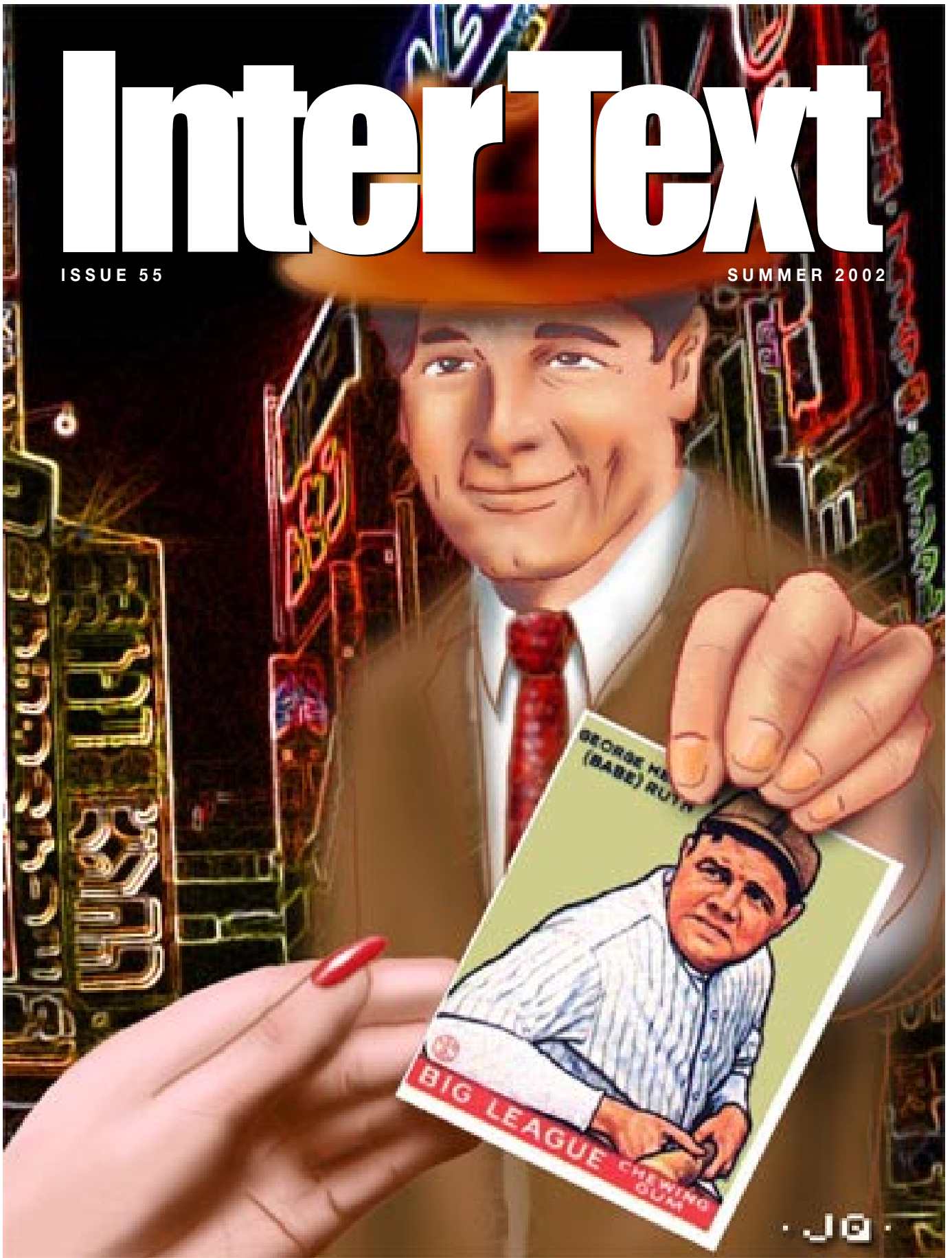


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The Rag Doll Man

PATRICK WHITTAKER

*Things fall apart. The center cannot hold.
But things aren't all that falls apart.*

DAMN JORDAN. THERE HE GOES AGAIN, WHINING and wailing like all the world's pains were in him and him alone. Why will he not be quiet?

I've told him. I've said, "Look, Jordan. You haven't got it half as bad as you think. You're not in pain. You're not dying or about to become a vegetable. With our help and a little luck, there's no reason you can't live to a ripe old age."

His self-pity disgusts me.

In the morning, I'll wheel him around the hospital. Give him a dose of reality. I'll show him the little boys and girls whose days are spent in chemotherapy, whose daily routine consists of one injection after another. I'll let him taste their pain—real pain. And then he can chat with the parents who know that their little Tommy or Sarah has but months to live.

But would it do any good? There are people who will never accept their lot in life. They feel the universe should bend to their will, cater to their every need. Jordan is such a person.

There's not a mark on him. He can breathe without difficulty. He can talk, cry, shit, and even smile if only he'd give it a try.

Clinically, there is nothing wrong with Jordan. Except, of course, he's not all there.

NOW WHEN I SAY JORDAN'S NOT ALL THERE, I'M NOT referring to his mental state. I am saying that various parts of his anatomy have mysteriously disappeared.

But don't go pitying the man. I'm not certain, but somehow I feel he's brought it all upon himself. And whether or not he is the agent of his own misfortune, there is a certain justice to his condition.

I could conceivably forgive Jordan his arrogance, his lack of fortitude and maybe even his insistence on occupying one of our precious beds when he could be looked after at home. But I cannot—and will not—forgive the man his occupation.

Jordan is a vivisectionist.

Here we have a man who makes a living by cutting up bunny rabbits and puppy dogs—and now something's been taking chunks out of him. If ever there was an irony fit to be savored, this is it.

I wonder how he feels about his job now. Does he dream of mice poisoned by lipstick, of kittens with fractured legs, disembowelled guinea pigs, rhesus monkeys restrained by leather straps as lethal volts course

through their skulls? Is he haunted by the ghosts of all the small, furry creatures he has tortured and killed? And are his victims sitting in Animal Heaven, rejoicing to see their tormentor getting a taste of his own medicine?

THERE HE GOES AGAIN, CRYING, "NURSE! NURSE!," LIKE a baby with a sore bottom. He probably wants his brow mopped or spittle wiped from his chin. I could attend to it, but I won't. I've been meaning to write these notes for some time, and I'm determined to get them done before I finish my shift.

Now Jordan's sobbing—*boo hoo, boo hoo*—and he's making no effort to keep his misery to himself. I'm work-

Clinically, there is nothing wrong with Jordan. Except, of course, he's not all there.

ing down the corridor in the Senior Orderly's office with the door shut, but I can still hear him whimpering. The spineless jerk.

Spineless! Ha. Ha. That's rather good for five in the morning. You see, Jordan no longer has a spine. It disappeared a few days ago, just after he'd noticed that his left ear was gone. And he thought things were bad when he lost his foot! That was the week before last. I remember it quite well.

Staff shortages, cash crises and the general mismanagement that is commonplace in British hospitals these days had left the Casualty Department desperately understaffed...

IN DEFERENCE TO MY SENIORITY, I HAD A LITTLE cubicle all to myself. It was a standard examination room—white walls, a bed, sink, mirror. Medicine cabinet. All beautifully contrived to afford the patients as little dignity as possible.

"Doctor? Could you see this chap?" A student nurse. She'd probably been pretty when she'd started her shift but fourteen hours and an endless stream of wounded humanity had taken its toll.

I took the white card she proffered. "Let's see. What do we have here? An amputee?"

"He says he lost his foot during the night."

"How did he manage that?"

“He doesn’t know. Apparently he woke up and just found it gone.”

“Isn’t there an old blues song about that?”

“Search me, Doctor. I’m not a blues fan.”

“You’d better send him in.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“And one more thing...”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Contrary to appearances, I’m not a Doctor. I’m a surgeon. You should address me as Mr. Coombes.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

THE FIRST TIME I SET EYES ON JORDAN, I DISLIKED HIM with the sort of intensity I generally reserve for football referees and traffic wardens. He had one of those smug, know-it-all faces that seem in constant search of a good hard punch.

It was clear he had dressed in either a hurry or something of a daze. His jacket did not match his trousers and the one shoe he had on was left untied.

To be honest, he was no sooner in my cubicle than I wanted him out. I was gripped by an irrational desire to see him wheeled down to the basement and thrown in the incinerator. Let him burn alongside the discarded dressings and contaminated needles...

The nurse and an orderly helped Jordan onto the bed. He did nothing to assist—just stared fixedly into space and dribbled like an imbecile.

“What happened?” I asked as the nurse and orderly trooped out.

“Foot,” he mumbled. “Gone.”

A quick examination uncovered no signs of violence. He was not concussed, had no contusions or abrasions or anything that need concern a surgeon at two in the morning. That he had no left foot was beyond denial, but why make a song and dance about it now? The skin covering the end of his stump was normal tissue. There was no sign of scarring, no hint of trauma.

“Mr. Jordan,” I said to him. “You haven’t lost your left foot. You never had one in the first place.”

“Left foot. Gone.”

I CAME TO A QUICK PROGNOSIS. MR. JORDAN WAS suffering from amnesia and had forgotten his disability. Or else he was in denial. Either way, his problems should not be ours.

I tried to get the Mental Health people to take him, but they were having none of it.

I wanted to send Jordan home, but that idiot of a Registrar insisted we keep him under observation for a couple of days.

The wards were all full—except the ones kept closed

for lack of money—so Jordan landed himself a private room.

And that, I thought, would be the last I ever saw of him. But it was not to be. Halfway through my next shift, I was summoned to his room. A nurse and a doctor whose name I can’t remember were frowning at a clipboard. Mr. Jordan looked to be asleep. The nurse said he’d been sedated.

“Had to do it,” announced the doctor with such gravity you’d have thought he’d just had the patient put down. “The chap was hysterical.”

“Well,” I said. “That confirms my original diagnosis. This man is off his rocker.”

The doctor pursed his lips and thrust his hands into the pockets of his white coat. “Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not.”

“There’s some doubt?”

“Yes, Mr. Coombes. That’s why we sent for you. Perhaps you could tell us how many feet Mr. Jordan had when you admitted him?”

“One.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Despite appearances to the contrary, I am a highly skilled surgeon. You’re not trying to tell me that the other one’s grown back, are you?”

Like a magician reaching the climax of a masterful illusion, the doctor pulled back the bedclothes. It was, I’ll admit, an impressive denouement. “Well?” said the Doctor.

For once in my life, I was speechless. Jordan now had no feet at all.

STRICTLY SPEAKING, IT WASN’T MY CASE. BUT I WAS curious, so I used my seniority to ensure I was kept up to date with developments. Despite my busy schedule, I popped in to see Jordan whenever time allowed, and we soon developed a healthy enmity toward each other.

You may think my attitude toward Jordan is unprofessional, but I really don’t care. As far as I’m concerned, the Jordans of this world cannot suffer enough.

On one occasion, I came across a rather attractive woman standing by his bed and I knew instinctively that she was not his wife.

“Mrs. Jordan?” I asked, pushing the door shut behind me.

Jordan sat up on his elbows. “Piss off, Coombes.”

“Not Mrs. Jordan, then? Your sister perhaps?”

The lady (if I may call her that) reddened. “I think I had best be off.”

She left without saying goodbye.

Jordan snarled like a dog caught in barbed wire. “One of these days, I’m going to kill you, Coombes!”

“With no hands?” A cruel jibe, but he deserved it. His

left hand had disappeared a couple of nights after he'd been admitted. The right followed suit a few days later.

He is a truly remarkable phenomenon—the greatest medical freak since the Elephant Man.

What will the papers call him when they finally cotton to the story? Perhaps the Rag Doll Man? That seems appropriate. Tug on his leg. Rip! Off it comes. No blood. No gore. Pull off his arm. Pluck out his eye.

Even under a magnifying glass, Mr. Jordan's skin looks immaculate. There is nothing to indicate it has in any way been torn or breached and no reason to suppose the missing parts of his anatomy ever existed. Tests indicate nothing in the least remarkable about Jordan's metabolism. His blood chemicals are the same as yours and mine. His cells are 100 percent human.

I sat down on the edge of his bed. "Your mistress?"

"None of your damned business." His anger suddenly evaporated, and he began to cry. "You've got to help me, Doctor. Please!"

"Actually," I told him, "I'm a surgeon. You shouldn't call me Doctor."

FOR ALL HIS FAULTS, MR. JORDAN DOES HAVE A certain entertainment value. Take for instance last week, when the orderlies ran a sweepstakes on which part of Mr. Jordan would go next. I put in for three tickets and ended up with his nose, navel and left buttock.

And I think the situation got to me, because I went home with my tickets and did a peculiar thing.

An old issue of the *Lancet* provided two views of the human male—front and back. I cut these out and placed them on the desk in my study. At midnight, I surrounded the pictures with lighted candles and recited a litany of body parts in Latin. I took a corkscrew and punched a hole in Jordan's face and pierced his navel. And then I cut off his left buttock.

This short but poignant ceremony closed with my lottery slips being baptized in either.

I'm no magician, but I believe I made some mighty juju that night.

THE NEXT TIME I SAW JORDAN, HIS GIRLFRIEND HAD returned. I did not like her any more than I liked Jordan. Less so now that I had met Jordan's charming wife.

"So," I said, smiling like the Grim Reaper. "Lost any more knick-knacks lately?"

Jordan treated me to a look that could have frozen nitrogen. His mistress made a show of studying her well-manicured nails.

"No," said Jordan, with an edge of triumph in his voice.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Have you checked?"

"Piss off, Coombes. I don't need to check. And I don't need you coming round here making smart-assed comments. I'm a very sick man, you know."

"You're not the least bit sick," I countered. "In fact, you're a sight healthier than you deserve to be. By the way—do you still have a belly button?"

"Yes, thank you."

"And your todger?" A low blow, I'll admit. Especially with his mistress there. But he was asking for it.

"Listen, Coombes," hissed Jordan. "I want you to stay out of this room and the hell away from me. Do you hear?"

"Loud and clear. But when your pecker does disappear, don't expect me to graft on a new one for you."

