

## The Redneck Kafka

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There was a simple sign on the window. Cheap Used Books. I was unemployed, trying to sell off some books, hoping to buy dinner for the night, then return to the apartment from which I was soon to be evicted. The apartment in which I had been married for a very short time.

I walked in, chiming a welcome bell. I had a box of hard covers in my arms. On top was my favorite book, a collection of Kafka's short stories. The shopkeeper, a thin, old man in his sixties or seventies, was helping an elderly lady decide on a paperback romance novel.

The shopkeeper waved at me. "Hello," he said. "Just stick the books on the counter. I'll be with you as soon as I can."

"Yes sir," I said. I gently sat the box down, being careful not to scratch the beautiful oak counter with the corner of my box. God, the store was warm. My apartment was freezing, without heat or electricity.

I had passed this store before. It was within walking distance of my apartment, about twenty minutes away. It's a hell of a walk if you're carrying a few pounds of books. It was my entire collection, the books that I had kept since I was a kid. I read them all the time, several times each. I loved them, I think, more than I loved my soul. But I was hungry, so damned hungry. I would have sold my soul for a cheeseburger, so why not these books?

The shopkeeper and the old lady had found a book. The woman held a paperback up to the light, then nodded her head and thanked the shopkeeper. They made their way to the counter, their shoes almost buried in the thick, brown and black speckled shag carpet. Each of them whispered polite small talk.

He smiled at me as he walked behind the counter. Thick, web-like creases formed around his eyes, showing his age, his wear. He turned back to the old lady and rang her up. She stayed a few feet away from me. Then, when the transaction was finished, she waved goodbye to the shopkeeper and darted toward the door, glancing at me with disgust for the briefest instant.

"Don't mind her," the shopkeeper said. "She's a pain in the ass chit-chatting lady. But she's a regular, so, what can you do? Now, what have we got here?"

"Not sure," I said, sliding the box of books closer to him. "Been reading these forever, but

I'm not sure if they're worth anything."

"Well," he said, "we'll see, I suppose." He began sorting the books into piles.

"Yeah," I said, "my wife said that readin' was the only thing we had in common."

The shopkeeper looked up for a second. "Oh? My wife used to say something like that, jokingly of course. Where do ya'll live? Around here?"

"Well, I do, sir," I said. "I don't know about my wife, though. She's gone." I instantly regretted saying that.

"Oh," the shopkeeper said, "I'm sorry." Then, quickly changing the subject, he added, "This is your first time in my little store, isn't it?"

"Yes sir," I said. "But it's a nice store. I like it."

"Thank you. Me too." The shopkeeper shook his head as if remembering something. He held out his hand. "I'm sorry. I've been rude. My name's Sam Burroughs."

I shook his hand. "Danny Sullivan, sir," I said. His politeness made me uncomfortable. My clothes stank. I stank. I just wanted to get my money and leave.

Sam Burroughs had finished separating the books. They were on the counter in two distinct piles, one much larger than the other. My newer books were in the smaller pile. They were mostly hard covers, mostly in pretty good shape. In the other pile were the books I had owned for years. They had cracked spines, dog-eared pages, and almost non-existent bindings.

"I'm sorry," Sam said. "There's not much I can do for you, son. These newer books I might be able to sell, but I doubt it. Don't get me wrong - I love poetry. And you have some good taste too - Bukowski and Snyder are two of my favorites. But, frankly, nobody buys poetry, and I have too many poetry books as it is. I can give you five bucks for the lot, mostly because of the Kafka book, but that's about all I can do."

I wanted more, but I had a feeling that he was being generous. "That's just fine," I said.

There was no cash register on the counter. Instead, he opened a drawer and flipped through some bills until he found a five. I watched him closely. His eyes kept moving from the drawer to my face. He knew I was staring. He also knew I was thinking about robbing him.

I took the bill from him. I nodded and tried to smile, but, instead, I quickly turned around and left the store.

I hadn't eaten for two days. The few dollars that I had this morning were spent on

whiskey in the afternoon. Now, it was after six o'clock in the middle of February, and it was cold, snowing. A light snow, but intolerable, freezing. So far, the winter had been mild. It was only a couple of weeks ago that my wife and I stood on the balcony of our second-story apartment in T-shirts. We smoked cigarettes and drank beer and let the sun heat our faces.

Then it got cold and my wife left me. And now I walk and think about her. My wife. Karen.

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It's early September. I see her in the distance, coming towards me, counting her change in her open palm. I am in my booth at the gas station. It's barely big enough to stand up and stretch in. It's okay though. I don't get up much. I sit and read and wait for the occasional customer to come walking up to the Plexiglas window that separates us and slide their money through a rusty metal box.

I get a blurry view of her when she walks up to the Plexiglas and puts a couple of bills and her change in the box, then slides it toward me. I glance at it for a moment and see that it is exact. I wave her away and go back to my book.

"What're you reading?" she asks. I look up and get a better view of her. She isn't fat really, just very thick, mostly in the right places around the breasts and ass and hips. Her straight blonde hair shines in the sunlight and flows maybe halfway down her back.

I show her the cover of my book.

"Kafka, huh?" she says. "Strange."

I am offended and want to defend myself. "I ain't dumb just because I work at a gas station."

She steps back. It looks like she is going to turn around and leave. But she doesn't. She just says, "No, I didn't mean anything by it. It's just -"

"You figured a guy like me would be reading Penthouse or something?"

"Well -"

"Don't worry about it," I say.

She turns sharply and acts like she wants to leave, but she doesn't. Instead, she turns toward me again. "I'm sorry. It must be this hot Alabama weather getting to me. I'm still not used to it."

"You ain't from around here?"

"Colorado, actually."

"I heard the mountains are pretty nice to look at up close."

"Yeah," she said, "but you'd be amazed how flat parts of Colorado are. I lived in a place called Odenville. It wasn't anywhere near the mountains. It was just flat. Plain."

I put a small crease in the page I was on, then close the book. I lay it on the shelf beside me next to my pack of smokes and the Coke can that is filled with vodka. "Why you down here?"

"A funeral. My father. Actually, I had to take care of him for a while before he died," she says, quickly wiping an eye with her pinky. "He grew up here."

There is a short silence, so I speak next. "I'm Danny."

"Karen," she says.

"That's a pretty name," I say. "So whatcha doing now? You workin' anywhere?"

"I'm a teacher at a small high school here in Birmingham. Actually, it's just a few blocks from where we are. I'm an English teacher. That's the main reason I was interested in what you were reading. I was thrilled to see it was Kafka. He's so dark. Unreachable."

"I breathe Kafka," I say. "Been that way since I was a boy. He made me want to write."

She laughs under her breath. "Maybe one day you'll be the Redneck Kafka."

