



A Real Tragedy

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Published 2019

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Little Frankenstein

Nobody liked Adam very much, not even the teachers. None of them would have said it openly, of course, not even in the faculty lounge, but you could tell. Mrs. Hampton got so frustrated with him that it nearly drove her to an early retirement if not an early grave. But she was not about to let him win. She was convinced that if somebody would have just pounded on his butt a little bit it really would have changed his attitude. But that mother of his wouldn't do it, and unfortunately teachers were not allowed to do that kind of thing in the schools anymore, an unfortunate fact that she believed was responsible for the recent decline of civilization and would be its ultimate downfall.

The class was governed according to the law of Moses: if you hit or kicked another kid the same would happen to you. She saw Adam kick T.J. Reynolds one time, out near the monkey bars. She called them over and grabbed hold of both of them by the arm. She tried to get T.J. to kick him back, but he wouldn't do it, he just stood there and cried, so finally she just

kicked Adam herself. Of course he had to fall to the ground and howl like he had been shot.

'Oh quit it! I'm an old woman. I can barely even raise my leg up. That didn't hurt you!' She said with disgust, then plodded away, leaning heavily on her cane. Adam was probably lucky that she did not crack him one with that. She was right, of course, it didn't really hurt that much; it actually hurt his feelings more than anything else.

She had a few other old school tricks. One of Mrs. Hampton's favorite things to do when a kid was misbehaving was to get a good hold on a little bit of the hair on the back of his head and then pull up sharply to really get his attention. It usually got them to straighten up, both literally and figuratively.

She did that to Adam once, but something didn't feel right to her, and when she looked down, it startled her to see something moving. It was quickly gone, burying itself more deeply in the hair, but for a second it stood out starkly against his relatively light scalp and the jet black hair. She did not know what it was at first, but then she noticed the nits, and realized that it was a louse. She let go of him and he crumpled to the floor, bawling plaintively.

'Oh of course. Why am I not surprised.' She thought. With a sigh she grabbed him by the arm and picked him up off the floor, then walked him over to the school nurse. Let her deal with it.

Mrs. Godwin was not very happy about having to watch her class, but she did not hurry back. As she washed her hands very thoroughly, multiple times, she began to mentally compose the strongly worded letter that she was going to send to his mother. By the end of the day she knew pretty much what

she wanted to say, and wrote it all out in less than an hour after the kids had gone home.

In the letter, she once again addressed his behavior, explaining what had happened in yet another confrontation with another student (which was why she had grabbed him by the hair in the first place, although she left that part out). She then spoke of the lice and said that now all of the children would have to be checked, and their parents would need to be notified. She stressed the importance of good hygiene, and closed by saying that though Adam had been treated at school it would also need to be taken care of at home, and that he would not be allowed to play with the other children until the matter had been fully and properly resolved. She printed out two copies on paper that had the school's official letterhead. She then went to the office and left one for the vice principle, who had told her on several occasions that she had his 'full and complete support', and put the other in with the rest of the school's mail.

On her way home she continued to think about, for the umpteenth time, what to do about Adam Jones. Others said that he had an anger problem, but Mrs. Hampton believed that it was more a lack of self-control. But without more support from the parents she wasn't sure what more she could do to help. She wished that she had put that in the letter, but it was too late now.

Adam did bully the other kids - at least according to them. Run for your lives! Save yourselves, or Adam The Bully will get you! Even some of the second graders were afraid of him. He was naturally big for his age, and having been held back a year, he was by far the biggest kid in his class. Well, Riley Thomson was a little bit taller, but he was so skinny it didn't seem like it. Riley was as afraid of him as everyone else.

The other kids countered his size advantage by running in packs. There was begrudging respect; nobody wanted to take him on alone. But as we have always been told, you can accomplish more with teamwork. Having a common enemy unified them. They were the little villagers, out with their torches and pitchforks to kill the monster, or at least tease him mercilessly.

Eris, the goddess of discord, ruled in those days. They would taunt him about his clothes, or how dirty he was, but mostly it was about him being fat and ugly. They managed to turn a strength into a weakness: he was not big, he was fat. Really fat!

Adam tried his best to give it back to them, but he was not well-equipped for a battle of wits. It may not have mattered much, though, because the battle was never really fair to begin with. His enemies were a rather unsympathetic audience. They would always laugh at each other's jokes, whether they were funny or not, but on the rare occasions when he got in a pretty good one it was met with only stiff silence. Then another volley of insults would be launched at him from all quarters. Before he could adequately respond to those on the left flank he found himself being attacked from the right, and even at times from behind. Some shots rang more true than others, but they all caused damage.

They would have loved it if they could have made him cry, but usually he got angry instead. A big mean scowl would come across his face like a dark storm cloud, and then suddenly he would charge after them as they scattered like quail.

This came to be considered an act of bravery, almost like counting coup. It did not really take all that much courage, though, because Adam was actually pretty slow. He would

charge after them, full of fury, but he rarely caught anyone. It was actually kind of fun to get him to chase you.

Occasionally there were some truly distinguishing acts of heroism though. One time Adam was chasing Bradley Miller and he was looking back at Adam rather than paying attention to where he was running and he tripped. Just as his destruction seemed eminent, a little fellow by the name of Ryan Berger ran over and saved the day. He stood between his fallen leader and the vicious beast, fending off the menace with a series of crane kicks that he had learned from watching *The Karate Kid*. He never actually connected on any of them, but it kept the beast at bay until Bradley had regained his footing, and his courage. With Ryan by his side, hopping on one leg in his crane stance, they flanked Adam, one on each side, and began to close in. Adam wanted no part of those karate kicks, and he turned to face Ryan while holding his hands out in front of him to try to protect himself. He even gave up some ground to keep his distance. Seeing that his enemy was distracted, Brad tried to run up behind the behemoth and hit him in the back of the head while Ryan advanced from the front, kicking and karate chopping the entire way. Adam caught a glimpse of him and turned just in time to keep from getting hit, but with Ryan closing in the monster panicked and went into full retreat. Now it was their turn to make the bully run!

In reward for his valor, Brad unofficially made Ryan his best friend for awhile, effectively making Ryan the second most popular kid in his class. Not bad for somebody who came from nothing.

It was far from over however. Adam's hatred of Bradley drove him to great lengths for vengeance, though he rarely got it.

A few days after this, Mrs. Hampton had the kids in their reading groups, and she would read with them out loud for about fifteen minutes while the rest of class worked on reading and writing exercises from the book. Of course Brad was with the Alphas. He was a pretty smart kid, but some of it was because his mom had been reading to him and teaching him the alphabet and how to sound out words since he was two years old. She was one of those perfectionist types who had read everything in the known universe about how to make your baby a genius. Bradley was no genius, but thanks to her, he was well ahead of his peers.

There were six Alphas in all. Listening to them read was an aesthetically pleasing experience. You could almost see Jack and Jill going up the hill and doing all sorts of other fun things in your mind's eye. They could even mimic the voice inflections that Mrs. Hampton used when she read. She felt some satisfaction in a job well done as she realized that maybe it was time to start reading more advanced books with the Alphas.

Next up were the Betas, which was the largest group in the class. They had a lot of the words memorized, and if it was necessary to sound it out they could usually do it themselves or get it with just a little coaching. They were really close to being able to read on their own. Mrs. Hampton thought that she could get them there by the end of the year.

Those in the Gamma group had some real struggles. They stumbled over a lot of the words. Mrs. Hampton had to help Brendan Davis with the word 'Jill' about five times. The reading was broken, with many stops and starts, but at least they were making a little bit of progress.

Then there was the Omega group, which only had Adam and Jose Ramirez, who barely spoke any English. At least Jose made an effort: he had no idea what he was saying, but he dutifully repeated the words after Mrs. Hampton said them. She could barely get Adam to even do that. She tried to gently coax it out of him, get him to sound it out himself, but he wouldn't even really try. He would just stare at the page and wait for her to tell him what the word was. It was very frustrating to her. The whole point of having reading groups was so that she could focus on helping the kids who were struggling, but you cannot help someone who won't even try. Mrs. Hampton had some tolerance for the kids who struggled as long as they did their best, but it was unacceptable to her for someone to just give up. Nevertheless, she bit her tongue and continued trying to help him; after all, she was trying to model for them the attitude of never giving up, even if at times it really did seem hopeless.

The session today had been particularly trying all the way around. She heard some of the kids laughing and said over her shoulder: 'No talking. Finish your exercises.'

She turned back to Adam and took a deep breath, asking the Lord for patience. She could still hear giggling and whispering in the background though, so this time she turned fully around in her chair. 'Boys!' She stared them down menacingly and then finally got up rather laboriously to put Bradley and Luke's name on the board with a check mark next to each.

A hush fell over the entire class. Whoa. She meant business. Usually she just put someone's name up and then put a check mark later on if they were really bad. Nobody actually knew what would happen to you if you got three check marks by your name because none had ever been foolhardy enough to

get beyond one, but it couldn't be good. Now the place was like a monastery. No one dared to even move their chair. Some kids scrambled to work on their exercises even more diligently than they were before, while others simply stared at it, but nobody looked up from their book.

Mrs. Hampton sat down once again and began helping Adam and Jose. She had Adam repeat all of the words after she said them, and tried to show him again how to sound them out, but he was still not really reading. She was grateful when the time was up. Helping the Omega group was one of the biggest trials of her life.

When Adam got back to his seat there was a folded scrap of paper on his desk. He opened it and saw the words: 'Stupid can you read this?' Ironically enough, he couldn't, but he got the gist of it. He knew they were making fun of him because they were always making fun of him. He looked at Brad with hate-filled eyes, knowing that he was the culprit, but Brad did not look at him. He just laughed silently, along with the others. Well, almost silently; they couldn't completely contain it, and Mrs. Hampton glared at them, wishing that she had retired.

After a few more minutes it was time for afternoon recess, and the note was forgotten by all. Well, almost all. Adam wanted to get him back. He considered a stealth attack at recess, but the plan had to be aborted because Ryan was with him. He had to somehow find a way to catch Brad when he was alone. If there was one thing Adam was good at, it was having patience. Because he could not catch anyone out in the open he had become an ambush predator, lying in wait for hours or even days until the right opportunity presented itself. Perhaps that was why he was such a terrifying enemy.

During recess they made up the funnest game ever. Scott Walker was teasing the girls about having cooties and being gross, so they tried to pinch him. But he just laughed and ran away and they couldn't catch him. So then more girls tried to catch him. Some of the boys were on Scott's side, and they yelled encouragement to him, so then the girls said that they were going to pinch *them too*.

Within a few minutes an entire set of rules had been codified based upon the well-accepted practice of saying that something was a rule, and then it was. Failure to challenge meant tacit acceptance. The rules were fairly elaborate, and constantly evolving, sometimes in the midst of heated protest, but the general idea was simple enough: the girls chased the boys and tried to pinch them. They were allowed to do it if they could catch a boy somewhere other than a base or some other safe zone. The Merry Go Round was universally recognized as a base, but exactly where all of the others were located, how many of them there were, and how long you could stay there were all points of contention. It was super fun though.

Adam ran too, along with all the other boys, but it soon became apparent that no one was going to chase him. He was kind of glad because he really didn't want to get pinched. But it seemed kind of silly to keep running around when nobody was chasing you, so he went over and stood in an out of the way spot next to the building to watch the others play.

Of course, lots of the girls chased Brad. But he was fast, and he mostly managed to elude them. Those with less confidence chased boys that were easier to catch.

Most of the boys ran away as fast as they could, but not Scott Walker. He was a smooth operator, that one. The rest of the boys looked on in horror as Scott was engulfed by about

fifteen little girls. They felt really bad for him, but no one dared to help. He squirmed and yelled, begging to be let go - and all the while laughing hysterically. The more he laughed, the more they pinched him. A very serious-minded little Sarah Myers did not think any of it was the slightest bit funny. She used her fingernails, and nearly drew blood. It left a mark that lasted for awhile. That one hurt, but Scott still could not keep from laughing, even as he was saying 'ow' and whining about how much it hurt.

They played all the way until the whistle blew, and pretty much everybody thought it was the best game ever. It was so much fun that they tried to play it again a few more times, but it was never quite the same.

After recess they did some math. It got pretty hard once you ran out of fingers. Then it was time for show and tell. DeAndre brought in a stereo that was almost as big as he was and used it to play his favorite song. It did not happen to be one of Mrs. Hampton's favorites, however. She let him finish playing it but then told him and the rest of the class that she did not share his taste in music. Arianna Ruiz brought a little plastic pony with long blonde hair that she brushed lovingly. Ryan brought a toad in a large glass jar with air holes poked in the lid. He had managed to keep it hidden in his backpack until show and tell. Luckily it was still alive. Those were the highlights. None of the others were worth mentioning.

As soon as school let out Adam went outside really fast and hid behind one of the big entrance and exit doors, waiting for Brad. It usually took him awhile to get to the bus because he was often talking with friends, and so it was on this day. But Joey Gardner saw Adam hiding next to the door. He did not

know exactly what was going on, but he guessed that Adam was up to something.

As soon as Adam saw Brad come through the door he tried to sneak up behind him but Joey screeched: 'Watch out Brad!' And he pointed at Adam, gesturing frantically.

It took a second for the warning to register, but Brad turned around just in time to see the monster charging at him and suddenly it all made sense. On instinct he deftly ducked and then dodged to the side as the boys around him scattered. Those boys needn't have worried, this predator had only one target.

But Bradley was a difficult catch. Adam got a good hold on his backpack, but Bradley was able to slither out of it before Adam could get a good grip on him. He threw it to the ground angrily, but now that Brad was a safe distance away he just laughed and told Adam that he was such a girl.

One of the teacher's aides on duty heard Joey's high-pitched shriek and saw the attack from a distance. She rushed over and stood between them, severely chastising Adam. She pulled out her index finger and shook it right in front of his nose.

Adam tried to explain but she was having none of it. She told him that it didn't matter what Brad said or did, hitting someone was never the answer. She told him that if he was so angry that he needed to hit something he should go punch a tree. That seemed like a pretty stupid idea because punching a tree would really hurt your fist. He had no interest in punching a tree, he wanted to punch Brad.

But he knew that he could not say that. The more he tried to talk the worse it was. All he could do was stand there and take it. That made him even more angry though. He was

close to crying, mostly out of frustration because she wouldn't listen to him.

Throughout it all Brad stood a few steps behind her and had the most satisfied gloating smirk on his face that a person could ever see. He was really hoping that Adam would cry, that would have been so funny. It was actually quite difficult for him to keep from giggling when Adam had to hand him his backpack and apologize.

They shook hands and said sorry because they were forced to, but the hatred was just barely below the surface, still simmering. Everybody knew how much Adam hated Brad, but few realized just how much Brad despised him. But Adam knew it. He knew it every time he had to look into those gleeful blue eyes, always mocking him. He also knew that this wasn't over, no matter what it cost him.

Such attacks, or attempted attacks at least, rarely inflicted much actual damage, but they were effective as psychological warfare. Part of it was their apparent randomness; nobody could quite figure out why Adam would just go crazy and attack someone. It seemed entirely unprovoked and uncalled for. That arbitrariness was scary because he might attack you right out of the blue when you were just minding your own business. Brad laughed the whole thing off and tried to pretend like it did not bother him, but he almost never went through a doorway after that without having a sentinel check it out first. In fact, none of the boys wanted to go through those big entrance and exit doors without knowing where Adam The Bully was, especially if they had recently had problems with him. If nobody knew his exact whereabouts, they stayed in groups and kept a careful watch until someone

had tracked him down. You never knew when he might try to get you.

After his very public dressing-down Adam was informed that Mrs. Hampton would hear about it, and told to get on the bus. Once he was there he tried to find a seat near the front but none of them were empty. There were some open seats in the back, but he knew better than to go back there. That was where the big kids sat. Thankfully at least Brad was not on the bus; his mom always picked him up and dropped him off. But the older kids could sometimes be worse, and they were not afraid of him. He usually tried to sit close to Mr. Gallagher so that he did not get hit with anything. Sometimes it worked but not always. Mr. Gallagher was old and hard of hearing, so he didn't always know what they were doing back there, or at least he pretended like he didn't.

Adam finally sat down next to a girl that he did not know in a seat near the front. 'Are you going to move or should I?' She asked.

He did not respond. Once she realized that he was not going to move, she got up, moved past him, and went to go sit with another girl a few seats back. It was a little insulting, but at least now he had a seat to himself.

After making a few other stops the bus finally pulled up to the entrance of a sprawling manor with a large sign that read: 'Mansion Hills Mobile Home Park' with a slogan in smaller letters right underneath that read: 'Life at the Mansion is Grand'.

Adam got off the bus, along with some other kids, and made his way toward his family's single-wide estate. As the bus was pulling away, he quickened his pace and stuck to the

opposite side of the road from where the other boys were. He did not talk to them, or even make eye contact.

For their part, the other boys kept a wary eye on him as well, especially three in particular. They did not really think that they had anything to worry about because Victor Hernandez was a second grader with a pretty good arm, and one time he caught Adam with a rock and it made him cry and run all the way back to his house. He hadn't bothered them ever since then. One could never be too careful around Adam The Bully though.

Victor and Emilio were brothers, and it did get a little dicey for Paulo once he passed their house. His house was within sight, but it was closer to Adam's house and he did not like having to go the rest of the way by himself when The Bully could be lurking in the shadows. So often he would just stay and play at Emilio's house for a while. Mrs. Hernandez didn't mind. She was really nice. Sometimes she even made homemade treats for them that were really good.

Home Sweet Home

As Adam went around the corner he passed by a large muscular white man with a shaved head and no shirt, his entire chest and back covered in tattoos, who had a cigarette hanging loosely from his lips. Adam gave him a tentative wave, trying his best to be friendly, but only got a cold stare in return. He did not even know the man's name, but he had always felt uneasy around him. He seemed really scary, even though he had never even spoken a word to Adam. In fact, the man had never seemed to even take much notice of him, but Adam's instincts told him that he had best tread carefully.

Once his own mansion came into view, he saw the Trans Am parked in the driveway, and ran the rest of the way.

'Paul!' He ran up and threw his arms around the waist of a little chicken-chested man in his early forties, with about a week's worth of whiskers.

The man was a bit startled to suddenly have a boy wrapped around him, but he tolerated it. He did not really return the embrace, however, or give any other

acknowledgement other than putting one arm lightly around the boy. Finally he had had enough and pulled away so that he could get back to work.

Adam noticed the parts strewn across the dirt driveway in front of the car, some of them sitting on a white sheet, or what had once been a white sheet: by this point it was nearly as greasy and dirty as the yellowish white tank top that Paul was wearing. Paul loved that car. He was always working on it. Sometimes he would fix things even when it seemed like it was running fine, at least to the untrained ear.

'What ya workin' on, Paul?'

'What's it look like?'

'Can I help?'

Paul seemed to roll his eyes and shake his head a little bit, but he finally shrugged. He stared at the now somewhat stripped down engine block, almost like he had x-ray vision and he was trying to see inside it. Adam imitated him, looking it over very thoroughly himself, as though he knew precisely what the problem was.

Paul pointed in the general direction of the tools without looking at them. 'Why don't you go get me that socket over there. The half inch.'

Adam looked in the direction that the waving hand indicated. He went over to the toolbox and began looking through the drawers, even though, truth be told, he had no idea what he was even supposed to be looking for.

Paul did not like to wait, and he was a bit irritated when he turned around; that irritation grew when he saw Adam rifling through his toolbox in such a haphazard way.

‘I said I needed a socket. They are over there.’ This time he pointed more specifically and Adam saw the set of sockets lying on the ground next to the toolbox.

Paul turned back to the car. He was like a doctor for old vehicles, or really anything with an engine. Whether it was a lawnmower, roto tiller, motorcycle, car, or truck, as long as it was not completely shot, he could get it running; and actually, even if it was, he could overhaul it and have it running in a few days if he could get the parts.

Adam searched through the sockets, choosing one at random, then returned, forgetting the ratchet. He lightly tapped Paul on the shoulder and handed it to him.

When Paul saw it he sighed and looked to the side, then up in the direction of heaven, as though he was searching for patience from above. ‘Boy, are you blind? I told you I needed a half inch! This is 9/16.’ He showed Adam where this was written on the socket. Then he pointed to the door of the trailer. ‘Why don’t you just go on in the house.’

Adam was shocked and more than a little hurt. His shoulders slumped, and he had to fight to keep back the tears. ‘But I want to help.’

Paul was starting to feel a little guilty, which made him defensive. ‘I don’t got time to teach you right now! You’re just gettin’ in the way.’

Adam stared at the ground but did not move.

Finally Paul took a step towards him, again pointing at the door. ‘Get in the house I said!’

Adam gave ground, then ran to the door and threw it open, slamming it dramatically, and ran into his bedroom crying.

Paul sighed and shook his head from side to side. It seemed pretty disrespectful to slam the door like that, but he decided to let it go, at least for now.

Adam cried about it for a good fifteen minutes, which is actually quite a long time to a 7 year old. But it wasn’t so bad once he remembered that cartoons were on. He got a beer from the fridge and settled into the big blue chair to watch some TV. He kept the beer partially hidden from view by putting it between the arm rest and his leg, just in case Paul came in.

At 5 p.m. cartoons weren’t on anymore and TV got really boring. There was nothing to do, so he went into Dallin’s room looking for some excitement.

A funky smell hit you when you first opened the door, but once you got used to it, it was not so bad. The place was an incredible mess, with everything from dirty paper plates and old pizza boxes to dirty clothes all over the floor.

Taped to the wall there was a picture that had been cut out of a magazine of a beautiful blonde woman wearing nothing but a machine gun clip of probably 150-200 bullets. Of course, that was tame in comparison to what he had under the bed. Adam had looked through all of it many times before, but it didn’t do much for him. He searched through the piles trying to find something interesting.

Along with an old 13 inch TV and a VCR there were some movies, such as *Robo Cop*, *Rambo II*, *Dirty Harry*, and the like. Dallin loved horror movies, especially stuff with demons and the devil in it, so there were some of those too. He also had a few of the Triple X variety, but those were under the bed along with the magazines. Adam had watched them before, several times in fact, but they were really gross. Grown-ups liked to do weird things sometimes.

He finally settled on a gun magazine. Dallin had more of those than anything else, and the cover of this one caught Adam's attention. He laid down on the bed and began casually flipping through it, only looking at the pictures. After awhile he heard the front door open. Oh no! It might be Paul. He hoped that it was, or he was going to die.

He threw the magazine back down on the ground and frantically searched for a way out other than the door, but none was to be had. There was no room under the bed. He thought about hiding in the closet, but if he was found in there it would only make it worse, much worse. He climbed up on the bed, trying to get the window open, but it was too late. The bedroom door opened, and in walked terror.

'Ahhh, you stupid little shit! Get the fuck out of my room!' Dallin grabbed him by the arm and dragged him roughly off the bed, punching him in the back before pushing him out the door and slamming it shut behind him.

Nate chuckled as they heard Adam howl out in the hallway. It was always worse when Nate was around. It was best to just go somewhere else and hide when he came over, and that is what Adam did. He went into his room, locked the door (as though that would have really stopped them) and laid on his mattress, rubbing his back and sobbing.

It hurt, but overall he got off pretty easy. One time Dallin held him down and burned him with a cigarette; he still had a mark on his chest from that. But that was for tattling. In general it was not smart to tell on Dallin. That was a good way to find yourself with him sitting on your chest, pinning your arms down with his knees, and then having him spit a loogie on your face, or some other kind of pain and/or humiliation. Dallin

could be very creative, especially when he had Nate to consult with.

Stupid Dallin. It was supposed to be his room too. They used to share it, but one day Dallin said he needed more privacy and he dragged Adam's mattress into Tina's room and from then on he had to share with Tina.

Adam stayed in his room (or rather Tina's room) until he heard the front door open and knew that Paul had come inside. He crept out timidly and saw from the hallway the three of them laughing and talking in the kitchen. They were making dinner, or defrosting it. When Paul saw him he motioned with his hand and told him to come in. Dallin and Nate ignored him. Paul microwaved a burrito for him and gave him a handful of potato chips on a paper plate.

Once everybody had their food they went over to the couch, and Paul sat in in the big blue chair, even though it was actually too big for him. They put the movie on and passed the chips around as the three of them sipped their beers and Adam his Coca Cola.

The movie was *Predator*. Dallin and Nate were in ecstasy. They had already seen it, but it didn't matter, they were geeked up on the blood and guts. They both planned to enlist in the army once they turned 18 so that they could kill people - or at least that is what Dallin said. Soon to be two of America's finest, no doubt.

After the movie was over they excitedly recounted the highlights. Then Dallin turned to Adam, sitting next to him on the couch, and hit him lightly on the leg with the back of his hand and said: 'Hey, did you know that was based on a true story?'

Adam looked at him with some annoyance and then rolled his eyes and looked away. He had learned not to trust much of anything that Dallin told him. ‘Whatever, Dallin. Shut up.’

‘No, I’m dead serious. Would I lie to you?’

Nate and Paul both started to crack up even though they fought hard against it. Nate managed to get control of himself and jumped in to provide backup, as he often did. ‘Yeah, I remember when that happened. I saw it on the news. They said that the Predators might come back any day now, a whole army of them, and that they wanted to come eat us.’

Adam turned from one to the other, searching for clues that they might be messing with him, but both of them kept a completely straight face. Dallin especially was masterful at this; he could lie to you about anything and maintain a perfect poker face the entire time. They were so serious and matter of fact about it that it was a little bit unsettling. He didn’t really believe them, of course, but . . . well . . .

But then he remembered who it was that he was dealing with. ‘You guys are stupid. Leave me alone.’ He would have liked to turn away from them, but he was stuck in the middle. They had him surrounded. Both were leaning in. He folded his arms and refused to look at either one of them.

Paul finally said: ‘Come on you guys, leave him alone.’ He was laughing as he said it though, so the rebuke was less than convincing.

Dallin just pretended like he had not heard him. ‘You know what I heard? Sources have told me that some of the aliens are already here right now. They found a way to infiltrate human society by transforming into human form. And get this-’ He paused suddenly and looked all around the room

suspiciously. Then he leaned in so that he was only inches away from Adam, as did Nate on the other side. Even Paul leaned over in the chair as far as he could without putting the foot rest down or having to get up. Once they were huddled, Dallin whispered: ‘Mom might be one of them.’

‘NUH UH!’ Adam yelled. He tried to get up, but Dallin grabbed him immediately and put his index finger up to his own lips without making a sound. He ducked his head and looked all around the room again, even above, as though there could be mortar fire coming from any direction. ‘Shhhhh.’ He said very softly. ‘Are you crazy? She could have this whole place bugged. If she knows that we know . . .’ He shook his head slightly and made the throat-slashing sign.

‘She’s not a Predator!’ Adam yelled, nearly as loud as before.

Dallin scoffed and shook his head. ‘Obviously you’ve never seen her early in the morning before she gets her makeup on, have you?’

That one nearly killed Paul. He and Nate could not stop giggling but Dallin barely even cracked a smile.

‘I’ve seen her in the morning!’

‘Not early enough. You have to see her before she gets her makeup on.’

Adam did not respond. He was not entirely sure what to think.

‘Okay, fine, have it your way then.’ Dallin leaned back against the sofa and looked straight ahead. ‘You don’t have to believe me. But don’t blame me if she eats you one of these days.’

He glanced over at Adam and saw that Adam was looking at him. He leaned towards him with a very serious

expression on his face. 'I'm just saying that it could be anybody. Anyone could be a Predator, even the people you least suspect. Maybe even me.' Suddenly he put both hands up in front of his face, spreading the forefingers and thumbs out wide to imitate the Predator's mandibles, and lunged at Adam like he was going to take a bite out of him while roaring menacingly. Adam instinctively jerked back and with a squeal he jumped up from the couch and desperately tried to run, but Dallin was nearly on top of him, growling and snapping at him. It seemed to Adam like a desperate struggle for survival, but Dallin allowed him to just barely wiggle free.

Once he was loose Adam made a run for it and nearly tripped over the coffee table as he fled towards the hallway, desperate for sanctuary. Dallin took off after him, with Nate right on his heels, both of them making the face while roaring and growling ferociously.

Adam ran into his room bawling for the third time that day. He slammed the door shut, locked it, and then leaned against it in an effort to keep them out. But the attack was over. They didn't even chase him all the way to his room. Once the door was closed they started imitating the Predator's evil laugh in the movie, but it quickly became genuine laughter. Adam could hear them through the door even though they were all the way in the kitchen.

Paul was now a little bit annoyed. 'Great. Now we'll never get him to bed. He's gonna have nightmares for a year because of you two.'

But they just kept laughing.

Paul tried knocking on the door a little while later and told him that they were just teasing, but Adam did not say anything in response. Paul didn't know what else to do, so he

finally just went to bed; he figured it would be fine. He did wait until Nate went home though, just to make sure that they left him alone.

After a few hours had passed Adam crept carefully out of his bedroom and into the living room. He had not dared to sleep because he had to watch the door and keep track of all the shadows that were inhabiting his room to make sure that nothing moved in them. It was scary to leave his room, but being in there alone was even worse.

From the hallway he saw his mother sleeping in the big blue recliner, as she frequently did, especially when Paul was home. All the lights were off, but the TV was still on. He had heard her come in earlier, but hadn't dared to come out to see her until he thought that she would be asleep. It felt terribly reckless to do it even now, but he had to know the truth. His heart pounded in terror as the blue light from the TV flickered and for just a split second he thought that he could see her Predator face. But then the light changed and her face went back to normal again.

He was too little to really understand, but she actually just looked exhausted. She had just finished a double shift and had passed out in her chair without even eating. She usually ate something at the diner, but what her body really craved was sleep. She often planned to just sit down and relax for a few minutes, and then get up and do the dishes, or the laundry, or the host of other things that always needed to be done before

she could go to bed, but she rarely made it. Once she had her shoes off and put the recliner back she was out.

Adam crept closer until he was only a few feet away from her. He suddenly felt a strong desire to climb up into her lap but he could not quite bring himself to do it. He just stared at her intently, now unsure of what to do.

Even as tired as she was, somehow she could feel him staring at her, and she began to stir, changing positions. She fought to return to the land of the living, and finally sighed.

‘What is it honey, what do you need?’

‘Mommy, Dallin was being mean to me.’

‘Oh, he was? I’m sorry baby. Come here.’ Her arm extended down, reaching out for him, and a warm and tender face greeted him, although her eyes were closed again. He obediently came up to the side of the chair and reached up to hug her.

She felt his little arms wrap around her neck and she hugged him back. A tired smile crept across her face and she leaned over a bit more and whispered in his ear: ‘Do you want to come sleep with me?’

Instead of saying anything he nodded vigorously, his whole body moving as he did so, and then leaned his head against her shoulder and cuddled into her as much as he could. With great relief he felt the large powerful arms wrap around him and lift him right up into the chair and on to her lap. She groaned and winced a little. ‘Oh, my word, you’re getting so big.’

They cuddled for a little while, and then Rita felt a little hand tentatively touch her face. She opened one eye and looked down, wondering what on earth had gotten into him, but said nothing.

Now fully satisfied, Adam relaxed and snuggled into her and their breathing became almost synchronized. Soon he was fast asleep, his arms and legs wrapped around her like a little baby monkey. He felt so warm and safe with those big tattooed arms around him. It seemed like nothing in the world could hurt him then, not even the Predator. Not when momma bear was around.

Unfortunately now Rita was having a hard time getting back to sleep. She wore a wry half-smile as she looked down at him again and then leaned back. Well, at least one of them was comfortable. She did not really mind though. She knew that he would not want to do this for much longer, so she savored it.

Finally she yawned, and then did so again less than a minute later. Soon she was once again in a deep sleep as the TV flickered, its background noise providing a rather unconventional lullaby, but a soothing one nonetheless. Both mother and child enjoyed a few precious hours of much needed rest. It was a welcomed respite for them both, but destined to be short-lived. Enjoy it while you can, miserable creatures, for Misfortune is on his way, and will surely find you once again in the coming day.

The small travel alarm clock that Rita had brought in from the bedroom buzzed obnoxiously at 4:30 a.m. and received a violent slap for its trouble. Rita would not fall asleep again, but she stole a few extra minutes with her eyes still closed.

Adam had stirred and thrashed about a little when the alarm went off (along with his mother) but now that it was quiet

he easily went back to sleep. She wished that she could join him. Oh what she would have given to just be able to sleep for a few more hours, or even a few more minutes.

But she had to get going. There was always a lot to do before they could open and the early birds were not a patient bunch. Why the hell did people want their breakfast so early anyway? Coffee, now she could understand that, but why were they hungry? She never could quite figure that out. But maybe she was just grumpy because it was the middle of the night and she wanted to be sleeping.

These days were always the worst. Yesterday (it was yesterday now) she worked a double; it was not supposed to be a double, but she was covering for someone. Now she had the morning shift at the other place. It was not supposed to be like this. She always tried to schedule it better so that it was not such a brutal turnaround, but somehow it often seemed to work out that way. Usually it was because of covering for people and extra shifts and all of the other things that she always had to do in addition to her own work.

She winced slightly as she got up, still holding Adam. She should not have done that; her back hurt already as she put him into his own bed and tucked him in for a few more hours of sleep. It was not a good omen. She was so stiff and sore that she honestly wondered if she would be able to make it through the day.

In her prime Rita had been quite strong. She actually still was, but the years of manual labor had taken their toll. On some days she felt much older than she actually was. The extra weight that she carried and the hard floors made her feet and back hurt almost constantly.

The back problems were from an old motorcycle accident. She never went to the doctor because she was afraid of what he might tell her. Whatever it was, she wouldn't be able to afford it, and she wouldn't be able to miss work. So she just toughed it out and assumed that it would eventually heal on its own. Everything else did seem to heal up fine eventually, but her back was never quite right after that, and it seemed to be getting worse as she got older. She still thought about getting it checked out, from time to time, but she never did because nothing had really changed: she still couldn't afford it, and she still couldn't miss work. So, she just ate painkillers like they were candy, and found a way to get through it.

Some days she did not think she was going to make it. She would try to focus on just getting through the hour, or making it to break. That is, unless they were short-handed, and/or really busy, in which case she did not get any breaks, except for smoke breaks. Stealing a few minutes here and there for a quick cigarette was the one indulgence that Rita could not do without. Having that to look forward to was sometimes the only thing that kept her going.

She made sure that Adam's alarm clock was set, really hoping that somebody would wake him up and help him get ready so that he did not miss the bus again. She did not need to be dealing with the school over attendance. She finally decided to leave Tina a note telling her to help him. She went back into the kitchen and wrote the note on the back of a paper plate and then brought it back in and put it on Tina's nightstand.

She did not know that Tina had only come home a few hours earlier. After being dropped off nearby by friends, she came in very quietly and Adam and Rita were sleeping so soundly that they did not even notice her. Tina was not going to

be getting up at all that morning, let alone help Adam to get up and get ready.

Rita sighed as she went back through the kitchen and saw the coffee pot. If she would have had more time she might have made herself some. She knew that she would feel better once she had a few cups of coffee. The one and perhaps only benefit of the job was that they could have as much coffee as they wanted. She took full advantage of it; twenty to thirty cups a day was not unusual, especially when she had to pull a double. It was hard to tolerate café food for her now, after being around it so much for so many years. She usually ate a little something at some point, but she mostly lived on coffee and cigarettes. Sometimes she actually wondered how she could be so fat when she smoked so much and ate so little. But she never got tired of the coffee. It wasn't so much that it tasted good (although it really did sometimes) it was that it made her feel so much better. She would take six to eight ibuprofen and between that and the shot of caffeine she could make it. That could have been Rita's motto for life: 'Just survive'.

As she was about to close the door on her way out she thought about whether she should leave a note for Dallin. She did not know exactly what happened, but she knew him, and how he could be. She thought about it for a moment or two, but finally decided that it was not worth it. She was having to be somewhat selective in choosing her battles with him now. Especially since she did not really know for sure what was going on, it would probably only make it worse to make a big thing out of it.

Dallin was being a real butthead lately, even more than usual. When he was fifteen she took him down one time and sat on him. He underestimated how strong she was, and she caught

him totally off guard, so it was not even that hard. It was so humiliating to him to be dominated like that by his mother that he had not dared to really test her since then. But lately it seemed like he was really starting to push again. It was almost like he wanted a confrontation. Things were different now. She could not really make him do things anymore, and he seemed to sense it.

Was it wrong to be looking forward to when he moved out? She hated herself for feeling that way, and she would not have admitted it to another soul, but that was the truth. It was not like she never wanted to see him again, it would just be so much easier if he had his own place. He was planning on going into basic training that summer, so she just had to make it until then.

She turned out the lights on what was still a very dark house, and shut the door as softly as she could so that she did not wake anyone. It always felt a bit unnatural to her to leave the house in the morning while it was still dark. She started the car, waiting to turn the lights on until she was out on the main road, but the fan belt screeched so loudly that it probably woke everybody up anyway, along with all the neighbors. She sighed audibly. She had been meaning to get that fixed for some time now. It was always something.

As she pulled away from the house she suddenly realized that she had the wrong uniform on. With an expletive she slammed on the brakes and pounded the steering wheel with her hands. She finally managed to take a few deep breaths and keep it under control, but barely. At least it was better to realize it now than when she was halfway there already. She left the car running and went back into the house to change.

She was back in less than five minutes. Then it was off to face another day. She greeted it with another sigh. It seemed so unnatural to have to leave the house before dawn. Why did people want their breakfast so damn early anyway?