His mistress decided it was her turn to vent some spleen. "People like you shouldn't be allowed to practice medicine. I've a good mind to report you to the BMA—"

And on and on, but I wasn't listening. I was watching Jordan out of the corner of my eye. Surreptitiously, he was exploring beneath his bedclothes with the end of his

What will the papers call him when they finally cotton to the story? Perhaps the Rag Doll Man?

arms. When he reached his groin, the blood drained from his face. His eyes widened, then closed. Jordan muttered a silent prayer. Another fumble. He grimaced and then plucked up the courage to look under the bedclothes. His hysterical screams told me that I had not won the sweepstakes, but I was not in the least disappointed. My day had been made.

I CAME SECOND IN THE SWEEPSTAKES. JORDAN'S NAVEL disappeared a few hours after his manhood, which left me twenty-five pounds richer. His torso followed this morning—but not before I'd photographed it for prosperity.

I have the photo in front of me now. Jordan looks like the top half of a tailor's dummy. He has no arms, no legs. One of his nipples is missing. His skin is smooth and unblemished. His muscle tone is perfect.

I am reminded of the Venus de Milo.

JORDAN WILL NOT SCREAM AGAIN. HE HAS BEEN silenced forever. Which is not to say that he is dead—oh no. There's still plenty of life in those baby-blue eyes. But now fate has rendered him all but mute by taking away his larynx.

This may be a bitter blow to the patient, but for the rest of us it is a mercy long overdue.

I checked on him just now. He lay there and blew raspberries at me. But I got my own back.

I told him he had two hours to live, which of course was a lie.

The blood drained from his face—to where, I have no idea—and he fainted.

It was the perfect opportunity to settle the Jordan problem once and for all. There's no reason why a mere head should take up a whole bed, is there? As soon as I can find a big enough box and some straw, I'll make him a nice, comfy home. I might even buy a few gerbils to keep him company. Until then, he'll be safe enough in the linen cupboard.

I'll be glad when this shift is over.

PATRICK WHITTAKER

Is an independent filmmaker with two short films to his name ("The Red Car" and "Nevermore"). To keep the wolf from his door, he works as a freelance software analyst in the airline industry. He is planning on having a midlife crisis as soon as he can find the time.

Bizarre Crime Shocks Sleepy Neighborhood

CHRIS J. MAGYAR

*Lies have a habit of forcing even more lies.
Especially when you've got a secret to keep.*

1
I RETURNED TO THE MUD, AS BLACK AND SLIMY AS it ever was. The sun, after my slippery frolic, caked me and I became a creature of cracked armor... exhausted, despicable, in desperate need of a bath. My clothes were somewhere else, strewn in the grass, probably getting soaked by mid-afternoon sprinklers. I was scandalously close to being discovered by an elderly dog-walker, tottering down the green-belt path, which was paved tar-black and rounded to allow runoff from the sprinkler water. Psychically, I sensed my danger with a moment of chaste clarity, and rolled behind a particularly thick clump of cattails by the creek bed. I left a trail of mud, but she wouldn't notice—who's looking for a trail of mud in the grass during a stroll?

It took an eternity for her to pass. Her dog, a toy of some sort, strained against the leash to return home and lap up water, nearly choking itself with effort. She muttered, half to the dog and half to herself or whatever dead family member she used to walk with down this path, and when I was very still, I caught snippets of her mutters every time the breeze ceased and the cattails hushed: "...out of milk... I told you she would... but how... calm down you mangy... shoes..."

When her footsteps were far enough away, I rolled deeper into the cattail forest, right up to the creek bed where fresh mud greeted the dry and welcomed it back to the fold—prodigal dirt, made mud again by the feast of stagnant water. Then, as soon as I was alone enough to stand and search for my clothes, a group of young boys hopped a fence and overtook the grassy plateau up the hill with a baseball game.

**I had two choices: become a
swamp monster or crawl
slowly and quietly away.**

My primal urges fully receded as I realized I was stuck in left-center field, one prodigious stroke away from being discovered in a home-run ball hunt. I had two choices: become an animal, a swamp monster so ferocious that even the teenagers would dash away in terror and allow me to retreat upstream, or crawl slowly and quietly through the brush on the other side of the creek from the game, praying like a ninny that my plump thirty-year-old flesh wouldn't stick out from the green hillside. This mud, is it camouflage? Those boys, are they skittish? Too many uncertain factors for my accountant-by-day brain. A bat struck a

ball. I flinched. The hit barely cleared their improvised infield. Maybe I would be saved by their underdeveloped swings.

The mud began itching with sudden and fearful precision: my testicles, my earlobes, my toes, the small of my back. As hit after hit failed to reach the slope, I came to the decision that inaction was my only choice. I nested in my cattail grove, covering my body piece-by-piece with fallen, soggy stalks (which also soothed my itching). One boy came running my way, but he intercepted the rolling ball halfway down the hill. Then I buried my head, and relied on my ears for warning of their approach.

With the immediate threat of discovery temporarily at bay, I turned my fervent mind to the problem of my clothes. They weren't carefully stashed; in my initial spasms of unrestrained joy, I thought only to deposit them behind a freestanding electrical box, shielded from the path but not the backyards which abut the park. Any one of three houses could expectorate a homeowner (watering plants perhaps, or pushing children on swings) and expose my Eddie Bauer plaid shirt, my Dockers, my silk boxers stained on the inside with small drips of urine thanks to my ever-failing plumbing.

In my cocoon, I imagined the sighting. It would be a housewife, just past sexy but still cute in that young mother way, wearing jeans and a maroon tank top. She would be in the yard with green gardening gloves on, dutifully pulling at juicy young weeds near the thorns of her prized roses. As she looked up and wiped her brow with the back of her wrist, she would squint and see something unusual on the other side of her ranch fence (lined with chicken wire to keep the terrier from escaping). What is that? Someone's shirt? She would stand up slowly (her knees creaking, her breasts momentarily swelling as she bends over) and walk to the gate her husband clumsily constructed before the divorce. With a grunt, she'd force it open and walk over to the electrical box, ignoring its insistent multilingual warnings of electrocution, and pick up, say, my boxers. How did these get here?

Would she notice a trail of trampled grass down to the creek, and a telltale swatch of mud eastward to my makeshift shelter in the cattails? Would the sprinklers still be on, preventing her from examining the pile of garments? Would the cops tell her not to worry over the phone?

And that's when I found out nothing stops worrisome thoughts like a baseball landing on your temple.

2

THERE WAS A BRIGHT LIGHT. MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS to walk toward it, but it turned out to only be a flashlight glaring in my eyes, held by some vague man on the other side of my woozy vision. I realized later that the kids,

once they found me, assumed I was dead. The dread and excitement of their discovery resulted in a long meandering argument—I was to be a secret—until the pressure of keeping such a secret burst and someone squealed to their parents. A whole cul-de-sac came down (it was dusk by now) to relocate me, and it took quite some time, since the baseball bat the boys planted to mark my grave fell over shortly after they left. Just as most of the parents had decided it was all a prank, one guy shined that flashlight in my face. As I said, I only found this out much later. My awakening yielded much dimmer epiphanies.

I saw, once my eyes adjusted to the light, a group of frightened suburban adults staring at me in astonishment. Unfortunately, the wife in the maroon tank top was not present. Even more unfortunately, my neighbor Jeff was.

"Jack? Are you okay? Can you tell us who did this to you?"

From the back of the group, I heard Jeff's wife pipe up: "We've got your clothes, Jack!"

I coughed, and everyone took an instinctual step back. I half sat up, conscious not to display my bathing suit parts (as my kids were taught to call them) in the process. Looking back, I had a golden opportunity there—just blame some malevolent perpetrator, some angry teenage hoodlum, some desperate crack fiend from across the highway. I was stupid. My head throbbed. My body wouldn't stop shivering. My left ear was clogged with creek mud.

Whatever the excuse, I said, "I'm fine."

Lots of people said something there, but I only heard Jeff clearly. "Who did this?"

"Nobody. I did it myself... I was just playing around."

Sometimes honesty is a real bitch. This is a lesson I've learned countless times from prime-time sitcoms in that one inevitable episode, the one in which the family learns that sometimes little white lies can spare everyone a heap of trouble and sadness. No matter how hard I tried to retract my statement later, even though people believed me on the surface, they mistrusted me for saying that, for saying "playing around."

"I was kidding!" I'd plead, but there must have been something about the sight of me, naked and mud covered in the creek, that betrayed the lie—how could anyone kid about such humiliation? Especially after just waking up from a brutal beating? (The baseball hitting me never came up—thank you, boys—so it was assumed, with my help, that I was knocked out with a blunt object, like the butt of a gun.)

The police, trying to question me gently but itching to do it the hard way like their heroes on TV, drilled me about "playing around."

"I was kidding!"

It turned out the suspect was Mexican (easier that way),

about 5'10", with a pencil-thin mustache and acne scars on his cheeks. Oh, and he had a tattoo of a teardrop by his right eye. Oh, and he was wearing a Broncos jersey, Terrell Davis I believe, and jeans, and sneakers, and his gun was... how should I know? I've never used a firearm in my life, officer. No, he didn't have any gold teeth. No, no jewelry either. Well, maybe a watch, but it all happened so fast, you know? He just sprung out from behind this electrical box and pointed the gun at me and demanded my wallet and... gosh, I didn't have it on me, since I was just going for a stroll... it was about 2:30... and the next thing I knew, he had me in a headlock. He must have known something, karate or something, and, if you want to know the truth, I'm not a very strong person. That gym membership is just a moment of New Year's weakness; I pay them off like a charity... but anyway, the guy had me in a headlock and I was trying to bite his arm but then I don't remember anything but blinding pain... must be then when he hit me. I have no idea about the clothes. Racial anger, I suppose. Or maybe he was going to take them but they didn't fit, or something. I don't know. I was quite unconscious at the time. I'm sorry. Can I call my ex-wife now? I was supposed to pick up the kids like 18 hours ago.

3

I KNEW BY THE TIME THE COPS DROPPED THE THIRD lineup pictures in front of me that they were pissed. They had run through every Hispanic suspect in the county in the first two lineups, and the idea of a crime like this unsolved after a month got under their skin. Everyone—my ex, my lawyer, my mother—egged me to just finger someone already. I couldn't even believe that I was pressing charges, but life snowballs like that. It reminded me of the divorce, actually. One day I said something stupid to her, and before I knew it a judge was telling me to give her the couch and the china cabinet in exchange for the television. I pointed. His tattoo was under his left eye, not his right, but... ah, it all happened so fast, you know?

His name was José Montoya, and he had three girls,

a gorgeous wife, and one conviction of possession of marijuana in 1993. He had real bad credit, so the motive turned out to be robbery, and to explain his bizarre disrobing of the plaintiff, my lawyer concocted some gang ritual that loosely correlated with his childhood in El Paso. His lawyer, court-appointed, argued everything including the kitchen sink but couldn't convince the jury of his alibi: he was drinking with his buddies between shifts at the nearby restaurant where he worked as a cook. So chalk the conviction up to two things: I have a damned good lawyer (I kept the television, didn't I?) and he has damned bad drinking habits in the eyes of one suburban county jury.

4

MOVING QUICKLY NOW, I KNOW, BUT SHAME HAS AN accelerating effect. Let's just get to the present day, the present hour, the present circumstances. I'm back in the creek, clothed this time, a victim of my own bad drinking habits. The moon is close to full, and summer keeps the ground warm even at four in the morning.

I'm home. Not home as in the shell of wood and brick I clasped greedily after the divorce. ("Your Honor, I know it's customary for the custodian of the children to keep the house, but you must consider the fact that my client makes barely one third of what his estranged spouse is pulling in.") Home, as in the sticks of cattail that are just beginning to flower, spreading a drift of white fuzz over the creek and clogging up the sewers, sticking to the freshly-washed cars, pollinating the carefully-groomed lawns. Home, as in the black mud imported for this artificial waterway through the neighborhood. ("A river runs through it," the real estate agent joked.) Home, as in the state of utter abandon I was trying to capture that fateful afternoon. Imagine that: capturing utter abandon.

I know it sounds ridiculous, but it's me, an escapee of sorts. It's what I am now. A tadpole, a minnow, a garter snake. I belong here, really. I just hope nobody finds me in the morning.

CHRIS J. MAGYAR

Never goes anywhere without his J. Chris and his J topped the masthead as owner/editor-in-chief of Go-Go Magazine in Denver, Colorado, an arts and entertainment bi-weekly distributed free to anyone who would take it. The relationship ended at the same time as the money, and Chris and his J now simultaneously spearhead the Entertainment section of the Denver Daily News and toil in the production department of a humongous multinational publishing corporation. The Colorado College saw fit to give Chris and his J a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing. This is the first useful thing to come of it. Chris dreams of living in Sydney, Australia. The J will tag along.

The Food of Love

MARK MCLAUGHLIN

*Never underestimate the wisdom of the old saw,
"You can't judge a book by its cover."*

MAP MOVED THROUGH THE WEED-CHOKED outskirts of the city, thinking about manna. Deep within, she felt her need for more. She saw a gray slough in the distance and considered dipping into it. She took a few steps forward, then stopped. Shallow, still waters held no manna. And yet the slough looked inviting... To stop the urge, she stared into the sun for a moment to clear her mind.

A mewling echoed within a brick building coated with gray filth. Map listened—the mewling grew louder. A long, hairless cat wiggled onto the ledge of a ground floor window and stared at Map with eyes like yellow marbles.

"Chigger!" A deep voice cried out in the building. "Here Chigger, Chigger, Chigger!"

Map hid behind a rotting fence. Soon a man came to the window and picked up his pet. His head was large and round, with a thick tangle of black hair. His eyes were dark and slightly bulbous.

Map shouted from behind the fence. "Hello, sir."

The man shaded his eyes and looked out the window. "Who's there? You shouldn't be outside—it's too sunny."

Map pressed an eye to a crack in the fence. "Map," she called out.

The man laughed. "A map won't do you any good. There's nowhere to go." He kissed his cat on its smooth head and carried it back into the dark.

Map crept along the fence. The urge for manna throbbed in her belly. The man made other parts throb.

The dark yellow grass felt crisp under her feet. She pulled up a few strands and chewed on them, then spit them out. Too sour. The wind blew a large plastic bag toward her. She caught it and examined it for holes. Surprisingly, it was in good shape... Perfect for carrying manna.

Soon Map heard the sound of running water. She hurried past soft, twisted trees and collapsed houses until she came to a dark, bubbling river. Frothy blue-gray masses floated with the current.

