FICTION

From Great Heights

Ryan Shoemaker

"How about a quick swim?" Carolyn asked, pointing to a lighted swimming pool glimmering through the fence of a large apartment complex on North Temple.

Norman smiled and continued to drive.

"I'm serious," Carolyn said. "We did it all the time at BYU. Walk in like you live there and jump in. It'll be fun."

Norman didn't feel comfortable with sneaking in, treading the chilly water in his Levis, and then driving home shivering and dripping onto the car seats and floor mats. "You're not in college anymore," he wanted to say. "What if we get caught? It's against the law." Instead he said, "It's getting late."

Carolyn stared at him, her pink lip gloss sparkling in the dim light. "Norman, you're a real stick-in-the-mud," she said.

Though Norman didn't tell her, the comment angered him.

The next evening Norman got a call from Cameron, an old friend who now lived in Murray with his wife, Erica. They'd grown up in the same ward outside Portland and had roomed together at BYU before their missions. A year ago, out of the blue, Cameron had suddenly taken an interest in Norman's social life and had even set Norman up with a few interns from his firm. Norman hadn't liked any of them. They seemed like girls Cameron would like, urbane moody types who only talked about themselves. When Norman began dating Carolyn soon after she'd moved into his ward, Cameron called weekly to pump Norman for information.

"So what's the deal?" Cameron asked. "Getting serious? Should I make room in my schedule for a December wedding? Or why not August? I'm joking. No pressure, really."

"I like her," Norman said. "It's just that . . ." He trailed off. "I think we have different ideas of fun." And then he told Cameron about the night before, about the swimming pool and Carolyn's jab. "Something

like that gives me pause," Norman said. "I mean, you can get in big trouble for that. It's trespassing."

"You have to lighten up," Cameron said. "Don't I always tell you that? The poor girl just wanted to have some fun. Live a little." There was a burst of static over the line. "So that's it? That's your big hang-up—you have different ideas of fun?"

"It's not just that," Norman said. "I know it's silly. I don't even want to mention this." He cleared his throat. "She leaves food out. Perishables like cheese and milk. And she doesn't hang her clothes up. She just slops them over her dresser. And she always loses her keys."

"Cheese and milk and keys? You're joking," Cameron said. "Come on, Norman. Be serious. Tell me you're joking, so I don't think you're a head case. A little spoiled milk and you're ready to call it quits. Isn't that alarming behavior? As a guidance counselor, wouldn't you agree? Seriously."

"It's an indicator," Norman said. "It's not a show stopper, but they're issues we'll have to work out. They're bad habits."

"How old are you, Norman? Thirty now?"

"Thirty next month," Norman said.

"Thirty and you can't stop thinking about the spoiled milk and the pile of clothes. Remember when you were looking for an apartment and stayed with us? It took you two months. Every place you looked had something you didn't like, roommates too loud or too messy, too far from work, too small. And then you end up getting your own place because you couldn't stand living with anyone. You know what happens to guys who can't stop thinking about the spoiled milk and the pile of clothes? They live alone. You see what I mean, Norman? Tell your mom I wash my hands of you." He shouted into the phone. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I'll call you next week." And then he hung up.

Sitting on the couch, the phone still cradled between his cheek and shoulder, Norman pondered the sliver of moon hanging in the window and the white, wispy clouds shooting past it. Privately, he valued little of what Cameron said. He remembered Cameron as a floppy-haired, gangly teenager, exiting the bishop's office with red-rimmed, puffy eyes, head bowed, wiping at his wet nose and weepy eyes with his sleeve. He remembered when Cameron and Erica were dating, and the way she berated him in front of his friends, snapping her fingers to get his attention. Who's Cameron to give marital advice? Norman thought. He'd married a piece of work, a bland, materialistic gossip who racked up a mountain of debt, a

downer who constantly scowled at Norman and breathed long, ponderous sighs whenever he spoke. At least I didn't and won't make the same mistakes, Norman thought, and the truth of those words comforted him.

Norman continued to date Carolyn. There were dinners at the Old Spaghetti Factory or Bucco di Beppo's, Saturday matinees in Sugarhouse, hiking Millcreek or Big Cottonwood Canyon. When Carolyn's parents visited from California, he met them. Over dinner at Biaggi's, Norman formed the opinion that both were sensible people, unobtrusive but caring, moderate in the cars they drove and the clothes they wore. Financially, they were secure; and physically and mentally, there appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, Norman was impressed with Carolyn's mother's physique. At forty-seven, she still ran in the Los Angeles marathon every year. If it's true that the daughter becomes the mother, Norman reasoned, as he studied her thin ankles and corded calves, then he would be satisfied with what Carolyn would become.

Their relationship was predictable, no surprises. Maybe I love Carolyn, Norman thought. Maybe. But he couldn't forget her sitting across from him in the dimly lit car, arms folded, her lip gloss sparking: *Norman, you're a real stick-in-the-mud*. There were the other images: a chest of drawers bearing the weight of last week's clothes, a forgotten gallon of milk warming on the countertop, Carolyn riffling through the couch cushions to find a set of keys, strands of her corn-silk blond hair falling into her face.

And then in the beginning of June, Carolyn told Norman she'd decided to move home for the summer. This revelation was so sudden that Norman, hearing her announcement, began to review the past few weeks, the past few months, searching for any premonition of her decision. He'd suspected something earlier that afternoon when Carolyn had called to tell him they needed to talk and then been evasive when he asked what she wanted to talk about.

"My roommate's sister said she'd take over my lease for the summer," Carolyn told him that evening. "I don't have to report back to school until the end of August, so why not move home and save a little money? My brother's home from his mission in a couple weeks. My family hasn't been together is two years. It is sudden, I know." She sat solemnly on Norman's couch, hugging a cushion to her chest. She wore a black, short-sleeved turtleneck sweater with a raised pattern of lines and dots coursing down its front, cashmere or merino wool, soft and expensive.

Norman wondered how much she'd spent for it and why she hadn't told him about the purchase.

"It is sudden," he said, exhaling loudly.

In the stairwell, a dog barked, a sudden hoarse discharge amplified by the concrete walls and steps, followed immediately by a woman's high, scolding voice. Carolyn leaned forward, squinting into the inky night beyond the window, and Norman, sitting on a worn ottoman in front of her, thought he saw in her droopy shoulders and narrow eyes a shudder of emotion, until he realized she was squinting to read the titles on the bookshelf near the window. "I don't want you to feel," Carolyn said, "that you shouldn't see other people over the summer. We'll keep in touch, and when I get back we'll see where we're at. It's for the best. Don't you think?"

The clock on the wall clicked dryly. A buzzing filled the room, the faint electrical whir of Norman's laptop on the side table, the unflattering overhead fluorescent lights, a moth batting against the window; and Carolyn's voice, the distant timbre of it, blanched of emotion, seemed lost in the room's sterile banality.

Norman, head bent down, traced the wood grain in the coffee table with his finger, taking in this new information. He was shocked, not at Carolyn's summer plan, but at how quickly and dispassionately she was dispatching him. All evening she'd hardly looked at him, but not out of embarrassment or uneasiness. She was already gone, already sunning herself on Huntington Beach, already a thousand miles away from this oppressive apartment. This evening, Norman felt, this tidy tapering of their relationship into nothing, was just another errand for her, another checked box on a list under "change oil" and "pay phone bill."

"I can't help thinking I've done something wrong," Norman said. "If I have, I hope you'd tell me."

"No, it's not like that," Carolyn said. "I'm not angry . . ." She let her hands fall to her thighs. "I never told you this. Before we started dating, I'd just ended a relationship with a guy from my old ward. He taught snowboarding in Park City. He was twenty, wasn't thinking about a mission, had never been to college, didn't think about anything, really, except snowboarding. His life was this chaotic mess that sucked me in. He never had enough money to pay his bills. He was always doing these stupid things to scare me: driving too fast, rock climbing without a rope, hiding behind doors and jumping out. That's why I liked you so much. You were different. You were cautious. You made me feel safe." She tugged pen-

sively at a strand of hair that fell into her face and then tucked it behind her ear. "You've been great, and I've had some fun, but you're too cautious, too safe. Maybe this isn't making any sense. It's like you don't leave anything to chance. It's like you're looking down at everything around you from some great height, weighing the options, qualifying, planning your next move. Sometimes I feel you see everything as if it was some algebra problem and you're solving for X, even with me, trying to see if I add up. You can't categorize everything. Everything doesn't add up—even when it's right. I mean, sometimes you can't be safe and cautious."

