She sat on the bench as if invited. Sebastian sat down next to her the same way.

"Jacob was four when he died. He fell down our basement steps," she confessed in one mechanical breath. "I left the door opened. I never left the door opened. But this time I did. The phone was ringing and I ran up the steps

forgetting about the door. He woke up from his nap and I guess he thought I was downstairs when he saw the open door. He came looking for me and fell."

Sebastian was stunned and all he could say was, "I'm terribly sorry." But his mind raced. This woman with the unknown name, had lived for ten years with the same demon. He wanted to pick her brain, ask a million questions, but he couldn't. He couldn't do that to her.

"For ten years the urn sat on the top of a dresser in my bedroom, so I would see it last when I shut off the lights and first when I opened my eyes in the morning. Nothing else sat on the dresser. Not a brush, not a candle, nothing. I didn't want to forget what I had done. I had another child and I didn't want to forget."

"What made you finally bring the urn here?" Sebastian asked the question hesitantly, trying to mask his anticipation.

"When I realized I wasn't grounded anymore and I was drifting. I thought the urn was my mooring to Jacob and our life together, but it wasn't. I had lost my mooring. His remains were a constant reminder of my mistake and the reason I couldn't accept forgiveness."

"Forgiveness from yourself?"

"No. That's not possible. We don't have that right. We must be forgiven."

"By who? Who will forgive?" Sebastian blurted with such emotion, she turned to look into his eyes. She saw herself reflected and she took his hand.

"In time, everyone forgave me. What I lost was the faith that I was worth forgiving."

He dreams again. They watch the boat fight against the current as the anchor holds it. Sebastian smiles and turns to Christopher.

"The boat isn't fighting to be free is it?"

Christopher smiles.

Sebastian feels joy for the first time since that day and stepping forward, dives into the racing river. The icy cold isn't brutal; it's invigorating, waking something lost. As he breaks the surface, he sees he's downriver and he begins to swim, paddling harder and fiercer than any swim meet in which he and Tom had ever raced. His lungs feel as if they will burst, each air sac inside wanting to explode like those overripe grapes. It feels good. We need to feel the death to feel alive, he thinks, and continues to stretch his arms, scooping buckets of water and pushing it behind. Lactic acid builds in his thighs, making them heavy and they burn in an almost tickling way that Sebastian remembers from his youth. He knows he is trying as hard as he can, he can push no harder and it's alright if he doesn't make it because he gave it everything, everything he has. Just when he thinks he is done, though, the boat is there, the bank is behind it, and with a scream that is half pain and half joy, he lunges to grab the anchor tight.

The current pulls his limp body. The boat and he pound against one another. Sebastian is a loose sail still tied to a mast, but tied taut, his hand a fisherman's knot tightening on itself. He could stay there forever. He drags himself on the bank, gasping,

sits against the big anchor and looks to the other side, the side from which he arrived. Christopher is no longer there, but the view is breathtaking. The grass is tall and green, a prairie. Trees in the distance mingle like crowds, lightly swinging branch ends inviting him to the gathering. An orchard stands directly behind where he stood on the bank, ripe with green apples. One falls to the ground as he watches. Two bluebirds escape the bouncing branch. Sebastian knows that after he has rested and drank his fill, he will return to where he belongs.

He stands on Christopher's grave reading the words. The bright sunshine bathes his neck and he smiles. The grass glows emerald over the boy and fresh daisies sit next to the gravestone. A bee lands on the yellow flower then immediately bounces to another and to still another before finding comfort. He glances to the stand of oaks and their inviting shade, but he chooses to stay in the sun until he can no longer stand it. The warmth feels too good.

Sebastian remembered three days earlier when he returned to the crematorium after his talk with the woman. Harlan and Cletus stood at their posts. Harlan had just loaded a casket and was shutting the door. Cletus had his oven door open and he was breaking up remains. His powerful body dipped forward in sharp motions and a little grunt escaped his lips with each whack. Harlan turned then smiled at Sebastian.

"You look different. The walk did you good." Cletus turned to look at Sebastian and his arms dropped to his sides. His smile showed envy.

"I'm going to miss you, Sebastian." He then turned back to his job at hand.