Map filled her belly and her sack with semi-solid chunks of the froth. How sweet, how delicious—and how plentiful! But then, all rivers abounded with manna. Sometimes, when Map wandered too far from a river and went without manna, she became stupid. This time, she had retained a good deal of intelligence. Enough to grab the plastic sack. Enough to remember where the man lived.

She gazed out over the river. Her last husband had explained the cycle to her. Over the years, rain washed chemical stuff into the rivers from fields and landfills.

Eventually the skies grew thin and the sun grew strong. When the strong new sun hit the rivers, the stuff cooked and made the froth. That husband had called it Satan's manna. Map wasn't sure who Satan was, but it was good of him to share.

Her husband had thought that manna was poisonous. He didn't know that manna made wonderful things happen,

**Sometimes, when Map
wandered too far from a river
and went without manna,
she became stupid.**

and Map didn't tell him. Like her other husbands, he had died from staying out in the sun too long.

Map loved the sun, and thought it was too bad that it made husbands get all blistered and smelly.

MAP SLIPPED BEHIND THE FENCE. "SIR? ARE YOU home?" she called out.

After a moment, the dark-haired man came to the window. "Who is it?"

"May I come in? I've been traveling for days." Map stepped out from behind the fence. Tall and beautiful she was, with long red hair and almond-shaped eyes. "I'm afraid. Everyone I know is dead. Are you a good person, sir? I think so. I can tell by your eyes."

"Come in," the man said. "Get out of the sun."

Map walked to the building and entered. The carpet of the front hall was streaked with gray lichens. The man peered at her from around a door jamb.

"Who are you?" he said. "What's in the sack?"

"My name is Pam. These are my things. Private things." She clutched the top of the plastic bag. "Please don't try to take them away."

"I'm Daniel. Don't worry, I won't take your things." He smiled broadly—his teeth were large, white and crooked. "I've got lots of food. Are you hungry?"

He led Map to a room filled with canned goods. Map scanned the pictures on the labels—peaches, cherries, green beans, olives, salmon, and more.

"This building used to be a shelter for the homeless," he said. "Most of the cans are still pretty good."

The cat writhed into the room and rubbed against its master's leg. Daniel picked it up and petted it. "Dod, Dod," the cat muttered.

“I taught him that,” Daniel said. “His name is Chigger.”

“Your cat is very smart,” Map said. “You are a good person. See how much your cat loves you.”

“Dod, Dod,” Chigger purred. “Dod, Dod, Dod.” It began to lick at Daniel’s chin with a pale yellow tongue.

WEEKS PASSED. THE DAYS GREW EVEN HOTTER.

Map hid her sack in a cluttered storage room. She secretly began to feed Chigger small bits of manna.

She told Daniel she did not like to talk about her past, and he said that he understood. She found out that Daniel used to cut people’s hair. That had been his job, he said—for fun, he used to throw pots. He laughed when Map asked who he threw them at. He explained that to throw a pot meant to spin clay on a wheel and shape it into something useful.

Map thought that pot-throwing sounded like a good thing.

Once, when it was cloudy, Daniel went outside to see if he could find any clay. He brought home a bucket of thick, gray ooze. He didn’t have a wheel, so they each shaped a pot by hand. Daniel admired Map’s work and told her that she had exceptional talent.

Chigger learned to call Map “Mom.” The cat grew large—so large that Daniel could no longer lift the creature. He cut back on the amount of canned salmon he fed his pet, and still the cat piled on rolls of fat.

One morning, Map curled up next to Daniel on a pile of moldering coats. “We should make love,” she said.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Pam,” he said. “But I don’t feel like it. I haven’t felt like it for years. Just as well. I wouldn’t want to bring a baby into a dead world.”

“You would make a good father, Daniel. Chigger loves you.”

“Hell, any babies born today would probably end up looking like Chigger. Big and hairless and ugly.”

Map shook her head. “You think too many wrong things. Chigger is beautiful because he loves us. Chigger! Come here, Chigger!”

Chigger lumbered into the room and threw himself into their laps. “Mommy. Dod, Doddy.”

“I have a surprise for you, Daniel,” Map said. “Chigger! Who do you love?”

The huge cat worked the muscles of his fat cleft lips. “Chiggy lubs Doddy and Mommy.”

“How can he do that?” Daniel whispered, squirming out from under his pet. “I thought I was doing good to get him to repeat one syllable, like a parrot.”

Chigger blinked. “Doddy lubs Chiggy?”

“You stop that!” Daniel clapped his hand over the cat’s mouth. “Cats aren’t that smart!”

Map slapped his hand away. “You are so mean! Chigger and I wanted to surprise you and now the fun is spoiled. Look, Chigger’s mouth is bleeding.”

“Doddy hurd Chiggy!” cried the cat.

Daniel ran from the room. Map and Chigger stared after him.

The cat tilted his head to one side and sobbed.

“Don’t be sad.” Map pulled a small piece of manna from her pocket. “Look what I have for you.”

THAT NIGHT, WHILE DANIEL SLEPT, MAP AND CHIGGER slipped out of the house. They went to the river, feasted on manna and refilled Map’s sack.

“Do you think Doddy would like manna?” Map said. “I’ve been eating it for years.”

“Doddy silly,” Chigger said.

Map nodded. “Doddy is very silly. He doesn’t know what is good and what is bad. We will have to show him.”

As they walked through the night, Map found a dilapidated shop with a mannequin in the window. Instructing Chigger to wait for her, she entered the shop and began to search. A shriveled cadaver in a polyester jumpsuit leered at her from behind the counter. In a back room, she found a large bundle wrapped in heavy plastic.

MAP AND THE CAT DID NOT RETURN TO THEIR HOME with Daniel for several days.

One morning, Daniel entered the kitchen and found Map preparing a large breakfast. He took his seat at the table. “Where were you? Where’s Chigger?”

“We had things to do.” Map smiled. “Chigger is probably asleep. Shall I go wake him?”

The man shook his head. “I’m sorry I was so mean. I missed both of you. Is Chigger’s lip better?”

“Of course. Young boys heal fast.” Map opened a can of fruit drink and filled three glasses.

“Chigger is not a boy. He’s the latest in a long line of mutant cats.”

“You are so silly, Doddy.” A lanky blond boy entered the room and sat by Daniel’s side. “Look at me! I’m a boy and you’re my Doddy.”

Map placed a bowl of manna in front of Daniel, and he pushed the bowl away in disgust. He narrowed his eyes at the boy. “You can’t fool me. I can still see the outline of Chigger if I squint real hard. He’s bigger now...”

“Doddy is so silly, Mommy! Doddy is so funny!” The little boy ran a tanned hand through his curly locks and began to laugh.

Map began to laugh, too. “Wait here, Daniel. I’ll be right back.” Map rushed to the storage room and threw the wedding dress over her head. It took a bit of wiggling, but she managed to work her way into the ill-fitting garment.

She still could hear Daniel talking to Chigger. “I can see through this trick of yours,” he said. “All I have to do is concentrate.”

Map swept back into the kitchen, white lace swirling in her wake. Still concentrating, Daniel turned from Chigger to the one he knew as Pam.

“Oh God, Pam. Oh God.” He squinted hard, hard. “You had me fooled all along.”

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” Chigger said. “I did it all wrong and Doddy figured us out.”

“Not to worry, Chigger,” Map said. She smoothed the ruffles of lace over her thorax with a chitinous claw. Her mandibles twitched furiously. “Your Doddy doesn’t know what is good and what is bad. So we must show him.

Right now.”

Chigger reared up out of his seat and threw Daniel to the floor. The wedding gown ripped as Map’s glistening stinger sprang forth. A milky drop of poison fell from the cylinder’s tip. Daniel’s shrieks were muffled by the vestigial limb that Chigger slapped over his mouth.

“Remember what to say, Chigger,” said the enormous mud dauber wasp as she slid the pointed tube into the base of Daniel’s spine. She squirted once, twice. Not enough to kill him. Just enough to keep him from ever running away.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.” Chigger nodded happily. “Everything is good now. You may kiss Doddy.”

MARK MCLAUGHLIN

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Water Music

CHRIS DUNCAN

*Growing up means more than just
outgrowing where you came from.*

S PITTING SPAM DROWNS OUT NPR THIS MORNING. My hell is beginning this Monday morning like usual: my mother cooking breakfast for my father, which consists of fried Spam, fried eggs, Nestlé Quik chocolate milk, and one piece of scorched rye toast.

I turn the radio up two notches—the most I can get away with without my father lifting his eyes away from the *Bristol Herald Courier* and resting them instead on his “sad excuse for a son.”

My mother treads softly in her white nursing shoes. She wrestles with the hissing skillet like a seasoned snake handler. The smell of burning toast wafts through the air, settling in my clothes to serve as a reminder of my sad existence for the rest of the day.

“Baby, don’t forget to get us some safes,” my mother says to my father with a sly grin, ambivalent to the inappropriateness of making such a request in my presence.

“Um-huh,” grunts my father. He bites a piece of loose skin from his lower lip with his top row of false teeth. He shifts his weight, throws his right leg over his left, and adjusts his small silver rimmed glasses. He clears his throat. My father works at a Quiklube. He doesn’t manage a Quiklube or own a Quiklube. He just works at a Quiklube. His navy blue mechanic’s pants have oil stains in them that have turned his uniform wear into something approaching a Jackson Pollack, adding to his incomprehensibility. I look to see what he’s reading. My guess is right: he’s reading the funnies.

“Mm’k, babe?” says my mother, serving Dad his Spam and eggs and scorched toast.

He gives her another “Um huh,” and keeps reading the funnies.

I leave the trailer we call home and head for the community college—Yes, I live in a trailer park, and yes, I attend a community college—and I put my radio headphones on, trying desperately to pick up Morning Edition.

I have to constantly remind myself to look up, straight ahead, and not down at the leaf covered sidewalk. I walk on College Avenue, a side road that leads from the trailer park to the community college. The walk takes about twenty minutes. I have my headset on and I am happy. Right on schedule, Mira bounds out the front door of a neat, smallish ranch house that’s across the street and out of which her father runs a dental practice.

The house is among maple trees and mums and lots of landscaping, very tastefully done, and is adjacent to the Sinking Springs town cemetery. Mira attends college

at Emory & Henry, a local liberal arts college, located about a mile from my college. Mira wants to teach music, hopefully to help the local yokels appreciate Daquin and Handel. Mira can’t believe that the rest of the world isn’t as enthralled with “Water Music” as she is.

Mira always reminds me of a praying mantis when I first see her in the morning (I’d never tell her this, of course). With her thick rimless glasses and tightly pulled

**Mira always reminds me of
a praying mantis when I see
her in the morning.**

back black hair, her flawless white skin, her always full red lips, and her two crutches—her two extra limbs—she has something of an insectlike appearance. Mira has just missed out on being stunning instead of interesting looking, I think to myself. However, it’s in this nether world of near-missness that I find my peace. I smile and take off my headset.

“Hey, you,” I say.

Mira is struggling with her walking today. Some days are better than others. “Do you think Blue has a room?”

I smile and look down at my worn out Adidas tennis shoes. “Probably.”

THE EVERGREEN MOTEL IS A NO-TELL MOTEL ON Route 11 that runs parallel to I-81. It’s close to the college. Sometimes Mira and I forget our classes and our lives and get a room for free for a few hours. Our friend Blue works the counter and gives us a room whenever we want. He’s called Blue because he fell into a creek when he was two years old during the dead of winter. He would say that he turned Blue as “a goddamned Smurf.”

On this day it is just after eight in the morning and Mira and I are in room B-12. “A real shot in the arm,” says Mira, never one to let a quip go wasted.

As soon as the door is shut and locked I embrace my praying mantis; her crutches fall to the floor. I do the usual: I turn on the television to a nothing channel and let the room flood with white noise; I turn on the bathroom faucet, more white noise; this is what Mira wants. We take off our glasses and book-bags and shed our lives, our skins, burnt toast and fried Spam. Mira’s body is a world within itself: a multiplicity of rain drops her head, her body an inviting eddy swirling in a stream golden

and deep, her legs two roads, pulling me further and further into a respite of calm decompression. This is how I see her. We lie on the motel bed, our lips never separating, not for an instant, and we hold communion, offering ourselves to God, who'll hopefully take us in as we take in each other, fully and with beautiful finality.

"I TOLD THE BITCH HEY, LOOK, WE DON'T HAVE QUAKER State. We got Pennzoil and that's all we got. I mean, jeez, how many times do I have to repeat myself?" so says my father, as he sits down at the same dining room table, in his same oily clothes, assuming the same cross-legged position. I sit next to him, in my same chair, listening to the same radio, listening to the same station, listening to All Things Considered on NPR. My father is talking to my mother, who's cooking spitting chicken. She's a home-health nurse who helps emphysema patients all day long. She puffs on her Misty Ultra Light Menthol One Hundred Full Flavors as she cooks. She smiles at her oily baby.

"I'm makin' chicken, babe."

My father rubs his eyes, shifts his weight on the seat, and adjusts his crotch with his right thumb and forefinger, giving him a little breathing room.

"You made it to Rite-Aid, didn'tcha, babe? I saw the receipt on the dresser," my mother says coyly.

I'm listening to All Things Considered; I turn up the radio another notch. Dad shoots me a look. The chicken spits and dances in the skillet like it had just been beheaded. Mom presses down on the chicken titties (mom always calls chicken breasts chicken titties—she thinks she's cute) with her spatula. Frying, burning chicken titties cry out in pain as my mother playfully smacks her twenty-extra-pound-ass. "I know whatcha want for dessert," she says, saying *dee-zert* in a disgustingly provocative manner, always oblivious that I might be disturbed by such innuendo.

My mother, still in a giddy mood, says to me. "*Magnum P.I.* is on tonight, ain't it, Mark? Your favorite. I love that Rick, flies that airplane—"

I don't stop listening to All Things Considered. I don't look at my mother. I say, "*Magnum* is on every night, and it's T.C. that's the pilot, not Rick, and it's a helicopter that he flies, not an airplane."