I smile a little. "Someday soon. We need to get a cup of coffee," I say.

She smiles shyly; then snaps open her purse and tears off a scrap of paper while digging around for a pen. She writes her number down and slides it through the box. It's a scrap of yellow notebook paper. In one of the corners there is a partial lipstick blot in fading red. It is a semicircle that reveals the delicate creases in her lips. But when I look down a little, I see her handwriting. It's scribbled, almost unreadable. Like a doctor's handwriting. It's the handwriting of someone who knows they're in control.

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I was wearing a sweater, but it was too cold for just a sweater. I could feel the snowflakes falling on my head. I looked up for a second to watch them fall slowly through the light of a street lamp. The used bookstore was behind me. Ahead, if I walked straight on the slush-covered sidewalk, was a diner. It was the last building on a street of old, run-down shops. It offered a wide selection of bad cheeseburgers and coffee. But it was cheap.

The waitress noticed me as I was opening the door. She was washing dishes. She looked up at me, closed her eyes, and sighed. I suppose she had a feeling about me, that I had no intention of tipping her. She was right.

There was a sign on the door that said the diner's booths were for two or more people. But there were only two other people in the diner, an old man and an old woman. They were sitting in a booth, drinking coffee, not saying anything to each other. The old man sipped his coffee through clenched teeth and rocked back and forth in his seat. I sat in a booth on the opposite side of the diner, ordering a cheeseburger with everything on it and a cup of coffee.

After the waitress gave me the burger, I ate it quickly and didn't stop, almost didn't breathe until after I had eaten the whole thing. It did nothing except to give me a slight stomachache and remind me of my emptiness. I wanted another burger, but I only had a dollar and some change left. Convenient enough, because I planned to stop at the bar afterwards. It was dollar beer night.

By the time I finally got back to my apartment, it was nearly two in the morning. Some of the guys at the bar had chipped in and bought me some drinks. I walked in and lit a candle.

The studio apartment was mostly empty. Karen had taken most of our stuff when she left me. She even took my stereo and most of my clothes. She must have stuffed the bed of her old Ford truck with as much stuff as it would hold. All that she left me were my books and a Garth Brooks CD. I tried to sell the CD, but nobody would buy it.

The apartment came with a pullout bed. I pulled it down and laid on it, not bothering to take my clothes, or even my shoes, off. I was on my back, my hands behind my head, staring at the ceiling. I was drunk and hungry and the room was spinning around me. There was a pain building up around my ribs. I began to shiver in tremors because I was cold, because I was alone. I laid on the bed, shaking in fits, crying, biting the sheets, wallowing in my drunken rage.

Karen, all I wanted was everything.

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Karen and I decide to meet for coffee. It's been two days since we met at the gas station and I'm not sure how to react when I see her. We meet at a coffee shop that has plenty of outdoor seating. We sit outside and enjoy the warm, humid night. The conversation starts out slow. We are wrapped up in the first-date formalities, with the obligatory nervous silences and awkward questions. But soon, the conversation drifts toward the topic of books. We talk about the Beat Poets and how they affected our teenage years, our rebelliousness, our lust.

"You know," I say, finally beginning to relax, "I was the School Poet."

"School Poet?" she says. "What?"

"You know, it's kind of an honor for the best poet in the school. All the kids vote on it. Doesn't really do much except get you some recognition in the yearbook. Didn't your school have a School Poet?"

"I didn't know that any school did," she says.

After that, there is no end to the pleasures of our night. Soon, we admit to each other that that we're really not "coffee people" and decide to get some drinks at my favorite bar. It's a short walk, but Karen insists that we take her truck. It's a welcome change.

When we're inside, sitting at the bar, Karen says that she really can't have any more than a couple drinks. She has to get up at six in the morning and get ready for work. But we're having such a great time that I doubt her sincerity. We drink till ten. I invite Karen to my studio apartment. She agrees. We leave the truck in the parking lot and walk the two blocks.

"Geeze," Karen says, when she sees where we are going, "We live in the same fucking building. How come I've never seen you?"

"Dunno," I say. "We keep different hours, I guess."

We decide to crash at my apartment. I pull the bed down from the wall. Karen is already taking off her clothes. I begin to take mine off. It almost becomes a race to see who can get their clothes off first. We finish around the same time. We get on the bed and fuck for what seems like hours. Drunk fucking. Fucking to a rhythm, like breathing, breathing or dance, dancing to create our own singular life. We wanted to forget that we would die someday.

But, oh Lord, in the morning, the world still burns.

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Somehow, the memory drifted away and I fell asleep.

I stayed asleep until God knows when. Maybe two, three in the afternoon, who knows? Who gives a fuck, anyway? Jesus, I might have slept forever if the pain hadn't come. It was like someone was inside of me, carving up my stomach with a sharp knife. I thought I was dying. I threw my covers on the floor, grabbed my knees, and slumped over into a fetal position. I then bit the inside of my lip and tasted a drip of blood. This was it, I thought, the beginning of my breakdown, my physical and mental psychosis.

I lay there for a while, without thought, letting the pain take over. I began to think that it might not be so bad, this pain. Maybe I was actually dying. Maybe this would save me

the trouble of suicide, which I didn't have the guts to carry out myself. Maybe God was going to do all the messy stuff for me.

Eventually, the pain dulled a little and I found that I could actually bring myself to move around again. I got up and changed clothes. The only clothes I had left - my red sweater, my torn jeans, and my brown, steel-toed boots. I ran a comb through my hair, although, I'm not sure why I bothered. I knew I looked like shit. I felt like shit.

I had to eat. I wanted a drink. I thought about Sam Burroughs and his drawer full of cash.

Then, trying my best to ignore the pain in my belly, I left the apartment, pulling a pink eviction notice off the door.

Outside, the weather hadn't changed much. Although the sun had come out and it wasn't snowing, there was still a bitter chill in the air. The wind blew in my face. I could barely keep my eyes open. I started the twenty-minute walk. I still wasn't sure what time it was.

Each step was a struggle. My hunger was killing me. The pain in my side was throbbing again. Each time I breathed in, the heavy, knifelike sensation came back. Each time I breathed out, it went away.

Before long, I was staring at my reflection in Mr. Burroughs' used bookstore. Cheap Used Books. I looked at all the books.

Karen, if only my passion for you was half as strong as my passion for books. My passion for Kafka, and his poetic prose.

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It's been a couple of months since we've known each other. A couple of weeks since we've been married. She's moved into my apartment, and that's where we are when she asks the strangest question I've ever heard: "You wanna quit your job?"

We're standing on the porch, drinking beers and watching the sun set. The question surprises me. I put my beer down.

"Of course I do," I say. "Doesn't everyone?"

