Teach. Write.
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Zeke eased himself into the tub. He thought there’d be more steam, but the patrons stayed visible. Despite the scalding water, the granite seat felt cool against his bare skin. He exhaled and closed his eyes, blocking out the gaze of the other bath inhabitants. The water lapped against his chest, the silence a blessing.

He felt a hand against his thigh.

“Feel good, eh? Relax?” The ahjussi smiled at Zeke through hooded lids. Incredibly close and extremely naked, the other man’s eyes shone as scented vapors wafted towards the ceiling of the dim jjimjilbang.

“Oh, hello...yeah. It feels...great?” Zeke straightened and placed his hands in his lap.

“Time?”

“I’m sorry?”

“First time?”

“Oh, right. Yes. First time at a jjimjilbang.”

The ahjussi nodded. “Like Korea?”

“Very much yes.”

“In Army?”

Zeke flexed in demonstration. The ahjussi laughed and poked at Zeke’s arm, his finger finding the bone with ease.

“English teacher actually. I wouldn’t last long in the military.”

“Ahhhhh…” silence returned, and the ahjussi seemed content for a moment before scooting closer. “When you arrive?”

“Two weeks ago, just over actually,” Zeke held up his fingers as he inched towards an unoccupied corner. Behind him, a pair of toddlers stomped in a puddle, their hair slicked up in twin mohawks. Two men sat together on a bench, laminated copies of the evening news spread over their laps, the water beading and dripping towards the sports section. “I work at Seoraksan Prep. I used to teach in the U.S.--in a place called Minnesota--but I needed a change, something new.”

“And now. You here at jjimjilbang!”

“Yeah, I read online that it’s a rite of passage--something that everyone should do.”
The ahjussi tilted his head, the smile unchanged. “But. You alone?”

Zeke swirled the water, and bubbles popped against his hands. “Well, this is a fairly unique experience for me. It takes some getting used to. And I wanted to go on my own before sitting next to my colleagues--the other teachers--naked in a giant bathtub.”

The ahjussi nodded and lay back, his head resting on the high stone lip that ran around the steaming vat of men. He made no more effort to speak, and Zeke followed suit. The slap of bare feet on stone and the murmurs of patrons swirled together. The muscles in his back loosened with the jets of water, and the scent of lemongrass sharpened his senses as he closed his eyes--but the respite was brief.

“Leave. Time to leave.” The ahjussi slapped Zeke’s shoulder, the sound melting into the damp walls. Several of the other men spoke to Zeke’s guide in Korean, laughing and pointing. Zeke recognized enough to make out the gist of the conversation. Waygook. Foreigner. Hondong dwaeyo. Confused. Spot on.

Bolted to the wall, a sign showed a cross-section of the building. In the lead, the ahjussi tapped the red “you are here” dot and moved his fingers along towards a room displaying water droplets emerging from a shower head.

“You speak Korean?”

“Only a little, but I’m taking classes online. On the internet.” Zeke mimed typing at a computer.

“Ah, you will learn. We all teachers. In your new home.”

Hurrying forward, Zeke’s companion disappeared down a hallway. Zeke stepped forward. The stairs to his left led up towards the locker room. He could be out, dressed, and settle his bill in minutes--less if he didn’t mind a wet train ride home--but the sounds from the shower room pulled him forward. The jjimjilbang was as safe as anywhere Zeke had been so far, and he’d left his job in Minnesota for adventures such as these. Steadying himself, he entered the cavernous shower room.

Spotting Zeke, the ajusshi motioned for him to follow. Surprisingly spry, the old man weaved through the mass of nudity until they arrived at a tower of pink plastic stools. He took one, and handed it to Zeke.

The ahjussi mimicked scrubbing, revolving so that Zeke knew to get every part. Several men brushed past--two of them patting Zeke’s escort on the back--before settling on their own stools. Zeke counted seventeen shower heads. Multiply that by four rows before a gap in the column, seven sections deep...but before a final count came, the ahjussi scurried away and gestured for Zeke to follow. Water and suds twirled towards the central drain. A man with a broom swept out the corners, the skin underneath his arms swinging with every
brush. An attendant—signified only by an ID on a cloth lanyard—handed them miniature loofahs. A nozzle was turned and steaming water poured forth. They began to scrub.

“So…” began Zeke, “Do you come here often?” The ahjussi grinned, but the tilt of his head gave him away. “I mean, do you like it here? What’s your name?”

“Name? Illeum. Illeum means name.”

“Illeum.”


Zeke gave his own name, refraining from the chest slap.

Hyungjin pointed at his loofah. “Scrub hard. Hard!” He mock-grimaced and howled as he put his full weight into the act, his legs splayed, perched on the edge of his pink stool.

Zeke followed, his skin turning pink and raw in the water. “How long do we scrub?”

“Until water is cold. Until skin fall off!” Hyungjin cackled and moved onto scrubbing his chest. “What is best? About Korea?”

Zeke thought. “Well, I do like the community—all the people. But so many people can be frightening. Scary. ‘Cause on the other hand, you can feel the isolation. You can feel alone. It’s a different loneliness from back home, where there was more space. Big open sky, lots of trees. Here I can enter a restaurant, and there are so many people, but I am alone. It should be a home, but it isn’t quite yet. But there is a thrill—an excitement, refreshment—in that. And I like new experiences like this one. I like the rush I get when I see something new. Something out of my comfort zone. But I sometimes need encouragement. Need someone to push me forward. Am I speaking too fast?” Hyungjin shook his head, but Zeke wasn’t convinced.

“Minny-sowtah. Your home. Family there?”

“Some, but my family is everywhere. All over the world. I went to school in Nebraska, and my parents split up,” Zeke split the air with a chop of his hand. “They live in different places. My brother lives abroad—outside of the US, like me. I haven’t lived in one place for more than a few years. Always moving. Have you always lived in Korea?”

“In Korea?”

“Yes, have you always lived here?” Zeke pointed down.

Hyungjin laughed. “Here? I live in jjimjilbang? Hooohoo! I live at jjimjilbang!” He spun on his stool and began to scrub his back. “Korea is in blood. It is home. Always home. Maybe in your blood too?”
“My blood? Not yet. I just got over my jet-lag.” Zeke scoured his nails, removing dirt he never realized was there. Making another round, the shower attendant placed a dry towel over the edge of their stall divider.

“You like hot rooms?”

“Hot rooms?”


“Oh. No, well, I thought I should come here first to get clean.”

“Ayyyya...nega teullyeosseo. Wrong! Wrong order. Sweat first, then shower.”

They continued to scrub. Zeke moved on to his ears, and Hyungjin nodded approvingly. Signaling the shower guard, their water slowed to a trickle, and Hyungjin snatched away Zeke’s stool, placing them both back on the stack.

Encased in their threadbare towels, the pair walked towards the exit. From the staircase, dozens of men worked their way towards the baths. Hyungjin, recognizing several, or just being overly nice, struck up a conversation, while Zeke stood wrapping and rewrapping his towel around his waist. Seizing a gap in pleasantries, Zeke stepped alongside Hyungjin.

“Hey, Hyungjin. Listen, I’m going to go back to the lockers to get dressed. I’ve got a pile of papers to grade and should probably be getting to my...”

“We go. Up. This is new. You are new. We are new! I guide you. We do jjimjilbang right.” Hyungjin started up the steps, plowing through the throng of men on their way down. Zeke followed in his wake, his towel firmly in place. No longer alone in a crowded room, Zeke braced himself, and hurried after Hyungjin.

Hyungjin waved Zeke into the primary changing room, and after donning their matching orange uniforms, they made their way to the 2nd floor. Stone pillars supported the ceiling, and Zeke couldn’t help but be reminded of The Shire as he eyed the rounded, wooden doors set deep into the wall. Like a puppy following its owner, Zeke followed Hyungjin into the first room, ducking beneath the low ceiling.

Zeke coughed as he entered, and the door banged shut. The air scorched his lungs, and his eyes immediately began to water, blurring the numbers on the digital thermometer. A few wooden planks cut the room in two, and off to either side were pits of green stone. A pair of hourglasses lay nailed to the wall. Hyungjin turned one, tapping it on the top to send the sand spiraling down. Moving off the walkway, Hyungjin sat back and shoveled handfuls of the rock onto his chest and feet. Zeke followed off of the path and pursed his lip to keep from screaming.
The rocks bit into the soles of his feet, and Zeke dropped to the ground, shaking off the shards of jade. Lifting his legs, he tried to buffer the heat of the stones with the fabric from his shorts. Hyungjin chuckled. “Breathe. Slow. Like this. *Hu.*” Hyungjin inhaled through his nose, and whistled the air away. Zeke tried, but the dry air tickled his throat, and soon he forgot all about the heat as he fell into another fit of coughs. Hyungjin extended his arm and patted Zeke on the back. The coughs subsided, and soon Zeke’s breathing calmed.

Sweat began to pool along the crease of Zeke’s belly, but as his body continued to adjust to the heat, he found the room to be quite pleasant. Exhaling through his nose, he discovered himself breathing in tandem with Hyungjin. Tentatively grabbing handfuls of the jade, he dropped the stone onto his bare legs, watching as the green rocks tumbled away in the dim light.

“So,” said Zeke, easing out the words, “why do you like jjimjilbangs so much?”

Hyungjin peppered his legs with more jade. “Jjimjilbang is happy, *haengbokada.* Is peace. Is refresh, yes? And friends are here. I am old, so I know many. Wife is gone, so my family is here.” On the wall, the hourglass signaled the end of their session, and Zeke followed Hyungjin out, the stones biting a little less.

Back out in the open, Hyungjin handed Zeke a towel, and together they wiped down their faces. Zeke had completely soaked through his shirt, despite the clock on the wall registering only five minutes in the sauna.

“Hot room. *Hanjeungmak.* It brings you to life, eh?”

Zeke tossed his towel in the nearby hamper. “I certainly feel alive. I think I was sweating from every pore.” He wiped a hand along his forehead as rivulets of water ran down his neck.

Hyungjin grinned, and again slapped Zeke’s back. “Then we must feed the life. This way!”

The clock on the wall read a quarter to seven. If the ungraded stack of papers were to diminish at all, Zeke would have to leave soon. Plus, those last few boxes wouldn’t unpack themselves. But as they neared the kitchen and the smell of food overtook the scent of sweat, Zeke’s stomach pushed the thought of correcting grammar to the back of his mind. Plus, he had heard that Koreans took their dining very seriously.

The kitchen sat tucked away behind the last set of hanjeungmaks. Zeke spotted a few other foreigners sipping tea or munching away on rice cakes, but they didn’t return his smile. Hyungjin motioned at an empty table and Zeke sat. He summoned an attendant, and soon two bowls appeared. Sliding out a drawer from underneath the table, Hyungjin handed Zeke a pair of chopsticks and a
spoon. Zeke swirled the soup—a mixture of seaweed and broth—and marveled at the multitude of languages represented. He caught snippets of Japanese and Russian. The couple sprawled out behind Hyungjin sounded like they were from Texas, and to his right Zeke heard Korean. He tried to hone in on the adjacent conversation, until Hyungjin shouted “Imo!” and the attendant returned.

A container of soft brown eggs joined the soup on the table, and Hyungjin popped one into his mouth. “What you want to leave with?” he asked, speaking through the mush.

Zeke speared an egg. “What do I want to leave with? I guess I came to be relaxed and—”

“No no. Here, Korea. What you want to leave with?”

Zeke chewed, enjoying the salty tang of the hard-boiled egg. “Well...that’s a great question. I haven’t thought much about what I want to leave with, since I’ve been so busy thinking about my arrival. I guess what I want to leave with is memories. With a sense of place in a country where I never thought I’d end up. I’m so used to bouncing from home to home, and I want to get a feeling for where I want to end up. Where my home will finally be.”

Hyungjin nodded. “You will get that. If! You dojeon! You challenge yourself.” He tapped his nose, then plucked the last egg from the bowl. He lifted up his shirt a bit and rubbed his exposed belly. Leaning backward, Hyungjin bumped the Texan, and Zeke watched as the Texan stiffened, then scooted forward. Zeke laughed. They probably skipped the sauna. I bet I looked the same down in the baths. Hyungjin stretched, pulled his shirt back down, then rose to his feet and began to walk out of the cafe. Zeke hurried to catch up.

They reached the staircase, and Hyungjin pointed down. Zeke nodded, and together they returned to the locker room. Hyungjin sat on a bench as Zeke changed back into his street clothes.

“You enjoy your time, here? In jjimjilbang?”

“Very much so, yes. Thank you for showing me around.” Hyungjin closed his eyes, and Zeke finished dressing. Cinching his belt, Zeke waited for Hyungjin to respond, but his friend’s eyes remained closed. Stepping forward, he pulled at the ahjussi’s sleeve, and Hyungjin’s eyelids opened a crack.

“Well, I’d better be going then. Are you staying here?”

“Here? Yes. I am always here. When you come back. I will be here. You will come back.”

It wasn’t a question.

“Of course. It may be a while, but I promise I’ll come back. This was a wonderful experience. I owe you.”
Hyungjin shook his head. “Experience is shared. No owing between friends.” He closed his eyes again and leaned against the lockers, shooing Zeke away with one hand.