My mother keeps frying; her smile dissipates ever so slightly; the corners of her mouth slide down very minutely. "Oh," she says. Dad shoots me a go to hell look. But Mom is still smiling, still swaying her hips this way and that, shifting her weight on her tired nurse's shoes, white and crinkled. I open up the twenty-ounce Sprite that I just purchased from Klink's Handy Dandy Mart, which is located between the community college and the trailer park. The fizz reminds me of earlier, of the white noise in the Evergreen. I intuit a different reality, one devoid of—

The phone rings.

Mom answers. "Hello, Mira, baby... now you tell your daddy that I've got a molar with his name on it! It's killing me like crazy!... Uh huh... Can't hardly sleep—I rinse my mouth with salt water but hell... yeahhh... yeahhhhhh, it's the truth... you tell your daddy the stock in Novocain's fixin' to go up when he sees me"—she laughs like a hyena—"yeahhhh... chicken, what else... nothin', listenin' to the damned radio... wait a minute, baby... umm'k, sugar." Mom smiles at me. "Mira," she says and holds the phone out.

I walk over to the phone. Dad turns off the radio as soon as I get up, shooting me a take-that-you-little-shit look.

"Hey," I say. Mom presses the hissing chicken titties with her spatula and makes two loud kissing noises, giving me a mischievous grin. I turn away from my mother and face the calendar on the wall. I'm staring at January 23, 1986, even though it is spring of 2000. Our family is too pathetic to take down the damned old calendar, stuck in time.

"I'm seriously feeling like I can't breathe," I whisper into the phone. I stare at my Adidas shoes, scruffy, old pieces of crap.

Mira sighs. "It won't be forever. Tomorrow morning we'll make like trees. Now just say okay and be happy. Be happy."

I smile. I can't believe it but my world has just dissolved into something splendid.

"And besides," says Mira, "Daddy's got a tube of new bubble gum tooth paste for you. Now doesn't that make you happy? Mark? Are you breathing better?"

"Yes," I say. "Eight o'clock, okay?"

"Okay. Eight o'clock. I wish I could make the night zip by—don't you?"

"Of course." Mom presses the chicken titties once more with her spatula. Sizzle. Crackle. Spit. Spit. "Mira," I say.

"What?"

"I love you."

A MALE NURSE MAKES PRETTY GOOD MONEY, AND the nursing program at the community college is always looking for males, so, well, I'm gonna be a nurse. I hate needles and defecation and other people's problems grate on my nerves, but I'm definitely going to be a nurse, a male nurse; that's what I'm going to do. My father always says male nurse when our friends and relatives ask him what I'm doing in school. "He's in the medicine program up there," he says, usually adjusting his silver rimmed glasses before he takes a deep breath and says, "He's gone be a nurse," pronouncing it like, "He's gone be a pussy."

Mira and her parents, Ed and Sue, think it's a great idea. Ed says to me, "Boy, a male nurse can work wher-

ever the hell he wants. You can pull down an easy-oh, I don't know-forty, fifty grand a year. Around here that ain't bad. I'm telling you, boy, by the time all the bills are paid and whatnot, hell, I don't do much better'n'at myself." Then he smiles and slaps me on the back. "Gotta make a buck doin' something. Whether you're takin' blood or wipin' asses or yankin' teeth—what the hell difference does it make?"

Ed is known as a "good ol' country dentist" to the people around here. He's very good to me, mainly because I'm very good to his daughter. If only he knew how good. But what else can one expect from any father?

I'm first in my class in the nursing program. I graduate in a month. I've already got a job at Johnston Memorial Hospital (with a little help from Ed), which is the town hospital. Things are looking up.

On this morning it is after six, just after six, and I am already up and out the door, walking briskly from the trailer park. I am up before Mom's Spam is frying and before Dad's toast is burning. The morning is heavy with dampness and cold. Crickets serenade me. I pull my Celtics jacket up higher on my neck (I'm one of only a few Celtic fans in southwest Virginia). I'm meeting Mira at the Emory & Henry College indoor swimming pool at eight. I'm going to visit the E&H graveyard first. I have time to kill.

PROFESSORS' HOUSES LINE THE NARROW, PAVED ROAD that wends itself though the E&H campus. A road diverges sharply to the left, going up another wending road, gravelly and dusty, leading to the E&H graveyard. Thorny shrubs and weeds line the path. Dogs yelp, crows caw, dew dances on every blade of grass. The sounds of roaring weed-eaters and lawnmowers resonate inside my skull; they are already running full-blast at this early morning hour. The maintenance crews never stop beautifying the campus. The college president's wife oversees most of the landscaping done at E&H. She does have good taste, I must say.

My mind is slow; leaking thoughts run into one another, creating a wet, runny, watercolor world inside my head. I see my mother, her innately good-hearted soul, and my father... my father's a nice guy. This world weighs heavily on the shoulders of clip-winged sparrows; this saying repeats itself ad infinitum in my head, born there when I was born. The cicadas' hum provides an incidental backdrop for my quite, uneven marching up the gently sloping road, leading to quiet bodies, serene against the invading, flying shards of freshly cut grass.

Blues leak into reds and pinks invade whites. Swimmin' lessons? You don't need swimmin' lesson, says Daddy. You don't even like takin' a bath, Mark, he says, saying Mark

like Twerp. Whadya need to learn how to sink for? You can already do that. Mom cackles. It's all good-natured ribbing.

The county recreation department is offering free swimming lessons to whoever wants them. It's only on Monday mornings. Brian's mom'll take us. C'mon. Pleezee.

Now here's the deal. Now here's the deal: another phrase that bounds from somewhere behind the silver-rimmed glasses. Now here's the deal: You're a smart mouth and I didn't raise you to be no—

Now here's the deal. Now here's the deal, okay, your mom and I have to have a little afternoon delight, if you know what I mean. Now, Mark, you're fifteen so I don't have to pretend you're stupid or nothing. So why don't you make like a tree and—

The deal is. The deal is you can turn off that radio crap you're listenin' to. Jesus H. Christ Almighty what's the deal with you, Mark? Goodness gracious, boy, you can't go through life—

I kick a pebble with my left shoe, and then I kick it with my right, bouncing it between my feet, a regular countrified Pelé. My grandfather's grave is up on the right. I plop my butt down on the wet ground and close my eyes. The bright sun gives me the brilliant backdrop of a red satin curtain, covering my thoughts, allowing me an intermission. World War II veteran.

My grandfather was a farmer, a poet on his blue Ford tractor. He died of emphysema. My mother helped treat him, bedridden, depleted, drinking constantly ice water out of a bending straw beside his bed. No teeth. My mother, smoking her Menthols as she bends over him...

I sit on the wet ground and hold communion with my grandfather. We offer something to one another on this day. As usual, he gives far more than I do. I press my eyes a bit harder with my fingers, playing with the colors in my mind, knowing that my life isn't so bad... not really. I'm wondering at this moment if I need Mira's crutches more than she does. I sigh loudly. Granddaddy, granddaddy, granddaddy.

ON THIS MORNING, THE E&H SWIMMING POOL IS closed to the public. The pool is closed, period. Maintenance crews come in and service the pool around noon. Mira and I have another friend who assists us. His name is Teddy, and he's a junior at E&H. He also gets his teeth cleaned at Mira's dad's dental practice. Teddy works in the athletic department. He doesn't mind. He leaves the door unlocked for us on cleaning day.

I open the glass door of the athletic department building which houses the pool, locking it behind me. I know that Mira is already in the water. I take the next door on the

right, a heavy wooden thing that's very hard to open. I'm in the shower room. Wetness and chlorine everywhere.

I drop my book bag and kick my shoes off while I'm walking toward the pool. The lights are off. I'm feeling my way through the darkness like a late-night trip to the bathroom. I know where I am. I know exactly where the damned elongated wooden bench is—the one that has caused me to almost break my shins several times. I know where the wastebaskets are. I know where everything is.

I throw off my shirt and take off my pants, still walking... not an easy trick. I near the pool, and I step out of my underwear, and in my final motion I step into the pool, into the deep end, right beside the high-dive. I feel my testicles pull into my abdomen. I enjoy the feeling of the cool water covering me like a blanket, filling every crevice, my ears filling like caves under a crashing cliff, loving the tide that's rolling in. I know what time it is.

I throw my head back and then down, down into the water, and I struggle in the dark abyss to the very bottom, to the drain.

I reach my hand out and I know that I'm right on schedule. I feel Mira's hair, her black run away hair, slipping between my fingers, and I know that she is smiling. And

we rise together, swimming the ten feet to the surface, ready to breathe. We are ready to live, breathe and play like otters for the next couple of hours.

Mira whispers wetly in my ear, her naked, thin legs wrapped tightly around my body. "Feels great!" She giggles when she says this.

MIRA HOBBLER IN FRONT OF ME, HER FOUR LIMBS stubbornly working together to get her from point A to B. Her hair is still wet and it leaves a trail behind us both, little droplets that give away our secret morning. I watch her move, intrigued by the ballet that I see in front of me, seeing a life in front of me preparing to play itself out. Droplets of raindrops descend on the sidewalk and roll on impact, like miniature wet parachutists. Mira glances back at me. "Never fails—I just washed my car."

I've never made the connection between just washed cars and the dislike of rain. Mira says that this is because I never wash my car. I close my eyes and I put one foot in front of the other, and I listen to a quiet music play that is just underneath the surface of my world, yearning every second to sweep me away in its undertow and carry me out to sea.

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JASON SNELL

*America's top export? Entertainment.
Export number two? History.*

THE MAN WITH THE RABBIT SKINS BLOCKED OUR path as we tried to enter the Sampo Hotel. He was wearing a torn jacket made of some kind of animal, probably vat-grown horsehide. Anyone selling rabbit skins on a streetcorner in Osaka couldn't afford the genuine article.

"Out of my way," I said to him in my undoubtedly American-accented Japanese, flashing my card. He immediately stepped back, probably out of fear that I might haul him in for soliciting. Osaka cards don't broadcast whether you're a detective or a cop, and that was fine with me—it was a lot less trouble that way. In L.A., a flashing *PI* tag was an invitation to either laugh or draw weapons. Believe me, I preferred it when they laughed.

As I moved to enter the hotel, the rabbit-skin man immediately confronted Gehrig. I turned to explain that he was with me, and shouldn't be bothered, but Columbia Lou had already scared him away with one firm wave of his hand. I've always been envious of people who can do that.

"You think this is where he is?" I asked Gehrig as the Sampo's smudged plastic doors slid open in front of us. The place smelled dirty—I couldn't smell the local stink, but the cheap air freshener in the air let me know that it must have been fairly putrid.

"The place may have bright lights and moving doors, Ken, but it's still a cheap hotel. And no matter what century it is, there are only two places to look if you've lost Babe Ruth: bars and cheap hotels."

The Sampo had both. We made our way for the bar first.

Laurie was there, of course. I had been to the bar at least fifty times since Matsushita sent me to Osaka—who I had pissed off to get the stranger-in-a-strange-land assignment was still an open question, but I had about a dozen suspects—and she was always there. The first ten times her appearance reassured me, reminded me of home. Then I was assigned to work with an American exec. I was astounded when I met her, because she looked nothing like Laurie. I guess in my time here, I had begun to think that all American women looked like hookers—and they don't, no matter what some of my ruder Japanese friends say.

After my experience with the American exec, I tried to forget all about Laurie. She was a California hooker, and that was all. No matter where you are in Japan, there are always expatriate Americans catering both to company boys and to crumbs who have credit to burn and a taste for the exotic.

"Hey, Kenny, wanna taste of home?"

"No thanks, Laurie. I need to ask you if you've seen someone around here."

I think she missed what I said entirely, mostly because she had already focused her attention on Lou. "And who's *this*?" she asked.

You've got to understand—no matter what the bizarre surroundings, Lou Gehrig still looked like he had walked straight out of 1927. We had given him a modern suit, but it didn't hang on him right. He was squeaky-clean, with

**Lou Gehrig still looked
like he had walked
straight out of 1927.**

wholesomeness and purity you'd expect to see in a Capra or Spielberg, but not roaming the streets of the American. His manner made him seem like a prime target for Laurie: he was a U.S. businessman or vacationer far from the States and ripe for some down-home pleasure.

He took off his hat—he had insisted on wearing a hat, despite my protestations—and nodded his head.

"My name's Lou Gehrig, ma'am. We're looking for a friend of mine named Babe Ruth."

I pulled the picture I had of Ruth from my pocket and gave it to her. It had been taken the day before, during yesterday's Classic Series game. Ruth, wearing an official 1927 New York Yankees baseball uniform, was touching home plate. He had just homered off Catfish Hunter to defeat the Oakland Athletics, 6-5. After the game, Ruth disappeared. He never made it back to the team's hotel.

"He's a fat one, isn't he? I didn't know they let fatties like him play baseball."

"Mr. Ruth is good with the bat," I assured her.

"Yeah, that's what Shelly said." She handed the picture back to me.

"Shelly? The Marilyn Monroe?"

"Yeah, that's *him*. I can't believe that a recon job could be doing better business than me. Jesus, they took off his dick and moved his fat around a little, that's all. At least I'm fuckin' real. As advertised."

"Has Shelly seen Mr. Ruth?"

"Seen him? She *did* the piglet last night. Said she expected him to be exhausted after one round, but he kept comin' back, like a boxer."

"Where is she now?"

“*He’s* upstairs with a client,” Laurie said with contempt. “A local. Little bastards never ask to see his birth certificate, so he takes ’em for full price. My fuckin’ chromosomes should be worth a little more, you know?”

“What’s the room number?”

“1530. And be sure to scare the shit out of *john-san*, so he asks for a refund. Serves Sheldon right.”

I thanked her, and Lou and I turned to go.

“Come back now, slugger,” she said to Lou. This time, Lou didn’t respond. Despite the 150-year gap, he *did* know when to be polite and when to ignore.

“Did she say that Ruth was sleeping with a man?” Lou asked as we entered the elevator.

“Sort of. Reconstructive surgery—I guess some guys really have something against their dicks, and want ’em off. Can you believe that? Lots of them end up as hookers—they say it’s a great way to affirm their newfound womanhood, but more likely they’re too deep in debt to afford respectable work. Either way, they usually end up being bartenders or marrying decrepit old men for their money.”

“This is an incredible world you live in,” Gehrig said, and shook his head.

“Not so incredible. There’s the same sleaze as before. It’s just shaped different.”