Sebastian did feel different. He felt clean, not the clean that comes from bathing, but a cleanliness that comes by purging. He felt clean in the same way he thought the smoke rising above the crematorium was clean. It was all burned away; sin, evil, and mistakes that led to both. He walked through fire and was anew. At least for now. He had no illusions. Dirt would collect again. There is too much dirt. But as he knelt at Christopher's grave, hands spread on the plush grass watching another bee join the first, Sebastian knew that cleansing was possible.

To Have Faith is to be a Mockingbird

Faith is not something to grasp, it is a state to grow into.
-- Mahatma Gandhi

"You'll save me, Ben. Not the doctors. You."

Benedict Rhodes held his sister hand. Its goldenrod shade contrasted his large hand's normal, pinkish tone. If it wasn't for her urine-colored eyes and sunken face, he thought her skin would look pretty.

Instead, Tessa lay dying. It was all he could do not to stand up and scream. He felt the shakes come on, but willed them back. He swallowed hard, looking up at the large crucifix hung over her hospital bed. Jesus' bowed head had a chunk missing. Ben felt alone.

"You need a liver, Tess. What can I do about that?"

She smiled a little, but it had the look of someone trying to lift too much weight.

"You'll think of something. You always have."

He always did, but he had no idea how he did it.

Ben talked to her nurse, Sarah. Nearly every day for the last five weeks, they spoke about Tessa. Ben asked if he could pump her for information about transplants, so on her break they went to the hospital café. He drank coffee, black. She drank Chai. Ben wanted to try Chai one day. It smelled good. Instead

he drank black coffee that ate through his stomach like a beaver through willow bark.

"What's it going to take to get a liver?" he asked.

"A lot of luck."

Sarah said this staring straight into Ben's eyes, no batting of the eyelids, willing him to understand it. Her eyes were hazel. Her face was long, her body European with long legs and a high waist. She was tall. He was six two and she matched up well with him. Ben figured five ten easy. A birthmark shaped like an arrow sat on the sexy part of her neck. It held his gaze. He had noticed that she moved through the hospital like an athlete, her stride long, determined, like flowing water. If it wasn't for Tessa's illness, he would have asked Sarah out long ago. But there wasn't time for that now. Never seemed to be.

"What do you mean?"

"Ben, I won't lie to you." Sarah raised the cup to her lips, pushing a freed strand of hair out of the way. He was mesmerized at how she didn't sip; she gulped like coming up for air. "Six thousand people died last year waiting for transplants. I see them die nearly every day."

"But she's only sixteen. Won't she go to the top of the list?"

"It's not that simple. It's not just about who is the youngest or the neediest. Angels like Tessa don't get first dibs because they're good. Organs are distributed locally first, then regionally, then nationally. Tessa moves to the top as she worsens, hour by hour. Then you wait."

"There's no other way?"

"Not unless you find a donor willing to sign over their liver directly to her. Then, that person has to die and die soon."

Ben's cup stopped in the air. His stomach churned.

"Sorry, Ben, but that's the way it is. If you want Tessa to live, you have to want someone else to die. There are no miracles."

For a moment, Ben felt shame then he thought of Tessa, slowly drowning in the poisons of her own body. She was counting on him.

Asleep when he returned, Tessa's face had relaxed and she looked peaceful. Shaken, Ben wondered if she were alive. But as quick as he thought it, the monitor showing her strong heartbeat framed in his vision and he exhaled. He set the small Virgin Mary statue that he had picked up in the gift store in front of the small, framed picture of himself that she always kept close. In the photo taken three summers ago, the day before their parents murder, it showed a smiling Ben leaning over a pier railing at Key West. He looked happy, happier than he knew he actually was. Something in the photo caught his eye and for the first time he noticed floating off the pier was the bloated carcass of a sea bass, caught forever decomposing.

With a shaky hand, he brushed hair away from Tessa's eye. Her breathing altered and she settled again. She had been through so much in her sixteen years. It wasn't fair. He remembered the day his parents brought her

home from the hospital. He was nearly twelve and an only child. But he was happy that she was there. She completed the family and he would never forget it.