Murder Ball

The tormentors of Adam Jones tried to eat their lunch as fast as they could in order to have more time for recess. However, Mrs. Madsen proved to be rather difficult to circumvent. If there was anything that she hated more than wasted food no one knew what it was. Novices tried to put their vegetables underneath or inside of their napkin, which was rarely effective. A more advanced tactic was to stuff the undesirables into one's milk carton and then close it back up so that no one could see.

It got so that whenever Mrs. Madsen looked away there was a flurry of activity, especially on lima bean days. But not everyone was as careful as they should have been, and pretty soon she started to get wise. She caught Zach Thompson in the act and the the jig was up. He was lucky that it was only green beans and carrots, but she made him dump it out and then eat all of them before he could go out and play, which was super gross because they had milk on them and everything. One can only imagine if it had been spinach. As it was he barely got through it without gagging and he hardly got any lunchtime

recess at all. Everybody felt really bad for him. The punishment seemed excessive, but Mrs. Madsen got her point across and order was restored.

Most of the kids were drinking white milk, but only for social reasons. A few weeks earlier Luke Evans had snuffed at Tyler Murphy while he was picking out his milk and said disdainfully: 'You're still drinking chocolate? What, are you a baby?' This public shaming forced Tyler's hand. He reluctantly chose white milk from then on, and others followed suit. But a few just accepted the social stigma and drank chocolate anyway: they knew who they were, and they did not care what Luke, or you, or anybody else thought about it.

Thomas Garza was the class clown. He had this bit about how President Bush was an actual bush that was a huge hit. Robbie Miller laughed so hard that milk actually did come out of his nose as he choked and coughed. Thomas showed him no mercy either. Every time Robbie tried to take a drink or another bite of food he would start into it again and the Robbie-volcano would erupt. Mrs. Madsen finally had to make Thomas come sit by her so that everybody else could eat. But even she got a kick out of his owl impression. For some reason it got her every time.

No one sat by Adam, or talked to him, and he ignored them as well, or tried to. Mrs. Madsen had tried to involve him more earlier in the year, but at this point she had basically given up. Now she was satisfied if she could just keep the peace.

It had been a tough year for Adam, as most of them were. The fourth grade was turning out to be a lot like first grade was for him. Some of the kids in his first grade class were in this one, so his reputation preceded him. But it wasn't

just that, there was something about him that other kids just did not like, for whatever reason.

Math was always a struggle for him. He did not do very well in other subjects either, but math was especially difficult. He was absent the day they first learned about long division and he never really did get that whole 'remainder' business for the rest of the year (and for years to come).

He was absent quite a lot, actually. Tina was off to college, so she was not around to help him anymore. It is not like she really helped that much even when she was home though. Tina was usually so focused on getting ready herself that it was hard for her to think much about anybody else. She spent hours trying to make it look like she didn't care. She strived to be goth, dressing mostly in black, painting her nails and her toenails black, and she usually had spiked purple or blood red hair, depending on the month. She also had two sharp metal studs protruding from her lower lip, and her ears were pierced in several places.

Tina was actually a lot nicer than she let on, but she was not going to take any crap from her little brother. One time when she tried to wake him up he mouthed off to her so she just let him go back to sleep and miss the bus. She figured if he got into trouble it would served him right. But even if she didn't actually help him, it was easier to get up when there was someone else up and moving around. This year had been hard for him in that regard.

After lunch they had to work on spelling for an hour and then it was time for PE, which almost everybody looked forward to. This time they played Dodgeball, or 'murder ball' as the kids liked to call it.

Mr. Garvelman, the gym teacher, made a rule that the boys had to throw left-handed. Billy Stewart was already in training with his dad to become a pretty darn good little league pitcher, and as it turned out, he was a lefty, so he was dominating. A couple of his teammates, Cade Andrews, and Adam's arch nemesis Bradley Miller, came over and whispered to him that they should all get Adam.

Billy got one of the smaller balls that he could grip well with one hand and really zing, and the three of them stayed in a pack and merely warded off any stray missiles that came their way while they waited for a good opportunity. They soon got it after Adam threw at someone (missing, of course) and found himself exposed near the front lines, now unarmed. The three boys made a run at him as he awkwardly tried to retreat, looking around desperately for support from his teammates but none was forthcoming.

Billy led the charge and cut loose with everything he had from only a few steps away. Having no other recourse, Adam tried to catch it, but it was too small and moving too fast for that to work. It slipped through his hands and was buried in his soft doughy middle.

As Adam doubled over in pain Bradley launched one that was a little bit bigger than a volleyball and it hit him on the side of the head and face, and to add even more insult to injury, at nearly the same time Cade's strike hit him on the left shoulder. Adam fell to his knees on the hardwood floor, wailing almost soundlessly for a few seconds because the wind had been knocked out of him, but when he had regained it he certainly put it to good use, filling the gym with an almost deafening pitiful wail.

The game came to a halt as everyone looked on in disgust. Finally, with a sigh, Mr. Garvelman went over and told him that he was fine and that he needed to move over to the sideline because he was out.

Adam gurgled a bit until he could catch his breath and then yelled back angrily: 'He hit me in the head!' He looked at Bradley and yelled: 'You're not supposed to aim for the head!'

'I didn't. You ducked you big dummy.' Bradley replied.

'I did not! You did it on purpose!' Adam got to his feet and started towards him, intent on vengeance.

But Mr. Garvelman stood in his way, pointing to the side of the court. 'You were out before that anyway. Stop acting like a baby. Now go over to the side so we can finish the game.' Then he turned to Bradley. 'Don't hit anybody in the head or next time you will be out. That was one of the rules.'

Adam hesitated, but finally he went over to the side. He glared at Bradley while walking off the court, and Bradley gave him a dirty look right back. Once he was on the sideline and the game was going again Adam lifted up his shirt to expose a rather rotund little tummy and a red mark was there, just as he had suspected. He looked all around for a sympathetic eye, somebody to see and appreciate the injustice in all of this, but no one was paying any attention to him. Everybody else was either in the game, or watching the game. Silently he plotted his revenge while watching them finish the rest of the game, hoping and praying that they would get to play at least one more time before PE was over.

His wish was granted, though he would have been better off if it had not been. Once the new game began he managed to collect two balls and charged after the three boys in a kamikaze fashion. The attack was reckless, and of course doomed to

failure, but Adam did not care anymore what happened to him, he just wanted to make somebody bleed; and he almost did, but unfortunately it was the wrong person.

He launched first at Billy, because he was still out front, but Billy easily ducked away from it and stood ready to fire. But Adam paid little attention to him, because the sea had parted and in front of him was the white whale: Brad. He wound up and threw it with everything that he had, right at Brad's head. Unfortunately he did not have the aim that Billy did, and he clocked little Ashley Jensen full in the face as Bradley ducked away unscathed, as always. She immediately collapsed to the floor and began to cry.

Adam felt awful. If he could have taken it back and had the ball hit him in the face instead of her, he gladly would have done it. But some things, once done, cannot be undone.

With the guiltiest of consciences, he knelt down by her to see if she was okay, along with the others, who had also gathered around her. He tried to gently pull her hands away from her face so that he could make sure that it was okay and look at her as he told her how sorry he was and explain that it was an accident, but she pulled away and covered her face with her arms and kept crying.

He looked at the others, trying to explain, hoping that they would understand, but no one was having any of it. 'Look what you did, you big dummy.' Bradley said.

Adam looked at him with a hurt expression, imploring his enemy to please understand and be charitable, just this once. 'I didn't mean to.' He said very earnestly, and with strong emotion.

But they were unmoved. Amanda, one of Ashley's best friends, was kneeling in front of her, and gently stroking her

arm. She gave Adam the evil eye. 'You aren't supposed to throw hard at girls.'

Mr. Garvelman had also come over to check on her, and now he was standing in front of the circle. He looked down on Adam accusingly. 'Yeah, I thought I said that boys were supposed to throw left-handed.'

Adam was shocked. He did not even realize until right then that he had not thrown left-handed. He didn't know what to say.

Mr. Garvelman finally told him that maybe he should go run some stairs to get some of his energy out. Looking as sad as a little puppy that has just been chastised, Adam dejectedly made his way over to the bleachers, shoulders slumping almost to the floor. He had to fight back the tears as he went up and down the stairs while the rest of the group returned to a now rather subdued game of Dodgeball.

For the rest of the day the boys gave Adam a hard time about hitting a girl, and the girls just gave him the silent treatment. No matter how many times he apologized it fell on deaf ears. If Billy had accidentally hit her it would have all been forgiven with a simple apology, but for Adam it was unforgivable. They had finally found the excuse they were looking for, and they were not going to let it go to waste. If Adam had offered to give her a kidney it would not have been enough. How gleeful we are when we have an excuse to hate. Society must have its pariah.

It all fit so well with the narrative: Adam The Bully strikes again, only this time he hit a girl! He was a menace! He must be stopped! Of course, no mention was ever made of anything that led up to what happened. It wasn't so much that they ignored it, or chose to leave that part out, it actually

seemed more like no one was even aware of it, like that part of the story did not exist for them. And of course they just ignored his frequent assertions that it was an accident. He still did it, accident or not, and they were never really convinced that it was an accident. After awhile the official history of the event was that he hit her on purpose and no one really knew or cared what had motivated him.

For her part, Ashley was really enjoying all the attention that she was getting. She cried a lot at first because it really did hurt, but it turned out to be well worth it. The extreme concern for her from just about everyone lasted long after the tingling pins and needles sensation in her face had subsided. It was very intoxicating for the little pre-diva. She had gotten her first taste of high maintenance pampering and she was loving every second of it. Perhaps if she would have donned a neck brace and been on crutches she could have gotten a large personal injury settlement; if it would have been a jury of her peers, they certainly would have given her all that she asked for and then some.

Several of the aspiring knights in shining armor offered to avenge her by threatening to ‘kick his butt’ after school, to which she merely blushed and giggled. None of the girls were trying to talk them out of it; they thought Adam deserved it. Too bad the fair lady did not have a little white hanky to pass along to each of her suitors as he went off to do battle with the ogre.

Most of it was just cheap talk. Those boys did not really want to fight Adam. He was still quite a lot bigger than most of them, and his fearsome reputation that was even larger. They were still a tiny bit scared of him even when they were all together, although they never would have admitted it. They just

liked to talk about fighting him, and brag about what they would do to him if they ever did.

There were a few confrontations throughout the year, but nothing very significant. One time Adam was jawing with Cade, and, as is almost inevitable in the fourth grade, Adam said: ‘Why don’t you come over here and make me.’

Cade pointed at his chin, gesturing angrily, and screeched: ‘Come over here, my face is right here!’

However, neither one of them moved from where he was. They taunted each other that way for several minutes, with dozens of threats to beat each other up, but still, nobody moved. That was usually how the ‘fights’ went down.

More than anything they just made fun of him. It was in the fourth grade that they really started to tease him a lot about being fat. One time Adam was accused of spitting; not at anyone, just on the ground, a charge he was guilty of. Kellen Price said he was going to tell on him. Then Thomas Garza said, without even missing a beat: ‘I’ve seen a lot of things go into that mouth, but I’ve never seen anything come back out.’ The others cackled with delight, and repeated it several times throughout the day. Zach Thompson especially loved it.

It was a great line, but Thomas did not actually come up with it himself. He got it from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* on TV and thought that it was so funny that he filed it away for future reference. He had been carrying that one around in the holster for quite awhile looking for a good opportunity to use it, and then there it was, the perfect set-up.

It was an awesome joke. Everybody really loved it, but pretty soon they moved on to other funny things. But that comment and the feeling of having everybody laughing at him would stick with Adam for the rest of his life.

On this day too, the day of 'the incident', they went back to that same old well and started teasing him about being fat. So Adam tried to turn the tables on them and he said that Billy was fat. The only problem? He wasn't. Billy just scoffed. 'No I'm not.' And that was that. Attack parried.

'You're so lame.' Brad said with disgust.

So Adam tried a new line of attack. 'Well you're a nerd. Everybody who is talking is a nerd.'

'You are talking when you call us nerds!' Billy retorted, now rather exasperated.

'Yeah, at least nerds are smart.' Zach said. Then after a brief pause he added: 'Unlike you.' Apparently he realized that this further explanation was necessary when speaking to someone of such dramatically lower intelligence.

Well that one stumped him. Adam really wanted to say something back to them, but he could now see that talking would inevitably make him a nerd. Caught in his own net. It was a real conundrum. He could not think of any way out of it, so he just stayed silent while they continued to taunted him. But after awhile he got so angry that he called them a cuss word, so then they told on him and he got into even more trouble.

The Birthday Party

The following summer, the one between 4th and 5th grade, turned out to be a little bit better than the school year had been. The highlight was a birthday party in July that Adam threw for himself.

Adam was often extremely bored during the summer, looking for anything that he could possibly think of to do. It seemed like he had watched every movie in the house fifty times, and looked through every magazine a hundred times. He was a bit of a romantic, and eventually he discovered Rita's romance novels. He even became engrossed in daytime soap operas, especially the ones that came on before cartoons. It was getting so that he liked them better than the cartoons. His favorite was *Days of Our Lives*; he very rarely missed that. *General Hospital* was also tolerable, so he usually watched that one as well, but the others he was indifferent to at best. They were really boring. Everything was so boring!

When his birthday was a few weeks away, on a whim Adam decided to have a party. You will never guess who he

invited: Zach Thompson, Cade Andrews, Billy Stewart, and, of all people, Bradley Miller. No, you are right, it does not make any sense, but that is what he did. Zach was actually the first person that he called. He tried calling some of the other kids from his class as well, but he could not find the right phone number for some of them. It was a pretty big phone book, and if they had a common last name it was hard to find them. But Zach gave him a few numbers.

The only girl that he invited was Stephanie Taylor. He actually called her a few times that week before her dad got on the phone and told him that she was too young to be getting calls from boys. Having Stephanie come would have been a dream come true, but Adam knew that it was pretty unlikely that would happen. It was okay though. He was happy that anybody wanted to come. The only person he had really expected to say yes was Randy. That was just some kid who lived in the same trailer park, but he was a year younger in terms of grade. Adam did not like him very much. He was a weird kid. Kind of stupid. But whatever, it was more people.

It is hard to say who was more shocked, the boys when they received the invitation, or Adam when some of them said that they were coming. Well, there was also Rita; she would have to be in the running for 'most shocked'. Adam only told her about it the night before when she got home from work. She told him that she was scheduled to work at that time, but he just shrugged and said: 'I know.' Oh. Well okay then.

She was not quite sure what to do at that point. But finally she drove him to a grocery store that was open 24 hours and they got some cupcakes with frosting and some milk. Unfortunately the store did not have much in the way of birthday stuff, other than candles. No birthday cakes. None of

the stores that were still open had them, or at least none that they found. But Adam said that it would be okay. The cupcakes would be enough.

Once they got home Rita pulled out the present that she had gotten for him and gave it to him that night, so that she could see him open it, and he really liked it. But the best present she could have given him was simply to let him have the party. She kissed him on the cheek, and silently prayed as she went to bed that it would go well. For some reason this seemed really important to him. Though she only had about 3 hours from the time that she went to bed to when she was supposed to be up, Rita had trouble sleeping that night, worrying about her little boy. She could not stop thinking about him the next day as well.

When their moms dropped the boys off, they had no idea that Adam's mom was not there. Mrs. Thompson wondered about it a little bit, as she was pulling away, because she did not see even one car there, and one would have thought that there would be a lot more people there for a party. She assumed that they must have just gotten there early. She had given a ride to Bradley as well, and when the door opened Zach and Bradley went right in, and didn't come back out, so she assumed that everything was fine.

Zach, Bradley, Cade, and Billy had all said that they would be there, but Cade called to cancel at the last minute. His mom probably forgot to pick up a gift, although he did not say that. So it ended up just being Zach, Bradley, and Billy, and, of

course, stupid Randy. But Adam was still thrilled. He couldn't believe that they brought presents for him. He had never expected that.

But he did not know quite what to do once everybody got there. They were all just sitting on the couch watching TV and he was in the blue chair trying to figure it out. He had been so focused on getting them there that he had not thought much about what to do beyond that. He couldn't think of any fun games or anything.

Trying to be a good host, Adam decided that he should offer them something to drink. He went over to the fridge and opened it to see what they had. 'Hey, do you any of you guys want a beer? Or, it looks like we also have milk, or Coke.'

The boys looked at each other in amazement, not quite sure if they had really heard that correctly. Zach got up from the couch and slowly walked over to the fridge with the others just behind him. 'Did you say you have beer?'

'Yeah.' Adam gestured towards it with his hand, and opened the fridge door wider so that Zach could see it.

Zach could hardly believe it. 'What! That is awesome!' The others echoed similar sentiments.

Adam laughed at their reaction. He took out a large can and popped the top like a pro, then handed it to Zach, who took it in both hands and held it as though it was the most precious thing in the world; he reverently took a sip, but then made a funny face as soon as he tasted it. The other boys erupted in laughter.

Then Adam got one for Billy and another for Brad. They both tried it at roughly the same. It was so bitter that Billy could barely bring himself to swallow it. He tried another sip but it was even worse than the first. Once again there was a

chorus of laughter. He handed the can back to Adam. 'Oh, man, that's disgusting.'

'Oh no, man, it's really good. You'll love it after awhile, you just have to get used to it.' Adam said. He offered to give the can back but Billy waved it off. He was done.

'Yeah, I could see that.' Zach said, and took another couple of small sips. You could tell it was hard for him though.

Bradley nodded. 'Yeah, it's not bad.' He and Zach were really trying to play it cool. They were not drinking very much, but they were not about to hand the beer back either.

Randy hadn't said much. He seemed to be taking an 'only speak when you are spoken to' approach since they were all older than him. All that he did was laugh when the others did. Maybe he was not such a stupid kid after all. He kept expecting Adam to offer him a beer, but he didn't. When he saw that Billy did not want his anymore he finally asked Adam if he could have the rest. Adam gave it to him, and he knocked it back and chugged about half the can without taking a breath.

'Holy shit!' Brad said. It was awesome. For a little kid Randy could put it away.

Adam laughed again at their reactions. He was in a good mood, but he was not about to be outdone by the likes of Randy; he got another beer for himself out of the fridge and chugged it in much the same way, but even better. He wasn't quite able to finish the whole thing, but he got most of it as the boys cheered him on.

Zach tried to chug his too, but he ended up coughing and spilled it on the floor, amid peals of laughter from the others. That only made it worse because then he was trying to drink while laughing and coughing. He finally gave up and handed the beer back to Adam. There seemed to be a newfound

respect in his eyes as he did so. Adam could tell. He felt like a big shot all of a sudden.

Bradley held on to his beer for awhile, but he did not end up finishing it.

Everybody was trying super hard to be nice to each other. Adam tried to make sure that Zach didn't feel bad, so he reassured them once again that they would really like it once they got used to it. Then he had another idea. 'You guys ever had cigarettes before?'

'You have cigarettes too?' Zach was dumbfounded.

Instead of responding, Adam went into Rita's room without a word and rummaged around in her stash while the other boys waited. He soon returned with a lighter and two packs, although one of them was nearly empty. 'You want Reds or Menthols? I don't like the Menthols very much. My mom tries to hide the good ones, but I still find 'em. You might like the Menthols though. Which do you want?'

Now he was just showing off. But it worked. Zach and Billy and Brad looked at each other in astonishment once again. Who was this kid?

Seeing him as a smoking connoisseur, they all took his recommendation and selected from the Reds pack. All except Randy that is, he took a Menthol.

After lighting up, which was really cool, Zach looked down at his in amazement, almost unable to believe that it was real. It was so cool just to hold it. They all felt really grown up.

Brad and Zach learned the hard way not to inhale too deeply, more than once erupting into a fit of coughing, to everyone else's delight. Everybody was laughing. It was so much fun.

They sat around, just talking and smoking. Adam actually had two full ones, and he did inhale. The others mostly just held theirs, only taking the occasional puff. Zach and Bradley tried one of the Menthols as well, but they did not finish it.

They noticed the cupcakes on the table and ate some of them with milk. Billy, for one, was grateful to be drinking milk again. They didn't sing happy birthday to him; Adam kind of wished that they would, but he didn't think he should be the one to suggest it. He did put some candles on the cupcakes, though, and they lighted them and then he blew them out. That was fun. Then he opened his presents, and they talked about how cool they were and played with them for a few minutes.

The next item on the list from Adam's stock of vices was a triple X movie, which the boys found terribly disgusting, but so much so that it was also quite intriguing. It was like a traffic accident that you did not want to look at, but it was so grisly that you also could not bring yourself to look away. There were frequent outbursts of 'Gross!' or 'That's so sick!' followed by fits of laughter. What was wrong with these people? It was all old news to Adam, but the others could hardly believe their eyes. They kept on watching though.

The whole place was like a funhouse of sleaze. It was incredible. Everything that they had been told not to do they could do here.

Things got a little crazy when Randy thought that he heard a car pull up into the driveway. They were watching the movie in Dallin's old room, now Adam's, and on Dallin's TV and VCR, which Adam had unofficially inherited, so they

barely even heard it. If they hadn't left the door open, it could have been real trouble.

Billy ran over to look out the window in the front room, and sure enough, it was his mom. Fear went through his entire body like an electric current. He sounded the alarm and they quickly turned off the movie and ran into the living room and kitchen to make sure that the beer cans and cigarettes were out of sight. She was getting out of the car!

Billy waved goodbye to everybody, quickly told Adam happy birthday again, and bolted out the door to head her off before she came up and knocked. They actually pretty much had it all cleaned up by then, everything was thrown away or at least out of sight, but he still didn't want to take any chances.

Mrs. Stewart greeted him with a smile and a hug. 'Hey, there you are. I didn't mean to rush you, I was just out running errands and I thought I would stop by and see how things were going.'

'Oh, they're good. It actually just got over, so we can go.'

She looked at him quizzically. 'Are you sure?' She had planned to go in and at least meet Adam and his parents.

'Yeah, its fine. We can go.'

'Well, do they need us to help clean up?' She asked.

'No, they're fine. They said it was fine.'

She shrugged. 'Okay.'

They got in the car and she started it up. 'Well, did you have fun?'

'Yeah, it was cool.'

'So what did you guys do?'

Billy's heart almost pounded out of his chest as he tried to think of something to say. It felt like he was going to pass

out, but outwardly he actually responded quite calmly. 'Oh nothin' much, we just hung out.'

'Oh yeah? Did you play some fun games?'

'Yeah. We watched a little TV too.'

She looked confused. 'You did? At a birthday party?'

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Billy couldn't believe he said that. He felt like slapping himself. 'It was a movie, just some cartoon they had.'

'Oh.' She pulled out of the trailer park and turned right, then checked her mirrors and looked over her shoulder so that she could change lanes. 'You had fun though?'

'Yeah.' Billy decided that he really needed to just shut up so he stared out the window and didn't look at her.

It seemed like he was acting kind of strange, but she could not quite tell what was going on. Sometimes it was hard to get him to talk. He asked if he could turn up the radio, saying that he really liked the song that was on, and then he just stared out the side window the rest of the way home.

Zach's mom came about 20 minutes later. He was actually supposed to call her when he was ready to leave, and he did call after Billy's mom came. Then they watched the movie for a few more minutes because they knew it would take her awhile to get there. But once it got closer to when she would arrive they turned it off and just sat in the living room talking until she got there. Zach had a lot more practice lying to his mom than Billy did, and he was naturally much better at it, so he had no trouble thinking of a good cover story and seemed to feel quite comfortable with the whole thing. Nevertheless, Billy's strategy seemed like a good one, so as soon as they saw her pull in Zach and Brad went out to meet her before she had

even turned the car off. In fact, she didn't even get out of the car. It was perfect.

After they left Randy stuck around for a little while and the two of them watched *Days of Our Lives* and some cartoons. Adam was in such a good mood that he did not even find Randy annoying, or at least not as much as usual.

Overall the party was incredibly successful. It was super fun, and it turned out to be one of the best birthdays that Adam ever had. It also paid some lasting dividends. Bradley and Zach decided that maybe Adam wasn't so bad after all, and the teasing eased up quite a bit. There were still a few dust-ups here and there, but overall, the next few years were better for Adam in school. This was not the only reason that it was better, but it helped.

Let us not get ahead of ourselves, though, for we have not yet finished with the telling of what transpired during the rest of the summer.

Adam tried to be friends with all three of them, but he had the most success with Billy. He was invited over to Zach's house once, but since they were not allowed to do any of the fun stuff there, it was kind of boring for both of them. But Billy lived close enough that he could ride his bike, and he came over several more times that summer. Of course Adam called to invite him nearly every day.

It was a wild ride for Billy. He kind of liked coming over in some ways, but there were times when he dreaded those phone calls. He had never been around anyone like Adam. He

had also never gotten into so much trouble (or at least they would have been in trouble if they had gotten caught). In addition to all the pastimes available at Adam's house, they rode around town on their bikes and went into an old abandoned house, putting rocks through the windows and breaking things. Then Adam claimed that he heard a noise and ran out of there like ghosts were chasing him, and indeed he believed that they were. They had great fun being scared out of their minds by the newly haunted house.

They rang doorbells and ran away (during the daytime), and made some prank phone calls that were not really that clever, but they sure thought that they were. Adam could barely even get through what he was supposed to say without bursting into laughter and hanging up.

Sometimes Adam's pranks went too far though. One time when Billy came over he got out Paul's 30-06 from the closet, and when Billy knocked on the screen door (the other one was already open) Adam yelled that he should come in. Billy did, but could not see him anywhere. 'Where are you?' He yelled.

'I'm in my mom's room. Come in here.'

Billy had never been in Rita's room before, and he hesitated, not feeling entirely comfortable with it now. The door was open, so he finally pushed it open a little more and cautiously went in. He looked around but still could not see Adam. 'I don't see you.' He said, but got no answer.

He walked a little further into the room and was looking into the bathroom. Adam peeked out from behind the bedroom door, and when he saw that Billy had his back to him he took a step to the side and raised the gun up to his shoulder.

Billy heard him, so he turned around to see what it was. When he did, he saw that Adam had the gun sighted in on his head, with his finger on the trigger, and he shouted: 'BANG! YOU'RE DEAD!'

Billy jumped, probably more from having someone shout at him than anything else, and he stumbled backwards, almost tripping over some of Rita's shoes.

Adam nearly fell over as well, but it was because he was laughing so hard. He tried to keep the gun pointed at Billy as he moved around, but he couldn't do it. He was laughing too much.

Billy did not find it very funny though, and he said as much as he pushed past him and went back into the living room. Adam followed him out and just kept right on laughing, now leaning against the wall for support.

It was awkward, and kind of rude. Billy was starting to get angry. He went out the front door and started to get on his bike. Adam followed him out there and finally seemed to get it that he was upset. 'Where are you going?'

'I don't feel like playing today. I'm going home.'

'Why? It was unloaded.'

Billy did not respond.

Adam finally realized how serious this was. 'It wasn't loaded, I promise.'

It was about all he could do to convince Billy to stay. He finally did get him to stay a little longer, but the damage had been done. It was never really the same after that. They did not have very much fun playing. Billy didn't talk much and he left as soon as he got the chance. Adam still did not really understand why, but he knew that something was wrong. He hoped that it would be better the next day. Maybe Billy was just

one of those people who didn't like to have jokes played on them. Adam decided to tell him that he wouldn't play any more jokes on him or tease him if he didn't like it.

But he never got the chance to tell him that. From then on Billy was always unavailable or gone whenever he called, and he never called back.

What actually happened is that Billy finally confessed all to his dad. He told him everything, or just about everything. After his dad and mom discussed it for a few days they decided that Billy should not play with Adam anymore. Billy was a bit disappointed by the ruling in some ways, but also relieved. He did not really want to go over there anymore. Adam still called him every day. They usually told him that Billy was busy, or gone, or sick, but it was a pain having to keep coming up with excuses. They kept hoping that Adam would eventually get it and take the hint, but that was not working.

Finally they decided that Billy would have to tell him that he could not come over to play anymore. The next time that Adam called, Mrs. Stewart gave the phone to Billy and stood close by to give him moral support and listen to the difficult conversation that they were about to have - and to make sure that it actually took place. Adam was glad to finally be able to talk to him. Like usual, he asked if Billy wanted to come over.

'Um, my mom says that I can't play with you anymore.'

'Oh.' Adam said. 'How come?'

'She says you are a bad influence.'

Mrs. Stewart cringed. She felt so embarrassed that she covered her face with her hands even though nobody was looking at her. 'Billy! Why did you have to tell him that?' She thought with a sigh.

‘Oh.’ Adam said. ‘So you can’t come over?’

‘No. Sorry man.’

‘Oh. Okay.’ There was a pause. Adam did not know what to say. ‘See you at school then.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Bye.’

‘Bye.’

Adam hung up the phone and just sat there for a minute, almost in a trance. He was in shock. He never expected this. Full realization did not even hit him until several minutes later, when he started to cry. In the span of only a few short weeks he had learned what it was like to have a best friend, and then what it was like to lose one.

Is it really better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? If Adam and had been familiar with that saying, and understood it, he probably would not have agreed, at least not right then. Up to that point it had been the best summer of his life, but now it just made the loss that much more severe. There were times when he wished that he had never even tried to invite anyone over. But perhaps he did not really mean that, maybe it was just the process of working through his grief.

He still did not really understand why, and because of that it was hard not to be bitter. Dallin did much the same thing to Nate one time, and they both just laughed. Sometimes they even shot each other with BB guns, and Adam too (although he never got to have a BB gun to shoot back) and they always just laughed about it. Was that even what it was about, or was there something else that he did?

As the first day of school approached, an idea slowly began to form in Adam’s mind. By this point he had worked

through the stages of grief enough so that he wanted to remember the good times, and to have Billy remember them too. He had this really cool butterfly knife that Billy loved to play with whenever he came over. Ever since Adam had showed him how to do it he liked to flip it around as they talked, or watched TV, or whatever they were doing. He actually got pretty good at it after awhile.

Adam really liked the knife too. He risked life and limb to get it. A few days before Dallin left for basic training Adam got it out of his room and hid it behind the refrigerator. Dallin looked all over for it, but he never found it. He suspected that something was up, though, because he knew Adam liked it. Dallin made all sorts of threats of bodily injury if he did not tell him where it was, but Adam did not crack; he calmly looked him right in the eye and lied, swearing to him that he had no idea where it was. At that point it was as much a matter of survival as it was to be able to keep the knife. Dallin still searched every inch of Adam’s room, even inside the air vents, but of course to no avail. He did not like it, but there was no evidence, so the threatened death and/or dismemberment did not take place. Adam figured that he would forget about it after awhile, and he could always hide it again whenever Dallin came home.

Adam took the knife with him on the first day of school, hidden in his backpack. He was terrified that it would get taken away before he could get it to Billy. Things were awkward between them. He only saw Billy from a distance, and there were other kids around. It seemed like Billy always had other kids around him. Adam never did get the chance to talk to him.

Finally, on the third day, he just went up to him right after school was out and tapped him on the shoulder, asking if

he could talk to him. He wasn't even sure whether Billy would do it, but he did. He seemed friendly enough. They walked around a little bit, just the two of them, and caught up on old times for a minute or two. But Adam knew that he did not have long until the bus left. He was nervous, but he decided to seize the opportunity because it might not ever come around again. He motioned for Billy to step behind a big tree for a minute, telling him that he had something to show him. Once they were partially out of sight, Adam took the knife out, handed it to Billy, and told him that he wanted him to have it.

Billy was surprised. He couldn't believe that anybody would ever give that knife away. If it had been his he would not have parted with it for anything. He took it in his hands and admired it, then finally looked up. He almost protested and told Adam that he couldn't take it, but something told him that he should not. 'Are you sure?'

Adam nodded and smiled.

Billy smiled too. He understood. 'Thanks man. That's awesome.'

He carefully put the knife into his own backpack. It was perhaps the best gift that anyone had ever given him, and would be one of his most treasured possessions for several years to come. Knowing of the sacrifice made it that much more meaningful. 'Hey, maybe we could hang out every now and then at school.'

'That would be cool.' Adam said.

'We probably better go or we are going to miss the bus.'

Billy said.

'Yeah.'

They ran to the bus, but it was not necessary, it did not leave until a few more minutes after they got there. Adam felt

really good. Billy even sat next to him on the bus. Maybe he could not see him very often, but it kind of felt like he had his friend back.

Billy kept his word, both to Adam and to his parents. He never saw Adam outside of school, but every now and then he would come up and talk to him and make sure that he was included in the group. It made a big difference because Billy was a pretty popular kid. The other kids decided that if Billy thought Adam was alright then he must be alright. That, along with Zach's acceptance (although he was not in Zach's class anymore) made the 5th grade the best school year of Adam's life. Even Bradley pretty much left him alone. To some extent, that even carried over into the 6th grade, which made that a pretty good year as well, at least as far as school was concerned. But once again we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Fireworks

Paul came back not long after school started when Adam was a fifth grader. He did that sometimes. He would disappear for days or weeks, months even, then just show up again, usually when he ran out of money. It was a Saturday afternoon when he got there, and he was excited to show Adam some fireworks that he had in the car. Adam was surprised, but delighted, when Paul asked him if he wanted to go set them off. Of course he did!

They got in the car and drove out of town towards the mountains. As they passed a convenience store Paul asked Adam if he was thirsty, and Adam said that he wouldn't mind getting something. So they stopped, and Adam got a Coke, but not just a can or a bottle, it was a big 44 ounce cup. It was so big that he had to keep both hands on it just to keep from spilling.

Paul got the same thing, but he only filled it up about halfway. Once they were back out to the car, he got out a bottle of whiskey that he had in the trunk and poured a lot of it into

the cup and stirred it with a plastic spoon. Then they were off to find adventure.

It took them awhile to find a good spot. They had to go quite a ways out of town but finally they found a wooded area that seemed pretty deserted. Once they stopped Paul poured the rest of the whiskey into his cup. He was slurring his words and stumbling around, nearly tripping several times. He never did actually fall down though. He was pretty happy because he was excited to set off the fireworks, but Adam knew that he could become angry almost instantly when he was drunk.

They started getting the fireworks out from the trunk. There were a lot of them, and the collection included everything from sparklers to M-80s. The sparklers were the appetizer. They danced around with them, writing their names in the air, and had a great time, both of them laughing uproariously.

Then they set off some bottle rockets. Unfortunately the only bottle that they had was the whiskey bottle. It worked okay, but not great. Beer bottles would have been better. It was still fun though. Paul shot Adam with one of them, and Adam almost started to cry, so then Paul let Adam shoot him with one to show that it was no big deal, and after that it was fine. He had Adam dump out the rest of his drink and use his cup for a bottle and they had a great time shooting at each other in a bottle rocket war. Luckily for both, neither of them could hit much of anything. The cup was so big that Adam could not really aim, and Paul was just drunk as hell. But it was still pretty fun to laugh and goof around.

Paul wanted to save the M-80s for last, so once the bottle rockets were gone he went to the various assortment of firecrackers, cherry bombs, and Roman candles. The cherry

bombs packed a pretty good punch. The first one left a small hole in the ground when it went off. Paul laughed uproariously and made a toast to it with his plastic cup.

After several more he started to get a little bored so he set off two or three at a time. After he lit one he would fumble around and rush to light another before running (stumbling is actually more like it) to get out of the way before they went off, cackling with glee the whole time. Then a bright idea crept into his foggy mind, and he realized with some amazement that if he held them so that the fuses were right next to each other he could light them all at the same time. This keen insight seemed very significant to him. He proudly showed Adam how to do it, and they lit 3, then 4, then 5 of them all at once. He also started throwing them rather than running away himself, so after they were lit he would toss them and watched them go off at nearly the same time in all of their various landing places.

Once they were down to the last few, Paul let Adam set them off himself. He laughed until he cried when Adam lit one and then dropped it and ran away in terror, even dropping the box of matches during his flight. Adam was about to cry himself, but he managed to keep it together, though barely. Luckily for him, Paul remained in good spirits and just laughed until Adam managed to get a hold of himself. Finally Adam started to think that it was pretty funny too, how much it had scared him, and he laughed as well. He really liked watching them go off, he just was not crazy about setting them off himself. But Paul helped him light the last one, and they tossed it away in plenty of time. After it went off Paul gave him an emphatic, though very slow moving high-five, and a literal slap on the back as they both cheered.

Finally they were to the main event, the M-80s. They had all kinds of fun putting them next to, or on trees, or around the roots to see if they could blow a hole in any of them, and stacked rocks over the top to see how many rocks it could move out of the way when it went off, and just generally ‘blowin’ shit up’ as Paul said. They even blew up the glass whiskey bottle. After every big explosion they laughed uproariously and Paul gave Adam another slow motion high-five. It was probably a minor miracle that neither one of them had a finger blown off. Good thing Dallin was not there, or who knows what might have happened.

It was dusk when they finally ran out. The pockmarked ground looked like a miniature war zone. Paul, now quite satisfied, took a piss for the third time since they got there, and waxed philosophical about how liberating it was to be able to pee outside. It really made a man feel like he was getting back to nature, he felt. They left (of course) without cleaning any of it up. At least they did not start a forest fire or cause some other major catastrophe; Mother Nature managed to escape with only a few minor cuts and bruises.

Paul was in a very good mood on the drive home, and because of that, so was Adam. It had actually been really fun. Paul was having a difficult time keeping the car in his own lane, weaving back and forth across the lines, as he excitedly told Adam that they were going to go get some more fireworks and then come back.

It was fairly dark inside the car, so Paul did not see the boy’s startled expression, but his eyes were wide as he stared at Paul in disbelief. Adam could not tell if he was serious, but it seemed like he was. Adam could not imagine setting off fireworks in the dark, which is a bit ironic, since they are

usually set off in the dark, but not cherry bombs and M-80s; that seemed like a bad idea even to Adam. All that he wanted at that point was to make it home safely. But he knew better than to say that. He sat quietly in his seat, hoping that Paul would forget about it and just go home.