"Yes, but your poetry. It's so good." My poetry. Jesus, she must have been digging through the closet while I wasn't here. Must have found those little scraps of paper that I keep in the shoeboxes. The stuff I'd written in high school.

"We gotta eat," I say. "Anyway, I haven't written anything since high school. Been through a lot of shit since then."

"I know," she says. "You've told me all about it."

"I told you about recent shit. How I came into the job I'm at. I used to be smart, you know."

"You still are smart," she says.

"I could have gone to college."

"You never told me that. You always said your parents couldn't afford it."

"Shit," I say. "We weren't well off. But I could have done some things differently."

"Like what?" she says.

"Like not turning down a college scholarship so that I could see the world. I wanted to travel around Europe and the U.S. I wanted to see everything. Instead, I moved out of my mom and dad's apartment and got one of my own. I got a job and tried to save some money, but I ended up drinking it all away. Before I knew it, a couple years gone by and I hadn't done anything with my life."

"You ever give writing another chance?"

"Yeah," I say. "All the time. It never works, though. I've lost my creativity. I sit down to write something, and nothing comes out. Or something stupid. Something that I don't mean. Something forced."

"Maybe you oughta quit drinking," she says.

"You think that'll help anything?"

She puts her arms around me and pulls me close. Her thick arms wrap tightly around me as she puts her head near mine and whispers into my ear, "Quit your job. We don't need the money. I want you to have some time alone, without worrying about work. Write poetry for me. Bring back my Redneck Kafka"

And for her, I would do anything. I quit my job and I worked all day on my poetry, scribbling endless lines into a notebook. It's agonizing, you know, facing the thing I had avoided for years. And it's torture. The endless lines are just lines with no meaning. I've lost my imagination, the part of me that could actually sense the horror and beauty of life. I'd lost my sense of poetry.

So, in the afternoons, I want to go to the bar. She comes home from work around five. I ask for money and she gives. But she wants to come with me. After spending all day struggling with words, trying to imagine, trying to create, my only wish for the end of the day is to be alone with a drink. But of course I can't say no. I depend on this woman for everything now. I say yes, but with a quiet anxiety. So she comes and she asks me about

my writing and I answer her in monotone with a yes or no. Every word she says; every question she asks; feels like condemnation. She means well, but I get angry.

Then one afternoon she just hands me some money. Says she's just too tired to go out, and if I really want to go out without her, then fine. I walk quickly to the bar. Inside, finally left alone with a beer and my thoughts, I begin to break down. I begin to think about my childhood, my teenage years, and my parents and I living in a three-bedroom apartment downtown. I wrote poetry. And all the poetry was good - nothing but praise from my parents and my English teachers - nothing but well wishes and encouragement to continue my studies in college. Find my voice, the English teacher said. I was a good kid and I wrote poetry, and the future was bright, as they said so often. How could I guess that the spark would die one day, that I would have no talent, no purpose in life? Worse, I did it all to myself.

By the time the bar closes, I have spent all of my money on beer. I walk the short way to the apartment, then take the elevator to the third floor. I stand in front of my apartment, shaking the keys, trying to find the right one. When I find it, I make a lot of noise trying to open the door.

I finally get it open, but Karen is standing in my way.

"It's midnight. I have to be up at six. What are you doing making all this noise?"

I shove her. She falls to the floor and I walk in. "Fuck you," I say. "I was trying to get rid of some of this pressure you've been putting me through."

She gets up, sits on the bed. She is shaken, disturbed. She looks at the ground and puts her hand on her forehead. "Calm down," she says. "What are you talking about? What pressure?"

"The writing," I say. "The fucking writing."

She rubs her eyes. "You want to go back to work? Fine. Go find some gas station somewhere. I don't give a shit. But you better let me sleep. I've got to get up early."

"I better let you sleep?" I say. "How about the sleep I ain't been able to get when I realize that everything I try to write is shit? You're really fucked up, you know."

"I'm fucked up?"

"Yeah. What's the point? What do you get out of all this? Do you have some fantasy to be the wife of a great poet?" I stop to think about my words. "There ain't no poet here. No fucking Redneck Kafka."

I'm hovering over her. She looks up at me. "Just come to bed, Danny. You're drunk. We can talk about this in the morning."

She lies down. I'm full of rage. I lay on top of her and put my hand on her mouth. She screams. Damn, how she screams. But I ignore it. I pull her underwear off and don't stop my attack. Karen has done nothing but care about me. And now she screams.

In the morning, when I wake up, the snow has begun to fall, and Karen is gone.

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I had been hanging around outside of the bookstore for almost an hour, crouching below the window, leaning against the bricks, trying to bum smokes. It wasn't working. I stared at the snow-covered sidewalk. I wanted to write a poem in the snow. A good poem. A poem about love and sex. I wanted to tell the world that I am Danny, and I am a sinner. Everyone's a sinner and love is not real. But then I remembered that I have no imagination.

The pain in my stomach began to come back. I started to hurt all over again. I could only pay attention to the pain. I prepared, once again, to die.

I must have fallen down, hit my head on the sidewalk and laid there in the snow. I can't remember anything about the next few minutes or hours. God knows how long I laid there. I woke up when a pair of hands grabbed me under the armpit. I was being dragged somewhere. I kept my eyes closed. I heard a door open and then there was warmth ... warmth all over my body.

"Son, are you okay?"

God, I was so warm. I held out my tongue and tasted the warmth.

"Son, it's okay. It's okay, you hear? I'm gonna call an ambulance now. Stay put."

I was lying on the floor. The shag carpet tickled my face.

"Yes sir. Seventh Avenue South. Burroughs' Used Books. Please hurry. He's cracked his head good. Okay. Thank-you."

I wondered what felt so good, then realized I was wiggling my toes. I felt a wet rag on my forehead.

"Son, try to open your eyes."

I slowly opened my eyes. It took me a second to get focused. Books. Books all around me. Shelves of beautiful books.

I saw Sam Burroughs. "There you go, son. You're gonna be all right. Hold on a sec. I'll get some coffee. Maybe it'll warm you up a little."

So many beautiful books.

Sam returned quickly with the coffee. I sat up and took hold of it. I let it warm my hands. I took a sip and let it warm my body. Sam Burroughs held the rag on my head.

"My wife's gone," I said.

Sam smiled at me. "Yes. I remember you telling me that yesterday. My wife - she's gone too ... with the Lord. But it's okay. I've got my customers and all these wonderful books."

Wonderful books. He was right. "Must be nice to be around books all day," I said. "Ever read any Kafka?"

"Sometimes," he said. "I read just about everything."

"He's one of my favorites," I said. And then, a confession: "I came here to rob you, Sam. I'm so sorry."

He laughed. "Rob me? With what? Are you armed?"

