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Ordinary Apocalypse

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ORDINARY APOCALYPSE

A Thesis

By

Anthony Villella

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Master of Arts

in

The Department of English
Concentration in Creative Writing

School of Graduate Studies
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My Father's Son

The alarm clock wakes me from a dreamless sleep. I can hear the rain trickling down upon the shingles at a steady pace. I am alone.

I sit on the edge of the bed, rubbing my eyes, then cracking my neck in a pretense of toughness- first to the left and then the right- though I know there is no one watching. I flex my right arm, watching the bicep and forearm muscles move up and down as I tighten then relax. I jump off the bed, touching my feet upon the cold hard wood floor, moving my ankles back and forth, assuring my ability to start and stop on command. I stare into the full size mirror, analyzing my half naked body: the scrawny boy is gone. I have improved but not enough.

I am not scared to fail. I am not scared that I will let my team down and we will lose. I have never failed. I am too strong to fail. I will do what I have always done- play without fear. I will hit and I will tackle because that is what I do- that is what I love to do.

But I do not want to move. I do not want play today. I do not want today to be here. If I play and we win- if I play and we lose- it will still be over. I am a senior and it will be over. I am seventeen years old. I have wasted my life up to this point.

I stare into the mirror, tightening my chest and neck muscles. I want to scream. I want to fucking scream.

I throw erratic punches into the air, punishing invisible and inferior men. My body is taut and I feel powerful. I am filled with nervous energy. I am angry. I am always angry. I am tired of being like this.

I look back into the mirror. I can not look away. I want to know what it is- what it

is about me. What is wrong with me?

I am 5'6" and 150 lbs. I feel that I am not supposed to be this way. I feel that I am meant for more than what this body can offer.

I am not satisfied. I pinch the fat of my stomach- fucking disgusting. I want no fat. I want more than a six pack. I want perfection. I want a perfect body. I want to add thirty more pounds of muscle. 5'6," 180 pounds is respectable. I will make them respect me.

I was supposed to be more than this.

To my left is a wall covered with academic plaques. National Honor Society; Maroon and Gold award winner. The top of my bureau holds my baseball and football trophies- I was all-state in both last year. It is all shit. It doesn't matter. They don't make up for what I am.

I can hear one of the cats crying outside of my door. I'm tired of this place.

My grandparent's house used to be a joke between my sister and me. We would be forced to come here for holidays and the cats would walk on the counters and the filth was everywhere and my grandparents never seemed to care. We would go home and we would laugh and wonder how they lived like that. But the joke was on me three years ago when I moved in and has been on me ever since.

I pick up my jersey and hold it up over my head. Maroon and gold. I will never wear anything better. I move my fingers over the word CASE. I am proud to be a part of Case football- part of the winning tradition- part of Coach Gibeau's legacy. I

am proud that he trusts me, that I am responsible for even just a little bit of that glory.

I remember when I picked out number 18 at the beginning of my freshman year. 32- Jim Brown...56- Lawrence Taylor...11- Phil Simms...27- Rodney Hampton- but I picked 18- a number I did not associate with anyone. I had the notion that maybe one day people would remember me. I wanted to be great.

I turn the jersey around, analyzing the salient gold lettering- COLLINS. There is something demanding, something heroic, about playing with your name on your back. I can never take a play off, never hide behind the other ten players on the team. I am vulnerable- exposed for all to see, representing a name that will define me for my entire life. If I make a great tackle, they will know. If I watch the arms instead of the hips, missing the ball carrier, they will see. The exposure forces me to work until I know I am prepared.

I was never supposed to be here. After my parents got divorced my mother began renting a house in Mattapoisett where my sister and I would both be living. I would go over and help my mother get the place in order with the expectations that once we settled in she would drive me back to Swansea so I could begin high school with my friends. But between the medications and my mother's natural tendency to be full of shit, that never happened. My sister started college in Bridgewater and I went to my grandparents'. My mother hasn't contacted me in more than two years. I was thirteen and she left me.

I have been living with my father in this place since then.

My father is 42 but looks ten years younger. He is a large man, over six feet tall,

with powerful arms and preserved swarthy skin. A combination of pride and jealousy fills me when I think of his appearance: pride because I know others are impressed by him; jealousy because I inherited all of his flaws and none of his assets.

My father is a carpenter- he has always worked hard. He wakes up at 4 in the morning every day and doesn't get home until well after six. His hands are calloused, his body damaged, but he doesn't complain. He is the type of person who demands respect but returns that with abuse and dominance. He will hit and he will yell because he has that right- because he is bigger and there is nothing I can do.

He slaps me and swears- "I'm going to fuckin break your neck," and I cannot hold my tears back. I hate him for that. I don't think he will ever know the shame I feel when he makes he cry.

But my father forgets. He forgets the fights. He forgets the hitting- the misery he puts me through. I remember everything.

I lather my body, letting the warm water heat on the back of my neck as I imagine running down the field and leaping over a blocker to make the tackle. It is loud- even with the flowing water I can hear the crowd. I am silent but they know who I am.

They look up to me.

Football does a funny thing to people- it humbles them. They think they're tough. But they better not step on that field with me if they're not willing to go full speed, if they're not willing to give their body up, give themselves up.

On the football field, I am not concerned with the future. I do not think about death or injury. I am there to hit, to tackle.

It was just supposed to be a temporary fix- just a few months until he got back on his feet. It has been four years. He has never looked for an apartment. Of course the conditions are really not a concern for my father. He comes home and gets his mail and says a few things and asks a few questions. Once he feels that he has done an adequate job and can call himself a father, he leaves and sleeps at his girl friend's house in Fall River.

They have been going out for almost three years now. Her name is Genevieve. She has four young kids: six, seven, nine and twelve. I resent my father for complicating our lives.

I do not blame my parents for getting a divorce- I'd be lying if I said I didn't see it coming. They fought constantly: my mother would instigate by spending money they didn't have or by refusing to move for days at a time and my father would yell and scream and swear. I didn't really blame one more than the other for their collapse but I never imagined when they split I would live with my father.

After all, my mother was the real parent. She was the one I studied with- the one who spent hours going over study guides with me- the one who said to me "just do your best" and I always did.

My father was just there to make me well rounded. He instilled in me his love of sports. I was good at sports because of my father. I remember at the age of six playing football in the living room- him on his knees, me on my feet; the couch was one end zone, past the chair was the other.

I played baseball since the age of 5 because of my father. "Glove down, get in

front of the ball.” I never played it off to the side- never. If I could get in front of the ball I would. I would take it off the chest, the face. My father made me tough.

At the age of eight my father signed me up for Pop Warner football. I was so excited, looking forward to emulating my heroes- my father’s favorite team, the New York Giants. “If it hits your hands you should catch it,” he said.

And I noticed something about the other kids I played with. They were bigger than me but they weren’t like me. They had fear. They didn’t want to get hit. They didn’t want to get hurt. But no one could hurt me like my father did.

I dry off and return to the mirror. I am not ugly. I’m not. No I can’t be. I flex. Harder. A little bit more muscle and I will get them. They will start to come. I will be normal.

The shame I feel is overwhelming. I am insecure because of it. I am seventeen years old. I am a virgin. I have never done anything with a girl.

One by one my friends began to have sex and get girl-friends. I would smile and go home and close my door, accepting the fact that I was meant to be alone.

I have always felt that my father failed me in this regard. Maybe he just assumed I would pick it up somewhere. But I didn’t and now it is too late.