As he thought more about it he wondered if maybe Paul meant coming back to that same spot on some other day. That would be alright. He had about convinced himself that this had to be what Paul was talking about, and began to relax.

But actually, that was not what Paul meant; he had every intention of getting more fireworks and going back that night. The problem was that he could not find anywhere that sold fireworks. He tried three different gas stations and was very disappointed to find out that none of them carried M-80s in stock. It was a real travesty of justice, and he let the clerk at the last place know about it. He did buy bread, milk, beer, more whiskey, and a few other essentials, though.

Somehow they made it back to their mansion in one piece. Adam was very relieved to see his front door. It had been an adventure, but he was glad to finally be able to relax in his room after he had put away the groceries and Paul had fallen asleep watching TV.

There were fireworks of a different sort only a week or two later. Paul could not stand the Mexican neighbors in the lot next to them. His battles with neighbors were legendary, and none were more intense than with these people. They were having some kind of party, and when they threw a party, they really

threw a party. It started at about 3 p.m., and not only was it still going strong at 10 p.m., it actually seemed to be growing and getting even louder. There were so many people that it was spilling over into the street, and cars were parked everywhere. Paul kept looking out the window and cursing at them. He had been since around 4 p.m.

The thing that really got to him was the noise. They had mariachi music blaring from a stereo system with some big speakers turned up to full volume. You could hardly even watch TV, even with the volume turned way up. And when you muted it during the commercials, as Paul liked to do, mariachi music filled up the whole trailer. It seemed to be pulsing through the walls and shook the windows.

By 10 p.m., Paul was steaming. He finally went outside to say something, and it was not nice. A few of them said some choice things back to him in Spanish, but for the most part they just ignored him or laughed at him. That made him even more angry.

At 11, after a few more beers, he threw open the door, almost ripped the screen door off, and rattled off a string of obscenities that was truly impressive. Few could string together cuss words like Paul when he really got rolling; it was partly because he practiced so much, but it was also an inborn talent, and here it was on full display.

If he had gone over there earlier that night and asked them if he could come join the party they probably would have given him a beer and something off the barbecue and been happy to have him. Even if he had gone over and politely asked them to turn the music down they might have done it, but not now; it was war now, and neither side was going to back down.

One of the men sitting on the porch took out a large knife and stared at Paul menacingly as another one cursed at him in Spanish. Paul did not know much Spanish, but he knew swear words when he heard them. He returned the favor, now directing all his fury at this hombre in particular. Not being content to merely call the bluff, he had to raise as well.

Paul felt pretty confident that he could handle the one swearing at him, if need be, but the one holding the knife was creepy. He looked like he would have no problem killing someone. One did not have to be a master of reading body language to see it - every so often he made a throat slashing sign across his neck with his finger and the knife was displayed quite prominently.

Paul had no doubt that this guy was serious, but still, he couldn't back down, at least not entirely. He did not push the issue nearly as much as perhaps he would have otherwise though. He decided to go back in the house for awhile, hoping that they would stop on their own. They didn't.

After about another half an hour had passed, and he had indulged in a few more cans of liquid courage, Paul went back out there and things began to escalate quickly. He threw open the door again, beer in hand, and yelled: 'Why the hell don't you skunks swim back to Mexico where you belong!' He could barely even get the words out of his mouth before laughing uproariously.

The whole group started yelling and booing at him then. He had to close the door quickly to dodge a few cans and bottles (and whatever else was handy) that were launched at him. He stood at the window, though, looking through the blinds at them, still chuckling.

We know, right? And if you think that is bad, you can imagine some of the other things that he said that night, especially behind closed doors. The only one who heard those comments was Adam, and he absorbed it all, just as he had since he was a toddler. At this time of Adam's life whatever Paul said was thought to be absolute truth; Paul's thoughts were Adam's thoughts, and Paul had lots of thoughts about a great many subjects, especially when he was drinking.

Whether it be about the 'Chinamen' (anybody who looked Asian was a 'Chinaman' to Paul) or black people (you don't even want to know what he called them), or the Indians (usually American Indians, but he did not much care for people from India either), Paul had lots of thoughts. But he complained most about Mexicans. It was because they were stealing all the jobs. Maybe that was the reason Paul had been 'between jobs' for about 12 years or so - he certainly thought so.

Paul's racism was passed on to Adam like an infectious disease. There was a certain irony to Adam's racism, however, something that he himself never could have imagined. You see, Rita did not share Paul's biases; at least when it came to adultery, she was all about equal access. Back when she was younger, and felt a little better, there were rumors that if it had not been for an abortion she would have had a black baby.

Paul would have liked to cheat more, once he found out, but his options were more limited. Perhaps that is why he kept coming back; that, and running out of money.

Adam never understood why Paul always seemed to like Dallin more than him. He did not know that for Paul, just looking at him was a constant reminder of something very painful. Dallin was not his either, but there was no expectation that he was: Rita already had Dallin when she got together with

Paul. But actually Dallin could have passed for Paul's son. He was a lanky, almost skeletal 6'1", with pasty white skin that tended to freckle, and sandy red hair. Except for the lack of a tan, he looked like a mix between a surfer, which he was not, and a wannabe soldier of fortune, which he was, especially when he wore the camouflage pants and army boots that he got from the war surplus store. Paul was shorter, only about 5'8", but his hair color and bluish green eyes were a much closer match to Dallin than they were to Adam's coal black eyes and very dark hair. From the first time that Paul saw that hair he knew.

But Adam never even suspected what Paul knew to be the truth. Because of his name, and a relatively light complexion, few people ever said anything about it. In the rare instances in which somebody did think that he was Hispanic, or make some sort of comment about it, Adam would scoff at the idea rather indignantly and quickly correct them. It never occurred to him that this could be a clue. He even innocently commented himself one day about his dark hair and how much different he looked than everybody else in the family. Rita let the comment pass without making any reply, and it was soon forgotten.

Adam's real father, whoever he was, may not have even been full-blooded Hispanic, but if Adam had been able to take a DNA test it definitely would have showed Hispanic origins. One wonders what the poor boy would have done if he had known. He surely would have thought it was a catastrophe.

O son of . . . well . . . somebody. O son of somebody! Poor little bastard! Must even your birth have been illegitimate and ill-timed? You did not ask to be brought into the world in this way, but here you are, and now you have to pay.

As it got later and more alcohol was consumed on each side, things were becoming very tense. Rita got home around 11:30, and she managed to talk Paul out of going over there and turning off the damn music himself, as he wanted to do. Now if Rita would have had a good buzz on, she might very well have gone over there with him. She had cracked a few skulls in her younger days, and been cracked a time or two as well. She still had the scars from a broken bottle in one such incident. But that was all a long time ago. Many years of severe back pain and the customer always being right had mellowed her out significantly.

In this case Rita was the voice of reason. Luckily, only about 10 minutes after she managed to calm Paul down a little, the volume on the music was turned down, and it finally went off shortly before midnight. It looked as though (from the window) that a few of the guests were starting to head home. It was a good thing that Rita got there when she did, or the police surely would have had to make yet another trip out to Mansion Hills; they certainly knew the way, and if it were not for the fact that some of the residents were rather reluctant to make that call, being generally rather distrustful of cops, they would have been sent for even more often than they were.

The Jungle

For a few people Junior High is the pinnacle of their existence (which is itself kind of sad in its own way) but for most it is awful. It is a time of transition and scrutiny, where one is not really a kid anymore, but also not yet an adult, and one's whole life can revolve around a simple note.

One time in music Ryan Berger wrote a note pretending to be Colin Kelly, and he asked Kayli Hansen if she wanted to go out. (Not on a date, just whether she wanted to be boyfriend and girlfriend.) As she was reading it she crinkled up her nose like there was a bad smell, and froze in place, as though if she did not move he would not be able to find her; the only thing that did move were her eyes as she looked up and scanned the room in terror. Then she saw Ryan and a couple of the other boys laughing and figured out what was going on.

She cocked her head to the side. 'Ryyyaaaannnn!!!' Everybody laughed then, even Colin. With a somewhat embarrassed, self-deprecating chuckle, he said: 'Ryan!'

It was pretty funny, but humiliating for Colin. That look of pure disgust on her face in that unguarded moment said it all. Adam could not help but imagine how she would have reacted if Ryan had put his name there instead; he was relieved that didn't happen, and he laughed along with everybody else at Colin, but he knew that it probably would have been a similar reaction if it had been him.

Kayli Hansen was maybe the most popular girl in school. She dated eighth graders almost exclusively, and rumor had it, even Freshmen. Maybe she was just surprised to think, even for a second, that Colin would have written her a note like that. She probably did not mean to hurt anybody's feelings. She would not have actually said what she was thinking, but that look - like she wanted to throw up - said it all. Ryan probably did not really mean anything by it either. He was just so desperate to get Kayli's attention he did not even think or care about how it affected anybody else.

Adam hardly wrote any notes to anybody the whole school year, and none to any girls. Perhaps he was wise to do so. Wisdom was not typically a traveling companion of his, but in this case he probably got it right.

Quite a bit had changed for Adam since elementary school. Some of it was for the better, some for worse. He blended in more now. It was nice to not be singled out as much, but one of the reasons was that he was no longer big for his age. The other kids had mostly caught up to him, and some were now bigger. Some of the eighth graders were really big. Jeff Giles was 6'6". Braden Smith was 6'2", but he weighed over 200 pounds. Adam was 5'5" in the 5th grade, but he had grown very little since then. There is perhaps no other time in a person's life when there is such a disparity in size amongst

one's peers, and it causes problems. Adam still had a lot of rage inside, but gone forever were the days when he could hide behind a door at recess and watch them scatter like a flock of pigeons when he attacked. No one was really afraid of him anymore.

He tried out for football, but that turned out to be a big mistake. The school counselor and some of the teachers thought that he would be good at it because of his fearsome reputation; they thought it would be a good outlet for his anger, like a release valve. But Adam was not much of an athlete, and he was not really very tough either. Perhaps he would have been a star if he could have played when they were all in the first grade, but not now.

Actually, he didn't really even want to do it. He almost backed out at the last minute, but Kyle Miller said that he would be a huge wuss if he did, so of course he had to play then.

The first few days were kind of miserable, just a lot of running and sweating and drills, but it got a whole lot worse once they put the pads on. The coaches put him at defensive tackle because at nearly 160 pounds he was still heavier than most of the seventh graders, and he was not really fast enough to play anywhere else. He was thick and low to the ground, so just from looking at him, the coaches thought that he might be pretty good in there. But they do not call them 'linemen' for nothing; the closer you line up to the football the nastier things get. Being on the line of scrimmage is like being on the front lines of a war.

Brody Shepard, a guard for the eighth grade B team, knew Adam, and like most of the kids who knew Adam, didn't like him. Adam never really knew why. Brody was big, and

heavy, and mean, which is exactly what you want in a guard. If he had been a little more athletic he would have been playing with the varsity.

On the first day that they had a full scrimmage Adam was matched up against Brody. The first few plays were runs and Brody drove him back about 10 feet off the line, and in one case, right on his back. It looked like Adam was playing on skates. He could barely even put up any resistance. Brody was loving it too. He hit Adam on every play, even if that wasn't really his assignment. None of the coaches said anything about it. In Junior High they are usually pretty happy as long as you hit somebody, even if it isn't your guy. One coach even slapped Brody on the helmet and told him that he was doing a good job.

On one play Brody gave Adam a little extra shove at the end, after the whistle blew, and Adam took exception to it and pushed him back. The next play was a short pass, but Brody fired out and hit him hard enough to knock him down to one knee and again kept on pushing him even after the whistle and even once Adam was on the ground. Finally the coach called the play that Brody had been hoping for: a dive right up the gut to Adam's side. As they were leaving the huddle Brody nodded slightly towards Adam and whispered to Scott Bell, the center, 'let's get him'.

The quarterback barked out the signals in an unnaturally low, guttural tone, trying his best to sound tough (good thing his voice didn't crack). 'Down, set, hut, hut!' Brody launched out of his stance, firing off the ball with perfect timing, and Adam felt and heard the crack simultaneously as Brody's helmet collided with his own and slid under his facemask down to his chinstrap. He could barely see anything except blurry masses of shapes, but he felt himself being bent backwards

despite his best efforts to keep it from happening. Just a split second later he felt excruciating pain as the top of Scott's helmet sunk all the way to the face mask into Adam's rib cage and marshmallow-soft midsection. They drove him back until he staggered and stumbled, creating a huge hole for the running back, and kept on driving him until he fell to the ground and both of them landed on top of him in a big pile.

The wind was knocked out of him, and Adam genuinely thought that he would never be able to breath again. It did take a little while before he could. Long after the play was over and everybody else had gotten up and started to go back to their huddle, he laid there, crying soundlessly. But when he finally did catch his breath he put it to good use and let out the most pitiful piercing wail one could ever hear.

Can you imagine what those other boys thought of him? What a little crybaby! Dallin always said that he was a wuss back when he used to pick on him. And to be fair, if the appropriate penalty for wimpiness is getting picked on, then we have to say that Adam deserved every bit of what he got.

Coach Troutwein was very worried at first; he thought that Adam must have broken his leg or something the way that he was carrying on. But when he realized that it was 'just a little tummy ache' it wasn't pretty; he lost his mind and went into a profanity-laced tirade the likes of which most of the boys had never heard before. Adam had heard it plenty of times from Paul, but it was not usually directed right at him the way that this was.

Coach didn't really mean it, he was just trying to make a point. Coaches yell; it comes as naturally to them as howling does to a wolf. He was an ex-marine who had been yelled at just that way a fair number of times himself over the years. He

just meant it to be tough love for both Adam and the team - really tough.

But Adam didn't see it that way. It was all he could do to choke back the sobs. The pain in his body was now going away, but his feelings would never fully recover. For once in his life, though, he was smart enough not to talk back. He just took it silently, trying unsuccessfully to stop the tears.

Oh come on Adam, stop crying, this is getting ridiculous! You don't cry on a football field unless your arm or leg has been ripped off, and maybe not even then. You are not injured, you are just hurt. There is a difference. Go rub some dirt on it, as they say, and get over it. If you ever want to earn anybody's respect out here you have to toughen up. Coach is pretty rough around the edges, he certainly could be handling this better, but the message is not wrong. You are not a little kid anymore. The waterworks need to stop. Just get up and say 'Yes sir' to Coach Troutwein, tell him that you promise you will do better next time and ask if you can try again. Low man wins, so make sure you keep your shoulder pads lower than his. If you get behind those big shoulder pads it doesn't hurt as much and they won't be able to move you. You are mad at Brody, are you? Well fire off the ball and hit him with everything you have, then dig in those cleats and push! Make damn sure you stay really low and hold your ground this time, no matter what it takes. If it is hard, do it anyway! Get down on all fours and grab the grass with your hands if you have to, but you will not get moved backwards this time!

Maybe something like that is what Adam's dad would have told him if he had been there. Perhaps even some other coach could have coached him up good with a little more tact and encouragement. But Coach Troutwein thought he was a lost

cause, and Adam did not do anything to change his mind. After yelling at him, Coach Troutwein finally had to just turn away in disgust as Adam gingerly made his way to the sideline and melodramatically collapsed, still holding his stomach with both hands as practice continued. Now it seemed like he was trying to prove how badly he had been injured to get everybody to feel guilty. But if he thought that would earn him sympathy he could not have been more wrong. From that day on, his reputation was set in stone. Adam was a wuss.

He never got into another scrimmage, and was actually quite grateful for that. Even some of the drills hurt. Adam hated everything about football. He dreaded having to go to practice all throughout the school day.

He finally quit a few weeks later. Not officially - he never actually talked to anyone about it, he just stopped showing up. After a month or so, they cut the lock off of his locker and cleaned it out.

Nobody actually wanted him on the team, but the other boys still gave him a lot of grief over it when they saw him at school. It was a good excuse to pick on him, and they took full advantage of it. Especially Brody; he called Adam a pussy right to his face pretty much every time he saw him when there weren't any teachers around. But even though he caught a lot of flak for it, Adam did not necessarily regret his decision. Maybe he was just not cut out for football.

Overall it was a pretty rough year. After the reasonably tolerable experience of the prior two years, the seventh grade was like a splash of cold water that wakes you up from a fairly pleasant dream. For his own survival Adam learned to blend in, to just fade into the background as much as he could, and he became very reserved. He rarely said much, and just tried to

stay out of the way and not draw any unnecessary attention to himself. As a result, he only got into one fight the whole year - with Brody, of course - but it wasn't much of one. Brody broke Adam's nose with the first punch, and that was about it. He walked away snickering as Adam wilted to the floor and became a pathetic sobbing mess. Both of them were suspended from school for two days for fighting.

Rita was unhappy about having to take him to the emergency room, but she kept her complaints to herself. She knew that she should not be thinking about money at a time like that, but it was hard not to. It took her several years to pay off the bill, but she did it. She tried to be as lighthearted as she could, teasing him about his 'nose job', and even claimed that it looked better than it did before. It was not true, of course, but it did make him laugh a little bit, which was needed.

One good thing that happened that year (as Adam perceived it anyway) was meeting Travis, who moved into the trailer park that spring. Travis was an eighth grader but he was always gracious about it and treated Adam like an equal. Travis did not have very many friends either, so he was not very picky about who he associated with.

Adam was usually so bored during the summer months that he could hardly stand it, but being able to hang out with Travis made the following summer the most fun that he had ever had. He finally had a friend, an honest to goodness friend, who seemed to genuinely like being around him. They did everything together that summer, nearly always involving getting into trouble somehow, but usually they did not get caught.

Unsupervised early teen boys looking for something to do was a recipe for disaster for any stray animal unfortunate

enough to cross their path; a pack of hyenas would have shown more mercy than these two. Their favored target was often stray cats. One time they found a litter of kittens tucked away in a corner of the trailer park under a sheet of old plywood that was with some other garbage. One of them hissed at Travis when he tried to grab it, and he jerked his hand back so fast that Adam almost fell over he was laughing so hard. Travis laughed along with him, but he showed it who was boss by moving it out into the open with his shoe (not an easy task) and then stomping on its head and kicking it a few times for good measure. Now that the kitten was sufficiently stunned, he grabbed it by the back of the neck and hurled it against a nearby chain-link fence.

One would like to think that Adam would have tried to stop him, but far from it; he laughed uproariously, finding the whole thing to be incredibly entertaining. Soon they were both doing it, and it became a contest to see how hard they could throw the kittens against the fence. Then they went back to Adam's house to get their bikes so that they could run over them. Once all the kittens were dead, or at least none of them were moving anymore, they went back to Travis's to play some video games.

Such wanton acts of cruelty were the norm rather than the exception. On another day Travis found a little snake that was about a foot long. It took them a long time to figure out what to do with it. At first they just threw rocks at it. Just as the snake was about to escape into the grass Travis would grab it and pull it back into the road. It would reach around and strike at him with its fangless mouth, and he would jerk his hand back and let go momentarily, but it did not deter him for long. He would not let it escape. The fact that it was trying to put up a little bit of a fight made it even more entertaining for the boys.

Finally Adam remembered that they had a five gallon bucket that was about half full of used motor oil back at his house. He mentioned it to Travis and said that they should burn the snake in it. Travis loved the idea. He grabbed the snake by the tail and carried it a little ways until it tried to bite at him; when that happened he would let go, but then he would pick it up again as soon as it tried to get away. The snake seemed to sense that it was in a desperate struggle for survival, but it was no use, its fate had been sealed from the moment that it was discovered.

The bucket was still too full for their purposes, so Adam tipped it and dumped some of the oil out, getting some of it on his hands and clothes. It spread out and seeped into the ground like black death.

Adam went into the house to get some matches while Travis, with some effort, finally managed to get the snake into the bucket without it crawling out.

Once Adam returned Travis eagerly took the matches from him as an impish grin spread across his uneven, unkempt teeth. They both giggled gleefully as he tossed the first match in, but it went out before it had ignited the oil. So then they soaked one end of a paper towel in lighter fluid and lit it before tossing it in, and that did the trick.

In what would have been perfect poetic justice, the boys, covered in oil and even a bit of lighter fluid, nearly got burned badly themselves in their efforts to start the fire. But cosmic justice is less succinct than poetic justice, and they managed to escape what was their due, at least for the time being.

Oh how they did laugh as they watched the snake helplessly swim around the bucket, engulfed in flame,

desperately looking for a way out that did not exist. It was in its own personal hell, swimming in a literal lake of fire. Such things are great fun for boys of a certain type.

Are you really feeling pity for that foul creature? Surely the frogs and insects that were its former victims would see this as just recompense. Perhaps all living things deserve to be put through hell for the pain that they have caused others. But it is not really punishment, these are just the games of chance that mortals are forced to play, the predator sometimes becoming the prey.

Take care, though, cruel boy. Wickedness may go unpunished for some, but it is unlikely to be so for you. Nemesis may take his time, but he will repay.

O, luckless boy, luckless boy! If only you had someone in your life who could guide you in the right way! If only there was someone who could cultivate and nourish the best part of your nature rather than the worst, as Travis does. Go on, laugh now cruel boy, you and your fiend of a friend; your laughter shall soon enough be turned to tears.

The Witch

The eighth grade was a little bit better for Adam than seventh grade had been. He was not around Travis as much, and although he did not like that, it was better for him. It also helped to be part of the oldest class. When the older kids picked on him Adam had a bad habit of mouthing off to them. It would have been better for him if he had just shut up, but he never learned. Unfortunately, he could not back it up, and they all knew it. One can only afford to be despised if he is strong.

In the eighth grade Adam had more problems with the teachers and the staff than he did with the other students. The fact that he was mouthy to the teachers actually helped him a little bit with the students. They were greatly entertained. He was not popular, by any means, but tolerated.

It was not really worth it though. When you make those who have authority over you miserable they will make you even more miserable. That is a life lesson that Adam, along with so many others, never seemed to learn (or at least never accepted) including his mother.

Adam's two main foes that year were Gloria, the head secretary, and Mr. Rowe, the Special Ed teacher. Believe it or not, the first one really was not his fault. Adam made plenty of enemies on his own, but this one was Rita's doing. Gloria, or 'The Witch', as many referred to her behind her back, sent out a letter over the summer informing Rita that Adam had lost his English textbook and that she would need to pay \$40 to replace it before he would be allowed to register for the upcoming school year. Rita was pretty skeptical that Adam had it - she did not say this to anyone, but he rarely did homework and she doubted that he would have brought a large heavy textbook like that home with him. When she asked him about it he swore that he turned it in on the last day of school. But they still tore the house apart looking for it.

After all that, Rita was certain that he did not have the book. A few days later she went over to the school office and told them that very thing. She said that she would not pay for it and demanded that they rescind the charge. She had been thinking about what she was going to say for a long time, and had actually become quite angry. Usually she was on the other side of it, but this was her chance to finally be the angry customer.

Gloria merely smiled and shrugged. 'He won't be able to register for classes then.'

'But you can't do that!' Rita replied. 'You can't keep him from coming to school just because of a missing book. Can I talk to the principal please?'

The principal was in his office, but The Witch had no intention of relinquishing control of this situation to him - he was too much of a pushover to be trusted in such matters. No, she would be handling this one herself. This foolish attempt to

go over her head (which was a subtle reminder that there was someone above her) made her more determined than ever that trailer trash here would not get her way. 'I'm sorry, Mr. Thompson is unavailable, but I am happy to assist you.'

Rita sighed with frustration and put her elbows on the counter as she leaned over it. She decided to try changing her tone. 'I promise you, we have looked everywhere. It is not in my house!'

'Well I am afraid that your son did not check the book back in at the end of the year.'

'He says that he did though. He swears that he turned it in along with his other books. You have the others, right?'

Gloria nodded. 'Yes, we have them. Perhaps he lost it.'

'No, he says that he turned it in when he turned in the others!' Rita was beginning to get worked up again.

'Listen, I do not know what to tell you. We don't have it.' Gloria was calm, but her voice was icy.

Rita sighed again and looked away, trying hard to keep her composure. 'Well can I look through the books? Maybe I can find it.'

That one hit a nerve. The Witch's jaw clenched, and she responded through gritted teeth. 'I can assure you Mrs. Jones that if *we* did not find it, *you* would not find it. It simply is not here.'

Rita glared at her and leaned over the counter a little more. 'What is that supposed to mean?'

Gloria met her gaze calmly and stared back. 'It means that our search was very thorough.'

That was not all that it meant, and Rita knew it, but there was nothing that she would be able to prove; that was part of Gloria's genius.

Rita was now ready for war. She was 185 pounds of mean (at least when she got worked up), and towered over the little five foot nothing secretary. She stood up a little straighter, as much as her back would allow, to let her know it.

But this was no bar fight, and unfortunately for Rita, she was outclassed here. Gloria looked up at her with the utmost assurance, the way a mongoose would at a fully-hooded Cobra. A counter separated them, but one got the feeling that even if it was not there Gloria would not have had the slightest worry.

It was frustrating to Rita that she was not able to intimidate her. But she remained in control, and did not climb over the counter to get her, as she would have liked to do. She knew that Gloria was trying to bait her, and even though it was still kind of working, she was not going to do anything that she could get arrested for. This bitch would love to call the cops on her. Finally she decided to just leave before she did something that she would regret. 'I will never pay for this!' She shouted on her way out.

Gloria yelled after her before the door closed: 'Well he won't be allowed in class until you do!' It was unclear whether Rita heard her. She sighed and shook her head, then looked over at Mary Ann, the other full time secretary. 'Some people shouldn't be allowed to breed.'

Mary Ann said nothing.

It took a few hours for Rita to cool off. She ran some other errands that had needed doing for some time, and tried not to think about it. After so many years of waitressing - where the customer is always right, even when they aren't - Rita did not think that she had much fight left in her. She had gotten used to just apologizing and eating crow whether it was really

her fault or not. But something about that woman really got to her. She had not been that angry in a long time.

But after some time had passed she began to rethink things. What was she going to do if they really didn't let him back into school? Could they do that? She didn't think so, but she did not really know. She did not want to get into trouble with the law over it. She also could not afford to take off another shift to come in and deal with it. So, at around three o'clock, she swallowed her pride and decided that she had to just go back and pay for the damn book and be done with it.

She averted her eyes as much as she could when she went back in, afraid that if she looked at that woman's gloating face she might punch it. And my oh my did Gloria ever gloat; when Rita said that she was there to pay for the book, she had her head down, and spoke quietly; Gloria heard what she said, but she made her say it again.

A concession only emboldened The Witch. Now she was going to rub her nose in it. As Rita began writing out the check Gloria looked at the amount and said: 'Oh, I'm sorry, but it actually needs to be for \$50. It is \$40 for the book, and then there is the \$10 service charge.'

Rita's head snapped up. 'What service charge?'

'Oh didn't I mention that? Silly me. So sorry I forgot to tell you about that before.' She smiled smugly. Adding insult to injury was The Witch's specialty. Perhaps she missed her true calling of working in a tow truck office.

Yep, Rita was definitely going to punch her, she just knew that she was. She crossed out the old one and hurried to write a new check before she lost control.

Mary Ann looked uncomfortable, but did not say anything. It is unfortunate that Rita could not have dealt with her while The Witch was away.

Rita realized that if she said anything else there would surely be even more ‘service charges’. She couldn’t bring herself to even try to apologize, though, and she wisely surmised that it would not really have helped anyway. Just before handing over the check she considered whether beating the hell out of this little bitch would be worth the prison time that she would get for it, and almost decided that it was. Maybe if she had not had kids to support . . . She just looked away and exhaled deeply, pretending like she was dealing with an angry customer. Unfortunately she could not spit in Gloria’s food. It was one of the most difficult things that she ever had to do, but she did not say another word. She tried to just walk away, but Gloria would not let her.

‘Mrs. Jones?’ Rita stopped and looked back. ‘Just so you know, there is a \$20 fee if the check bounces. Do you need me to hold it for a few days?’

Rita very nearly told her to fuck off, but she didn’t. She just turned and walked away without saying a word. Later, she wished that she had given her a bounced check for real.

One would think that The Witch would have been satisfied after all that, but her thirst for vengeance was never sated. She could be as vicious as the Romans. It was rare that anyone dared to cross her, even tenured faculty. She had a knack for turning everybody against you, and once you were on her bad side there was no return. The school was her own little fiefdom, and in it she wielded great power and influence.

Sometimes the victim did not actually do anything to provoke her though. Like any good predator, The Witch was

masterful at sensing vulnerability, especially social vulnerability. If she could isolate her prey they were done for. It was her way of culling the herd of undesirables, and it sent a message to everybody else that she was not to be trifled with.

But of course she was not mean to everyone (not even she was powerful enough to get away with that). It depended on who you were, and for students, who your parents were. If you came from the right family she could not have been any nicer. This was not necessarily a calculated decision on her part, it was just how she was. She always dressed immaculately, and if you did, especially with good brand names, that helped a lot. Most who did not have the right pedigree just tried to avoid her as much as possible, but because of Rita, Adam could not do that. She barely knew who he was before, but now she sought him out.

Adam did not make it any easier on himself either. Once when he was kicked out of class and sent to the principal’s office he just didn’t show up there. No one even knew that he was gone for nearly an hour, until the teacher came down to the office after the period was over to see how it was being handled.

Gloria gleefully took it upon herself to find him, of course. She went from classroom to classroom, politely interrupting to ask if anyone had seen him recently. She made sure that everyone knew all about it.

After she left Mr. Miller’s Social Studies class he chuckled and said to the students: ‘I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t want to be him right now.’ The students laughed and several heads nodded in agreement. No indeed. No one ever really wanted to be Adam Jones, but especially not then.

Gloria looked far and wide for her lost sheep (she was in the mood for mutton), but after a few hours, she finally decided that he must not be on school grounds. On a hunch, she looked up his home address and drove out there to see if he was at his house. As it turns out, he was. Once he started walking he just kept right on going and went all the way home. Like a dummy, he actually came to the door when she knocked. But then again, he had no reason to suppose that he had a bloodhound on his trail either.

He just stood there dumbfounded when he saw who it was. She quickly opened the screen door and Adam instinctively backed up and tried to close the other one, but she blocked it with her foot and her hand shot out and latched on to his ear like a pit viper, the long perfectly manicured fingernails digging in like fangs. He yelped in surprise and pain, wanting to bawl. He grabbed hold of her hand with his own and tried to free himself, but the nails just dug in more. Unless he wanted to leave his ear behind, he was not going anywhere. The escaped prisoner was caught; the warden had won.

She had been thinking about what punishment she would give him from the moment that she started looking. Most schools gave out suspensions but Gloria had never liked that because she felt that it was basically just a few days off from school. What kind of punishment is that? She had decided that two weeks of detention would be more fitting. She could do a lot with two weeks, and if he mouthed off, or did anything else at all, it would be more. She nearly told him what his sentence would be, but then thought better of it. It was a mere technicality, the principal would go along with whatever she decided, but appearances had to be maintained. She had to let him feel like it was his idea, at least in front of other people.

She patrolled detention like a tiny prison guard. Nobody messed with her. The students knew that several years earlier she had actually slapped a kid full in the face, and although his mom had a fit about it, she ended up getting away with it. She could do whatever she wanted, and everybody knew it. She was right, her detention was much worse than suspension. Those two weeks were a living hell for Adam, and she knew just how to push him so that he got angry and he ended up getting two extra days besides for mouthing off. She wanted more, but all in all the whole thing was quite satisfying to her.

This did provide an incentive for Adam to shape up. He tried to be on his best behavior for the rest of the year for fear of being sent to detention again. For the most part, he did not give his teachers any more trouble, and they were quite grateful for that. Gloria still gave him a hard time when she saw him in the hallways, but for the most part he learned to avoid her and not give her any excuses to punish him. In that way he managed to mostly stay out of her clutches.

The only teacher that Adam still had problems with, despite the ever present threat of Gloria, was Mr. Rowe. He was the Special Ed teacher. They sent Adam to him because he was so far behind in both reading and math. But Adam was not disabled, and Mr. Rowe knew it. He had some behavior problems, he was really far behind, and above all, he was kind of lazy. Nobody had ever really made him do his homework, and like a lot of kids, he only did what he had to do. He always meant to do it, he just procrastinated. But now he was so far

behind that he felt overwhelmed. In some cases he did not even know what he was supposed to do, let alone how to do it. That was especially the case in math.

Mr. Rowe patiently tutored him, and it helped a lot. Adam felt like he was kind of starting to get some of it. But after a couple of weeks of not doing his homework, Mr. Rowe started getting in his face about it. Adam had never been one to just take it, so he would yell right back at him.

There was one particularly bad incident that caused lasting damage. It turned out to be a breaking point. Mr. Rowe had spent nearly an hour helping Adam with his science homework the day before, and he got him to commit to finishing the rest of it that night while it was still fresh in his mind. Adam took it home with him, but he forgot. Homeroom with Mr. Rowe was Adam's first class the next day, and Mr. Rowe was livid when he found out that he had not even worked on it at all from what they had done the previous day.

He pulled Adam out into the hall and started yelling at him, pointing his index finger at him, and he was standing so close that it almost touched Adam's nose. Of course Adam had to yell back, as he nearly always did, saying that he just forgot and he told Mr. Rowe to 'cool it'.

Well, as one might imagine, that did not go over well at all. Mr. Rowe really lit into him then. He was yelling so loudly that everybody in the building could hear it. T.J. Reynolds got caught out in the hallway and came upon the scene unexpectedly as he was coming back to class after using the bathroom, and he wisely just went the other way.

As loud as Mr. Rowe was, Adam held his own. His voice cracked as he shrieked at the top of his lungs. But then he made a very bad mistake. Mr. Rowe's finger was almost

touching his nose, and Adam angrily swatted it away with his hand. Mr. Rowe grabbed him with both hands and shoved him up against the lockers really hard, pinning him there. He got nose to nose, and eyeball to eyeball, and yelled even louder (if that was possible) from about 2 inches away.

This time Adam did not say anything. He could tell that Mr. Rowe was really really mad, and he was actually a little scared. He had to work pretty hard just to hold the tears back, especially because he could not look away. Truth be told, his feelings were hurt, and he was embarrassed, and he felt guilty because deep down he knew that Mr. Rowe was right, but all of that emotion turned into anger.

It didn't feel to him like Mr. Rowe was just trying to help, it felt like he was taunting and cursing and bullying him. Physiologically, his body was experiencing a fight or flight response, and because he was pinned against the locker, flight was not really an option. But even if he had been loose Adam probably still would have chosen to fight.

Mr. Rowe noticed that both of Adam's hands were balled up into fists, and he had a murderous look in his eye. *Adam was angry at him?* He could hardly believe it. He stopped yelling and just stared at Adam for a moment.

'You wanna take a swing at me, kid?' He finally said in a relatively normal voice, but his top lip was slightly curled up into an angry sneer, almost like an animal showing its teeth.

Adam did not say anything, but yes, in that moment he wanted to hit Mr. Rowe more than anything that he had ever wanted in his life. Something stopped him though. Apparently the rational part of him had not entirely ceded control. Just having the chance to take a few breaths and think without all the yelling helped him.

They stood there eyeballing each other for a few more seconds. Finally Mr. Rowe looked away, shaking his head and sighing in frustration, and then he walked away without another word.

That was the moment when Mr. Rowe gave up on him. He decided that if Adam was not even going to try, then he was not going to bother with him anymore, or at least no more than he had to. It annoyed him that they had him working with Adam in the first place. It was not really his job, he was not a tutor. But whenever a kid was behind in school work or had behavior issues, they always sent them to him because they did not know what else to do with them. Well, he couldn't keep them from sending him over, but he was not going to waste time on him anymore.

From then on Mr. Rowe followed Adam's lead and only did the minimum that was required of him. He helped Adam when he had to, but did not ask much of him anymore. Like others, he was satisfied as long as Adam minded his own business and did not cause any trouble.

The two of them found a way to coexist when they were forced to be together, but it was an uneasy peace. Neither one ever apologized, or even discussed what had happened out in the hallway ever again. But for the most part, they got along alright because if Adam did not want to do anything, Mr. Rowe did not try to make him. That suited Adam just fine. He preferred just sitting there and doing nothing to doing homework.

It really is a pity that things turned out the way that they did, though, because Mr. Rowe might have been one of the few people who could have helped Adam. It could have been like one of those heartwarming stories about a special teacher

who had a really positive impact on a student's life, so much so that they stay in contact and are friends even many years later. But as it was, because he did not really understand him, Mr. Rowe despised Adam more than any student that he ever had, and Adam knew it, so he felt the same way about Mr. Rowe.

The Goddess

In high school Adam started showing some signs of anorexia. (Yes, boys can get it too if you call them fat often enough.) But nobody recognized it, including him. He weighed less as a sophomore than he did when he was a fifth grader. He started exercising a lot; too much actually. Rita had a cheap treadmill that she almost never used, but Adam used it quite a bit there for awhile.

Mostly, though, he just didn't eat very much. He became obsessively focused on his weight. Whenever he started to feel hungry he would smoke instead. It seemed to work pretty well, except that he ended up smoking a lot. Beer was by far the hardest thing for him to give up. Smoking somewhat took its place, but not entirely.

He still hadn't grown very much since elementary school. He was only about 5'7" in shoes, and he began to realize with despair that he was probably not going to get much taller. Adam had not exactly won the genetic lottery: with narrow shoulders, wide hips, and carrying what little weight he

still had mostly in the lower body, he was one of the most pear-shaped boys one would ever see. Being skinnier just highlighted how wide his hips were, and how narrow he was in the shoulders. He had a plain face, with teeth that could have used some braces (but of course never got them), and a slightly crooked nose that had never been quite right since it was broken. He fared little better in the intelligence department. He was below average in most respects, and was at least somewhat aware of it.