Suddenly Norman felt angry, felt heat rising through his neck and coloring his face, the same anger he'd felt after Carolyn's dig in the car. "What's wrong with caution?" he demanded, slamming his open palm down on the coffee table. An unlit red candle at the table's center teetered in its black terra cotta saucer, then toppled over. Carolyn looked at him with wide, shocked eyes.

"I get sick of hearing about how recklessness is this endearing quality"—Norman made a deliberate effort to lower his voice—"the rebellious charm girls love." He twined his fingers together. His hands shook. He glared at Carolyn, feeling a certain pleasure in having gotten her full attention. "I mean, what kind of world is it where people get by on dumb luck and good graces? Not a world I want any part of."

He tried to explain—how he could still remember the inattentive, bored faces of a few of his high school classmates: Andy Dumas, Jimmy Richards, Danny Manetas. He could name others. How they'd done poorly, really, had spent their money on stereo equipment and custom rims for their cars, smoked weed in the school parking lot, boozed it up, and bedded any girl they could. Blithe grins smeared across their faces, they sashayed across campus on loose joints, heads thrown back, squinting through black shades, not a care in the world, a reckless, live-for-today charm the girls, and even the teachers, found endearing. And watching them, Norman, for the first time in his life, had experienced a nascent pleasure he could never quite articulate then, knowing they'd somehow reached their zenith, that for them life after high school would forever be a tedious struggle, an existence of depleting habits and regrets, of trying to recapture a freedom they'd never really had. How could Norman make Carolyn understand? Caution, vigilance, carefulness. These were a safeguard against catastrophe; these were the secrets of success.

"I think I'm starting to see that I can't live in that world," Carolyn

said. "I can't live in a distant place where it's always me against everybody else, where I'm constantly on guard, trying to anticipate what's next." She stood and walked to the door, pausing there, one hand resting on the knob, the other fisted on her hip. "I don't even want to ask what you really think about me, Norman. I'm only beginning to see all the ways I don't measure up. I'm starting to wonder why you even asked me out in the first place. Seeing you now in your high, moral tower, I'm wondering how you can ask anyone out. Good-bye, Norman."

For the rest of the evening, Norman read through a *Newsweek* article on a shooting at a high school in Maine, but he understood very little of it. The words floated on the page so that he had to read sentences and whole paragraphs again. Finally, he turned off the lights and lay on the couch, replaying their argument and picking through it, rehearsing what he might have said. For a moment, this image—the image of him bounding down the concrete steps toward the parking lot, putting his arm around Carolyn's shoulders, and voicing his defense—satisfied Norman. But the image quickly soured as he thought of himself standing before her, solidifying the very image of himself that she disliked.

At 10:00 P.M., Norman, not fully understanding why, opened the telephone directory and wrote down the names of three jewelry shops.

* * *

The next morning, Norman sat in an office at Caesar's Jewelers, thumbing through glossy stacks of *Modern Bride* and *Wedding Bells*. Dark, oak paneling lined the walls and a bulky desk the exact color of the paneling occupied the center of the room. Behind the desk sat a rectangular safe whose polished black surface had the glossy sheen of used motor oil.

"The measure of anything, Mr. Reeves, is in the details," the jeweler said. He sat behind the desk, head tipped back, eyes closed. "Setting, cut of the diamond—it's crucial we get these right."

"Truthfully," Norman said, "this is kind of a surprise, I guess. I really don't know anything about rings. You're only the second jeweler I've seen."

This statement piqued the jeweler's interest. "Oh, I see," he said. As if suddenly aware of his sloping shoulders, he sat up straight, the leather squeaking under his shifting buttocks. "I'll beat any competitor, Mr. Reeves. Where've you been? Blue Boutique, Sierra-West?"

"Freidman's on South Temple. I only stopped in for a minute."

"Oh boy," the jeweler said, rolling his eyes. He plopped his hands on to the desktop as if he were about to rise. "Oh boy, oh boy. I'm not one to tell a man where to spend his money, but Friedman's out to milk people like *you*. I get couples in here all the time, practically in tears, because Friedman said he could save them a buck by making the setting himself. I've seen some of those settings, if you can call them that, Mr. Reeves. They're the kind of mess you'd expect from a high school jewelry class. I won't even go into the quality of his diamonds. Details, Mr. Reeves. And there's something else." From the desk he lifted a brass statuette of a dove with outstretched wings and hefted it in the palm of his right hand as though he were judging its weight. "He's not a brother, if you know what I mean. I don't even think he's Christian. It can be a shady business. I could tell you stories."

He put the dove down and threw himself back sharply in his chair, then leaned forward again. A tall, skeletal man in his late fifties with dyed, wiry hair, the jeweler drummed his long, thin fingers against the desk's lacquered surface. "Take your time," he said. "I assure you Friedman won't provide this level of service. You'll know the ring when you see it, Mr. Reeves. I, more than anyone else, understand that this process requires time and thought."

The jeweler wore three rings on his left hand. One bore the hologram of an NFL team that changed colors depending on the angle at which the light struck it. The other rings were thick gold bands crowned with diamonds. Each ring, particularly the one with the hologram, reminded Norman of jewelry he'd seen as a kid in quarter gumball machines. The gaudy rings and the gloomy office, though, didn't fit the jeweler. He wore a white button-up shirt with a brownish ring around the collar and dark suit pants that bunched at the waist where the belt buckled.

He saw Norman staring at the rings.

"How much do you think they're worth?" the jeweler asked.

"No idea," Norman said.

"Take a guess."

Knowing the man wanted him to guess a lowball figure and then be surprised at the actual cost, Norman, not wanting to be contrary, played along. "Seven thousand dollars. Maybe eight or nine."

"Thirty thousand for the three," the jeweler said, brushing at something imaginary on the polished desktop, as if thirty thousand dollars were a drop in the bucket, chump change. "And check this out." He set his

arm on the desk and inched up his shirt sleeve in a slow tease to show Norman the silver Rolex strapped to his lean wrist. Then shooting his cuffs, he sank back into the plush leather with a satisfied grin parting his thin lips, as if he'd just proven something of great importance. "Diamonds, platinum, gold—they speak, Mr. Reeves. You probably don't realize that. When I walk into a crowded restaurant at lunch, do you think I wait for a table? When I stroll into a car dealership with these babies shining, do you think I'm dickering with Joe Salesman on a grimy plastic lawn chair in the showroom? No way. These open doors, Mr. Reeves." He rapped the desk with his bony knuckles. "Think about that."

"I don't even know what she wants." Norman closed the copy of *Modern Bride* he'd been perusing and pushed it away. "Maybe I've made a mistake."

Breathing a ponderous, dramatic sigh, the jeweler interlaced his fingers and rested them serenely on the desk, his face suddenly weighed down, revealing a small network of hairline wrinkles around his mouth and eyes, a transformation imbued with a fatherly quality, and Norman almost expected the jeweler's next words to be: "Son, listen to me and I will tell you how the world works." The air conditioning clicked on, showering down a frigid jet of air on Norman. He shifted in his seat, suddenly feeling cold and constricted. Why did this man feel it necessary to dish out advice, Norman wondered. Was there something about him that screamed out for it?

"It's always the same scenario," the jeweler said, "all guys, not much different than you, who want this to be a surprise, a moment she'll never forget, but they don't know what she wants. Am I right?"

Norman nodded.

"Quite a conundrum. But let me tell you something, and this is the truth, the God-honest truth, from one brother to another: you pay for what you get, Mr. Reeves." The jeweler stared at his rings, holding them up against the light. "Women are infinitely more observant than men. Especially in these delicate matters. They notice the quality of the setting and the size of the diamond, especially the diamond. It becomes a point of conversation, how big so-and-so's diamond is, if the setting's platinum. Small details, Mr. Reeves." The jeweler put his hand over his heart. "You wouldn't believe how many unhappy women I see because their husbands go cheap. That's the truth. And guess who has to wear the evidence of that for a lifetime? It's a bad way to start things off, don't you think, Mr. Reeves?"