Zeke climbed the stairs to the lobby and joined the line of patrons checking out. He spied a sign that hung above the exit—a picture of a smiling sun holding a scrub brush. Reaching the front desk, he turned in his key and offered his credit card for payment—the card held in his left hand, his right hand placed on his left wrist—in the way that he’d been taught.

“And how was your stay?” asked the receptionist as she returned the card.

“It was good. Unexpected, but refreshing.”

The woman smiled, familiar to such responses. Leaving the line, Zeke patted down his pants: keys, check, wallet, check, shoes. His toes wiggled against the stone tile. As he fished his trainers out of their cubby, there was a feeling of completion—although the musk from his shoes was already beginning to drive away the scent of lemongrass.

Outside, the last few rays of pink and purple streaked between the skyscrapers, and Zeke joined the rush of commuters on their journey home. He scanned through the turnstile, and as he descended into subway, he tuned in to the snippets of conversation that flowed around him, seizing the few words familiar to him.

“Shigpum.” Food.

“Gichayeog.” Train station.

Owen and Freeman slaved for an online tech-support operation near Carson City. Owen wasn’t really cut out for this kind of work but needed the money.

Callers frequently lost patience with Owen and asked to speak to “an American,” erroneously thinking all tech-support calls were outsourced to Mumbai. Freeman never had that problem. People actually asked to speak to Freeman’s supervisor, so they could gush about his expertise and polite phone manner. When Owen’s customers asked to speak to a supervisor, he disconnected them. When he wasn’t on the phone, Freeman was heroically humble. Another thing Owen envied.

Owen met his wife Vendela back when they both delivered pizzas at UNLV. He’d dropped out of college, one year short of getting his degree in computer science. Owen was tired of being poor. His father, Rory, a bellicose Air Force Colonel, had been in and out of the family picture since childhood. Owen once counted up the total amount of time Rory had been home versus the time he’d been deployed and came up with ten years—meaning that out of the first eighteen years of Owen’s life, his father had been absent for a full decade. Rory abruptly retired after the divorce, and the convergence of those two events effectively bankrupted himself and everyone in his immediate orbit. Owen’s mother split town, as if she couldn’t wait to rid herself of the men in her life. She returned to her hometown in upstate New York, to start over.

Owen vowed not to repeat the flaws of his parents’ marriage: drinking, hints of infidelity, verbal abuse. As it turned out, he inherited a completely unforeseen set of problems, and they were all related to money.

“The money,” Vendela would say. “Let’s talk about the money.”

Colonel Rory Biggs often lectured Owen and Nelson that he’d “sacrificed everything” to ensure that his sons “would never go hungry.” In the end, after thirty years on the government tit, all Rory was able to pass along to Owen was a pair of washed-out green eyes and massive fiscal ineptitude.

Just like Owen’s indentured servitude at Supportekus, Vendela’s job at
Betta Burger had no benefits. “I flip burgers,” she’d say. “Your job is specialized—you’re supposed to have benefits.” Owen agreed. But his boss, Jeb Grafton, didn’t see it that way. Grafton was a malignant narcissist who pushed his tekkies to sell “Support Packages” to unsuspecting customers. The job was part tech-support, part sales. You’d tell them the problem they were calling about was “complicated,” that it may take “a couple of interactions” to get a “handle on it”: Hey—why not get a “Support Package” before we start, so that you’re covered for any eventuality?

Owen hated it.

If the Supportekus offices had been located on the third or second floor, Owen and Freeman might have been able to see Lake Tahoe. But Grafton took the term “low overhead” to heart and set up shop in the cheap basement. No windows, poor ventilation, cubicles—literally a boiler room. There was the company mascot over in the corner, a cheesy inflatable Godzilla Grafton had painted black and renamed Supportekus Rex. Sometimes Owen worked the graveyard shift because it paid a little more and gave him a break from Vendela’s bitching. She was in a huge hurry for them to get rich. But the economy was always slow. There weren’t any jobs to be had, let alone jobs with benefits.

About five years into their imperfect marriage, Owen decided it was time to start a family. Vendela froze up whenever Owen broached the subject. Part of it was physical fear; she was a petite woman. Just to look at her and imagine childbirth made Owen’s loins hurt. Vendela was understandably worried about their financial picture and how a baby was going to impact that. Between them, they carried about fifty grand in credit card and student loan debt. Vendela assured Owen they would need to get solvent before they could ever consider having kids.

So, Owen joined DA, Debtors Anonymous, and started going to meetings twice a week. He got a sponsor, created a spending plan, kept track of his numbers—the whole deal. When he went to bed each night Owen knew exactly, to the penny, how much had come in and gone out that day. He began to pay down their debt and was making significant progress when he began to notice a spike in Vendela’s credit card balance. Seems there were things she just had to get, “necessary” expenses. Owen had a hard time understanding how a flat-screen TV and cappuccino machine were “necessary,” but he bit his tongue.
“Focus on your own disease,” his DA sponsor told him. He also told Owen to “detach from difficult personalities.” For a while, Owen found this advice helpful, especially at work.

Freeman was the Anti-Debtor: he brown-bagged it, shopped at thrift stores, walked to work, clipped coupons. Freeman was amazing—the embodiment of parsimonious perfection. He paid cash for everything. Freeman carried around a wad of bills in his front pocket, held together by a rubber band. No wallet, no money clip, just a wad. He kept his driver’s license locked in the glove box of an old VW Beetle he only drove once a week to the grocery store. In general conversation, Freeman’s words were parsed with precise economy, as if he were saving it all for work calls. Freeman had the best closing ratio of anybody. Grafton would jerk people around, take them off salary and put them on commission as it suited him. But Freeman was always on salary, the only person with some semblance of stability, such as it was.

Freeman detested Grafton as much as Owen did, but had made a sort of peace with it all. “It’s a gig,” Freeman would say with a shrug, flipping a swatch of dark hair out of his eyes. Freeman cut his own hair to save money, with scissors borrowed from work. Separate checks, always, when they went to lunch. Freeman never bought a round at the tavern. Owen studied every move Freeman made. Owen was prone to grandiosity, like his father—a trait common to debtors. Now that he was in recovery, Owen never slapped down a credit card and told everyone to put away their money. He used to do that a lot. Those were the days when his bank account just didn’t feel right unless it was down to the last dollar before payday. Savings? Prudent reserve? What the hell’s that?

The most important thing he learned from his sponsor was that money was only part of the problem. “Debting is about other issues,” his sponsor would say. Owen thought of all the years his father owed the family, years he’d never be able to make up. There were a million ways to debt that had nothing to do with credit cards or cash. Jeb Grafton was always being hounded by creditors and none of his employees had benefits—not even Freeman. Yet when someone got a sale or the company had a good week, Grafton immediately went out and bought himself something nice, like a leather jacket or an afternoon at The Sagebrush Gentleman’s Club. Sometimes Grafton didn’t make payroll. He’d lie and say he’d “accidentally missed the deadline to sign off” and everyone would be kiting checks over the weekend to make rent or car payment. This happened at least three or four times a year.

“The amount of money we bring in,” said Owen, “doesn’t even begin to
cover what Grafton wants to spend on himself. He’s a classic debtor.”

“‘Debtor,’” repeated Freeman. “You make that word up?”

“No, man! That’s what you call someone who debts: a debtor.”

“Really.”

“Yeah.”

“Huh.”

“`Debtor’s Prison’? Ever heard of that?”

“Never.”

“I’m not surprised.”

So there it was: Freeman was so solvent he’d never even heard of the D-word.

Owen tried to get Vendela into DA, but she was, as they say, drowning in denial. Owen cut up their credit cards just to make a point. Vendela wept and yelled. They quarreled back and forth for an entire weekend until she finally broke down and agreed to start going to meetings. She went to one DA meeting and never went back. And the debts just rolled on, assuming different shapes and balances—but always growing; gestating into what would eventually be the very ugly, full-term stillbirth of bankruptcy.

A correction was coming. They could both feel it.

One night after work, when Owen had downed four beers to Freeman’s one, Owen tried to express himself. He wanted to make a buddy connection, explain what he was going through.

“Freeman, man, have you any idea?”

“What?”

“I look at you, and the way you live your life. It’s something else, man.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it in a good way, you know?”

“Okay.”

“This isn’t as faggy as it sounds, okay? What I mean is... if I could start over, I’d wanna be like you.”
“Thanks,” said Freeman. With his flannel shirtsleeves rolled up, he looked like an honest tradesman, nursing a pint of ale, not a care in the world.

“I mean you are one squared-away SOB. That’s what my old man would say. He was Air Force.”

“I know.”

“Yeah, that’s right, I told you. And I’m not just talkin’ about sales and shit. I’m not talking about that at all.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

Owen wanted to say: “The money, I’m talkin’ about the money.” But Owen knew just saying that word, injecting it into his drunken palaver, would have been indecorous.

It was Vendela’s idea to go hiking up in Portola across the California state line. Spring was kicking in and they both wanted to see redwoods. It was Owen’s idea to bring along Freeman.

Vendela was unimpressed with Freeman and resented having him along. She and Owen began arguing as soon as they hit the freeway. Vendela wanted to take the freeway. Owen preferred the scenic route.

“Loyalton connects with the 70 at Vinton, then it’s a straight shot out to Portola,” said Owen, “are you listening?”

Vendela lit a cigarette, maneuvered their 16-year old Chevy Blazer into the fast lane. The engine knocked loudly, as usual.

“I heard you.”

“So?”

“I guess we could do that.”

“You want to take her out of second gear?”

Vendela liked to downshift when she merged. She popped it back and cracked the window. Owen glanced at Freeman in the back seat. He didn’t seem bothered by the smoke.

“You’re gonna kill this car,” Owen muttered.
“We all gotta go sometime,” she said.

Conversation died out. They stared at the vegetation which would get stingy and sparse, then suddenly erupt into verdant explosions of foliage. Likewise, the sun slipped in and out behind the clouds, making it either too hot or too cold. Eventually, they turned onto Loyalton Road.

“Goddammit, we’re heading east!” she said. “I told you this was too roundabout. We’ll never get there.”

“Relax,” said Owen, “it only goes east for a bit, then resumes north. West takes you back into town.”

“Speaking of west, did you know Reno is actually west of Los Angeles?” said Freeman.

“It is not,” said Vendela flatly.

“Is too,” said Owen. “Look it up.”

“You’re both idiots,” Vendela sneered. “Look at that: Garbage Pit Road.”

“We should go down there,” said Freeman.

“Why?” Vendela studied the rearview as if Freeman were some hobo they’d picked up.

“It’s the city dump. You can find really cool stuff at the dump.” Vendela snorted. “You must be joking.”

“People throw away perfectly good things. I got a nice lamp and chair at the dump.”

She did a U-turn back into town. “We’re not going to any dump, but I am hungry.”

“Good idea,” said Owen. “You hungry, Freeman?”

“I guess.” Freeman held up a sack. “I brought lunch.”

They lunged into Loyalton. When Vendela whipped the Blazer into the parking lot of a chain steakhouse, Owen freaked.

“Come on, man! What are you doing?!”

Vendela said, “I want a decent meal.”

Freeman surveyed restaurant with childlike curiosity. It occurred to
Owen that Freeman had probably never seen the inside of this place, where the smallest steak on the menu was forty bucks. They got out of the Blazer, Owen grabbed Vendela by the elbow, took her aside.

“Give us a sec’, Freeman.”

Freeman, sack lunch in hand, halted and stretched.

Owen kept his voice low. “This is a bad idea.”

“What do you mean?” she said from behind sunglasses, mouth working a stale piece of Nicorette. She alternated between the gum and actual cigarettes—insane.

“For one thing, we can’t afford to eat here and another... it’s just... I know that Freeman can’t afford it either.”

“So? He’s got his lunch, we’ll have ours.”

“Vendela, please. Can’t we just go someplace cheap? This’ll take too long.”

“I am hungry, Owen. I am tired of being hungry all the time. I want to do something for me for once, okay? I’m eating here. You guys can go wherever you want.”


He was standing there, thumb hooked into the front pocket of his Levis, calm tilt of the head. He just wanted to get this over with and see the redwoods.

The right side column of the menu was double digits. Freeman seemed bored, as if it were all medical mumbo jumbo about a disease he didn’t have. The waitress brought water and bread. Freeman took a long sip, Owen did the same. Vendela ordered a sirloin steak medium rare, baked potato with the works and salad.

“And a glass of Merlot,” she added.

“Nothing for me,” said Freeman.

“Nothing for me either,” said Owen. The waitress left, he added, “I’ll just have bread.”

Vendela reached for her cigarettes—then thought better of it since no one else in the restaurant seemed to be smoking.

“So Freeman,” she said. “Where are you from again?”
“Truckee.”
“You grew up there?”
“Yeah.”
“Parents still live there?”
“They passed on.”
“I’m sorry,” she said. The waitress placed a salad before her.
“Ground pepper?”
“Please!” Vendela liked pepper on everything. “More, keep going. Good.”

Vendela shoveled in a fat forkful of green. Chewing, she asked how Freeman’s parents had died.
“I told you all this before,” said Owen.
“Drunk driver,” said Freeman.
“That’s awful. Any brothers or sisters?”
“My sister drowned when she was three.”
“That’s terrible.”