Their mother was a judge. She had a hawked nose and inky hair that made her look like a raven when wearing the judicial robes. The father was a Urologist. He had wide hips and droopy jowls below a balding head. His doctor friends joked that his shape mirrored his specialty. They met years earlier when mother sued father for malpractice. She always said that she lost the case, but won a husband. Ben came soon after marriage and then their respective careers took off so more children weren't possible. Only after a dozen years and a marriage falling apart was a love-child born to bring them back together. Ben still remembered the couple of years before Tessa, the arguing and the silence between the two people he cared most in the world. Ben blamed himself and wanted to do something, but didn't know what to do.

A year before Tessa, at another silent dinner, he decided to just ask.

"When did you two stop loving each other?"

The mother choked on her Cabernet. The father simply froze while looking down, cutting his beets.

Years later, not long before their murder, the parents told Ben and Tessa how important that night became.

"It was your brother who saved us, Tess. He woke us up and we believed again." Ben didn't know how to tell them he just wanted to know what happened to their relationship.

The role as savior repeated itself since that first night, but Ben never understood any of it. He never consciously acted in any intended way. Each incident was an accident, not preordination. He never had a plan.

When Tessa was two she choked. Mother, father and Ben worked on a large puzzle depicting a Native American scene. Ben concentrated on the multi-colored Medicine Wheel that the box showed in the hands of an ancient-looking Indian. Little Tessa was mainly in the way, attempting to force pieces where they didn't belong. Suddenly, she was choking. Then she stopped choking and turned blue. The father/doctor reacted calmly, performed the Heimlich maneuver, which didn't work. He calmly stuck his fingers in her mouth, but could reach nothing. The mother called 911 stoically, like reading instructions to a jury, but her eyes were wide and she rocked forward then back. Ben watched in horror the skin of his sister go from healthy pink to periwinkle to an azure that he thought impossible. As his father worked frantic, losing his steel composure as the seconds and possibilities dwindled, Ben leaned over his sister, covered her mouth with his and blew hard. His father pushed him away, screaming.

"No, you'll push it further down."

But that didn't happen. Tessa coughed, took a breath and continued coughing. The piece shot out. Later, after coming back from the hospital, Ben flattened the puzzle piece and noticed it was part of the Medicine Wheel.

The father could never explain what happened. He said it shouldn't have worked and he continued for weeks to come up with different physiological

reason why it did. The mother said it was Ben. She believed he had a gift. Ben tried to explain that he made a mistake, that he saw Tessa blue and thought she needed air, so he tried mouth-to-mouth, but they weren't listening. Ben didn't understand.

While Tessa slept, Ben strolled to ninth floor arboretum. Built on the southern end of the hospital, the arboretum's glass ceiling curved down like a helmet's visor to take full advantage of a moving sun. A large space, easily taking up a quarter of the top floor, it was an extravagant addition to a hospital. But the Saint Cabrini designer's felt nature held the power to heal and considered it an investment in cost-reduction.

Upon entering, the green was so overpowering in contrast to the hospital's blank, sterilized, white facade, Ben felt his perception shift, a physical feeling of leaving one world and entering another. Considered so spiritual, even the hospital staff rarely entered the green space, leaving it a sanctuary for the ill and their troubled families. Rumor had it that buried sensors throughout the arboretum recorded vitals, attempting to prove a link between nature and nurture. Ben didn't believe the stories, but liked the idea of it.

Benches sprouted along each path and around pools. Patients and visitors lazed around the garden, a look of peace upon in their eyes. As Ben walked by a grassy knoll, he spied a couple cuddling under a fig tree, giggling like teenagers. Ben wished it was him and Sarah.

In one corner, he found a quiet grotto where he hoped to relax and think. Sitting on a bench he watched the sun's rays cut through the foliage like prison bars sent from heaven. Thinking of Tessa, he began to weep. His hands shook, his chin quivered and his head hummed. He heard what he thought was a parrot nearby then the caw of a crow. He wasn't aware that there were actual birds in the arboretum. Then the air filled with other animal sounds, one after another, all emanating from the same direction.