Cold air hissed through the ceiling vents. The jeweler kneaded his

bony hands together, warming to the subject, staring expectantly at Norman as if waiting for a hint of validation. Norman, sitting across from this man, understood the simple dynamic of their relationship, the businessman, with his expertise and skills, providing a service for a profit. Norman also understood the rhetoric: the subtle persuasion, colored with sentimentality, building on guilt. This didn't bother Norman. There was something else.

It was this: In their short time together, the jeweler had pegged him as a cheapskate, and Norman wondered when he'd arrived at this conclusion: the moment the jeweler greeted him at the door? when he'd invited Norman into the back office? maybe when he saw Norman striding across the parking lot?

Suddenly the jeweler threw his hands up as if signaling defeat, though Norman hadn't said anything. "But, hey, I'm not going to twist your arm. That's not my business. You spend your dime the way you want. If you want to go small, I have some Black Hills gold settings and cubic zirconium. It's your choice." The jeweler formed a small triangle with his fingers. "But to tell you truthfully, it's a waste of my time. You can buy jewelry like that in a Sears catalog."

Despite the cold air filling the room, Norman felt a tepid stickiness building under his arms and across his forehead. Slightly dizzy, he clutched the arm rest to steady himself. "I want to do this right," Norman said. He knew what he must say next. His tongue clicked in the dry sheath of his mouth, practicing the words: *Cost isn't an issue*. And then he said them, his voice sounding carefree and unencumbered, like a man who really meant it.

"I knew it the moment I saw you," the jeweler erupted, slapping his palms against the desk top. "When I first saw you, I said to myself, 'Here's a man who's not going to let price stand in the way of love.' I respect that, Mr. Reeves, I admire that."

The jeweler offered his hand and Norman shook it, warmed by the man's sudden ebullience.

"Why don't we get comfortable?" the jeweler said. He pushed a green, illuminated button on the phone. A high, feminine voice crackled through the speaker: "Yes, Mr. Livingston."

"Fran," the jeweler said, "why don't you bring us in some lemonade"—he shot Norman a wink—"and some of those chocolate biscotti I like." The jeweler stared at Norman. "So here we are," he said.

"Should I keep looking through this?" Norman asked, resting his hand on *Modern Bride.*

"Look through that?" the jeweler said incredulously. He grabbed the magazine by the spine, dangling it at an arm's length as if it were something grossly offensive. Then he heaved it over his shoulder without looking. "We're beyond magazines, Mr. Reeves." Still grinning at Norman, he scooted his chair backwards and began working the brass dial on the safe. "Haven't you learned anything from what I've said today? You, Mr. Reeves, have just moved to the next level."

* * *

Norman picked up the ring on Saturday.

The jeweler walked with him to the door, draping his long arm over Norman's shoulder. "Good luck in California," he said. "It's a bold move. I have no doubt she'll be overjoyed. That's why I love this business. There's seldom bad news." The jeweler opened the door. "Think of us in the future, Mr. Reeves."

Excited and carefree, Norman drove home slowly, cracking the window to let the cool mid-morning air wash over him. He wanted to speak with someone, to pull the polished ring case from his pocket, to confess that he was going to California to propose to Carolyn. Calling his parents was not an option. Norman feared the provident, penetrating tone of his father's voice building to disappointment, feared his probing questions: *How well do you know this girl? How much did you spend? Isn't this all a bit hasty?*–bristling questions Norman could only contain by avoiding them. Norman could think of no one from the ward to share his excitement. News of his impending journey and intentions might reach Carolyn before his arrival. In the end, Norman decided to visit Cameron.

Norman knocked at the door. "Who's there?" Erica asked. Norman told her and then heard what he thought was a curse and then a slamming cupboard door.

Cameron opened the door, squinting through the radiant morning light. "It's early."

"It's already ten," Norman said. "I can't sleep past six-thirty."

"We were up late," Cameron said. He stepped out of the doorway so Norman could pass, waving him in. "Come in before I change my mind."

The living room was still dark and shaded, but Norman could see the clutter from last night's festivities: the coffee table littered with empty

soda cans and half-full bowls of chocolates and nuts, a Monopoly board speckled with tiny game pieces and paper money. Erica, in a blue terrycloth robe, loafed on a naugahyde couch the color of peanut butter, and Cameron paced the room, tidying things up, chatting nervously.

"New couch?" asked Norman.

"I guess we haven't seen you in a while," Cameron said, sweeping the Monopoly pieces and paper money into the game box with his palm. "We also bought a plasma TV."

"How much that set you back?"

"About two grand."

Norman made a sucking noise. "Two grand," he repeated, throwing a quick glance at Erica. Her silence was unnerving. She stared at him, head slightly tipped forward, scrutinizing him from where she sat.

"Well, unlike you," Cameron said, "We're not in a monastic order. We actually spend our money."

Still standing near the door, unsure of what do with his hands, Norman wondered why they hadn't asked him to sit down.

"So what about you?" asked Cameron. "Still dating that girl? What's her name? Shannon, right?"

"Carolyn," Norman corrected, "and funny you ask. We're getting married."

"That poor girl," Erica said, breaking her bored silence. She thumbed through a *Cosmopolitan* and yawned.

"She's always so sarcastic in the morning," Cameron said, shooting Erica a look Norman couldn't interpret. "You know how she is. She never wakes up until noon."

"This will wake her up." Norman fished the ring case from his pant pocket and opened it. Even in the room's weak light, the diamonds sparkled.

Erica perked up, rising slightly onto her knee to examine the ring. Cameron nodded his head.

"Cubic zirconium and white gold," Erica said. "Or is it sterling silver? I know you, Norman. You wouldn't spend more than seven hundred."

"Platinum setting and a one carat diamond," Norman said. "Eight thousand dollars plus tax and insurance. Monday I drive to California to surprise her. Ring. Flowers. Down on one knee. Right in front of her family."

"Who is this guy?" Cameron said, grinning broadly. "Where's that old Norman Reeves? So unlike you. This from the guy who didn't go to our senior party because he'd be out too late."

"Does it have a return policy?" Erica asked flatly.

"Ignore her," Cameron said. "We're both happy for you. We really are. Aren't we, honey?" He moved toward the door and Norman followed. "Taking the plunge and all, that's great, really great. Your mother will be happy. Somebody to clutter your life a little. That'll be good for you." He pointed at his watch. "I don't mean to hurry you along, but I have some friends from work coming over to watch the game and we need to scour this place." He opened the door.

"I'll send an announcement," Norman said.

"You do that. And good luck. When you get back, I'll call you."

Norman wanted to ask Cameron if someone in a monastic order would plop down eight grand for a ring, but the door shut before he could. As he walked to his car, Norman wondered why Cameron hadn't invited him to watch the game.

* * *

Eighty miles into Nevada, Norman's car began making a sharp metallic noise, something like loose change rattling in a dryer, and then a translucent veil of acrid, yellowish smoke began pouring from beneath the car. Just as Norman pulled off at the next exit, the car stalled, coming to a lurching halt on the ramp's gravel shoulder. When he turned the key, the engine whined faintly but wouldn't start. A worn atlas in hand, he stepped onto the scorching asphalt, the lurid sun pounding down like a hammer. He opened the atlas on the hood and traced the faint line of Interstate 80 to the town he'd passed earlier, a vague memory—a casino with a flashing billboard, a gas station, a decaying mobile home park surrounded by a sagging chain link fence. *Wells, Nevada*.

Norman tried to get his bearings. In the distance, barely distinguishable from the blanched landscape, he saw a dilapidated farmhouse and began walking toward it, hoping to find a phone that could get some reception since his didn't. Before he reached the stop sign at the end of the off ramp, a kid in a dusty pick-up wearing a frayed cowboy hat and no shirt—Norman believed he couldn't have been more than fourteen— stopped and offered to send help. Norman thanked him and waited by the car, lifting his

head and squinting into the fierce sun whenever a vehicle topped the rise in the interstate and agitated the desert's vast, ghostly silence.