Owen buttered his bread. There was a crunch of paper beneath the table as Freeman quietly removed his sandwich, took a furtive bite, hid it back in the bag. Vendela attempted chit-chat about the redwoods and hiking. Owen ignored her. Freeman remained polite, if not monosyllabic. When her steak arrived, hissing obscenely, an involuntary growl of hunger barked from Owen’s stomach. He wanted to drive a steak knife into Vendela’s left eye. She piled on the ground pepper and sliced off an end piece. It was the perfect combination of charred fat and meat, cross-section revealing the sirloin to be uniformly cooked to pink, roseate rareness. The serving waitress patiently waited for Vendela’s verdict.

Vendela proclaimed it “excellent.”
“Very good,” said the waitress, with a respectful bow and sidelong glance at Owen and Freeman’s empty place settings.
“Wanna bite?” said Vendela, masticating the succulent chunk.
“Go fuck yourself,” said Owen.
Vendela put all her attention into eating, quietly groaning with pleasure. She topped off the sybaritic repast with postprandial crème brûlée and espresso.

“What—no cigar?” said Owen.

Freeman laughed at this. Vendela assumed a stony, defiant smile.

The check came. Of course, Owen was having none of it. Freeman, however, pulled out his wad of cash to leave a tip for the service and water. Vendela’s eyes nearly popped out of her skull. Owen had never told her about Freeman’s wad and miserly, eccentric relationship with money.

“Freeman, you don’t have to do that,” said Owen. “Your water is on Vendela.”

“I’ll leave a dollar,” said Freeman. “That seems fair.”

Freeman removed the rubber band, peeled off a single. The denominations included lots of fifties and hundreds. He had to be carrying around at least four thousand bucks.

“Wow,” she said. “You’re pretty flush.”

To Owen, the half-smile and shrug that Freeman gave Vendela seemed weighted with the kind of pity one might reserve for a sadly deranged whore. Vendela laid down her credit card, the waitress took it, then returned so quickly that Owen couldn’t believe she’d already run the card. But she had—three times: a trifecta of declines.

“Well, don’t look at me,” said Owen. “I cut up my credit cards, remember?”

Vendela appeared ready to vomit the expensive meal she’d just consumed. Owen waited for Vendela to say something, then turned to Freeman.

“Freeman, my wife... has put herself, and me, in an embarrassing situation. Would you please help us out? I promise I’ll reimburse you promptly upon our return to Carson City.”

“Sure,” said Freeman softly. “No problem.” He examined the check, pulled out the wad, removed the rubber band and peeled off the required notes. He paused to calculate a tip.

“I’ll cover the tip,” said Owen.

Owen did just that. Freeman added his dollar.
When they left the restaurant, it was midday and pleasant. A balance seemed to have finally been struck between sun and clouds. Owen watched Freeman discreetly discard his trash and carefully fold and pocket the paper bag for re-use. Owen recognized it as the same paper bag Freeman had brought to work for weeks. In the car, Vendela lit another cigarette.

“Well, that was awkward,” she said, exhaling at the windshield.

“You think?”

She ignored Owen, looked in the rearview. “Thanks, Freeman.”

“Sure.”

Once again, they passed Garbage Pit Road. The highway curved north like Owen said it would. She gunned the Blazer, trying to make up for lost time, engine knocking ever louder. Owen studied his wife’s profile, wondering how much longer this could go on, how it would all play out. Vendela held each drag a long time, as if intentionally polluting herself.

The number of cars and trucks diminished. Eventually there was no traffic, no houses. They passed a black 4x4 pickup with oversized wheels spinning doughnuts off-road in a perfect patch of mud created by spring melt. The tracks of the truck crisscrossed surrounding hills. Someone pitched an empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s out the driver’s window and it shattered against a boulder with a sound like loose change. Audible whoops could be heard.

“They’re certainly having fun,” said Vendela.

“At least someone is,” Owen shot back.

They drove on for another mile or two and the Blazer’s knocking became so loud that conversation was suddenly impossible. Vendela popped another Nicorette. Owen became aware of Freeman, leaning forward from the back seat, looking past their shoulders.

He said, “Is that your engine light?”

Owen had warned Vendela that the Blazer ate oil like crazy and they needed to keep it topped off. It leaked so badly they couldn’t even park it in the apartment garage anymore. Between oil and cat litter to soak up the mess, it was costing a small fortune.

“Did you put oil in before we left?” Owen started to say, but was inter-
rupted by a horrific mechanical cataclysm. The engine seemed to heave against the hood as the Blazer topped a hill. They came to rest at the side of the road. No one moved or took a breath for about five seconds. The Blazer gave one last clunk and shudder—a death rattle. The silence was hard and absolute. They got out, cordite smell and smoke curling from the engine. Owen slid into the driver’s seat, hit the hazards and hood release. Freeman secured the hood prop and they peered inside.

“You threw a rod,” said Freeman.

“Is that bad?” she said, putting a hand on Freeman’s shoulder.

“It’s only the automotive equivalent of a massive coronary,” said Owen, gently removing Vendela’s hand from Freeman’s shoulder. “The Blazer’s heart just exploded.”

“What does that mean?”

Freeman shook his head.

Owen said, “It means, dear, that you fucked up.”

“What about you?” she shot back. “You could have remembered to put in some oil.”

“Yeah, but my husband didn’t tell me last night, as I was heading out to gas up the Blazer: ‘Vendela! Don’t forget to top off the oil!’”

“Well, what are we supposed to do?” she directed this at Freeman as if he might have a more reliable idea of how to proceed.

“Have it towed back, sell it for scrap—she’s done for.”

Owen already had his cell phone out. He tried dialing. “No reception.”

”Shit!” Vendela paced. “And I’m out of cigarettes.”

“Good,” said Owen.

“SHUT UP!”

Freeman crossed the road. Owen called out: “Where you going?”

“To pee.”

He disappeared behind some tall brush. Vendela studied the engine. Owen looked back the way they came, but couldn’t see beyond the blind curve. Ahead of them, flat road stretched to the horizon.
“We are so fucked,” she said.
“You’re right about that.”

His sing-song tone reinforced the idea that this was all her fault. She stepped back from the car, arms folded.

“Nice.”
“Pig-Fuck.”
“Keep going.”
“How... how are we supposed to get back?”
“Rent a car, I guess.”
“Yeah, but... then what? We have to get another car.”
“Maybe we can buy one in Loyalton.”
“We have no credit, Owen. No money whatsoever.”
“Something cheap. We’ll get something for the Blazer—”
“SHIT!” she kicked the car.
“—unless you keep bringing down the value with crap like that.”
“What value, Owen? Huh? Tell me, what value?!?”

She pulled out her car keys and set about carving a single long line into the paint.

“WHAT VALUE?!”

“Attagirl.”

Because the hill they were parked on was also a blind curve for north-bound traffic, they never heard the truck until it was upon them. The driver was doing about eighty, no doubt hoping to get airborne as he crested the hill. It was the same redneck 4x4 they’d seen a few miles back. As he topped the hill, the driver’s bloodshot eyes locked onto the Blazer and sent a message to his whiskey-addled brain to swerve a bit, so as to not hit the man and woman standing next to the driver’s side of the crippled Blazer. By the time that message was processed and well on its way to execution, the eyes noticed Freeman crossing the road at that exact moment and now directly in the path of the 4x4. The truck impacted Freeman cleanly, with the wet crunchy sound of a paper bag full of
apples being kicked in by a steel-toed boot. Freeman was launched sixty feet through the air, dead before he even hit the ground.

The 4x4 slammed on its brakes much too late and skidded to a stop.

Owen and Vendela, their mouths hanging open with a scream they could not summon, observed three heads in the truck cab twist around and peer out a dirty back window through the slats of a gun rack at Freeman’s motionless body. The heads engaged in a quick, inaudible, panicked conference before the 4x4 burned rubber and tore out.

Owen was the first to reach Freeman.

He’d landed on his back, body limp as if all the bones had been disconnected. Blood trickled from his mouth and ear. His eyes were open, pupils fully fixed, giving his features a strange, feral, feline beauty. Owen felt the neck for a pulse: it was warm but completely still. He opened Freeman’s mouth, thinking he might give the breath of life—but purple blood and bile began to rise from the throat, the juice of crushed organs.

“FREEMAN!” he hollered. “Oh God! Oh God! Please God, no!”

Vendela staggered forward, hyperventilating, both hands to her mouth. Her eyes bulged with shock, limbs tremulous, like someone with Parkinson’s.

“O-o-o-o-oh …!” was all she could get out.

“SOMEBODY HELP US!” Owen shouted. “HELLLLLP!”

Sobbing, Owen closed Freeman’s eyes, the way he’d seen it done in movies. He lifted Freeman’s head and cradled it in his lap. He whispered, wet and choked: “I’m sorry... I’m so, sooo sorry…” Vendela fell to her knees and wept with theatrical abandon. They settled into a quiet, almost prayerful grieving, occasionally looking up to see if a car might at last be approaching. Owen tried again to place a call for help, but it was futile, no reception.

After more time had passed, when Owen and Vendela were completely cried out, Owen softly set Freeman’s head down and rose to his feet. He helped Vendela up. He hugged her tight and for a second it was like the old days, when there was genuine need and feeling between them. He stepped back, in careful contemplation of his partner; to appreciate how this horror had passed through her, to peer inside and see what it might have illumined or injured. But she was still staring at Freeman, bloodshot eyes glazed. Owen draped his jacket over her shoulders. She shivered and did not take her eyes off Freeman.
“I’m gonna get a blanket and cover him,” he whispered.

She nodded, lower lip quivering.

Owen went back to the Blazer, his heart strangely calm. He tried to think of anything that might help the situation. The first aid kit was useless. Nothing left to do but cover the corpse of his friend and wait for help to arrive. After that: police report, coroner... they’d have to help locate a hit-and-run driver. And Freeman’s next of kin. What kind of truck was that again? It was important to get details right, keep a clear head for the accounting to come. How would he explain any of this to Jeb Grafton? He was thinking like his father might have, in better days. He located the blanket. Through the windshield, he observed Vendela kneeling over Freeman. For a second, he did not believe what he saw. Then he broke into a run.

“No!”

He arrived just as she got her hand into the front pocket. Grabbing her wrist and forcing Vendela to let go, he lifted her from behind, off her feet, and backed away.

“STOP IT!” she yelled, body twisting like a berserk mental patient. “PUT ME DOWN!”

“Get hold of yourself!”

“No!” she broke away and confronted him like a cornered cat.

“Have you no shame?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” she said, panting. “He’s got no family, it’s just gonna go to some cop or EMT!”

“Are you for real?”

“Yes, I’m being realistic, Owen—something you could learn from.”

“No.”

“Yes!” She went for the pocket again, he blocked her. She started crying again.

“Owen, we need that money to get back. This is about survival for fuck’s sake!”

This was true. They needed the money. Desperately. But something in Owen would not allow it.
“Absolutely not.”
“You’re a fucking LOSER! Jesus Christ!”
“No, Vendela.”
“I HATE YOU!”
“Nope.”

A car surfaced on the horizon. Vendela tried to strike a reasonable tone as she circled Freeman and Owen blocked her.

“Owen, listen to me. Listen. Please don’t do this. Please. I’m sorry I said that, okay? I didn’t mean it. I’m just scared, Owen, I’m so scared... our situation is bad, Owen, please...” More tears.

“I know.”

She rushed him, screaming like a savage. He caught her and twisted her around again, holding on from behind. The car was now close enough to see the row of lights on top. She kicked the air with both legs.

“OWEN! DON’T DO THIS! WE NEED THAT MONEY! WE DESERVE IT! LET ME GO!...”

The patrolman had almost turned around and cited the oncoming truck, but they’d hit the brakes pretty fast and were headed downhill, so he let it pass. From the mud-splatters, he guessed them to be a truckload of good old boys just out for an innocent afternoon of four-wheeling. Nothing wrong with that.

Twelve miles on: blinking hazards in the distance, human activity at the side of the road. The last few hundred yards he spotted the body, supine and still. He briefly hit the siren, lights and accelerated, coming to a halt a few feet from the victim. He quickly radioed for an ambulance before jumping out of his patrol car.

This guy was restraining a distraught woman, who was bucking and screaming in hysterical grief. The guy was calm and centered, resolute in his control of her. The body on the ground lay broken and petrified in ways the patrolman was all too familiar with, but he knelt down to check for a pulse anyway. He searched the pockets for ID and found no wallet, only a rubber-banded wad of cash, which he examined with interest then replaced. He straightened up
and approached the couple, the keening woman’s screams now given over to a hoarse, hysterical moan. She was a little bitty thing—but man, was she worked up. The man had her clinched tight from behind. As the patrolman approached, the man whispered reassuring words into her ear.
In the spring of 2016, I was casting about for work. I’d acquired an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles in 2014. Aside from teaching occasional online classes in Antioch’s I2P program and several private book-coaching clients, the job pickings were slim. I’d gone through a year of training and vetting to teach prison inmates in the Five Keys Program and seemed on the verge of landing some regular substitute teaching shifts, but nothing like the creative writing class I wanted to teach at the college level. The Five Keys classes covered everything from math to dog-grooming. They took place in scary detention centers that required a lot of driving. I was up for it—but the energy in those places was very bad.

For the previous three summers, I’d taught high school kids from around the world in UCLA’s Summer Discovery Program. It was six weeks of annual work, paid well, fun, easy hours and I got to design the curriculum: Entertainment Business and The History of Film & TV. Each spring I had to re-apply and get re-hired. I asked Chett, my supervisor, if I might do the interview over the phone since I’d already spent the usual several hours filling out questionnaires and a tedious online application.