“Don’t get any girls pregnant,” is the only statement he ever made to me. I nodded.

The phone rings. “Hello.”

“Hey Mike, Happy Thanksgiving.” His voice is warm and inviting.

“Yeah dad, you too.” I hate when he calls me from there.

“You excited about today?”

“Yeah.”

“Gonna be really wet out I bet.”

“Yeah, it is.” He deserves no better than this.

“Ok, well I’m gonna be there really early so maybe I’ll talk to you before the game starts.”

“Yeah, ok.”

I will not be kind to him. I will not pretend that everything is alright because he is too dumb to realize that it is not. I will not forget our fight last week.

“Hey Mike.” He does not bother to knock. “There’s a sox game from the 80’s on NESN. You wanna watch it with me.”

I look up from my biology book. “No dad, I have a test I need to study for.” I turn my head down again.

“Well why can’t you study after the game?” he answers with, like a curious ten year old.

“Dad, it’s a big test. I need to cover a lot of material. I’m going to be studying all night.”

He has no interest in academics. He never has. College was never an option for him. He has no idea what classes I am taking, but he expects to see the report card at the end of every term and he expects A’s.

He walks over to the desk and grabs the remote, turning the television on.

“Are you serious?” I yell, looking over at his oblivious face.

“What?” Just like that he changes- his demeanor alters; I shouldn’t have raised my voice. “What the fuck did you just say to me?” I realize I have woken the monster in him.

“Dad I need to study.”

“I don’t pay the fuckin cable bill?” He screams.

“I need to study.”

“Do I pay the fuckin cable bill?”

I cannot take this any longer. I cannot keep my mouth shut. “Fuckin psycho.”

He grabs me by the arm and pulls me to my feet then slaps me across the face knocking my glasses off and to the ground. I want to fucking kill him. I want him fucking dead. But I do nothing. Nothing. Just wait for him to leave then lock the door and cry.

I have allowed myself to become like my father. I am always angry- always on the verge of flipping out and releasing my monster. I tell myself that things would be different; I would be different if I could go back a relive these past four years.

I step onto the linoleum floor of the locker room. The usual streamers are there, with signs of “BEAT SOMERSET” and “GO CASE,” but then there are the banners. Seven banners, one each for the seniors, with names in big bold letters. I have been a starter the previous two years but have never known anything like this. The finality of the sign is alarming- making me proud, angry and sad at the same time. This is the game that people remember throughout their lives: Somerset, Thanksgiving-day game, their senior year. Nothing else matters.

Camp during 95 degree heat. The 50 yard walk-runs. The ladders. The workouts. The pride I feel when wearing my jersey to school on a game day. It will all be lost if today does not go as planned.

We are 7-2 going into the game. Somerset is 8-1. The only opponent who we both previously played is Dartmouth. We beat Dartmouth the week earlier 24-7 and Somerset beat Dartmouth in week 3, 35-0.

I begin my usual pre-game routine, putting my thigh and knee pads into my pants, tightening up my shoulder pads and making sure my chin strap is securely on my helmet. My pants are too clean. It's annoying when they're clean. I love when a grass stain forms, steadfast on my maroon pants. Or better yet, if it's muddy out, a chunk of earth gets stuck in the front of my helmet. But best of all, the paint of my opponent's helmet rubbing off onto my helmet. They say don't lead with your head: it's a good way to break your neck. But there's nothing like two guys running at each other, neither one giving in, neither one giving a shit about their own health or their opponents. After all, when you're seventeen, you're invincible. I can't be hurt and if I do get injured, I'll heal. The two pieces of plastic collide and instantly a ringing pain is sent shooting down my neck and into my shoulders. Occasionally I'll get a concussion. But it doesn't matter. I'll get up. I always get up. There's plenty of time, plenty of life, to be weak. Football is not that time.

My equipment prepared, I sit on the bench and collect my thoughts. I wonder how other people make it through life without playing football. Football is not a game. I do not play football. I am a football player. It is my identity. I have no delusions of grandeur about the NFL or getting a scholarship for football to college. I am the only

5'6" tall defensive end in Southern New England, probably in the country. But I can not picture life without playing. It is not an option. Next year I will walk on to my college team and my identity will continue.

I do not like to play football. No one does. I love back yard football with my buddies. I love to watch the NFL on Sundays. But playing organized football is simply hell. People who have never played assume it is just a game- that they could do if they really wanted, if they cared to. Bullshit. It is a full-time commitment, a full time job. As a 10 year old I can remember doing 100 yard crabs on my hands and feet. I hated it. But I never complained- never thought of quitting- because of the feeling I get when it's over. There is nothing like it. Running with forty pounds of equipment on is not fun. It is a challenge. It is an obstacle. The true ecstasy comes when the pads are removed, the sweat and dirt are smeared across my face, and I can finally rest.

Those who haven't played, I simply do not understand. How do they expect to get through anything in life? What do they have to be proud of? I do not respect them because they don't try. They don't want to put the effort in, unaware of the magnitude of the reward.

My favorite part of football is easy to name, "Jack and Diane." It plays, ringing through the locker room showers after a victory. I close my eyes, soaking my head in the warm water, not wanting to move, fearing I will speed up a moment of perfection.

Little ditty about Jack and Diane
Two American kids growin up in the heartland
Jacky's gonna be a football star
Diane debutante backseat of Jacky's car
Suckin' on chili dogs outside the tastee freeze
Diane's sittin' on Jacky's lap

He's got his hand between her knees

I can picture the two of them, just two kids, sitting there, time stopped, not wanting to move on. I hope that there will be a number of moments of true happiness as my life progresses, but thus far nothing has surpassed the glory, the pride, the warmth I feel, from that boy, from that girl and their song.

The music in the locker room has begun. I really don't care about the music until the last two songs. I sit on the bench and bounce my feet up and down, but it does not motivate me. I use something else. "I'm going to break your fucking neck!" I can hear his words clearly, over and over again, first suffocating me then filling me with rage.

Football welcomes my anger. I am good at football because of my aggression, because of my rage. Because of my father.

"Eye of the Tiger" finishes playing and the team lines up to go outside just as "Welcome to the Jungle" comes on. I am third in line behind the other two captains. The team runs down the stairs, a stampede of cleats banging on concrete, young men yelling for victory, and hearts pounding in chest walls.

The winter air is thick, making it hard to breathe. Droplets of rain begin to fall, turning the dirt to mud. The familiar smell of white paint and freshly cut grass fill my nostrils. I have a habit of looking at my teammates' faces before games. I can tell who is nervous and who is scared. I bite down on my mouthpiece, ready for battle.

I see my father- not in the bleachers with the other parents- but by himself to the side. I know he feels strange. Genevieve could have come. No, he deserves this.

It is 3-0 Somerset going into the second half.

I play aggressive defense. I'm there to cause chaos, to run around and hit people. Somerset's left tackle laughs when he first sees me- it fuckin drives me crazy. I use my father words. "You're gonna break my fucking neck, dad," I yell to him. His eyes are wide. I can feel mud and snot covering my face. I love it.

With three minutes left, the score remains 3-0 Somerset. The clock continues to count down- faster, faster. Our hope begins to drain. Somerset has the ball. We have one timeout. It is third and fifteen after a false start penalty. The Somerset quarterback takes the snap, dropping back to pass, then rolls to his right. I rush in, easily getting passed the tight end over my face. The quarterback stops and turns back to his left, staring me in the eyes. "Screen," roars the defense. The tight end is wide open, as the quarterback begins to bring the ball back to pass. I dive for the quarterback, just clipping the ball with my left hand, sending it to the ground.