After forty-five minutes, a tow truck materialized from the striated heat rising from the scorching road, a massive thing with a long flat bed and dual chrome exhaust pipes on each side of the cab. The tow man nodded as he pulled onto the shoulder and then backed up until the truck's bumper almost touched Norman's car. He jumped from the cab and pulled on a pair of soiled leather gloves, making a business of it, gaping at Norman through dark sunglasses and smirking as if what he saw amused him. Leaning against the truck cab, he yanked a lever that sent the bed into a sluggish, grinding tilt, and while waiting, he lifted his glasses and wiped at his forehead with the back of his gloved hand. "I bet you're wondering how I'm going to do it," he said, staring at Norman with bulging, vapid eyes.

"Pardon," Norman said.

"I bet you're wondering," the man said slowly, making a little pantomime with his hands, one palm rubbing against the other. "I bet you're wondering how I'm going to get your car on the bed of this truck." He opened a metal box under the truck bed and pulled out four greasy chains. "Everyone wonders. Last week I had a van load of Japs stop and take pictures of me loading a car. I swear to God, they took a hundred pictures, jabbering on in their Jap language, smiling ear to ear. Couldn't even see their eyes, just slits really, so excited, I thought they'd piss themselves."

Not knowing what to say, Norman turned away and said nothing, relieved when the shrill whine of hydraulics and clattering chains discouraged any dialogue. Gazing at the broad sky, Norman fingered the ring case in his front pocket, tense and anxious. The sun, suspended in the expansive sky like a child's ball, had reached its apex. Everything appeared washed out and muted, dingy browns and dull greens in every direction. Norman kicked at a faded beer can and sent it skipping down the gravel embankment.

"Almost there," the tow man said. He attached a chain to the car's undercarriage and slowly hoisted the vehicle up the angled bed. Norman watched the mechanical process, the pulley motor straining, the car inching forward against the tug of gravity, shuddering slightly—a fly suspended in a web. And then the bed of the truck, bearing the weight of the car, came level, and the tow man secured the chains over the axles and boomed them down, kicking the taut metal, turning away satisfied. He waved Norman to the passenger door. "I have to tell you now," he said,

pulling the gloves off and shoving them into his back pocket, "we're a good twenty miles out of town. Ain't going to be cheap."

Wanting to say, "It never is cheap, is it?" Norman, instead, said nothing. Head lowered, he opened the door on the passenger side of the cab, slightly cheered that his MasterCard provided a towing reimbursement for such emergencies.

Norman nudged himself into the mess collecting on the worn vinyl seat—fast food wrappers, loose paper, and a few glossy magazines with women in bikinis bent provocatively over the hoods and roofs of flashy, souped-up cars with wide tires and ornate chrome rims. The cab smelled distinctly of motor oil and dirt, and the air was thick with dust. Norman rifled through the clutter around him searching for the seatbelt latch, ready to stick his hand into the seat's dark crevices when the tow man spoke.

"Won't find it," he said, slamming the truck into gear, spinning the tires as he pulled onto the road. "Got rid of them a while ago. Read something in the newspaper about how many people die from wearing seat belts. Car rolls into a lake, you can't get your seat belt off. It happens more than you think, you know what I mean?"

Norman made a low, grunting noise, neither a positive nor a negative reply. He wanted to collapse into himself, empty his lungs of air and be gone, close his eyes and wake up a hundred miles from this stifling cab and the crass figure occupying its foul space.

"My friends call me Curly," the tow man said, extending a callused, grease-stained hand Norman reluctantly grasped. His forearms were thick and tanned a deep brown, the muscles like tight rope pushing against the skin, and Norman couldn't help thinking how pale and soft his hand appeared in Curly's sturdy grip.

Curly wore a gun on his hip, partly concealed under the greasy, threadbare shirt he wore untucked; and when he saw Norman eyeing it, he explained he carried it for job security. "Last month alone," he said, "two of my buddies in Elko almost got robbed. The cops call it attempted robbery, but you never know what'll happen. A few years ago, I heard of a tow truck driver out of Vegas who got shot in the head, execution style, murdered for forty bucks, and then dumped in a canal. Far be it from me to make a racial slur, but I say it's these wetbacks moving their drugs across the border. I can see you're a Utah boy by your license plate, and I know you're getting them over there, too. I have an uncle outside St. George. Says you can't turn into Home Depot without almost running one down

in the parking lot. Hell, it's the same all over the West I hear: L.A., Vegas, Salt Lake City. And it's not just the drugs and the crime. White people are becoming a minority. Excuse me if that sounds bad, but it keeps me up at night. I have two daughters in Elko. I have to think about them. My family goes back in this county two hundred and fifty years, and some dark-skinned invader from the south waltzes in here and wants a free piece of the pie, wants to take food from my babies' mouths. Doesn't that piss you off, paying someone's way?"

The question bothered Norman, the man bothered Norman, everything within the grasp of Norman's senses bothered him—the abrasive sun, the stifling heat in the cab, the dashboard clock, Curly's provincial drawl and crude demeanor. Norman had already conceived his own hard-nosed views on illegal immigration, views not so different from Curly's, but he didn't want to concur. He didn't want Curly to think they had anything in common. "It's a complicated situation," Norman said.

"Don't think I'm racist," Curly said. "Not at all. But some of these people will steal your car because you're white, because they think you're loaded. They don't care about giving, they just want to take, take, take, and they don't care from who. And then you see it on the news, the random violence. They'll shoot you in the head and not blink an eye. They're monsters." Curly adjusted the air vent and cleared his throat. "I hope I haven't offended you. But you have to understand my work: dark, deserted roads, strangers. I'm one who sees and hears things in the dark."

He smiled. Norman could see the yellow glint of his teeth. "Hell, I wish all my customers were like you, clean-cut and white bread. You know, you look like a guy I knew from high school, this guy voted Nicest in Class. No joking. Scott Chandler, great guy. You could have nailed his sister to a tree and skinned her alive, and he wouldn't have raised his voice. No one liked him, though. Too nice, too boring."

Curly, as if suddenly taking notice of the filth surrounding him, threw a few of the magazines and some of the hamburger wrappers behind the seat. "So tell me," he said, "a good boy like you, what's the worst thing you've ever done?"

The heat and the metrical hum of the diesel engine had lulled Norman into a semi-conscious state. He'd listened to little of what Curly had said, but the question—*What's the worst thing you've ever done?*—jolted him awake.

Curly smiled, showing his dingy teeth and gray, swollen gums. "The

worst thing you've ever done. Just between me and you. Our little secret. The worst thing you've never told anyone."

Norman, not knowing why, suddenly felt panic, his palms damp, his hands trembling, his mind frozen.

"Forget it," Curly said. "Forget I asked." He switched on the CB radio near the gearshift.

Norman wiped at his sodden forehead. The question persisted like a noisome, lingering odor. What was the worst thing he'd done? On a Webelos campout twenty years ago, he'd tested the blade of his pocketknife by cutting through the rain fly on Brother Seegmiller's tent, and then blamed it on Cliff Wallace, a smelly welfare case all the boys secretly called Pigpen. In junior high, on a dare, he phoned Christie Reed's house when she'd gone to the movies with friends and told her parents she'd been in a car accident, and then gave them the number of the county morgue. Later, in high school, he and Cameron left an unkind note on the windshield of an obnoxious, overweight girl in their European history class. Norman heard she committed suicide a few years after graduation.

Considering these small cruelties, even after so many years, Norman still felt an immense weight for what he'd done, a crippling guilt seeping into his whirring mind as he tossed in bed at night, unable to sleep, comforted only by repeating to himself again and again that these mistakes had saved him from larger mistakes. One's hold to the Iron Rod is tenuous at best, Norman had always believed. Life could quickly turn tragic, one small mistake begetting another, and then another, until the unspeakable occurred. Yet at times, Norman wondered if, in his effort to stay on the strait and narrow, he'd missed out on something.

The CB crackled. A distant, twangy voice, devoid of emotion, announced the details of a car accident south of town: rollover, station wagon, Lifeflight chopper en route, clean-up requested. Curly whooped loudly. Wide-eyed, licking his lips, he turned to Norman: "That's a hundred and twenty dollars in my pocket. It sounds bad, I know, but the more accidents the more money I make."

* * *

THREE GUYS AND A GAL AUTOMOTIVE. The faded sign rose above a cinderblock building with two open bays gaping like dark, toothless mouths. Dust-stained and deteriorating, the building blended with the barren desert around it. Norman, at first glance, thought it might be a

wrecking yard, an automotive graveyard littered with rows of afflicted cars: flat tires, peeling paint, and gutted interiors, a wasteland from which cars never returned.