"I ain't."

"Well, I keep a gun in my desk. It would have been hard for you to rob me."

Mr. Burroughs was sitting on an upside-down wooden crate. His hands were cupped underneath the coffee, making sure that I didn't drop it. I looked out the window that said, "Cheap Used Books." I saw that the snow was gone. I looked down and saw a cardboard box, a moving box, filled with books. On top of the pile were most of the books I had brought in yesterday, maybe all of them. I saw my Kafka book. In black permanent marker, the box read, "Free."

I laughed a little as slices of pain ran through my chest. "Mr. Burroughs," I said, "one day I'm gonna write a poem about you. A good poem."

"That's fine, son - Danny. Just have another sip of coffee. I can hear the ambulance coming."

I could hear it too.

## **Watching**

Paranoia blew through her hair. Even if she knew why he watched her, she wouldn't have cared.

Blow. She sees the invention of the mind as the dumbest concept yet.

Blow. Even if she could see the future, she'd rather live in the past.

He looks through the window. She's in the alley again digging through the trash.

"Even if you do get away," he says, "I'll still be here waiting for you. You'll come back and see me again."

Cold. She gives him a look. A dark kind of figure many stories up, looking menacing. She digs through the trash again, looking for something to eat.

Cold. "I'll only ever be anything as long as I can watch you from a safe distance."

Cold. "I think, though you're covered with muck, that you're the most--but how to put it? Sensual woman I've ever seen."

She finds some spaghetti in black garbage bag. She smiles, sniffs. Smells okay. She pulls some noodles out and eats.

Cold. Business man from many stories up strokes his tie and smiles. "Who were you before?" He thinks he knows. "You were someone like me, weren't you?"

Snap. She climbs down from the dumpster.

Snap. She puts some of the noodles in a small cardboard box box in her shopping cart.

Calm. She looks up at the man in the window. She thinks: what was he like before he sold his soul?

Calm. She has enough noodles to last for a day or two.

She starts to wheel her cart out of the alley. Eyes close and body stops to the beat of memories pounding in her head. Remember those things you want to forget? Remember the stop signs and the minivan and the husband and the kids and the dog and the....

Forget that the memories were never real and that you really have no past. Forget that there are really two, twenty people living inside your skull at any time.

He sees her walking away, straining to push her cart. He knows that he will see her again; hopes he will, at least. The Italian restaurant on the other side of the alley keeps her coming back. She can't get enough of their noodles.

He waves goodbye while her back is turned. He knows that she won't see--that's the point, of course.

He sits at his desk and shuffles some papers, looks at his computer screen. Does he love her? He doesn't know anything about her. But what is love anyway? It's the way she sometimes looks toward the sky and sees him. It's the way that she doesn't really smile when she sees him but seems content all the same. There's a peacefulness to her pale, expressionless face.

He says the words underneath his breath: "I love you. I love you."

He runs to the window and opens it. "Hey!" he says.

She turns around, looks up.

He's flustered. He doesn't know what to do.

He throws a stapler at her. It barely misses her, but it startles her just the same. She pushes her cart as fast as she can run.

Personality #6: The angry, humiliated personality.

"Stay the hell out of here!" he says. "Decent people work here, you know!"

He closes the window and sits down at his desk.

Bewilderment. How to tell her that he loves her now, after this incident?

Will she ever come back?

She decides to find another dumpster when she wants lunch.

He decides to get a new job. He thinks: I've always wanted to be a cowboy.

He goes back to work.

She walks aimlessly, remembering a life she never led.

## **The Sound of A Birth**

*First appeared in Babel Magazine #100*

I try not to remember that night on the beach. The daytime fading, turning purple and dark blue and sitting naked on the sand with a cigarette in one hand and Nadine's hand in the other. Her face was expressionless except for a small twitch in her eye that gave me hope that life could be found somewhere inside her pumping blue and white heart muscle. Her nostrils breathed in smoke from my body. The smoke came from the

burning, melting coke sensation, like dreams injected into twitching nerves.

Nadine was swept away in the tide. I had seizures underneath a hot white moon. I made body-craters in the sand and dotted the saltwater with my blood.

I sat up in bed when I heard someone open my apartment door. I tried to rub the morning crust out of my eyes. My bedroom door opened. Diana stood in the doorway. I tried to focus my eyes.

“Time to get up, lazybones,” she said. She walked over to my bed.

“It’s Saturday,” I said.

She shook me by my shoulders. “Just get up. I’m taking you shopping.”

I got up and started rummaging through my dresser for a pair of pants and a shirt. “Shopping for what?” I said. Not that I cared. Going shopping meant driving to the beach and walking around the boardwalk.

“Clothes,” she said. “Nice clothes. Just a little thank-you for paying attention to me these past few months. To make up for dragging you over to my place the other night.”

“Don’t be sorry for the other night,” I said.

“But I am,” she said.

My apartment was in Dead Sonny, Florida, a fifteen-minute drive from the beach. We took Diana’s car. We listened to Metal bands on her stereo. We yelled above the music, catching each other up on what we had been doing these past few days, the days since we had last talked. Georgette, she told me, was her newest crush. Diana had met her at a club the day before. They danced all night. They exchanged phone numbers. I felt sick listening to her. I wondered how I had allowed myself to fall in love with a lesbian.

She took me to Paul’s, one of the more expensive clothing stores on the boardwalk. We wove through racks of designer shirts, coats, ties.

“Anything you want,” she said. “Name it.”

“No,” I said. “None of this stuff. I can’t see myself in anything like this.”

“You’re such a beach bum.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“I guess. Come on and pick something out. I can afford it.”

“That’s not the point,” I said. But I’m not allowed to argue with Diana, not really. It’s one of our unwritten rules. I picked out a suit.

We left the store and strolled around the boardwalk. She bought a couple hot-dogs. We sat on a bench and ate them, watching the tourists stroll by, going in and out of souvenir shops that were like the one I worked at, places that sold plastic sharks and inflatable floats.

Her long, silk dress moved with the wind and she tried to keep it in place. I glanced at her legs: saw a tattoo, a snake that circled her leg, the tail at her ankle, the head stopping where her underwear started. A boy, thirteen, maybe fourteen years old, walked by, staring at Diana. He stopped in front of us. He squinted at Diana, tried his best to place her, figure out where her sketch of familiarity came from. “I know I’ve seen you before,” he said to her.

“I get that a lot,” she said.

The kid’s T-shirt was an advertisement for the band Scorched Flesh. Diana must have known that with enough searching, enough digging around in his memory, the kid would recognize who she was. The person she was trying to hide. She stood up. “Let’s get back to your place,” she said, visibly shaken.

We started walking back to her car. “He doesn’t recognize you,” I said.