“Chett, I know a face-to-face meeting would definitively answer the question—which was actually on the app—‘Are you a pedophile?’ But do I have to come in?”

“Sorry,” he said. “Yes.”

I came in, a little grumpy. Towards the end of the interview, Chett said, “Well, is there anything else you’d like to teach?”

“Chett, as I’ve said before: I have an MFA in Creative Writing and would love to teach a short story class.”

“Sorry, we have that filled.” It was his usual response. Then he paused, thoughtfully. “However, we are in talks with the VA across the freeway to teach a creative writing class to veterans with PT—”
“THAT’S ME!” I yelled. I jumped out of my chair. “I’m the son of a warrior, my father was a Naval Flight Officer, I grew up on military bases. I know this culture. I am absolutely the person for this job. Do not even talk to anyone else!” I thrust my CV in his face as well as several journals with my stories in them. “I have a story in the upcoming definitive anthology of Speculative War Fiction, *Deserts of Fire*. I write about the military all the time. I’m your man.”

“Well, um, okay,” he said, recovering from my wildly enthusiastic outburst. “I’ll pass this on.”

I left there convinced I’d never hear anything about it again. The combined bureaucracy of the VA and UCLA would doom this initiative. I put it out of my mind.

But there was something I didn’t know: the West LA VA sits on some of the most expensive real-estate in the country (Brentwood). For years, there’d been a massive homeless veteran problem. VA residents were treated like minimum security prison inmates. That was all changing. There’d been a huge lawsuit. UCLA and the surrounding community had been forced to step up. I was shocked when the call came two weeks later:

“You’re hired. You start immediately. These men and women desperately need your help.”

I got a high and tight haircut, ironed my shirt, shined my shoes. I knew what was expected.

The first class meeting had six veterans. A perfect cross-section of gender, age and ethnicity from every branch of the service. I showed up with bags of books I’d found at Goodwill and other places: Tobias Wolff, Flannery O’Connor, ZZ Packer, Isaac Babel, Roberto Bolaño, Andre Dubus, Lydia Davis… I stood before them, ramrod straight, like George C. Scott. The only thing missing was a massive American Flag backdrop.

“This class will run from 1700 to 1900 hours once a week. I want to see this room squared away before we begin. My name is Robert Morgan Fisher. I did not serve in the military. However, after a brief hitch in the Army during the Korean War, my father went to college then re-enlisted into the Navy and became a career NFO. Later, he served in the Pentagon. I’m here because I’m a creative writing teacher and I know this culture. I believe I understand you and your particular challenges and mindset.” My speech was peppered with military acronyms and terminology—I wanted to win hearts and minds. They leaned in.
I saw a few faint smiles. “As you can see, I brought books. This will be our li-
rary and we will add to it. You must read. We will cover both the craft and
business of writing. This won’t be some kind of feel-good journaling class—
though if you want to do that, it’s fine. I will never discourage you from reading
or writing. You’ll notice the books here are high-protein—no ‘airport books’ as
I like to call genre fiction: mysteries, thrillers, romance novels—there’s plenty
of that stuff lying around Dom’, right?” The Dom was the domiciliary, resident
housing dormitories. “Our home-base library is high-protein. We’re doing what
I like to think of as Ph.D. work here. If you want to write airport books, I will
fully support you in that. I only ask that you, 1) Love airport books, 2) Study
airport books and 3) Write airport books with a firm literary foundation. I will
add that if you are successful at writing airport books you will make more mon-
ey in a short amount of time than any of us. You see those mansions across the
freeway, in the hills above the university? Writers of airport books live up there.
Airport books paid for those houses. And they’re very big.” I looked into their
faces, saw a lot of pain. “I know many of you have been through the mill: com-
bat, homelessness, addiction, MST.” I let that last one, Military Sexual Trauma,
hang in the air, for I knew it was far more common among both men and wom-
en than the public could ever begin to imagine. “We write not because we want
to be rich and famous,” I said. “But because we have something screaming to
get out of us. That said, my goal for you is to get you reading, writing and pub-
lished. In five years I want you to have your own Wikipedia pages and a career.
That’s my goal.” I could see they were getting it. “We have to come up with a
snazzy name for you. ‘The UCLA West Los Angeles VA Creative Writing
Class for Veterans with PTSD’ is just too damn wordy. For the last several
years, my Twitter handle has been Wordcommando—so that’s what you are: Wordcommandos!”

“WORDCOMMANDOS” they collectively barked.

“And I’m your GUNNY!”

“GUNNY!”

Gunny is a Gunnery Sergeant, E-7 pay grade. Safe to say they’d all had
a gunny at one point in basic training.

“Now, are you ready to write and read?!”

“YES SIR!”

That was how I began to teach the UCLA Wordcommandos. Within the
first year, two of my students were published in respectable literary journals and
the class meetings and my salary were doubled. Several more Wordcommandos have been published since then and we’ve had many guest lecturers, gone on amazing field trips to spoken word events including Cedering Fox’s acclaimed WordTheatre where they’ve met the likes of Richard Bausch, TC Boyle, John Edgar Wideman and Tim O’Brien. Wordcommandos were featured at LA LitCrawl in 2017 and in 2018 will be honored by The New Short Fiction Series—LA’s longest-running spoken word event—on Veteran’s Day.

Our in-class library is massive and at least two Wordcommandos are going after their MFA. Working with these men and women has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. It’s kept some of them alive, and given me even deeper insight into my own process. I don’t want to ever stop teaching this class. It’s what I was meant to do. My calling.

A few months ago, an African-American Wordcommando who’d seen some very heartbreaking, intense action in Vietnam left me a voicemail message. It was a little less than a minute long and in it, he informed me that a story he’d written had been accepted by a journal. As he thanked me, the connection started breaking up—then I realized: he was sobbing. I too started sobbing. He pulled himself together, wrapped it up, thanked me again. All I’d done was format it correctly, fix a few typos and grammar, suggested a title change. It was a wonderful story—the man’s a very talented writer.

I will never delete that voicemail.
Papal Sanction

When the Vatican relented, making red meat edible on Friday not marked by holy sacrifice, Dad, lapsed Catholic made good by Mom conversion, decided on a grilled ribeye ritual, with potatoes baptized from a premade tub of cheese, sour cream and butter.

But papal sanction would not be extended to my brother, eight and amiable, mixing margaritas from scratch, blender screeching as it made its sacrament, as hands not yet adept at cursive masterfully sprinkled salt on the rims.
J. T. Bryson

Madonna

*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*

*1 Corinthians 13:11*

It was a gloomy morning before
the first bell of school—
before I dressed or devoured
a bowl of Cheerios—I remember
lying in the hallway
on our trailer's cold floor
(stiff particle board covered in thin,
mildewed carpeting and beagle hair)
listening to my mother sing while showering.
Though steam rose as if from hell itself
underneath the bathroom door,
Mom's voice was clear—it resonated
like a Gothic choir chanting
"Are You Washed In The Blood?"
She bathed, I knew, with St. Ives—
aromas of apricots and raspberries,
oatmeal and shea butter—
the spray of water
deflected against her body
like snare drums in a parade
or a desk clerk typing.
Back then, my child-mind was convinced that her presence was needed to keep me faithful. I felt so alone, imprisoned, I was petrified by the love she gave me, I feared I could never compare to her strength in life. But on the day I became a man, I lay on that musty floor and considered the words beyond her voice—the meaning beyond her cadence—until a new faith passed to me.

Now, I no longer loiter in the hallway of concealment. I search for a wife whose face will shine as she exits the shower—through veils of vapor and sheets of steam, bright white lights refracting—wrapped in immaculate linen.
Casper’s Marina

A white heron, gliding low and slow, searches for a place to rest. It hears the splash of croakers and pinfish hiding in the marsh grass. The dockyard creaks as the wind tosses a small wave. Seawalls fade green from algae, fade black from bay oysters. Like eyes of a sleeping moccasin, the cold water glitters. At high tide the estuaries are almost covered. My father points out, and I see mariners pulling in their nets. Muscles bulge as they heave in their daily catch. Sweat swims down their faces and drips into the sea. So, that’s how the ocean is replenished. Not by rain, but by man’s labor—drop by drop.
Elizabeth let the curtain fall. Nothing but gray sky as far as she could see. And snow. This winter had been bitterly cold and today looked to be no different. She opened the closet and pulled out the black dress hanging there. While time was of the utmost importance this morning, she was in no hurry to get downstairs. Already, she could hear the low murmurs of people talking. People coming in and out, doors opening and closing. Who was here? She knew they meant well, but she was tired of hostessing the endless hordes of people. The faces blurred together; the voices buzzed in her ears.

She pulled on the black pantyhose and let the black dress drop over her head and down her slender, taut body. At the age of twenty-six, Elizabeth shouldn’t have to be doing this. Dread filled every fiber of her body. Her brother Remington’s laughter reached through the closed door and she shuddered. She felt nauseous but proceeded with the chore of dressing. Once the black shoes were on her feet, she opened the door and headed down the stairs.

A small crowd had gathered in the living room, mostly family on this morning. She took a deep breath and stepped into the room. Remington flanked her side and casually dropped an arm across her shoulders, “How are you, Sis? I was beginning to get worried about you.”

While Elizabeth found some comfort in his arm across her shoulders, she wanted free of him. But, she leaned her head on his shoulder, patted his chest, and then pulled away. Looking at her watch, she said, “I guess we should go. Is Marlowe here?”

“He’s in the kitchen with Mom.” Remington walked across the room, stuck his head in the kitchen door and announced that Elizabeth was ready, and
they could leave. Marlowe was almost immediately by her side. Though no words passed between them, she was comforted by his presence.

Marlowe lived on the next ranch over and they had known each other all their lives. They shared the familiarity of family. The only time Marlowe and Elizabeth had ever been apart was during the time he and she had gone to different colleges. He had gone off to study agriculture at Clemson, and she had headed across the mountain to study math at Western Carolina University. She had the notion that she wanted to be a math teacher. Marlowe had found this amusing, “How’s math going to help you care for that ranch?”

“Did it ever occur to you that I might not want to care for the ranch?”

“That ranch is in your blood, Liz-Beth,” he’d said affectionately. He’d called her Liz-Beth since day one. At first it was because his young tongue just couldn’t handle the many syllables of Elizabeth, but Liz-Beth stuck even when she knew he could pronounce it. It annoyed her when they were teenagers. But when she was in college, she missed the double name Marlowe had given her.

She and Marlowe had written almost daily. He was what she missed second only to the ranch. She told him everything. She never thought twice about telling him of the many young men who swarmed after her. They found something alluring about a ranch girl whose curves gave away her femininity and whose laughter was contagious. She didn’t mind making people laugh, but she didn’t care about her prettiness. She wanted people to love her, not her looks.

While she thought she’d get away from the ranch and discover a whole other world, what she learned was that Marlowe was right. Four years of college taught her that the ranch was in her blood and she had missed it with a longing that she had never been able to describe. She finished her education and returned to the ranch with a math degree that helped with managing the account books of the ranch, but mostly, it collected dust as it hung on the wall in the den.
In the past three years she’d learned more things than she’d ever learned in college, more than she cared to learn, and the last three months had brought her even more lessons. Some of the lessons were hard and painful, others comforting and warm. She would rather have lived her life never learning any of the lessons. Some things Elizabeth knew would happen, other things she would have never dreamed, ever. Unfamiliar emotions overwhelmed her, and she was uncertain about what to do with them or how to respond to them.

Three years ago her dad was diagnosed with cancer. The first bout, while scary, had come and gone rather easily. Easily compared to the other bouts. He discovered a knot under one of his arms, showed it to the doctors, and was told that it was nothing to be concerned about. A year later, the knot had grown significantly, and the doctor who said it was nothing to be concerned about was suddenly concerned. A biopsy was done and cancer was discovered. An oncologist said surgery was necessary, but he felt confident the mass could be removed and life would return to normal. Elizabeth and her dad learned that it didn’t matter what type of cancer it was, the fact that it was cancer was enough. The mass was removed, and her dad underwent radiation treatments. After months of radiation, the doctors declared the cancer in remission.

Some normalcy returned to their lives and the ranch. But, fear and dread loomed every three months when the tests were run and along with the waiting came uncertainty. It was like inhaling and holding your breath for as long as you could, or like going underwater, staying there until your lungs felt as though they would burst, and wondering if you could make it back to the surface. Or at least that’s how it was for her. She couldn’t even begin to fathom what her dad experienced during the waiting times. Her mom said, “Just pray,” and little else. It was hard to tell what was on her mind. Even though Elizabeth was with her parents every day, she could only imagine, from her own hell, the hell her mom and dad lived in during those days of waiting. For two years, the quarterly reports came back showing the cancer in remission.
The third year, her dad was not so blessed. A spot appeared on his lung. “We’ll watch it,” the doctor said. Three months later, three spots were on the lung, “We’ll do a biopsy.” The little twerp doing the biopsy punctured her dad’s lung, causing it to collapse, and he spent three days in the hospital. The biopsy revealed cancer, and they were told the best treatment would be chemotherapy.

She found herself angry most of the time, angry with the doctor who told her dad the knot was nothing to be concerned about, angry with the incompetent person who’d done the lung biopsy, angry with the doctor who told them that the spots were cancer. Aside from the anger, there was the numbness. Suddenly nothing in life seemed important. But time and time again her dad affectionately said, “Cowgirl up, Elizabeth. God is in control.”