The problem was not just his genes, it was also his jeans. Coming from a family that is hovering just above the poverty level means that you cannot afford to have much fashion sense. You mostly just wear what you have. But Adam was a teenager now, so he was embarrassed.

He was now quite shy and withdrawn. He rarely spoke to anyone unless they addressed him directly. That was especially true when it came to girls. Adam considered them to be far above him, and for the most part the girls agreed and paid very little attention to him.

Except, strangely enough, Abby McKnight. Everybody knew that Abby would one day be the prom queen even before she got into high school; she was born for it, predestined, or at least it felt that way.

Adam was so attracted to her that even having somebody mention her name (and she did often come up as a topic of conversation) made it feel like there were butterflies fluttering about in his stomach. This was no mere crush, mind you, Adam thought that he was in love with her, although it was really something more like worshipful adoration. She was indeed fit for worship: an angel, maybe even a goddess.

The other girls claimed that she was arrogant and full of herself, but that was just Envy stirring up their hearts against her; Adam knew that it could not be true; to him, even insinuating that Abby had a flaw was tantamount to blasphemy. He kept all this to himself, but he would have vigorously defended her honor if he had dared to speak. He put forth a solid defense for her in his own mind, though, and held the day against all of his interlocutors during their imaginary cross-examination; then, after he had thwarted them all, he and Abby lived happily ever. She was his Cinderella, and he was the prince. Maybe Adam had read too many of his mother's romance novels for his own good.

In real life he had the considerable good fortune to sit behind her in Biology, a fact that he was grateful for every day. But the hormonal reactions occurring in his own body did make it difficult to concentrate; how exactly can one be expected to learn about biological processes while one is experiencing them firsthand? It was well worth it though. Adam cared a lot more about Abby than he did about Biology.

Sometimes her long golden hair would spill over onto his desk and he would get the crazy impulse to run his fingers through it, or at least touch it. He knew that she was too perfect to be defiled by the touch of his impure hands, but it was very tempting. He never did it, though, not even 'by accident' even though it was right there in front of him, sitting tantalizingly on his desk. He was too afraid that she would know, and that it would be so awkward and weird if she did. So he would just stare at the back of her head and her shoulders, sometimes for nearly the entire class period.

It was still awkward and weird even then. She seemed to be able to tell when he was looking at her. Adam could never

quite figure out how she knew, even when her back was to him, but she did. Maybe it was because he tried so hard to hide it whenever she looked at him. She rarely caught him staring directly at her (at least he did not think so anyway), but if she turned around, or when she got something out of her backpack, or even when she came into the room, she often caught him looking at her; then he would quickly look away, sometimes flushing with embarrassment. She didn't know why he was so shy; she tried to smile at him, and even say hi a few times, but that just seemed to make him even more embarrassed. But he had to look again the moment she was no longer looking at him.

At lunch Abby saw Adam sitting by himself. Actually she had been noticing it for awhile, and wondered where all of his friends were. It took a few days for her to realize that he must not have any, or at least none that had the same lunch period. She had friends around her pretty much all the time and naturally assumed that it was that way for everybody else as well, so that was a bit difficult for her to even comprehend at first.

Well, she had been thinking about it for awhile now, and this time she decided to do something about it. Her nurturing instincts had been triggered; she was determined to help this poor creature. Instead of going directly to her usual seat, a virtual throne that had been established for her where all the cool kids sat, she passed them by and went over to where Adam was sitting in a remote corner of the lunchroom.

She cheerfully said hello and introduced herself, holding her lunch tray in the left hand and extending the right to shake his hand. She mentioned that she thought they sat next

to each other in Biology, you know, just in case he had a hard time remembering her.

All Adam could do was nod. It was a good thing that he was already sitting down or he might have fallen over. Was this a dream? He was not sure, but whatever it was, he was liking it. He did shake her hand at least, but had a hard time saying much.

It was okay though. With the calm assurance of someone who had never really experienced rejection she asked if he wanted to come sit with her and her friends, pointing over at the table of the gods. Adam was not the only one who was surprised by this; as she pointed at them they looked at one another, wondering what she was doing.

‘Well, do you want to?’ Without waiting for a reply she motioned with her hand and said ‘come on’ and smiled warmly. She was so beautiful it was hard to even function, especially when she smiled like that, and it was at him! He had to look down for a second just to regain his composure and even be able to respond.

But he finally did. ‘Yeah, sure.’ He picked up his tray, and his courage, and followed her.

Those at the table somewhat reluctantly made room for Adam (Abby’s seat was always reserved for her) and he sat down right across from her. Abby then introduced him to everyone. It was mostly jocks and cheerleaders but there was also a smattering of others who had earned their bones some other way. Scott Brahmin, for example, was the lead singer in a pretty decent band that played some local shows on weekends, and was reportedly quite hot. Trevor Overman, the drummer, was there as well, along with his spiked mohawk.

Abby was not a cheerleader, but she was friends with all of them. That was mostly because of the Fury twins, Becca and Alyssa. They were co-captains of the team, and the squad nearly always did whatever they did.

No one at the table knew quite what to make of this new development. Everybody seemed a little uncomfortable. One cheerleader, Nikki Dentzmann, turned to Alyssa and gave her a questioning look. Alyssa just shrugged slightly and shook her head no. She did not know either. No one did except Abby.

Abby tried her best to keep a conversation going, but it was difficult. She asked Adam some questions about himself, but he gave only short answers and kept looking away uncomfortably. He felt so out of place - like a dirty sock that had been mistakenly dropped into a load of freshly laundered white linens. That is how it felt, like he was unclean. He was not fit to be eating at this table; he knew it, and he knew that they knew it; it seemed like the only one who did not know was Abby.

The last thing that Adam really wanted to do was to sit at that table. He knew his proper place, and it definitely was not there. But he stayed because she was there; she invited him, and she was even talking to him. He still could barely look at her when she was looking at him - it was like looking directly at the sun, the brightness was simply too much - but he could hardly bring himself to look away either. Adam would have gone through just about anything for the chance to be close to her.

Everybody at the table was reasonably pleasant to him that first day, though they mostly ignored him despite Abby’s efforts to include him in the conversation. No one really knew what to say to him, or about him.

They all assumed, and perhaps hoped that this was just a one-time thing that would resolve itself of its own accord. But then Abby started inviting him to come sit with them every day. They kept thinking that surely she would figure out on her own that this was wrong, but after a couple of weeks it was finally decided that something had to be done.

It was for her benefit really; they conspired only in an attempt to save her from herself. You see there were already whispers, and her friends were becoming concerned. They told her about them, for her own good of course, but it was like she did not even care. Well, they did not want her risking her social status (and theirs) by being seen with such unseemly company. Sure, one could talk with the peasants on occasion, as long as it was done in the appropriate way, saying hello in the hallway between classes for example, but actual fraternizing was unacceptable. A queen could not mix with the commoners without becoming common herself.

They finally had what nearly amounted to an intervention, led by the Fury sisters. They sat her down and told her the hard truth. People were like, seriously beginning to talk; like, a lot. Suppose Adam got the wrong idea and thought that she wanted to be more than friends? Certainly other people were getting that idea. Everybody was talking about it a lot; like, a lot lot.

But they were not able to talk any sense into her. It just turned into a big fight, and Abby brushed off their concerns, saying that she didn't care what other people thought of her.

Concerned by the signs of madness their queen was displaying, they hastily made plans to save her from herself whether she liked it or not. After some consultation, they finally decided upon a different strategy: they went after Adam. Who

did he think he was, anyway? The Fury twins had had enough; it was time to restore the natural order of things.

The twins decided that the best way to accomplish this objective would be to have an open and frank discussion with Abby's boyfriend, Jeff Brady. He ate lunch at a different time, so he had not been present for any of this, but he had, of course, heard all about it from several sources. The twins knew that they had their work cut out for them to make him jealous. Jeff was not typically the jealous type, and in fact, up to that point he had found the whole thing quite amusing. Being a three year starter at quarterback, and well aware that he was widely regarded by the fairer sex as the hottest guy in school meant that Jeff did not exactly feel threatened by the likes of Adam Jones. He just laughed off the many jokes sent his way by teammates and others. But Becca convinced him that the jokes still were not good for his image. Sure, Adam was not a genuine threat to take her away from him, but it was a threat to his reputation. It made him look like a fool. People were not laughing with him, they were laughing at him. Iago could not have done it any better.

After that conversation the jokes started getting on Jeff's nerves a little bit. It was irritating that everybody was always talking about it. The whole thing was starting to get old. He decided that maybe it was time to put an end to it so that everybody would shut up.

The next day Jeff found out where Adam's locker was and met him there (along with a couple of his larger teammates) before school started.

'Hey, you're Adam right? You need to stay away from my girlfriend. You have been hanging around her too much. If

she invites you to go somewhere, tell her you are busy; and from now on, you eat somewhere else at lunch. Deal bro?’

He was half expecting Adam to completely understand where he was coming from and be grateful that it had been handled in such a respectful way, man to man (or rather man to man-with-two-large-friends), but in this he was disappointed. Adam did not see it his way at all. He looked crestfallen at first, which made Jeff feel kind of guilty; he didn’t want to be a jerk. But why couldn’t he understand why this was a problem? Jeff felt like he had been very patient up to this point and had gone to great lengths to be fair. A lot of guys would have just beat him up.

Adam tried to protest even though he knew it would not do any good. ‘It is a free country, I can sit where I want.’ He said. But he was really unsure of himself and it showed. Jeff simply reiterated that he had better stay away from her, and then they left.

Adam thought about it for the next few hours, trying to decide what to do. When lunchtime came he finally decided to just go back to his old spot without making a big deal out of it or saying anything to Abby. He actually started to wonder if maybe she already knew all about it and even if she had actually told Jeff to do it. Part of him hoped that things could just go back to the way they were before and that the new seating arrangement would just be ignored, but he couldn’t help but feel a rush of excitement when Abby came over to ask why he was not sitting with them. She noticed! She didn’t put him up to it!

But then he did not know what to do. He tried to think of some excuse, but his mind was blank. All those hours to think about it, but then when the moment came he had nothing.

She could tell that something was wrong. After some hesitation, he finally told her what happened. He actually really wanted to tell her, hoping that she might choose him, but surely he had to know how risky that strategy was; he should have just lied, or been rude to her, or pretended that he had somewhere else to be; just about anything would have been better than telling her the truth. It really would have been better for him if he had done as he was told, but love makes fools of us all.

Abby was shocked. Jeff hadn’t said anything about it to her at all. If Adam had not had such a serious tone she would not have believed it. She had never seen that side of Jeff before, and the more that she heard the more angry she became. She told Adam that she would talk to Jeff and straighten it all out. Actually she planned to really let him have it, but she did not tell Adam that part.

In the meantime the problem was what to do for today. She thought about just inviting Adam over to the regular table anyway; Jeff wasn’t the boss of her, he did not get to decide who she could and could not sit with. But one look at Becca and Alyssa at the cool kids table made her think better of that. She knew that somehow they were involved in this.

Finally she decided to stay right there and eat with him, just the two of them. It was like a dream come true for Adam. He finally knew her well enough now that he could talk to her, and they had a good conversation.

But try as he might, and as beautiful and engaging as she was, he could not keep his eyes from wandering over to the cool kids table; the way that those in the aristocracy were looking at them made him very nervous.

As he looked at her, though, the way she brushed her hair away from her face, the cute dimples when she smiled, and

those beautiful blue eyes, he decided that whatever happened, it would be worth it. To have Abby all to himself, even for fifteen or twenty minutes, seemed worth any price. But as we know, all good things must come to an end (particularly if you are Adam Jones). He would pay dearly for this later, and he knew it. As the time ticked down and it got closer to when they would have to part ways and go to other classes a large pit began to form in Adam's stomach as he began to more fully realize what he had gotten himself into, and how it might play out.

Abby had her back to them. She did not necessarily intend it as a symbolic gesture, but it could have been, as it perfectly captured her feelings. She noticed Adam glancing over her shoulder at them, and the look of concern on his face. 'Don't worry. Everything is going to be fine, I promise.' She told him reassuringly.

But of course it was not. Abby saw Jeff in the hall between class periods and she lit into him right there. But word had reached him already about the incident at lunch and he was just as angry. That caught her off guard. She found herself trying to explain, and it was not going very well. Jeff was having none of it, and she was surprised by his stubbornness.

Everybody was looking at them. Once Abby noticed she tried to keep her voice down, but it did not matter, they were all listening. And staring.

Feeling isolated for perhaps the first time in her life, Abby nearly lost her nerve. She was not angry anymore, she was just desperately trying to explain. But she could not seem to find the right words to make them understand; it never occurred to her that maybe they did.

Jeff had had enough. He knew that pretty much everybody who was anybody was on his side, and his righteous

indignation gave him the upper hand. Make no mistake, he was winning; she even apologized for the 'misunderstanding'.

But then Jeff made a huge mistake. He had to take it too far: he forbid her from ever eating lunch with Adam again, and threatened to break up with her if she did.

Abby could hardly believe that he said that. 'You forbid me?' She repeated. That was it. He might have won her over and resolved the matter peacefully if he had not said that, but now she had to prove her independence. She turned her back on him and simply walked away.

This was without doubt the best day for gossip during that entire school year. They were like the school's celebrity power couple. Were they going to break up? No one really knew, but speculation was rampant and everyone was figuratively sitting on the edge of their seats waiting to find out.

The football team was angry. Who did this little jerk think he was? When a senior tells you to do something (especially when it is Jeff Brady) you had better mind your manners and do it. None of them would have dared to make a move on Jeff's girl, and they all knew that they were a hell of a lot better than Adam Jones. The hutzpah to think that he could dine at the table of the gods anyway . . .

Jeff never told anybody to do anything; as a matter of fact, he said that he did not care anymore, he hoped that they would be very happy together. But once Adam was Jeff's enemy, and justifiably so in their minds, he became the common enemy of the entire football team, and the cheerleaders too, although their energies were mostly focused on cutting Abby down to size. After all, Jeff was now single, and after the appropriate amount of time had passed they thought that maybe they would have a shot with him.

Tucker was the worst. His actual name was Casey Tucker but everybody mostly just called him Tuck or Tucker. He was a reserve linebacker and special teams player on the team and he took it upon himself to avenge his master. He went to Adam's locker and waited for him after school that day.

'You think you're a real big shot don't you asshole.' He said as soon as he saw Adam.

Adam did not respond, and tried not to look directly at him, but Casey was standing right in front of his locker. Adam decided that it wasn't worth it and tried to just walk away and come back some other time, but a big offensive lineman named Shane Dibble blocked his path. Casey came up and swatted the books that Adam was holding out of his hands. Everything scattered all over the floor. Then with one hand Casey lightly pushed Adam up against the lockers. Adam did not try to resist; he did not dare. He had never been so scared in all his life, even when Dallin was after him. A ring of students had formed around them. Everybody was watching.

Tucker took a step closer, towering over him. 'She doesn't like you, dumb-ass, she just feels sorry for you.'

There were some snickers from the crowd. Shane had to look away and cover his mouth to keep from laughing.

Adam tried to think of a comeback, but he could not come up with a decent one. He wanted to say something like: 'Well, she likes me better than you.' But that seemed kind of lame, and was it even true? What good would it do to even try to argue with him anyway?

Piercing truth hurts more than an insult ever could. Pain seared Adam's heart as he desperately tried to think of some way to prove Casey wrong, but he finally realized that it was true. It was only pity - that was all that it had ever been, and all

that it would ever be. Adam looked down at the floor, lost in thought and staring off as though he were somewhere far away. Down deep he had always known the truth, he just did not want to admit it. But now it could not be ignored.

How could this have been such a revelation? What an astounding lack of self-awareness for Adam to have even allowed himself such misguided hopes in the first place. But let us not judge too harshly, as we have all done the same thing. No one is rational when it comes to love. We hope when there is no basis for hope, we wish for the impossible, we strive for the unattainable, we dream of what we know can never really be. It is a form of madness.

Cupid is a mischievous god; those poison-tipped arrows sow the seeds of misery. The cruel one typically only infects one party, leaving the other to flee in fear and dread, but even in the rare instances when love is returned it is then merely a mutual madness. Yea, romance is a drug that makes fools of us all. Even the greatest succumb.

It is that damn Biology that is to blame. Accursed hormones! Biology does not care about your happiness, she is only concerned with serving her own interests. Biology - that great egoist who tries to form all living things in her own image.

Adam's subdued response surprised Casey. He had been mentally preparing himself for battle, and he assumed that he could goad Adam into coming at him. But now he did not know what to do. Finally he pushed Adam into the lockers again. 'You're such a loser.'

Adam's mind was forced to return from the far off place where it had been, and he stared directly into Casey's chin and nose, now hovering menacingly close to him, and then he

finally looked up into those angry-looking eyes. Why were they so angry? What had he ever done to Tucker? Adam did not feel angry at all, just confused and sad.

He looked away and very politely moved to the side, then bent down and began to pick up his things from the floor. He was hoping that Tucker would just leave him alone, but no such luck. While he was still on his knees Casey bent down and roughly knocked all of his things out of his hands again and gave him another shove, almost sending him all the way to the floor.

A slight murmur came from the crowd, which was growing by the second. It was going to happen! Fight, fight, fight!

Now Adam was starting to get angry. His fight or flight response had finally been triggered as he realized that perhaps he was not going to get out of this one. Part of him really wanted to just haul off and punch Tucker as hard as he could. Since he was already on ground, the thought occurred to him to drive at Tucker's knees and try to tackle him. Maybe if he could catch him by surprise and get him on the ground . . .

But Adam was not insane. Casey Tucker was first of all a senior, 6'2" and 180 pounds, and pretty athletic, while Adam was a 5'7" sophomore and at this point weighed about 135 pounds. Not only that, but what if his rather large teammates got involved? Everybody in the crowd was against him, there wouldn't be a single person on his side, or at least that is how it felt. He was truly terrified. Finally, he decided to flee. He got up quickly and tried to push his way through the crowd so that he could leave without even attempting to pick up his belongings again, knowing how that would go. The people in

the crowd almost did not let him through. He almost had to fight with them just to get by them.

He finally managed to escape while being serenaded by a chorus of jeering. Tucker smiled mockingly and shook his head from side to side in disgust. What a little bitch.

It was terribly humiliating having to just take it while everybody laughed at you. But Adam knew that he could not fight Tucker, so take it he did. Luckily he did not start bawling, but he sure wanted to.

O Adam The Bully, he who once inspired such great fear and dread in the hearts of his enemies, to what depths the once mighty have fallen!

All that he could do was to keep walking, and with a hurried step at that. But now he was very angry, even trying to plot some sort of revenge. The mocking of the crowd had really gotten to him, as it always had.

Well, as Fate would have it, that was exactly when he ran into Tavon and Bob, hanging out with a few other people just outside on the school steps.

When Bob recognized him he pointed and said: 'Hey, hey, you that white trash mutha fucka tryin' ta cozy up on Jeff's girl, ain't you? You better back the fuck up hommie, you know what's good for you.'

It was not intended to be a threat, or even an insult, that was just how Bob talked. He had a friendly smile on his face when he said it. He called his white teammates 'white trash' all the time, and his black ones the word that should never be uttered, but he only did it playfully. Everybody who knew him knew that he did not mean anything by it. He didn't know Adam from, well, Adam, but he actually thought of himself as performing a good deed in giving him the warning. That was

not how Adam perceived it, though, especially right at that particular moment.

Tavon and Bob were both wide receivers on the football team. Bob was 5'11", Tavon was 5'8", and both were relatively skinny, although Bob had a pretty good build on him for a skinny guy. For some reason Adam was not nearly as intimidated by them as he had been of Casey Tucker. Maybe it was the crowd, or it may have been as simple as the fact that they were sitting down when Bob talked to him and they did not seem angry or aggressive. At any rate, in his current state of mind, with hackles officially raised, to be called white trash really got to Adam, maybe because it was true (well, partially anyway) and there had been enough hard truths to deal with for one day.

No Adam! Don't say it! We beg you, please do not use that word! It does not matter what they said to you, or what the circumstances are, you cannot ever call someone that no matter what! But being Adam Jones, of course he did; he called them the most vile contemptuous term ever created by man, the king of all racial slurs, the word that should not be uttered.

Tavon and Bob and those around them all looked at each other in shock, not only because of what he said, but also because of the contempt that he said it with. What the hell was he so mad about? They didn't do anything to deserve that.

But after that initial shock wore off the anger came quickly. Adam started to walk away. Tavon turned to Bob and said: 'Let's get him!'

Adam heard him and looked back. As soon as he saw them stand up he realized what a terrible mistake he had made. But it was too late. There was nothing that he could say or do

now that would get him out of this. He tried to run, but there was no way that he was going to outrun Tavon and Bob.

Bob did not really need any help, but Tavon gave it to him anyway. It was Tavon that tackled Adam around the legs in less than 20 yards. Once they had him on the ground a hail of punches and kicks rained down upon him, nearly matched by the profanities and insults.

Adam tried to curl up and protect himself, but it did little good. They made him wish that he had never existed, which perhaps is appropriate, since nearly everybody else wished that he did not exist either. The thought did cross his mind that he may indeed die right there.

When they were both out of breath and it became clear that he was not fighting back they finally stopped. Adam was trying to play dead, as though it was a grizzly bear that was attacking him, and he did not dare to move. But he could not contain a slight whimper as he laid there, with his eyes closed, wishing he could be transported somewhere else.

Suddenly realizing what they had done, Tavon and Bob got scared. 'Let's get out of here.' Tavon said. They ran off, hoping that nobody other than their friends had seen it. But of course several others had. It all happened so quickly that there had not been time for a crowd to form, but news of it traveled nearly as fast as Tavon and Bob.

They did not actually have nearly as much to fear as they thought. Pretty much everybody was on their side. Their friends could corroborate what Adam said, and it only validated what everybody already knew, that he was scum, and everyone for the most part thought that he had gotten what he deserved. Even the principal had little sympathy. He suspended all three of them for two days each. He said that all of them were

equally at fault because it takes at least two people to fight, which is true, but it only takes one for assault and battery. This was not a fight, it was a beatdown. Adam never threw a punch, he just curled up into a ball like an armadillo and tried to protect himself. But when Tavon and Bob told the principal what was said to them, and were sincerely quite emotional as they did so, he was angry, and he understood where they were coming from. Adam's suspension was as much for what he said as for anything else, and perhaps deservedly so. At least he escaped with relatively minor injuries. As angry as they were, they did not hurt him as badly as Casey Tucker probably would have.

Of course Adam blamed Tavon and Bob for the entire thing. In his mind, they started it (which is exactly what he told the principal) and his hatred of them, and black people in general, just burned that much hotter as a result. It only validated what he already knew, that they were scum.

Abby was horrified when she found out what happened but there was little that she could do. Adam was an Untouchable now. Even his name was toxic. She felt responsible, but she did not know how to help. It had been a rough few days for her as well. She was beginning to feel how lonely it can be at the top. Being an object of desire for some aroused envy in others. Unseen enemies, some of whom claimed to be her friends, and others that she did not even know by name, all secretly plotted against their queen. Her rivals would have loved nothing more than to knock her off of her pedestal. This had been a serious misstep, and her enemies could smell political vulnerability in the air. Now that it was safe to do so, they pounced.

Most of the comments about her had become negative. The girls said that she was a slut, and the boys hoped that it was true, although they did not dare say so. However, much to the disappointment of all, the rumors were greatly exaggerated. They were repeated anyway.

They also talked about her intelligence, or lack of it. Before, she was a beautiful blonde; now she was a dumb blonde. Instead of blonde jokes everybody started calling them Abby jokes and substituted her name into them. There was even a rumor that she was failing most of her classes. It was not true, but since when has the truth ever gotten in the way of a good rumor?

As it turns out Abby was mortal after all. Not even her popularity could withstand the stench of Adam Jones. It was like trying to help a drowning man who, in his desperate fight for survival, ends up pulling his rescuer down to the depths right along with him. Now people were saying that Abby was a racist simply because she was associated with him.

All of this was just a taste of what was to come if something did not change, and change quickly. Right now Becca and Alyssa were just punishing her, but if they fully turned on her the pack would eat its own. Once the Fury twins get their hooks into you, they were merciless. The crowd would follow their lead and be merciless as well. Even the fall of Oedipus is no greater than that of a disgraced woman.

The attempted character assassination was now in full swing. The rabble wanted blood. Without further support from the nobility they could not fully bring her down, but many were trying.

Abby had more political savvy than her enemies realized though. She decided that she had to talk to Jeff. That

was the only way. Jeff was the one person who could call off the dogs. She wanted to try one more time to explain what her true intentions had been, and she did. She even swallowed her pride and apologized. Jeff never apologized, but he swore that he did not know about, or even want Tucker to do what he did, and he promised to talk to the guys on the team and get them to back off. Abby thanked him for that, and they hugged and kissed. The king and queen were officially back together, to the disappointment of many.

Being back with Jeff helped, but Abby knew that to be fully restored to her former glory she had to make things right with Becca and Alyssa. Once the twins were appeased, they would bring everyone else along. But it would be no easy task. Of the two, Becca would be the most difficult to convince. None of her peers had ever dared to talk to her the way that Abby had, and she could hold a grudge for the rest of eternity.

Abby was right in suspecting that it would be difficult. Becca did not like her (did she really like anyone?) and she would never truly forgive her. But she did respect the young queen's resourcefulness. Becca did not believe for a second that the apology was sincere, but it didn't need to be. Abby knew what she had to do, and she was playing it just right. She had nearly managed to extricate herself entirely from this genuine political crisis, the first one she had ever faced, and she was doing it entirely on her own. That had to be worth something. She was still quite young and inexperienced, but there was great potential. She just needed to listen.

Becca knew that it was all in her hands and she exulted in her power. She seriously considered rejecting the bid just out of spite. They didn't really need Abby, they could always find a new queen if they wished; perhaps it could even be Becca

herself. But Becca was a powerbroker at heart. She was a queenmaker more than a queen, and she enjoyed working behind the scenes. It is more fun to pull the strings than to be the puppet. Abby had been humbled, and she seemed to have learned her lesson. She would listen from now on.

Becca carefully considered whether she ought to make further demands. She currently held all the cards, but it is unwise to overplay one's hand, and Becca was wise beyond her years as a political operative. One of her strengths was the ability to make others feel like it was their decision, which allowed them to save face. She adjourned the meeting and went on her way, never mentioning Adam. She assumed that if Abby had gotten this far on her own she would know what to do. It would be good for Abby to fully resolve the matter on her own.

Abby did realize that something had to be done there, she just wasn't sure what. She had been thinking about it for the last few days, and had not been able to reach a decision. She felt really bad about the whole thing because she never meant to give him the wrong impression, if indeed he really was in love with her, as everybody said. Abby always tried not to assume such things because she thought it would show arrogance if she did, but she was not stupid, despite all the Abby jokes. She knew. Especially now.

Unfortunately this is no rags to riches love story in which the princess falls in love with the everyman and after overcoming great adversity from those who would keep them apart they live happily ever after; such things only happen in fairy tales. Abby McKnight was never going to fall in love with Adam Jones. It was only misguided hope to ever think that she would. Abby tortured him by giving him hope, though it was the last thing that she ever intended to do.

Now she was in a real bind. She desperately tried to think of a way out, but what could she say? After making such a big deal out of making sure to include him, how could she now explain why they could not even be friends anymore? Could you have that conversation with somebody who worshipped you? What would you say?

The poor girl was only trying to be nice, and she had paid dearly for it. No good deed goes unpunished, as they say. Now she regretted it all, but she did not want to hurt him, at least no more than she already had. There just did not seem to be a good way out.

The only thing that she could think of was intended to be more of an intermediate step than anything. On the second day of Adam's suspension, she stayed after the bell to speak to the Biology teacher, Mrs. Bell, and asked if she could change seats. She did not explain why, but Mrs. Bell knew some of what was going on, and granted the request. When Adam came back to school the next day he was surprised to discover that Abby was now sitting all the way on the other side of the room, five rows away, and somewhat behind him near the back. It made it difficult to look at her because he had to be far more obvious about it. He still did it anyway, on occasion, and he always looked at her when she first came in through the door or moved around the room, but for the most part, he was forced to keep his eyes in front.

Abby was just trying to get through a couple of days. She assumed that she would not be able to put off having that difficult awkward conversation forever, but she just couldn't face it right then. After those first few days had passed she made a point to give a slight wave or say hi to Adam when she saw him, and offer a bit of small talk when they passed in the

halls or before or after class, but she was always with someone else and she just offered a little something in passing before going quickly on her way. Even this caused problems. People still gave her looks. It felt risky to even talk to him at all. Being polite felt like it was the best that she could do. She kept expecting Adam to try to talk to her about it, or send a note or something, but he never did. After a few weeks had passed she finally began to breathe easier. Perhaps they were not going to have to talk about it after all. After that much time had passed it seemed like it would have been even more awkward. She hoped that he felt the same way, and talked herself into thinking that he did. Perhaps he understood after all.

In reality, though, Adam never did really know why she changed seats. He assumed that she, just like everybody else, did not like him anymore because of what he said to Tavon and Bob. He actually thought about apologizing to her, but he did not think it would do any good. It never had with anybody else.

Not being able to see her as much made Adam sad, but not angry. He could never be angry at Abby. Deep down he had always known that it could not last. Somehow it seemed appropriate that she was back out of reach and could only be appreciated from afar. Cosmic order had been restored, and he worshipped her even more as a result. She seemed more like an idol made of gold than a mortal.

It was indeed a remarkable sight when she walked down the hall like a model on the runway, especially when the Fury twins were with her. She was like a whole different person around them. She had to be. Abby, being the center of attention, was usually in the middle and the twins flanked her on both sides. Her long golden hair, seemingly always gleaming in the light, was in perfect contrast to the shiny black hair and athletic

panther-like grace of the twins. Opposites merged into a beautiful complementary form that inspired nearly universal awe. Butterflies would immediately begin to flutter inside of just about anyone, both male and female, that gazed upon them. The commoners hoped to be noticed by them, but also feared it.

Sometimes the other cheerleaders followed along, making it look like a gaggle of geese in formation with a swan at their head. But everyone knew their place in the hierarchy. None of them dared to be overly presumptuous in trying to climb the social ladder because of a healthy respect for Becca and Alyssa, who everyone knew would defend their positions like Rottweilers at feeding time. Wherever Abby went the spotlight tended to follow, and they were following it; she just happened to be there too.

Changing seats worked: Abby was popular again. They had always hoped to reclaim her, and once she came around they were happy to welcome her back into the fold. She had paid her penance and now all was forgiven. Becca and Alyssa were a little less warm in their reception of her though. For them it was more of a probationary period. She was back in, but on a relatively short leash. That whole thing with Adam was like a bad dream that the cool kids just wanted to put behind them. But everybody did love to tell the story about how Abby had to ask the teacher to change seats because Adam had creeped her out so much. Whenever it came up Abby said nothing. Why try to explain or correct the facts? No one would listen anyway. She finally realized that.

It was a valuable lesson in the rules of propriety for the young queen. She was only a sophomore, she would learn . . . and she did. She never quite turned into Becca, but she would never again be the same Abby either.

The Leper Colony

Adam's junior and senior year of high school were some of the best of his life. Though he was still despised by the bourgeoisie, at least he was known, which was enough for the lower classes. High school is when the outcasts and misfits of society finally band together to form their own culture, or really more of a counterculture. Instead of exclusivity they preach tolerance and acceptance, no matter how geeky, weird, or ugly you happen to be.

Since tolerance was a core value, one could still get into trouble for being intolerant though. The racial slur was a stumbling block for Adam in that regard, but this group was more willing to forgive. For one thing it happened all the way back when he was a sophomore, which seemed like forever ago. They assumed that he knew now that he had made a terrible mistake. Adam's feelings hadn't changed, but he had learned to keep them to himself. If he would have done or said anything else of that kind again he would have been an outcast

even here, but after a suitable grace period had passed without further incident he was welcomed in with full fellowship.

Adam finally had some friends, a whole group of them! As a matter of fact, he was probably the most popular among them; the prince of paupers. The boys thought he was pretty awesome because Abby McKnight came over and sat by him that one time. Just him! Even being king for a day was more than any of them had ever had, or ever expected to have. The story had become a legend.

The black sheep had found a flock that was just right for him, and it felt so good to finally fit in. He even had a quasi-girlfriend. Her name was Marla. Her most striking features were the dyed red hair, although it was not overly extreme, and a nose ring.

Marla drove the bus, Adam was just along for the ride. When she found out that he had never had a girlfriend, and he said that girls never really liked him 'that way' Marla saw it as a call to action and stepped in to fill the breach. They were never in love, or even really in 'like', but there was mutual affection. After awhile, though, (once Marla decided that it was time) the tiny amount of eros that was in the relationship died peacefully of natural causes. It became more and more platonic until it had drifted back into friendship. Remarkably there were no hard feelings either way, perhaps of the lack of romance. They mostly just hung out with everybody else even when they were dating, so it wasn't much of a change.

Marla humanized women for Adam. She had disgusting hairy legs and armpits that she refused to shave, and she belched and swore like a dude. She thought it was hilarious to fart and drive away the person sitting next to her on the couch.

She was basically just one of the guys. She even liked video games, and was actually pretty good at them.

Maybe the reason that Adam always felt so comfortable around her is because he was not really attracted to her. She was also very accepting, and that helped too. She didn't care about his looks any more than she cared about her own. Adam never felt nervous or shy around her, or around other people when she was there, even when there was a big group. He could talk to Marla about anything. In that way he was actually much closer to her than to any of his guy friends. Guys don't usually like to talk to other guys about their feelings if it can be avoided: too mushy, too awkward. But Adam needed to talk and Marla was willing to listen.

We are all a collection of psychological wounds. If we carried them around with us on the outside, rather than buried deep within, it would be a terrible sight to behold. The worst of it is that these wounds never completely heal. They can be reopened by the most random event or memory and the hemorrhaging begins all over again. The best that we can do is to manage them, to just try and keep it under control. For Adam it was like a disease that was currently in remission, but it never entirely went away, and never would. But Marla was like a living breathing bandage, and her healing arts worked wonders, at least for the time being.

Marla hated bullies. One wonders what she would have thought if she would have known Adam The Bully, way back when, but that was not the Adam that she knew. She saw him as the victim and was always on his side.

It was so nice to have people to hang out with, even if most of the time all they wanted to do was get high and play video games. Adam liked getting high, especially with friends,

but drugs never had the hold on him that alcohol did. Meth was too complicated; he could have blown himself up. Cocaine was too high maintenance and expensive for someone of his means. Heroin just made him itchy. But Adam had fallen in love with alcohol. They flirted a lot while he was growing up, but the relationship had never been all that serious; now they were going steady. What began as a mere dalliance was turning into a very serious relationship. But it was an open relationship. Alcohol never seemed to mind when he got a little side action from marijuana. She was kinky like that. It actually seemed like they were both kind of into it. Alcohol was cheap and easy, just how he liked them, so he kept coming back to her.

Rita got pissed sometimes because it seemed like there was never any beer in the fridge, but she kept buying more. It never occurred to her that there might be a bigger problem.

Because of his history of behavior issues Adam was sent to see the school counselor. She was an older woman with kind eyes and a soothing voice. It took awhile, but she finally got him to open up about some of his problems and it helped him to talk to her. The biggest thing that she helped him with was the eating problem. Marla helped a lot with that too. She was heavier than she ideally would have been, but she was certainly not apologizing to anybody for it, or feeling sorry for herself. Her attitude was somewhat contagious and it helped Adam to accept himself as he was. If Marla didn't care, why should he?

It seemed like things were finally looking up for Adam. Overall, he did better and was happier during those last two years of high school than at any other time in his life. But of course it could not last. This was merely the eye the storm.

Boss Man

Adam tried community college, but he did not do very well. He had never liked school, and was not particularly good at it, especially because he had always been behind. After awhile he was going mostly just for the financial aid. He failed several classes and quit after a few years without earning any kind of degree.

However, while in college he met a classmate who had been a prison guard, and talking to him really piqued Adam's interest. He decided to apply. It was a somewhat lengthy process, but Adam was quite committed to it (perhaps more committed than he had ever been to anything) and eventually he got the job. He was very excited, almost giddy. He thought it was about the funniest thing that he had ever seen when they made him sign a legal document promising not to sodomize the inmates. He would not have done that otherwise, of course, probably. But he did love to show the bad guys who was boss.

When he was growing up many people assumed that Adam would one day end up in prison but it would have

surprised them that it would be as a guard. He had already greatly exceeded their expectations.

Rita was just glad that he was finally moving out of the house. Well, sort of. She had mixed feelings because he was the youngest and now she was alone. They actually got along okay, but it was time. She was happy that he was so excited about it.

You would have absolutely hated Adam The Corrections Officer if you had been one of the inmates, particularly if you were black or Hispanic. Of course it is not like he got along real well with the white inmates either, but it was not quite as bad. Adam The Bully had been lying dormant for awhile, but now he was released and this time he had a nightstick. You would have thought he was the most cruel, racist, despicable human being that you had ever met, and you would not necessarily have been wrong, for we must acknowledge that Adam The Bully was all of those things. You would not have known any of the good in him. You may not have even believed that there was any. You would not have understood him because you would not have known his story. There are many sides to a person and usually we only see a few. We may have an entirely different view of those we love and those we hate if we had known them in other circumstances. What complex creatures we are.

Adam especially hated the gang members because when he told them to do something they would never just do it, they always had something to say. They mouthed off to him the same way that he did to teachers while growing up, but few of us (if any) are able to see ourselves as we really are, and Adam was certainly not one of them. He never could see the Gloria in himself, nor himself in the inmates.