We got into her car and drove away. She didn’t turn the stereo on. We were silent for a few minutes.

“You haven’t said anything about the clothes,” Diana said.

“Oh yeah, yeah, thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” she said, “but that’s not what I meant. If I can ever get you into that thing, we’ll go out. The women’ll be all over you. We can get you a girl.”

But I only wanted Diana.

“And maybe,” she said, “you could quit that souvenir shop gig.”

But I liked my job. I was on the beach. I sold worthless shit to tourists. I smelled the saltwater all day. I closed the shop around sunset. Sunset, when I looked at the ocean and prayed that God would forgive me for what happened to Nadine.

I looked at Diana. “And do what? I’ve got a BA in marketing. You know what a BA in marketing gets you these days?” She shook her head. “It gets you a job selling junk to tourists.”

She smiled at me like a mother smiling at a silly child. We kept driving until we reached my apartment.

Diana is like a thread and needle weaving itself through all points on my body.

I met her at a NA meeting at a local Methodist church. I was leading the meetings that month. I sat at the end of a long, candlelit table. She was one of many new faces. I was used to new faces. We always had vacationers at our meetings.

I noticed her right away. She stood out from the rest of the tourists. She had long, straight, black hair with a few purple and pink streaks in it. She had on a black dress and wore fishnet stockings on her legs and arms. She had glitter on her face. It shone in the candlelight.

She stayed silent during the invocation and when it was her turn to talk she simply waved her hand, indicating that we should move on to the next person. She tapped on the table with her black fingernails and ground a design into it with a clothespin.

I kept glancing at her throughout the meeting. I tried to pay attention, to focus on whoever was speaking. But I would see her through the corner of my eye and suddenly my attention would be hers. I stared at her without even knowing exactly how long I was staring. I wanted to love her.

My turn to talk came last. I had never told the group about Nadine's death before. It was just something I preferred not to talk about. I liked to talk about the future, how I was getting along these days, how hard it was to stay sober with all of the temptations that life can blow your way. But I wanted to reach Diana.

"I'm an addict," I said. "I've been clean for almost two years now." And I went through the story. Nadine and I were in college together - dating for a few months. Incredible coke heads. Binge drinkers. We took a handle of vodka and some coke to the beach. Met some friends at a party. Snorted coke and drank and danced to a DJ spinning acid-influenced rave music. We kissed and groped and wanted some time alone. We walked to a secluded side of the beach, taking the coke and booze with us.

We could barely hear the acid music. We heard the bass, quiet like a tiny heartbeat. We got naked, tried to fuck. We laughed about my impotence. We drank and did coke until we were unable to speak, until Nadine was washed away into the ocean. I didn't try to save her. I couldn't save myself.

I finished my story and looked at Diana. She looked down at the table and rubbed her temples.

We closed the meeting in a circle, holding hands. "One day at a time," I said, and then we broke away from each other and dispersed. I turned the lights on and blew the candles out. I poured myself a cup of coffee and turned the machine off.

“I just got out of rehab,” a voice behind me said. I turned around. It was Diana. She introduced herself to me and I invited her to have some coffee at the table. We sat down.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything,” she said, staring at the table again.

“We don’t ever pressure anyone,” I said. “You go at your own pace.”

She looked at me. “You don’t recognize me, do you?”

“Should I?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “You look like you couldn’t be more than twenty-five, twenty-six or so. You’ve probably seen me on MTV.”

“I don’t watch MTV,” I said. “I don’t watch TV at all. It depresses me - makes me want to go off the wagon.”

“My stage name,” she said, “was Betty Skumm. You know, from Sister Queer? We’re pretty much the most famous Lesbian Metal band around.” She looked for confirmation in my face, but my mind was blank. She smiled at me. “I’m nobody special to you, am I?”

“Well,” I said, “I mean, I just haven’t heard of your band. Sorry. I pretty much just have my job and my meetings.”

“Can you help me?” she asked.

“I can try, but you’ve got to want to stay sober. Do you?”

She shrugged.

And we kept talking. About her life on the road, writing songs, taking pills and heroin and booze. She told me about her band, about how they kicked her out when she went to rehab. Getting clean wasn’t easy. Convulsing on the hospital floor. Diarrhea for a week. Vomiting. Praying at the hospital bed, her knees shaking on the cold floor, dried tears crusting her eyes. She prayed for epiphany; a reunion with a god she had never believed in.

But in all of her thoughts, behind the scattered speeches of her schizophrenic voices (they had come to her when the heroin was leaving her system) was the calming sound of the ocean - the waves breaking slowly, crawling to the shore. It was the sound, she thought, that a baby hears when being born.

After she got out, she bought a condo on the beach. She wanted to be closer to the waves, the sound of a birth.

I kept my eye on her - my special project. And she really needed my help then, those first few weeks on the beach. I remember late nights, calls at midnight, two in the morning. I would leave my apartment in Dead Sonny, too tired to get up, but too obsessed not to help her. I had to talk her out of rage, out of suicide.

Her recovery seemed to be going well. She started smiling, laughing. We would share jokes and watch movies. But she started ignoring me. She ignored my calls, my knocks on her door. She quit going to meetings. I thought she might have gone off the wagon.

And weeks went by and I started to accept that I might never see her again. But she called one night and I came over to her condo and we talked. She told me about the mess she had gotten into those past few weeks. No drugs, just women. Women she met at The Catch, a local lesbian bar. Women she met strolling on the beach. Wives of tourists looking for a little adventure in their vacation.

“I was obsessed with them,” she told me, “like I was obsessed with the drugs.”

And I held her. What else was there to do except hold her and tell her that everything was going to be all right?

Then, a couple of days ago, late at night: “Hello?”

“I need your help.”

“Nadine?”

“Diana. Look, come over. I was at the club and I found a guy who wanted to sell me some ...”

“Jesus,” I said. “What was it? You haven’t taken anything?”

“Just come over, okay? I need you.”

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And when I got there, I could feel my heart beating in my throat. I ran up the porch and opened the door. And there she was, smiling at me. She was wearing a bright red dress. It was the first time I had seen her in anything other than black.

She danced over to me and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“What’re you on?” I asked.

“Dreams,” she said.

I figured she had already taken the drugs.

Diana kissed me on the cheek. “It’s so late,” she said. “I thought that you wouldn’t come see me unless it was an emergency. I wanted to tell you how much your friendship means to me. I couldn’t have stayed clean without you.”

I broke free and sat down on her leather couch. In front of me, the TV was playing Looney Toons and the volume was muted. I rubbed my temples. I had work tomorrow. I couldn’t believe this. Diana came over and sat next to me.

“I want you to hold me,” she said. “I feel so good right now. You know what I did today?” I shrugged.