Once the chemotherapy began, he did his best to continue working on the ranch. But, it finally took its toll on him, and he spent more days supervising than riding the fences and caring for the horses. He planted a garden, but was unable to tend to it, so Elizabeth, Marlowe, and a few of the hired hands took over the care of it. She had wondered if it was a sign when the garden didn’t thrive. After all, they had carried water and tended the garden as best they could given the many other things they had to do. The fact that the drought and heat may have affected the garden never occurred to her.

Marlowe had been at her Dad’s side, and hers, through all of it; Remington had been away, coming home once a year. She was angry with him because he wasn’t there. Now she was angry with him because he was there. It was another one of the many emotions she needed to sort through or get over.

On a day like today, the first thing her dad would say to her would be, “Cowgirl up, Elizabeth.” The meaning of this phrase sometimes changed depending on the circumstances, but most of the time it meant, “Find your inner strength and do what needs to be done.” She swallowed hard, the lump catching in her throat and taking its time going down. Now, today, was her dad’s funeral. It was like some foggy dream with no end. Her mom had asked her to speak. Elizabeth didn’t want to speak. She didn’t want to stand up in front of all those
people and talk about her dad, nor did she want to let her mom down. What was she supposed to say? How was she supposed to find the strength to do this?

The words had come to her only last night as she lay there, sleepless, in her bed. Elizabeth didn’t think they seemed appropriate, but then, she’d never been good at spilling her heart. Words never seemed to encompass emotions; they were too vague or too all inclusive. She always held her emotions in and putting words to them seemed to empty her and leave her wishing she’d said the words differently or not at all. There was always a better way to say something once it had already come out of her mouth. She didn’t want to regret the words she’d say today. The words, right or wrong, were on a tablet in the little purse she was carrying. She never carried a purse, but thought it necessary today. Words and Kleenex housed in a tiny black purse. If she knew how to capture and bind strength, make it fit in the black purse, she would do it, but it eluded her.

Elizabeth and her family had decided to have the visitation in the early morning and before the service. The hours dragged; the smell of the flowers overwhelmed her, choking her. She thought she may never desire to smell flowers ever again. An endless sea of faces passed her; hands shook hers, fat hands, bony hands, sweaty hands, cold hands, a few warm hands. Countless, “I’m sorry for your loss,” and “He’s in a better place,” were spoken by every single person. The intent was kind and meant to be comforting, but she filed the words away in her memory as words to never say to someone whose loved one had died. She wasn’t sure what words to say, but she knew these weren’t the right ones.

Elizabeth stepped up behind the pulpit and bowed her head; she took a deep breath, then looked up. Her eyes surveyed the audience of both familiar and unfamiliar faces. Her mom smiled ever so slightly when Elizabeth’s gaze fell on her, but Elizabeth moved her eyes past her mom and found Marlowe’s eyes. He gave one slow solemn nod, and she began her speech. “Mom thought I should speak to all of you today about Dad, and I’ve struggled with what to say since she asked. There are no words that can sufficiently cover the man he was
and what he meant to me. I know you all heard Dad tell me to cowgirl up more than once, and today, of all days, Daddy is saying, ‘Cowgirl up, Elizabeth.’

“Dad termed the phrase ‘cowgirl up’ long before it became a pop culture phrase. Those were his words of encouragement to me, his way of telling me that I could handle a task or meet a challenge. Today, I meet my biggest challenge.” Elizabeth began to falter; her words caught in her throat; she felt the hot sting of tears. She paused, closed her eyes, took a deep breath and continued, “My life will never be the same. I’m thankful that Daddy taught me all about horses and family. But Daddy taught me life lessons, too. Because he never let me give up, he taught me that I can face any challenge. Because he made me get back up every time I was down, I learned that I don’t quit just because life is hard. And because he held me in his arms so often, I learned that love will always see me through. Since he is a part of me, I will always cowgirl up. I’ll do it for Daddy.” She stepped away feeling there was so much more that needed to be said, but words failed her. Drained and empty, she found her seat, crumpled her notes, and waited patiently for the service to end.

As soon as they returned home, Elizabeth made her way to her room, tossed the black dress into a corner and put on the familiar jeans, boots, and a sweater. Although she knew she should feel more comfortable now, she didn’t. The house didn’t seem like home. It had been invaded by too many people for entirely too long: church friends, former ranch workers, old friends, new friends, family, nurses, caregivers. She wanted the invasion to stop. Elizabeth needed normalcy and routine, and nothing about this winter had been normal or routine. Along with the record amounts of snowfall came the freezing cold temperatures. Fallen snow from mid-December could still be seen lying about now, at the end of January. Normalcy had fled this winter, and Elizabeth wasn’t sure when it was coming back, but she needed it. Routine had been interrupted, making everything so very hard to do.
She stood the comings and goings of the people for as long as she could. The smell of the endless array of food lost the level of comfort it was meant to bring and left a feeling of sickness in its place. She was tired of talking with people, familiar and unfamiliar, about her dad’s death. She was tired of the well-meaning people hugging her and rambling on and on about what a good man he was. She was tired of their stories, their laughter, their condolences, but most of all she was tired of their tears. They had no right to the tears, not when she, herself, could not shed them. She was tired of being strong. She needed to get out; she needed air; she needed to breathe.

She donned her winter attire and snuck out the back door. They had been so wrong when they thought having an early service would free them up for the remainder of the day. Whose idea had that been? Probably Remington’s. But, she was thankful for the daylight. She could find somewhere to go, something to do. Without thought, she found herself standing in front of the wood pile. No wood needed chopping, stacks of it filled the cribs, but chopping the wood was the only thing she could find to do that gave her release and helped her feel somewhat normal. The certain repetition of picking up a two foot piece of wood, placing it on the chopping stump, heaving the ax into the air and landing it in the precise place to split the wood into twin halves comforted her. It was therapy. With each fall of the ax, she felt some anger escape, some deep seated pain of emotion surface from heart to hand to ax to wood, so that she could let it out and be done with it. She wanted to be done with these emotions, this dull thick pain, this useless, helpless feeling. Elizabeth felt certain that she was working it all out. For the first time in months, her mind was blank, focusing only on the chopping of the wood.

When Marlowe’s hand reached for the ax, she was startled back into reality. How long had she been out here? Looking at him, her insides crumbled, “When is it going to end, Marlowe?”

“It’ll take some time, Liz-Beth. What are you doing anyway?”

“Chopping wood,” she forced a smile.
“No, what are you really doing?” He asked with deep compassion and concern.

“I’m so tired of it all, Marlowe. When do I get to grieve? No one will let me grieve.”

“I will.” His words came out quietly, and she knew they were true. “You don’t have to pretend with me. You don’t have to be strong. You don’t have to hide what you feel. Do what you need to do, talk, cry, yell, cuss.”

“Where do I start?” She shrugged. “How about with how angry I am that Daddy stopped fighting? He just gave up, Marlowe. He would never let me quit. So, why did he?”

Marlowe thought long before he answered. “He was tired, Liz-Beth. You know that. The chemo wore him out and then when he quit that, the cancer wore him out.”

She didn’t look at him, instead she focused on the horizon or something far out there beyond him. “I know,” were the only words she could find.

“What else, then?” Marlowe asked.

“How about Remington? How he just swooped in here and became Mom’s hero? I was here every single day, but he shows up for one week, and he is her savior. It pisses me off. If he thinks that he can come in here after all these years and take over this ranch, he has another thing coming to him. I’ll fight him, Marlowe. I will not let him do it.” The words were coming faster now. “And how about Adrienne? My best friend.” Her words were sarcastic. “Do you know that she hasn’t even called? Not once. Not since you called her to tell her Daddy died. No card, no call, no flowers, nothing. I’ve always been there for her, but the one time I need her, she’s not even here for me. What kind of friend is she?”

When she was silent for a moment, Marlowe responded, “First, Remington doesn’t want this ranch. He just wants to be your mom’s hero, and he’s done that. He’ll be gone in a few days. And Adrienne’s a self-absorbed alcoholic; you know that. Maybe she was in a drunken stupor and doesn’t even re-
member the call. Unlike you, I can’t tell by her voice when she’s drunk. You didn’t really think that she’d drop everything and travel here in the snow?”

“Not really, but why can’t she be here just this one time?” They were both silent for a moment, then she whispered, “Hell, Marlowe, we can’t even bury him yet.” She found her voice again. “I never heard of having a funeral but having to wait to have the burial. Even the weather won’t let me have peace. That doesn’t set well with me either. It just seems like it’s never going to end. It just keeps dragging on and on.”

Elizabeth realized that it was beginning to get dark and noticed her fingers and toes were tingling from the cold. “I guess I should feed the horses and get back inside.”

“I’ll help you.”

Darkness settled in before they returned to the house. Marlowe stayed awhile, making small talk with the family and warming himself before his drive home. Chopping the wood and talking with Marlowe had calmed Elizabeth and helped her let some things out. The visitors were gone, and the house seemed unusually quiet. The quiet brought with it exhaustion. Saying good night to the family, Elizabeth crawled into bed, letting the darkness and sleep engulf her.

It had always been a long trek from the house to the barn, but this morning, it seemed especially long. She couldn’t tell if it was the cold air or the suppressed sigh that had made a home in her chest that made it hard to breathe. Heavy frost crunched beneath her cowboy boots, and although the cold seeped in through the leather, biting at her toes, she didn’t notice. As her boots pounded the concrete hard ground, it was relentless, threatening to remain unthawed for many more days. She peeked at the gray sky from between the hat that covered her head and the scarf wrapped around her neck, mouth, and nose. Even the silence of the cold, gray morning seemed threatening. Was this ever going to end? She was just so damned tired. It all weighed on her, smothering her – the air, the cold, the hard earth, the clothing, the tiredness.
She passed the wood pile and noticed the amount of wood she’d added to it yesterday. She thought that she’d let the anger, the sadness, the emotions out, but when she awoke this morning, it was all still with her. How long? How long would this go on?

As she opened the barn door, the horses nickered and lovingly watched her appear. This place was her refuge from the world, the place she had always come for comfort. She loved everything about the barn and the horses. The combined smells of grain, hay, leather, earth, and horses were a sweet aroma to her, and she breathed it in. She spoke gently to the horses as she stepped into the feed and tack room. When Elizabeth saw her dad’s saddle, she removed her glove and stroked the cold leather. She looked around at the trophies from his younger cowboy days and smiled at the pictures. Touching his face in her favorite picture of him, she whispered “Daddy.” She turned from the picture, opened the feed barrel, and began scooping the feed into the buckets. As she was bent over, Elizabeth saw a set of boots enter the door. Knowing they belonged to Marlowe, she rose to greet him.

Before she could speak, Marlowe said, “I thought I’d come over and give you a hand this morning. Didn’t figure Remington would get out of the bed on such a cold morning to help you.”

“Thanks, but you know I don’t need help,” Elizabeth answered.

“I know,” Marlowe reached and wiped a tear from her cheek, “but thought I’d come anyway.”

She wasn’t even aware the tear had escaped and felt betrayed by her own emotions, but yielded to them, feeling safe since it was Marlowe. “Marlowe, you know that words don’t come easy for me, but there’s something I’d like to say to you,” she stopped, feeling the uncertainty arise within her as she tried desperately to pull the words from her heart into her mouth, “I want to thank you for loving my daddy. He wasn’t always an easy man to love.”
Marlowe smiled, “Sometimes we love somebody just because they’re there; sometimes it’s the only thing we know; sometimes we got no choice in who we love. We just love ‘em.”

“I appreciate you and all you’ve done. I don’t think I could’ve made it through all of this without you. Every time I ever needed someone, you’ve been here. It means more than you know. You’ve never let me down, Marlowe.”

Marlowe bent to pick up the feed buckets. “That’s the way it is, Elizabeth. That’s the way it’s supposed to be. Always has been, always will be. I’m just waiting for you to figure it out.” He raised up, looked into her eyes, smiled, and carried the feed to the horses.

Rays of sunlight peeped through the cracks and crevices of the barn, and as she watched Marlowe walk towards the stalls, a small smile found its way to her mouth. Something released inside of her as the numbness she’d become so accustomed to gave way to warmth. It didn’t escape her that Marlowe had called her Elizabeth for the first time ever.
Journey to College

Putting my book-bag in the back seat
Of my car, I am ready for another daily venture
To college. As I pull out of my driveway,
I leave my home for knowledge, to learn
Heights of the past.

In college, if college really exists at all,
Discussed in Philosophy class, we learn of
Queen Ann cherries, the rotten ones and all;
We learn of battles and bloodshed, and these are
My thoughts as houses rush by.

But learning didn’t begin there, half running,
Half pulled along. It began with big-wheels
And pop guns, and mom’s strawberries.
My mind wanders as I drive, trees and cars
Whizzing past my window.

I reminisce about my knowledge beginning
Like a tortoise conversing on eternity. The smoke
Inside my chimney soon turned to fire, and, like a storm,
I learned more. Because it was not until college that my
True knowledge had begun.

And when it did begin, they said what I
Learned before was not real, but shadows on the wall.
I had my reality, but like scissors, they cut it.
All that I learned before no longer mattered,
And I journeyed further.