The real issue was with Carlos, one of the leaders of the gang MS-13. Adam knew he was the one responsible for much of the gang's activities, and called him out over it. But he did not really have much proof. Carlos was not about to lose face, and he always replied with sarcasm and insults.

It was a battle that Adam should have known he could never win, as the audience was biased against him from the start, but he could not let it go. The more he tried to win this little battle of wits with Carlos the worse it got. The inmates just made fun of him, and that was something that Adam could not handle very well. He would become furious, and then they would do it more when they saw that it was getting to him. Soon there was bitter hatred on both sides.

More than once, Adam, along with a few other guards, took Carlos off by himself for 'questioning' and beat the hell out of him. But if Adam thought that this would intimidate him, he was wrong. Carlos never made a sound, and hardly even winced or gave any acknowledgement that it hurt. He did not try to fight back - he was handcuffed - but the hatred in his eyes was terrifying. Adam tried not to be afraid, but he was. He overcompensated with his bravado, but it did not fool Carlos or anyone else. Adam could not break him. He carried the baton, but Carlos was always the one in control.

It was one thing to rough up a couple of the underlings here and there to send a message, that was fairly normal, but to go after a leader was a big no-no. The gang interpreted it as a sign of disrespect, and that could not be tolerated. A lot of them wanted to kill Adam, and they hinted at it even when he was around. But the more flippant and insulting and even threatening that they got, the more that Adam felt like there was no way he could back down.

It was like a chihuahua giving orders to a wolf pack. Oh what they would have done to him if only he had been another inmate! They talked about it often amongst themselves. There was even some halfway serious talk about having their associates do something to him on the outside. It had not progressed very far, but there was talk. That would have been a big step, though, and it was not to be taken lightly. Everybody knew how much Carlos hated Adam, and that worried him, even if it was made to look like an accident. Carlos was a planner. He hadn't gotten to where he was by being reckless. He had a long memory, and he decided that he could afford to wait until the perfect opportunity. Maybe he could even do it himself once he got out. He viewed Adam as more of a nuisance than anything else; he was a mosquito that needed to be swatted, but the timing had to be right. Carlos's levelheadedness and willingness to set aside personal vendettas for the greater good really impressed his associates.

Could it be? Was Providence smiling down upon Adam Jones? Was it a bit of luck that kept him alive for a little while longer? Or could it be considered a kindness to extend a life such as his? Perhaps Providence is the cat and Adam the mouse. Whatever it was, they decided that he was not worth it, at least for the time being.

What may have actually saved Adam was essentially getting fired. He did not make it through the probationary period. It certainly did not help that he had a DUI, but the biggest problem was that when it got back to his supervisor what was going on with Carlos, Adam lied to him about some of the things that he did.

Being a prison guard brought out the worst aspects of Adam's nature. Though he would not have agreed, it was better

for everyone that it did not work out for him. Even the other guards did not like him much. They backed him up because they had to, but they did not appreciate him causing problems and letting things get so personal. Thus ended (at least temporarily) the quixotic quest for control and dominance that Adam had so often sought, but would rarely have.

Now he had to try to figure out what he wanted to do with his life all over again. He felt betrayed and somewhat hurt because he thought that they basically took Carlos's side over his, and he couldn't believe that they would do that. He still thought that he wanted to do something similar for awhile, but he could not figure out exactly what. He applied at an illegal immigration detention center. He would have loved to do that. But they never called. He also thought about becoming a cop, and kept thinking about that for several years, but he never actually applied or did much about it. It is just as well, he would not have been a good cop.

But he had to have a job of some kind, and he finally found one doing drywall. It was a bit random. He had never done drywall before, but he started by doing construction clean up. Mostly he was carrying plywood and drywall sheets to different locations, sweeping, taking small leftover pieces out to the dumpster, and just general cleanup. The guy who was second in command at his job site for some reason took a liking to Adam, and after a few weeks he started training him a bit doing drywall. Once that job was finished they let him stay on, and after some months had gone by and others had quit, he got to be one of the regulars doing drywall, and got the subsequent bump in pay. He did not love it; who would? But it paid the bills. Rita was kind of proud of him for sticking with it.

The Harpy

Adam had a parasite on his arm. She was currently in the process of burrowing her way in. She squeezed his bicep admiringly and said: 'Wow, do you work out?'

He did not, and really it was pretty obvious that he did not, at least not seriously, but such questions came naturally to her. That is what she did around men. It was not original, but it worked extremely well. Adam blushed and shrugged it off, but he was quite flattered.

It was quite unusual for Adam to be receiving this kind of attention from a woman, especially a woman like this. He did not really know what to do with it but he was certainly enjoying himself.

Her bright red lipstick accentuated the friendly beautiful smile that she often had, the three inch heels lightly touched his own legs from time to time, and wow, did she ever fill out that tight low cut dress! Adam could hardly believe his good fortune. He had just come in for a drink. There was certainly nothing out of the ordinary about that. But nothing like this had

ever happened to him. Well, unless you count that one time with Abby McKnight, but this was different. This woman seemed to be genuinely interested in him. She was laughing at all of his jokes. That never happened.

Adam did not realize that when the parasite was flirting (which was quite often) she laughed at almost everything whether it was funny or not. It sounded like sweet music, a siren's song that could pull in an unwitting sailor even from great distances, and Adam was at close range. 'Oh, you are so funny.' Hearing her say that made him feel like he was the king of the world.

Although Adam thought she was gorgeous, her attractiveness was not actually exceptional - only a 6 or maybe a 7 at best, even by bar standards - and to get there she had wrung every bit out of what nature and some of the best plastic surgeons in California had given her. But she had a great personality, or at least it seemed that way when you first met her, and after 5 minutes of talking to her many men were madly in love, especially if it was near closing time.

It was pretty much always the same game plan. She was naturally quite friendly, especially towards men, especially at bars, so inevitably some guy would strike up a conversation with her or she could get one going with him, and then she would hang on his every word and laugh at every joke, leaning in and lightly caressing his shoulder while doing so. She gave him so much respect and deference and attention that it felt like everyone else did as well, and it would not be entirely in his head; people really did perceive a man differently when he was with her, and he acted differently when he was around her. It was an honor to have her on your arm, and when you did, it felt like you owned the room because she did. Adam hadn't felt

that way very often and he found it as intoxicating as the alcohol.

Their bar stools were quite close together now. He looked deep into her eyes as they talked, and she returned his gaze. Perhaps it was the alcohol that gave him such courage; he would not ordinarily have done that. At times they were so close that it looked like they were about to kiss. He really wanted to go for it. He knew that she would not have minded, and it was incredibly reassuring to know that. But that was still a little too much for him. He couldn't quite bring himself to actually do it.

The fact that Adam fell so hard for her was no real surprise. It was Destiny. Seldom did she make up her mind to catch a man and was unable to get it done, particularly in her native habitat, the local bar. She was a master of seduction, but much of it was not even conscious. Adam thought that they were soul mates, destined to be together, but really it was no big thing to her. Adam had no way of knowing this, but she flirted with pretty much all the guys that way. That is just how she was.

When he finally managed to ask for her phone number she could not suppress a little giggle. He seemed so innocent and shy. He could barely even look at her. She thought it was cute.

She reached over and pulled him close, whispering into his ear that there was no need to text her later when they were both already there that night. She then licked and sucked on his earlobe and suggested a few of the things that she would do to him, and for him, if he wanted to come home with her. No bar tab has ever been settled more quickly than that one. They still did not make it all the way home though, in fact they barely

made it back to his car. Good thing it was dark and few people were in the parking lot, but at that point they did not really care anyway.

At first it was great. Adam had never been happier. But soon he was paying for things - a lot of things. She rarely had to come out and ask for them, hinting was usually enough as long as it was not so subtle that he did not pick up on it. He really wanted to make her happy, and buying things for her did do that.

It was bound to happen: a man with low self-esteem and a woman who was more than willing to put her affection up for sale seem destined to find each other. A match made in heaven? Perhaps. For awhile it seemed to be. Maybe it could have been a mutually beneficial arrangement but for one very unfortunate thing: Adam had fallen in love with her. Cupid's poison-tipped arrows had struck again.

After about eight months they moved in together. Adam begged her to do it. Her lease was ending soon anyway, so he finally managed to talk her into it. He, of course, paid all the rent. They had originally planned to split it, but she happened to be out of work just then, and she never knew when it was due (even though he reminded her several times) so he just paid it and soon they were both used to having him just pay it. The reasoning was that if he lived by himself he would have to pay the full rent anyway, so it was really no difference. They also got new cell phones together, which of course he paid for, along with lots and lots of jewelry and clothes and shoes. She already had more shoes than Adam had ever seen in his life. There was hardly any room in the closet for his things. Without those new credit cards he never would have been able to pay for it all, but she was very helpful in assisting him to apply for those.

At least she did not steal his identity; she did not really need to, all she had to do was ask and he would get her whatever she wanted, as long as he could get credit. And she wanted a lot of things. In addition to the clothes, her hair, nails, and makeup were always perfect, and that took money.

Destiny had a few other sources of revenue, and that was really the only way that they got by. Most were middle-aged businessmen. They just 'helped her out' from time to time. Not a very high class of Sugar Daddy, but you have to go where the money is. For the most part they were just business associates. There were others that she dated just for fun.

She found a lot of them online, but there was also girls night. Destiny had never let being in a relationship put a crimp on her social life. Girls night out with her friends almost always ended up being some guy's night in.

'Sometimes I just need to have little fun too.' She told the girls. They would have been willing to cover for her, if it was necessary, but it rarely was. Adam soon figured out that she got really mad when he pushed her to provide many details. The only answer that he ever really got anyway was 'with friends', which was not technically a lie. He trusted her, or wanted to anyway, and the last thing that he wanted to do was insult her, so it was just easier to leave it alone.

So she liked to be taken care of. Is that so bad? Men cheat all the time too, she knew that from personal experience. They were both getting what they wanted. They could not have lived on what he was making anyway. He was better off than if he had nothing, wasn't he? She needed more than what he could give her. But she let him have his fun from time to time, and it seemed like everybody was getting what they wanted.

She thought the arrangement was pretty clear, and it actually made her angry if it seemed like he didn't get it. Some things were uncomfortable to talk about. Was he really that stupid that she had to spell it out for him?

But he really didn't understand. Those under love's spell are blind to the truth, even when it is right there in front of them. He did not see it at least in part because he did not want to see it. To be fair, though, she was actually a lot better at hiding it than she gave herself credit for. Years of experience in leading a double life had made her almost like an international spy. She was very good at lying and manipulation.

Adam was fine - he was just kind of dull. She thought that relationships in general tended to get stale after awhile. It just wasn't enough. Destiny had become bored with him. When she first met him he seemed fine, but now that she was living with him she was starting to see all the vulnerabilities and insecurities, and that was a major turnoff. But it was also comfortable, like an old pair of sweatpants. You would not want to wear them all the time, especially when you went out, but sometimes it was nice to be comfortable

In a way it was kind of fun to sneak around. It added a level of risk to her life that spiced things up a bit. But it is not like she really valued the relationship all that much; if she got caught, it wasn't like she would have lost a whole lot. But it was comfortable, and it is difficult to give up comfort, so she decided to stick with him for awhile, at least until there was a better offer.

The Mechanic

For an example of Adam's blindness to all of this we need only look at what happened with the mechanic. They had been together for a little over a year and a half when Destiny was having car trouble one day. She couldn't get the kind of acceleration that she was used to (she was kind of a speed demon) and it was hard to get the car to shift gears. That really worried her. She figured the transmission must be going out and it would cost a fortune to fix it. She managed to make it to a mechanic shop and called Adam.

After she called, Adam, wishing to be supportive, took the afternoon off from work and came over to give her a ride home and help make sure that they did not take advantage of her. When he arrived she was sitting in the lobby looking over a beauty magazine while they were taking a look at the car.

Finally somebody came out of the shop and talked quietly with one of the guys at the desk, who in turn began looking something up on the computer. After a moment he

looked over at them, and they got up and went over to the counter.

'Well the good news is that it is not the transmission. But you do need a new clutch. The estimate is \$1,252.00 with parts and labor.' He handed them a printout which showed a breakdown of the costs.

They looked at each other in dismay. What were they going to do? They didn't have that kind of money for an unexpected expense like this.

As Destiny was thinking about it she gave the young man who was helping them another look. She had already checked him out earlier, of course, but now she scrutinized him more closely. He was kind of cute. Early to mid twenties it looked like. She didn't usually like the working class type, but he had a couple of cool tattoos. Yeah, she could go for that. It might be kind of fun to date somebody younger for a change. At the very least she could flirt with him a little and see if they could get a discount.

She had on a low-cut shirt that gave her all the cleavage permitted by law. She leaned over the counter nonchalantly, with her arms under her, boobs nearly popping out. She glanced at his name tag. 'Sean - I've always loved that name by the way.'

He looked up from the computer and got an eyeful. She paused to let him take it all in. She couldn't help but smile, although Sean never saw it. Yeah, she definitely had his attention now. She stood up straighter and slowly moved one arm up from her chest to her neck, then touched her ear. 'It is so hot right now.' She looked back and forth from Adam to Sean. 'Is anyone else hot?'

Neither of them answered, so the question just hung in the air. Her movement had broken Sean's trance, and now he was a bit self-conscious about staring for too long and tried to pretend like he was very busy, staring at the computer intently. Nevertheless, he could not help but steal a few glances at her out of the corner of his eye. He needn't have worried. Adam was oblivious and she certainly did not mind.

She turned to Adam. 'Baby, could you please be a dear and go get me one of those big fountain drinks with lots of ice? I'm so hot right now.'

Adam looked confused. He turned and pointed to the lobby area, off to his left. 'There is a vending machine right over there.'

'Oh, I know sweetheart, but I really need some ice. Get it with lots of ice.' She turned back to Sean without waiting for a reply, but he was still very busy on the computer.

Adam sighed and shook his head. 'It'll be cold out of the vending machine.'

She gave no response. In fact she did not even look over. He seemed so whiny just then.

He touched her arm to get her attention (as though she just had not heard him). 'Do you really need it now? I don't even know where any gas stations are around here. How am I supposed to get a fountain drink?'

Troy, the other attendant at the desk, a skinny young guy with bleach blond hair, had been taking this whole scene in himself and even though nobody asked him, just for the record, he was getting quite hot. Sean was not the only who had gotten a show. He thought this was a good opportunity to jump into the conversation. 'There are actually a couple of gas stations right along this road, probably less than a mile.' He pointed

with his right hand. 'Once you go out this door just take a right and then keep going straight. You can't miss them.'

Adam gave him an annoyed look. 'Thanks a lot asshole.' That is what he wanted to say, but he didn't. It was certainly not hard to tell that he was irritated, though, although nobody really seemed to care. Now out of excuses, he sighed loudly again, making sure that Destiny heard it, and then reluctantly went on his quest.

Once Adam was gone she leaned over the counter again and let it all hang out while perusing the estimate. 'God this is going to be expensive. I don't know if we can afford it. Is there anything you could do to help us out? I would be so grateful if you could.' She paused briefly, then smiled. 'Maybe I could do something nice for you.'

Subtle it was not: Her voice sounded like a cheap knock off of Marilyn Monroe singing to Kennedy. Even Troy could figure this one out. But that was alright. Sean was glad she was making it so easy.

He looked over at Troy, who was grinning broadly at him. This was so crazy. Were they in a porn movie?

Sean looked at the computer for a moment, and then finally up at her, intentionally looking her right in the eye; a look that she confidently returned. He finally said: 'Well, if you are willing to be patient maybe we could fit you in around some of the other jobs that we have and just charge you for the parts.'

'Oh, you are such a sweetie, thank you!' She reached over the counter and he stood up slightly so that they could have an awkward hug.

As he sat back down Troy said: 'Well, you seem like nice people.'

'Oh, we are.' She nodded.

Sean didn't seem to know quite what to do next, so she decided to help him out and provide a down payment to ensure that the deal was official. 'Sean, could you be a dear and show me where the ladies room is so that I can freshen up a bit?'

'Well, we just have one bathroom, but I can show you where it is.' He got up from his chair and walked around the counter.

With a smile she offered him her hand daintily. He did not kiss it, but did hold it lightly up to eye level and escorted her to the restroom very formally, like they were exiting a ballroom dance floor.

She made that first payment in a greasy locked bathroom under the romantic yellow glow of a single uncovered light bulb. They were serenaded by a fan usually meant to remove foul odors, but in this case repurposed to drown out sounds of the same type. It did not fully accomplish the task however; the parasite was a screamer. Anybody who walked by would have immediately known what was going on inside.

But the only one around was Troy. He stood right next to the door. He was actually hoping and about half expecting that he would get a turn next. He probably would not have - for whatever reason, Destiny was not very interested in Troy. But it will never be known for sure, because Adam came back while they were still in there.

Troy went back behind the counter as soon as Adam came in, and he covered for them. When Adam asked where Destiny was Troy couldn't think of a good lie, so he just said that she was in the bathroom. Adam nodded and then went and took a seat in the small waiting room area and opened a

magazine, the large fountain drink with plenty of ice sitting on the end table by his side.

Destiny came out a few minutes later. He put away the magazine and showed her the drink, then stood up as she walked over and she hugged him while taking it out of his hand. 'Oh, thank you sweetie.'

While they were hugging Sean came around the corner and quietly went back to his desk. Troy kept trying to get Sean to look over at him, but Sean wouldn't do it.

Destiny turned towards the counter and began leading Adam over there, still with an arm around him. She rested the drink on the counter and then turned to face Adam once they were standing in front of Sean. 'Guess what sweetheart? The guys said that they would help us out and only charge us for the parts. Isn't that nice?'

'What?' He turned to Sean in disbelief. 'Really?'

'Yeah.' She continued. 'I told them things were kind of tight for us right now, and-' she just shrugged and smiled.

'Wow. I don't even know what to say. Thanks guys. Man, the service here is excellent!'

Destiny nodded and giggled; so did Troy - in fact, he just about lost it. Destiny noticed, and decided that maybe it was time to leave. 'We should probably get going and let these guys get back to work.'

'Yeah.' Adam nodded in agreement. He turned back to Sean and smiled. 'You guys are some of the nicest guys I've ever met. I probably can't make it up to you, but just know that we won't ever forget it and we'll always be grateful.' He reached out and shook Sean's hand.

Sean had to shake it, but he could not look Adam in the eye while doing so. Troy had no trouble, though, when Adam

shook his hand; in fact he had a giant smirk on his face, and he shot Destiny a look that made her a little uncomfortable.

Adam could hardly believe his good fortune. Here he had been worrying this whole time about how they were going to pay for it. It still wouldn't be easy, but suddenly things seemed a lot better.

'How did you manage to pull that off?' He asked once they were outside. Destiny just shrugged like it was no big deal. That girl. She could talk people into anything. Adam just shook his head in amazement.

Back inside, Troy burst into laughter as soon as the door was closed. 'Oh my God what a dumb-ass.' He said, shaking his head in disbelief. "'You have provided excellent service'" he mimicked, then burst into laughter again, cackling like a hyena.

O how the world does love to laugh at Adam Jones. What great joy others seem to receive from his misfortunes.

Sean mustered up a feeble smile, but he wasn't in much of a laughing mood. He was too busy feeling like a piece of shit. That handshake really got to him.

Of course Troy told everybody in the shop about it. Sean would have preferred that he didn't, but there wasn't much help for it, he recognized that the more he protested the worse it would be. He got some good-natured razzing from the guys, but overall they were surprisingly supportive. He was Troy's hero. Once the parts came in they managed to work around their other projects and got that little red Mustang fixed for Sean and his new girlfriend. Isn't it nice when people can come together for a good cause?

Destiny came in to the shop several more times even after the car was fixed - that was when the teasing was almost

unbearable for Sean. Although mercifully, at least she did not bring Adam with her anymore after that. She always came when he was at work. One time she came with one of her barely-dressed girl friends, and the other guys appreciated that. She always got a free oil change and a tune-up. All in all, one could say that she was quite well-serviced.

She even went on a few dates with Sean besides the greasy bathroom. She kind of liked him. He always felt bad about the whole thing, but not enough to stop seeing her. The guys probably wouldn't have let him stop even if he had tried.

Not-Desperate

Destiny was usually fairly good at keeping her activities private. It was only occasionally that she slipped up, due to the sheer volume of instances.

One time she had been texting with someone nearly all day and Adam finally asked who it was. She said that it was one of her friends but the way that she was acting made him a little suspicious. When she went to the bathroom she left her phone in her purse on the coffee table. It buzzed when she got another message and curiosity got the best of him.

It was from a guy, and not a guy that he knew. It was shocking. He quickly scrolled through some of the previous messages and it was very clear what was going on. Adam was immediately very angry; angry enough to not even try to hide the fact that he was looking on her phone when she came back into the room.

‘What are you doing?’ She grabbed the phone away from him and looked at the text in disbelief.

‘Who is Jason?’ Adam said.

‘None of your business.’

‘It is my business, now tell me what is going on!’

‘He’s just a friend, okay, I’ve been friends with him for a long time. We’re just goofing around. We’re not being serious.’

Adam sighed and rolled his eyes.

‘What, am I not allowed to have friends anymore?’ She was standing next to where he was sitting on the couch and she leaned over him and put her right index finger in his face, pointing accusingly. ‘You need to respect my privacy and stop being jealous, you know how much I hate that! What, are you going to start stalking me and watch everything that I do now?’

‘Maybe I should!’

She slapped him. It surprised both of them a little. Her hand was close to his face, and she just reached out and whacked him right across the cheek.

In a flash of anger Adam lunged at her, grabbing both of her arms and knocking the phone out of her hand in the process. He pushed her backwards forcefully and she nearly tripped over the coffee table; they did knock over a cup that was sitting on the coffee table.

Adam was about two inches away from her face, still holding her arms, and he yelled: ‘You ever do that to me again and I’m gonna knock the shit out of you!’

For just a moment, Adam The Bully almost came out and Destiny was genuinely scared. She had never seen him like this. She actually surprised herself a little by slapping him in the first place, and this reaction was even more unexpected. It seemed so out of character. He was usually very docile. She had never seen him get angry at anyone, let alone her. She looked away, not wanting to meet his eyes, and began to cry.

With some effort, Adam managed to stuff the bully back inside, and let her go. He couldn't maintain his rage for very long while she was crying. Once she felt his grip begin to relax she pulled away and fled to the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

He listened outside the door for a few minutes, feeling worse and worse, and then finally knocked. 'Destiny-' He sighed. 'I'm, I'm really sorry. I didn't mean it. I . . .' His voice trailed off as he searched for the right words, but he could not think of anything that would make it okay.

'Why did you do that? You really scared me.' She said between sobs.

'I didn't mean it, I-' He sighed again and leaned his head against the door.

'I'm gonna call the cops.'

Adam was quite startled by that. 'Oh no, no, don't do that. Everything is fine. I promise I would never hurt you sweetie, you know that.'

'You said you were going to.'

'No, I just, I was angry, that's all. You hit me, and-'

'That's not an excuse!'

'I know that. I know it isn't. I didn't mean it, I swear. Please honey, I didn't mean that I promise.'

Destiny was no longer afraid. The whiny Adam that she knew so well had returned, and he was not scary at all. But she was still angry, and now she wanted some payback. It was lucky for Adam that she did not have her phone in there with her or she would have called the police and there is no doubt that he would have been arrested - they were in California, after all. It would have gone very badly for him. The parasite could be as vulnerable as needed. All but the most seasoned police

officers, attorneys, and judges would have been easily taken in by her. After hearing her tell the story Adam would have seemed like a monster.

It took him about half an hour of begging, but Adam finally got her to say that she would not call the police. He had to make nearly every concession imaginable to get that from her, and she made it very clear that if anything like that ever happened again she would call immediately. He swore that it wouldn't.

She finally came out and they hugged. Then they started kissing, but before things progressed much further she stopped him and made him promise that he would never look at any of her personal things again without asking. Her indignation was genuine. To her, violating her privacy was a much bigger wrong than anything that she had ever done.

He agreed. He still wanted to find out about the guy, but he couldn't bring himself to ask her about it, fearing that it would start up the fight again. It just didn't seem like the right time. He thought that maybe he could bring it up again in a few days once things had quieted down, but he never did. It turns out that it wasn't really a good time then either. It never actually was. She always got really defensive whenever he said anything that made it seem like he didn't trust her. He had learned that it was better to just not talk about it, especially now. It wasn't worth having another fight.

It was probably nothing anyway. If she said that he was just a friend then he probably was. One thing that she said during the fight which really stuck with Adam was that if he wanted the relationship to progress he had to learn to trust her. That seemed right, and he really did want the relationship to progress. Adam was in love with her, or at least he thought that

he was. So, he took a chance and decided to take her at her word. To prove that he trusted her he bought her a new phone with better security features so that he would not even be able to unlock it when she was not around, as they had negotiated.

But an infestation of crab lice in his nether regions only a few months later made it difficult to continue to trust her. It still took awhile for Adam to process it though. He was bewildered when he first heard the news. He told the doctor that he could not imagine how he could have gotten it. At first the doctor did not know what to think. He had heard it all before, and thought maybe Adam was just embarrassed. But noticing the simplicity and apparent sincerity of his patient, he inquired a bit more about the situation. He tried to drop a few hints, but Adam did not seem to be picking up on them. Finally he got tired of it and did not pull any punches. 'Your girlfriend is cheating on you.' He said, then left the room for a few minutes while Adam tried to pull himself together.

As it turned out, the crabs were not even the biggest problem. Dr. Phillips recommended more tests and they discovered that Adam had herpes as well.

Of course Destiny had a ready explanation for all of this. She tried to keep Adam from going to the doctor initially, but when that did not work she knew what it would be because she had gotten treated for it herself. She told him that the crabs must have come from letting another woman at the gym use her towel. As for the herpes, she had gotten that a long time ago, at least 10 or 12 years earlier. She didn't think that she could give it to him as long as she was taking the medication and didn't have an outbreak. She really felt terrible about it and was very sorry that she hadn't told him.

The old doctor did not believe any of that, but he did not know how much he should say. He finally called Destiny when Adam was not around and said rather gruffly: 'Stop spreadin' it around.' Then he hung up on her before she even had the chance to explain herself or promise that she would. She thought it was very unprofessional and almost filed a complaint.

Adam tried to still believe her, but it was becoming more and more difficult for him. Realization was slowly creeping in whether he wanted it to or not.

Over the course of the next few weeks he began to get angry. He did not know whether he even wanted to be with her anymore. He figured that, at the very least, if she could cheat then so could he.

He did not try to hide it either; in fact, he wanted her to know exactly what he was doing. One random Wednesday evening he texted Destiny and told her that he would not be coming home after work. When she asked where he was going he said: 'Out with friends.'

She could not tell what that meant. Was he trying to throw it back at her that she sometimes went out with her friends? Or was it more innocent, and he just wanted to go out with his friends from work? She was not sure. Did he even have friends at work? She thought about it for awhile before responding, but finally she just replied: 'K. Have fun.'

Adam didn't know whether he was happy to get that reply or not. She did not seem very concerned. He almost would have preferred getting into a fight. He had actually kind of worked himself up into almost spoiling for one, especially if it could be over the phone. But he finally convinced himself that this was good. Now he could do whatever he wanted.

After work he treated himself to an early dinner at a fairly nice place. He rarely ate anywhere but fast food unless Destiny was with him, but this time he decided to go to a steak house. He didn't get a steak though, just a huge bacon burger that was incredible. It also had those big steak fries; usually Adam didn't care for those much, but tonight he loved them. It tasted like freedom.

He even tried flirting with the bartender a little bit. (Since he was alone, they seated him at the bar so that it wouldn't tie up a table when the dinner rush came in.) She even flirted back a little. She was so hot.

Adam thought that he might have a little something cooking there for awhile, but then she stopped coming over as much and she seemed pretty busy. She got even busier as the evening crowd came in and the place started to fill up. After a couple of pints it was hard to even get her to come back and get him another beer.

Adam finally decided that he needed to go to a real bar. It would be fun. It had been awhile since he had been out on the town without Destiny, and they hardly ever even went anywhere together anymore. He never got the chance to say goodbye to Danielle. Even though he thought the service was mediocre at best he left her a \$20 tip on a bill of \$27.48, vowing to come back and visit her again sometime when she wasn't so busy. He still thought he might have a shot.

The first bar that he went to was kind of boring. Some people were doing country swing, which Adam hated. He decided that the place sucked. It probably had more to do with how early it still was rather than the bar though. The second one he liked better - especially since he was already a little drunk when he came in.

He sat right at the bar for a few hours, just enjoying the scene, listening to the music, and trying a few different types of drinks. He was dying to find a woman to start up a conversation with, but it was so difficult. He had not had to do this for quite awhile, and he had never been very good at it to begin with. If he hadn't been pretty drunk by then he wouldn't even have dared to try. He kept looking over at a table of five women who were really enjoying themselves at a nearby table. He didn't mean to stare at them, they just looked so good. Especially the blonde on the far left, who was basically at the head of the table. Wow. But there were a couple of them that were looking pretty good.

One of them kept looking at him. She was a pretty brunette. She didn't have quite the body that the blonde had, but there was something about her that was very appealing. She seemed nice for some reason. There was no good reason for why he thought that she would be nice, he didn't actually know anything about her, but in his mind, she was nice. It was probably just because where she was sitting happened to be facing him and so she couldn't help but notice that he kept looking over at them, especially every time they laughed, which was a lot.

He should have known that it didn't mean anything. A woman might look at a man for a variety of reasons, it doesn't mean that she is interested.

O Adam, why couldn't you just send over a round of drinks like a normal person? Then they could have come over to say thanks and talked to you if they wanted to, but if not, at least it would not be so embarrassing. But Adam had rarely done anything like this, and he just didn't know any better. A desperate man does desperate things.

It was nearly twenty minutes after he had decided to go talk to them that he actually got up the courage to do it. The approach was awkward. He started towards them, but then hesitated; then he kind of tried to pretend like he was just going to walk past, but he didn't, he just stopped and stood there.

Now they were all looking at him. 'Hi.' He said with a little wave of the hand.

They all said hi back.

Now what? He had been so busy thinking about whether to approach them or not that he had not given much thought as to what to say or do next. The poor guy was really fighting out of his weight class here. Even a very smooth operator would have had a hard time pulling this one off, and Adam certainly was not that. He just stood there awkwardly, not quite sure what to do. It seemed like he had to say something. 'So how is everybody doing?' He finally blurted out.

'We're good.' A couple of the ladies answered, almost in unison.

'Just enjoying "girl's night".' The blonde said, and smiled, hoping that he would take the hint. He did not.

Adam sat down in an empty bar stool next to their table without being invited to do so. The blonde gave a barely audible sigh and a look passed between the women.

'So what is everybody's name?'

A couple of them were about to introduce themselves but then hesitated and looked around the table to see if anybody else wanted to go first.

'It's not desperate.'

It came from the blonde. Adam did not fully comprehend what she meant at first. She didn't say it very

loudly, and he did not know for sure if that was what she actually said over the music.

But now that everyone at the table was staring at her in amazement, she got pretty fired up. She raised her voice and glared at him fiercely. 'Get a clue, dude. Nobody here wants a date, okay? So just keep moving. We're not interested.'

Adam quickly stood up and bowed his head in shame. 'I'm, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you.' He could not look at them, so he apologized to the floor. 'I'm really sorry.' He turned and obediently went back to where he had been sitting before and tried to pretend like nothing had happened.

A couple of the women were covering their faces and trying (unsuccessfully) to contain their giggles, but once Adam was gone they exploded into laughter. Then one of them said: 'Oh my God, Alicia you are my hero. I could never have done that.'

The blonde shrugged slightly. 'I wasn't going to let him ruin our night.'

This caused more giggling. But then the brunette that Adam had been exchanging glances with finally spoke up. 'No, come on. That was mean.'

The others stopped laughing and looked at her. Then Alicia said: 'Oh, come on Hope, none of us are anywhere near drunk enough to want to make that kind of mistake.'

More giggling.

'You didn't have to be so mean to him. He seemed nice.'

'Well, I was nice, too, at first.' She glanced around the table. 'But he wouldn't go away, so then I wasn't.' This caused another round of laughter, including from Alicia.

Even Hope couldn't keep from grinning, but at the same time she shook her head from side to side in disapproval.

'Would you keep it down. He's gonna hear you.'

'I don't care if he hears me.' She turned in Adam's direction and spoke extra loud. 'He needs to hear it. Guys like that need to get a clue.'

Everybody was laughing so hard that they could barely talk. Finally Hope said: 'You are such a bitch.'

'I'm a bitch? Why am I a bitch?'

'You are a bitch.' One of the others said, and she barely got it out before going into another fit of laughter. They all laughed, including Alicia. She finally shrugged. 'Well, sometimes you have to be.'

A little while later Hope tried again. She nodded slightly towards Adam and said: 'Seriously Alicia, you really need to go buy that guy a drink and apologize.'

Alicia scoffed. 'That is not happening.'

This was accompanied by more laughter. Alicia looked over at Adam, and then turned back to Hope. 'You can go over there and talk to him though. I'm sure it would rock his world if you went over and sat down by him.'

Grinning in spite of herself, Hope just rolled her eyes and shook her head, giving a slight sigh as the others begged her to do it.

Alicia took a sip of her drink and then looked mischievously at Hope. 'I'm sorry, I won't be mean to your boyfriend anymore, I promise.' And the others giggled some more.

Momus, the god of raillery and ridicule, was strong with them that night. He was a frequent companion of Alicia's - especially after a couple of cocktails.

Adam could not hear them very well, he was sitting too far away, but he saw them look over at him from time to time and he knew that they were laughing at him. Why didn't he just leave? Like some sort of emotional masochist, he didn't want to know what they were saying, yet he had to know what they were saying. It didn't really make much sense, but emotions rarely do.

It was good that he could not hear very much. They were laughing about how they should have given him a fake phone number that was actually the number of a radio station; the DJs called it the 'loser line' and made fun of the messages that the guys left.

Actually, after awhile they were not even talking about him anymore, but in his mind they were talking about him the whole night. He really thought about going back over there and telling that bitch off. Telling them all off. But what would be the use? It wouldn't change anything. He would probably just get arrested. He wisely kept his seat and continued to brood.

Instead he got very drunk. The beautiful thing about alcohol is that you just don't give a shit anymore. The numbness felt so good. It helped him to relax. But listening to their laughter brought back memories of what life had been like before he met Destiny - and what it would be like without her.

It was so nice to be with her. He felt like a whole different person when she was around. She made him feel that way. When she was with him it was like he wasn't a loser anymore. He loved her. She was everything that he had ever wanted.

So why not forgive and forget? She made a mistake; everybody does. Why not try to make it work? They could start over from the beginning and really do it right this time.

These thoughts were eventually interrupted by a gentle tap on the shoulder. He turned around to look and saw the brunette. It seemed strange to see her standing there right next to him, almost like it was a dream. She reached out her hand. 'Hi, I'm Hope.'

Adam was moving pretty slowly at this point, but he finally reached out and shook her hand.

'And you are?' She said.

'Adam.' He mumbled.

'Well, it is nice to meet you Adam.' She paused, looking away briefly, and then looked back. 'Listen, I just wanted to apologize for my friend. Or, really all of them actually.' She smiled and began to chuckle, but seeing that he did not, she stopped. 'It was Megan's last day to today, she is taking a new job, and we just came out with her to celebrate and spend some time with her. They didn't mean anything by it. They just get silly sometimes.'

Adam almost snapped at her. 'They didn't mean anything by it?' 'They just get silly sometimes?' Are you kidding? How could you say that? But he managed to contain himself, and later he was glad that he did. Why yell at the nice one? At least she tried.

He looked her over more carefully. She really was very pretty, and she was nice. He could tell. There was just something about her; she had those really kind eyes and you just knew that she was a sweetheart.

For just a second, Adam had a tiny bit of hope; but then, almost as soon as he began to entertain such thoughts, she looked over and saw the others coming out of the ladies room. 'Well, I guess I need to go. They are my ride.'

Adam nodded reluctantly and slowly turned back towards the bar.

'Are you okay?' She asked.

'Yeah.' He said quietly, almost mechanically.

'Are you sure?'

He nodded slightly and stared straight ahead, not looking at her.

'Okay. Well, it was nice to meet you Adam. Have a good night.' She went to meet up with the girls, no doubt to face another round of teasing on the ride home. Adam watched them as they left, wishing that somehow things could be different.

Hope. It was a lovely name for a lovely lady with kind eyes and a tender heart. Anyone would have been lucky to have her, but now she was gone and he knew that he would never see her again.

Adam did not know that she was going home to a very cute 10 month old baby boy, now sleeping, and a dutiful husband taking care of him so that she could have a night out with friends. He never did notice the ring on her finger.

He stayed until closing time, drinking and brooding. The bartender almost cut him off more than once, but settled for simply slowing it down a bit.

Adam just sat there, pondering Destiny. He had just about talked himself into going back to her. It was only that morning that he had decided it was time to move on, but he had an entirely new perspective now. Not-Desperate said no in a most emphatic way, so he said yes to Destiny. Hope was gone forever, but Not-Desperate would be with him for the rest of his life.

You cannot change Destiny; only a fool would even try, but Adam was known to be rather foolish at times. This time it would be different. He would love and treasure her so much that she would never even want anybody else ever again. He recognized that all of this was partly his fault too. One could not lay all of the blame on her.