“Today—today I woke up feeling like I had a hangover. I wasn’t sure why—it’s been months since I’ve had anything to drink. It took me awhile, took a lot of thinking to realize what was wrong. I was still Betty Skumm. I still looked like her, the addict. I just, I realized that I had to make peace with my past and let it go. So I bought some really pretty dresses. And tomorrow I’m gonna visit one of those expensive salons here on the beach and see if they can’t get this black out of my hair. I’m gonna be a whole new person.”

I stood up. “I thought this was an emergency.”

She looked disappointed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m feeling real good tonight. You’re my best friend. I wanted to thank you for everything you’ve done to help me.”

I looked at my watch. It was almost one. I had to open the store at eight. “Next time,” I said, “figure out some other way to thank me.”

“Fine,” she said, almost whispering. She turned away from me. She rested her head on the arm of the couch. Was she crying? My heart was aching. I started to apologize. But I didn’t. I left her condo and drove home.

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Okay, so it was an asshole thing to do. I admit it. But I was cranky. And I was tired of being in love with a lesbian.

A couple days later, Diana decided to buy me an expensive suit to make up for the situation.

When we got home from the beach we went to my bedroom and Diana put the suit in my closet. She started to pick up my dirty clothes and throw them in a pile. I was sitting on the edge of my bed flipping through a magazine.

“You don’t have to do any of this,” I said.

“Sure,” she said. “And we should just wait till December and hope that Santa comes and picks this mess up?”

I laughed. “I’m not that lazy.”

“Yes you are.”

She bent over to pick up a dirty T-shirt. I tapped a finger on the small of her back. She turned around and faced me.

“Hey,” I said. “Thanks. And I’m sorry for walking out on you the other night.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “It’s nothing. It was my fault.” God, she was beautiful.

“It was my fault,” I said.

“Look,” she said, changing the subject, “you need to actually wear this suit, okay? I didn’t buy it for nothing. You could get out of your apartment for once. Go to a club. Meet a girl. Maybe you could look for a better job.”

“A new job, huh? Can’t I just be happy being happy?”

“I guess. But you still need to meet a girl.”

I rolled over onto my side and patted the bed with my hand. “Come here,” I said. “Take a break.” She lay down next to me, on her side. I put my arms around her shoulders and touched her hands. Our fingers locked together. I felt a tiny shaking in her hands, just below the surface of her skin. Mine shook a little too. I rested my head on hers. We fell asleep, intertwined.

# Hours Beyond the Pale

*First appeared in Cathedral #1*

Charlie Sullivan was sitting on his bed stroking Tim Gallavan's hair. Tim's head was limp in Charlie's lap. This had been the most passionate, violent evening of sex Charlie had ever been through. They had bitten into each other's skin, hit each other, kicked each other and drawn tears and blood. The violence was spontaneous, fluid, natural. Neither of them expected it. They gave in to their urge to possess, to frighten, to control. They were filled with lust and rage because they had passion and didn't understand that passion could be subdued, conquered, lulled into sleep.

"Goddamn, I love you," Charlie said. Charlie was awake because he was scared and because his stomach was bubbling with a gassy sickness.

Charlie ached like his entire body was becoming a sickness. He pushed Tim off his lap. Tim flopped loosely onto his side of the bed; murder and calm and calm and sickness creating calm and calm becoming the sickness becoming a calm becoming a sickness. Tim was face-down in a pillow. One arm hung over the bed. Charlie got up and went to the bathroom to clean himself up.

In the shower, the water tapped Charlie like razorblades. He dug his hands into his chest and traced the scratches that Tim had gashed an hour earlier. Or two hours. Time sometimes click-clock's its way from WHEN to WAS without letting you know. Charlie got out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. Steam from the scalding water had burned Charlie's body red. The mirror on his medicine cabinet had fogged over. He had been in the shower for click-clock minutes. He knew it felt like click-clock click-clock.

Charlie opened the bathroom door and steam billowed into the hallway. He heard something like a moan coming from the master bedroom and thought that it might be his lover crying out because he was lonely. But Charlie wasn't in so much shock that he didn't realize that the moan couldn't have come from Tim. Maybe it was the wind becoming violent. His body turned icy when an absurd subconscious spasm suggested that the moan came from his mother, who had been dead for almost seven years. But this was an equally absurd idea.

Charlie walked back toward the bedroom. His towel slipped off in the middle of the hallway. He stopped cold. His nudity reminded him of click-clock hours ago when the first beads of sweat rolled off Tim's back and onto Charlie's tongue. His nudity reminded him that he existed.

He was aware that he existed and his new awareness left a stunning haze of vibrations in his field of vision. He was incredibly warm and incredibly cold at the same time.

He click-clocked his way to the bedroom. The shag carpet danced in vibrations. Aware. Aware that he existed.

“Shhh...” the carpet said. “Best not to wake the lover.”

Charlie had only a vague sense of who this “lover” was. Aware. Aware that he existed because he was breathing, because he could taste the air. There was a body lying face-down on the bed in front of him. Charlie walked over to the side of the bed where the body’s arm flopped over the side as lifelessly as a doll. Charlie bent down and kissed its hand. The skin was surprisingly warm. The corpse leaned over and the two men embraced and click-clock click-clock until being aware that faceless is falling falling falling into the abyss of heaven.

Forget me not and collect my names.

## Generation Nothing

*Originally published in Cathedral #1*

### I

Joe Griggs allowed his life to pass by in black and all other forms of dark colors. Throughout elementary school, throughout high school, Joe walked the halls a stranger to his classmates who were in turn a gallery of strangers to him. Joe had friends but they came to him only while he was dreaming; women with silk lips and long arms that twisted to envelop his body.

He sometimes tagged along with his older brother Tom. Joe would stand in the back of a crowd of boys in a cramped apartment, trying not to be noticed as they got high around him. Sometimes they passed the joint toward him. Joe would take a hit and it would loosen him up. He might say a few words or laugh at some jokes.

Joe imagined that women’s lips tasted like silk until he found out they tasted like clay. There was an incident. Tom had just gotten a promotion at the pizza place where he worked. Joe met Tom at his apartment and the two brothers drove around a few of Atlanta’s seedier neighborhoods looking for a lay. Tom paid for two women, a mother and a daughter. They were both fat and had greasy blond hair. The two women got in the car and gave Tom directions to their apartment building.

The building should have been condemned.

Joe was in the main area, on the couch, getting a blowjob from the mother. Tom was in the bedroom with the daughter.

She stopped and looked up at him. “My God,” she said. “You’re a beautiful young man.” Clay. She had allowed Joe one kiss on the lips and she tasted like clay. Then she went down on him. She unbuttoned her shirt a little and exposed her sagging breasts to him. Then she laid back. She motioned for Joe to undress her. Joe wasn’t sure what to do but he was dying to know what it felt like.