Then, like a single chimney standing in a
Pile of rubble, I climbed into the brilliant
Light of the afternoon sun. One day, looking back
At my life and my civilization, I know that
I’m no longer young.

So now I arrive at college, where I
Spend most of my time; time to ponder the
Truths and time to think of Time. But no matter
How much time, I know that I cannot know
Everything in time.
Apostrophe

What to do with you,
curly-cue hovering saucily
above the thought line,
your root-end snuggling
between a pair of monograms—
or sometimes moored alone,
east of the word-ending squiggling S
morphing singularities
into more-than-ones
somehow possessed
and muddling, for example,
with your haunting absence from
the it to which something belongs
(but saying just the same
with your presence for the non-its,
then compounding the conundrum with the simplicity of your smirk
saying the it exists)?
Could you please retire gracefully,
leave us Anglophones
to dance on other hot coals
of our linguistic quagmire?
Diacritic

Which of you do we love—
the pause to catch our breath,
gel our thoughts,
the period-topped comma
baking two fruits into a pie;
the pair of periods piggy-backed
one atop the other
grabbing our throat
saying: pay attention, pal,
this is important;
the bar fusing two would-be entities
into a third creature;
the double bar heralding a break in thought—then ist twin
guiding us back
to where we left the road—
the curly-cue thing in the attic
above the plane of thought
saying an “it” exists or
something is owned by something
(as long as it’s not an it)
No, I think it’s the single
polka-dot of ink
cohering this wad of words
into a knot of meaning
allowing our minds to rest.
Or maybe it’s the hook over
the polka-dot that begs an answer?
All, I think, of the above.
Katie Winkler

Proverbs

I miss my dad. He died three years ago, May 6, at age eighty. He always said he would make it to eighty, and he did. Dad did most things he put his mind to. Sometimes I called this characteristic stubbornness, especially when I, like all children, became fiercely angry at him. Other times, like in the last years of his life when he was fighting the debilitating effects of type I diabetes, I called it persistence. Now I call it courage.

By profession, my father was a soldier, a preacher, a singer, a teacher, but above all, a courageous leader. Here are some memories, things he did, said and wrote, in no order, that have helped shape me into the person, the teacher, I am today. Some of them may seem cliché, but when I heard them from Dad, they were fresh and new because his actions and his character stood behind them.

Once, when I was about thirteen or so, Dad hit a dog and killed it. My father went across the road and knocked on doors until he found the owner of the dog to let them know, apologize, and help in any way he could. Afterwards, climbing into the truck to drive away, he said, “You have to go through your problems. Meet them head on. You can’t go around.”

“I’m not going to retire. I’m going to re-fire.”

“Do everything you do out of love, and you can’t go wrong.”

In answer to the question, “What word best describes your life?” Dad wrote this: “Integrity. I believe that we all need to be people of our word. I don’t believe we can go wrong if we adopt this word to live by. I heard of a man. A banker was once asked how much money he would loan that man. ‘I’d loan him as much as he wants,’ said the banker, ‘because he will die rather than
not pay it back.’ That’s integrity. That’s what I want. I want to live by that
word.”

“It’s hard to be a Christian—a true Christian.”

” Love is ever ready to believe the best in others.” Dad said he learned
this from my mother, one of the other great teachers in my life.

“That’s the name of the game—helping people.”

“I like to travel. Travel is a part of education. Learning about different
peoples, countries, children, religions is a part of education. I’m glad that all
of our children have gotten to travel. I believe all of it has contributed to the
positive attitudes they have now about different countries, cultures and peo-
ple.”

“Never do anything half-ass.” Mom taught me this too. She just said it
in a more refined way: “Anything worth doing is worth doing well.” Same
sentiment and one that has served me well.

After Dad retired from working as a representative of a large ministry,
he went back to teaching. He worked for the county office, taking long-term
substitute assignments. This was in the 80’s at the beginning of the AIDS epi-
demic when there was still a great deal of fear and misinformation about the
disease in the country. There was a little boy with hemophilia who had con-
tracted AIDS from a blood transfusion. The school would not let the little boy
attend school and could find no one to teach the boy at home—until my dad
volunteered. He taught the boy until he was too sick to study, but Dad became
more than a teacher to that boy and his family—he was a friend. Years later,
the boy’s mother posted under Dad’s obituary, “Mr. Whitlock was a wonder-
ful man….He meant the world to us.”

Dad was principal of a Christian school in Georgia. Although the
school was started as a dodge around integration, my dad did not pay any at-
tention to the racist views of some board members and enrolled the first Afri-
can-American student. “Do what you know is right,” Dad said, and did.
Dad recorded ideas on what it takes for a husband and wife to maintain a healthy marriage:

- Love each other
- Pray together
- Be in unity
- Put Jesus first
- Attend church and have all of the family go together
- Have a spirit of forgiveness toward each other
- Be patient with each other
- Build each other up, not tear each other down.

“I love everything about your Mom,” wrote Dad. He sweetly called Mom his “little hummingbird” and loved her fiercely. Their relationship has taught me more about having a successful marriage than anything else could ever do. When two fallible people can live together, for the most part happily, for fifty-eight years, they must have done something right.

Although it was hard to watch Dad as he went through the last difficult years of his life, I learned so much about perseverance, determination and courage from him during that time. Through the death of his oldest child, a devastating tornado, his own failing health, leading to two amputations and eventually succumbing to heart failure, Dad endured much embarrassment, discomfort, and pain but rarely complained, usually about not being able to have salt on his food.

He continued to be an inspiration to those around him by learning how to walk again with one prosthetic, losing the other leg, then learning to walk on two prosthetic legs. Knowing how athletic and active Dad had been most of his life made it even harder to watch as he struggled to do basic tasks, but Dad persisted and endured with courage and dignity. The last time I was with Dad, about a week before he died, his heart severely weakened from the effects of
diabetic neuropathy, I watched as he tested his own blood sugar and gave himself his own insulin shot. The last thing he ever said to me was, “I love you.”

Two weeks after my dad died, I was diagnosed with type II diabetes. It was hard to hear as my doctor spoke of possible nerve damage leading to blindness or amputation, especially after watching my dad go through what he did. But I am his child, so I have determined that this disease won’t lick me. Dad, I’ll do what’s right, won’t do a half-ass job, won’t try to go around.

Life is worth doing, so I’m going to do it well.

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The Young Boy and The Lion

The world seemed foreign now, strange, yet somehow it always drifted back to the same familiar playgrounds to haunt the realm of man since the beginning of time: hopelessness, dread, and the constant pressure of endless worry etched into the brow of every parent since Adam laid his son to rest. He blamed himself, like all responsible parents do. Blamed his inadequacies for the dimly lit, bug infested, barely livable two-bedroom apartment he forced his family to reside in. Blamed his lack of education for a piss poor job, barely able to cover the most menial of requirements, which forced his family to adjust to a life of poverty, and acceptance, most starving animals wouldn't submit themselves to. And blamed his lack of constitution for not being more of a man, to his grandson, when the weight of the world, the truth of his surroundings, finally came crashing down on him. He had to admit the world had changed.

The lucky ones, the ones with enough zeros in their bank account to jump ship when the Invasion started, left the planet nearly fifty years ago: taking the best parts of Human technology, and dignity, with them. But for the rest, the scabs left to fend for themselves against the Deviant Hordes, the world sat squarely between the rungs of Purgatory and Hell; with little distinction between the two. Life, for better or worse, was nothing more than one dismal moment after another. He hated living in the Dead Zone, hated having to scrounge and scour just to maintain the little foothold of sanity he had, but, in the eyes of many, he was actually considered lucky. His son,
against his better judgment, became a soldier, a good one, and even now, seven years after his death, his name was still thrown about in pleasant conversation. Such heroic military service was the only reason his family was allowed within the Dead Zone; though, in all honesty, it was simply the equivalent of trading barbed wire for a briar patch.

The Dead Zone offered military protection, steady work, and a solid two-hundred-meter wall, surrounding the entire area, to defend the region. The endless crime, ruthless gangs, and unchecked poverty were simply the amenities afforded by such lavish accommodation. Of course, there was nothing written in stone, no single agreement reached by the parties involved, but most of the criminal element seemed to operate under a fragile truce during the daytime, allowing for work, hunting for food, and even a rudimentary form of schooling; but all bets were off once darkness fell.

Get caught in the streets after the eastern wall shadow touched his sister's hand in the west and making it home wasn't something most people even considered possible; his grandson still being out there, in the middle of the night, only served to drive this point home with clarity. He couldn't count the number of times he was glad his grandson had turned out to be the spitting image of his father – 6.5, big for his fifteen years, powerfully built, and graced with the old man's quick hands when it came to fighting, but none of that mattered after dark. After the shadows touched, man wasn't the only monster walking the streets of the Dead Zone. After the shadows touched...the Hordes swarmed.

He made his way across the tiny living room, finally leaving his coveted spot at the window, and rudely pushed aside the arrogant cockroaches vying for supremacy at the kitchen sink. He washed his hands, the act seeming almost one of insanity considering the fact he would be reaching into a disease riddled, maggot infested, refrigerator to pull out a moldy loaf of bread and some stale
bologna and proceeded to the table to fix a sandwich. Most of the bread, the slices halfway decent anyway, had been claimed by his wife and two granddaughters earlier. He wasn't mad, he always allowed everyone else to eat first before he made his way to the kitchen, late at night, and offered thanks for the meager scraps he was allowed to salvage for himself. He ate, standing in the kitchen with countless bugs fighting for the tiniest morsel to fall from his mouth, and felt the savage knot in his belly give way to the brief deposit of nutrients quickly digesting in his stomach. He pulled a dirty cup from the bin, the filth on the inside only serving to hide the true atrocities in the brownish green water flowing from the sink, and washed the paupers platter down.

He made his way down a short hallway, stopping to check in on his sleeping granddaughters, before returning to the living room to pull the lice-covered blanket up over his wife's shoulder as she slept on the couch. She tried to stay up, tried to be the rock he needed to steady himself at this time, but age, and a hard life, had taken their toll....and, against her will, she drifted off to sleep. He smiled, even after sixty-five years of marriage she still shivered at the slightest touch of his hand against her skin and made his way back to the window. He pulled the curtain back slightly, peering out into the darkness of the vicious streets below, and shook his head in trepidation. Even sixteen floors up he was risking a lot just looking out the window at this time of night. The Hordes aside, it simply wasn't a good idea to have factual knowledge of the activities going on in the streets below; not if living was something you wanted to continue in the near future.

“Where are you, boy... Where are you?” His wife stirred, as though his words had somehow breached the veil of detachment and reached her heart as well, and he sighed, gratefully, when sleep continued to hold her. He turned back, his eyes searching the darkness again, and felt the concern, he desperately tried to hide from his family, wash over him; his eyes closing, as he offered another prayer for the safe return of his grandson.
A noise startled him, his hand reaching for the well placed gun on the end table, and he stared across the room towards the door. His wife awakened, the soft sound of rustling coins and clanging metal forcing her from the deep slumber the bugs couldn't, and slowly the door opened: the sight of their grandson, standing in the doorway, clothes bloodied, pieces of skin hanging from gaping wounds on his body, nearly sapping the remaining life from their bodies. He staggered in, the last of his strength taking him a few more steps before he finally collapsed, and his grandmother was there instantly.

“Gail...leave him be,” he stated plainly, as he made his way across the room and locked the door once more. “He's home now, The Good Lord took care of that much, that's all we can ask. You know what to do.”

Gail smiled, kissing her grandson softly on the forehead before rising, and then forced herself to stand: walking over to her husband to pat him lovingly on the chest. “Be nice, Marcus, you know he's his Father's son, and your grandchild...I expected no less.” She made her way towards the bathroom. “I'll make the preparations...” She looked back at him sharply. “...you talk some sense into him.”

Marcus waited until she was down the hall before he knelt beside his grandson and helped him to the couch. “Come on, Terry, you asked for all of this; at least have the decency to stick your chest out, and fake a little pride, in front of your grandma.”

Terry leaned back on the couch, his ego seemingly more bruised than his body, and scoffed in rebuttal: his head shaking in dismay. “You're too old to understand, Pop, this place is home to you... you don't know anything about what's going on in my head.”

His grandfather laughed. “You think the world began when the sky fell, and the Deviants descended upon the Earth, boy? The entire Dead Zone was once a lush field of trees, resting in the heart of the Great Smoky Mountains, when I was your age: a paradise, even, when the Natives had it to themselves.”

He nodded his head knowingly. “You think this is the first war we've ever had...
The first time the world has been plunged into chaos?” He laughed at the thought of it. “You're just one, in a long line of dumb young men, to start smelling his own scent, and race stupidly into the fray, to have their narrow behind handed back on a platter.”

Terry rolled his eyes in response.

“Oh...I see. You think you're different....special....unique. Well, I know you'll probably hate to hear this from an old man....but get over yourself: you're no different from anyone else.” He raised himself from his seat, walked over to the bug inhabited table to retrieve the photo album his wife kept proudly, and returned to crash by his grandson. “You think I don't know, huh? You drag your half beaten carcass into the house, collapse to the floor, and....what....we just believe you got your butt kicked by Nigel, and his Rastas, again?” He scoffed. “You think I can't tell the difference between a cut from a knife, and a slash from a claw... You think your grandma won't be able to tell.... Do we really look that stupid to you?”

Terry sat up, the gash on his chest forcing the pain straight into his heart, and he found himself seeking a more comfortable, lying, position on the couch. “Whatever.”