Adam was very drunk by the time the bar closed. He could barely walk, let alone drive. The bartender offered several times to call someone to come give him a ride home, but Adam assured him that he would be fine. The bouncers were actually surprisingly nice as they helped him out the door, but they would not take him all the way out to his car. It is a wonder that he made it home without getting into a wreck or arrested, but somehow he did.

Destiny was there waiting for him. He was somewhat surprised that she stayed up, but he was very happy to see it. She did care.

She was very kind to him. She helped him to bed and then started pulling off his clothes.

‘Destiny.’ He reached up to touch her face and gently pulled her hair back with one hand. ‘I am so sorry. Please forgive me. Please don’t leave.’ He began to sob.

Destiny was surprised by this, but she assumed that it was just because he was drunk and she did not think too much of it. She hugged and kissed him, and told him everything was going to be okay, she was not going anywhere. She cuddled with him until he fell asleep. She was so soft and warm. Adam was comforted, and quickly fell asleep in her arms.

Halcyon Days

Unfortunately things did not change very much. It was pretty good for a week or so, but then they both settled back into old familiar patterns. Adam needed her a lot more than she needed him, that was obvious. In some ways Destiny liked it because she pretty much always got her way now (as opposed to before, when it was just most of the time), but her respect for him dwindled. The problem was that both of them knew that she could do better, and the more that he did for her in an attempt to make up for that, the more that this feeling was reinforced to both of them. It almost seemed like an act of charity for her to be with him.

Adam thought that giving in to whatever she wanted would make her love him, but actually it just turned him into her servant. Sometimes she treated him more like a butler than a boyfriend.

But even Adam’s Destiny was not all bad. There were times when she could be quite wonderful and they got along very well together.

The best of those times began, oddly enough, when one day Adam noticed a necklace that she was wearing (a rarity for him) that had a beautiful turquoise pendant. As he touched it admiringly, and then held it up to look at it more closely, she told him that she had gotten it in Chinatown in San Francisco while visiting with her family some years before. She said that she did not wear it often, but she loved it.

She had actually gotten it from one of her boyfriends only a couple of days before. She was surprised and a bit caught off guard that he even noticed. Now she was wishing that she had not worn it in front of him.

But Adam was not questioning where she had gotten it, he just liked the way it looked. He accepted her explanation without further comment, and never even really considered whether it might be false.

‘Huh.’ He said. ‘I haven’t ever been there, but it sounds like fun.’

‘You mean you’ve never been to Chinatown, or you’ve never been to San Francisco?’

‘Neither one.’

‘What? You live this close to San Francisco and you’ve never been there?’

He shook his head no.

‘That’s crazy.’

Adam shrugged. ‘We never had any reason to go.’

‘You have to go see the Golden Gate Bridge sometime.

It is so amazing. I love San Francisco. The shopping is amazing, and the food . . . there is seriously nowhere else like it. It is seriously the best place ever!’

‘Really? Huh.’ Adam looked thoughtful. The silence started to become a tiny bit awkward as he sat there pondering. But then he smiled at her. ‘So when are we going?’

She looked so excited that it made him laugh.

‘Are you serious?’

He nodded.

‘Sure, I mean, whenever you want. I’m always up for going to San Francisco.’

‘How about this weekend?’

‘Yeah, that would be great!’

And so began the great adventure. They could hardly wait until the weekend. Destiny planned out a number of fun things that they could do while they were there. Adam was amused by how excited she was. He was happy because she was.

Adam usually worked 4 days for 10 hours, so he had Fridays off. He decided to surprise her again by using half of a personal day and came home early on Thursday at noon. She was thrilled, and gave him a big hug as soon as she saw him.

They got there a little after 3 and checked into what Destiny called a cute little boutique motel that she remembered from the last time that she was there. After checking in, they walked the steep streets looking for a cable car to take them to Fisherman’s Wharf. Eventually they found a bus that was packed to overflowing. It was a little less glamorous way to travel, but they made it.

Fisherman’s Wharf was ‘amazing’. (Destiny was right.) It was the best seafood that Adam had ever had. After dinner they went through all the various shops, some selling trinkets and touristy items for only a few dollars, others selling marble sculptures for \$90,000. Careful: you break it you buy it!

Despite Adam's excessive carefulness about where his elbows were so that he did not knock over a statute, it was fun.

A man on the street was selling a real pearl still in the shell for only \$15. Adam bought her one and did not even try to haggle. Destiny was thrilled. Another street vender was selling pencil drawings of famous people. They looked through them all, and he bought her the one of Marilyn Monroe. They almost bought Elvis and James Dean as well, but finally decided against it. For once Adam was not being so tight with money and Destiny was the voice of financial reason. She decided that Marilyn was enough.

One of the men on the boats was offering to take people around Alcatraz Island and then to the Golden Gate Bridge at sunset. He wanted \$10 a person, which didn't seem too bad. It was quite fun. Adam loved Alcatraz. They got to the bridge just as the sun was setting. It was beautiful. The boat passed close to one of the pillars and went right underneath the bridge. From below it seemed to take up almost the entire sky.

The waves were quite choppy. Luckily no one on the boat got seasick, but it rocked them around quite a bit on the way back. The city was gorgeous. By then it was almost pitch black and all of the buildings had their lights on, which shimmered off the water. Adam put his arm around Destiny and hugged her. They braced against the side of the boat and steadied each other against the waves that rocked the boat up and down. Luckily no one fell overboard. Somebody said that there could be sharks.

But to Adam and Destiny it could not have been more perfect. It was the most romantic experience that they ever had together. That night they made love, and for the first time it felt

like it really was making love. It was the best night of Adam's life.

The next day was almost as good. It did not start out that way though. Adam really wanted to go on the tour of Alcatraz, but it was expensive, and Destiny told him that he had to walk across the Golden Gate Bridge. He could not come to San Francisco without doing that.

'But we just saw it last night.' He gently protested.

'No, walking across it is way different. You get to see a whole different view of everything. It is not just the bridge, it is awesome, but you also get a great view of everything else.'

Adam started to say something but she cut him off. 'Just trust me, okay sweetie? You have to see it.' It was free. She almost added that, knowing that would probably be the easiest way to convince him, but she decided that she did not want to encourage his cheapness.

He finally acquiesced. It wasn't worth arguing about. 'She's been here before.' He thought. 'She probably knows what she is talking about.'

So, Adam put his trust in Destiny, and once they were there he was very glad that he did. It was incredible. They got there around 11 a.m. The sun was shining and everything was very bright and colorful. The sailboats, painted almost exclusively in white and/or very bright colors, shone like little gemstones against the aqua blue water. Even the bigger boats were quite colorful. Everyone and every thing seemed happy. They even saw some dolphins playing. They looked so tiny that it was hard to even tell what they were at first. Adam was very excited when he finally figured out what they were and pointed them out to Destiny. They watched as the dolphins whipped

around each other and darted back and forth. They seemed to be having a great time.

They saw a porta-potty painted in the reddish orange of the bridge, and that made them laugh. Just about everything made them laugh. Bikes whizzed by, and the occasional runner, even though it was near the middle of the day. But more than anything there were a lot of sightseers, just like them.

For awhile it seemed like a whole different Destiny. She was bubbly and sweet, and so much fun to be with. She was feeling good so she laughed at everything, just like old times. It was her, but it was her at her best, and that could be pretty good. When she was happy Adam could not help but be happy.

He leaned over nonchalantly while checking around him to see if anybody was looking. Destiny kept asking him what he was doing, but he kept covering it up with his left hand and would not let her see.

Finally he let her take a look. With one of his keys Adam had carefully scratched into the rail 'AJ + DD' with a crudely drawn heart around it. He thought about putting in the date, as several others had done, but then decided against it. Better to have it be timeless.

Destiny just rolled her eyes and looked away, muttering something about getting them arrested. But she was smiling. It was a little cheesy, but also sweet. She was genuinely enjoying being with him today, and Adam could tell.

This was their special spot now. Without even thinking much about it (if he would have, he would not have dared) Adam put his arm around her, brought her in close, and kissed her, right there in front of everybody. Destiny just giggled. He knew she didn't mind, and that was a wonderful feeling.

Adam noticed that people going by were looking at them, or trying not to look at them, so he decided to keep it to just a little peck that only lasted a few seconds, no tongue. Nobody could get too upset over that, could they? He still held her close as they looked out into the bay. So this was heaven; it had to be, because there was no way that it could get any better.

They never did get around to taking that tour of Alcatraz. They kept meaning to get to it, but the afternoon was spent shopping (of course) and then that evening they went to Chinatown. They negotiated a price outside on the street for the Chinese restaurant. It was pretty fun, and the food was good. Then they hit all the little shops and found lots of little trinkets and touristy things. No necklaces that looked like the one that Destiny had, but a lot of neat stuff. They didn't buy very much. Destiny bought a hand fan, but that was about it.

They did finally get to ride on a cable car when they went to Chinatown. They did not even have to walk very far either. It was really crowded, but everybody was nice, so it was still fun. Destiny was actually pretty good at navigating all the cable car and bus routes and she figured out pretty easily what they had to do to get somewhere. It was a lot easier than driving in most cases.

The next day they went to the contemporary art museum, which Adam did not get very much out of at all. Destiny tried to be interested, but she did not like it very much either. Then they went to Haight-Ashbury to see the sights and hit some more stores. That was a lot more fun.

At around 2 or 3 p.m. they had to make a decision. They had only booked the motel for two nights, so they had to either get one for that night or head back home. Destiny said that one of her girlfriends actually wanted to take her out to lunch on Sunday, so they decided to go ahead and go home that night. It was kind of sad. Adam did not want to have it end. But he was glad to not have to pay for another motel room.

They decided to head to Muir woods and up the coastline for a bit before going home. Driving across the bridge brought back good memories of the day before and provided another spectacular view; it was nearly matched though by watching the sunset on the coast.

The trip was amazing. It was far and away the best few days of Adam's life. But it could not last. Joy is fleet of foot and cannot be easily captured. All that we can do is welcome her when she arrives and hope that she will decide to tarry; but she is in high demand, and will not usually stay long, especially for the likes of Adam Jones.

Once the sun set everything seemed to change. It was back to the same old Destiny. Even on the ride home, in the dark, she was already back on her phone, texting with somebody. She never said who it was. Adam finally just turned on the radio when it became obvious that she did not want to talk anymore. It was okay. He was still in a really good mood. It had been a very special trip and this was not enough to bring him down.

The closer they got to home the further away heaven seemed. But it was a great memory for them both. The next night, while cuddling on the couch and watching TV, Destiny kissed his cheek and thanked him for the wonderful weekend.

Adam just smiled and thought that maybe a little piece of heaven could be close to home after all.

It was a good thing that Adam enjoyed himself so much because he was scheduled to make payments on it for several years to come. He put nearly the entire trip on his credit cards. It seemed to be more than worth it. But he could not have foreseen the other ways that it would end up costing him; sometimes what we love the most can be our undoing.

Miss Cassandra

Perhaps if it had not been for that trip things would have worked out differently with Cassandra. She was an administrative assistant where Adam worked. They had both been working there for awhile, but never had much interaction. Adam got to know her when he came in to complete a change of address form after switching apartments, and they got to chatting. For some reason they really clicked. It seemed very easy to keep the conversation going with her, which was not usually the case for Adam. In fact, the only other time that had happened was with Destiny. But Destiny could make small talk with anybody.

And, you know, not that he was looking, but she was kind of cute, in an unassuming sort of way. She wore thick glasses and her dark hair was usually up in a tight bun, which made her look like a young librarian. She actually looked a lot better when her hair was down, but it did not happen very often.

She was a little bit dowdy; it is fair to say that she could have used a makeover. If she had gotten one she would have been stunning, because she did have some natural beauty hidden away, but she probably would not have stuck with the style for very long even if it worked. That kind of stuff just wasn't her.

She wore a lot of sweaters: my that girl did love her turtlenecks! She was usually cold, so she wore them even when it was actually pretty warm outside, and, of course, they were almost always in dull muted colors. She was only about 5'2" and petite, but you would not have known it with all those layers of clothing that she piled on.

She couldn't stand the sound of her own laugh, but Adam thought that it was cute. (Good thing, because she laughed a lot around him.) In fact, Adam found just about everything that she did to be rather endearing. Her mannerisms were really cute - you know, in that nerdy scientist kind of way. Cassie would certainly have felt at home in a lab coat, and she looked like she belonged in one.

There was just something about her - she had a very girl-next-door kind of vibe, maybe that was it - that was very appealing. Even her wardrobe choices were kind of refreshing to someone used to seeing big hooped earrings, bright red lipstick, leopard print pants, and such. She seemed wholesome somehow.

It was not long before Adam was finding excuses to stop by the office and say hi, especially on Fridays, his day off. (He worked four 10 hour shifts out at the job site, but in the office they worked five 8 hour days.) Occasionally he came in on other days before he went home as well. Cassie usually

stayed a little later than everybody else (of course), so it was a good time to catch her.

It soon became hard to think of excuses. After awhile he stopped even trying to come up with some sort of question to ask her, or a lame explanation for why he was there again; he just told the truth, that he came by to say hi. She didn't seem to mind. In fact, it always seemed like she was really happy to see him. They chatted away about everything that one could imagine.

One Friday Adam was out running errands and Destiny happened to be with him. He hadn't really planned on her being there. He almost didn't go to the office. Something told him that maybe it wouldn't be a good idea to go in when Destiny was with him. The idea of them meeting caused him some anxiety. But he figured that he did not have anything to hide, so why not? Perhaps he did it to make a point of showing that he had nothing to hide. He felt the need to prove that, even to himself. Besides, he had already told Cassie earlier in the week that he was going to come on Friday. Maybe they would like each other and become friends.

When they got there Adam asked Destiny if she wanted to come in, but he hadn't told her why they were there. She assumed that he was just going in for a minute or two to get something, so she had him leave the car running and she just stayed there playing on her phone. Adam did not try to convince her to come in. In fact, he was a bit relieved. He did plan to spend only a few minutes.

But after awhile Destiny began to wonder what could be taking him so long. She finally decided to go in and remind him that she was out there waiting. With an irritated sigh she turned the car off, pulled the keys, and got out.

Before she even went inside she saw them through the glass door. Adam was leaning over the counter talking and laughing with some woman that she did not know. She could tell that they were flirting, and it made her furious.

She almost went in and lit into him, maybe even slap him. He deserved it, and she really wanted to. But after thinking about it for a moment she realized that doing that would only make it worse. She had to play it cool or it would only drive him to her.

She walked in calmly, but assertively, her heels clicking against the floor as she strutted down the imaginary runway. Adam heard her come in and turned to look, along with Cassie. 'There you are.' She said to him with a smile. She gave him a hug and then a kiss on the cheek.

She looked at Cassie over her shoulder. 'I don't think we've met.' She said, but made no move to shake hands or give any other sort of greeting.

'Oh, sorry.' Adam said. 'Cassie, this is Destiny.'

The two women eyed each other suspiciously. They still did not shake hands. Destiny's demeanor was not overtly hostile, but Cassie could tell that she was seething inside. When she tried to smile it looked like a snarl - she was baring her fangs.

Adam was oblivious to some of what was going on, but even he felt a bit uncomfortable. Finally Destiny flipped her hair back, pursed her lips, and asked him: 'So what were the two of you talking about?'

'Oh, nothin'.' Adam said.

'Oh, it looked like you were talking about something before I came in.' She forced a giggle as she playfully poked at his stomach. She looked back and forth at both of them but

neither one said anything. ‘Come on, don’t let me interrupt. What were you talking about?’

‘Actually I should probably be getting back to work.’ Cassandra said.

Destiny cocked her head to the side and put one hand over the other. ‘Oh, yes, you are supposed to be working, aren’t you. Well, anyway it was nice to meet you.’ She turned to Adam. ‘We should probably get going babe.’

He nodded. ‘Yeah. Bye Cassie.’

‘Bye Cassie.’ Destiny repeated, nearly cutting him off. She turned and looked back at Cassie, waving goodbye with one hand while putting her other arm around Adam’s waist as they walked away. She cuddled into him and rested her head on his shoulder as they walked out. Adam was a little surprised by this unexpected display of affection, but he put his arm around her as well, and they walked out to the car that way.

As they were walking out Cassandra noticed that Destiny’s cut off shorts were so high that you could see the bottom of her butt cheeks. She was horrified. ‘How can she walk around like that? I couldn’t even wear those at the beach.’ She thought.

It surprised her that Adam would be with somebody like that. He had talked about her before, of course, and she did not really know what she expected Destiny to be like, but that was not it.

‘So why didn’t you ever mention her?’ Destiny asked once they were both in the car.

Adam seemed surprised and even slightly alarmed when he looked over at her, but merely gave a little shrug. ‘I don’t know, it just never came up.’

‘Yeah, I’ll bet.’ She thought. But all she said was ‘seemed nice’ and let the matter drop. Adam was certainly ready to change the subject. Were they having an affair? She didn’t know, but her instincts told her that something was going on. The fact that he had never talked about her before and seemed quite reluctant to do so now was concerning. He was definitely hiding something. But surely he would not have brought her there if they were already sleeping together. Not even he was that stupid. Did he even know that she was after him? He might not. Sometimes he did not pick up on signals very well.

She glanced over at him while contemplating her options. Was he actually into that girl? She could hardly believe it, but clearly he was. She wasn’t even that cute! But for whatever reason, there was definitely something there.

Destiny wanted to scream at him but she was shrewd enough to know that the most effective strategy at a time like this would be to pamper him. One of these days he would pay, but now was not the time. Bring on that little skank - there was no way she was going to lose a guy to her, little bitch.

Adam had never been more desirable to her, now that she knew somebody else wanted him. Catch and release had never really been Destiny’s style. She liked to take them home and file the ones that she caught.

That night, lying in bed after some of the most passionate sex they had ever had, she casually brought it up again as they were spooning.

‘Cassie’s just a friend.’ Adam insisted.

She lightly caressed his arm. 'I know. I just don't feel completely comfortable with it.'

Adam grinned and then even started to chuckle. Upon hearing this, she turned to look at him, now lying flat on her back. She tried to look serious to stress how important this was, but it was hard when he was laughing. She finally smiled and laughed a little herself. Once she did, he kissed her lightly and asked: 'Are you really jealous?'

'No! I just don't think it's a good idea.' She turned and went back on her side again so that she did not have to look at him, but that just made him laugh even harder. He was really enjoying this. You cannot imagine how good this felt, what a boost it was to his confidence.

She turned around again, this time lying on her other shoulder so that she could face him. 'She has a crush on you ya know.'

He was resting on his elbow, but threw his head back so far to laugh that he ended up on his back, howling with delight. 'She does not have a crush on me! We're just friends!'

'I'm just telling you, she wants you. Girl's intuition.'

Adam sighed and rolled his eyes to the side while shaking his head 'no'.

'What makes you so sure that she doesn't? You're pretty sexy ya know. I have a crush on you.'

That might have been laying it on a little thick, but Adam was eating it up and ready for seconds. He leaned over, looking deep into her eyes, and then kissed her reassuringly. 'Well I am glad that you do.'

He was now lying on top of her, and began kissing her neck, but she stopped him. This time she touched his face lightly with her hand and looked into his eyes. 'Please?'

Adam sighed and looked away for a moment. 'Really?' He turned back to face her. 'I can't even be friends with her?'

After receiving no response he sighed again. 'Alright, I guess if it is really that important to you I won't be friends with her anymore.'

She immediately threw both arms around his neck and reached up to kiss him. She was so excited. 'Thank you sweetheart.' Then they had sex again.

Adam came to regret telling her that he would do this. Cassie was probably the best friend that he had ever had. He did not want to give that up. But he kept his word, even though he still liked to tease Destiny about it a little bit from time to time, which she accepted in a good-natured way - at least outwardly.

He did finally decide that he needed to let Cassie know what happened though. He didn't think that he should go by in person, but he decided to send her an e-mail explaining the situation. He assumed that she would understand.

Cassie did not know quite what to think of that e-mail. It seemed like he was trying to make a joke out of it and found the whole thing to be quite amusing. He actually said that the fact that she got so jealous showed that at least she must care about him a lot. Cassie was not so sure about that. It had never seemed like a very healthy relationship from some of the other things that Adam had told her. He didn't even tell her everything, but she figured out some of it on her own. She had never said much to him about it though because she was not certain that she was right, and she did not know if she was getting the whole, or even the correct story. But now that she had met her in person, it all seemed to fit.

Cassie was pretty disappointed that he would not be coming around anymore. She had developed a little thing for him, even though she didn't want to because he was already in a relationship. But she was also concerned. She wanted him to be happy, but this just didn't feel right.

She pondered for a day on how to respond. She wanted to tell him: 'Wake Up! She does not really love you, she is just using you, and one of these days she might really hurt you.'

Maybe she should have, but she could not bring herself to do it. She could not say that, and she knew it. So instead she just told him how much she had enjoyed getting to know him, and the only thing that she said about Destiny was: 'I guess I am just a little bit concerned because it doesn't seem like she treats you very well.'

Of course that is the part that really caught Adam's attention. At first he was quite confused by it. He couldn't imagine why she would think that. He sent a reply asking her what she meant. He said: 'I'm not really sure what you are talking about. She treats me fine.'

So then Cassie felt like she had to explain herself and gave him a whole list of reasons, including the fact that the checking account that they used for direct deposit of his paychecks had her name on it. (Yes, she had been snooping around in his file, which she probably should not have done.) 'I just don't think she is good for you, that's all.'

But it wasn't all. It is not easy to pry a man away from Destiny, as Cassandra soon found out. Her strategy backfired. The more that she attacked Destiny the more that Adam felt obligated to defend her. Lots of couples have joint checking accounts he said. He was fine with it. He told her that he regretted telling her about some of the things that had

happened. He wanted to get a woman's perspective, but he shouldn't have involved her. Anyway, things were better now, so she shouldn't worry.

He kind of wanted to tell her to mind her own business, but he did not go that far. He still treated her with respect. But it did damage the friendship. It would have been nice to have parted ways on better terms.

The truth is, Cassie panicked. She knew that she was losing him, and she didn't know what else to do. But, maybe looking back, instead of criticizing Destiny she should have just told him how she felt about him. Based upon how he responded, though, she did not dare tell him after that. It hurt to know that he would choose Destiny over her, but she knew that he would.

O accursed one, if only you would listen! She has feelings for you. Destiny could see it, but on this you won't even listen to her. You can feel it, but you will not trust yourself. This is your only chance to escape Destiny. Why must you be this way? How can you not see that Cassandra is so much better, and so much better for you? Destiny is like a triple fudge sundae, having her all the time is going to give you diabetes; Cassandra is like an apple - sweet, but also full of fiber. Make better choices!

But alas, he cannot hear us, and if he could, he probably would not listen. He won't listen to Cassandra, why think that he would listen to us? He is set on Destiny, and there is no one who can change his mind.

Does he really understand that there is a choice to be made though? It is not like it never occurred to him that Cassie might have feelings for him, but whenever such thoughts came to mind he just immediately brushed them off, actually feeling

a bit angry with himself for even considering it. If there was one life lesson that Adam had learned well, it was that a woman being friendly does not necessarily mean that she is interested in you romantically. He assumed that she wasn't. Based upon his background experiences, and the information that he had at the time, are we really surprised?

Adam thought that she was just trying to be a good friend and was worried about him; he assumed that she would have done the same thing if it had been one of her other friends who was in what she considered a bad relationship. But well-meaning friends can get kind of nosy at times. She was wrong about Destiny. Whatever she thought she saw was mistaken. Everything was fine. More than fine, in fact. Things were really good now. They had had their struggles, certainly, but that was all in the past.

They stopped communicating. Cassie did not reply to his last message, feeling that it was rather futile to try to argue with him, and Adam no longer went by to see her. He did not actually stop coming because he was angry with her, it was simply because Destiny had asked him not to. But Cassie worried and stressed over it, thinking that he must really hate her now, and feeling bad about how things ended.

It was only a few weeks after that when Adam got a phone call from his sister in the middle of the night. He did not answer it the first time, but then she called again almost immediately. He realized then that it must be important so he got up and took the phone into the other room so as not to disturb Destiny, and answered it with a groggy 'hello'.

Rita was dead.

The Funeral

She was only 64. It was probably some combination of painkillers mixed with alcohol and caffeine and smoking that finally did her in. But the ultimate cause was that she worked herself to death. She was pulling double shifts right to the end. In fact, that was why she was found. She did not show up for her shift one day, which was quite unlike her, and she hadn't even called.

Jenny, a young mother of two, was a friend, and she was concerned. She had never seen Rita even be late for a shift, let alone just not show up. She called her 6 year old, Brandon, who was at home babysitting his little sister, and told him that she would be home later than she thought. She had already covered Rita's shift so that she would not get into trouble, but she felt like she had to stop by the house and check on her. Jenny was the one that found her.

It troubled Jenny for a long time, seeing her friend like that. Rita had been good to her. She took her under her wing back when Jenny was just starting out, and she was always so

good about taking her shift when the kids were sick or she needed anything. Jenny really loved Rita. She was almost like a second mom. Jenny cried a lot for awhile, especially at night. She probably should have had some grief counseling, but poor people just have to get over it, or at least try. She had to keep going, there was no other viable option, but it took a toll on her.

Ron, the manager, did close for a few hours so that all the girls could go to the funeral. That meant a lot to them. He even came himself to pay his respects. He was better than most. They all said so.

Overall it was a nice service. Everybody said some very nice things about Rita. The pastor assured them that she was in a better place now. He was good speaker and he made everybody feel quite a bit better.

After the funeral they had a special dinner for Rita's friends and family, cooked and served by Jenny and a couple of the girls from the diner. It was pretty neat of Ron to let them do that too. They thought it was probably what she would have wanted most, and maybe what she would have done for one of them if the situation had been reversed. At least that is what Jenny thought.

It was really nice of them. Everybody said so. It gave those who knew her best a chance to tell funny stories, to share a few of the very best memories that they had of her, and finally, after awhile, to even catch up themselves and discuss a few other things before they had to head home and go back to their lives.

If there was a silver lining to any of this for Adam, it was that he did get a chance to reconnect with his siblings. All of them called Rita from time to time, and she kept them up to date on what the others were doing, but they rarely called

each other. It had been awhile since Adam had talked much with either one of them.

Rita's relationship with Tina had always been more strained than with her two boys. Sometimes Rita told Adam that she did not even know what Tina was up to. But she did. They were perhaps closer than they even realized, though they fought sometimes.

Actually, Tina's life was pretty normal. She went down to Fresno for college, and ended up staying there after she graduated. She was an insurance adjuster now, and married with kids of her own.

She was sure a lot different than she used to be. Sometimes it was still a little strange for Adam to see her in a dress and with normal-colored hair and fingernails. She was easily embarrassed anytime somebody pulled out a photo or mentioned her goth days, especially in front of her kids. Of course Adam and Dallin teased her about it for that very reason. It is always fun to embarrass your sister no matter how old you get.

Tina said that he and Destiny should come out for a visit sometime, and Adam accepted. In fact, they made plans to come for Thanksgiving. Destiny seemed to really hit it off with Tina, which Adam was happy to see because it had been somewhat strained with Rita. They had only met a few times, and there were no major blow-ups or anything, but there was just a general coolness between them. Rita never said much about it, but she made it pretty clear that she didn't like her. Of course Adam tried to fix it, but he could not, and it only ended up putting a strain on his own relationship with Rita.

Adam had been feeling pretty guilty about all of that the last few days. He did not do a very good job of keeping in

touch with her, at least not as much as he should have. That was especially true the last few years. They only lived about 40 minutes away. He should have come to see her more. But Destiny told him that it was not his fault. She was very supportive, and it helped immensely.

Adam's parasite was on her best behavior. One could not very well speak unkindly of the dead at a time like that, Destiny knew that as well as anyone. Even though she actually hated Rita and secretly rejoiced to be rid of her, she kept it to herself. She played her role well, and for the most part she made a good impression on the rest of the family.

Dallin was still his old self. He was now in his mid-forties, and his hair was getting a little thin, although it was a lot longer now than in the days of the buzz cut. He parted it in the middle and it went all the way down to his shoulders in the back. He had a beer belly, but was still just about as skinny in his arms and legs as he had ever been. It kind of made him look like a thin pregnant woman that was just beginning to show. He was so crazy; he would say shit that nobody else would dare say, but he was really funny. Adam found that he enjoyed Dallin's personality a lot more now that he was an adult. He was still the butt of a lot of the jokes, but for some reason it was more palatable now. He just laughed along with everybody else and it was actually kind of fun. Pretty soon Dallin had everybody laughing, which helped the mood a lot.

Conspicuous by his absence was Paul. Nobody even knew where he was. He may not have even known that Rita died. He called Dallin every so often, but it had been awhile, and Dallin said that when he tried the phone number that he had for him it did not work. When Adam asked about him at the

funeral Dallin just shrugged and then said with a laugh: 'He's probably off somewhere drinking himself to death.'

It was so fun to see everybody. They had never been a very close family. Now that Rita was gone Adam worried that there would be nothing to keep them from drifting apart again. He was determined to not let that happen. Losing Rita so unexpectedly was a reminder of just how important family was, and to not take anything for granted.

He told Dallin that they needed to get together sometime, and Dallin said that he wanted to, but a few weeks went by and Adam never heard from him. Adam really wanted to reconnect with him, but he was nervous. Dallin was a difficult person to talk to on the phone. It was hard to get him to say very much, and that always made Adam feel a little unsure of himself. Despite these misgivings, Destiny finally convinced him to stop worrying so much and just give his brother a call.

The conversation began a bit stiffly, as usual. Adam tried to ask him a few questions about what he was up to, but it was hard to get him to say much. He wouldn't even say where he worked. Adam knew that he had retired from the military as a 'lifer', so he had some money. (It was an honorable discharge, but let's just say that the army was not exactly sorry to see him go.) He said at the funeral that he was living in Las Vegas, but he wouldn't say much about what he did there. It was usually just one or two word answers, and even those were pretty evasive.

It was difficult to keep the conversation going because Dallin never asked anything about him either. Adam quickly ran out questions. Sometimes he would start telling him something just to have something to say, but Dallin seemed kind of disinterested, and even a bit annoyed by that. In some ways Adam dreaded talking to him. But maybe if they spent more time together it would be easier.

This particular conversation was not going any better. He had already run out of things to talk about, and once again Dallin was not doing him any favors by trying to advance the conversation himself.

But Adam was determined to do this, so he finally decided to just ask him. ‘So um, I know that we talked about this a little bit before, but I was just going to see if maybe you had any time off coming up.’

‘Yeah, I got time. Why?’

‘I was just wondering if you wanted to come out for a visit.’

‘Eh, yeah maybe.’

‘We could come see you if that would be easier.’

‘You can if you want, but it is probably easier if I come out there.’

‘Okay. Well we were planning on going to Tina’s for Thanksgiving. Were you coming to that?’

‘No, she invited me, but I got some stuff I gotta take care of then, so I won’t be able to make it.’

‘Oh, okay. Well what about Christmas?’

‘Uh, I’m not sure yet. I was actually going to hang out with a buddy of mine for a few days then, but I’m not really sure after that.’

‘Well if you want to come here and stay for a little while you are more than welcome. Maybe you could even look for a job around here. I think maybe my company might need someone.’

Dallin laughed. ‘Nah, I don’t want to do drywall.’

‘No, I know. But it’s a big company, they might have something that you would be interested in.’

Dallin didn’t say anything. Adam gave him a moment to think about it, but finally he couldn’t stand it anymore. ‘I just think it would be good for us to spend some time together. Reconnect, you know?’

Dallin scoffed and then started to laugh. ‘Why ya gotta be such a fairy all the time?’

That made Adam laugh too. Dallin added: ‘Seriously man, you have this way of making *everything* sound gay.’ And they both laughed some more.

‘So you’ll come?’

Dallin snickered and just about started laughing again at ‘you’ll come’. He almost made a joke about it, but he didn’t think Adam would get it so he didn’t even bother. ‘Yeah, I guess.’ He said with another sigh.

‘Awesome! This is gonna be so much fun!’

Dallin smiled in spite of himself. Adam’s obvious sincerity and enthusiasm was starting to win him over a little bit. ‘Yeah, it’ll be pretty cool.’

There was another pause. Neither of them knew what to say next. Finally Dallin broke the silence. ‘I probably better go. We can talk more as it gets closer so that you will know when to pick me up.’

‘Okay, yeah. I figured you would probably rather fly than drive but I wasn’t sure.’

‘Yeah, I’ll be flying.’

‘Sounds good.’ Another brief pause. Adam almost just hung up, but he couldn’t resist: ‘I love you Dallin.’

‘Oh geez. *Goodbye.*’ Dallin said, and hung up as Adam giggled.

Adam was all smiles as he put the phone down. That had actually gone way better than he expected. He was really excited. For some reason he had a funny feeling about it though, down deep in the pit of his stomach. It was difficult to describe, there was just this vague feeling of uneasiness, although he did not really know why.

Maybe he was just a little nervous. Dallin was kind of a hard person to be around sometimes. Adam was already worrying about what they would talk about. But maybe if they spent more time together it would be easier. It was probably nothing. Destiny always said that he worried too much.

O Adam, how can you not see the risk? How can you be so blind? Why won’t you allow Intuition to be your guide? He is a far better judge of character than you.

The Great Betrayal

They met Dallin at the airport, near the baggage claim. It was a little awkward at first, as it usually was with the two of them. Adam did not know whether to hug him, or just shake his hand, or what. He had been worrying about it for days before the flight came in. But when he saw him he just gave a little wave as they were walking up, and Dallin seemed more than satisfied with that. He acknowledged them, but then mostly just stared at the conveyor belt, although his flight was not even up yet. As they waited Destiny asked him how his flight was, and they chatted briefly about his trip. It was a short flight and there was nothing unusual to report, but they talked about it anyway, because that is what you do.

He only had one green duffel bag, but it was huge. Adam thought about commenting on it - maybe asking him whether he had a dead body in there or something - but then he thought better of it. That would probably be lame. It was hard for him to think of much to say.

There were more awkward pauses as they walked out to the car, with everyone trying to think of something that they could talk about. Adam tried to ask Dallin a few questions, but he only gave short answers. It was almost as hard as trying to talk to him on the phone. Usually it was easier in person, or at least that was what he had hoped, but only ten minutes into this visit it was already a struggle. He was staying for almost a full week too. Adam was really glad about that at first, but now he was not sure what they were going to do to keep him entertained that long.

Thank the gods for Destiny. She somehow managed to keep the conversation going - well, sort of, anyway - it was bit difficult even for her. She sat in the back and let Dallin have the passenger seat, so she had to lean forward to feel like she was part of the conversation. But in a way that was almost better because then she was nearly between them and acted as a much needed buffer.

Soon her laughter filled the whole car, and happiness spread along with it as they all started to feel more at ease. After awhile it was like the three of them were old friends. Destiny was so good at talking with people. Adam was honestly a little jealous of that, but it was one of the reasons that he loved and needed her so much.

After stopping at a 24 hour drive-thru to get a quick bite to eat, they returned to the small one bedroom apartment of which Destiny had always been a little embarrassed - and more so on the rare occasions when they had company. Adam told Dallin to set his bag down by the couch. They already had a pillow, bed sheets, and a couple of blankets, very neatly folded, sitting on the cushion closest to the wall. Dallin flopped down on the other side and made himself comfortable. A few feet

away from him, and to the side of the couch, there was a small somewhat scruffy Christmas tree with few ornaments except for one string of lights. It had a few wrapped presents around it, but one just had the plastic bag that it came out of the store in wrapped tightly around it.

‘Sorry that you have to sleep on the couch.’ Destiny said. She took a step towards Adam and poked him in the stomach playfully. ‘I keep telling him that we need more room.’ She turned her head from him to Dallin as she said it, apparently expecting Dallin to back her up.

But Dallin just laughed, as did Adam. Dallin said: ‘Don’t worry, I’ve had a lot worse than this.’

Destiny smiled and nodded, then went into the kitchen area (which was fairly small) and got a drink of water. She asked Dallin if he wanted one, but he said that he only drank beer, and everyone laughed. So Adam went and got him a beer. That was something that he kept well-stocked.

It was actually Christmas day when Dallin came in, but quite late; technically it was the 26th now. They had waited for him to open gifts, and they were pretty excited about it, so they opened them before going to bed. Only a few were notable. Adam gave Destiny a beautiful set of earrings that sparkled all the way across the room. She loved them, which was rare. She usually did not like the gifts that he got her. She got him a nice watch. For Dallin they got a shaving kit, a set of several sample size colognes, and a few other knickknacks. But the gift that Adam was really excited about was the knife. For him, this was a long overdue atonement. He had been thinking about it for years, and feeling guilty. Dallin didn’t get it though, which was not that surprising because it was not a butterfly knife, it was a large fixed-blade. It was really cool though. The handle had

camouflage and it looked kind of military, with a serrated edge on the back of the blade. It wasn't as big as Rambo's knife, but it was kind of like that.

Dallin liked it, of course; how could he not? It was awesome, and absolutely the perfect gift for him. But all that he said was: 'There is no way I'm gonna be able to take this on the plane.' That was not exactly the reaction that Adam was hoping for.

There was some discussion about whether he could have it in checked baggage or not. Finally Adam assured him: 'It's fine, we can mail it to you. I just wanted you to see it.'

That seemed to put Dallin's mind at ease. He kept looking at it and playing with it. It seemed like he liked it. Destiny said later that she thought he did.

They had fun that night, and for a few nights after that. For the most part everything seemed to be going well. The only downside was that Adam still had to work during the day. Destiny tried to convince him to call in sick on Tuesday, the first full day that Dallin was there, but with the funeral and going out of town for Thanksgiving, Adam was out of time. He did worry that Dallin might start to get bored, but, thank the gods, Destiny was more than willing to show him a good time.