"Ball," scream the players hysterically. I grab the quarterback's legs bringing him to the ground, preventing him from recovering the ball. One of our linebackers, comes up from the flat, scoops the ball, and runs past me and the fallen quarterback.

I close my eyes. I can tell what yard line he is on from the noise of the crowd. 20...15...10....5....and the crowd explodes. Touchdown.

My eyes remain closed, tightly shut. The field is where I belong. It is where I feel worthy. It is where everything makes sense. If I open my eyes, the game will end and I will have to go back to being me.

I soak my head. Water in my ears, I can hear nothing but the perfect voice of John

Mellencamp. But as the song comes to an end, “Little ditty about Jack and Diane / Two American kids doing the best they can,” I can’t get that image out my head. After the game the seniors circled the field for the last time. We finished are victory lap and my teammates ran to their parents, to their family. I looked for a moment. I looked for my father. I wonder if anyone will ever love me as much as my father does.

Contemptible Man

Her moaning grows louder as the pace of my thrusts becomes more rapid and severe. I am happy. My eyes are focused on the phosphorescent moon-light penetrating from the window before me. I have to make it through. There is a point I've found during the first ten minutes of sex that I am normal, that I could cum. But I never do and after that I never can.

We are both drenched in each other's sweat. I analyze her taut body as we change positions and she takes the lead. My stomach muscles flex as she rocks back and forth. She could be anyone right now. The fact that she's beautiful only matters in tomorrow's story. Fat, ugly, old, young- it all feels the same. But I am happy- happy she chose me. There must be something- something in me. I am curious what it is. I am ashamed for her.

I keep up the action but could fall asleep at any moment. I think about how funny it would be if I fell asleep and she continued on and finished. But I don't want to stop. I love how I good I feel right now- how important- how worthy.

I wake up in the same twin bed. I am cold and naked. I am hungry but feel like throwing up. Her back is to me. I motion to kiss her on the cheek but think better of it. I look over my body in the mirror. Almost- almost where I want to be. I close the door behind me and amble out of the dorm into the cold December air.

My confidence will be high for a while. She was beautiful. And she thought me good enough to see her naked, to fuck her. I am bubbling with pride.

I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing.

I am hung over and I feel good. This is normal. I am young and this is normal. I am making up for the past- for the time spent alone- for the years when I was unwanted, useless. I should have sex with as many girls as possible, every night a new girl. I don't want to waste a night. Soon I will be old- I don't want to regret anything. I have wasted enough time in my life.

I feel better- good even- but I can't help but feel that things have not changed- my destiny has not altered. I am 21 years old and have never had a relationship. I don't think I am capable of one. I feel that if I stay, if I try, I will lose all power, all confidence I have acquired and I will be rejected. I am scared to go back to that.

I get ready earlier than I have to; I don't want to miss him. The air is cool and moist and the moon hovers above, unwilling to give up the morning to the incumbent sun. It is still dark. I like it this way.

I sit on the stoop in front of our apartment complex. I sit. I sit and I wait. For no good reason, I sit and I wait for him.

I want more. More than just a glimpse. On this morning I want more.

I walk toward the road. I am alone but I walk in a pretentious manner, chest out, head up. If there are people around me- people watching, hiding- I want them to know that I am scared of nothing. There is no one there but if there were.

I lie down. I lie down in the middle road and close my eyes. I can hear him. I can hear him coming; his motorized wheelchair coughs like a dying dog. He is right on time.

I turn over and open my eyes. He is gigantic. He is obese. He is magnificently

grotesque.

He approaches- slow but steady he makes his way closer.

He is older but not old- the type of person that you know is younger than he looks. He is at least 500 lbs with a pale but sturdy face, a few flailing auburn hairs on the top of his head and short stubby limbs that look irregular for his massive torso. He is in his usual attire- navy blue pants and a matching sports-coat and tie covering a white button down shirt. He carries a large bouquet of roses in his right hand.

When he gets about twenty feet away he notices me and stops. He glares. I return with a smile.

“What the fuck you want?” asked the man who rides by my house.

I am silent.

“You hea’ me boy? What you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“Body wants something’. What’s you angle boy? I ain’t got no money. Don’t carry none of it cause peoples like youself.”

I get to my feet. “Are you happy?”

He looks at me, confused for a moment and then angry.

“What, you tink I aint? You tink I’m misable cause I in dis chair- well you wrong boy- you dead wrong.” He turns his chair to the right and begins to ride away.

“I just need to know.”

“Why you care ‘bout me boy?”

“What are you doing? Where are you going? What have you done? What are you proud of? What do you regret? What do you look forward to? I need to know.”

He stops and stares.

“Jesus boy, was wrong wit you?”

“I’m lost- have been since I can remember.”

“You tink I got de ansas?”

“I think you have a place to be.”

“You got dat right and you makin me late boy.” He begins to ride off.

“Can I come with you?”

“Hell, I don’ care boy- just don’ be bothrin me no more.”

We are silent for the next few minutes. I feel warm- like I am a part of something- like I can’t be disregarded.

He turns to his left, glancing at me through the corner of his eye. “You lose a body boy?”

“Never had anyone.”

“Oh, das it boy? Das your probblem?”

“I don’t know...I’m tired.”

“We all tired boy.”

“Where are we going?”

“Gon to visit to my wife?”

“Did she pass away?”

“Almos’ five year ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too boy, me too.”

“How’d she die?”

“Canca got ‘er- just ‘er time I guess.”

“You ever think about being with her again?”

“Course boy...What you mean?”

“I mean...ending it and being with her again.”

“Na boy...I neva do dat. Dat can’t be dee ansa.”

“I think about running.”

“Runnin?”

“Just running, living in a blur, running until someone says ok that’s enough, ok you’ve been through enough, ok you can rest.”

“Dat soun tiren boy. Soun like ‘lot ‘a work ta me.”

The pavement becomes icy as we turn down a nearby side road. His chair begins to malfunction and he swears quietly to himself. I stand behind his chair and push him through the entrance of the approaching cemetery.

He has me place the bouquet of roses in front of his wife’s headstone. He has me remove the flowers he placed there yesterday. He closes his eyes and we are silent.

“Tank you boy,” he says as we make our way back.

“Must feel good,” I say, “loving someone that much.”

“It hurts boy, it hurts.”

People, Like Me

“Can you hear me?” Manny rubs his tired eyes, hoping to change the image in the mirror, hoping that once his vision clears he will see the man he once was. He was sixty pounds lighter back then, with perfectly structured cheekbones, one single chin that stood prominent but unassuming and a full head of thick jet black hair. He opens his mouth and closes it just as quickly; he lost another tooth yesterday- doctor says they’ll all be gone soon. He had beautiful teeth once. He had a family. He had a life.

“You wanna go somewheres tonight? Whereva you want?” He knows the room is empty. But he can still see her, sitting on her side of the bed, sipping her morning coffee- she likes it black when she first gets up.

“You know I love you right?” His body is falling apart. The pain is unbearable. Both arms are in splints from the carpel tunnel. The pain is resolute and uncompromising. They removed the nails from his big toes yesterday; when the Novocain wore off he went into the bathroom and closed the door- he didn’t want her to see him cry.

He sits on the once white couch- now the original color is unrecognizable as it is streaked with dirt and various stains from food he didn’t care enough to clean up- and begins to take the first of his twenty three medications.