Marcus frowned. “Whatever, huh?” He shook his head in pity: the first hints of anger finally finding their way into his heart before his uncaring attitude. “I told you to stay away from the 123rd, didn't I... Told you to take it slow, that you're not ready, right? Told you to stay out of Little Town, altogether, huh? But you decide, in your infinite wisdom, you no longer have to listen to the old man anymore, take it upon yourself to do what you want to do, and head out into Little Town anyway! I told you to come straight home, boy! Straight home! And you take your scrawny behind into Little Town anyway... to chase Deviants! What's wrong with you, boy... are you trying to get yourself killed!?”

Terry sprang up again, the stabbing pain in his chest only serving to fuel his anger. “Look around, Pop... what do you think is wrong with me? You
think I want this? You think I want my sisters to grow up in this place, like I did?"

“Oh, please! You think I like these conditions anymore than you do...of course not! But I know a few million people, living in the Tunnels or some other God forsaken graveyard system, that would gladly kill every one of us to take your place! So don't feed me that crap, boy...you know how lucky you are....how lucky we all are to still be above ground! And it has absolutely nothing to do with the fact I told you bring your narrow behind home!”

Terry couldn't argue the point, not with the truth put so clearly, so he quickly moved forward: it was now or never. “So what...so what... I went to the 123rd ....so what? They're true Citizens, military...so what?”

“I told you not to, that's what,” Marcus returned!“ I.”

“I'm tired, Pop,” Terry interrupted! “I'm not a kid anymore... I know what's out there....and I'd rather die out there, fighting, than to die, in here, doing nothing! Either way, I'm a dead man....at least I get to choose how it happens!”

Marcus fought to restrain himself: was he ever that stupid. “Oh...so you think you're a big dog now?” He scoffed. “You see a few things, get into a few scrapes, throw some hands, earn a few stripes, and now you think you're ready to get yourself a gun and run the streets, huh?”

Terry pulled the gun from its resting place behind his back. “I don't have to get anything, old man.”

Marcus nodded his head, his eyes taking in the sleek silver of the well polished nine millimeter, and sighed heavily. “So what now, Terry... I just let you run go out there and get yourself killed; is that it? What would Michael think if...”

Terry drew back, as if hearing the name had forced a vicious slap across his face, and staggered to his feet. “Don't, Pop... Don't do that.... Don't ever mention that man's name, around me, ever again. He's the one who left. I
watched him pack his gear, lace up his boots, and walk out the door without a word. Don't ever talk to me, about him, ever again.”

Marcus lowered his head, his mind searching desperately for the slightest thread to tether his restraint to the moment, and offered a prayer, in gratitude, when the tightness in his heart finally subsided. Still, the insult couldn't go unaddressed, so he, calmly, offered a response. “So... you want to stand there, and speak to me like a grown man; but you still want to cry like a little baby because your daddy ain't here to pick you up, huh?” He stood, his soft brown eyes conveying his message clearly. “I love you, boy – I do...and I've certainly let you get away with more than your fair share of disrespect in my house... But, if you want to call out my dead son for being dead, or call out the plasma discharge for taking his life, and then worship the very duty that made him put on his gear, and walk out the door – then I suggest you find yourself another place to do it.... Because that kind of talk will never have a place in my home – you understand me!?”

Terry shook his head, he regretted saying the words the moment they left his mouth, but he was in too deep to turn back now. “See... I told you.... You don't understand me at all!”

Marcus was growing irritated. “Understand you?” He laughed. “What is there to understand? You're a dumb, young, kid, who's started smelling himself, and wants to jump into waters he has no business trying to swim in!”

“You...”

“What did they say at the 123rd, huh?” It was his turn to interrupt.

“What?” The question caught Terry by surprise.

Marcus didn't hesitate, he was growing sick of the whole thing. “You took this ego trip to Quan, right.... What did he say?”

Terry scoffed. “General Quantavious was my father's best friend, what do you think he said?”

Marcus laughed. “He probably told you take your narrow butt home, and don't let him catch you up here again.”
Terry was furious, the memory seeming to force a bitter taste in his mouth. “And you think it's funny right... Well it's not; it's jealousy!” He felt his stomach beginning to churn, his guts spinning until he felt his muscles knot up violently, but he refused to relent. “I deserve to be in the Corp, Pop – you know I do... And he knows it, too!”

Marcus frowned, the endless buckets of sweat beginning to drench his grandson from head to toe. “Really... You think so, huh?”

Terry felt his strength ebbing away quickly, his unsteady legs forcing his body to sway slightly, but still he refused to yield. “Damn right!” He wiped his face, the sweat becoming too profuse to see through. “You think I don't hear the people talking.... Hear what they say whenever I walk by?” He scoffed, a savage chill shaking him to his very core. “Oh...you know who he is...that's Marcus' grandson, Michael's little boy.” – do you know how that makes me feel? Everyone in the Zone knows me, everyone, and not a single person can call me by my name! I'm not you, I'm not my father, I'm me...Terry – that's my name!” The room started spinning, but he continued with his rant. “The two of you, put together, ain't done half the things I have....haven't seen the things I've seen, or been through what I've been through! I'm nearly as big as you, bigger than my father ever was, and I'm just fifteen...fifteen, Pop!” He wiped his mouth, the slight hint of blood bringing only the slightest pause before he continued again. “The General knows, he knows.... He's just scared I'll steal his thunder, that's all... Because I'm bigger than him, too! I'm bigger, I'm stronger, I'm faster – everything! But everywhere you go, in this God forsaken Hellhole, all you here is “The General...The General....The General will save us!” Why? I'm standing right here, right in front of you, and no one can see me; because of him! Put me on the front line, give me a shot, and see how many Deviants I bring down! The General is about two hundred credits away from having enough money to jump ship – what then... Whose going to step up then? You – no... My dad – oh, that's right, he's dead.... Oh, that's right, I'll tell you who it's going to be – me, that's who! I'll do it!” He stumbled backwards, but refused to
fall, and continued his rant through nearly blind eyes. “Why don't you be more like your Grandfather, be more like your daddy, that's all I've ever heard my entire life! Be like this one, be like that one, be like the General... I'm sick of it! Put me and the General in a locked room and see who makes it out... put us on the range and see who shoots better.... put us on the bench and see who can lift more... I can! I'm tired of living like a second class nobody, I'm better than that, I deserve better than that, and I'll be damned if I'll sit back and accept this crap any longer! I'm ready, Pop, you know I'm ready.... So why are you standing in my way?”

Marcus was rendered speechless, the audacity of the child forcing him to stop himself from reaching for a hammer and slapping his grandson across the temple just one good time; but images of his son, and even his own father, held his anger in check. He paused, closing his eyes to allow himself a moment to gather his senses, and simply shook his head in pity. “Is this the BS you fed Quan... that you're better than him.... You're ready for your turn?” He scoffed in contempt. “Are you really that stupid, boy... Or is there an actual mental issue your grandma, and I, need to address? No wonder Quan put his foot up your butt and sent you on your way!” He laughed sarcastically. “Let me guess... The moment he sent your tired little carcass packing...you decide to hit Little Town and prove everybody wrong, huh?”

“And?” His arrogance betrayed his stability: his shaky legs finally buckling, and sending him crashing to the floor.

A heavy sigh escaped Marcus' lips, the long awaited end finally reaching its climax. “And how did that work out for you?”

A vicious cycle of savage body spasms, and an endless hacking bloody cough, was the only response Terry could muster.

Gail made her way back up the hall, the sight of her convulsing grandson not eliciting the slightest hint of urgency from her at all, and she calmly laid the pail of water, and hastily made bio-kit, on the dirty little coffee table in the middle of the room. “Strong as a mule...and stubborn as an ox.... Definitely one
of yours, Marcus.... Definitely one of yours.” She sighed. “Well, no sense in letting him suffer any longer...roll your sleeve up, old man.”

Marcus grumbled the entire time, his irritation all too apparent, but he did as he was told: begrudgingly removing his sweater, and rolling up his sleeve to expose his arm, as he crashed into the weathered old recliner in the corner of the room. “We're too old for this, Gail. Damn fool....his daddy was out in less than ten minutes, you know?”

Gail laughed, she remembered it well. “And his Uncle Roger lasted for nearly six hours... now that was one stubborn little boy; God bless the dead.”

Marcus winced, accepting the sting of the needle as his wife drew his blood, and laid his head back in vain. “The world is getting tougher, for them, Gail...they don't have much hope left, so they want to rush out there, grow up too fast, and try and fix it.” He sighed heavily, glancing over his shoulder towards the dark shadows of the hallway. “By the time those two come of age, I'll probably have to request some days off to deal with it.”

She laughed, soft and sweet, and gently placed a bandage on his arm when she was done: returning to the foul smelling concoction, to add the missing ingredient, and finish preparing the noxious brew. “Probably.”

Marcus left the wiry comfort of the chair, kneeling beside his grandson to hold him down as Gail prepared another needle for the injection, and shook his head. “Yeah....the world sure has changed; I can't recall ever giving my Pa this kind of trouble.”

Gail laughed, tickled by the very thought of it. “Old Pappy said you took two swings at him, before he put a belt to your backside, you old fool!” She laughed until her side ached; the pungent remedy slipping through the needle to calm her grandson instantly, and she raised her beautiful brown eyes to capture his. “Where do you think they get it from?”

He scowled, bringing her to another fit of laughter, and leaned across his sleeping grandson to softly kiss her on the forehead.
Five hours would pass before Terry was finally able to find his way through the murky haze in his mind and lift the heavy iron curtains to open his eyes; the light forcing him to squint, as the realization it was nearly mid-day echoed in his head like a swinging mallet. He raised himself to a sitting position, a multitude of bugs jumping to safety as the slumbering giant awakened, and instantly felt the sobering touch of pain, and nausea, as he reached for the well-placed bucket at his side.

“Punch Drunk....that's what the men call it,” Gail said, her hand reaching out to feel his forehead as he continued to heave his guts out. “Seems like everyone knows a Deviant is poisonous...that a drop of its venom can kill a child in less than a few hours...but somehow the part about a neural toxin being carried in theirs claws, as well, never makes into any of the military brochures or literature. It's a damn shame, if you ask me.” She forced herself to her feet, the first time in nearly three hours, and headed for the kitchen to retrieve a small cup, still hot from hours of careful tending, and made her way back to his side; the weariness of old age, and severe arthritis, admonishing her for such foolishness. “Here, drink this...you'll feel better.”

Terry fought his way through the grizzly deed, the wretched scent wafting into the tiny apartment to linger for an eternity and found the act of simply rising to a sitting position one of emotional turmoil. His body hurt. And not a normal, I think I might have the flu, kind of ache, but a gut checking, I think something might seriously be wrong with me, feeling. He accepted the cup, grateful for anything capable of easing his torment, and just as quickly pushed it away: the wretched taste almost unpalatable, and foul smell nearly forcing another round of agonizing nausea. “Ohhh...no!! I can't drink that!”

A quick slap to the back of his head made it clear his grandmother felt otherwise. “You want to nurse those body aches, and that headache, for another three weeks.... Alright then...drink.”

Terry reluctantly did as he was told, the warmth helping to settle the chills in his body – but the sheer horrific aspect of it making it nearly impossi-
ble to get down, and his face twisted in objection as he forced a large portion of
the sickening brew down. “Oh God.... It tastes like...

“Cat's piss,” his grandmother answered for him, as his reckless night
finally concluded for her, and she was finally able to take a more comfortable
seat in the chair. “The men folk call it a Tabby, just for that reason. Takes the
blood of someone whose been scratched a few times to make it though...just so
you know.”

Terry shook his head and continued to force the drink into his mouth, as
quickly as he could, and felt his body respond instantly: the fierce stabbing
pains slowly relenting to replaced by a more tolerable dull ache. He noticed the
numerous bandages covering his body, his mind slowly recalling the dreary dis-
play that concluded the most awful night of his young life, and sighed heavily.
He forced himself to his feet, his legs were still unsteady but his strength was
quickly returning, and made his way to the couch. “Pops at work?”

“She smiled. “When is that man never at work, child. I swear he's going
to put himself in a grave before the Deviant's even get a chance.”

Terry laughed, understanding completely, but was suddenly filled with
an overwhelming sense of shame for the way he acted. “Grandma, I...”

“Has your grandpa ever told you the story about the Young Boy and
The Lion,” she interrupted.

Terry was unsure of how he was suppose to respond. “Uhhh.... No.”