As he sat confused, a man popped through the foliage like an actor through a curtain. Dressed in light blue overalls and pushing a small wheelbarrow, he walked with a gait that favored his right leg. The gait appeared practiced, even accommodating, as if it had existed a long time. He wore a beard and it, along with his shock of hair, was white and unkept, giving the appearance that the hair was not so much part of the head as it hovered around the head, full of static electricity.

Ben realized it was the gardener who made the sounds. At some undefined interval, the man made an animal sound. His face contorted for a millisecond, uncontrollably, and an animal sound came out. The face went back to normal then after a time, it jerked again like a bad spot in a film or a sneeze, and another animal sound emerged. Ben immediately figured it for Tourette Syndrome. Ben watched the man, uncomfortably stuck between pity and fascination when the gardener turned toward him.

"Don't mind me, son. I won't bite and I'm not crazy. Just a problem I've had since I can remember." His face was gentle, his smile alluring and Ben instantly felt at ease.

"Sorry if I was staring. It was just new."

The man walked closer to Ben and stuck out his hand.

"No sorry needed. I'm Max," he said, then his face contorted and a perfect pig sound came out of his stretched mouth. Instantly, his face was normal again and Ben wondered if it even happened.

"Do you take care of this place?" Ben said, shaking hands.

"Sure do." Noticing Ben's puffy eyes and stained cheeks, he asked, "You okay?"

"It's my sister…" Ben began and then trailed off.

"Tell me about it, Ben. It's break time anyway." Max sat down. Ben looked at the man and the wrinkles didn't stand out so much. Even with the unkept hair, Ben thought he didn't look as old as he first thought. Max could be fifty or ninety. His age seemed to change depending on what light, or context Ben saw him.

"She's needs a liver. She's dying," Ben began and then effortlessly spilled all to Max as if they were old friends. He told Max about his parents' murder and how he had taken care of his little sister since their death. He told him about Tessa and how she became sick with liver cancer the previous year, and he told Max about how he had to find a way to save her because it was expected. While

Ben spoke, Max's face contorted three times and the bray of a donkey, the bark of a small dog, and what Ben thought was the call of some type of hawk exploded from Max's mouth. Max seemed not to notice it, so Ben just continued.

"When Tess was ten, she fell out of a tree. I was standing beneath and broke her fall. She landed on my chest, giggling. Our parents saw it, at least part of it, and they said I caught her, probably saving her life. Tess now remembers it that way, too. I didn't do anything. I just broke her fall, but the myth grew."

"So, you don't think you did save her?" Max asked.

"No, I was just standing there and she fell on me. I could have easily been standing a few feet away."

"But you weren't were you?" Max asked then jerked and produced a cat sound. Ben gave another example.

"When I was eleven, we were in the car. I saw a friend, Mark Stewart, running down the sidewalk. I screamed to stop and dad hit the brakes hard just as he entered an intersection. We didn't know it, but another car ran a stop sign, clipping our front end. He hit us so hard we spun in a circle. No one was hurt. My parents said I saved us all, that I had a premonition. I tried to explain what really happened, but it was too late."

"But your outburst did save them, right?" Max inquired.

"Technically, yes, but I had no part in it. It wasn't conscious. It wasn't planned."

"Maybe it doesn't have to be. Maybe it shouldn't be."

Ben needed to get back to Tessa's room. He told Max he might see him again and before making it out of the arboretum, Ben heard the gobble of a turkey and the call of a bullfrog. Ben smiled as he entered the hospital again.

Outside of Tessa's room, Ben met her doctor, Dr. Thandh. He was a small, round man, originally from India. His English was perfect with a strong British accent. His demure was stiff, formal and Ben could easily picture him in nineteen century Bombay, trying to blend into British rule without realizing it was impossible.

"You can have my liver," he offered the doctor.

"You require it, Mr. Rhodes."

"But you can have it," Ben pleaded, his hand reaching toward the doctor.

Dr. Thandh softened. One corner of his mouth curled, his brow relaxed.

"Each day at least one of my patients dies. Each day. This is a transplant hospital. All here are dying. At times, we are fortunate and a gift arrives and we save someone. But they are gifts. They are neither solicited nor expected. We hope for them and we beg for them, but there are never enough. It is not a reflection on us, our society or on altruism itself. It is just a cold, hard fact of biology. People die."