I wasn’t really talking to Lou Gehrig, of course, no more than the man that we were chasing was really George Herman Ruth. But they thought they were, and for all intents and purposes they acted just like their long-dead counterparts. I don’t know the specifics of how they were created—it involves artificial intelligence, chromosome matching, and lots of baseball nuts doing research into the history of the all-time great baseball teams.

Matsushita, seeing as it owns half the National League and most of the teams in the Pacific League, decided to throw some of their money behind a “greatest baseball series of all time” event. So they set their technicians and research people at work on finding the eight greatest teams of all time, getting information on all their players, and creating exact replicas.

And they did it. Last night, in the fifth game of the semifinal series, Babe Ruth—or his ghost, replica, whatever you want to call it—hit a home run to send the 1973 Oakland Athletics (most of whom weren’t even born before Ruth had died) back into the ether from whence they came. Ain’t science something?

“The woman we’re going to meet looks exactly like Marilyn Monroe,” I told Gehrig.

“Who?”

“I’m sorry—I thought you knew who she was. Some Yankee player ended up marrying her.”

“Must’ve been after my time.”

The elevator stopped on the fifteenth floor, and as the door opened we found ourselves looking right in Marilyn Monroe’s face.

“Shelly, we’ve got to talk.”

“Shit,” she said, and pulled something from her purse. It was money. “Here, take three thousand. Just don’t pull me in.”

“Shelly, you know I’m not feeding for the locals. And where the hell did you get money like this?”

“All of Scarlett’s girls have it on ’em, to make sure they don’t get into any trouble with the cops.”

The first time I had met Shelly, she had just been a cheap hooker, not much different from any other. But now she was working for Scarlett—the den-mother-meets-madam who controlled half of the city’s sex trade and a good portion of its money. Being one of Scarlett’s girls carried lots of perks—including, it seemed, plenty of bribe money to keep the cops away.

“This gentleman and I need your help, Shelly. We’re looking for this man.” I took her hand, led her into the elevator, and showed her the picture of Ruth.

“Oh, him,” she said, and rolled up her eyes. “I figured he’d be an easy one, pay me for more than he could actually handle. But he didn’t stop.”

“When did you do business with him?”

“Last night, around midnight. He came into the Sampo bar and we had a few drinks. Then we came upstairs.”

“Did he say anything about where he was going after he left you?”

She paused for a moment, pursing her lips in thought.

“Three or four. The bar had closed for the night. He asked what else might be open that late, and I told him to head for the Plaza. Everything’s open all night over there.”

The door slid open, and we were back in the lobby. I thanked Shelly, and Lou and I headed for the door.

“You sure I didn’t marry her? I mean, later on? My Hollywood phase?” he asked me.

“Pretty sure.” Gehrig knew his life’s history up to 1927, but not beyond. To the Yankees, it seemed as if they had been sucked through a time machine—they didn’t even know that they were created beings. I’m sure Lou had spoken to other players from other eras as they stood on first base, next to him, but I didn’t know if they had mentioned what happened to Lou Gehrig after 1927.

For the poor bastard’s sake, I certainly hope not. To this day, there’s still a Lou Gehrig’s Disease—though depending on where you live, it’s got different names, like ALS and Hawking Syndrome. There are still people who die slowly as they lose control of their bodies—just like Gehrig did. I tried to picture the huge, incredibly strong man in front of me as a uncontrollable shaking pile of flesh, and couldn’t do it.

“Let’s go find him, so we can all get back to work,” Gehrig said as we walked out the door. “We’ve got to get ready for the Giants. The game’s tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, tomorrow night.” The beginning of the Classic Series. Great publicity for the Matsushita Corporation. I had to discreetly find Babe by midnight, or the Corp would send out a massive search team for him. Publicly admitting the loss of one of the ghost players wouldn’t reflect well on my dear Corp, but Babe Ruth had to be there for the opening game. He was their star, the all-time best baseball player in the baseball series of the ages.

The Corp preferred that I find him quietly. And considering how well I knew the American, I would have no problem doing just that. Or so I hoped.

The American District in Osaka is, well, a laugh. Which isn’t to say that it isn’t American—in fact, I came here quite often, to try and remind myself of what home was really like. It didn’t help.

The American was a strip of movie theaters, fast food restaurants, cheap hotels, a sports memorabilia shop, a couple of soldier-of-fortune weapons stores—and lots of Lizard Joints.

Lizard Joints were, economically, the glue that held the American together. They were incredibly popular to the locals. For them, seeing a Lizard show was the ultimate American experience, without actually going to America.

I avoided them. My memories of growing up in California included McDonald’s, Hollywood movies, the occasional stay in a Holiday Inn, cheering on the local sports teams, and even occasional bursts of gunfire.

But I never—not even *once*—went to a live show featuring songs like ‘My Way,’ ‘Night and Day,’ and ‘The Candy Man.’ Nor did I see any Elvis, Beatles, Michael Jackson, or any other oldies revival show. No singer crooning ditties while his gut stuck out over the cummerbund of his tuxedo. Not even when I went to Vegas.

Nobody at the Corp in Osaka could believe it, when I told them. “You have to see it,” they said. “It’s the best of America!”

And they took me, kicking and screaming.

I only learned two things from the trip to Sammy’s Sinatra-riffic Sensation In the Heart of the American. First, I learned that it was up to me, New York, New York. About that same time, I discovered that I would never go see a Lizard show again.

“We’ll start with the bars,” I told Gehrig. “Hopefully we’ll find him soon.”

I prayed that George Herman Ruth wasn’t downing gin and tonics while swinging to the groove of ‘Feelings’ as performed by the Jerry Vale Memorial Orchestra.

“You seen this guy?” I asked Mark at Rick’s American Café.

“Fat guy,” Mark said in that funny accent of his.

“So you have seen him?”

“Hell, you can tell from that picture that he’s a fat guy. Look, Kenny, you know that information don’t come without a price.”

“Here’s a thousand for your time,” I said, and dropped the coins in his hand. “Got any leads on him?”

“You guys missed him by about three hours. He was here, all right—first he got completely drunk, but then he got hold of some detox pills. Then he proceeded to get drunk all over again.”

“Sounds like our man. Any idea where he went?”

“Look, after he got drunk again, he started playing

The American District in Osaka is, well, a laugh.

around with a couple of local girls. They’re hookers, but your fat guy was trying to *romance* ’em or something.”

“Was there trouble?”

“Nah. They straightened him out. Guess he paid one of ’em, because they gave him some Randies and then headed for the door.”

“Shit. So he bought Randies and took off with a hooker?”

“That’s about it.” He tapped his watch. “Time’s up.”

“Look, thanks for your help. Can you call me if you see him again?”

“No way,” Mark said. “The babes are Scarlett’s. The Randies, too. They walk out the door, it’s her business, not mine. Protective bitch, that one.”

“A few thousand help you forget that fear?”

“Not for that fat-ass, it wouldn’t. Didn’t much like the looks of him anyway.”

I gave Mark my best *fuck-you* smile. “Let’s get out of here,” I said.

“I knew he wouldn’t help us,” Gehrig said as we headed for the door.

“Why?”

“Didn’t you hear the accent? He’s from Brooklyn. They’ve always hated the Yankees.”

Outside the bar, he dropped his big right hand onto the top of my shoulder.

“Hold on a second,” he said. “Do you mind explaining what all that was about?”

“What part didn’t you get?”

“Well, most of it. I know plenty about girls and booze, but what are Randies and what’s a detox?”

“Pills,” I told him. “Randies are slightly psychedelic, plus they increase sexual drive and potency. Kind of the best of all worlds. Detox pills are instant sober-ups. Babe

probably took a Detox by mistake, and then popped some Randies to rectify the situation.”

“What a world,” Gehrig said, shaking his head. “If we had sober-up pills in the ’20s, Babe might’ve hit 70 or 80 home runs a year.”

“And if you had Randies in the ’920s, he would’ve ended up dead in an alley somewhere.”

And then it hit me. Randies were no common street drug. Scarlett’s girls had them because they went with the business. Randied-up johns could still get it up. But, like Scarlett’s girls, Randies cost large sums of money for even the smallest of doses.

And none of the players had carried any money.

“Oh, man,” I said.

Gehrig looked puzzled.

“If I asked you to buy me a drink, could you?” He shook his head.

“Of course not. I don’t have a wallet—hell, I feel naked without one.”

“Right. So where has Babe gotten the money to pay for his fun?”

I *had* hoped we could get him back before he had broken any laws. Now I just hoped we’d get him back before the skin of the world’s greatest batsman was being peddled on an Osaka streetcorner.

Home base for Scarlett and her girls was, as you might expect, a mansion known as Tara. And while the hookers didn’t resemble any character in “Gone With the Wind,” all of Scarlett’s security people looked exactly like Rhett Butler—or should I say Clark Gable?

“What do you want?” one of the Gables at the door asked us.

“We need to see Scarlett,” I told him. “We’re looking for a friend of ours.”

“Scarlett’s real busy,” the Gable said. “Who should we say is callin’?”

“My name’s Ken Nishi,” I said. “I’m looking for a man named Babe Ruth.”

“Hold on,” Gable Number One said, and went inside. Gehrig and I stood outside with the silent second Gable.

“This Scarlett has identical twin bodyguards?” Gehrig asked me.

“Not quite. The one that just went in is almost two inches shorter than this one.” Lou raised his eyebrows. “I’m a detective. I notice this stuff.”

“Are these bodyguards like that Shelly girl, then?”

“The plumbing’s different—but otherwise, yes.”

“I’m sorry,” said the first Gable as he emerged from the front door. “Scarlett can’t be disturbed right now. I suggest you call again tomorrow.”

“Sir,” Gehrig began, “would you be so kind as to let us go inside and find our friend?”

The Gable smiled widely. “I’m sorry, pal—but business is business. No visitors while work is in session.”

I turned away from the Gables and began walking down the steps that led down to street level.

“Come on, Lou,” I said loudly. When we reached the street, I added: “We’ll be back. Just need to make a quick purchase.”

We found a couple of Scarlett’s girls back at Rick’s—the problem was getting them interested in us. Scarlett’s trained her girls to be *very* selective about who they’ll bring back to Tara. The first thing we had to do was make sure that the girls were first-string—only the cream of the crop room at Tara. The dregs, like Shelly, work at shit-holes like the Sampo.

After we found out that Sara and Viv were Scarlett’s top-of-the line, we had to convince them that we had money. The first-string ladies are extremely expensive, and the purchase of a few Randies is also required.

We managed to pass our john interview by showing them my credit card (with billions in Corp money backing it) and claiming to be two of the baseball players from the series. Sara bought Gehrig’s story, which had the virtue of being true. As for me, well, I told Viv I was legendary Japanese slugger Saduharo Oh.

I guess my credit was good enough that Viv wasn’t going to question my veracity. I do look fairly Japanese, though about half my family is European-American—but when it comes to my clothing, body language, and the way I talk, I’m about as inauthentic as you can get.

After they took my money, they handed each of us two small green pills—Randies. I turned to look at Gehrig, who was staring into the palm of his hand. He made a small gulping noise.

I smiled at him and dry-swallowed the Randies. I have to give it to the guy—he had a lot of guts. He imitated my actions as soon as I had finished swallowing.

It was a couple blocks to Tara, so we ended up walking there from Rick’s. As I stepped out of the bar and onto the dirty sidewalks of the American, I felt the whole district slide around me.

I could tell that the Randies were kicking in, though their psychedelic effects were mild compared to the drugs I’d taken in the past. And I wasn’t really afraid of getting out of control—if I needed it, I had a couple of detox patches in the bottom of my pocket and a gun hidden against the small of my back.

The randies also had an effect on my libido, and so I suddenly began to take more notice of Viv. She was reconstituted-gorgeous, every man’s dream and a credit to her plastician. Though I like to think of myself as a pretty good detective, I didn’t know whether she was a natural male or female. Some people can take one look at

a person's neck and figure out whether they've had their Adam's apple picked or not.

My hand slid around her back and I could feel the curve of her hip underneath the strange material her clothes were made out of. It felt almost alive, more of a second skin than actual clothing. Then again, it could've just been the Randies talking.

Gehrig, meanwhile, was squeezing Sara's breasts and mumbling to himself. I didn't suppose the old boy had much experience with drugs like these, and the double-whammy of sexual drive and hallucinations had to be more powerful than anything that existed in Gehrig's time.

I decided to let him enjoy it while it lasted.

It didn't take us very long to reach Tara. As we neared the front door, a skinseller approached us. It looked like the same one who had been in front of the Sampo earlier.

"Buy some skin," he said. "Real rabbit!"

This time, under the influence of Randies, I was a bit nicer to the little man. Rather than ignoring him, I paused briefly to say hello to the cute bunny skin and pet it a little.

"Nice rabbit you've got there," I told the man. Then Viv pulled me away from him. It was time to enter Tara.

I blinked as I looked up at the mansion's facade. It seemed incredibly huge, aristocratic, and completely out-of-place amidst the cheap neon and plastic crap that made up the rest of the American.

"My, my," I said, "I do believe the south has risen again." The girls ignored me, wisely. We went inside.

"Ready, slugger?" Viv asked me. I have to admit, the Randies were certainly having an effect. I put my hands on her waist, and then slid them up to her breasts. From there, I moved them to on her cheeks, as I began kissing her. Then I slid one of my hands to the nape of her neck and gently stuck a sedative patch to it.

Twenty seconds later, she was unconscious. Two minutes later, Gehrig and I had slapped on our detoxes and were searching room by room for Ruth.

We found the Sultan of Swat half-clothed and face down on a bed a few doors down from our rooms. One of Scarlett's girls was sitting on a chair in the corner, surfing the news channels.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Can't you see I've got a customer?"

"A busy one, too," Gehrig said.

"Look, Scarlett doesn't allow more than one client per girl. And I've got mine. So you'd better leave."

"He's a friend of ours," I told her. "We've come to take him back home."

"Oh, no you don't," she said. "He's paid up. I'm supposed to keep him here until he walks himself out."

"Who asked you to do that?" I asked.

"Scarlett. She told me the fat guy had some big money behind him, and that I should try to get as much of it out of him as possible."

"So you'd keep him here, charging him for your services and for drugs until he finally left?"

"Or until his money ran out, yeah. Why not?"

"Like I said, sister... we've come to take him home." I nodded to Gehrig, who went over to the bed and began shaking Ruth awake.