He is on the fifth day of a supposed one day bender. The remains of seven 30-racks and five bottles of rum form a sea of shame and helplessness.

“You knew I liked to drink when we wa’ datin’. It neva bothered you then. Why you gonna give me a hard time now?” He takes a swig from the bottle of rum. The taste is banal; it is like water to him now. He takes another. No better. He takes

another.

“I seen a couple the otha’ day drinkin’ together. Why can’t we be like that?”

...

Jodie awakes and she is scared and she is guilty. She does not know where she is. She does not know who he is. But this is nothing new. She rubs the outside of her nose, brushing away the remaining coke and runs into the nearby bathroom, not wanting the sound of her nausea to wake him up.

She gets dressed quietly, slowly, like a soldier trying to escape enemy lines; but it is not him that makes her leave- it is the sober her that she fears.

The road is empty and the air is cold. The blue tank top leaves her skin exposed; she walks with arms crossed, wishing she was one of those girls that owned a business suit, that people respected.

She approaches a man waiting at a nearby bus stop. His appearance is sloppy as his shoulder length cinnamon hair glistens due to its oily state and his tattered clothing wraps around his frail bones without thought or direction. And yet despite his obvious infirmities, he stands tall and straight, exuding confidence and judgment. Jodie walks with her head down; he stares at her, a devious smile forming over his pockmarked face.

He grabs her arm harshly. “Hey how much for a blow?”

She is startled but accustomed to the words. “I...I don’t do that anymore,” she whispers, too scared to pull away. She does not know the man but word travels fast;

when she hit rock bottom two years ago, she sold her body- she cannot take it back.

“Fuck you, you don’t do that anymore. Once a whore always a whore. Don’t give me that shit.”

He pulls her behind the Shell station; there are no cars at the pumps- the store is empty except for the attendant and a man by the candy racks he converses with. He forces her to her knees- she gives in easily- she is used to this kind of treatment- she deserves this. He unzips, exposing himself, and grabs the back of her head, digging his fingers into her sorrel-colored hair.

He is smiling, staring at the top of her head. Her eyes are closed. She is crying quietly.

“Hey Johnny, Mike, come take a look at this fuckin dirty bitch,” he yells into the back window. Moments later the back door opens and the attendant and the man by the candy racks exit out of the store.

“Oh, shit!” says Johnny.

“Where’d you find this one?” asks Mike.

They stand nearby. They watch and enjoy.

The man inhales deeply then exhales slowly. He pulls himself away from Jody’s mouth, grabbing her by the hair and pulling her head back, finishing upon her face.

“Here, get the hell out of my sight,” he laughs an infamous unforgiving laugh, throwing a five dollar bill at Jodie’s feet.

Head down, Jodie makes her way back out to the road. She wipes away her tears and places the five dollar bill in her pocket.

...

Kenny sits at his post, waiting for the clock to strike seven. His new job at the power plant is the best thing that has ever happened to him. He's finally getting paid like an adult; things are finally starting to turn around. He's been clean sixteen months.

He is a large man, in his early forties, with a cropped flattop haircut and scaly tired skin from a lifetime of drug use. Track marks line his left forearm and bicep along with an elaborate rose tattoo, a silver sword through its center.

He has done it all but crack cocaine is his drug of choice. He has an extensive record and has been in and out of jail since the age of sixteen.

Every morning, after his 11-7 shift, Kenny goes to a step meeting. Later on in day, after he has slept and eaten, he goes to another meeting. He needs the steps; he needs to be reminded every moment of every day what things could be like again.

Kenny, by most judicial accounts, is a bad guy- a criminal. But in the AA and NA world he is a sponsor, a leader, someone to live your life by. He is uneducated but speaks from the heart. He is brash and crude but is empathetic and has been through it all.

"Kenny give me whatever you can. I need some help," she says in a presumptuous manner.

They have been divorced for five years now. He doesn't know why they ever got married. She has had him arrested for one thing or another more times than he can count. She has sent him to jail without a passing thought. He hates her spite, her insanity, but loves her tits and the occasional romp she allows him. He wonders if

she would be different with a better man. He's ashamed that he still loves her.

"I need more than that!" she yells, her hands in balls, as if holding a tantrum back.

"Look Maria, shit, that's all I can give you. Jesus, I'm helping you. Don't be such a fuckin bitch."

"What did you call me?"

Kenny walks away, opening the screen door and exiting the house. He leaves the money he's brought on the top step. He feels good that he didn't let her walk all over him. He feels good that he gave her something. He owes. Maybe not her, but he owes.

Kenny gets ready for work: he bought new Timberland boots- he's going to show them to the guys. He hears a knock at the door.

Four police officers wait outside his home. He is surprised but opens the door without hesitation. He does not fear them. He hates them.

"Yeah, what the hell do you want?" He recognizes two of the officers; they have arrested him before.

"Mr. Diel, your under arrest for assault and battery. You have the right to remain silent. You have the...."

"What the fuck are you talken about? I didn't touch anybody!"

He didn't touch anyone. He didn't touch her. But it doesn't matter. She said he did.

His hands manacled, he's thrown into the back of the squad car. They laugh at his denial. He is a piece of shit. The truth really doesn't matter.

...

Ally is comfortable in her home. She has enough food; she has the clothing she desires; she has a backyard with a swing-set. But she is not happy. Another week has gone by without custody of her two children.

She is forty five. It is approaching one year since she got her third OUI and they called her an alcoholic. She never disagreed with them- she knows she is.

Lying on the couch, her blue pajamas on, she drinks a glass of wine, relaxing before she goes off to bed. She doesn't want to stop. She loves to drink.

It is the third Saturday of the month: she is seeing her kids today- Cody is seven, Kayla is fifteen.

"When are we coming home?" He asks, but she has no good answer. "I want to come home."

"When mom decides to stop drinking- so probably never," returns Kayla. She has been angry since her father died four years ago; she shares that with her mother.

"I haven't had a drink in four months and if all goes well you guys will be back home within the next couple of months." She tells herself they need to hear the lies.

They will not understand the truth. They do not understand her pain.

"Why do you drink mom?"

She remains silent.

"He asked you a question."

They don't want to hear that she hates herself. She always has: the way she looks, the way she talks; they don't want to hear that the alcohol makes life bearable, that

the only time she feels happy is with a glass in her hand. Some people are just not meant to live sober- she is a better person with alcohol; she is the person she is supposed to be- sociable, funny, energetic. The OUI's were just a stupid mistake. That will not happen again. She can still drink. Things are going to be ok.

They arrive at her home. Her hair feels out of place. She is jittery. Her skin itches. Her throat is dry. She is nauseous. She needs a drink.

Cody hugs her leg. His touch is warm and she can feel his love. She is sweating. Her body aches. She can take no more.

Ally pushes her son off of her. "Mommy has to pee really bad honey. I'll be right back." She has a bottle of vodka stashed inside the back of the toilet. She licks her lips. She needs it. She needs it now.

But as she reaches the bathroom doorway Kayla is there, standing tall- filled with judgment; an empty bottle of vodka in her hands, its remnants down the bottom of the drain.

"I'm not letting you drink. I'm not. I'm not letting you do it any more." She is crying but holding firm- gripping the evidence tightly in her right hand.

Ally is angry. She is the adult. She is the parent. It is her choice. She has the right to drink.

She raises her hand and slaps Kayla across the face. The bottle drops, shattering, sending pieces of glass throughout the room, each one a broken promise, a painful betrayal.