"But not Tessa. She's been through enough."

"Maybe Tessa, Mr. Rhodes. Maybe your sister. It isn't up to us. It never is." His body stiffened once again, "I'll check in again later" and he walked off, chin up, ramrod straight.

Inside the room, Tessa was awake and talking with Sarah.

"You promise you'll do that for me, right?" Tessa asked.

"No problem."

"Do what?" Ben inquired, "I thought I did everything for you." He leaned over and kissed his sister's forehead.

"This is something special."

Ben turned to Sarah who looked flushed.

"I met the gardener, Max."

"Max is great. He's been taking care of the arboretum since the beginning."

"I love Max," Tessa added, "He does a perfect crow."

Later, they watched television. At least Ben did. Tessa drifted in and out of consciousness. She ate no dinner and Ben noticed her skin had changed from goldenrod to a sickly greenish-yellow like a bruise mostly healed. She seemed to be going down fast and Ben hyperventilated as he walked around the room. First he straightened the room, putting the furniture back where he remembered it when Tessa first arrived. Then he stood at the foot of the bed and jockeyed it until it was exactly perpendicular to the wall. He smoothed out her blankets and tucked them neatly at her sides. His head became light, his vision blurred and he produced a little eerie hum as he toiled.

"Sit down and relax, Ben," his sister whispered, "you'll figure it out."

He sat down and took deep breaths until he could breathe again.

When she fell into a deep sleep, Ben could sit no longer. He could no longer separate the beeps, sucks, and squeaks of the machines hooked up to Tessa from Tessa herself. Ben needed to talk to someone, so he headed for the hospital chapel.

The chapel was on the lowest floor, tucked at the end of a confusing hallway, an afterthought by the designers. Two swinging, surgical doors, each with a porthole acted as entrance. Once through the swinging doors, the darkened chapel, in comparison to the well-lighted hallway, gave the appearance of entering a large cave lit by candlelight.

The chapel was beautiful. Ornate and spectacularly designed, it had the look of an old European cathedral modeled to one-twelfth scale. He stood in the nave and its walls were arched arcades. High, above the cornice were stained-glass windows. Above door height and below the vault, pillars stood, interrupted by niches with figures of saints peering down. Near the altar, on both sides of the chapel, large tapestries hung from the vault. One depicted John the Baptist bathed in light, staring upward. The other was Madonna and Child.

The altar was golden, sitting on a mahogany stage covered mostly with a scarlet rug. Strategically around the altar stood statues of saints, some golden and some obsidian, arranged alternately like set-up chess pieces. Golden columns rose on each side, framing the large relief of a crucified Christ. Dozens

of candles at the rear and sides of the altar gave off an eerie, moving light making it appear that Jesus burned at the stake.

Father Theodocius stood at the altar, his back towards Ben. Standing on the tip of his toes, arm outstretched, he wiped the dust off the feet of Christ, grunting with effort. A heavy man, he had the look of a round wraith, standing in the low light in front of the golden altar while wearing his full-collared shirt and cassock. Ben walked to the left and sat down in the presbytery, not wanting to disturb the priest.

When the priest finished his cleaning, he turned and breathed out hard, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. He lifted a golden goblet off the altar and drank. As he set the cup back, he saw Ben sitting in the presbytery and started, spilling a small amount of liquid from the goblet.

"Who is that scaring an old priest?"

"I'm sorry Father. My name is Benedict Rhodes and my sister is very ill."

"Come up to the altar and we will talk at the Savior's feet."

Ben stepped up to the altar and the two shook hands. They sat on a mahogany bench at the back of the altar. The Father was plump, but not obese. His face was round and he wore a close beard that came down far, hiding his thick neck. Balding and wearing thin-wired glasses, Ben guessed his age in the early sixties. He had a cauliflowered right ear he attempted to hide with hair.

"Tell me about it, son."

So, Ben did. When he came to the part explaining his supposed gift, he remembered another story.

