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## Thismia

The wind blew out of the south, warm and moist. It came in gusts that whipped up tiny white caps over Wolf Lake on Chicago's far southeast side. The sun was strong, promising a hot, muggy day. The bells of the church pealed for the start of the 10am mass.

The sidewalk was empty save for two men. Nick sat in a wheelchair and jerked the wheels back and forth. A handsome, muscular man in his late thirties. He handled the wheelchair expertly, popping wheelies and balancing it on its two wheels.

"You're going to break your neck" said Steve. He stood awkwardly on crutches, his left foot bent unnaturally inward. He was a frail man, the same age as Nick.

The hollow echo of the Mass sounded through the open church doors like a sad memory. Another gust of wind blew Nick's hair into his eyes and he plopped down the wheelchair.

"Watch this." And he twisted one wheel hard and held the other fast. The chair leaned on one wheel. Nick held it there until his arms began to quiver. The wheel hit the sidewalk so hard that it made the whole wheelchair bounce.

"Why do Eskimos still live in Alaska?" Steve asked without acknowledging Nick's trick.

"What?" Nick said while fidgeting with the wheels.

"Why are there still Eskimos in Alaska? Why don't they move south?" Steve said as he pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. "I mean, like years ago if you were born an Eskimo that was it, that's where you'll have to die but today with cars and planes, there's no reason to stay."

Nick stopped playing with the wheels "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm asking why do Eskimos choose to live in the Artic? They don't have to anymore."

"Maybe they like it there?"

"C'mon, the Artic?"

"They're used to cold. It'd be too hot for them here in the summer."



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Steve thought a moment. “Blacks live here and they’re from a hot place. They don’t seem to mind the cold in the winter.” Steve took a long drag on his cigarette to let his point sink in.

“Not the same. They didn’t want to leave Africa. We brought them here.” Nick braked one wheel and pivoted the chair in a circle. “I guess they could go back but it’s a crowded place and the natives there probably don’t want them back.” He stopped suddenly and looked at Steve. “A better example for your point is Mexicans. Mexico’s a hot place but no matter how cold it gets here they keep coming.”

Steve shifted his weight to the other crutch. “Well, okay, so how come there’s Mexicans but no Eskimos?”

Nick rocked the wheels of the chair back and forth. “Cold, snow, eating blubber. They like that shit. It’s what they know.” He spun the wheelchair in a circle. “Nobody does nothing unless they gotta.”

Steve blew out smoke “I’m glad I’m not an Eskimo.”

Inside the church were a smattering of gray heads. A girl in red sneakers was the server. The communion line went quickly. The priest gave his final blessing half-heartedly and walked from the altar before the congregants could say “and also with you.”

Outside an elderly man assisted an old woman with bad legs down the church steps. She concentrated on each step with a worried expression. Nick saw them and jumped out of the wheelchair and hurried up the steps. He carefully took the woman’s arm. “Thanks Mr. Burke.”

“No problem, Nick. See’ya Emma.” The old woman gave him a quick smile in between her concentration. “Bye. Thanks Tommy.”

She plopped into the wheelchair with a sigh. “Your mom says that she’ll be out in a minute, Steve. She’s talking with Father.” Steve reached out to her with his pack of cigarettes. “Hope it wasn’t about me.” She pulled one from the pack. “Why? Watcha’ done?” They laughed and he lit her cigarette.

Nick turned the wheelchair. “Okay, buddy, see you tonight at the couch.” Steve gave him a silent wave. Nick pushed the wheelchair down the sidewalk.

Just as they were out of earshot, his mom whispered “You shouldn’t sit in the chair with him on crutches.”

“He gets mad if I offer.”