"I hate you. I fucking hate you." Kayla runs down the hall, stopping when a safe distance has been reached. "I'll call the cops. I will. Go ahead and drink. I'll run

next door and call the cops.”

After countless apologies and promises for change, things quiet down and Ally begins to make dinner.

“So Cody, how’s school goin? Does Mr. Mathews help you with your homework?”

He gives an answer but she can not hear it. The thirst is still there. It has not gone away. It never goes away.

She has a headache. Her body aches. Her lips burn. Her face tingles. She has a bottle under the bed. Kayla doesn’t know about that one.

But Kayla won’t let her drink. She’ll tell. But the thirst. She has to. Needs to. Her bottle of sleeping pills sits on the counter. Morals don’t matter. It won’t hurt. She can’t fight it anymore. They’ll just sleep for a while.

...

Michael swallows hard. He does this countless times every day; he does this whenever he begins to feel cheated. Just swallow hard, swallow hard. You can’t take it back. The bitterness and resentment will kill you.

He is not who he wants to be- never has been- but now, after what he has done, he is lost.

He gets dressed quickly. His mind is constantly racing. He shouldn’t have gone- should have stayed home. Stop it. Stop it. Can’t take it back. Don’t. Can’t take this anymore.

He walks to work, looking forward to his menial job, where his mind is occupied and his thoughts are on hold.

“So why don’t you have a girl friend?” asks Sarah, keeping her deep blue eyes focused on Michael as her fingers remain busy, typing on the keyboard.

He is silent, smiling inside, grateful that his co-worker sees him as normal enough for such a question. She does not know what he has done. She does not know where he has been. He can not believe he was there. He does not know what he is.

“Because I was waiting to meet you,” he returns, not meaning a word, but relishing the normalcy of flirtation. He glances at her body, pausing briefly over her chest and then the top of her thigh.

“What? What do you think I am?” Sarah looks to her left, slapping him playfully on the slope of his shoulder, pinching skin to further gain his attention.

“C’mon, I know you’re game. Give me a kiss.” Michael leans in, his bravado at full thrust.

But her eyes can not lie. They are prepared, not for a teasing gesture, but filled with genuine emotion, eager to plunge.

He recognizes his mistake and is confronted by the reality of his world. He cannot do this, he cannot do anything. He pulls away, apologizing, explaining that his life “is just too complicated right now.”

To her he is normal- just another guy with his own agenda that may or may not be right for her. But he is not like her; he is not a part of her world anymore. He is one of the bad ones. He always knew he would end up like this.

Michael walks slowly. It feels like he's been walking for hours. He mouths "fuck you" to every car that goes by; he has not driven in almost two years, not since he drove drunk that terrible night. He has never done a drug, never smoked a cigarette, but he is a convicted felon and can't take it back.

He is self-righteous but tired. He has accepted his fate but can not let go of his anger.

He is floating. Even after a year in jail it is still difficult to believe that this is real, that this is his life.

He glares out over the wooden railing- the bike path is busy with walkers and riders but he sees no one. He wants to jump; he wants to lie beneath the water's surface where no one will find him. He wants to end this life and try again.

He has been going to this group counseling session every Wednesday at 7 o'clock for almost four months now. He has never spoken. They go around the table and "check in" as Crystal- the facilitator- says. They say how their week has been, if they have relapsed, what they hope the next week will bring. He says he's fine. Nothing more.

He walks into the outpatient treatment center. He looks around the table; all the regular characters are there. But something funny has happened since his first encounter with people like them.

Jodie is the first to check in. She tells of the weekend spent with her grandmother, her Vavo.

"I went with my Vavo to the doctors. She doesn't like to go by herself. While we were waitin a man and woman walk in and sit by us and the woman has a big mark on

her face. We both look at each other but I don't say anythin. And you know my Vavo- she don't hear that good. So she yells to me, with them sittin right there- "Jodie Marie, I think he give her slap. I just put my head down and tried to stop laughin."

The room erupts in laughter. Michael smiles. He looks around the room- he looks at the people he is with- Manny, Jodie, Kenny and Ally.

"I'll go next," says Kenny, shuffling in his seat as he prepares to talk. His eyes are tired but a sly grin remains on his face. "This fucken woman is fucken killen me. I'm sorry for my friggen language but all this shit I gotta deal with cause she got a bug up her ass."

Michael watches Kenny intently as he speaks. He has judged him- he has judged all of them. They are drug addicts and alcoholics. On one night he drove drunk and hurt someone. It was a mistake. It was an aberration. He graduated from college with honors.

It doesn't matter what you were, he thinks to himself- it doesn't. You drove drunk. You. Your actions- your actions- your actions could have killed- killed- killed- someone. People were hurt because of you. It doesn't matter what you were. It doesn't. Doesn't. You're lucky- lucky- lucky to be here. You are a convicted felon. You are. You are. You are. It's not a mistake. You did it. You did. You did. You're lucky you're with these people. They will not judge you. They do not care what you have done. You are no better than them. One mistake or a lifetime of mistakes- your mistake was big enough. You are no better. No better. These are your people.

Entitled to be Cruel

My father's truck is a blue house on wheels. I feel strong, invincible, as I dangle my arm out the passenger side window, slightly flexing in the mirror, looking down upon the insignificant mortals below, imagining their envy. The full size crew cab seats no one and I doubt if it ever has or will but adds much needed bulk to our size. My father listens to sports talk radio as I stare out, looking stern, stoic, keeping up the uncompromising pretense. He is excited to show me his new apartment. His blinker has been on for the past three miles.

My father is 49 but looks ten years younger. Tufts of gray hair reveal his age but his body remains strong, resolute.

"I really think your gonna like it," he says breaking the silence, a permanent look of sadness covering his face.

"Yeah," I answer curtly. I am not angry. I am not annoyed. But it is too late. I cannot be kind.

"You think they're gonna win tonight?" He asks with an almost deferential tone, as if he chooses his words carefully before speaking to me.

"Should." I could make him cry at any moment.

"They gave me two parking spots. 223 and the other one is underneath. I'll show it to you."

"Why are you...?" I begin but stop. I do not want to be like this. I do not want to be sarcastic or mean or "have an attitude" as he is always accusing. "Why'd they give you two spots?"

His face brightens because I've shown an interest and I want to cry. I think of him

as intellectually inferior to me because of the things he says and doesn't say and has no interest in; and because he didn't go to college and never really knew enough to care about education. I am cloaked in my own conceit and I am so ashamed of myself that I cannot concentrate on what he is saying.

“You can park in either one of these when you come and visit. You're gonna come up and visit once in a while right?”

I have never thought his yearning, his emotion, his love, to be disingenuous. I have always assumed he was overcompensating because his father never showed him any affection. But it makes me sick. We would fight and he would yell, towering over me, dominating me, and then he would apologize and say he loved me and I knew he meant it. And now I am stone.

I do not blame him any longer for what I am. Everything must have a cause. I am the effect. He did the best he could. But I could never let it go.

“Yeah.”

He parks and we get out and he offers up every insignificant detail about the complex that I couldn't care less about. How the lawn gets mowed and that a lot of people walk by on the bike path behind the complex and the elevator was fixed last night by a maintenance guy named Gene.

I can feel myself getting agitated as he continues to talk. It's not a big deal- it's just talking, but I can feel it.