"When she started Middle school, a boy teased her on the bus. Everyday she sat in the same seat and when the boy got on, he sat across the aisle. I told her to move. If he followed, she could tease him about liking her. That would scare any boy. The next day, she sits in the very back. The bus is in a bad accident. Two kids are killed, including the girl sitting where Tess normally sits and the boy who teased her."

"I think I understand," the priest said.

"Again I am the savior", Ben continued, "and again, I did nothing. I didn't have a feeling or a vision. She moved for a completely different reason, but it didn't matter."

Father Theodocius nodded at the tale, looking thoughtful.

"I'm sorry for you, Ben. Your family never should have put all that on you. There is only one Savior," he said pointing to the crucified Christ, "and he will decide if Tessa gets a liver. You are right about all those incidents. They mean nothing. They were only coincidences, just luck."

"No chance I was guided then?"

"Ben, if you were so special, why didn't you stop your parents' murder?"

Ben wanted to say something, but couldn't get the words out.

"Make your sister comfortable and pray hard," Father Theodocius advised, "I will also pray for you. Maybe the Lord will listen."

As Ben exited the chapel, a fresh breeze greeted him in the hallway. He felt more confused than ever.

It was late when Ben returned to Tessa's room. She slept. Moonbeam filtered through mostly closed curtains and Tessa's jaundiced skin glowed golden. Arms across her chest and breast barely rising and falling, she was a sarcophagus. Ben grabbed a blanket and sat in the chair closest to her and slept. He dreamed of his parents and bloated fish. He dreamed an older version of Tessa surrounded by children in an impossibly green garden with a cacophony of animals hiding in the brush.

The next morning, Tessa was worse. Her skin was grayish-green. Ben blamed it on the moonlight. Sarah coaxed her into eating some yogurt. Dr. Thandh arrived and stiffened more as the examination advanced. He ordered tests and spoke quietly to Tessa in a distant tone Ben didn't like. Sarah could sense Ben's anger rising and with effort shook her head while looking at her brother.

"Why isn't she getting a liver? Ben demanded.

"We've talked about this subject, Mr. Rhodes," the doctor intoned, "These things are not in our hands."

Ben had enough with doctors and priests and God. God got his parents. Why was He taking his sister, too?

"I'll be back soon," and Ben headed for the door.

"Ben, you need to stay close," cried Sarah.

"Let him go," Tessa whispered, "He's almost understands."

As Ben headed toward the elevator, he came alongside a patient toiling in a wheelchair. It was a man with a large mop of reddish-orange hair. Ben thought he looked like a sick clown. Strapped to the chair was a bottle of oxygen and the clear tubes snaked up the man's body hung precariously under his nose. He looked very sick and old, but something, the stretch of the skin or the way he held himself, told Ben he wasn't old, just damaged. Wheezing between the forced oxygen, his effort was that of pushing a boulder up a hill. Watching the poor soul, Ben's anger dissipated like the unused oxygen on the man's exhales.

"Where you headed?" Ben asked.

The man stopped like it took too much effort to both push and talk. He looked up at Ben and his flaming hair jutted conspicuously against sallow skin.

"The arboretum."

"So am I. You can show me where it is." Ben stepped behind the chair and pushed. The man's face became younger when he smiled and even the hair seemed to glow brighter.

His name was Spencer and when he talked, he had to pause periodically to suck oxygen from the bottle. Ben noted that it didn't seem to slow Spencer down much. He had been in the damned hospital for a month waiting for two

lungs and he couldn't smoke and he was tired of what was on television and no one visited him because his ex-wife lived a thousand miles away and took the kids and the doctors were all quacks and the nurses were all bitches, even the men nurses because they were queers and the food was worse than when he was in the Navy and his legs were always cold and watch the bump going into the elevator and why was Ben there.

"My sixteen year old sister needs a liver."

"I once had a sister", he said quiet and slow, chewing on it, "I would've done anything to help her."

"What happened?"

Spencer didn't answer at first. The elevator rose and Ben looked around the car. The polished metal walls appeared freshly cleaned and maybe there were new light bulbs, but the reflections of the two men repeated off the shiny surfaces, shrinking smaller and smaller until Spencer and the chair disappear and the only thing left was Ben reaching for a ball of fire.