Curly swung the truck through the narrow chain-link gate and braked harder than was necessary, jumped from the cab and loosened the chains mooring the car to the truck bed.

"Help me give her a shove," Curly said to Norman, and together they pushed the car into an open bay.

After Curly had returned his credit card, Norman thanked him, and then began walking toward the mechanic's office, happy to be done with Curly. Before he reached the door, someone yelled his name. Norman turned and saw Curly jump from the truck and run over. "Listen," he said, practically panting from the short sprint. "I've been thinking I offended you back there."

Raising his eyebrows to convey a surprise he didn't feel, Norman said, "No, not at all." And then: "It's been a very long day. I just don't feel that chatty. That's all." Norman, standing in the wash of Curly's rank breath, felt constricted, felt as if he wanted to tear at his own skin and scream. What did this man want, some kind of validation of his worth as a human being? A friendly, sympathetic sounding board? What? A service had been rendered and paid for, a receipt given. Norman thanked Curly again and turned to leave, feeling he owed this man nothing more.

"I have this feeling you don't think much of me. Maybe you think I'm some kind of brute," Curly said, patting the gun on his hip. "Understand this isn't Utah. This place is isolated, out in the middle of nowhere. You see strange things. And this business of making money from accidents"—he paused, looked off toward the interstate and then back to Norman—"it's not like I'm a vulture. Somebody has to do it. Somebody has to get their hands dirty to clean things up. Hell, it puts bread on the table for my babies. Don't that make it right?"

Norman didn't like the insinuation that by his living in Utah he was innocent and needed a lecture on the world's sad realities. "Really, I'm not offended. As I said, it's been a long day. I've been distracted."

"I understand," Curly said. "I didn't want you to have the wrong impression of me. You're a nice guy. I didn't want to shake you up or anything."

Stepping toward the mechanic's office, Norman said, "I'm fine. It was nice to meet you. Good luck."

"Hey, I'll tell you what," Curly said, slapping his hands together. "I'll do this job and when I get back, I'll take you out for a drink, show you the town."

Norman felt his jaw drop, felt the dry wind on the tip of his tongue. He looked up and down the narrow street, Wells's main thoroughfare. To the west he could see the blinking lights of the casino and to the east a few bars and a mobile home park. "I appreciate the offer," Norman said, "but I plan to be on the road by then."

Curly smiled and then began tapping his foot. "You don't get it. Your engine's toast. I can smell it from here. There's no way you're getting out tonight. So what do you say? My treat."

"I don't drink," Norman said.

"Then a cup of coffee."

"I don't drink coffee."

"That's right. You're one of those Mormon boys," Curly said, shaking his head. "You wear a short leash. I respect that. How about a soda then? Do you drink soda?"

Norman couldn't speak. He felt the silence gathering and knew Curly wouldn't take no for an answer.

"All right. A soda."

"Good," Curly said. "About two hours. I'll be back." He mounted the truck and, just before closing the door, turned to Norman: "Hey, tonight you can even crash at my place if you want."

Norman watched the truck move toward the freeway and knew he would do anything to be somewhere else when Curly returned.

* * *

Norman sat on the worn couch in the office and picked at a yellowed newspaper he'd found stuffed between the couch cushions, creasing the faded pages loudly and staring through an open door leading into the garage, where the two mechanics seemed oblivious to him. Both wore navy blue coveralls unzipped to their navels, exposing hairy, distended bellies. One smoked a cigarette near the open bay door and the other was bent over the engine of a black Ford truck, tapping his heavy black boots to the drone of a radio bleating out "Smoke on the Water." Norman's car, its hood up, sat forlornly on the far side of garage. Norman looked at his watch and drew a long breath.

"Gee, I hope you don't need to be somewhere tonight," a woman

said. She walked across the room and sat at a metal desk cluttered with yellow carbon copies and dirty coffee mugs with oil-smudged handles. She grabbed a bag of potato chips someone had left there and started eating. She was about Norman's age, skin tanned to a deep bronze, hair sun-streaked.

"No hope of getting out tonight?" Norman said, hoping his expectant smile might prompt her to hurry the mechanics.

"I'll be honest with you," she said. "This is the only garage in town. These guys tend to take their time." She tipped the bag of chips in Norman's directions. "Want some?"

"No, thanks. I really don't have much of an appetite."

"It's probably for the best," she said, throwing the bag on the desk. "Doctors say these things will kill you. Hydrogenated oil. That's what does it."

"Bad stuff," Norman said. He peered through the dusty window at the sign. Already its shadow was growing longer over the mass of crippled cars littering the parking lot.

"I'm the gal," the woman said.

Norman turned from the window. "Pardon me."

She pointed to the sign. "Three Guys and a Gal. I'm the gal." She crossed her legs and smiled, showing a row of straight, radiant teeth so white it seemed that light emanated from them. Norman wanted to compliment her but decided against it, wondering if she might interpret his observation as a come-on.

Through the open door came the sound of metal striking concrete. The mechanic working on the black Ford picked up a long wrench that had fallen to the floor and began fingering it as if it were a guitar, leaning back and pumping his head from side to side. The other mechanic stood over Norman's car, peering at the engine, the burning nub of a cigarette pinched between his black fingers.

"So you're the gal?" Norman said, cheered at the sight of the mechanic. "Where's the third mechanic? Did he get fired and nobody's changed the sign?"

It was meant as a joke, but the woman became very serious. "Oh, he's not around anymore," she said. She picked up a stack of papers and stared at them a moment before putting them aside. "I'm Maggie," she said, smiling again.

Norman meant for the conversation to stop there, but she asked

him a few questions and to be polite, he felt he should ask her a few. She had been born in Wells, lived there all her life except for briefly attending a small college in Colorado. She was unmarried and had been working at the garage for the last three years. "But this isn't the only thing I do," she said. "If I had to define myself solely by this job, I think I'd go mad. This is just something steady with benefits, something to pay the bills. What I really like to do is make herbal products, soaps and oils, facial scrubs, lotions. I sell them on the web. It's all about helping people achieve balance, about finding inner peace."

"Soaps and oils," Norman said. "I didn't realize there was much of a market."

"You'd be surprised," Maggie said. "I ship products to New Zealand and Finland. They're things I make in my house. There's a personalized touch. People like that."

Norman imagined large metal vats of bubbling lye and Maggie standing over them in goggles and a rubber apron, stirring the seething concoction with a long metal pole, pouring in beakers of scented oils. He imagined her body leaning into it, her narrow hips turning in small circles, her bare arms, a glistening line of sweat on her upper lip. Norman stared at the weave in the brown carpet and ran his hand quickly across his forehead as if the movement might erase this image of Maggie from his mind.

"So what about you?" Maggie asked. "I've been chattering away and I don't even know your name."

"Norman Reeves."

"Norman Reeves," Maggie said, repeating the name a few times as if practicing it for recitation. "I can't say I've met many Normans. In fact, you might be the first. The only Norman I can think of is Norman Bates from *Psycho*." Maggie narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice to an ominous whisper. "So Norman, do you have your dead mother stashed away somewhere? Do you dress in her clothes and speak in her voice and prey on vulnerable young women searching for a new life?"

"Nothing that exciting," Norman said, grasping the joke. "It's a family name. My great-grandpa—I don't know how many greats back—crossed the plains in the dead of winter pushing a handcart. I guess it's supposed to be inspiring. I've never liked it. And the diminutive's not much better. *Norm*. It makes me think of an obese alcoholic."

"What? You think you got problems?" Maggie said, her eyes bright

and playful. She leaned forward as if to impart a confidence, and Norman could smell her perfume circling the room, something like vanilla. "I'll tell you a secret," she whispered. "Maggie's my middle name. I'm really named after my grandma." She looked around and then spoke. "Her name was Elva. Isn't that horrible?"

Laughing, his hand covering his mouth, Norman tried to think of something to say. He felt awkward and disoriented, finding it strange that, after all the inconvenience the day had proffered, he now sat with a beautiful woman, having nothing to say, unsure if he should even be speaking with her.

"So what do you do?" Maggie asked. "For work, I mean." And when Norman told her, she said: "It must be nice to help people."