On Tuesday afternoon the two of them went to the mall to do a little shopping and return some gifts, and then to a matinee, which they both loved.

On Wednesday they had lunch with a couple of her friends. They couldn't stop talking about how different Dallin was than Adam. It was hard to believe that they were really brothers. Destiny felt the same way.

Adam was grateful that they were getting along so well, and having fun, but he did feel a little left out. There was also

something else that was bothering him, a nagging worry that would not go away. He tried hard not to allow himself to be suspicious. You cannot have a healthy relationship without trust. For the gods' sake, it was his own brother! There was nothing to worry about, he was just being paranoid.

But he did worry, no matter how much he fought it. A sixth sense told him that it was not a good idea to have them spending so much time alone together. On Wednesday Adam even made it home about 20 minutes earlier than usual to check up on them. There was some hesitancy to actually go in, but when he did they were just sitting on the couch looking at something on the computer. Destiny got up and kissed him on the cheek and they both seemed happy to see him. Adam felt kind of silly for even worrying about it at all after that.

He decided not to say anything. What could he have said, even if he had wanted to? He couldn't talk to Destiny about it, that would just make her really mad. She hated it so much when he got jealous. He couldn't say anything to Dallin either. What, was he going to tell him to go stay somewhere else? Adam was the one who invited him to come stay with them. Now he was going to accuse him of something like that? Based upon what?

They did act kind of silly and flirtatious at times, but that was just Destiny. She was always like that. They both were. And actually, they weren't even doing that anymore. That was mostly just right at first. So what was he so worried about then?

The real problem was that Dallin had been there for three days now and they hadn't really done anything very fun. What were they going to do until Sunday? It was boring to just watch TV all the time.

Adam worried about that all night, along with other things. He did not get much sleep. But then at work the next morning an idea came to him that seemed so fantastic he did not know why he hadn't thought of it before: why not go to San Francisco? Destiny loved the place, and Dallin had never been there. It would be such a great weekend. They could even come back on Saturday night again if they wanted to, and then Dallin would have another day before his flight left.

Adam was so excited about this that he could hardly contain himself. He thought about sending a text to Destiny to see if they wanted to go, but then he decided that it would be more fun to surprise them. Destiny seemed to like it when he was spontaneous.

It might be kind of expensive though. He worried over that, spending the next hour planning their trip rather than thinking much about drywall. But he had done drywall for so long by then that he could do it on autopilot. He would have liked to call ahead or go online and make some reservations. Maybe they could stay in that same little motel, and he would even pay for Dallin's room if he could pay for himself on everything else. It seemed like he would probably go for that.

Once he had made the decision to go, he could hardly stand to wait around until 5 p.m. It would take a little while to get packed up and ready to go, and if they left that late they wouldn't really be able to do anything by the time they got there, they would just have to wait until tomorrow. And, if they left the next morning they would probably get a late start and half the day would be gone. It would have been a lot better to leave that afternoon.

So, at around 11, Adam went up to Red, his foreman, and told him that he was feeling sick.

'You look fine to me.' Red said. He turned and started to walk away, hoping that would end the conversation.

Adam almost just let it go. It wouldn't be worth getting fired over. But now that he had this in his mind it seemed like the perfect solution. He was feeling desperate.

'C'mon Red. You know I don't miss very often.' Adam regretted that as soon as he said it, because he then realized that he had missed some time lately, but it was true until recently. He'd been a good employee. He tried to gauge the reaction, but Red was a hard person to read, maybe because of his long gray beard. 'I don't really feel like eating so I could just go home when we get to our lunch break.'

Red sighed and thought about it for a moment. Adam nearly panicked when he realized that if Red asked for more details about what was wrong with him he would have had absolutely nothing to say. His mind was a complete blank. How could you not have figured out ahead of time what your symptoms were? What an idiot! But Adam scolded himself needlessly. Red finally just shrugged. 'I guess it is up to you. It won't be paid.'

'Okay. I understand. Thanks.'

Red started to walk away, but then turned towards him and pointed at the wall he was working on. 'Make sure you finish up that wall before you go, or let the other guys know so they can finish it.'

'I will. Thanks.'

It didn't seem like Red believed him. It probably didn't look very good to ask for the afternoon off right before a long holiday weekend. But so what, at least he was letting him go. He could make up for it later.

It took him until 12:20 to finish the wall, and then do some clean up. He wanted to make sure that he left everything pretty clean so that nobody would get pissed. But finally he decided that he better get going or he would never get out of there.

Jesus was disappointed that he was not staying around for lunch. For some time now they had been trading lunches, or at least part of it. Jesus's wife made some of the best burritos and tamales in the world, no joke. They were hot as hell, and Jesus would munch on a jalapeno pepper in between bites when he was eating them. Adam couldn't do that. Just the burritos alone would make his eyes water and all the Mexican guys would laugh uproariously as they watched him. They were sure good though, and all homemade.

Keeping up with his fake malady, Adam held his stomach and told Jesus as much through gestures as with language that he felt sick and did not want to eat. Jesus seemed genuinely concerned when Adam told him that he was going home for the day, but Adam assured him that he would be fine.

Adam liked those guys pretty well. He didn't at first, for obvious reasons. But after working side by side with them for awhile now, he had decided that they weren't too bad after all. Most of them were really hard workers. They did good work too, not just fast. No wonder they took all the jobs.

These guys were some of the good ones, especially Jesus. He was always really friendly, and when he laughed his whole body would shake. That made Adam chuckle just thinking about it.

On the ride home that day life seemed good. There was less traffic than he was used to, and with a long weekend in front of him things were looking up. It was exciting. Adam had

never really done anything like this before. It felt like cutting class back when he was a kid, but this time he was not even going to get in trouble for it.

There was still that little nagging worry though: should he let them know that he was coming? It might be a good idea so that they could start packing now and be ready to go. It usually took Destiny awhile to get ready. But of course that was not his true concern. Yet he was angry with himself for even thinking it. Of course he didn't *need* to call ahead, what he needed to do was to stop being so paranoid. He decided that he should not ruin the surprise.

Would Dallin even like San Francisco? He was starting to wonder about that, but it would be better than sitting at home. Adam liked it so much that he had been thinking about moving there. He would have done it if he could have figured out how to make it happen. It was just so expensive. And what would he do for a job? He had looked into a transfer, but the company he was with wasn't out there. Maybe someday though, if that was what Destiny wanted.

When he got to his own front door, once again he hesitated for a moment before going in. He had been thinking about texting her ever since he pulled into the parking lot.

No Adam! Do not go in there right now, we beg you! If you do, this happy home of yours will come crashing down around you like a house of cards! But alas, our warning is in vain; he cannot hear us. We can only watch as it unfolds.

He feels it too, though, that fear that we all have about what might be happening behind that door. He should have just left, but he could not. (Could you?) He would not have been able to live with leaving and then always having to wonder. He needed verification that there was not anything to worry about.

He put in the key and opened the door gently, not wanting to wake Dallin up if he was still asleep on the couch. He was there alright, as was Destiny, but they were definitely not asleep. Adam knew what they were doing just from the sounds that he heard as he was opening the door. It was unmistakable. He did not really need to see it, yet he could not have left without seeing.

Adam pushed the door open and came in, still clinging to any bit of hope, no matter how remote, that this was all just a terrible misunderstanding, that he would not see what he expected to see; but it was every bit as bad as he feared. They stopped when they heard someone at the door, but he saw Destiny straddling Dallin, peering over her bare shoulder at the sound.

She gasped when she saw him. He seemed almost like an apparition of himself, staring at them expressionless, suddenly appearing in a place where he did not belong. 'What are you doing here? You are supposed to be at work!' She said accusingly. She got off of Dallin and reached down for her nightgown, lying on the floor a few feet away, and frantically put it on.

Perhaps if Adam had come home earlier that morning while they were in the bedroom they would have heard the key turning in the lock and the door open while there was still time to recover before he came in; or if they had been in the bathroom (as they had been a few times) Destiny would have locked the door, as she did even during the day, and she would have been able to come up with some excuse for why they were in there together, why it was not what it looked like (even though it was); but there was no explaining this.

Adam just stood there, still holding his keys in his hand. He didn't move. No one said anything. What could you say? He looked at Dallin, still sitting on the couch. He was remarkably unperturbed. In fact, he almost seemed to be throwing down a challenge.

Finally Adam looked down at the floor. After hesitating for a moment, like he was trying to decide what to do, he turned, and without a word, just went out the door.

'Adam, wait, let's talk about this!' Destiny went to the door and reached out to him with her right hand from just a few feet away, as though to comfort him, but he did not want her to touch him. He slammed the door on her and made a run for it.

If he had not seen it with his own eyes he probably would not have believed it. Even now it seemed hard to believe. This was like a living nightmare.

Still in a daze, Adam somehow made it out to his car. He had to get away from here. He wanted to outrun it, to go faster than the pain that now began to flood over him; but there would be no escape; no matter where or how far he went, it would pursue him like a shadow.

Destiny wanted to go after him. She opened the door, but was now strangely self-conscious about going outside in only her nightie. She hid behind the door, in case someone was out there, but tried to peek her head out to see if she could see him. 'Adam!'

'Just let him go.' Dallin said from the couch. 'He'll be fine. He just needs some time to cool off.'

She closed the door softly and looked back at him. It was a little bit reassuring to hear that, but she was still not fully convinced. She sighed and looked at the ceiling. 'That was bad

Dallin. That was really really bad. I need to talk to him, or at least try.'

Dallin scoffed and then started to laugh while Destiny stared at him in shock. 'What the fuck are you gonna say to him?'

'I don't know!' Now she was starting to get mad.

That seemed to amuse Dallin as well, but he could tell that she was getting really pissed, so he tried not to laugh. He shrugged and put his hands out with the palms up. 'Listen, don't worry. He'll be fine.' He said again. 'And if he isn't, tough. He'll just have to get over it.'

She was once again shocked, but couldn't help cracking up a bit, in spite of herself. Grinning at him, she shook her head in playful disapproval. 'What the hell is wrong with you? You are so ROTTEN!'

Dallin just laughed. He got up from the couch, fully naked, and walked over to her. 'I guess that's why you think I'm so sexy, huh.'

He put his arms around her and pulled her in close, then went in for a kiss but she turned away. It was not because she did not want to be kissed, it was because it actually was kind of sexy and she couldn't look at him out of embarrassment.

Undeterred, he kissed her cheek, and then her neck, and began chewing on her earlobe as she giggled. 'You're such a creep.'

He moved behind her, still kissing her neck, and began taking her towards the couch. 'C'mon, you and me have some unfinished business to take care of.'

'What!' She stopped and turned to look at him over her shoulder. 'You can't be serious?'

But he was; one look told her that. She turned to look straight ahead but stood firm and resisted going to the couch.

'You really think he's gonna be okay?' She finally said.

'He would have found out eventually anyway. It's not that big of a deal.'

She was still hesitant. Dallin sighed. 'If you are really that worried about it you can call him in an hour or two, or maybe he'll come back and we can talk to him then.'

For some reason the idea of talking to him with Dallin was comforting. She hoped that they could do that. Well, maybe. It was a little scary imagining what Dallin might say. But it would definitely be a lot easier than talking to him by herself.

Dallin went back to chewing on her neck without waiting for a response. 'But that means that we have an hour or two to kill.' He whispered in her ear. He began pushing her towards the couch again, and this time she let him.

O, the perversity of nature! We animals are more selfish about sex than anything else in our lives; perhaps it is in the genes to be so, those rotten selfish genes, which then get passed on through selfish acts, thus perpetuating the cycle of selfishness. We may have been programmed that way, but it is damnable nonetheless.

The Bridge

A man without hope pulled into an empty parking lot near the Golden Gate Bridge in the dead of night. He turned the car off and just sat there for several minutes. He did not feel like moving. But finally he got out of the car and slowly worked his way along the walking path toward the bridge. The yellow light coming from the street lights cast an ominous glow on the orange paint, set against the backdrop of a menacing black sky; it looked like the bridge to hell.

It seemed strange that nobody else was there, other than a few cars passing by. But when he got closer he saw the security gate that blocked his path, and then noticed the sign. The bridge was only open to pedestrians from 5 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. It was now just a little after 2 a.m. Adam sighed. 'Fuck!' He yelled.

As he thought about what to do, he very seriously considered leaving and not ever coming back - just getting back in the car and driving, it didn't really matter where. But he had been driving for several hours already, and it hadn't really

helped. You cannot outrun your thoughts no matter how far you go, or how fast.

He probably should have found a motel room and gotten a really good night's sleep. He certainly could have used it. But he did not think that he could have slept anyway, and getting a motel would only remind him of her. Might as well just wait till it opens. It wasn't like he had anywhere else to be. There was something here that really needed to be done. He came all this way, and he wasn't going to leave without doing it. Then he could go wherever.

He turned back towards the car, but then hesitated. Maybe he could find a way to get over or around that gate. He went back and inspected it carefully, and then went over to the chain-link fence that was off to the side. Nope, not really. They even had barbed wire at the top of the chain-link fence. Apparently someone else had thought of that already. Even if he tried it somewhere else he would probably just end up getting himself arrested, not that he really gave a shit. He smacked the fence lightly with an open palm, and then reluctantly headed back to the car. It was too cold to wait outside.

At the very least he needed to find a bathroom, but he didn't want to have to drive anywhere. Once he got back to the car he pissed on the front tire on the driver's side, not really caring if anybody saw him. Emptying his bladder made him feel a little more comfortable, but it still didn't help much. Nothing really did.

He passed the time by listening to the radio, his heart breaking anew with nearly every song. When you are feeling melancholy they pretty much all seem sad, especially the love songs.

The floor in the back seat was littered with beer cans. Adam bought two twelve packs an hour or two after leaving his apartment, and had finished one already. Now he started on the second. But it barely took the edge off because he was used to beer. It was not unusual for him to finish off a twelve pack in a weekend, just himself, so this did not seem to be doing much to numb the pain. He should have gotten something stronger, like whiskey or bourbon. He chided himself for that, but beer was what he was used to, and what he liked. He didn't even think about it at the time. Everything was in a haze. In some ways it still was.

How could he have been so stupid? Did she even care about him at all? Had she ever? It didn't seem like it.

Neither did Dallin. He was such a selfish piece of shit. Adam wished now that he had done something to him. He should have taken that knife that he gave to him for Christmas and stabbed him in the heart with it. Instead, he just stood there like an idiot. Dallin was like a reptile: no matter how much love you showed to him he would never see you as anything more than potential food.

And he just walked away and didn't even do anything, like a little bitch. Why didn't he do something? Be a man! Fight back! But the truth is, he probably would not have won, and deep down he knew it. It was just like it was growing up, Dallin could do whatever he wanted and Adam could never really get him back. And anyway, it would not have changed anything.

Adam suddenly felt very tired. He thought once again about going to a motel, but it couldn't have been the one that Destiny liked. As tired as he was, he didn't think he could have slept anyway, no matter what motel it was.

He rested his head on the steering wheel with the radio playing and quietly began to sob. Once he accidentally hit the horn for just a second. It might have been a little bit funny if he hadn't been so miserable. He chuckled a bit, through the tears, but it did not last. The grief washed over him like a flood. Then it became anger again. He went into a rage and beat on the steering wheel.

He felt a tiny bit better after that, almost like after throwing up when you are sick. Adam hadn't cried like that in a long time. He was like a cup filled with grief that had finally been emptied. But the relief was only temporary, as the cup was soon full again.

He leaned back in the seat and fell asleep with the radio still on. It was a fitful, troubled, exhausted sleep. He could not really escape, even in dreams.

He awoke to a car door being closed nearby. It was daylight now, but still early. There were a few cars in the lot. He got out of the car and walked to where he could see the bridge. There were some people heading in that direction.

It was a cold blustery day. Occasionally gusts of wind blew in his face, and Adam was glad to have his coat. He hated the cold. In some ways going back to the car seemed a lot more inviting than going to the damn bridge on a day like today. Nevertheless, he pressed on. Perhaps Moros drove him.

Though the view was partially obstructed by a chain-link fence, off to his right Adam caught a glimpse of Alcatraz in the distance. He had totally forgotten about that! Maybe he could take that tour after all. Suddenly he was not feeling quite as bad about being single. Maybe he would finally be able to do some of the things that he wanted to do for a change.

As he walked along a sign caught his attention. It read: 'Crisis Counseling: There is hope, make the call. The consequences of jumping from this bridge are fatal and tragic.' A bright yellow call box was next to the sign.

Adam stared at it for a moment or two, and actually thought a little bit about calling, but decided against it. What could anybody say that would make things any better? There was not hope, not for him, not really. Now he was horribly depressed all over again.

Everything was different from how he remembered it. Today was a very gray day. But even on a morning like this the bridge was beginning to bustle with activity, which was growing by the minute. Joggers and bikes passed by. There were more of them at this hour than sightseers, but that would soon change. Two female joggers passed by, their ponytails bouncing up and down, trying their best to carry on a conversation even though they were both out of breath.

He had to pee again, and stopped at a porta potty. While doing so he looked down at his belly and sighed. He hadn't exercised much since high school because it seemed like he could not do it without becoming obsessed. So, he didn't even try, and got fat. He was not really fat, though, just chubby, always chubby.

The car traffic was somewhat noisy. Adam didn't notice it much as he walked along, but when he stopped to look out at the bay, and leaned over to look down at the greenish gray water, he leaned against the rail and could feel the vibrations as cars passed by. It frustrated him. All he wanted to do was stop for a minute, and he could not even do that in peace.

It would have been nice to see the sailboats. There was one way off in the distance, but it would have been better if

there were more. Maybe even a dolphin. Adam would have loved to see a dolphin. But all he saw was gray. Water, land, and sky were all gray. It looked like it was going to rain. The clouds were almost black in some places. Wispy strips of foam were the only things to see in the water. No happy sailboats today.

Adam sighed, then slowly continued on. He finally stopped at a familiar spot. This had to be close to where it was. He remembered that Alcatraz was just off to the right of them, but he couldn't remember exactly how far. He moved slowly, carefully looking over every inch of the top rail, and even feeling it with his fingers.

It had to be here. He knew it was pretty close, but now he was wondering if he had gone past it. He almost went back and started over, but before doing so he went a little bit further and finally found it: a crude misshapen heart with 'AJ + DD' at its center.

It was no worse for wear, but then there had hardly been enough time for it to rust. He thought back to that day and remembered how he had nearly put 'forever' in there as well, but there was not enough space. Now he was glad. It seemed ridiculous enough as it was.

But he really believed that it would be forever back then. Ever since that day Adam had been planning to bring her back here to propose someday, right here in this very spot. How stupid that all seemed now.

He took out his keys and checked all around, feeling as though everybody was watching, including the cameras. Because he was looking around rather than at what he was doing he fumbled with them a little. He was not really that close to dropping them, and if he had they would have just

fallen on the pavement, but it caused him to imagine what it would be like if somebody accidentally dropped their car keys into the water. Surely that must have happened to someone. People have probably dropped cameras, phones, hats, sunglasses, who even knows?

Thinking about it nearly made him laugh out loud. It was so silly, but for some reason it seemed funny. Now he really wanted to throw something into the water just to watch it fall. Too bad he hadn't bought that damn engagement ring yet, that would have been perfect. Maybe not the car keys, though; it would be a real pain in the ass to be stranded, and then he would have to call you know who to get the spare set. No, not worth it.

He searched through his pockets looking for something else and pulled out some change. A penny would work. Maybe he could even make a wish. But surely they must have rules against that. What if somebody saw him? He would have to say it was an accident. The good thing about using your keys would be that everybody would think that there is no way that you would intentionally throw your keys into the water, which is exactly how you could outsmart them. They would never suspect a thing. And, so what if he was stranded? What difference did it make? Nothing mattered anymore. He just wanted to see what it would look like. Maybe later.

He looked around one more time for cameras, and to see whether anybody was watching, but it didn't seem like anyone was paying attention to him. People were walking by, and occasionally a bike would pass, but nobody stopped. Even still, he leaned over the rail as though he was admiring the view below, allowing his coat to shield the area, and, as nonchalantly as possible, used one of the keys to scratch out the heart. It may

not have been quite as nonchalant as he thought, though, because once he got started the scratching became rather violent.

It was vengeance that drove him: he was trying to punish her. He hoped that she would come back here one day, see it crossed out, and be very sad. It would serve her right.

He felt good at first. It seemed like the best way that he could think of to get a fresh start and finally leave her behind. But then, as he thought about it more, he realized that she would probably never see it, and if she did, she wouldn't care. She never really cared about it as much as he did. She might not even remember. The whole thing was stupid. He was stupid for thinking that it mattered.

Now the sense of loss was even worse. He had to choke back the tears as he remembered that sacred day. Filled with regret, he touched it gently with his forefinger, caressing it, as he wished that he could with her, despite everything. This was all that he had left of her, the best memory that he ever had from a glorious time, and now it was ruined. Some things, once done, cannot be undone. The letters were unrecognizable, the heart only vaguely so. He tried to reemphasize them with the key, but it did not work. No matter how much he wiped the dust away and polished it with his sleeve, or caressed it with his finger, he couldn't get it back. Now he truly had lost everything.

He wiped his eyes and finally decided to keep walking. He had to get away from that spot. He began looking for the place where they had seen the dolphins, and actually had to backtrack a little bit to find it. He would have given just about anything to see a dolphin at that moment, but no dolphins were to be found.

She looked so beautiful that day in her pure white pants and those dark sunglasses. Adam had a thing for pretty girls in sunglasses. She seemed so wonderful back then. O Destiny . . . he hated her, yet he longed for her, and he hated himself for longing for her.

He also hated having to pass by the spot again, and in fact almost just headed back so that he wouldn't have to, but for whatever reason he wanted to go all the way to the other end of the bridge, maybe just because that is what they did before. Once he got there he almost kept on going and walked around a little bit on the other side. It was not like he really had anywhere to be. But then he thought that maybe if he was going to take that tour of Alcatraz he had better get over there and get tickets before it got too busy. Maybe he could even still get in on the full day tour.

He finally turned around and started back with the intention of taking that tour. He almost made it, he really did, but as he was walking back he thought about how much more fun it would have been to go with others rather than just going by himself. If things had been different and they were all here together, Dallin would have wanted to go see it even if Destiny didn't. But she would have gone if Dallin wanted to. That seemed pretty fucked up: she would go for Dallin, but she wouldn't go for him? But that was how it was.

Pretty soon these thoughts had so poisoned the idea of the tour that Adam did not even want to go anymore. There was no escape from it. Everything reminded him of her, and of them.

So what now? Go get some breakfast and pretend like nothing happened? Nothing was ever going to be right again.

He did not want to go back to the car, back to his shitty life. He even dreaded having to walk by his mutilated heart. Part of him wanted to look at it again, but another part wished that he would never have to see it.

He finally stopped and stood for a long time, out of the way of those who were passing by. A thought crossed his mind, almost like a demonic little voice whispering in his ear: *You don't have to go back at all.* There was another way off this bridge. He imagined himself standing up on the railing and spreading his arms out wide while he took one final look at San Francisco Bay and said goodbye. Then, as everyone gasped and pointed, he would dive off like it was the high platform at the summer olympics.

What a way to go out: like dropping the mic at the end of a concert. He would have tried it if he had been bolder. But the wind was gusting, and that made him nervous. He did not want to make a fool of himself in his final moments. There had already been enough of that during his life, he did not need it in death as well.

He thought about it for a few minutes, feeling strangely at peace. He didn't have to go back, and that was such a relief. Now there was clarity.

He knew that if he waited much longer he would lose his nerve, so he took a few deep breaths and went for it. He hunched forward and swung his leg up over the rail like he was climbing over a fence and carefully went over the top. But once on the other side he clutched at the rail desperately with both arms, which seemed a little ironic. O Adam, how silly you look! You want to jump, but you are afraid of falling?

People were just starting to notice. Adam knew that he did not have much time. Somebody would probably try to stop

him, maybe even grab him, and he suddenly realized that he did not want to be stopped. He wanted out. He had failed at everything else in his life, he was not going to fail at this.

No doubt someone would have at least tried to talk him out of it if he had waited much longer, but what would they have said, that things will get better? THEY WON'T! Not for Adam Jones. Abhorred of both heaven and earth, the Unfortunate One was fated to a cursed existence. Why lie to him and tell him that it will be otherwise? Do we really believe that, or are we just trying to trick him into prolonging the torture? If we do believe it, perhaps we lie to ourselves as well.

So he does not want to be stopped. Can you really blame him? You've seen his life: Would you want to keep living if you were Adam Jones?

Who would not want to escape this place, where evil thrives and villains prosper? We may cry out for vengeance against his tormentors, but it will never come. The only punishment that they will receive, perhaps, is to be them.

Is there no justice? Has Rhadamanthus fallen asleep? Who is manning his post?

The high heavens and the underworld must also be like what Solon said of this one: that the laws are like spider webs, catching the small creatures while the larger ones break through and get away. But these two vile creatures were no gods. How can they afford to commit acts of injustice with impunity? They must be favored by some powerful god who smiles upon them and keeps justice at bay. Is it Zeus? Why isn't the great king of both god and man more equitable?

This was no mere cry for help: once Adam made up his mind he meant business. Looking down, the only thing between him and the grayish green water below was a steel

beam, about a foot wide. All he had to do was to make sure that he cleared that and he would be free. But it was really scary. The water looked somewhat rough and choppy even from this height. It did not exactly seem like a warm inviting bath. He tried not to look at it, and instead focused on clearing the beam. He wanted to close his eyes, but he could not because he had to make sure that he cleared the beam. It felt to him like he had hesitated much longer than he actually did, and he thought that he was running out of time. If he was going to do it, he had to go now.

While part of him did not want to be stopped, another part yearned for an excuse not to do it; but not finding any, he leaned out, holding on to the rail with one hand, and then let go as he jumped forward, almost like he was jumping off a porch.

It takes about four seconds for a falling body to reach the water below. Adam spent the first half second or so simply rejoicing that he had managed to clear the beam and evade those who might try to stop him; then came regret as he realized what he had done. But it was too late. Some things, once done, cannot be undone.

He tried to look down and caught a glimpse of the green water hurtling toward him at astonishing speed, but the wind was so strong that it was hard to keep his eyes open. Now somewhat blinded, he braced for an impact that seemed to take forever. Shouldn't he have hit by now? Just as this thought crossed his mind, BOOM! There was water all around him. It was so hard that landing on it felt kind of like tripping and falling on concrete; and it was so cold; he knew that it would be, but not like this; he did not think that water could even get this cold.

It was not at all like he thought it would be; for one, he thought that he would be dead by now. Even death row inmates get to request a last meal; all that Adam wanted was one last look at the bay - just one more glance at heaven before he died. He assumed that he could get it on the way down and then it would all be over the instant that he hit the water. Quick and painless, that was how he planned it. But since when had things ever gone according to his plans?

Maybe if he would have been fully sober and had jumped head first he would have lost consciousness immediately upon impact; or, if he had landed feet first and put his arms straight up above him he may have even had a small chance of surviving it. But when had Adam Jones ever landed on his feet? Perhaps if he had been even more drunk than he was, or if he was on drugs, he could have been like the jumper who hit a parked car, did not die, and did not even lose consciousness.

But while some seem to lead a charmed existence, Adam had no such luck. He fell a little bit sideways and forward rather than fully vertical; he had to land awkwardly, of course. He instinctively put his hands down and out in front of him to break the fall; unfortunately that does not do much good when you hit the water at a speed of 75 miles per hour.

Both legs buckled upon impact; next to hit was his left knee and then elbow. Surprisingly, none of his limbs were broken, but the left shoulder and upper arm were severely damaged. Adam now had a broken body to match his broken spirit.

That body sank deep into the abyss, despite a feeble attempt at swimming; Adam had never been much of a

swimmer, even in the best of times. Nobody ever taught him, or at least not very well.

Nociceptors all over his body registered warnings to an overloaded brain. It hurt everywhere, but the worst was his lower back and the whole left side. He let out a muffled scream that accomplished nothing other than to swallow a fair amount of sea water. Then began the coughing, which only made it worse. It was difficult for Adam to breathe, but at this point that had more to do with a punctured lung than being under water. He tried not to breathe until he could make it to the surface; he did not know that he had a punctured lung.

It was so cold, so unimaginably cold. Why had he not realized how cold it would be? It seemed as though it went through his entire body in an instant. He was submerged in an ice bath. Perhaps that is why he never lost consciousness, despite the horrific pain. No, his lot was to suffer. Could it have been any other way for Adam Jones? As it was in life, so also in death.

As he struggled helplessly, a sudden rush of panic took hold of him as he remembered hearing somewhere that there were sharks in the bay. But he needn't have worried; the sea was more than capable of doing her own work, she did not need the assistance of her creatures, though they would be feasting soon. Adam would have given anything then just to be out of the water. Though literally only a few minutes earlier he had longed for death, now, with a surge of adrenaline, he fought to live.

But it was not to be. He fought desperately, his arms and legs flailing about in a panic, trying to will himself to the surface; but fighting did little good. It never really had. For

what is man against such forces? It was a hopeless struggle; it always had been. He kept fighting anyway.

But finally, the cold and a lack of oxygen overwhelmed him. He was out of time. It was involuntary; he gulped for breath the way a fish would on land. The last bit of reason left in a mind consumed with pain told him that very soon he was going to die, and it was terrifying.

Was it a sin, what he had done? Would he go to hell for it? Suddenly such questions seemed to have far greater significance than they ever had before. If only he had thought about them a little bit sooner.

Adam prayed with all the fervency of a dying man to be forgiven and begged for God to save him. He promised to change his life, to dedicate himself fully to God's service from that time on if only he could be spared. But his cries were either unheard or unheeded. O luckless man, hapless soul, fated to a cursed existence, why is it that you are so unloved?

Death is an ugly thing. The body endures so much damage that it can no longer function, but it does not go without a fight. It takes severe trauma, disease, or a long period of decay to damage it beyond its ability to repair itself. For most, the process of dying is horrific, and this was no exception. It hurt so much more than Adam had even imagined.

It took a few minutes - a few agony-filled minutes that seemed to drag on forever. But finally it was over. Adam never made it back to the surface. He was close, tantalizingly close, but the forces against him were too powerful.

The last few struggles finally ceased as the powerful current calmly but firmly pushed the body out to sea, and the soul all the way to Acheron. Ironically, Adam's last few moments of consciousness were the most peaceful because he

finally stopped struggling and simply accepted his fate. Then the lights went out and everything went black. He would soon begin the dream from which one never awakens.

Sleep on Adam; you will no longer feel the cold. You were doomed from the very beginning to an ill-fated existence, destined for misery and woe, but now you are free. Rest in peace.

Several people on the bridge had called for help. Even a driver in one of the cars passing by had called 911. A fairly large crowd was forming around the spot where he jumped. They searched the water with their eyes near where the splash and that sickening slap of flesh hitting the water had been, but no one could spot him. Perhaps if the day had been more sunny they could have seen him under the water. A bridge patrol officer came over and dropped a smoke flare into the water to mark the spot so that the Coast Guard could find it.

It was so shocking. He hadn't really given any warning that he was going to do it, other than perhaps lingering in the same spot for awhile, but it was not all that long. Nobody knew who he was, or anything about him. He never said anything to anyone.

An Asian woman who happened to be standing a few hundred feet away from him, along with her daughter, would blame herself for years, although it is unlikely that she could have done anything. 'So sad.' She said.

'It is a real tragedy.' A gray-headed man in the crowd said. 'He was so young.' His wife added, looking up at him,

then at other members of the crowd. The man put his arm around her and hugged her. They leaned against each other for both emotional and physical support.

Other bridge patrol workers arrived shortly. They had called it in already, of course, and the Coast Guard was rushing out to find him. No one up here could really do anything, other than try to spot him. They still tried to think of something to do. Finally they started talking to people in the crowd about what they had seen.

Only a few boats were already out on the water at that time of day. None of them were close by. It would have been futile to send word to them. The Coast Guard got out there in under 5 minutes, but that feels like a very long time when you are drowning. It didn't really matter though. If they had found him they would have treated him, or at least tried, until they got him back to shore, but ultimately it would have been a hopeless endeavor. When Adam hit the water his internal organs were not slowed down as abruptly as the rest of his body; as a result, several of them had torn loose, and some were shredded by the broken ribs. The internal damage was simply too severe. His fate was sealed from the moment he hit the water.

The members of the Coast Guard that were on that ship were not going out there for the first time; they knew better than anyone that most likely they were just looking for a body. As it turns out, they didn't even find that, despite a diligent search. The boat was no more than 50 feet away at times, as they canvassed the whole area, but they could not see it. Perhaps if the water had not been so murky . . .

The body never would be recovered, for Adam had been fated to a watery grave. What is man against the will of the

mighty Pacific? The current continued to inexorably push him out to sea, floating not far from the surface.

Without recovering a body, or any form of identification, and without anyone knowing anything else about him, the authorities did not know what to do, other than to look for a vehicle. They finally did find his car. They were pretty sure, based on the video and eyewitness testimony that this had to be the jumper, but without a body it could not be guaranteed.

An investigator at the Marin County coroner's office contacted the local police department where Adam lived and they went over to the address on the vehicle's registration. They arrived not too long before Destiny was supposed to take Dallin back to the airport. The police showed them some of the surveillance footage that the investigator had sent them and Destiny confirmed that it was indeed Adam. The police then informed them of what they thought had happened.

As it turned out, when Adam felt like there was a camera on him, there actually was. One of the bridge patrol officers noticed when Adam walked by that he was by himself, and he did not look very happy, so he called the bridge office and had a camera put on him for awhile. They were watching as Adam scratched on the rail with his key. The office called the patrol officer back and told him about it. They thought he was fine because by then he had started walking again. The patrol officer thought about catching up to him and saying something to him about it, but he finally decided that it was not that big of a deal. There was already plenty of graffiti on the rails. They all assumed that this was probably the reason that he seemed to be acting a little strangely, and now that he was moving again they didn't worry about him anymore. Maybe if Adam had come to the bridge planning to jump, it would have been more obvious

that he was deliberating. As it was, he really didn't deliberate for very long, and by then nobody was paying much attention to him.

Tina later called the investigator and asked to see all of the surveillance footage that they had. He initially tried to gently persuade her that maybe that wouldn't be such a good idea, but she was insistent. Some shots of Adam were very clear. However, the footage of him jumping was not. It was taken from far away, and the cameras were not focused on him. Tina held out hope for a little while that maybe it wasn't him. Destiny never told her why he left in the first place, she just said that they had a fight, but Tina thought that maybe he was just upset and needed to get away for awhile. It was obvious that he had been at the bridge, and she didn't know why he would have left his car there, but maybe he just needed some time away and he would come back when he was ready. For some time she held out hope that he was missing, not dead, and refused to have a funeral until they found a body and knew for sure.

Adam actually thought briefly about calling Tina during his time of distress. He should have. For some reason he did not want her to know. Maybe it was because it was Dallin and he was embarrassed, and he thought that she would just take their side. He assumed that she would try to defend Destiny because they were becoming friends and he was just not in the mood to hear it. But he should have called her. He might have been surprised.

O Adam, why couldn't you have picked your other sibling to draw closer to? Why did it have to be the reptile? With Tina there was potential. She could have helped you if only you had reached out.

They looked for the body for some time, but eventually life had to go on for the living. San Francisco Bay was beginning to awaken in earnest, and activity was increasing everywhere: on the bridge, in the city, and in the water. There was a more optimistic feel in the air. The storm clouds had parted a little, and there was a hint of blue sky behind them. It was as though the heavens had been sated by the most recent blood offering, and now, at least for a time, there was peace. After a few hours the jumper was almost entirely forgotten. Most of the people on the bridge then did not even know that it had happened. It is too bad that Adam was not there to see all the little sailboats that were out now. He would have really enjoyed that.

The Missed Call

Cassie had a plan, but as is often the case with mortals, things were not going according to her plan. She had decided a few weeks earlier that she had to tell Adam how she felt about him. Even if it didn't work out, at least then she would know and she could move on with her life. Or at least that is what she told herself. Nobody ever really expects to be turned down, or they would not have asked at all. But she told herself that she would be okay either way, she just had to know. If she didn't do it, she knew that she would always regret it.

She kept thinking about him, wondering how he was doing. He was such a good friend, and she missed him. She was not going to tell him that she loved him - she had thought about this a lot - because she did not know if that was even true; after all, they hadn't even been on one date yet. But there was definitely something there, and she knew that he felt it too. Why couldn't they just spend some time together and see what happened? No pressure, just keep things casual.

It all sounded good as she rehearsed it over and over in her mind, but she was still terrified. Cassie had a friend once, while growing up, who wrote a letter to a guy professing her undying love for him, and, of course, it scared him off. He barely spoke to her after that. Cassie could not stop thinking about that, wondering if the same thing was going to happen to her, wondering if this was a huge mistake.

It was out of character for her to be this forward, and it made her really uncomfortable. A lifetime of being nearly invisible (or feeling that way at any rate) had made her think that she must not be very pretty. In reality, though, she was more like a poorly set diamond. She had not gotten much attention over the years because most could not recognize her true value. Not to say that she had never had a boyfriend; there had been a few over the years. They were all fine, but she had never felt like this.

One of those prior relationships was something else that had been holding her back. You see, Cassandra had a terrible secret. She had herpes. It was so humiliating that she just wanted to die. She got it from her stupid boyfriend back in college, who was cheating on her, of course. Ever since then, she dreaded even trying to have a relationship. If anyone showed interest in her she usually pushed them away just to avoid having that conversation.