As a 15 year old during the brunt of our collapse I always imagined there would be some monumental showdown: where as a powerful adult I would take on my father and kick the shit out him. I promised myself that I would make him pay. He thought

he was so strong, so tough; and I've been keeping that promise ever since. I do not think I can take it back.

He opens the door to his apartment and it is nice and neat with hardwood floors, a long l-shaped couch and a large flat screen tv; and I am glad. He deserves nice things. He deserves to be out of his mother's house after all these years. He wakes up every morning at 4 am to be on time in Boston at the site and gets home at 6, only to do it all over again the next day.

He shows me the back room filled with a beige couch, a desk holding a flat screen computer and a sizeable tv.

"That couch, we got that couch cause it folds out into a bed. This is where you could stay when you sleep over."

"Ok," I answer, though I know I will never subject myself to that kind of awkwardness.

"I'm serious," he reiterates, almost pleadingly. "I set up this room for you... You want something to eat?"

"No, thanks."

"C'mon, I have plenty of stuff. Have some chicken wings with me."

"Na, it's ok." I haven't eaten all day. I am starving but I do not want to eat with him. I am uncomfortable, drowning in the misery of his sadness and my guilt.

I get a glass of water and sit beside him on the couch. Everything in the apartment is orderly and serene. There is no clutter. There are no cats. He is an adult. He is finally trying to live.

"She thinks she's the reason why you haven't come to see the place yet."

“What? I’ve been busy- work and school and everything.” The truth is I wish him only the best, though I know it will not end well. It angers me when I think of how hurt he must have been when his last girlfriend broke up with him and he had to retreat back to his parents’.

I sit there thinking of how happy it would make him if I just said what has been on the tip of my tongue for the past five years. I forgive you. I forgive you even if you feel you did nothing wrong. I do not hate you. I never have. Things will be different now. We will speak to each other as two adults, as friends.

But I know I will not say it. I will never say it. Because I can not handle the reaction; I do not want the reaction. I do not want the tears, the emotion, the questioning. Forgive me for what? What made you say that? Are you ok? Is there something wrong? I will not say it. I will never say it.

The second inning ends and I squirm in my seat, trying to think of a sufficient excuse for leaving.

“Dad, I think I’m gonna head out.”

He does not ask why and I am relieved.

“Yeah, that’s ok, you can leave whenever. You’re gonna come back though right?”

“Yeah, I’ll come back.”

I close the door behind me, catching a final glimpse of his dejected face and I know that this misery will never end until one of us is dead.

.....

I have hit rock bottom. I feel thirteen again and my mother has shown her true colors, getting rid of me when things get difficult. I have no one. I have nothing but a past filled with insignificant accomplishments and one unforgivable mistake. I am not unhappy. I am in a movie. This is not real.

I am in the stairway of the gym, thoughts of homelessness and murder suffocating me, ashamed of what I am about to do.

“Hey, dad, um can you come and pick me up?” I am disgusted by my arrogance, assuming he will drop everything to help me. I do not deserve to be rescued.

“Definitely, what day?” His voice is warm and eager to please.

“Um no, like right now.” I am helpless.

“What happened?” He becomes the protector.

“She kicked me out.” I am too old for this.

“I’ll be right there.”

“Everything is going to be ok,” he says prophetically as I step up into the truck. “I want you to come and live with me. I already talked to Suzette and she wants you to too.”

I am silent. I cannot believe this is happening. Our relationship was simple, it was easy: I would see him for a movie or lunch to reassure myself that I was a good son and we would watch or eat in silence and the punishment would soon be over and I would feel good, like I did at the end of football practice, when something tiresome and grueling was finally over and I would not have to endure the pain again for weeks. It was something I had to do and could not avoid because I didn’t want to regret anything in the future if something should happen to him. I was always in

control: if we fought I could go home, if he yelled I could go home, if I was a miserable prick there was nothing he could do to me.

But now I am vulnerable. I cannot avoid our relationship. I can avoid nothing. I must accept our past. I must let go of my anger.

I feel as if I am betraying myself; I am betraying that 15 year old who swore revenge. If I go with him then I am saying that it never happened, that everything is and always was ok. I have no choice.

“Hey come ‘ere, I want to show you how to work the hd.”

We walk into the living room and he is so excited that I cannot help but smile.

“I think I shoulda went a little bit bigger- maybe in the forty inches or something. See look, when it’s in hd you need to adjust it to the full screen. Look at that picture. You see the difference. Wait I’ll show you the regular again. You see it?”

We sit and stare at the tv, watching an animated gecko intently.

“You see that right? You think it was worth it?”

“Yeah it looks really good.”

“This is going to be awesome watching the games on this. You can watch them in your room if you wanna have privacy or out here with me, whatever you want.”

“No, of course I’m going to watch them with you.” I wonder what kind of a person he sees me as. I never wanted it to be this way. I do not want him to be intimidated by me. I don’t know what I want from him.

We sit down for dinner and I eat his food, drink his water and enjoy the warmth of his home. He smiles warmly as he jokes with Suzette and gobbles down his remaining pasta. He has forgotten. He has forgotten the countless phone calls I never

returned and the visits I never showed up to. Just like that, without an apology, he has forgiven me.

Best Thing

I'm pretty sure I could beat cancer. I think my will power would beat the disease. I would not let myself get weak, get sick. I think the disease would be surprised by how strong I am.

I'd like to die on a freezing cold day. I'd like to think the cold would remind my former teammates of me; how I would wear two wife-beaters instead of a long sleeve shirt under my pads.

I wish I could drink again.

The long glass bottles glisten in their racks. I will not touch it. Alcoholics suffer from withdrawal- their bodies need it. I never liked the taste.

The game is on and my friends sit beside me. Shawn and Pags sip their 28 ounce Coors Lights; Theresa likes Sam Adams; Laura orders a Cosmo. Throughout the bar I see people with glasses and mugs; they eat and they drink- they drink and they talk- they sit and they drink.

I am not uncomfortable with their drinking; my friends know that. It has been over two years since my last drink; since I drove drunk and hurt a stranger.

But I know what it was like. I miss it.

I want to write a letter to alcohol. I want to explain how I feel. I would start it like this:

Dear Alcohol,

I would never blame you for what happened. It was all my fault. You were innocent. I will never regret you coming into my life. I never had more fun then with you by my side. I was never better then when I was with you. I was a better me, the me I wish I was- when I was with you. You have nothing to be sorry about. Don't listen to what they say. I couldn't control myself. I made a terrible decision. Because of you I have wonderful memories, worthwhile stories. Because of what I did with you

I hurt someone and went to jail- I am a convicted felon- but without you- before you- I wasn't living- I was nothing. You opened my eyes- you made me happy. Thank you.

Shawn and Pags giggle playfully for no apparent reason and I can tell they are buzzed; they have reached the point where life turns from bearable to worthwhile. I remember that feeling- that warmth- that protective cloak of alcohol- where I am afraid of nothing- where I am able to interact, to live.

A caprice of cold air floods the room as the front door is pushed open and newcomers amble in. Three girls walk by and I breathe in their scent- smells like lavender and vanilla. I look over their bodies- one in particular. She is petit but thick, with long auburn hair and large conspicuous breasts.

I swallow hard as I look at her. I will never speak to her. I will never speak to any of them. If I were drunk- if I were drunk things would be different. If I were drunk I would not even think- I would not be sitting here thinking; I would get up and say something, anything- I would give myself a chance.

So I sit. I am not unhappy. I am happy to be out of jail. "Things could be much worse" I tell myself over and over again.