His grandma didn't flinch. “Your great great granddaddy told it to his
pa, his pa told it him, and he's passed the story down to your daddy and your
uncles.” She paused, taking a moment to gather her thoughts, and continued. “A
long time ago, when the world was still green, there was a very poor village.
And in this village, a little boy was born. And, as each year passed, the little boy
grew, and grew, until, one day, he realized he was just as tall as the men of the
village. So...as all boys do, he began to look at his surroundings. And soon he
realized he was actually bigger than the men in the village...he was stronger,
and, as another year passed, he began to think he was a better hunter than the
men in the village. Yet, to his dismay, the people were not paying attention to his new found prowess; the people, you see, all sat at the fire of Oyalo, the old warrior, and sang songs of his greatness. And this angered the young boy, for he felt as though the people should be calling his name, singing songs about him, and should be sitting at his fire. Then one day, a lion came into the village, his paws as big as a man's head, and took a little girl. The young boy jumped to his feet, grabbed his best knife, and raced to join the men in the hunt. But the men only shunned him, pushed him away, and said, “Go away, child. We must wait for Oyalo to return from his hunt. Learn, boy. Go home to your mother, and find your place.” And the little boy was filled with such anger, his heart in turmoil, he raced into the jungle, alone, to hunt the lion. Soon the path disappeared, the brush became unfamiliar, and the young boy was lost. But he was not alone. For as he rounded a great tree, he saw a lion, larger than any he had ever seen, walking slowly, with purpose, towards him. Yet as he approached, the young boy couldn't help but notice the great beast, though strong and powerful, wore a mane of the purest silver, and his face was weathered from time. And with each step, the young boy, hearing the strong roar of the lion, began to believe the lion was speaking to him. And the lion said, “I hear that you've been calling my name. I've come to hear what you have to say. I'm here to show why things are done my way. Come here, now, young one...come here.” Four hours later, Oyalo found the young boy. His body was broken, his flesh ripped apart, but he was still alive, and Oyalo took him home. In two days, when the boy finally regained himself, the worst of his fever past, he opened his eyes to find the old warrior sitting at his side: a greasy rag being dipped into the pot of the JuJu Woman's healing salve to ease his burden. And the young boy, realizing it was Oyalo who saved him, waited for the old man to admonish him for his arrogance. But Oyalo, knowing the boy had finally opened his eyes, only sat there, his hand continuing to dip the rag into the pot, and said, “A single man cannot kill a lion with a knife.... A single man kills a deer, and uses the deer to lure the lion, away from the village, into a tight place. Only then can many men, with
bows and spears, kill the lion.” And the young boy, accepting his foolishness, began to turn away in shame.... Until Oyalo turned slightly, his aging chest clearly showing the well healed scratches from a lion's claws, forced his eyes open wider: wounds seen a thousand times before, yet wounds he'd never taken notice of. And Oyalo seeing his eyes, said, “Don't call the monster...for the monster may come.” He placed the rag upon the young boy's chest, the salve numbing his pain instantly. “Now, you are a man.”

Gail finished her story, her eyes taking in the changing attitude of her grandson, and slowly reached forward to push the old photo album across the table towards him. “Now...you're a man.”

Terry picked up the album. He'd seen it a million times, sitting on the table collecting dust and bugs, but never paid it the slightest bit of attention. He opened it, his eyes drawn to the very first picture, and felt his eyes fill with tears: the image of his grandma, being held lovingly by his grandpa, in his full dress military attire, staring back at him. “Grandpa was a member of the First Militia.... He fought in the Black War?”

“Your grandfather was a soldier long before the sky fell, son,” his grandma corrected. “He was about your age when the two towers fell in New York. It tore him up so bad, he raced down to the recruitment office to join immediately....and got a boot up his butt for the effort.” She laughed. “He was so distraught, being his size and all, he went straight out into the city and tried to do something stupid. A friend of his father found him badly beaten on the side of the road, and brought him home. Old Pappy sure put a whipping on his back-side, too.” She laughed at the thought of it. “That beating he took...that's where all those bad scars come from; the rest are just souvenirs from his time in service.”

“Grandma, I...” Terry began, hoping to explain himself.

“You'll be fine, son,” she interjected before he could get the words out of his mouth. “You'll be just fine.”
He flipped through a few more pages, his tears falling freely now, and found himself unable, or unwilling, to wipe them away. He smiled, laughing at his own ignorance, and fought his way through emotions to overwhelming to proclaim. “I bet you're glad you had a couple of daughters, at least, huh?”

“Ha!!” His grandmother scoffed. “Girls are even worse than boys! Little brats are born with the instinct to nurture, to comfort, and by the time they're ten years old....they already think they know more than mama ever could!” She laughed. “Which is why your aunties spent half their time, here, sitting on a pillow.” They laughed together, and Gail smiled warmly. “Always remember, Terry.... You're not the first to be where you're at, and you're not the only one to attempt to go where you want to be. It's okay to listen sometimes....to find your place....you might actually learn something.”

“The Young Boy and The Lion, huh?”

“The Young Boy and The Lion,” she returned.....

Thirty Years Later..... Commencement Address for the first graduating class of The Terrence Allen Military Academy..... Guest Speaker: General Terrance Allen

........ General Allen gathered himself, the watchful eyes of four hundred graduates – seven thousand proud loved ones in attendance – and countless others watching across the system helping him to keep his emotions in check, and he pushed through to bring an end to his speech. “My grandfather died twelve years later, and my grandmother passed the year after that.” He reclaimed his composure, his hands reaching up to unbutton his jacket. “An old man, in the Dead Zone, once told me, “If you can become half the man your grandfather is...then you'll be ten times the man of anybody else.” I didn't understand it then...or maybe I simply didn't want too....but I understand it now.” He smiled. “You see... The trouble with youth...is that it's so young: you haven't lived long enough to respect your past, and you only see things that continually
move forward. You only see the things in front of you. You see....My grandparents didn't live to see the day we finally rose up, the day we finally united, and drove back the Hordes. They weren't there when we opened the graves, during The Grave Wars, and the Human Race took back the surface. And they never heard the stories of the heroic soldier who lead the charge, across the Black Waters, to strike the final blow and break the Deviant stronghold. In fact, my grandparents, and countless other elders within the Dead Zone, never heard anything good, at all, about their grandson. And truthfully speaking... I don't think it would really matter to them. You see, everything I am...everything.....is because of them. They molded me, shaped me, and made me the man I am today. That hovel I hated, from the day I was born, was considered a palace by most of the people in the Zone. The moldy bread I thought was disgusting, was looked at a luxury, and only the most dedicated workers were even allowed the opportunity to purchase it. And that dead end job, I thought my grandfather was so content with, lead to the first prototype of the Manna Machine: the ability to take any organic compound and mass produce it into viable food – the machine that changed the world.” He laughed, his jacket falling open as he quickly unloosed his tie and began working on the buttons of his shirt. “You see... The photo album, my grandmother showed me that day, contained the history I had, so blatantly, ignored. You see.... Some of you, my son included among that number, will understand what I'm about to say.... You'll understand the reason I've chosen to offer this part of my life at this particular time. But for the rest of you, those unfortunate few who've lived a sheltered and well protected life – so far, rest assured, your day will come. The day will come when you'll begin to feel a certain type of way, your heart will be uneasy, and your mind will be start to question your station in life. You'll look at yourself and realize you're bigger, stronger, and faster than we ever were. And the weapons you'll have, at your disposal, will be a thousand times more powerful than anything most of those who fought in the Grave Wars could possibly comprehend... Then one day you'll look to your side, as you walk through a hallway, and you'll see some gray haired old fool sitting
behind a desk as though he doesn't have a care in the world. Or you'll be out in
the field, fresh from battle with your lip still bleeding, and some aging Superior
Officer will give you a command that makes absolutely no sense at all, to you,
or seems poorly conceived. And you'll think to yourself... Why should I have to
listen to him?” He sighed. “It's at that time I hope you remember this speech,
that you remember the story of The Young Boy and The Lion, that you'll re-
member you're not the first to be where you are – or to attempt to go where
you're going, and that you stop... think.... and remember.” He opened his shirt,
displaying the savage scars he earned in his youth, and nodded his head. “Listen
to your elders, to your Superiors. Not because they're always right... But be-
cause they have more experience....at being wrong.” His body went rigid, his
hand snapping forcefully into a crisp salute, and the young cadets immediately
snapped to attention. “Fighting Dragons of the 123rd .....The First Graduating
Class of The Terrance Allen Military Academy... I salute you! Congratulations
Soldiers, you are no longer scum! 123rd .... You are dismissed! Hoo-Rah!!!

“Hoo-Rah,” they echoed; the thunderous applause of the crowd clearly
showing their approval.

Thirty minutes later, as the crowd dwindled down, a handsome young
graduate approached the General with a warm look on his face. “You did good,
old man....that shirt thing was a nice touch, too.”

The General embraced him, returning his son's strong hug with one of
his own, and offered his own congratulations. “It was the only thing I could
think of to keep you awake during the ceremony.” He glanced over his son's
shoulder, several of his friends, including a number of beautiful young women,
anxiously awaiting his return. “Looks like you've got a few plans for tonight.”

His son looked over his shoulder, smiling the entire time, and lowered
his head. “I'll try not to bring home a few grandchildren, tonight, okay.”

The General's eyes sprang open, his face conveying the severity his
words didn't. “That's not something you try, boy....you succeed at it; I'm not
trying to be the old man.”
His son backed away, laughing. “What you talking about, Pop.... You already are. Hoo-Rah”

He turned, walking away with his friends, and leaving the General with the ramifications of his life's work simply summed up as turning out to be just like his grandfather. And for the first time, in his life.... he was cool with that. “Hoo-Rah, Marcus,” he said. “Hoo-Rah, son.”
Write Your Own

Editor’s Note: Write Your Own features prompts that composition teachers have used successfully in writing classes. The twist is that I ask the instructors to write a piece using their own prompts as inspiration.

This issue I asked my colleague Sam Sonnier to take a stab at the challenge. Sam and I taught creative writing together for a couple of years, and he was always coming up with creative prompts to inspire our writers. We used the following one to help jump-start our unit on short fiction writing, beginning with very short stories:

Prompt:

After looking at the examples of flash fiction and nanofiction we discussed in class, write a piece of fiction that is less than 100 words. Make sure your piece has most (or all) of the major elements of fiction (character, setting, tension, resolution) that we discussed in class.

Result:

He cringed at the sharp pain of his knees folding in reverse as the car she was desperately trying to back out of the driveway pushed hard on him. As his body compromised, he collapsed into the concrete, smiling up at the chrome bumper looming overhead. Even as his consciousness dissipated, he knew that he had finally, irrevocably, made her feel him.
Contributors

Rand Bishop frequently reads his poetry at monthly literary open mic nights in Hendersonville, North Carolina, sponsored by the North Carolina Writers’ Network. His work, always appreciated, is erudite, witty, and wise, like the man himself. He read the two “grammatical” poems included here at a recent open mic event, and I was thrilled when he gave me permission to print them in Teach. Write.

Alex Bowser has called Hendersonville, North Carolina home for over twenty years. Married to his lovely wife, Stephanie, he firmly believes she is the reason he's never lost faith in himself or his work. Alex recalls a moment during his senior year in high school, when his English teacher, Mrs. Ogletree, took the time to come and sit with him and ask if he had ever considered being a writer. He hadn't, engineering was his focus at the time, but she saw past all the numbers and formulas, seeing the true heart of the young man she had watched mature for four years. He credits this moment as one of his greatest inspirations: for creating the spark which lead to his career in writing.

J. T. Bryson is an English teacher at an alternative school in Brunswick County, North Carolina, where he has taught ninth grade English for three years. Mr. Bryson’s favorite part of teaching writing is the daily journal entry his students work on at the start of each class. He loves helping students develop their own voices on the page and encourages them to push the boundaries of their abilities. Above all, Mr. Bryson teaches his students to have confidence in themselves and to enjoy learning new things.

Bill Camp currently teaches college composition courses at Paul D. Camp Community College and Norfolk State University. His writing credits include a literary short story in Teach. Write., a dark comedy in Page and Spine, a science fiction paranormal romance short story titled “Paranormal Experiment” in parAbnormal Digest, and a poem titled “Cats” in New Author’s Journal. He lives in peaceful Suffolk, Virginia with his family, which includes four cats and a dog.

Wanda Gant has worked at Blue Ridge Community College in Flat Rock, North Carolina for the past twenty years, holding numerous teaching positions. Currently, she is the coordinator of the college’s Student Success Center, which gives her plenty of opportunity to guide students through the writing process. As a student of writing, Wanda was always encouraged by her English instructors. During her Master’s studies at Western Carolina University, she took Fiction Writing under the novelist Ron Rash. His encouragement and constructive criticism aided her in the craft of fine tuning her writing.

Aaron Menzel writes and teaches in Incheon, South Korea, and has previously taught in Minnesota. He has helped students across the globe submit their writing to various magazines and journals, and has hosted annual "National Novel Writing" parties for students and teachers alike. He is currently studying with the University of Glasgow to obtain his Master of Letters in Creative Writing, with the hopes of teaching creative writing full-time. You can reach him on Twitter @A_P_S_Menzel.

Sam Sonnier has had a vagabond career in which he has been a freelance writer, sports journalist and, for the last nine years, an English Instructor at Blue Ridge Community College in Flat Rock, NC. He studied in the McNeese State University MFA program under Robert Olen Butler and John A. Wood, earning an M.A in English. Sam and his wife, Claire, currently live just outside Asheville in Horse Shoe, NC, where they enjoy hiking, sampling the local culinary and malted delights, and waiting hand-and-foot on their three cats.
Katie Winkler is the editor and publisher of Teach. Write.: A Writing Teachers’ Literary Journal and publishes the blog Hey, Mrs. Winkler: Musings and Mutterings about Higher Education in the South. Her work has appeared in numerous online and print publications, most recently featured in a special edition of Pisgah Review, Sci Phi and Saturday Evening Post. She is also a playwright, having seen two full-length plays produced—A Carolina Story and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. A member of the Dramatists Guild of America and the North Carolina Writers Network, she lives with her husband and daughter in the beautiful mountains of Western North Carolina.