"She ran away from home. Said she wanted something better. Died of an overdose." His voice cracked at the end.

"I'm very sorry for both of you, Spencer."

"I believe you are," he said with a touch of surprise.

"I sometimes think we're all waiting for something we won't get," Ben said without thinking.

Spencer said nothing.

"I apologize, Spencer. I'm sure you'll get your lungs."

The elevator opened. Ben pushed Spencer into the arboretum; both absorbed the tidal wave of green.

"No problem, Ben. You're right, except you forgot to add 'and some of us don't deserve.'"

Ben deposited him near the window. Spencer said he liked to sit in the green and look down at the streets.

"You need anything else, just call. I'll be over there," Ben said pointing, "There's a nice rock to put my feet on."

Spencer smiled knowingly, "Thanks, Ben," Spencer said, reaching out his hand, "Thanks for not treating me like I'm dying."

Ben walked as far as a nearby lilac bush when he heard Spencer call his name. Ben turned.

"Your sister deserves her liver."

"Father Theodocius says it was all coincidence."

Ben and Max sat in the same grotto. Ben hadn't sat down long, wondering if he would see Max, when the whinny of a horse announced his presence. He wore the same blue coveralls and pushed the same wheelbarrow that looked to have the same wood chips in it. His face broke into a glowing grin when he saw Ben. They sat together throwing fallen leaves into a rock pool.

"He would," Max stated then made the sound of a chimp, "Faith is hard, Ben. It's a belief in something intangible, something blurry when others think you're fatuous."

"And Father Theodocius doesn't have faith?"

"He's a parrot, not a mockingbird. A parrot copies, it mimics. Mockingbirds take a song and change it; they mold it into their own then have the conviction to use it to better their lives. To have faith is to be a mockingbird."

They sat for a time, Ben taking in what Max said. They heard only the water in the pool and the perfect sound of a lamb escaping Max's lips.

"Father Theodocius asked me why I didn't save my parents if I had this gift. I couldn't answer him. I was too ashamed."

"You could have saved them, right?" Max whispered.

Everything seemed to still, even the water quieted. The world became torpid.

"We were on vacation in Key West. We went out ocean fishing on a rented boat. Dad snagged a Swordfish, but it broke the line. The deckhand gave me the creeps; he stayed too close to Tess and Mom. I just knew, like I always knew, but never wanted to admit."

Ben stopped, dropped his head and wept. His tears fell on dead leaves. He picked up those leaves and tossed them in the pool.

"They rented the boat for an evening romantic trip. Just the two of them. Tess and I stayed in the hotel. I didn't tell them what I thought. I didn't want to

ruin it, they looked so happy. But a part of me knew. It always does. The deckhand murdered the captain and my father. He eventually murdered my mother too."

"And what does your gift tell you about your sister?"

"She's going to be saved," Ben answered with no hesitation, "She's going to get her liver."

Max smiled and all that white hair was fresh, powdered snow.

"Then maybe you need to go tell her so she believes."

"Ben. I'm dying. I'm not crazy."

"You said that I would save you."

Tessa was now dirty yellow, not a good sign. Based on past patients, Sarah told Ben she might have hours, but not more than a day. Ben needed that day.

"I said that in the hopes you would understand that you couldn't," she said, the words coming slow and forced, but they were words needed saying, "Ben, we were wrong. We wanted you to believe you had some power, some gift to save others, but you don't. I thought by realizing you couldn't save me, I could help make up for what I did."

"Tess, it was all leading to this point. You will get a liver. Please don't give up."

"Ben, listen to yourself." Her lowered lip quivered and she reached out to stroke his cheek, "We did a job on you. I'm sorry."

"No," Ben said, leaning closer to her face and stroking her hair, "you were right. I just didn't want to believe it. I didn't want to believe in anything."

Ben looked up at Sarah and he smiled. She smiled back.

"Sarah, tell her to hang on. Take a chance this once, take it for Tess, take it for me," he pleaded then smiled, "and take it for us."

Sarah cocked her head in confusion, hesitated then decided. She leaned closer to Tessa and kissed her on the cheek. Their hands clasped.

"He's right, Tessa. Hold on, your liver is coming."

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