## II

Tom hired Joe as a dishwasher. Years passed. Joe got into a routine. He was happy with his routine. It made it easier for him to pretend he was invisible, to disappear.

He left his apartment at three o’clock and walked to work. He carried his dinner in a brown paper bag. From four o’clock to about one in the morning he scrubbed pans, plates and glasses. He went home and watched TV for the rest of the night. He could count on his routine six nights a week.

## III

Tom fired Joe but he said it was for his own good. He said that Joe needed to do something on his own for once. He needed to grow up. He needed to branch out a little, spend some time on his own.

So Joe looked through the paper. He looked for a job where he wouldn’t be noticed, some place where he wouldn’t draw any attention to himself. He couldn’t find anything.

He took the paper to Tom. “Look,” Tom said, “here’s one.” They wanted security guards.

“Fuck that,” Joe said. “I’ll have to break up fights and shoot people and shit. It’s not for me.”

Tom laughed under his breath. “Nah. I’ve got a friend that does this. He reads books all night and if he sees anything suspicious he calls the real cops.”

Tom picked up the phone and called the main office, pretending to be Joe. He got Joe a seat at their next training session.

It was a lecture. Joe sat in the last row of folding chairs, holding a notepad on his shaking knee. He tried to take notes. He tried not to make eye contact with the instructor. At the end of the lecture they issued everyone a uniform and a sew-on badge and gave everyone a location to report to the following night.

Joe was assigned to a place called The Phantom Club.

## IV

Joe walked in and found the owner. He was a gruff man who slumped as he walked. He looked like he was in his mid thirties.

“There are some rules,” he said. “Mainly don’t drink or sleep. And try to at least look like you’re keeping things safe, okay?” Joe nodded. The owner turned around and went into his office, slamming the door. Joe found a barstool and dragged it away from the bar. He set it down near the wall. He sat on it and folded his arms over his chest and tried to disappear into the wall.

The night wore on. The club filled with people. Bands started to play. It occurred to Joe that this job might make him even more invisible than his dishwashing job had. Everyone seemed to be ignoring him. At the restaurant, people were constantly shouting at him, telling him to hurry up. He could get used to sitting in a chair and listening to music all night.

## V

He had been at The Phantom Club for a couple of weeks when Marie Ruiz introduced herself to him. She walked up to him and stood next to him for what seemed like a long time. Joe looked away. She put her foot on the barstool and shook it a little. Then she started to talk, nervously.

It occurred to Joe that she might be half as nervous as he was. He was nothing to get nervous over.

She asked him questions and he answered them. His answers were short and to the point. Part of him wished she would go away. But her brown skin seemed to shine and her words had a soft, soothing tone to them.

“The boys that come here are all creeps. I mean, just creeps. But I tell you, I saw you and you don’t look like a creep. You’re not a creep, are you?”

Joe shook his head.

## VI

She moved in with him. On a Saturday, the two of them walked back and forth between the apartment Marie shared with a girlfriend and Joe’s apartment. They made several trips, carrying Marie’s clothes, her stereo and various parts of her computer.

Joe particularly liked her computer.

He liked to get online and pretend he was someone else. He liked the anonymity. He could be anyone he wanted to be.

## VII

He had conflicting feelings about it all. Marie was an art student. She liked to draw him while he was sleeping, in the early mornings. And while they were not quite silk, her lips were soft.

But they were also dry, chapped. And her nails cracked on his back as he made love to her.

Coming home from work, and opening the apartment door, watching Marie sleep in the pink light of the rising sun, Joe could almost feel love rising inside of him.

She woke up and put her arms around him.

## VIII

Her screen-name was CYBERSLUTT and she wanted to fuck Joe with her words. Fuck me, she wrote. Get inside my wet, wet pussy.

Joe looked at the words on the computer screen and started to jerk off. Marie was at school and Joe had had time to kill before he went to work.

He had no idea how new, how fresh he would feel, pretending to be someone else. This is how it feels to be normal, not to be shy, he thought.

## IX

“Never trust a man,” she had said. “Not even a shy man. They’ll all break your heart.”

Joe had come home at his usual time; five in the morning. He hadn’t been going to work for days. He had found an all-night Internet café before work one day. He had been spending his nights there, writing to women in chatrooms.

When he walked in the door she threw the phone at him.

“Some man calls me and asks if I know where my boyfriend is. That’s all he says. Then he hangs up.”

She told him to get out and he did, even though it was his apartment.

Hell, Joe thought, it must have been the club owner. The asshole. Joe took the elevator down to the ground floor and walked outside.

## X

He sat on the steps outside the apartment building for a while. Occasionally, he'd look behind him, to see if Marie was looking out the window. She never was. Might have been sleeping. The call might have come early, when his shift was supposed to start.

He wondered if she really meant as much to him as it seemed. It occurred to Joe that he didn't know anything about her. Not really. He never asked any questions about her life. Did he care about her or did living with a woman make him feel less shy?

He didn't want to think about questions like these. He didn't want to think at all. He wanted to feel human.

Joe stood up and headed in the direction of the Internet café.

## XI

He was at his favorite table, on his favorite computer. He logged on and pretended.

He pretended that he was in a real café having a real conversation with a real woman. He pretended he was handsome.

He often wondered if the people he typed love-messages to were putting on a similar show for him. Of course they were. They were just as lonely and terrified of reality as he was. That was part of what made it special. Two lonely people meeting in a place that doesn't exist.

Joe looked up from his computer and saw someone. It was a blond woman with short, boyish hair and a long, old-fashioned dress. She was sitting at the bar, having a coffee. He had noticed her before. She was always here. Sort of her hangout. Sometimes Joe thought he could feel her eyes staring at him.

The two of them caught each other's eye. Joe's head snapped back to his computer. Warm sweat began to bead all over his body. Especially his palms.

She picked up her coffee and walked over to the table where Joe was sitting. She sat down at the computer next to him. She logged on.

"You've got a beautiful profile," she said to him.

She showers him with compliments until Joe finds himself turning off the computer and following the woman to her apartment.

## X

She was on top of his naked body, fucking him.

“You ever been alive, Joe?” she asked.

“No,” Joe said. She started fucking him faster, violently.

“You ever been alive, Joe?”

“No.” Thrusting harder, fucking harder.

“I want you to be alive, Joe. Right now. Come alive and fuck me Joe.”

The silky warmth of her body. So tight. This new blond woman was fucking him fiercely.

He had forgotten her name. But the way she felt. So warm.

Conclusion  
Or  
Something just went kaboom

Of course he was shy and lonely and had a beautiful face. He realized that after he left the woman’s apartment. I’m beautiful, he thought. But it doesn’t matter. The colors are always dark and the lips always rough. Something quite unlike silk.