"Stop it!" the girl shouted. Before she could get protest too loudly, I walked over to her and slapped a sedative derm on her neck.

"Hey!" she shouted. "What the hell do you think you're doing? What's this fucking thing you stuck to me? What did you do to me? Help! I can't stand up..."

Scarlett's girl hit the ground.

Babe Ruth was slowly coming to, under the kind hand of Lou Gehrig.

"Come on, Babe... time to get up... got to get back before the next game," Gehrig said to the massive home-run king.

"You've done this before," I said.

"Too many times to remember. Like I said... the drugs and buildings may have changed, but he's still the same man and a whorehouse is still a whorehouse."

Gehrig and I pulled the Babe to his feet and began leading him out of Tara. We were about 10 feet from the back door when an alarm went off. I heard a woman screaming from upstairs—it was Viv. Her constitution was stronger than I had expected.

"He fuckin' knocked me out!" she yelled.

Four Gables were suddenly running toward us, two from the front door and two more from the hallway that led to the rest of the building.

"Down!" I yelled to Gehrig and the Babe, and we all fell to the ground. I pulled my gun, hoping that I could get all four of the Gables before they got us.

"Frankly, my dear," I said, pulled the trigger, and scored a direct hit on the head of Gable Number One. "I don't—" and Gable Two went down, "give a—" and Gable three went down, "damn..."

And then Gable Number Four's gun shattered my pistol hand. The gun flew across the floor, but I didn't really notice. I was screaming so loud that I can't even remember being knocked out when the Gable kicked me in the head.

WHEN I WOKE UP, I WAS IN A MATSUSHITA HOSPITAL bed. I obviously hadn't been killed by Scarlett—in fact, she had turned me back over to the Corp.

There was nothing I could do during the next few days I lay in that hospital bed but stare at the TV—so I watched the Classic Series. It was as exciting as the Corp had hoped

it would be, and they no doubt made a killing on the entire affair. The series went to seven games, just as they had hoped. Maximizing profits was the key.

I was amazed the series was that close—I figured the Yankees would win in a cakewalk. But they were actually down three games to two going into game six. Just as the Corp had hoped, the game ended dramatically—Babe Ruth, looking just as healthy as he always seemed to look on those old-time movie reels, doubled off the top of the centerfield wall in the top of the ninth to score Lou Gehrig and put the Yankees ahead to stay. That hit sent the championship of all time to a seventh game. And to think that just a few days before, Gehrig and I were carrying a half-naked and stoned out of his mind Babe out of a local whorehouse.

The day of the seventh game, I finally found out how I had managed to come out of my adventure alive, and how Babe and Lou had managed to get back in order to play in the series.

My first visitor was a mid-range Matsushita executive named Mariko Santos, and she sure didn't seem happy to see me. In fact, when she walked in the door and saw that I was conscious, she began to scowl. She also refused to make eye contact with me.

"Well, Nishi, at least you managed to get Ruth back without any bad publicity," she said.

No publicity? I had blown away three reincarnations of Rhett Butler in the middle of the biggest brothel in Osaka.

"But you also cost the Corporation a mint, almost all of it unauthorized. You paid for hookers—*expensive* hookers—and drugs for both yourself and your assistant, and we had to pay Scarlett for all the services Ruth paid for while he was out."

"The Corp had to pay for that?"

"Sure did. Scarlett knew that we were behind the series, and she knew perfectly well who their customer was. So they tried to wring as much money out of the Corporation as possible."

"Well, I *did* manage to limit how much time Ruth spent at Tara," I told her.

"True. But you also managed to kill two of her bodyguards and seriously wounded a third. We had to pay for his medical bills, plus yours. Scarlett also demanded a very large sum of money to keep it all away from the police."

"How large?"

"Extremely large. That's all I'm allowed to say."

"Shit," I said. Once a Corp worker, always a Corp worker. Matsushita would never fire me—they'd just transfer me

again, this time to Antarctica. I'd be gutting fish and throwing their heads into a bucket by Thursday.

"We've got plenty of money, and we got Ruth back in time to have him play in the series. So you're not going to be disciplined. But regional will probably want you out."

I nodded. I would be going somewhere else, if not Antarctica, then somewhere equally unappetizing. Outer Mongolia. Inner Moscow. Someplace cold, where I couldn't read the street signs. At least I'd be someplace where I wouldn't be confused with the locals.

When Santos left the room, Gehrig came in. Right behind him was Babe Ruth himself.

"You're looking a lot better, Ken," were the first words out of Gehrig's mouth.

"Yeah, lookin' real good," Ruth said.

"Thanks. Hey, good luck tonight."

Ruth smiled his famous dimpled, fat-cheeked smile.

"And thanks for pullin' me out of that dive the other day," Ruth said. "I've got hold of some mean stuff in my time, but those pills really take the cake."

"Look, Ken," Gehrig started, "we can't stay long. I practically had to beg on my knees before that Santos woman agreed to bring us here. I just wanted to thank you for all you've done for us. You did a great job."

"It's the first time anyone's gotten shot up for me," Ruth said with a laugh. "If there's anything I can do for you, just name it."

"One thing, Babe," I said. "Hit one out for me tonight."

He smiled again. "You got it, kid."

Whoever made this Ruth character sure got the recipe right.

Ruth hit me a homer, too. It won the series for the Yankees in the bottom of the ninth inning.

The next day, the simulations of the 1927 Yankees were sent back into the void from which they came. They were melted down or erased or whatever you do with computer simulations of real people.

So I had risked my life for these artificial people and the integrity of my corporation. And after all that, while I lay in a hospital bed, the people I had saved were wiped from existence. The only real souvenir I had of the whole event was my shattered hand.

Well, not just the hand. The day after the series, as those players were being dispatched back into oblivion, a Matsushita courier brought me a special package. Inside was a baseball, signed by the real live Ruth and Gehrig replicas.

It was good enough for me.

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The Turn on the Trail

GREGORY E. LUCAS

*Sometimes our final acts are, much as we try,
unknowable and indecipherable by others.*

Day 31, Lost Day 26, July 5
"I die with... [unreadable] ...any regrets."
—From the journal of a lost hiker

Jane Alton

DAMMIT, NO! BRIAN'S DEATH WASN'T A SUICIDE. For two years now, ever since those hunters found 'im face down in that stream in Vermont's Green Mountains, I've heard rumors 'bout my brother's death. I'd say ta myself, "Tell 'em what ya know—how he tried ta survive." But I couldn't bring it up. So I did the best I could ta forget what people said. But now I'll let the dead man speak through his journal.

I burnt his tent when they brought it ta me. I threw out the sleepin' bag he starved in. And after I took the notebook outa his backpack, I put the pack in the attic and haven't gone up there since. I was able, a bit at a time, ta face the words he'd written in his last days. Just a page here and there, in no order the first few times I took it out'a my night table drawer. But on a rainy night while my husband slept, I began readin' from page one and kept goin' straight through.

Wayne Langly

SHE COMES OVER HERE, JANE DOES, WITH THAT STUFF my son wrote. "No, I won't read none of id," I tell her. "No sense bringin' up the past. Leave what's past 'lone. Got more'n I can handle with your mother on 'er deathbed. That brain cancer's eatin' her mind," I says, but does she listen? "Won't read none of it?" she says. And I say, "No, no, take id. Take id with you." But she let id set here on this scratched up table when she left.

Ned Griegs

BRIAN. MY BEST FRIEND. WE WORKED TOGETHER A few years at the post office in Company, Vermont. Both of us clerks, sorting mail all day long in that little room. No matter what time a year—was hot in there. No air. Brian had been there eight years. He was thirty-eight when he died. Eight years younger than I am now. Brian was young at heart, even if he looked older than he really was. String Bean, we'd call him at work. He wasn't more than 160 pounds, and a little over six feet tall. His arms and legs were so long and thin that he looked kinda awkward. He always walked a little stooped over, maybe on account'a being bent over those letters so much of the time. He had dark brown eyes, the color of his hair—his

hair was medium long usually—and the skin of his face was a little wrinkled.

"Explore the Grand Canyon—yessirree! That's what I'm gonna do some day," he'd say. Jungles. Deserts. Mountains. Sea voyages. Brian never stopped talking about adventures. He'd wipe sweat of his face and talk about the breezes on tropical islands he'd go to someday. The only thing keepin' him back, he said, was his job.

**On a rainy night while my
husband slept, I began
readin' from page one.**

"Life's passing me by," he said more than once. "And here I am, another day sorting mail."

He was a man with a family, though, and since the office didn't give him much paid time off, he felt like he would be doing his family wrong by not making every penny he could. But then after all that awful stuff happened with Annette and the kids, he took ten days vacation—decided to hike 135 miles by himself along the Appalachian Trail.

Jane Alton

WE GREW UP IN A MOBILE HOME. I HATED WHEN people called it a trailer or said we lived in a trailer park! There *is* a difference. Our father was a house painter. Near 70 now. Still paints homes, but not all day long like he used ta. Says he's gotta work some still cause he's gotta pay off a small mortgage on this little house he bought not long ago—it's a *real* house, not a mobile—and besides, he says, "I like workin'." Cold and silent, that man. Tough speakin' ta 'im. Brian tried. Tried ta talk with 'im, joke with 'im, or just tell 'im 'bout school, 'bout ball games. Only thing that ever did was annoy the man, though. They didn't fight, Brian and Dad, they just didn't talk or do much together. Uncle Brian. That's who my brother played catch with, went fishing with, watched ball games with. Uncle Brian was our mother's brother and my brother was named after 'im. They were close. Always.

Wayne Langly

"IF'D MAKE ANY DIFF'ERENCE I'D READ IT, BUT IT DON'T," I says to Jane when she comes over one night to take care her mother so I can sleep some 'fore having to get up early and paint 'nother house. She's mad at me for not readin' it, says I didn't ever wanna really know who my son was.

Believe that? I walk away. Turn off all the lights. Get into bed. At last I get a little peace while she's in there with her mom. I took good care'a that woman. She never had to work none 'cept for a little while when the kids was both in their teens and growin' so fast that there wasn't clothes that fit for more'n a month it seemed, and they eat all that food up so fast. Cashier at the drug store. Only for a few months.

Not wanna know who my own son was? What the hell's she sayin'? That son a'mine was lots like me. Jane takes after her mom with her red hair and copies the way her mom smiled 'fore she got sick, but Brian'd always took after me. I'm not talkin' looks so much, but ways. Depression. I admit I got that problem. Get so low sometimes wish I was never born. And id sticks. I seen Brian even lower than me but he had a way of changin', real fast. Brian was always way up or way down. Never much 'tween. Me, I don't get the up part. That's why I keep quiet. That boy a'mine, he'd be way up in love one night and down in the dumps soon as he'd broken up with her. Next day he'd be back up in the sky. In love, again. Never could believe how up and down he'd be over girls, women. That's how come I know it was a suicide. That divorce. Made final and official just a week 'fore he set off. Married seven years to Annette and then not no more. Id depressed him. Took the kids with her too. That's why he went in them woods and never come back. He planned id that way.

Jane Alton

THE EVENIN' 'FORE HE STARTED OUT I WAS OVER there, at his house, in his livin' room, talkin' ta 'im. He was busy gettin' his stuff ready—tent, ponchos, socks, mosquito net for his face, matches, clothes. I don't know what all else it was, but it was lots. Couldn't believe that he could carry all that. Even had a Coleman lantern and fuel. He said it wasn't the usual thing ta bring 'long, that lantern, for someone who wanted ta travel light, but he said that he wanted it and it'd be worth the weight. "And what's that you're makin'?" I asked 'im when we were both in the kitchen. And he said, "My special survival food." Peanut butter, chocolate, nuts, and Oat Bran mixed together. He scooped and pressed it with a spoon into some empty plastic margarine containers and stuffed 'em into his backpack.

Ned Griegs

JANE CALLED ME FROM HIS PLACE THE EVENING BEFORE he set out. She said that he was all set, had everything packed and ready to go. Only thing left he had to do was drive up north to the Daskin Lake Campsite to store a food supply in a cache. She asked if I'd like to go along with the two of them. I went.

We parked at a trailhead and hiked a short way through the woods to the campsite. It was close to sunset then. He slung his food supply up between trees close to a lean-to so that the black bears couldn't get to it and then we walked back to the car and drove off. It was dark by then. On the way there and on the way home, he didn't say anything about Annette. He joked, sang along with the Bob Dylan tapes we played, and said that he could hardly wait to hit the trail the next day. Maybe there was a minute when he looked lost in thought, a little sad, but it was nothing much. There's no way I'd say he was depressed, like some people say he was.

Annette

ANOTHER SLEEPLESS NIGHT. TRY ANOTHER PILLOW. He's gone into those woods and is never coming back. Quiet, Annette. Get some sleep. Sleep.

...be alive today if it wasn't for you, all your idea, the divorce, seeing him the first time that night at the diner, Brian bussing the tables, me with the AA crowd, then they all leave except me, the last one, and he's there... movies and kisses and poetry, reading poetry by the silent TV like it was a fireplace, me to him, him to me... putting the kids to sleep together... his rough beard in our love making, but me and my booze... that's what did it... seven years together, happy, until I... it was just a slip, Brian, don't worry.

But why? Stop asking why, I don't know why, Brian... sober here, a drunk night there, oh come on Brian, let me have a little fun... not sure if I love you anymore Brian not as much as I love to drink, anyway... leaving you Brian, shocked, that look on his face... where were you last night? Shouting, it was just a one-night stand with a man at the bar, stop prying, forget it... Forget it? How, Annette? Not that argument again... Smashing all the booze bottles in the sink... Brian, I'll take the kids... take the kids? You work, yes, but if there's no way to pay for day care...

Hated that about him, about us, no money, blue-collar bullshit, me a college educated woman stuck in that shabby two bedroom house, those crude folks his friends that I pretended to like, dirty stinking diapers, and is this all there is to my life? Taking care of kids and cooking meals and cleaning a home I can't stand to live in? And it's back to my mother who doesn't stop prying, and then another man and another drink and then another man, the barfly you called him, Brian, and you wanted to know what I saw in him and why I just didn't stop and I couldn't tell you because I didn't know, and now if I could just sleep tonight, sleep and forget about you...