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“Don’t matter. It doesn’t look good.” Another blast of warm air nearly blew her hat off of her head.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was rough on Wolf Lake. Born of a melting glacier 4,000 years ago, the shallow lake provided for animal and man alike. A passive and benign part of the landscape that ended up bordering Chicago and Hammond. The shores were altered, roads and tracks were cut across it, native fish replaced with carp, sewage and industrial waste. Despite the onslaught, the lake continued to provide cool winds in the summer, a place to sail a small boat or just sit and listen to the life that clung to it.

Stars filled the sky. A glut of frogs croaked from a clump of reeds. The air was damp. Steve smoked. A hollow thump broke the peace and before he could turn his head, a tire rolled out of the blackness behind him. It hit a rock then wobbled as it rolled into the water. The frogs went silent.

Nick laughed and jumped over the back of the couch. A six pack of beer bounced on the cushion between them.

“Hey dude” he said as he cracked open a can. “Don’t mind if I do.”

A muffled grinding sound came from the buildings across the lake. Slowly, the frogs began to croak again.

“Man, I don’t want to go to work tomorrow.” said Steve as he drew in his cigarette.

“That’s two of us, bro.”

“No, this is different. I really don’t want to go” Steve cracked the top of a beer. “My chest feels tight just thinking about it.”

“You know what you need?” Nick turned to Steve with a serious look.

“What?” said Steve, half believing that Nick might have an answer.



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“Poon.” he said with a straight face. Steve sighed and turned away. “No, really. You gotta give yourself a break. Get out of the house. You remember that girl, Cheryl? She dug you.”

“The one you fucked?” Steve closed his eyes and leaned his head back on the couch.

“So what? She was always asking about you. There's interest there.”

“Thanks.” Steve said sarcastically and took a drink of beer.

A train blew its horn and rumbled through the wetland along the lake.

“I'm serious, man. You gotta get laid.”

“Let's drop it.” Steve said in a way that Nick learned long ago to not transgress.

“They didn't extend benefits. It's going to be an ugly week.”

“Ouch. I'm glad that I'm working.”

“I hope there's a cop posted. How's your week?”

Nick scrunched down in the cushion. “Busy. The weather's got everyone freaked out about their AC.”

“Can you still give me a ride?”

“Sure, but you'll have to take the bus home. I got a Thismia meeting tomorrow night.” He turned to Steve. “You should go. There'll be girls there.”

“You feel lucky?”

Nick smiled. “About girls or Thismia?”

“You don't need any luck with girls.”



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“Damn straight on that.” He drank. “Nobody’s going to find Thismia. Not even me.”

Steve took a last draw on his beer and crushed the can. “Then why do you look for it?”

Nick counted on his fingers. “I like being in the woods. It’s a way to meet girls. And, what the fuck, it’s something to do.”

Steve tossed his can into the lake. “She really asked about me?”

Morning came to Avenue M with a golden glow of sunlight to the tree lined street. Nick and Steve’s homes stood side by side. Handsome brick bungalows in the Chicago style, octagonal front with stained glass windows. Steve’s grandfather bought their house in 1952 on a GI loan. Nick’s dad bought the other in 1965. As they grew up, the neighborhood had fewer and fewer children so Nick and Steve, despite their very different temperaments, grew closer out of necessity. By the time they reached adulthood, there were children again in the streets but children of a different culture and language.

Nick awoke to the sound of a cardinal outside of his window. He laid in bed for a few minutes feeling good about the day. He had a job that he was good at, a nice house to live in and still plenty of time to chase girls and enjoy life. College hadn’t worked for him. He had wanted to be a biologist, particularly a botanist, but his dad died of heart attack in his second semester. He came home and told himself it was just until his mom was adjusted. He never returned.

The bedroom was full of plants. As soon as he got out of bed he checked the soil gauges stuck in the pots. He talked to some of the more elaborate blooms. There was an ivy that spanned from the metal shelves to his dresser. His alarm and the UV lights clicked on at the same time. The radio predicted a hot day.