Norman cleared his throat and stared at the floral print on the couch with its faded arabesques of leafy boughs topped with pink flowers. "It is," Norman said.

This admission—that he was a guidance counselor—always garnered the same response from those who didn't know him: *It must be nice to help people*. This bothered Norman. Those who knew him, always scratched their heads, confessing they'd pegged him as something else when they'd first met him—an accountant, an engineer, someone who balanced rows of numbers or great masses of metal or concrete. Privately, Norman felt that he was a poor match for his chosen profession. He thought of the students who'd passed through his office, most of them slackers, oozing a palpable bravado and indifference he could sense in the way they shuffled along with no hurry or urgency, sedated, faces as blank as a cue ball, slouching and yawning as he intoned the rhetoric of fear, quoting statistics on drug use, hefting glossy pictures of doe-eyed meth addicts, painting the stark realities of the adult world as vividly as possible. Norman's scalp tingled. There was a dull ache pulsing behind his eyes. Who was he to lecture anyone? Who was he to speak with authority? He couldn't even get to California. He couldn't keep a girlfriend. And then there were the more troubled students Norman met with weekly, kids who emanated a deep hatred for everything around them. He sensed they heard nothing but white noise when he spoke, saw nothing but a hypocrite in a shirt and tie reciting facts. Norman often wondered if they saw in him a contempt for the world and disaffection equal to their own, a pained, lonely cynic as broken and jaded as themselves.

"I don't have any formal training, but I think I know when people

need help," Maggie said. "When I walked in, I saw you were having a bad day. Maybe sometimes it's enough just to talk with someone, to have a connection, and that makes a problem seem smaller. That's the way I see things. Is that strange?"

"Not at all," Norman said. He could truthfully say he felt better just talking with Maggie.

Maggie rubbed her right knee and then straightened both legs. "So where you going?"

"California," Norman said. And then he told her about Carolyn, about the ring in his pocket and his plan to propose.

"Very romantic," Maggie said. "And she doesn't know you're coming?"

"No idea at all," Norman said.

At that moment the mechanic who'd been inspecting Norman's car walked into the office. Norman jumped, suddenly feeling panicked, as if he'd been caught doing something wrong.

"Don't you need to deposit those checks?" the man asked Maggie.

She pulled an envelope from the top desk drawer and said: "I almost forgot." She looked over her shoulder as she walked through door. "It's been nice, Norman. It really has."

"It has," Norman said, noticing she had the smallest limp, a favoring of the left leg over the right. She got into a blue pick-up truck and drove toward the interstate.

"Women," the mechanic said, sitting down heavily behind the desk and making a wide sweeping motion with his arm in the direction Maggie had driven away. "Especially this one. She's a dreamer, always has her head in the clouds, always talking about the stars and moon." He yawned and scratched at a woolly patch of dark hair poking through the neck of his coveralls.

Norman cleared his throat. "What's wrong with my car?"

The mechanic pulled a short section of black rubber hose from his pocket and flopped it on the desk. "You see that hole? You lost all your radiator fluid. Overheated and shot your engine to hell. Blown head gasket."

Norman knew very little about cars, but had a vague notion that a blown head gasket was a major problem. "How much?" he asked.

"How much?" the mechanic said. "That's what everyone wants to know." He took a thick green book from a dusty shelf above the desk and began flipping through the pages and then writing columns of numbers

on a legal pad. "Parts and labor will cost two thousand, plus or minus a hundred. Might have to replace the water pump."

The words felt like a kick to the guts. Norman, speechless, stared at the mechanic's name embroidered on the breast of his coveralls. *Lou*. The name was like a stereotype, like a joke people make about bad mechanics.

"So what do you want to do?" the mechanic asked. He'd found the bag of chips and shoved a handful in his mouth, wiping his hand on his pant leg.

"Are you sure?" Norman said. "That seems high."

"Positive," the mechanic said. "It's straight from the book. Look for yourself if you want." He smiled. "I'd tell you to get a second opinion, but what can you do?"

Norman knew the cost of repairs wasn't worth it. The car was old, his grandmother's car, a gift she'd given him when he graduated from college six years earlier. He could get another car. What bothered him was that he wanted out of this town. He looked around the office, at the faded walls and furniture, all in various stages of decay, a reflection of the view through the window. People live in this. The thought baffled Norman.

By now the mechanic was drumming his fingers against the binding of the green book, waiting.

"I don't even think the car is worth two thousand dollars," Norman said.

"I got a buddy who owns a junk yard across town," the mechanic said. "He'll probably give you fifty bucks for it." He paused and then began picking at the grit under his thumbnail with the tip of a pencil. "I have to charge you a twenty-five dollar diagnostic fee for looking at the car."

Norman handed the cash over. The mechanic counted the bills and then shoved them in his pocket. "I don't mean to hurry you along," he said, "but we're closing. If you want, there's a motel near the freeway, not more than ten minutes on foot. I think the Greyhound passes by there tomorrow afternoon or maybe it's the day after tomorrow."

* * *

Norman left the mechanic's office. A hot wind blew through the empty streets, and overhead the streetlights flicked on, making an annoying buzzing sound. Norman, a backpack with a few clothes and toiletries looped around his shoulder, walked toward a restaurant he'd seen earlier from the cab of Curly's truck, a cinderblock building with a neon sign

broadcasting its name in an obnoxious red: The Ranch House. Norman walked toward the building, thinking he'd call someone for a ride and then have something to eat.

The restaurant door was locked, though Norman could hear a susurrus of voices inside. A red curtain that hung on the inside of the door suddenly parted and a man with a bloated pink face and a stubble of blond hair on his freckled head pointed at a doorbell to the right of the door. "You have to ring the bell," he said, his voice a murmur through the glass.

Norman pressed the button and waited. A woman in a low-cut red dress and black stiletto heels, blond and heavily made-up, opened the door. "What can I do for you?" she said in a low breathy voice whose affectation made each word sound sticky. She stared at Norman, her lips constricted, as if she were suppressing laughter.

"Is there a phone I can use?" Norman asked.

"Come in," she said, leaning against the doorjamb and leaving just enough room for Norman to squeeze by. "You just need to use the phone?" She spoke the words slowly, as if to leave room for Norman to interject something.

"I might order something, too," Norman said, sliding past the woman, feeling the swell of her soft breasts touch his shoulder. She smelled of lavender, a scent Norman could taste in the back of his throat. "Is there a menu I can look at?"

The playfulness drained out of the woman's face. "A menu? You're serious, aren't you?"

"Isn't this a restaurant?"

The woman began to laugh, head thrown back, eyes glistening. "If you want a restaurant, honey, you got the wrong place. This is a . . ." She paused. Her eyes searched the ceiling. "I bet you thought I was your waitress, didn't you? Thought I'd walk you to a table and take your order."

Norman could feel the crimson burning in his cheeks, could see the rising color in his cheeks reflected in an antique mirror near the door, could see himself crumpling, shoulders falling, arms crossed tightly over his chest.

"You never heard of the Ranch House?" she asked. "Where you from?"

"I just need to make a call," Norman said, looking around the room, feeling at the very center of it. "Just the phone."

Men, mostly truckers, Norman thought, judging by the big rigs in the parking lot, were scattered throughout the room, slouching around wooden tables, playing cards. And why hadn't Norman noticed it before: no plates on the tables, no crumpled napkins, no smell of food, only the stench of stale cigarette smoke, alcohol, and perfume. The room hummed with a palpable tension, a tightness and anticipation permeating the men's eager faces, animating their coarse speech. Their eyes darted about, drawn mostly to a pulled black curtain that hung in the back of the room. Norman felt revulsion for all of them. He wanted to run out the door as a sign of protest, but knew this action would be only another source of laughter for this woman, a story she'd recount later to amuse her colleagues.

The woman, seeming to tire of Norman, pointed him toward a dim hallway. "If you decide you want more than just the phone," she told Norman, "take a seat anywhere."

Not turning to acknowledge her, Norman wove through the tables, avoiding the curious eyes following him. He lifted the phone and listened to the dull pulse, seeing across the room that the woman at the door was speaking with a co-worker, a short woman in a red strapless dress carrying an empty drink tray. Both were gawking at him and laughing.

Turning away from them, Norman dialed Cameron's number and waited. After three rings, Erica answered.