The thought of having to admit all this to Adam, and wondering what he would think of her was just horrifying. She dreaded that conversation more than anything. But it never even occurred to her to not tell him, because it wouldn't be right for him to not know what he was getting into. They would have to talk about it before they could be intimate, maybe even before he broke up with Destiny so that he could make an

informed decision. But all that could come later. She was getting ahead of herself again, worrying about things far off in the distance, and that was always what kept her from acting.

Her instincts told her that somehow it would be okay. Adam was so sweet. He remembered her birthday and they weren't even dating. How many guys could you say that about? He really was a sweetheart, even though he did not want people to know. When they were together it seemed like they could talk about anything. Maybe even that. It was still horrible. But even if he just wanted to be friends, at least she would have her friend back.

This was so unlike anything that she had ever done before. She just knew that she needed to talk to him. Over the past few months she kept hoping that he would come to her, and even half expected it. She knew that he felt something too. But he never called, or came by, and now she was starting to lose hope. As terrifying as this was, she was also terrified not to try and then always have to wonder.

The problem was figuring out how to contact him and what exactly to say. Should she start with an apology? Did she really need to apologize? Should she do it anyway, even if she didn't really need to? Would he even read the rest of the message once he realized it was from her? Did he hate her?

At first she was just going to use e-mail. It seemed like it would be easier to write what she wanted to say. But that hadn't gone very well before, and it seemed like this was the kind of thing that needed to be said in person, as difficult as that would be. He needed to see her face, and hear her voice, and she needed to see and hear him as well to truly gauge how he felt.

She finally decided to send him a text message but it took her three days to finally settle on what to say. 'Hi, it's Cassie from work. Can we talk sometime?'

After she sent it she fretted that maybe Destiny would see it, and regretted using her name. But how could she let him know who it was without also letting her know?

After only a couple of minutes, and before getting any response, she sent another text. 'I have some things I really want to say. Could we meet for lunch just us? Maybe Sat or Sun? Or even just to talk?'

But there was no response. She worried about it all night long. She tried watching TV, then reading, then some mindless internet stuff, anything to take her mind off of it. But it didn't work. She went through a wave of emotions. First she was angry, then sad, then hopeful; it seemed like it just had to work out, it was meant to be; but then she would cycle back through all of them again. She finally became convinced that he had gotten the messages and was simply ignoring her. But that did not seem like him, and because of that, she still had a little hope.

The waiting was terrible. It was just so strange that he did not even respond at all. It hadn't been very long, she told herself, but it sure felt like it. The longer that it went the more concerned she became. She had this strange feeling that there was something very wrong. It just wouldn't be like him to completely ignore her like this.

She nearly called him at almost 11 p.m., before going to bed, but she could not think of a good excuse for why she would be calling so late. She did not want to seem like a stalker.

She continued to worry about it all night and hardly slept at all. For some reason she had this terrible feeling of

foreboding, but could not pinpoint why. She assumed that it was just nerves. It was starting to seem like a huge mistake to have even tried this. Finally, at about 2:30 a.m., she got down on her knees and prayed. She didn't know what else to do. She wanted to pour out her soul to Adam, but she could not reach him, so she spoke to God instead. She felt a tiny bit better after that, but was still close to tears. Unfortunately there was no response from heaven either.

Adam had turned off his phone in case Destiny called. He did not want to talk to her, or at least he had convinced himself that he did not. Part of him wished more than anything that she would call to beg for forgiveness and plead with him to take her back; to say that she loved him, and that she was worried about him. Then he would have told her to go straight to hell. At least that is what he told himself he would do. And to prove it, perhaps to himself as much as anyone, he decided that he would not even take the call.

As it turned out, his caution was unnecessary: Destiny never tried to call. Perhaps, deep in his subconscious somewhere, Adam was more worried that she wouldn't, rather than that she would, and that was his real reason for turning off the phone. She did feel kind of bad about the whole thing, especially that he found out that way, but she had decided to take Dallin's advice and let him cool off for a few days. By 11 p.m. they were snuggled up in front of the TV, enjoying a quiet evening at home (Adam's home) with only the occasional thought about him, or where he might be. Destiny assumed that he must be staying at a hotel somewhere, probably a cheap one, knowing him.

The next morning, Cassie came really close to calling before she went in to work. But it had occurred to her sometime

during the night that maybe he could not answer for some reason. Maybe he would just come to see her, like old times. It was Friday so he would have the day off. She convinced herself that this must be the case. She was half expecting him to show up all day. But he never did.

She didn't know what to do. She finally decided to text again. 'It's Cassie from work, r u ok?' Once again, though, there was only silence.

It was right before a long holiday weekend, so everybody else left by 3 p.m. But Cassie stayed even later than she usually did, still hoping that he would come. She looked up the contact information that they had on file for him before leaving the office that night to make sure that she had the right number and sent an e-mail that was similar to the texts. It was worrisome to send something so personal through a work account. She imagined all sorts of ways that this could go terribly wrong, and her imagination presented some remarkable scenarios.

But she still sent it. Perhaps that shows the level of desperation that she was feeling. She also sent him a message through social media. Destiny had made him unfriend her, but she found him and sent a private message. But then she got really worried that Destiny might have access to his account. If she got him in trouble with Destiny he might never forgive her. But she had to risk it. At this point there was no turning back. She had to at least know what was going on.

Once she got home she checked her e-mail every half hour or so for the next few hours, but never heard anything. It was so strange.

Finally she couldn't stand it any longer and she called. There was no answer. She did not leave a message. She

couldn't keep doing this. He was going to think she was crazy if she kept sending all these messages. She was also becoming frustrated and even a little bit angry. Here she was putting herself out there and making herself very vulnerable, and he didn't even have the decency to answer her? But it just didn't make sense. It wasn't like him to be like that, which still gave her a tiny bit of hope that maybe he just hadn't seen the messages yet, but it also caused her to feel mildly alarmed. Was everything okay?

She told herself that she wasn't going to call again. He would either respond or he wouldn't. Calling or leaving more messages would not do any good. She had about decided to just give up on the whole thing, and really wished that she had never even tried. But then only about ten minutes later she did call again, and this time she left a tearful, heartfelt message, pleading for him to call her back, if nothing else just so that she would know that he was okay. She even told him that she really cared about him, and that it was important. She gave her number, even though he probably already had it, and disconnected the call with trembling fingers.

After hanging up she held the phone with both hands and laid down on the couch, putting it next to her heart. She said out loud: 'Come on Adam, don't just leave me hanging.' She was close to tears already, and now she started to cry. Her stomach felt like she was on a roller coaster, because in many ways, she was.

She didn't even know if she could have talked to him if he had called back; it felt like by then she had lost her nerve. Nevertheless, she held the phone for some time after that, still hoping to receive a call that would never come. She would never even know why. She had no idea that the waterlogged

phone that she was trying so desperately to reach was floating in the Pacific, along with its owner.

All that Cassie knew was that he never came back to work. She assumed that it must be because of her. She thought that maybe Destiny wouldn't let him respond to her and had made him leave his job. Perhaps she was not far off.

It is too bad that Cassie and Tina did not know each other. If Tina had known about her, she would have let her know what happened. They would have liked each other. Maybe they could have helped each other through it.

Perhaps if Rita had still been alive things would have turned out differently. Adam would have called her. If he had been able to reach her she probably could have helped him. Even if she had been at work, at least he would have turned on his phone. Rita would have liked Cassie if she had ever gotten the chance to meet her. And she really would have liked her son when he was with her.

Dear sweet Cassandra, we do feel bad for you. What you ever saw in Adam Jones we cannot say, but we know that your feelings are real. You would have been so good for him, and so good to him. You would not have betrayed him; we know that, because we know you. Adam could have safely loved you with all his heart, and he would have. In time he would have come to realize that he had traded fool's gold for the real thing, and been so happy to be with you. And oh how we would have loved to see the look on Destiny's face when she saw the two of you together!

If only he had met you before she fully attached and began sucking the life from him. Why couldn't she just let him go? Why? Why! She didn't really care about him, why couldn't

she just step aside? Why couldn't she let him be happy? But that is just how she is; that's Destiny.

Miss Cassandra probably was too good for Adam, actually. Did she even know the real Adam Jones? Probably not the one that we know. But then again, maybe we do not know him in the way that she does either. We all need somebody who sees the best in us. He was not the best of men, but one might be surprised at who he could have been under different circumstances and with different influences. Now we'll never know. It is the tragedy of unfulfilled potential.

Earlier in that same year there was a meeting to mark the beginning of construction for a suicide barrier at the Golden Gate Bridge. But construction was only in the very early stages. It was not even visible yet to the public. It would take a few more years to complete. If only construction had begun years earlier. If only these events had transpired a few years later . . .

O Cassandra, dear, sweet, heartbroken Cassandra, if only you had tried to contact Adam a few days earlier. If only he hadn't turned off his phone. If only . . . if only . . .

Epilogue

What is the meaning of this accursed tale? Why must we hear about the afflictions of this man, despised of both heaven and earth, that we suffer with him? Are any among us wise enough to interpret? Ah, yes, there is Tiresias; bring him forth, that we may examine him. Tiresias we wish to consult with you. Please explain to us the meaning thereof, for we know not whether to give the poet a prize or a beating.

Tiresias: Friends, some things are better left hidden. Do not trouble me and I will not trouble you.

Chorus: No, we insist. We have endured much, and it shall not be in vain. You tease with your dark sayings, and though we tremble a little at thy warning, our curiosity is greater than our fear. Tell us, therefore, by whom, and for what cause was this hapless soul cursed? What great evil did he commit? Which great god did he offend? Were the Fates spinning in anger?

Tiresias: (Sighs.) Very well, the blind shall be your guide. The answer, my friends, is you, for you are not just

spectators, but also the characters in this play. It was you who cursed this man and caused his sufferings.

Chorus: No! You are wrong this time Tiresias, we have been his advocates throughout. There may have been times when we became frustrated with him, but we always hoped for his success. Did you not hear us jeering at his enemies?

Tiresias: You mock and berate them while you are spectators but then you become them once you leave the amphitheater. Here you see the whole story, but while in the midst of it, you see only your side.

No immortal god fated Adam to a life of misery and woe; we did. We are the tormenters of Adam Jones.

Chorus: Our accuser has spoken hard things against us. But if we are actors then we merely follow the script that was written for us by forces far more powerful. Whether he was cast as victim or villain, that is not our doing.

Tiresias: Do not pretend that you were unwilling participants. You acted as the underlings of Evil, the minions of Cruelty. You did their bidding in tormenting him.

Chorus: Oh, such nonsense! Really Tiresias, you greatly exaggerate. Adam was not a slave in the salt mines, or a defenseless woman in a sacked city; he was not drawn and quartered, tortured as a prisoner of war, or made a political prisoner of his own government; he was not lynched to satisfy the bloodlust of a cruel mob, or sent to a concentration camp; he did not suffer from horrible debilitating disease or a chronic illness; there have been many in this world who drew lots far worse than his.

Tiresias: Yes, unfortunately that is so. Others have had it far worse. But that is no consolation, it is cause for more weeping.

Chorus: Oh, why should we mourn for him? This is only trivial mundane suffering. His was merely the common lot of man. It now seems foolish that we ever cared.

Tiresias: You should mourn because it is the common lot. These are the sorrows of the everyman, just trying to make his way in the world.

The Buddha was right that life is suffering, but wrong to suppose that anything can be done about it. The only remedy is death. He has it backwards - we do not stop existing because we have freed ourselves of attachment and no longer have desires, we are free from desire only when we stop existing.

Desire is natural in animals. Were Adam's desires somehow improper? This was not a man who wished to scale Mount Olympus and challenge the gods. He did not seek to rule the world or even to be a king. He had only the most basic of human desires, and yet even these were denied him.

Chorus: It sounds as though you think that Death coming earlier than expected was a blessing to him.

Tiresias: We cannot blame Death for doing his job. All mortals die. The tragedy was not Adam's death, or even that it was an untimely death, the tragedy was his life.

It is the tragedy of misguided hope, of impossible dreams, of finding your soul mate - only to have Destiny keep you apart; it is the story of missed opportunities, of bad timing, of coming so close; of what almost was, of what could have been; it is the tragedy of almost.

It is the tragedy of the human condition, yea, even of all living things, the pain of existence. It is the constant struggle for existence; the constant struggle of existence.

The tragedy that we are just animals, and that sometimes we act like it. The tragedy of being the prey, and the tragedy of the hunter, full today, but destined one day to hunger.

It is the tragedy of the contest: that for every winner there is a loser, often many of them; the tragedy - for the loser - of winner takes all. The tragedy of only the strongest survive, of the war of all against all.

Chorus: But that is the natural order of things. You rail against Nature, but that is her way of making us strong.

Tiresias: Our mother has great beauty, but a wicked heart. All living things have cause to lament, for she is a neglectful parent, watching her offspring battle each other with callous indifference. Generation after generation of competitors come forth, whose only true victory is to pass on their genes, and along with them their misery, to those that follow. Instinct prods them, not reason, for surely such is not reasonable. This is the legacy of the hundreds of millions of generations who came before. Ironically, all living things are consumed by *the will to live* - even though living is misery.

Chorus: Not for us, we are the winners.

Tiresias: You? Winners? We'll see. The philosopher was forced to consider the question of whether one can even say that a man is happy until after he is dead, and with good reason, for Tyche is a capricious one: Even if things seem to be going well now, one never knows when she may turn on him. Not even she knows what she will do tomorrow.

Tyche, or Fortuna amongst the Romans, is the god of all, but she is not a she, it is an it. Chance is a most frightening god because it has no guilt, no shame: indeed, no feeling at all. It is impossible to appease with offerings or cajole with praises and/or pleadings. We cannot expect mercy or justice; we have

no idea what to expect, and no way to influence the outcome.

Life is more a matter of luck than justice. One must face the terrifying reality that whether just or unjust, pious or impious, their life could still turn out tragically. Perhaps no less troubling, there are also times when the wicked prevail even if Tartarus is what they deserve. Poetic justice rarely occurs in a world of randomness, much as we might wish for it. We should savor it when it does, it could be a long time until it happens again.

The fate of all is determined by probabilities. Random chance rules the heavens above and the earth below, and all that we can do is play the hand that we are dealt. There are occasional winners in life's lottery, but the hopes of most are dashed before their eyes. Yet we still hope, even though hope is irrational.

If only there were some wise benevolent deity, a father or mother that we could appeal to for help, perhaps a beloved ancestor even; but it is not so. Such a being would never allow what takes place in this world. They say there are no atheists in foxholes, and maybe it is so; but just as many die whether they are believers or no. Do not blame God; it is not that our pleas fall on unsympathetic ears, it is that there is no such ear. We are alone. We must fend for ourselves.

Ah, the truth is heavy. O that we might be like the fish of the sea, or the fowls of the air - entirely unaware. But the lot of humankind is to know of our dreadful situation. Can we bear it?

Chorus: Perhaps not. You are starting to make us believe that Adam made the right decision after all. Maybe he is better off now; maybe we all would be if we did the same. The wise

demigod Silenus, when compelled by King Midas to say what was the best and most desirable of all things for man, replied, with shrill laughter:

Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do ye compel me to tell you what it were most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is beyond your reach forever: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you - is quickly to die.

Tiresias: Adam's problems were real, there is no denying it; it is not that he just needed to have a more positive attitude, or take a pill and then everything would be fine; his life really was awful. Perhaps ours is as well. Hume, through the voice of Demea, asked whether anyone would want to live over again the last ten or twenty years of their life. I would not, unless I could make changes. But changing things would likely only lead to new unforeseen mistakes and hardships rather than the ones that I already know. They say hindsight is 20/20, but that is only because we do not actually know the outcome of what would have happened on alternate paths. Some errors would be corrected, but other decisions would only lead to new regrets.

However, this world does not contain only misery and pain. There is also beauty, and pleasure, and love, and kindness. The real tragedy of this story is that it did not have to be so. Adam never really got a fair shot at life. If he is better off dead then that is tragic because that is not how it has to be. It was not fate, we made it that way ourselves.

Chorus: But that is the natural order of things. Some are great like the gods, others are born to be our servants. The strong should have dominion over the weak, the great should be served by the less! Not all can be favored. If Fortuna were to smile upon all, none would be blessed. Only those who are not chosen denounce favoritism; it must be that you speak from a jealous heart.

Tiresias: (Scoffs, shaking his head in disgust.) You Nietzscheans, disciples of a loser who had such a lack of self-awareness that he thought he was a winner. That great ass-kisser of the aristocracy and the self-described 'elite', that is the prophet you have chosen? Those who think that some are naturally superior always seem to see themselves as among the great ones. Coincidence? You say it is for balance, that it must be this way, but far fewer are blessed than those who are cursed. Justice would dictate a more equitable distribution.

Chorus: Justice? You speak to us of that old fool? Justice is weak! He is easily overcome by more powerful gods. Passion alone overpowers Justice.

Tiresias: Among you, maybe, but not everywhere, and not always.

Chorus: But Justice is so boring. It is Power that we adore. One can do great things with him as their god. We side with the winners, that we may be winners!

Tiresias: Yea, and that is part of the tragedy. Power is like Ajax, strong but stupid. He is easily influenced by other gods, and you have surrounded him with bad influences. You abandoned Goodness, and those that follow him, to defile yourselves with Evil's consorts.

Chorus: O, enough of this! Fortuna must choose favorites, and to give ourselves a better chance of gaining her

favor we serve whom we will. No more of your ramblings old man. We wish now that we had taken your prior counsel, and we will do so now, that we may forget about this and go on with our lives in peace.

Tiresias: No, it is too late. You will not be able to rid yourselves of Adam that easily. From now on you will see him in many of the faces around you. That shall be your curse.

Chorus: What is it that you want from us Tiresias? Why do you chastise us this way? Not all were unjust. Have you forgotten about those who did right?

Tiresias: I have not. They accounted themselves well. Let them depart in peace. For them there should be no guilt. But as for the rest of you, be not the servants of Evil. It is too late for Adam. Nothing can be done for him now. He is not cursed to be reborn - perhaps the universe does have a modicum of mercy after all. But do not add to the woes of those who suffer still, lest you contribute to a tragic life.

Appendix

It is unfortunate that this section is necessary. I would have preferred to leave you with the final thoughts of the epilogue. But the way that I have punctuated the dialogue in this story does not follow the style guidelines for either British or American English, so even though it causes a rather dramatic shift in mood, I realize that I need to provide some kind of explanation so that you do not think that it was simply an error. Perhaps some still won't like it, even after reading my explanation, but at least it will be clear why I chose to do it that way, and what my rules are.

I am departing from both the British and the American styles on this point because the way that they each handle quotes and dialogue is inconsistent and makes no sense. I dislike it so much that I have actually avoided writing much dialogue at times, in large part because of the rules for how it is supposed to be punctuated. Maybe that sounds kind of silly, but writers are perfectionists. If I slave over where to place the comma in a sentence for half an hour, and rewrite it 15 or 20

times, you can imagine how much it drives me crazy if I feel like I am supposed to consistently put that comma in the wrong place.

Let's first discuss the way that it is done in American English. The rule is that commas and periods are always supposed to go inside of the quotation marks. This is true whether it is quoted text, or direct speech, as in dialogue. For example:

"I have a dream," said Martin Luther King, "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

In the actual speech Martin Luther King did not pause after the word 'dream', that comma is the author's pause to insert the phrase 'said Martin Luther King'; the comma is not part of the quote, so logically it should be placed outside of the quotation marks to reflect that, just like the second comma that sets off the author's inserted phrase.

So why is it done like this? I honestly believe that the real reason is simply that most people think it looks better that way. I admit that it does look a little strange sometimes to have a comma (or a period) on the outside of double quotation marks. In American English (or at least according to many style guides) you are supposed to always put a comma or a period inside of the quotation marks, even if it was not originally part of the quote. (Except for the comma before, which introduces the quote; that one goes outside of the quotation marks.) This is the case even if the quoted portion is a single word at the end of a sentence, such as:

I think that is what he was getting at when he said that I was "pious."

Doing it this way makes no logical sense. The period is not part of the quote. Obviously the quoted portion is not a complete sentence, it a single word that is being incorporated into the narrator or author's sentence. Putting the period outside of the quotation marks would accurately reflect that. If punctuation marks are the author's rather than part of the quote they should be placed outside the quotation marks.

When the quote is a complete sentence the period is changed to a comma and the period goes at the end of the larger sentence that the quote is incorporated into:

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," he said.

If there are multiple sentences in the quote, you are not supposed to change all of the periods into commas, just the last one. (Not that I think all of them should be changed, the point is that there is no more justification to change the last period to a comma than there is to change any of the others.)

The whole point of a quote is to report the exact words of someone else verbatim; it is not just paraphrasing, or coming close to what they said, it is supposed to be exactly what they said. We would not tolerate inserting or changing a word without it being put in brackets [], so why is it considered okay to modify the punctuation when the punctuation tells us how they said it? If the author is going to insert his or her own punctuation into the quote then perhaps they should have to use brackets to indicate that it is their change, not something that

existed in the original. But that is not how it is done, the alternate punctuation is just slipped in there.

I suppose the reasoning for this is that you would not want to have a period in there when the quote is incorporated into the author's sentence because it would be confusing to have two periods, so instead you just put a comma to indicate a pause where the period would ordinarily go.

However if it is a question mark or an exclamation point it is not changed to a comma, one simply continues on with the sentence without capitalizing the next word. Like these examples:

“Are you going to the grocery store today?” she asked.
“That’s fantastic!” she squealed.

Why isn't it:

“Are you going to the grocery store today,” she asked?
“That’s fantastic,” she squealed!

I suppose I know why: it is because it changes the meaning of the sentence. In the first example, the quote is a question, ‘she asked’ is not, or it shouldn't be; and while it is conceivable that there could be an exclamation mark after ‘squealed’ in addition to the one in quotes, the emphasis is supposed to be the speaker's, not the narrator's. The narrator is not necessarily excited, they are just reporting what she said.

But the placement of commas and periods changes the meaning too. A comma represents a shorter pause than a period, and indicates something different grammatically. If the quoted material is a complete sentence or set of sentences then it seems

to me that commas and periods and where they are placed are an essential part of the quote.

Occasionally you will see a question mark or an exclamation point following a single word within a sentence, but nearly always these punctuation marks indicate the end of a complete sentence, just as a period does. But when used inside quotation marks the first letter of the next word is not capitalized, which is confusing because it does not follow the general rule. These punctuation marks should be used the same way with quotations as they are in other contexts.

In British English the rule is to put a comma or a period outside of the quotation marks if it is incorporated into the author's sentence. The reason for the difference may very well just come down to the fact that it does not look as strange to have a period or a comma on the outside when you are using single quotation marks rather than double quotation marks. It seems a bit silly that this would be what it is based on, but I really think that is the case.

In some ways this system is better than the American style, but there are still problems. If the quoted portion is a complete sentence itself the period is moved to the outside and the quote then has no punctuation. For example:

Spencer said, ‘I don't understand why I can't go with you’.

The quoted portion is obviously a complete sentence, and if it were not part of a larger sentence the period would go inside the quotation marks where it naturally belongs. The rule for British English is that the final period goes on the outside of the quotation marks even when the quote has multiple complete sentences, such as:

He said ‘You better call a cab. I don’t think this guy is in any shape to drive tonight’.

Is this one sentence, two, or three? It is hard to tell because the punctuation is giving conflicting signals. Putting the punctuation on the outside of the quotation mark at the end makes it seem like it is all one large sentence but punctuation within the quote indicates that it is two quoted sentences. It is sort of both one sentence and at the same time three sentences. But notice that the second quoted sentence has no punctuation at all. I guess we are just supposed to know that the period outside of the quotation marks ends that sentence as well as the author’s sentence.

Is this better? Grammarians on each side of the pond argue over whether you should put the period (or comma) inside or outside of the quotation marks, but the problem is that in either case there ends up being no punctuation for either the last quoted sentence or the larger sentence that the quote is part of.

I believe that an author should report the quote with the exact same punctuation that it had in the original. If it is dialogue you should report what your characters say with the same emphasis that you picture them using while speaking. Any punctuation that is within the quotation marks should be considered part of the quote, and any punctuation that is outside of them is from the author or narrator.

I am not satisfied with how quotes are handled in either style, but the real question is whether I can come up with something better. There may not be a perfect solution. It seems as though all of them have some drawbacks. But here are some possibilities:

The most obvious solution would be to simply double up on the punctuation marks. Here are some examples:

Samuel said, ‘I hope you brought your cold weather clothes.’.

“I hope you brought your cold weather clothes.”, Samuel said.

He turned to me and laughed, saying, ‘I told you that would happen!’.

“I think,” she walked towards the fireplace, then turned to face him, “I think maybe we need to take a break.”.

“I don’t know if you know this,” she ran her fingers through her hair nervously, “but I really like you. Like, a lot.”.

This may look kind of strange at first, but it is accurate. I like the fact that the punctuation of the quote itself is not altered, but the larger sentence that it is incorporated into also has correct punctuation. In a way, it is like saying that both the British style and the American style are right (or at least partially right and partially wrong), punctuation is needed both outside the quotation marks and inside of them.

It might seem redundant to have two punctuation marks right next to each other, but it is not; punctuation marks that are inside of the quotation marks are part of the quote while those that are on the outside are from the author. This makes the writing more precise, more clear, and far more consistent.

I actually thought for a while that this is how it should be done. There are some drawbacks, though, which I soon discovered when I tried to use it. The most obvious one is that it is a bit clunky. That is a lot of punctuation marks, and it does look a bit strange to have the comma hanging out there in space

after the quotation mark. It is technically accurate but not aesthetically pleasing.

But, maybe that is not really such a huge problem. I sometimes get annoyed with the extreme emphasis that is put on cutting out anything that can possibly be cut in current style manuals. Why do we always have to write in shorthand? Not everything has to be a text message or a tweet. If a word or phrase really is unnecessary then go ahead and eliminate it, but not at the expense of accuracy, clarity, or consistency, which perhaps these additional punctuation marks add. Writing is not always made better just by making it shorter and more direct. Minimalism taken to an extreme is no better than being verbose it is just bad in the opposite way.

A bigger problem is that this style can be confusing because at times it seems to send mixed messages. The third example has an exclamation point and a period right next to each other. If you were reading it out loud would you read it as though the sentence ended with an exclamation point or a period? I don't know. If the quoted portion has a question but the larger sentence has a period would you read it as a question or a statement? Once again, I don't know. Even if there were two periods next to each other, we wouldn't want to pause twice, or pause for twice as long. I like the fact that the part of the sentence outside of the quote now has some kind of punctuation, but at the same time it confuses things about which punctuation mark takes precedence. It might be better to simplify if we can.

Another option would be to punctuate the quote just as it would be if it were standing alone but then continue the sentence without capitalizing the first letter of the next word. If one is allowed to do it with an exclamation point and a question

mark, why not a period? This would show that the quoted portion is a complete sentence, but the fact that the next word is not capitalized would indicate that it is also part of the author's sentence. Here is an example:

‘Please stop snoring dear.’ she said.

This might work. At least it would be consistent in treating the period the same as question marks and exclamation points. But there are some drawbacks here as well. What about for longer additions, such as: *she said, while balancing the bag precariously in one hand and searching in her purse for the car keys with the other.* What about when the quote is three sentences long? Should that still be incorporated into one large sentence from the author? How can a sentence, which by definition is a complete thought, also simultaneously be a component of some other complete thought?

If one is allowed to do this then it should also be allowed when not using quotation marks. Something like the following would have to also be acceptable: *We went to the movies. then we went to dinner. then we went shopping. it was exhausting.* That seems strange, but maybe it is just because it is not what we are used to. It seems to imply that the sentences are connected to each other. But we already use a semicolon for that. A semicolon is used instead of a period when there are two (or more) main clauses that we want to show are connected. *We went to the movies, then to dinner, then shopping; it was exhausting.* That is definitely better, and it does not require a change to the rules about when to capitalize the first letter of the next word as the prior example did. But it just does not

work to use a semicolon with a quote. For one thing, it is still unclear where we should put it:

‘Move over please;’ he said.
‘Move over please’; he said.

If you go with the first option you would still be replacing what was originally a period with a semicolon, and I do not think that is much better than replacing the period with a comma. The main problem with the second one is that the quoted sentence has no punctuation at all. That is similar to the British style, but it shares the same drawbacks. Also, if ‘he said’ is considered a dependent clause, then it should be separated from the other clause with a comma, as is currently done, rather than a semicolon; if it is an independent clause, then it would also be acceptable to use a period and just make them two separate sentences. I think that option would be better. It would look like this:

Move over please.’ He said.
He said. ‘If you don’t move I am going to move you.’

Traditionally a comma has been used before introducing a quote. Perhaps we could use a period instead and just end the sentence before beginning the quoted sentence, as in the second example. If it were being read aloud the period would simply indicate a longer pause than a comma. We already capitalize the first letter of the first word of the quote when it is a complete sentence or set of sentences. Like this:

He handed me a box and said, ‘Take that into the kitchen.’

It is less common to use a comma before the quote now, but whether you do or not, what is odd about this sentence is that there is no ending punctuation at all for ‘He handed me a box and said’. I guess the reader is just supposed to know that the punctuation for the quote also doubles as punctuation for the writer’s sentence as well. What if we just made them two separate sentences:

He handed me a box and said. ‘Take that into the kitchen.’

Maybe this seems too choppy, or that the first sentence is only a fragment; if so, one could fix it by simply eliminating the words 'and said', like this:

He handed me a box. ‘Take that into the kitchen.’

This works. You know from the context who is speaking, and they are both complete sentences. You could also do it this way:

‘Take that into the kitchen.’ He said, handing me a box.

I think this method is actually the best solution. It does not require a radical departure in style from what we are used to, and it is cleaner and more direct than doubling up the punctuation marks for both the quote and the narrator, yet it is still just as accurate. We do not need to modify the punctuation of the quote at all, and there is punctuation for both the quoted sentence and what is not in quotes.

The real heart of the problem with all the other styles is trying to incorporate complete sentences of dialogue or quoted text into another sentence. A sentence is supposed to be a

complete thought. It is a separate and complete grammatical unit. It cannot be stuffed into some other sentence without it being awkward. It is odd, if you think about it, that we even try to put two or three quoted sentences inside of another sentence. Maybe we feel the need to group the description of what is going on with the dialogue, but as long as it is part of the same paragraph that should be enough to indicate that they go together.

One may wonder why it is not already done this way in the British and American styles. I suppose the reason is that 'he said' or 'she said' is thought to be incomplete, that it could not stand alone as a sentence. Dialogue tags like this may seem more like a dependent clause, which is an appendage to the main clause (the quoted material) so it would be separated with a comma, as other dependent clauses are.

But is that really true? He spoke. They talked. He yelled. She listened. They screamed. She ran. Those are all complete sentences. I don't see why 'he said' or 'she said' couldn't also be considered a complete statement in some contexts. It does have a subject and a predicate.

The best solution is really just to eliminate dialogue tags whenever possible, but when they cannot be eliminated they should be considered separate and distinct grammatical units; this is what the writer is saying, which has to be kept separate from what the character says.

To me it seems fairly natural to consider the dialogue tag a complete sentence when it follows the quote, but maybe less so when it comes before the quote, like this:

He said. 'I cannot believe you just did that.'

I don't think this is necessarily incorrect, but when the dialogue tag comes first it is natural to wonder what it was that he said. If it seems like an incomplete thought that is probably the reason. But you could use a colon instead of a period. The previous sentence would then look like this:

He said: 'I cannot believe you just did that.'

This works because a colon is used when the writer wants to separate two clauses, the second of which expands or illustrates the first. In this case, the quote tells us what it was that he said. It is already quite common to use a colon to introduce longer quotes, so this would just be an expansion of that practice. In a way the colon acts as a quasi-period so that at least the first part has some kind of punctuation that refers to it, and the colon sets it off as a separate clause. What follows can be a new clause, or a complete sentence, or sometimes even a set of several complete sentences. This is perfect for dialogue. It is usually only necessary when the dialogue tag comes first though. When the dialogue tag comes after the quote it could almost always be considered a complete thought itself, since then you know what was said.

A quote should stand alone if it is written in complete sentences but if it is just a word or phrase that is quoted it can be incorporated into the author's sentence. Sometimes a single word or a phrase can be treated as a complete sentence in one context but it would not be in another. For example, the word 'sorry' or 'thanks' could be a complete sentence, but it could also be treated as a word that is incorporated into a sentence even if it is quoted. Both of these are correct:

When I gave it to him he said ‘thanks’, but from the way that he said it I knew that he didn’t really mean it.

‘Thanks.’ He said.
But I could tell that he didn’t really mean it.

As a writer you have to make a decision as to whether it would be better to have the quote be a complete sentence on its own or whether it would be better to incorporate it into the narrator’s sentence, but you have to choose, it cannot be both at the same time. In some cases, it might be defensible to do it either way. There should be a little bit of leeway on that to allow for personal style and tastes.

One advantage of doing it this way is that you would be capitalizing the next word after question marks and exclamation points. Like this:

‘Are you going to the grocery store today?’ She asked.

“Stephen!” Cried a feeble voice. “Why don’t you ever come when I call you?”

In both the British and the American styles the next word would not be capitalized, which creates confusion because the rules are different when it is a quote than they are when it is not a quote.

Now you may be wondering how I would handle a sentence like this:

For many years the question ‘Is it ever morally justifiable to lie?’ has been a point of contention.

My answer is that you do not really need to include the question mark because it was already stated in the sentence that it was a question. The question mark is actually redundant. So you could just write it this way:

For many years the question ‘Is it ever morally justifiable to lie’ has been a point of contention.

Now there are a few instances in which a question or an exclamation is incorporated into a statement and the punctuation marks have to be retained because it has not already been stated that the quoted portion is a question or an exclamation. In fact, one of those examples appeared in this story:

There were frequent outbursts of ‘Gross!’ or ‘That’s so sick!’ followed by fits of laughter.

This would probably occur most often with an exclamation point. However examples like this are quite rare. Nearly always there should be no punctuation for the quoted portion when it is incorporated into another sentence.

If the quote is a sentence then the first letter of the first word is capitalized, there is punctuation at the end, and the first letter of the next word is capitalized. If it is incorporated into the author’s sentence as a quoted word or phrase then the first letter is not capitalized and there is no punctuation inside the quote. If there is a comma it should go outside of the quotation marks, being part of the larger sentence, and a period would also go outside of the quotation marks. For example:

I cannot stand his ‘poetry’.

She told me to ‘butt out’, but I am not going to just stand by and watch while she gets hurt again.

A proposition could stand alone as a complete sentence, but it could also be incorporated into the author's sentence, as it is in these examples:

The proposition ‘No dogs are cats’ is true.

Either ‘All x is y’ or ‘Not all x is y’.

For propositions I do capitalize the first letter of the first word, but I do not use any punctuation within the quote. Maybe it is inconsistent to capitalize without also having punctuation, but for whatever reason it does not bother me. It communicates that it is sort of a complete thought that could stand alone in other contexts, but here it is being incorporated into the larger sentence. Sometimes we do capitalize without punctuation, as with titles, things that are part of a list, and even proper nouns that appear within a sentence.

The rule then, is that all punctuation goes inside of the quotation marks if the quote is being treated as a complete sentence; otherwise the quoted portion has no punctuation at all, any punctuation that is used goes outside of the quotation marks and is part of the sentence that the quote is being incorporated into. If the quote follows a colon the punctuation goes inside the quotation marks if the quote is a complete sentence or sentences, and outside if it is just a word or phrase. I would rarely if ever use a colon if it is just a word or phrase though.

‘Said he’ or its equivalent seems like it would be a little bit awkward as a complete sentence. I would usually just avoid that one myself, but if you used it occasionally to add variety it would probably be best to use it when the quoted portion is a phrase rather than a complete sentence, or you could put it before the quote and use a colon.

Now you may wonder what I would do about sentences like these:

“I was thinking that we could, uh,” he glanced down at his shoes, unable to meet her gaze, “maybe, go together?”

“To tell you the truth,” she blushed and looked away, “I wasn’t really listening.”

I don’t think I would ever write something like this, where you interrupt the quote to interject a parenthetical description. If I did, it would be extremely rare. It is rude to interrupt people at a party, and it is rude and kind of awkward to interrupt your characters mid-sentence too. It is like you are trying to speak over them. At least have the decency to let them finish their sentence before you frantically interrupt to describe the scene or say something that you think is really important. Then, if you must, make sure to insert a complete sentence of your own. After that you can go back to quoting the character, but once again, let them use complete sentences. If you do that then you will have no trouble keeping their sentences separate from yours.

I suppose one reason that writers do this is to add variety, but I don’t think that one should add variety just for the sake of adding variety. That seems too forced and obvious. Just think about how the conversation would actually go, and

punctate it accordingly, using complete sentences. The variation will then occur naturally.

When a quotation is followed by a source the standard procedure is to take the period out of the quoted sentence (or the last quoted sentence if there is more than one) and put it after the reference, making the whole thing one sentence. Like this:

“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Hebrews 12: 11).

To me it seems like it would be a lot better to not modify the quote at all and just put in another period inside of the parentheses so that you are treating the reference as a separate sentence. Like this:

‘Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.’ (Hebrews 12: 11.)

I also hate it when a long quote starts with a quotation mark at the beginning and the quote is never closed but the next paragraph starts with another opening quotation mark anyway, and it continues like that for several more paragraphs to show that the quote continues. If you are going to use quotation marks at all just have one at the beginning and there should not be another one until the quote is finished. For long quotes it is probably better to just use a different font or text that is a different size to show that it is a quote and not even use any quotation marks at all.

Finally, I have decided to use single quotation marks and save the double quotation marks for when it is a quote within a quote. This just seems more efficient, and a little more aesthetically pleasing, but it does not really matter, you could do it either way.