Steve had been up before dawn. The first thing he did before getting out of bed was to light a cigarette. The last few years he had noticed that he frequently woke up feeling nervous and irritable for no good reason. Nick was his only friend. Their houses were close enough that he could actually hear Nick’s snores in the middle of the night. He knew that Nick would do any favor that he asked of him. Yet, he was starting to despise him.



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He lit another cigarette and yanked the blanket away to stare at his withered leg. It was ugly. The muscles had atrophied and a long, dull red scar went from his calf to mid-thigh. He ran both hands down his leg as if to push the ugliness into his foot and out his toes. He thought to himself, "did Cheryl really ask about me? Did she see something attractive in me or just pity? Was Nick telling me the truth?"

He pulled the dead leg off the bed and stood on his crutches. He took a few more quick drags on his cigarette and then thumped his way down the hall to the bathroom.

At Nick's house sunlight streamed in through the kitchen window and into the sink. It reflected off a plate full of water and rippled on the ceiling each time a drop fell from the faucet.

"Morning Ma!" Nick announced when he entered the room.

His startled mother looked up from her newspaper. "Don't do that." she said sharply "you'll give me a heart attack."

He pulled a box of cereal from the cupboard. "Do what?" he said with feigned innocence. He poured the cereal and went to the fridge.

"You know what you imp. You do that on purpose." She went back to the paper.

"Just keeping you on your toes. Hey, there's no milk." He took the bowl to the sink and filled it with water. "You need some today or can I pick it up on the way home?"

"I'll get by." She turned the page.

"I won't be home until late. Thismia meeting tonight."

"That time of year already? Taking Steve?"

"No. He won't go just like I said he wouldn't." He sat down.

"Well, you tried." She looked up at him. "You did, didn't you?"



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“Yee-ah.” He shoveled the cereal into his mouth.

“Grace is worried about him.”

“He can handle himself. Just give him some room.” he said while water and cereal dribbled down his chin. He wiped it with the back of his hand.

“Please don't hover.” Steve thought as he came toward the kitchen. His mom was at the stove frying eggs. He felt smothered with her in the room. Whenever she flitted about him, bringing him coffee or the paper or a pillow or whatever, he wanted to scream.

“Morning.” she said as he entered. He could hear the fear in her voice, the question of what kind of mood he was in this morning. He felt like a heel and at the same time irritated. The night before, lying in bed, he told himself that this morning he would be nice and say “Good morning” to her, nice and bright. But she beat him to it. This too irritated him.

He was wearing a brown polyester suit with brown shoes and a tan tie. His hair was unkempt and a little too long for a government office but the manager gave him some slack for his appearance because of his handicap. He sat down at the kitchen table and picked up the newspaper that was folded neatly next to his plate. “Morning” he finally answered. “Gonna be a rough week” he said without looking up.

His mom turned toward him “I heard that Lever Brothers laid off over a hundred people.” She was born nervous. A thin woman, prone to answering too quickly and always nodding no matter what was being said. She had been a very protective mother since his birth but it bordered on the pathological after the accident. She slid the eggs onto his plate and placed a small plate of toast to the side.

“I hope Hendricks hired a guard.” He was a fastidious eater and held his knife and fork like a surgeon. “I'll be home late 'cause I gotta take the bus. Nick is going to his flower meeting.”

“Be careful coming home.” Her voice cracked and when he looked up she appeared to be on the verge of tears. The polar emotions of love and irritation raged inside of him. “You know how I worry.” She said and put her palm to her cheek. He chewed slowly, staring at her, then swallowed “I'll be okay.” He stood up quickly, not finishing his meal and thumped toward the door.



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When Nick came out of his house, Steve was having a smoke next to the van. “Hey buddy for someone dreading work, you sure seem anxious.” Steve flicked his cigarette onto the lawn. They got into the van at precisely the same moment as if they had been practicing the action for a long time, which, in some ways, they had.