"Do you have a problem with alcohol?" The officer asked me this at my parole hearing; I hear her words a thousand times every day.

"No," I answered quickly. She was outraged. She said it was an insult to my victim.

Am I an alcoholic? I can't be. But how do I answer- how do I answer truthfully? "No, I don't have a problem with alcohol, I have a problem with me. I have a

problem with wasting my life.”

At WMCAC (Western Massachusetts Correctional Alcohol Center), where I was incarcerated for nine months- after two months in Worcester County jail- one of the counselors, Marty, drew a long line on the board. “This is your life,” he said. Then he placed a tiny dot toward the front portion of the line. “This is you in here.” His ruddy face grew a big dumb grin. “You have plenty of time to change, to turn around your lives.”

If I was drunk I may have questioned Marty. I may have simply asked him how. “How Marty? How do I change- not my habits, but me- me. How do I basically become a different person?”

I imagine it is difficult for an alcoholic or drug addict to become sober. But at least they would have some frame of reference; they would be trying to get back to someone they used to be- someone they already were before their addiction took hold. I have never been the real me- the me I was supposed to be- only when drunk.

I try not to think. The more I think the more I hate her. I drove drunk and hit her car and I hate her.

I wonder how many people would have done what she did. How many people would have walked up to the stand and asked for the maximum sentence on a first offense? How many people would have went to the papers? How many people would have forced my parole hearing back so she could be there? I want to fuckin hold her down and spit in her fuckin face.

It's funny. When I was incarcerated all I wanted was to be out- to appreciate the little luxuries of freedom. But I was better in there: I brushed and flossed three times

a day; I ate three small meals and nothing else; I went to bed at 11 o'clock the latest; I read a book a week; I taught the GED curriculum to the other inmates; I took care of Charlie.

I was downstairs in the WMCAC library helping people with their resumes when Michael O'Connell, the man in charge of enrollment into the program, approached me.

"Jim Ashe, the Sheriff here, is good friends with a man who lives nearby in Longmeadow. This man is getting up there in age and he has a handicapped son so he needs some help. Now I've gone through the records of everyone here and you're the only one who pretty much has one thing- one mistake, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any experience in the medical field?"

"Um...no...I mean I was an English major."

"Well would you be willing?"

"Yes, I think I could."

...

Jacob's apathetic voice announces my name over the intercom, calling me down to central to leave for work. The C.O., Jonesy, swipes me out and I take a seat with the other inmates, waiting impatiently, holding their brown paper lunch bags. At 7:30 I get up and walk out the door. I feel important, contemptuous even: the other inmates have to wait for their rides to come. I am the first inmate in the history of the facility

to be let out on their own and take the bus to work. There have been prouder days, but I'll take what I can get right now.

I walk down the road, past Red Rose Pizza, to the corner bus stop. I can see the tower from the basketball hall of fame and cannot help but think that Springfield is such a shitty city for it.

The February air is bitter cold and I'm glad that I wore two undershirts beneath my Assumption College sweatshirt. I wear the sweatshirt everywhere: I want the inmates to know, more importantly I want the C.O.'s and counselors to know- that I was not always like this- that I did some good things in my life.

I wait in front of the nail salon- the sidewalk is covered with black snow that refuses to melt away. The Asian workers inside give me dirty looks for being in the vicinity of their store; they probably think I'm some drug dealer- they're not that far off.

Across the street is Grapevine Liquors. I'm not tempted. I am not an alcoholic. But I like that it's there. I need to prove myself to everyone.

A homeless man walks by. He is middle aged, heavy set, with a distinguishable mustache and short black hair. His face is covered with dirt and grime and his clothes are tattered. He carries a brown paper bag in the shape of a liquor bottle. It is not until he gets a few feet passed that I realize I know him. His name is Dave. He was released from WMCAC less than two weeks ago. I remember his speech at clap-out, explaining how the program had changed his life and everything was going to be different from then on. I do not call to him. I do not want to see the shame in his eyes. He is a diabetic and I do not expect he will be around much longer.

My bus arrives: it is the G-line with the heading “Dickenson/Jewish Home/Longmeadow.” I swipe my bus pass and say “how ya doin” to the bus driver like I do every morning and he returns with his usual response, “You know the 7:20 bus goes right on through past the Jewish Home.” He knows I know only adding to my dislike for him. He is a very small man, in his early sixties maybe, with marginal brown hair and old out dated glasses that are too small for his portly face. “I know,” I answer, walking to the back of the bus, past two Jamaican women speaking quietly about different types of coffee.

At Locust St. the young girl gets on. She is in her early twenties, with shoulder length ginger hair and a quiet unassuming demeanor that reflects her plain features. She has been taking the bus for the last three weeks. She walks to the back and smiles politely at the two Jamaican woman and does the same to me as she sits nearby. I say hello, like every morning, and nothing more. I do not want to know her name. I do not want to know what she does or why she’s on the bus. I assume we all have our own sad story.

Twenty minutes later we arrive at the Jewish Home in Longmeadow. I thank the driver and he remains silent, staring forward, as he shifts into park and lets us off. The suburb of Longmeadow is a pleasant change from the urban Springfield environment. I walk down to the sidewalk and start to head for the Auth’s house.

The Auth’s house is large but inconspicuous compared to some of the other homes in this affluent neighborhood. It is a brown two-story, with green shutters and a matching front door still decorated with a Christmas wreath. Behind and to the left of the home is the garage, holding Mr. Auth’s green Volvo SUV and Mrs. Auth’s beige

Suburban.

I walk up the ramp leading to the side of the house and enter through the unlocked door.

“Good morning,” greets Mrs. Auth. She is in her late fifties with an attractive but aging face.

“How are you?” I return. “Headed out?”

“Yeah, we have parent teacher conferences later today. So I’m getting all my paperwork ready.”

“Oh those probably aren’t fun.”

“No, my kids are good. It’s fun to meet with the parents and see what they’re like. Hey there’s pizza and subs in the fridge for lunch.”

“Mike.....Mike,” I hear in a soft almost inaudible tone.

“Charlie’s up. I’ll see ya Mrs. Auth.”

Charlie lies on his back. He is blind without his glasses but when I enter the room he can sense it and his eyes get wide.

“Hey buddy.”

“Hey...Mike.” His voice is weak; it takes a great amount of effort to release a single word. Charlie is 27. He has a mitochondria disease. Our bodies need only a small amount of our mitochondria to function normally; about 90% of Charlie’s are deficient. He can move all of his limbs but is too weak to sustain movement. He can move his legs but can not stand on them. He can move his hands but can not grip. He drifts in and out mentally.

Charlie has one of the rarest mitochondria diseases in the world. The family has

seen every expert possible to try and better his condition, but thus far no one has been able to help.

“How are ya buddy?”

“Good.”

“You watch the Celts last night?”

“Yeah.” He kicks his legs out and tries to get the comforter off of him but his legs get entangled and he begins to get frustrated. “Jees.”

I pull the comforter off exposing his disposable underwear and frail legs. His feet are livid, discolored from a lack of use. I detach the rubber piece connecting Charlie’s penis to the external catheter. I analyze the contents of the plastic pouch.

“1200 buddy. Good job.” Charlie is incontinent so he uses a catheter when he sleeps to prevent discomfort. Over the past two weeks, however, he has been weaker than usual and has been struggling to push the urine out of his system. The more urine in his system the worse his kidneys become. This is a good morning. 1200 ounces is a lot.

“Thanks...Mike.”