But I told him to get on with his life, you've got to forget about me, Brian... But she'll sober up—how could he think that? hope for that?—and come back with the

kids... because he never stopped loving you, even after... well, at least he saw his kids almost every day after work, never denied him that, so you could go out and party with your new boyfriend... poor me poor me pour me a drink... down down down the trail into the shadows of the trees, they found him in a stream, crawling toward the voices he said he heard, it wasn't a suicide, yes it was, but what about what Jane showed you?... unreadable half of it so who will ever really know, you don't need to see all the words, yes you do to be sure, he was depressed when he left, kept pleading for me to come to my senses the last time I saw him, but later, on the phone, said he forgave me everything and wished me the best, sadness in his voice, such sadness....

Jane Alton

ABOUT THREE IN THE AFTERNOON ON JUNE 5, 1990 I dropped Brian off at a trailhead in Betterton. That's in Central Vermont. All day he'd been anxious ta get goin'. But I got a job at the bank. I'm a teller. I look at money all day long that I wish I had more of cause I don't have much of it. I couldn't get off more than a few hours early ta take 'im. He asked for a kiss on the cheek after he was out'a the car ready ta set off. That surprised me. We didn't do that too often—close as we were—and I asked 'im why and he said that a sister's kiss brings good luck. So I kissed 'im lightly on his cheek, then watched 'im set off into the forest while I sat behind the wheel. Driving off I said ta myself I should've given 'im my rabbit foot. I meant ta bring it 'long with me, but I forgot. I know it sounds silly, but sometimes I think that if I'da gave 'im it, he would've had the luck he needed ta find his way out'a those woods.

Brian Langly

DAY 1—JUNE 5:

Late start—3:00. Hiked fast pace. 8.3 miles to Glittering Lake. Saw no one else on trail. Signed trail register a while ago. Set up my tent by lake. Was a beautiful day. Lots of sunshine filtering through the trees and a nice cool breeze. Perfect hiking weather. Nice half moon tonight. Been sitting here listening to the loons. Eerie echoing sound they make, their song a strange beauty. Think there's more than two, maybe four. Haven't seen them yet. Just keep hearing them. Nice sparkle of moon on water, a bright trail of flickering silver. Know now how this lake got its name. Most silvery sheen I've ever seen on water. Still a nice breeze. Tiny ripples on the lake. Must turn in soon, tired, but will stay awake a few more minutes hoping to see loons. Peaceful. Feel God's presence everywhere in this stillness and solitude.

Jane Alton

GOD YES, BUT RELIGION NO. MY BROTHER DIDN'T GO ta church since he left our parents' house. He once said what his sorta belief in God was called. It wasn't a word I can remember exactly—Pan something. Pantheist? I think that's it. Said I should read Emerson's essay on Nature sometime and then I'd understand. I've read it since Brian died, but I didn't understand it. Brian didn't think'a God as a bearded man in the sky. He thought God was everywhere and that he could sense God when he was alone in the woods, by lakes, on mountaintops. He also said that God was in people, only it was harder ta feel God in others than it was in nature. I don't say I agree with all this. It never made sense ta me why if God was every-

**It wasn't a suicide,
yes it was, but who
will ever really know?**

where or in people why there were so many bad places and bad people. I go ta a Protestant church. I go ta just get outta the house once in a while. Really I don't hardly even think about God or pray unless I'm in trouble. Then I think about God a lot and pray hard. I prayed and prayed once I knew Brian was missing.

Brian Langly

DAY 2—JUNE 6:

Up at first light. Granola bars and fig bars for breakfast. Hit trail at sunrise. Hiked 10 miles to lean-to on Little Scar River. Stopped off for scrub down at Muck's Pond. Not mucky like name implies. Crystal clean water. No towel to dry off. Used extra shirt and fresh air. That's camping life. Also passed beaver hut in small pond. Saw two beavers swimming in pond. Late morning now. Looks like rain soon. Very cloudy. Sore feet bothering me a bit. Boots new. Should have broken them in more before... [unreadable] ...such a long... [unreadable] ...Plan to soak feet in river and stay put for rest of day.

Annette

I NEVER EXPECTED TO HEAR FROM HIM WHILE HE WAS on the hike. But I got a postcard from him. It was post-marked Fisherville, June 7. That would have been day three of his hike. It didn't say much—just a few words. "Sore feet but no sore feelings. Say hi to the kids for me. Sincerely, Brian." Fisherville. That's on Spencer Road. The trail he was on crossed it. I must've still been on his mind, or else he wouldn't have sent that card. To me it shows he was missing the kids. He says he had no sore feelings, but I don't believe him. That man! He just wouldn't let

go of me and move on with his life. I don't remember if I told the kids that their Daddy wrote or if I showed 'em the picture on the card. I think I just got drunk and lost it, threw it out, or something.

Jane Alton

AND THERE'S THE POSTCARD HE SENT US TOO. REAL nice picture of a waterfall on it. It was addressed to me and Steve. Steve, he's my husband. "Havin' a good time," he said, "and tell everyone—Mom, Dad, Uncle Brian, Ned—Hi." Seemed happy to me still, just like when I dropped 'im off a few days before he sent it. Annette never did understand Brian as well as I did. She told me 'bout the post card he sent. If he said he had no sore feelings, that's what he meant. She could always turn his words around to exactly the opposite of what he said. That was part of the trouble he had with her. Never did blame Brian for gettin' mad at her 'bout stuff like that.

Ned Griegs

FORGIVENESS. THAT'S WHAT THAT POSTCARD TO Annette was all about. To me it showed that he had already forgiven her. He was doing just what Annette said he would never do. He'd put their troubled past behind himself and was moving on with his life. Brian didn't want to find another woman to make him forget Annette. He didn't want to forget any of his life, because he valued all of it, even the rough parts. Rather than forget, or try to even the score with anyone, he would forgive. Annette's way was always to forget—to get drunk and forget, to find another lover quickly to forget the last one. But that wasn't Brian's way. It might've taken him a long time when it came to some people who troubled him, but that's what he eventually did, forgive.

Wayne Langly

JANE SAYS THAT SHE WAS OVER HERE WITH A postcard from Brian the same day she got it, and I seen it and read it, she says. But I still say she never showed me no postcard.

Brian Langly

DAY 4, JUNE 8:

Deep into the wilderness now. Stopped at Birch Lake and rested a while. Had to. Just no energy today. Frequent stops a must. Had to go at slow pace. Stopped a little while at each of the Tucker Lakes. Each one close together. Very remote lakes. A little muggy today. Lots of bugs. Good thing I have the face net. Keeping track of mileage according to guidebook. Covered 40 miles. Not so bad a pace even though I did have to slow down today. Too much pack weight I think. Maybe should not... *[unread-*

able] ...lantern and fuel. Too bulky. Met another hiker today... *[unreadable]* ...Lake... *[unreadable]* ...said... *[unreadable]* ...

Edward Winter

THAT'S HIM! SHOCKED ME, MAN. I WAS JUST READING the newspaper after getting off work at the steel mill—the razor and saber mill we sometimes call it—and there it was, the face. I knew it was him the sec I saw the picture—the face of the sick looking guy I'd seen when I was fishing at Lost Lake. The paper said he'd been missing and to call this number if anyone had any info on his whereabouts. So I called right away.

"Yes," I told the ranger, "it was *definitely* him." And "no," I told him, "he didn't say he was lost or that he needed help."

"And was there anything unusual about him?" the ranger asked.

"There sure was," I told him.

"What was that?" he asked, and I told him how his tent poles were sticking out all over the place from his pack and that the guy looked pale and weak, like he was real sick. I told the ranger—I wanted him to know this—that I asked the guy if he needed help and that the guy said he was doing okay, just a little tired. So I didn't do nothing to help him, but I sure would've if the man had asked for help because that's the way I am. I mean, I always help people out if they need help. I'm not the kind of guy who's afraid to get involved. Why should I be afraid to help a man out in the wilderness, even if he did seem strange with his tent poles all over the place and looking like a ghost? I'm a big man, six-four, and I work out all the time lifting weights. I could've even carried the man out if he had wanted me to, but he didn't look like he was really *that* bad, *that* weak.

"It was by the Lost Lake Dam that I saw him. The dam." I gave the ranger the exact location. I still can't believe it man—I was the last one to see him alive!

Brian Langly

DAY 5, JUNE 9:

Started raining during night. Rain would not let up. Didn't bring enough food. Not eating enough and am very weak. Never make my food cache. Too far away, so had to take short cut. Left original trail. Now at Lean-to on bank of Clear Brook. Pouring. Plan is to hike 7 miles along this trail offshoot (Teasing Brook Trail) to Detter Lake Campsite. Looks like there's a road by there. Will hitchhike (or hike if must) to town of Duster. Can renew food supply there or most... *[unreadable]* ...Can't get over how weak I suddenly felt yesterday. Guess I'm aging faster than I realized.

Jane Alton

IT'S MY BELIEF THAT HE WANTED TA CALL OFF THE rest of the hike, just get ta that town anyway he could and call me, tell me ta come get 'im.

Wayne Langly

SUDDEN SICKNESS HE SAYS HE HAD. ID WEREN'T JUST that. He was a broken man. Maybe he was havin' second thoughts 'bout going through wid the suicide. Maybe that's why he started off toward that campsite. But he changed his mind back, I say. He's like me. A man that gets so down that he just don't know where to head.

Ranger Fisk

FACTS. I STICK TO THOSE AND HERE'S A FEW: NUMBER one: He signed the register at Glittering Lake and specified a segment of the Appalachian Trail. Someone gets lost, that's where we look, along and near the specified trail route. The farther a hiker wanders from that, the more difficult it is to locate him. No one—I repeat, no one!—could have guessed that he'd decided to take an offshoot of the main trail, a short cut 40 miles into his hike. Fact number...

Brian Langly

DAY 6, LOST DAY 1, JUNE 10:

Lost trail. How? Can't believe this. Have tent set up. Ripped red shirt into 4 pieces. Hung red rags on trees. Hoping someone will see and follow them to tent. Still pouring. Never stops. Been praying. Pray and pray. Must stay calm. Sure someone will look for me if not back soon after scheduled time of return. Hope so. Maybe if rain stops can find my way out. So hard to see through pouring rain. Was raining hard early this morning when I left lean-to on bank of brook. Hiked three-and-a-half, maybe four miles. Wettest trail I ever imagined. Follows brook, just like map shows. Didn't expect to have to ford brook so many times though. Boots sopped. Everything sopped. Am weaker by the hour. Am looking at map now. Still can't understand why... [unreadable] ...try... [unreadable] ...clean.

Ranger Fisk

...TWO. LOOK AT THE MAP AND YOU'LL SEE WHAT confused him. Teasing Brook Trail does not follow Teasing Brook for the first 3.1 miles. It follows Clear Brook. Then the trail veers away from the brook and...

Jane Alton

SONOFABITCHES! WHAT THE HELL WERE THEY thinkin' when they made that map? If they'd a called the trail what they ought'a called it, he might'a made it out. Might'a figured the way.

Ranger Fisk

...FOLLOWS A STEEP RIDGE. THERE AREN'T MANY markers there and the ones there, granted, are hard to see, but...

Jane Alton

AND HOW COULD THEY NOT HAVE MORE MARKERS? Tell me that! The trail should've been clearly marked.

Ranger Fisk

...A MORE EXPERIENCED HIKER WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN puzzled. The map clearly shows that Clear Brook eventually runs into Teasing Brook and that the Teasing Brook

Lost trail. How? Can't believe this. Ripped red shirt into 4 pieces.

Trail runs almost parallel to it. But first you must ascend the ridge about twelve hundred feet.

Jane Alton

IT HAD NOTHING TA DO WITH EXPERIENCE, LIKE THAT ranger tried ta say. Anyone could've gotten lost the way things were.

Ranger Fisk

FACT THREE: THE FATAL ERROR HE MADE WAS INSTEAD of veering off the brook and following the trail up the steep ridge, he followed the brook down into the Teasing Brook drainage area.

Ned Griegs

IT ALL ADDED UP. HE WAS FEVERISH. HE WAS HUNGRY and weak. The downpour made it hard to see markers that were hard enough to see in good weather. The map was confusing. He was alone and must've been scared. And all that hiking tired him. No wonder he was lost.

Brian Langly:

DAY 7, LOST DAY 2, JUNE 11:

What to do? Won't stop raining. Sleeping bag wet. Tent leaking. Ate last of my peanut butter survival food. No more food at all left. Lantern no help in getting fire started because all wood is so wet. Cold all the time. Know I have high fever. So weak. Stay here for another day and rest hoping I get over illness and recover strength before searching as long as it takes to find trail? But without food, will strength return? Resolve to stay put until rescue comes? Head farther down this small brook, even though no trail is there? Just plunge into deep forest and keep going in

wild hopes of running into trail, people, or road? If only rain would stop.

Ranger Fisk

THERE ARE LITTLE BROOKS BRANCHING FROM THE main stream. An experienced hiker with a clear mind might have followed the tiny brook he was near until it took him to the main stream, then followed it. The map he had shows the main stream eventually leading to Hunning Road. But he was neither experienced nor able to think clearly anymore.

Annette

MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE IN THIS WORLD, BRIAN wished he could have been a poet. He wrote some, but only for himself. His love poems to me, they were touching, but more for the intention than for the poems themselves. He knew that he hadn't the gift for writing poems, so he didn't write much. When he did—except during our courtship—it was strictly for himself. He didn't keep them. He didn't even let me read many of them—not that I really wanted to either. I had enough of that sort of thing from him. Sure, I found some of it romantic, reading poetry in front of the TV with the picture on and the sound off, like it was a fireplace, but it got old after a while, especially when I started drinking again.

Jane Alton

“ANSWER ME THAT THEN, DAD!” I SAID. “WOULD HE’A eaten insects if he wanted ta die? No sir! That’s a man doing anything and all he can ta stay alive!”

Wayne Langly

SHE SHOVES THAT JOURNAL’A HIS RIGHT IN MY FACE she does and she says, “Read it.” I do and she’s shoutin’ about him eatin’ insects while I read about it.

So then I say to Jane, I say, “I don’t want’a know nothin’ ’bout my son eatin’ insects.”

But she keeps asking me, “Does that sound like a man who wants to die?” and I say to her, “I don’t know. I don’t know, I don’t know, so okay, maybe he was tryin’ to live and maybe you’re right. But it don’t make no diff’rence to me.”