US 12, the Industrial Highway, is a modest four lane road that cuts through the densest collection of mills, factories and refineries in the United States. To drive it is to take a tour of 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial might. Once formidable, now forgotten. The looming smokestacks, the overlarge buildings with iron-orange stains, the anonymous containers that dwarf train engines have all lost the awe that they once inspired a half century ago.

“Whatcha’ got today?” asked Steve.

“Dot head motel in Miller.”

“That’s redundant. They’re all Dot head. Which one?”

Nick stopped the van at a light. “That scuzzy one that’s painted blue.”

“They rent by the hour.” Said Steve.

“Where do they come from?”

“Whores?”

“No” said Nick exasperated “Dot heads.”

“India.”

“I know that. I mean what brings them here? India’s a beautiful place. At least, from what I’ve heard.”

“Maybe they get Indiana mixed up with India” Steve said smiling.

“...and why motels? They must have some huge international School of Motel Management. I mean, they got it locked down around here.”

“Well, your clients should sue whoever stuck them with the blue motel.”

“Yeah” Nick added “can you imagine one day you’re in this lush paradise and then, Wham!, you end up here.” He nodded toward the window. The car zoomed past a long line of refineries. Their stacks blowing furious blue flames.

“Somebody over there must know.” Nick faked an Indian accent. “Oh, no, it is just as it is here. That is why it is called Indiana.”



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Steve laughed out loud. “Man, that’s good. How’d you learn to do it?”

Nick continued with the Indian lilt. “Do what? This is how I talk, Sahib. I wanted to major in 7-11 but my father said no, no, you must go to Motel U.”

Steve laughed so hard that his eyes watered. “Stop it. That’s good.” He wiped his cheek.

They pulled up to the Employment office. It was a half hour before opening and there was already a line of people waiting to enter. Steve stopped laughing.

“Shit. Back to reality” he said and got out of the car. Nick watched as Steve crutched his way to the door. A beefy black guard opened the door from the inside. Nick didn’t pull away until he saw Steve disappear into the building.

20 minutes later he pulled into the parking lot of the Great Lakes Motel with dread. He hated these places that were limping along and the owners just doing enough to get to tomorrow. Especially the dot heads, they’re all smiles at first but get shitty as soon as you talk money. And it was always impossible to know who was actually in charge. “It’s always so and so’s cousin who’ll be back in an hour but never shows” Nick thought as he pulled his tool kit from the van.

“Oh, no, that is much too high.” he lilted as walked across the weedy parking lot “Can you do better?” He chuckled to himself.

The lobby was dark, mainly because the walls were painted a deep blue. The couch and two armchairs were covered with a thick plastic. The air felt moist and had the faint smell of mold. A dark, skinny boy sat quietly reading a picture book. He didn’t look up when Nick entered.

Nick approached the front desk and heard muffled angry voices. He gently tapped the bell and peered at an elaborate Hindu religious calendar behind the desk. The voices came closer and he realized they weren’t in English. He tapped the bell again, more forcefully just as two Indian women came around the corner still arguing. The younger one was in her 20’s and carried an armload of linens. She stopped immediately when she saw Nick. A small drop of sweat rolled down the side of her face. She lifted the linens higher to wipe it away. Despite her mussed hair and scowl, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen; high cheek bones and deep, ebony eyes. Both women went quiet. The younger one put down the linens and went behind the counter. The older one, with the dot, disappeared through a door to the office.

The young woman brushed her hair back and sat at the desk computer.

“Do you have a reservation?” she said with disinterested authority.



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“No. I’m here to repair an air conditioner.” He knew he was staring but couldn’t look away. “Is Mr. Patel available?”

She turned from the computer to look at him. Her disappointment that he wasn’t there to give money but to take it was obvious. She took a deep breath. “I’ll get him.” She went through the office door.

Muffled voices erupted through the walls. A man, mid-50s, teetered out of the office door. He was unshaven and his eyes had trouble focusing on Nick. He gripped the counter. “May I help you?” His breath was overpowering with alcohol.