Marie forgave Joe but the relationship fizzled. She moved out.

“The thing is,” Tom said, after Joe asked to get his dishwashing job back, “I don’t think you’ve tried living your life. I don’t think you’ve learned how.”

“I just want my routine,” Joe said. “Something I can count on.”

Several weeks after he got his job back, Joe walked to the front of the restaurant with an armful of plates for the Sunday night buffet line. A woman in her early twenties with black skin and bright-red hair walked up to him. She pretended to look over the pizzas in the buffet line. Then she looked at him. “I hope I’m not being rude or anything,” she said, “but, do you have a girlfriend?”

Joe looked at his shoes and admitted he didn’t. She asked for his phone number and he told her the best way to reach him was to call the pizza place. He was always here.

Although that wasn’t completely true. When he wasn’t at work he was at the Internet café, chatting it up with CYBERSLUTT and girls (he hoped they were girls) like her. And he created words and sentences and paragraphs of lust and fucking. He was good at it. He was good at nothing.

## The Stain

*First Appeared on the ULA Blog ([www.undergroundliteraryalliance.blogspot.com](http://www.undergroundliteraryalliance.blogspot.com))*

### I

To be young and talented, yeah, that's what it's all about. Or what it would be about. Or, actually, what it would be about if I was talented. Other people are all about being young and talented, because, well, they are. But me: just young.

Saturday morning on a park bench and I swear that she's being raped by the devil. He's got his big red cock inside her from behind. He's grabbing her ass as she hangs onto the swing post for dear life.

But is the devil real or is it the girl? Or are either of them real? I realize that this is strange, but I really don't know. Been up all night eating acid. My friends drank beer instead. Passed out long ago. And here I am at the park. Saw a sunrise, though. Ain't often I see a sun rise. But the devil-Jesus Christ, he's really wiggling me out.

### II

I entered the Cathedral not quite sure where I was going or why I was there. I let the spirit of the place guide me along. At that moment the only thing I could think of was becoming a swinger-marrying some beautiful chick and settling down and having all the sex I wanted to on the side. There was something reassuring about a crazy scene like that as I walked along the corridors of God's palace. Enter here and forever fuck and be fucked. Kingdom come. Let no man forget carnal desire in the house of the lord. At the moment I looked through the stained-glass window and the light shining through and knew that the light was God himself looking at me. In the name of the father. In the name of the mother. Go onward from my castle and sin again.

### III

Even still, I'm always Danny Sullivan. I'm always going to walk through these Southern streets and look on toward the silly people and their silly lives-the peace activists holding a rally near the fountain in Five Points. The counter-protesters holding up their signs. "We support the troops," they say. And the protesters with their signs that say "No blood for oil." Mob vs mob as I walk by and smoke a cigarette and dig on the entire scene. No, no buttons or signs or bumper stickers for me, thanks. The world can go to hell for all I care. But as long as I have cigarettes and chicks, I'll be just fine.

### IV

Sure, you're right. I used to be sober. Kicked the booze and the drugs and started going to school. But there's where the problem was. See, it's well known that one can not at the same time be a twenty-something college boy and sober. I share a dorm with Scott Hickie. From out in the sticks. Guntersville, I think. Decent guy, I suppose. Maybe not.

Once he told me a story about his ex and how he caught her cheating on him. Or so he thought. The guy was leaving his girlfriend's apartment just as Scott was pulling up. Did it matter to Scott that the guy was leaving in a cable van? No. He smacked her around anyway. And now he lives in the dorm. With me.

Bastard loves to drink, though. And I like to drink, swallow or smoke just about anything. So we get along on a superficial level.

V

It's also true that I'm a rapist. Never convicted but a rapist just the same. I was married. Young and stupid and married. And on a binge. I came home and I took it out on her. I never saw or heard from her again except through lawyers.

An incident like that-something that turns you into a monster-you carry with you for the rest of your life. If you have a shred of decency in your body, then the guilt and the sadness will drive you nearly insane. Yeah, but what of it? Death is always following, his sweet, soft hands around your throat. And to live: Yes, that's the thing to do. Just live.

So I quit drinking and borrowed some money from my folks and went to Europe for a while.

VI

Among other things God told me in the Cathedral: Go to school and smoke cigarettes and remember the Sabbath. Fuck often and with gusto. Never mind the voices in your head.

I sat through mass. Be with me now, I chanted under my breath. Be with me now and now and don't forsake me. A church. A bell in the distance. A bell overhead as I sat outside the Cathedral long after mass had ended. Just to feel the sweet palm of death on my neck and sit on a spot in a place an ocean away from the land I call home. This world is madness. And only the mad are in love.

## Calling...Calling

*Previously published in Cathedral #2*

"I saw Tim today."

"Who's Tim?"

"A theater major in the university."

"How do you know him?"

“I know him because he hops into my dreams like so many other lost souls.”

“That’s a drag then?”

“No.”

“I would have wondered if it was. What brought him up?”

“The curling of your toe underneath my ankle. The sound of your breath on my neck. Tim is that person outside of me, the person who I would call my male-self.”

And then I hung up. There was no reason to continue. She needed her sleep and I had my own distractions to worry about. I sat up in my chair and wandered around the room for a while. I carried the phone in my hand just in case I might need to call her again, to hear about Tim. To hear about myself.

I went to the kitchen and made myself a sandwich. It’s called surrealism nowadays. Talking on the phone in the middle of the night trying to work out the do’s and don’ts of our relationship trying to figure out why and what and what was it that we had in common besides our grand delusions about ourselves.

The phone rang. Can we call it a vibration in my hand? A sudden twitch that let me know it was time to do something about my name, the person that I would share it with the person that I would get to see and touch and feel without holding back, that for the first time I could be we and she could be we. But we need to work out all of our old problems first.

“Hello,” I said, clicking the phone on. “Is it you? Is it my love?”

A man answered, scratchy voice like the tassels on an angels forehead, a scratchy, brutal, sing-song voice a voice like you and me and we are all together.

“Calling collect,” the voice said. “Calling for your lust.”

I threw a penny on the floor and started to whistle.

“She’s gone to bed now, I think,” is what I told this strange man on the other side of the phone.

“Is she then?” he said. “And how can I call her.”

“I’ll hit redial for you.”

“Thanks then,” he said. “I appreciate it very much.”

And I hit redial and felt the voice, the singsong voice scratchy-oh-why-can't-we-all-be-friends voice travel through the phone lines to the residence of my love. And I could feel otherwise clean, like I had just removed an insect from my back.

And then, the phone rings. It rings again and it is hurled across the room by me and my and it cracks and breaks and my heart breaks with it. I'm little more than trapped here in my room.