Brian Langly

DAY...*[unreadable]*

...more afraid to eat plants than bugs. Can’t tell which plants are poisonous. Always been a phobia of mine—poisonous plants—but have eaten some clover... *[unreadable]* ...flap open and bugs fly in. Close flap and eat them. Eating black flies and snails and beetles.

Ned Griegs

ONE OF MY FAVORITE MEMORIES OF HIM...IT’S A FALL day. A Saturday or a Sunday. Brian and I are out on a pond paddling a canoe. I can’t even remember which pond, Teardrop or Drucker, one of those I think. He stops paddling. I keep watching him, waiting for him to dip the paddle and pull again so that we can move on. I say, “Brian.” But he doesn’t seem to hear me. He just keeps looking off to the side while we drift. And I see his face glowing. He’s looking at the sunset. The sunlight’s the same mix of red and gold as the treetops. All but the very top of the sun has gone down behind ’em. It’s not just the sunlight giving his face such a glow. It’s joy—a special kinda joy, a feeling that you could only know about if you were real peaceful, it seems. He keeps watching the reflection of the leaves in the pond. And he also watches the trail of sunlight that reaches out from the land to our canoe. God, the colors—the sparkles on the water! It’s like they got a grip on him, me too by then. Then he dips his oar into the water, into that stillness. It makes a little splash but the sound is so quiet that it seems to be a part of the peacefulness. When we paddle back to the tent, the peacefulness stays with us. It’s like Brian, since he’s part of that memory, has never completely left me.

Ranger Fisk

HIS MAKESHIFT CAMP WAS ABOUT A MILE OFF THE trail that would have been his shortcut.

Jane Alton

HE SURE DID LOVE HIS GARDEN. HAD A BUTTERFLY garden in his backyard. All sorts’a pretty flowers in it that were special cause they were supposed to help attract butterflies. Evenings, he’d sit out there, a book of poetry in his hand. He’d gaze up between poems—he used ta tell me he liked doing this, though I never saw for myself, he was ’lone while doin’ this a’course—and watch the butterflies.

Once, just after it had got dark, I went over ta his place—we were only ’bout two miles away from each other, his house and my mobile home—and I went all through the house lookin’ for him. Knew he was expectin’ me. “Out here,” he said, and when I stepped out onto the back patio I saw ’im stooped down low, his nose ta a flower. That’s the way he was—someone who took the time ta smell the flowers, someone who wasn’t always in such a hurry that they missed out on the small good things in life. It’s somethin’ that I learned how ta do from him. But since it don’t come natural ta me, like it did ta him, I’m not so good at it as he was. I’ve got a little garden of my own now. And just the other day, when I was feeling low on account a my marriage—me and Steve, we’ve got our

problems these days, him takin' up with somebody else, a younger woman than me, but that's for another time—I went out ta my garden and looked at the flowers still in bloom. I just sat there a while and enjoyed them, the way he would'a.

Brian Langly

DAY 11, LOST DAY 6, JUNE 15:

Stopped raining during night. Got a little fire going now, late afternoon. Know Jane and others must have been concerned when I was not at destination yesterday. Hoping that rangers are looking for me now.

Jane Alton

“JUST WHERE THE HELL IS HE, NED?” I KEPT ASKING him. Thank God Ned came along. I couldn't a stood the worry all alone. “This is where he said for us ta meat him, right?” I asked. Ned kept saying that we were at the right spot, just what he'd written down. “Maybe it just took him a little longer than he thought it would,” Ned said. Then it got dark and he still wasn't back. Then Ned looked worried too. “I'll stay here and you go call,” Ned said. And that's what we did. He waited and I called the police. The police called the ranger's office.

Brian Langly

DAY 20, LOST DAY 15, JUNE 24:

So weak. Can only live off these insects and clover for short while longer. Am desperate. Can't believe that no one's found me yet. Where the hell is anyone! Going to die here unless I can follow that little brook to the bigger stream and that stream leads me to someone. Tried to make it. Pathetic though. Totally exhausted after 30 feet from tent to brook. Rested at start of brook, crawled as far as I could then. Not very far. Too weak. Took all my strength to get back to tent. Do not want to give up hope, but believe if not found here will die here.

Ranger Fisk

NO MATTER HOW MANY VOLUNTEERS WE HAD—and we had many, more by the day—135 trail miles is difficult, if not impossible to search. That's dense forest. No one can be seen from a plane unless perhaps they make themselves visible on a wide stream or in a clearing. We searched with more and more men and dogs from the morning after we were notified. We looked along the trail that he specified in the trail guide, and nearby. That's standard procedure. I followed standard procedure. Let's be clear on that. Meanwhile, the family and friends of the lost hiker did their part by circulating photographs. I made sure that newspapers in the area along his route had his picture and that the information for contacting my office

was clearly stated and correct. Days passed without a clue of where he was. Then we got that call. A fisherman at Lost Lake had seen him.

Brian Langly

D... *[unreadable]*

...plane with pontoons overhead every day. Set lit lantern on brook bank every night. Will let it burn every night until out of fuel. Have made last escape attempt. Must rest, stay still, preserve strength as best I can.

Ranger Fisk

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THAT CALL, WE CONCENTRATED almost all our search efforts in the area where he had been last seen. We combed the perimeter of Lost Lake and a big area on either side of the trail. Every day we flew more

135 trail miles is difficult, if not impossible to search. That's dense forest.

volunteers in to search the Lost Lake area. We never saw his lantern because we only flew during the day. His lantern was only lit at night.

Jane Alton

EVERY NIGHT I SLEPT AT THE SEARCH HEADQUARTERS. Think I'd let 'em quit looking for my brother? I'd do whatever I had ta ta make 'em keep lookin'. After two weeks I had ta plead. The ranger said he was sorry, but that it was time ta call off the search. I cried and cried. And I just wouldn't leave.

Brian Langly

DAY 25, LOST DAY 20, JUNE 29:

Am so sorry I missed your birthday Uncle Brian. Love you Uncle Brian. Love all of them, Mom, Dad, Ned, Jane, the children... *[unreadable]* ...see my children again... *[unreadable]* ...before bedtime every night and am so glad that I took time to... *[unreadable]* ...every day. No regrets either about Annette. Would marry her all over again if I had the chance. Always knew that my father loved me, even if we had our troubles. A good man. Even if we did not do so much together, am all the more grateful for the few special times we did share. And Mom was so wonderful. Sure do miss Mom's meals now. Can smell her pies in the oven and wish... *[unreadable]* ...too... *[unreadable]* ...so dizzy.

Ranger Fisk

AFTER AN EXHAUSTING SEARCH OF THE AREA AROUND Lost Lake we fanned out another few miles. The sister

pleaded hard for me to continue the search and I told her we'd search until the first of July.

Brian Langly

DAY 29, LOST DAY 24, JULY 3:

Whatever happened to that plane? But was it ever involved with search for me? Was never sure of this. Can only crawl and not far before I collapse. Am helpless. Lantern no longer burns. Nice day. Sunny. Will listen for 4th of July fireworks and try to crawl toward sound tomorrow night.

Annette

WHAT WAS I SUPPOSED TO TELL THE KIDS? YOU TELL me. I didn't know what to say. "He's on a vacation. He just decided to go away for a long time, but he's coming back." Was it wrong to say that? I mean, how do you tell your kids that their father is missing and that no one can find him? How do you tell them that he's probably dead but nobody can be sure?

Brian Langly

DAY 31, LOST DAY 26, JULY 5:

Heard fireworks last night. Saw lights in sky. Know where to head now but am so weak is ridiculous. Could not walk and crawl more than very short distance. No way could make it out. Wrote HELP on tent with ashes and dirt. Am imagining death. What it will be like. Trying to accept it. Was counting on many more years. Remembering life. This struggle with survival has taught me greater appreciation of my brief life. Every minute of what I had seems to mean so much more to me now. Hope others, if they find this journal, will... [unreadable] ...If I die here, I die with... [unreadable] ...any regrets.

Jane Alton

WHAT SOME PEOPLE SAY THAT LINE A HIS JOURNAL SAYS is "I die with many regrets." Those are the ones who think that his death was a suicide, the ones who never wanted to hear how he ate anything he could, how he tried with the last bit of his strength to make it out. I believe what he wrote there, if we could see all the letters that had been smudged by the dampness, is "I die without any regrets." It's a world of a difference. Some say that line shows just how unhappy he was. That he was troubled enough to take his own life. They're wrong! He had come to terms with his life. He had learned to value life more than most of us. He was saying that life was so precious to him that he couldn't regret any of it.

Wayne Langly

I DON'T SAY I EVER READ ALL THAT STUFF IN THAT journal, but Jane, she has me read that line and asks me

what I think. I tell her, "No one dies without at least some regrets." So it can't mean what she says it means. Still I don't turn them words against him, way maybe some people would, the people who just talk and never look at nothin' he wrote. I admit, I was almost one of them types myself, but I did read most of that journal after all. It don't mean that he committed suicide if he died with some regrets or even many regrets. No, Brian, ya can tell, he tried hard as he could to stay alive. Wasn't suicide, but how much difference that makes, I'm not so sure.

Brian Langly

DAY 32, LOST DAY 27, JULY 6:

My last page of notebook. Am so groggy. Why didn't anyone find me? Amazed to still be alive. Should have lived like I was amazed to be alive before all this. What my life might have been like then? Hard to say. Unable to stomach insects anymore, just a few snails and a little clover. Water never was a problem. Have full canteen now, but will I be able to even get that far to fill it if I'm still alive a few days from now? Silly concern. Doubt if I will be alive much longer. Will use inside cover of guidebook to write Will and say good-byes.

Jane Alton

"WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?" MY FATHER ASKS. "If his death was a suicide," I told 'im, "it'd be like he was sayin' it's okay to give up." And if people think his death was a suicide they don't remember Brian for the person he was. Some times when I feel down, I think a Brian in the woods, tryin' all he could to keep livin'. And all right, maybe no one can die without regrets. But what comes to mind when I think about his journal is that we can all try to live so that we die with as few regrets as possible. I think that if I try to live so that I end up with as few regrets as I can, that somehow the few that I'll be left with will be easier to accept, knowin' that I did the best I could. But what happened to my brother out there in them dark deep woods wasn't only 'bout tryin' to live. It was also 'bout acceptin' death. Once he saw that death was just around the corner, it seemed that he was able to accept it, and the reason I think he could was because he had accepted his life for what it had been. I believe that somehow made it easier for him to die. So it does it make a difference how he died. And now ya know why I had to bring up the past, why I had to fight the rumors.

Ranger Fisk

SOME FACTS ARE NOT CLEAR. HE EITHER WAS ALIVE long after we stopped searching for him or the last dates in his journal entry are incorrect. It is especially hard to believe the date of his last journal entry, which was written on the back inside cover of his guidebook.

Brian Langly

DAY... [unreadable] ...MAYBE AUGUST 3:

If you find this follow brook and go downstream. Think... [unreadable] ...voices. Am going to keep crawling as far as can that way.

Sam Moore

I DIDN'T BELIEVE MY EYES AT FIRST—A DEAD MAN, face down in the stream. I'd never seen a dead man before. Never! I'm 25 years old and that was the first time. I couldn't say nothing at first. I just stared. It was the end of October and there was lots of leaves blowing. We was out hunting, me and my pop. Leaves clung to one side of his face. It was really just part of a face because so much of the skin had rotted away. Flies and other little bugs buzzed around his hair. He had on dirty jeans and a dirty blue coat. He was in a shallow part of the stream. His face was down in the froth and one arm was stretched out in front, like he was reaching for something or trying to pull himself along. The other arm was twisted back, dangling in the current. I was just hunting with my pop, ya know. I was shocked and shouted loud for Pop to come.

Rick Moore

WHAT'S WRONG? I WONDERED, AS SOON AS I HEARD him shouting. Couldn't be that he had shot game because I never heard a shot. Then I come and I see. "Go back to the truck. Head for the nearest phone and call the police," I told him. "I'll stay here." He did just what I said and I waited until the police came.

Annette

I WAITED UNTIL HIS BODY WAS FOUND AND I WAS SURE he was dead. Then I told the kids. I didn't know how else to tell them. I just said it straight out to them one night while I was putting them to bed. They cried like a storm, but I believe that the waiting and worry about where he might be, the not knowing, was worse for them than the certainty of their father's death. I held them. We all slept

together in my big bed that night. "Can Daddy see us and hear us from heaven?" they asked. "Yes," I told them. "Yes, he can." Even if I don't believe that—I'm never sure of what I believe, the hereafter being so mysterious to me—it makes the children feel better, helps all of us who knew him to think that's so anyway.

Ranger Fisk

DUE TO THE BODY'S DECOMPOSITION, THE AUTOPSY shed no light on his death.

Jane Alton

NED SAID TA ME THE OTHER DAY THAT HE'S GOT A NEW friend who's a reporter, someone he knows through the trails club that he belongs ta, the one that me and Brian also belonged ta. "Why don't you let me show him this journal of Brian's?" Ned said. "Maybe he'd write an article about it. Just think how many people Brian's experience could reach that way," he said. And now that I've thought about, it sounds like a good idea. I just might ask Ned ta bring 'im ta me sometime soon.

Ned Griegs

NOT SO LONG AGO I WAS PADDLING A CANOE ON A small lake. It was a beautiful fall day—the wind was cold and the leaves as colorful as they get. No one was with me. I was fishing. I hadn't caught much but I liked it out there, so I stayed out. About sunset I got all my fishing gear together and began paddling into shore. A minute later I stopped paddling and set the oar down in the bottom of the boat. I drifted and looked at the ripples on the water. They were red and bright 'cause of reflecting the sun. I looked along the path of light crossing the water and up to the sun. It was mostly hidden behind the treetops. I watched the sun go below the horizon and the bright colors of the leaves blend into one dark color. And then I picked up the paddle. Before I dipped it into the water, I thanked Brian for showing me how to appreciate that little part of my life.

GREGORY E. LUCAS

Has lived in northern Delaware for more than 30 years. He lives in a small house in New Castle with his wife, two dogs, and four cats. For the past 13 years, he's made his living as a tutor to homebound students.

Welcome to the world, Jamie Natalie Snell. Born November 7, 2001.