“I’m here to fix...” before Nick could finish, the man collapsed to the floor. The young woman came out of the office, never once looked down and with a tremendous will summoned all of her dignity to address Nick.

“I can show you.” The man on the floor began to snore. She stepped over him, lifted the front desk extension and began to walk down the hallway. The older woman emerged from the office and screamed when she saw the man on the floor. She leaned over the counter and hurled, what Nick took to be, insults at the young woman.

Nick caught up with her as she slid the keycard in the lock. She turned to push the door open and looked at Nick as if she saw him for the first time and smiled.

“What’s your name?”

“Nick” he said feeling a little uncomfortable with her stare. He attempted to reassert himself. “I can come back later if you want to tend to your dad.”

She let the statement settle in without taking her eyes off Nick. “He’s not my father.” She said in a strong voice, not loud or confrontational, just assertive. She pushed the door with her butt. “He’s my husband.” The smile was faint but showed no mirth. They entered the room and the door clicked shut behind them.

Half an hour later Nick sheepishly poked his head into the hall. He looked both ways and then quickly scurried out the exit at the end of the hall. The woman stood at the mirror in the bathroom studying her face. Her hair had been released from the rubber band that held it earlier. She gathered it up off of her shoulders and drew it into a ponytail. She splashed some water on her face, stuck her tongue out at herself and then left the room.

Steve stood in the alley behind the Employment office smoking a cigarette. The dumpster for the Mexican restaurant next door was pungent in the still air but he certainly wasn’t going to stand in the front of the building. The sun felt good on his face.



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His thoughts, as usual, turned to women. Sometimes he felt that all he was missing was an attitude, that if he could convince himself he was remarkable then women would pick up on the vibe and start paying attention to him. Sexual attention, not pity attention or “friend” attention, like this morning when LuAnn Preet went on and on about her drunken boyfriend. He exhaled and heard a deep throated croak of a frog from the reedy drainage ditch across the alley. “LuAnn is cute” he thought, “in a chubby sort of way.”

The door opened and out walked a guy wearing a cheap tie, his collar unbuttoned. He seemed surprised to see Steve.

“Quite the crowd today.” He lit up a cigarette. “I shudda’ guessed someone’d be out here.”

“They’re in an ugly mood” Steve said, his thoughts of LuAnn were scrambled. His mind went with the flow of his new arrival.

The man’s belly hung out a good foot from his belt. His face was beet red and every time he took a drag on the cigarette Steve thought he would keel over with a heart attack. The guy had been with the agency nearly 25 years and knew all the tricks to avoid work and responsibility.

“They’re always in that mood. The difference is that there’s more of them today. Fuckin’ losers.” he grunted a laugh that turned into a cough. When the cough subsided, he hocked into the ditch.

Steve returned to his thoughts of women. “Even Yolanda, I’d go out with her.” He smiled at the thought of introducing a black girl to his mom. Then he tried to imagine how he could approach a woman at the office. He could walk a few feet without the crutches but it was dicey and besides he looked like a lurching robot so he never chanced it. “So what I’m on crutches,” he told himself, “they already know that. I’ve got to pick a woman and then make a campaign to get her on a date.” But even as he thought this he knew that he’d never find the courage to follow through and even if he did he was certain that somehow it would turnout humiliatingly wrong. Yet the idea was fun to muse about over a smoke.

“Hey, George,” the fat guy turned around, “what do you think of Yoland?”

He took a few steps closer to Steve and scowled. “She’s a cunt.” He started to cough again and his face turned an even deeper red. He held the back of his hand to his mouth. Steve waited until the cough subsided. “I think she’s a spy for Hendricks.” Tears from the cough glistened at the corners of his eyes. “Why?” he asked. Thankfully for Steve, George had completely missed the motivation for the question.



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Steve dropped his cigarette butt and squashed it with his shoe. “No reason, just don’t know much about her.”