I change his underwear and wipe down his legs. “Hey buddy you want Papelbon today or Pierce?”

“Pierce...basketball...season...Mike.”

“That’s true. You’re right.” I help him into his green Celtics t-shirt and shorts.

“Ok buddy let’s turn over and put the pad on.”

Charlie gets sores on his lower back because of the amount of time he spends sitting down. Every few hours I take him out of the chair because the pain is

unbearable. “How’s it feel today buddy?”

“What?”

“Your butt- how’s it feelin?”

“What?” His hearing fades in and out.

I take his legs and pull them towards me over the edge of the bed. I sit down by his side and grab his Red Sox socks and begin to take my shoes off.

“No,” says Charlie with a smile on his face.

“They’re nice though buddy, comfortable.”

“Yeah.”

I put his braces on, strapping his legs in and then securing his sneakers. His legs turn inward and overlap each other when left alone. He puts his arms on my shoulders and I bend down and lift him off the bed. His body quivers as he struggles to support himself.

“I gotchya buddy. I got ya.”

His frail body towers over my own. Charlie is well over six feet tall but weighs less than 130 lbs. I buckle him into his chair and put his glasses on. His head is down; he struggles to hold it up.

“Head up buddy. Try and keep it up.”

“I...know...Mike...I ...know.”

He looks at me sheepishly and I grab his shoulder. His bulging brown eyes close momentarily as his hands slip off the wheelchair arms and he falls forward. The seat belt prevents his collapse as I jump in and supports his chest. He is weak today. He’s been bad lately.

“You need a haircut buddy. You want me to shave it?”

“No...I...really...don’t.”

“I see you took my advice-growing the beard out huh?”

“No.”

I give him his Dylantine- he needs it for his seizures. He begins to cough and the spoonful of orange liquid spills out onto his shirt.

“It’s ok- gross huh? You want to do the first two cups up here or downstairs?”

“Down....down.” He continues to cough.

I wheel Charlie out of his room and by the chair lift. I sit down in the chair and the motorized lift begins to descend.

“No.”

“What? I have to walk downstairs?”

“Yeah.”

I walk through the downstairs hallway, past the pictures of Charlie as a normal kid. He was fine up until high school. But it just kept getting worse. First he got the braces- then he couldn’t walk anymore- and then he almost died.

Charlie wheels himself by the kitchen table as I pour two cups of cranberry juice into a glass container. I open up a pill of Macrochantin and empty it’s contents into the glass; he gets this antibiotic whenever he’s sick.

Charlie has a stomach peg inserted into his abdomen. It is a clear plastic tube that enters his body through a hole in his stomach. The tube branches out into a bag that allows Charlie to absorb nutrients faster than if taken orally. I insert a plastic funnel into the peg and pour the juice in. Charlie will get two more cups every 90 minutes

for the rest of the day.

“Mike...some...tunes.” He loves music.

“Oh, sorry buddy. You want the radio or a cd?”

“Stones.” His favorite band is the Rolling Stones. He’s been to five of their concerts. “You...know...my...dad...took...me...to...see...them.” He tells me this whenever we talk about music.

“You know I was in the Stones for a while Charlie- but everything got too commercial so I took off.”

“No.....I.can’t...get...no...satisfaction....no...no...no.”

His arms bounce up and down, flailing uncontrollably. I stand by the counter watching the waffle maker cook our waffles. I love coming over here and eating real food.

“Chuck who sings this song?” Mr. Auth thunders into the room. He is the largest person I have ever met, standing at 6’7” tall and weighing well over 300 lbs. He is 62 with thinning gray hair, a jovial ruddy face and bear paws for hands. He is a doctor of math- a former professor; he works at home now- for a computer company.

“I...know...dad...Stones.”

“Ok, let’s keep it that way.”

He takes a seat in his chair by the radio and begins to look over the morning newspaper.

Charlie stares at him. “Funny...dad.”

“I was watching a special last night on the NFL network- it was all on the Giant/Colts game- the “Greatest Game Ever Played.” You would’ve liked it Mike. I

remember watching that game when I was younger than you.”

“That was in the 20’s right?”

“Fuck you,” Mr. Auth laughs. “I’m not that old.”

I put an apron on Charlie and feed him his waffle. He eats slowly but I can tell he likes it.

“Are you going to be able to watch the draft this weekend?” asks Mr. Auth in between gulps of coffee.

“Um...yeah. I just need to get the tv first.”

“Do you want to watch it over here? I can tell Jimmy that I need you to watch Charlie.”

“Yeah. Thank you. That would be awesome.”

I brush Charlie’s teeth and shave his face with an electric razor. “Charlie I still think you should grow the beard out.”

“No...no...I...won’t...do...that.”

I put Charlie on the commode and change his underwear. He sits and he tries. He tries to go the bathroom. It feels like he has to go but he can’t.

“Mike...I...can’t.”

We play monopoly on the living room table. He can’t roll the dice or hold his property but he is still legitimately beating me.

“You’re....done....Mike.”

“Yeah I know wiseass. It’s cold out today buddy- don’t know if we’re gonna be able to go outside.”

“No...too...cold. I...can't...wait...for...the...summer...for...my...birthday.”

“Yeah me too buddy.”

“In...June...in...June...we'll...go...to...the...house.” The Auth's have a summer home in Connecticut. Charlie is always talking about it- how the hallways are wider so it's easier to get around; how he can go in the water and it feel good on his legs.

“Yeah buddy, almost here. I can't wait for it either. I'll be home by then.”

“I'll...be...28...Mike. My...dad...is...gonna...make...me...this...mixed...tape.”

“That's awesome buddy.”

“Mike.”

“Yeah buddy.”

“Mike.”

“What's up buddy.”

“I'll...miss...you.”

“I'll miss you too buddy.” I give him a quick hug and start to put the pieces away. I feel good. I am doing something good. I remember my junior year at Assumption- a sociology class- we were asked to get up and say the best thing or most altruistic thing we had done in our lives. I said that when I was 10 I went to Giants stadium and saw Rodney Hampton break the Giants all-time rushing record.

We eat pizza for lunch- Charlie likes the crust pieces. I give him half a cup of orange soda and he sips the straw greedily. After he eats, it's time for his vitamins: 3 Coenzyme Q, 2 Acetyl Coline, 1 Zinc, 1 more Macrofantin, 1 vitamin B, 1 vitamin C, one scoop of yogurt and 2 more cups of cranberry juice. It all goes down his stomach peg.

“I...don’t...want...to...be...no...slave...I...don’t...want...to...work...all...day...I
...just...want...to...make...love...to...you.”

“Charlie are you comin on to me?”

“No...Mike.” He continues to sing along to the radio, taking deep breaths and pausing briefly to finish off his soda.

We watch Indiana Jones and the Last Crusades. Mr. Auth comes out of his office with a camera. I put my arm around Charlie and he snaps a picture.

At 4:33 I leave and catch the 4:35 bus. I say hello to the usual afternoon bus driver. He is a black man in his late twenties and is much friendlier than the morning driver. I sit in the front and listen to the bus rattle on as it takes me back home, back to jail.

...

I went to visit Charlie on his birthday. I had never seen him that bad. He couldn’t hear. He could barely speak. He remembered me though.

I kept in touch with Charlie and Mr. Auth for the first few months I was home. I changed cell phones around Christmas time and I haven’t called them. I will though.

I wish I knew Charlie before the disease. I wish he had the chance to have a normal life. I bet you he would have done some pretty special things.