"Erica, I need to speak with Cameron."

"Who is this?"

Suddenly Norman heard an eruption of sound behind him, a twangy country song with a sharp steel guitar, clapping, voices shouting over the steady beat of drums. Norman cupped his hand against the phone. "This is Norman." He paused. "Norman Reeves."

"Cameron isn't here," she said. "Call back later."

Her voice began to fade, so Norman had to shout. "Wait, don't hang up. Erica, please." Then he told her about the trip, about the car and the mechanic, and how he was stuck and wanted a ride. "You need to come get me," he said. "As soon as possible."

"I'm through waiting on you hand and foot," Erica said. "What gives you the right to order me around? After all we've done for you. And not even the courtesy of a thank you."

Norman was shocked, wanting to believe he hadn't heard her. "I don't understand," he said.

"Listen," Erica said. "When you stayed with us, you never once volun-

teered to do the dishes, never once vacuumed the floor, never cleaned the bathroom, or paid a bill. All you ever did was sit around and talk about how reckless and misguided the world is, how you're better than everyone. Do you know your mom used to call Cameron every month practically in tears, begging him to help you, to set you up with a nice girl? It's hopeless, Norman. But you got everything figured out, so figure your way a ride home."

At that moment a hand clamped onto Norman's shoulder and spun him around. He immediately recognized the face, the dark, vacuous eyes and the yellow teeth framed between two thin lips.

"Of all the places," Curly said, his words thick and slurred, his breath sour. "I never thought I'd find a good boy like you here." He draped his arm over Norman's shoulder.

"I need to go," Norman said. He tried to lift Curly's arm, but it held him tightly.

Curly waved to a woman across the room. "Marta, bring a Coke for my boy Norm. No, bring a Sprite."

Three women, all wearing short red dresses that glittered in a false and irritating way, circled the tables carrying drink trays. Others sat at the tables. One sat on a man's lap, laughing, her head thrown back, her hand kneading his arm. The black curtain was open, revealing a long hallway that led to some rooms. One door was open. There was a bed in the room and a black light that made the bedspread look like neon liquid.

"Please," Norman said. He suddenly felt sick. "I need to go."

Curly raised his hand and whistled. "Everyone, this is my friend, Norm, one of those Utah boys, voted nicest in his high school class. His car broke down and he won't be leaving tonight, but while he's here he's chosen the finest entertainment in town."

The room erupted in a chorus of shouts and wolf calls. A few men lifted their glasses and winked.

"Looks like your friend needs to loosen up a little," one waitress called out. Norman could see dark freckles on her chest. They reminded him of constellations. "Maybe I should give him a freebie just to put a smile on his face."

Again the room erupted. Norman stared at the circles of smiling faces and felt as if his mind had shrunk into something no larger than a pebble.

Lifting a sweaty glass of beer to his peeling lips, Curly said, "Well, what do you say? Isn't that hospitality?"

"I don't feel well," Norman said. He turned for the door. Curly's arm slackened on his shoulder.

"What do you mean?" Curly said. "Why'd you come here in the first place?" He set his glass down and took a step toward Norman. "You don't have any explaining to do, Norm. You're among friends. No one's going to tell, and no one's going to care."

Norman didn't turn back when he heard a crescendo of laughter and boos. He opened the door and decided he was doing the right thing.

* * *

Norman walked toward the motel, passing a bar with a wagon wheel suspended over the door. Through the window, he watched a dozen couples, hands clasped together, faces touching, waltzing across the wooden floor. He needed to call someone but knew that no one would offer a ride, not one person. They'd make excuses. They wouldn't answer. They'd delete his message. He touched the brass door knob and paused. The plaintive notes of a steel guitar filtered through the door, a sad melody that yanked at something in the back of his throat.

Norman began to cry, and so as not to be heard or seen, he covered his face with his hand and turned from the window, cupping his mouth to deaden the sobs. His body shook as if with convulsions. Norman had never felt so alone. And then, with a stone-cold clarity that razored into him, Norman knew he couldn't remember not feeling alone. There had been Carolyn, the girls he dated in high school and college, mission companions and roommates, his colleagues, friends from home like Cameron. Hadn't they been friends, conversed together, shared memories? A chill inched up Norman's spine, passed through his trembling shoulders, and settled into his jaw, making his teeth chatter. They were his friends, Norman knew, yet he'd always felt comforted he'd avoided their pitfalls and vices, and evaded their unhappiness. Norman wiped at his eyes with his palm and shook his head. Then why am I so unhappy? he thought.

At that moment, Norman saw Maggie walking up the street. A short overweight man with thinning brown hair and lardy skin followed close behind her, talking loudly and gesturing.

"What do you mean you're waiting for your boyfriend?" the man said. "Just one drink. It's not going to hurt anyone. You're the cutest little thing I ever seen in this town."

Norman was about to turn away when Maggie waved.

"Just play along," she whispered when he was close enough to hear. She held his hand and turned on the man. "I told you I was waiting for my boyfriend," she said. "Get lost." Norman narrowed his eyes and tried to stand a little taller. The man shrugged and walked the other direction. Norman looked down at their hands, at her fingers intertwined with his. The hand was soft and warm, and he didn't want to let it go. Maggie smiled and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. He gently squeezed. She squeezed back. What am I doing? Norman thought. He slowly released her hand and took a step back.

"Thank you," Maggie said. "We get some real creeps passing through."

"It was a pleasure," Norman said. He could smell Maggie's perfume. It came to him in small bursts. He wanted to close his eyes and breathe it in.

"Hey, tough luck with the car," she said. "Lou told me what happened."

"Some things you don't see coming," Norman said. "What a place to get stuck." He realized his last sentence sounded too harsh. "I don't mean to criticize your town. It just hasn't been a good day."

"No need to apologize," Maggie said. "Sometimes I feel this place is the end of the world, but it does have its redeeming qualities. And, hey, at least we met. You could call it serendipity. Well, maybe it's not so unexpected." She puffed her cheeks and then let her arms fall to her side. "Okay, I'll confess. Lou told me what direction you went, and I started looking. Do you think that's strange? I usually don't do this: scour the town for someone I just met. Gee, to be stuck in a strange town, not knowing anyone—I felt bad." She tapped her bottom teeth with her thumb nail and gazed up at Norman. Her eyes, as resplendent as burnished onyx, were disarming and seemed to take him all in at a glance, his utter melancholy and loneliness, his helplessness. "Hey, why don't you come over for dinner? I just live around the corner. It won't be anything special, just leftovers from last night. Come on. What do you say?"

The street lamps buzzed overhead. Norman looked down Main Street toward the blinking casino lights. Beyond the lights he saw nothing but darkness. The thought of walking in that direction seemed unbearable. So did the thought of lying in a motel room, surfing channels, and listening to the rush of cars and trucks on the interstate.

"I *am* hungry," Norman said.

Maggie's house was small, a bedroom, a kitchen, and a living room

sparsely furnished with a blue denim couch and a square slate-topped coffee table. Next to the door hung a collage of photographs in a black wooden frame. Several potted plants, arranged according to size, adorned the windowsill. "This is it," Maggie said. "Stand in the middle of the living room, spin once, and you've seen everything." She disappeared into the kitchen. "Just give me a second."

The refrigerator opened and closed. The oven door banged shut. There was the click of a turning dial and then the hiss of gas. Norman waited by the door, fingering the ring case in his pocket. "You can set your bag down," Maggie said, reappearing so suddenly that her voice startled him. "Make yourself at home."

Norman set the backpack near the door, loosening and then tightening the shoulder straps for no reason at all. The evaporative cooler switched on and rattled through a vent above the bedroom door. On the other side of the room, Maggie stood near the window. She twisted a yellowed leaf from one of the potted plants and rubbed it between her fingers before setting it beside the terra cotta pot. "I believe in being honest," she said.

Norman waited for some kind of revelation, that Maggie was married or had brought him here to sell him something. "So do I," Norman said.

But Maggie said nothing. Instead, she lifted her pant leg, yanked at a leather strap cinched around her thigh, and removed the leg below the knee. She took the leg, with the shoe still attached, and set it under the coffee table. Then she looked at Norman. "Do you mind?"

"I don't mind," Norman said, watching how the empty pant leg swayed slightly in the blast of air from the vent, surprised, really, that he didn't mind.

"I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable," Maggie said. "That's why I asked. People can be cruel. You wouldn't believe what they'll say and do. Total strangers, too. Some guy in Elko, right in the middle of Wal-Mart, wanted me to show him how the prosthetic went on. One guy wanted to rub the end of my leg. I don't wear shorts anymore. Even in the middle of summer. You can understand why, I'm sure."

There was something beautiful in her vulnerability that Norman couldn't explain, something in the sadness that clouded her eyes when she told him this, in the drawn-out sighs, in the way she stared at the floor, shaking her head and smiling bemusedly at people's thoughtlessness and

cruelty. Suddenly, Norman wanted to hold Maggie. The unexpectedness of this thought shocked him. He wanted to embrace her and utter an apology of some sort. Norman wondered if he should leave. He ran his hands over his eyes, as if that might help him decide, and then stared at himself in the window, blinking at his warped image in the dark glass. The night beyond the window terrified him.

"When I'm at home I like to be myself," Maggie said. She hopped to the couch with one graceful leap and sat down. "If you're a floor person, you can use a pillow. I had the carpets shampooed a few weeks ago."

"I'll just sit by you," Norman said. As an afterthought, he took his shoes off and set them near the detached leg. "That's much better," he said, and then leaned back.

"I knew you wouldn't mind," Maggie said. "Good people are interested in more than just appearances. Most would probably freak out if I took my leg off."

"Really, I don't mind," Norman said, feeling undeserving of Maggie's admiration. "I'm glad you're comfortable."

"I'll admit it's not always easy," she said. "Sometimes, even after ten years, I still cry about it. In high school my friend and I were coming home from Elko when a drunk driver hit us. That's how it happened: out of nowhere, a bright light and then silence. My friend walked away, but I didn't." Maggie rested her arm on the back of the couch. "We didn't have any health insurance. The whole town helped. Maybe that's one of the reasons I stay. On the outside people here seem rough and uneducated, but on the inside they're good. It beats other places where people look nice and are really mean."

"It must have been quite the community effort," Norman said.

"It was," Maggie said. "For a while I wasn't doing well. Just imagine, one day I'm running track, and the next I can't walk. And on top of that we couldn't afford a prosthetic or the rehabilitation. That's when everyone chipped in. After that I always swore I'd help someone if I had the chance. That's why I came back."

With an agility that impressed Norman, Maggie lifted herself from the couch and, with her arm resting on his shoulder, took the collage of photographs from the wall. She set the collage on the table and pointed to a picture of a bearded, heavy-set man with a rifle slung over his shoulder. Behind him was the flat, monochrome desert stretching to the mountains. He looked at the other pictures: Maggie playing the piano in a white

dress, making a pie, running track. Norman wondered why the bearded man occupied the center of the collage.

"Is he your father?" Norman asked.

"He was a friend of the family," Maggie said. "Bill Mortensen." She stared closely at the picture and then wiped away a speck of dust on the glass. "He was the third guy at the garage until he got sick. Cancer. Three packs a day, unfiltered cigarettes. I saw the X-rays of his lungs. The cancer was like wisps of smoke in there, like smudges. I was living in Colorado at the time, working, taking classes when I wanted, drifting here and there, and then my mom called to tell me that Bill was getting worse and how she'd been trying to care for him, but could only do so much." She paused, fighting for composure. "It was one of those moments. It sounds so silly, I know. A moment of clarity, as if the universe opened itself for a second and I saw a pathway, a purpose. So I followed it and came home." Maggie wiped at her eyes and smiled apologetically. "Gosh, I don't know why I'm telling you this. You must think I'm so gloomy."

"I don't think that at all," Norman said. "You did something most people wouldn't do."

"That might be the case," Maggie said, "but looking back, I didn't know what I was getting into. It was the typical story of a person dying of cancer. He lived a year beyond the diagnosis. We got into the chemotherapy routine. They called it 'daycare' at the clinic. There was always a long wait. Then the drip in the arm. Then the inevitable nausea. It was the most helpless I'd ever felt to watch him puke his guts out, a big, powerful man. Then the cancer got to his liver and then into his brain. There's a horror in watching someone you've known all your life fade away. Our conversations became shorter. He began to forget things. The last forty-eight hours were the worst. My parents were there. Bill's brother, too. By that time we had a nurse. And then there was the sound of his lungs, like a squeaky door opening and closing every time he took a breath. It's like it went on forever. At one point the nurse wanted us to leave so she could freshen him up. That's when he passed, when we were standing outside the room. It's like he knew we were out of the room and wanted to save us from the final moment. When I was looking at him after, I couldn't help thinking that everything else in him had worked well. Maybe that's the lesson in all of this. One fatal flaw, one bad habit, took him from us."

"Awful," Norman muttered, wincing at how trivial and common the word sounded. He could imagine the shaded room, the smell of sick-

ness, the shrunken, waxy figure on the bed, and Maggie standing there, weeping quietly. Norman remembered a phrase he'd read and underlined in a college textbook seven years ago. "There is a great sadness pushing at the world," it said, "and it only needs a little slipway, a little opening." The words seemed rife with meaning, and Norman, for the first time, thought he understood the implication of those words.

"Have you ever read *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran?" Maggie asked. "I mention it because you're a guidance counselor and help people."

Norman knew the book—the story of an old sage imparting pearls of wisdom—but he'd never read more than a page or two, though many people had recommended it. The story seemed too contrived, too feel-good and saccharine, one of those books that litters thrift stores after its initial popularity has waned. "I haven't," Norman said.

Maggie stood and took a worn blue copy of *The Prophet* from a shelf next to the door. There was a gold hand stamped on the cover, and in the palm of the hand were human silhouettes stretching their arms upward. "This was a gift from my English teacher," Maggie said. "She gave it to me after the accident. It helped. After reading it, I started writing my own poetry. When Bill got sick I bought him a copy. Every day we read a chapter and talked about it, shared experiences and things like that. I want to read you something from it. This was Bill's favorite." She cleared her throat and began. The poem was about pain, how pain breaks a shell that encloses our understanding, how pain, like joy, is one of the miracles of our lives, how we must accept pain just as we accept the seasons of the year because pain is the bitter potion the physician uses to heal us. Maggie barely glanced at the page.

Norman tried to smile as she read, knowing that nothing he had ever thought or said had been as powerful. In all his time as a guidance counselor, he'd never helped anyone the way Maggie had helped herself and later Bill.

"You're beautiful," Norman said. Maggie closed the book and touched the gold hand on the cover. "And I'm talking about more than just the way you look."

"Thanks," she said.

"You said you write poetry?" Norman asked. He suddenly wanted to hear Maggie's voice again reading something.

"I dabble in it," Maggie said, "but it's awful stuff. I'm embarrassed."

Norman touched her hand. "Read something."

Maggie took a worn spiral notebook from under the coffee table. "I read this at Bill's funeral. It's called 'Joy and Sorrow.' You might think it's too depressing. Maybe I'll read something else."

"It's important," Norman said. "I'd like to hear it."

Taking Norman's left hand, Maggie said, "I love the way you look at me." And then she began to read.

Norman closed his eyes and listened. The words were simple and the rhythm somewhat forced, but he enjoyed the poem and even began to believe what Maggie was saying: that the deeper we are cut by sorrow, the deeper our joy, and that joy and sorrow are inseparable, and without them life is empty.

When Maggie finished, she closed the notebook. "You keep doing that," she said, pointing to Norman's right hand clamped tightly over his pant pocket.

Norman pulled the ring case from the pocket and examined its polished surface.

"California," Maggie said. She let go of Norman's hand and began fingering the notebook's metal spiral.

"I don't know if I want to go to California," Norman said. He set the ring case on the coffee table.

"What do you want?" Maggie asked.

"What do I want?" Norman said, more to himself than to Maggie. He reached for her hand. "I want you to read another poem," he said. "I want you to read all of them."

Maggie stared at their clasped hands and nodded. She opened the notebook to the first page and began reading.

Outside, the wind had picked up, and somewhere in the distance Norman heard chimes ringing, a dreamy melody that seemed to emanate from the earth itself. Sitting beside Maggie, who seemed so beautiful, Norman understood that everything, if examined closely enough, is beautiful. Norman closed his eyes. "My life's going to change," he thought.