“Nice ass,” George leered, “but watch what you say around her.”

Steve fumbled with the door and his crutches. George stepped forward to help him.

“I got it.” Steve’s voice was just sharp enough to stop George but not so sharp as to be rude. It was a tone that he had perfected first with his mother and then with many others that the world had sent to help him.

He passed through the storage room and entered the main office. There was Yolanda, a dozen feet in front of him, tall and slender. “George was right” he thought as he watch her from behind. She suddenly turned to see Steve before he could look away, smiled and came toward him. His face flushed.

“Hi Steve” her voice had a warm, tinkling quality, like a wind chime. The olive green of her dress brought out the rich tones of her skin. Steve felt his heart race. “Have you seen George?” she asked.

“Uh, no.” he muttered and quickly kalumped to his desk, suddenly feeling uncomfortably hot.

### **August 5, 1912**

*The streetcar bell clanged twice and the conductor told his only passenger that it was the last stop. If he wondered why a young woman would alight at this desolate destination, he didn’t let on. He watched her walk down Torrance Avenue until he clanged the bell once and the streetcar headed north again.*

*It was early August and the air had a moist fetid smell. Norma, an introspective, quiet young woman was happy to be alone and looking forward to spending the day in the swampy prairie between Wolf Lake and Lake Calumet. The paved road soon turned to dirt.*

*The sun had just risen over the tree line. The air was still cool but the day promised to be hot. She had come to collect specimens for her botany class – at least that’s how she justified the long trip to herself. After an hour of walking, she passed a small farm and wondered how long it could hold out against the bulging industry of Chicago’s Southside. West of the road stretched a sea of grass.*

*The last rain was weeks before but the ground was still soggy. Most notable were the mud chimneys that dotted the field. Once, very briefly, she saw the tips of claws*



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*retreat quickly into the chimney hole. The sounds of birds and the wind through the reeds filled her heart with a joy she found nowhere else.*

*By mid-afternoon she had filled her specimen bag when her eye caught a small bit of bluish-white hugging the ground. At first she thought it was a bit of trash, a bad omen of things to come for the area. But when she bent down, she saw a tiny translucent plant. It was completely devoid of any green. She could barely make out the shape of three leaves surrounding a tiny cup. She felt her heart thump a little harder in her chest as her slender fingers pushed away the vegetation around the ghostly plant. Carefully, she snipped the roots holding it to the soil and stood up. It was a plant like no other. She laid it in a napkin and put it in bag. She left the soggy prairie for the road back to the streetcar.*

There was still light in the sky as Nick pulled into the Wolf Lake Education Center parking lot. A squat, cinder block building along the highway that bisects the lake. Power lines crackled over its roof. Nick felt energized from his morning sexual encounter at the blue motel and the six service tickets that he successfully filled in the afternoon. The sex was quick and he thought it odd that she refused to kiss him. "Women!" he said to himself with a smile, "I'll never understand them." He thought it natural that she would want him even if it was he who gasped when she stepped out of her dress. Thinking of that moment sent a tiny electrical charge through his skin that made him shiver.

The lecture had already begun by the time Nick entered. There weren't many seats left and Nick's large frame cast a shadow across the screen of an old black and white photo of a translucent orchid. The crowd was mostly grey haired people who whispered "Hi'ya Nick" and "Glad you made it, Nick". His presence brought an energy to the group. Nick felt it and liked it.

The speaker continued as Nick found his seat "... by 1937 Dr. Norma Pfeffer had gone out to Lake Calumet six times to find *Thismia* again, each time unsuccessful. Of course, the human footprint on the area had been a stomp."

Before he sat down, Nick took a quick survey of the room. All grey heads, he thought as he smiled and nodded to the ones who looked back at him. It was too dark to be sure if there was anyone in the room besides himself who was under 50. He sat down in the back near the projector. The lecturer continued, "Let's meet here at 8am, Saturday. Looks like we have enough people for about ten teams. You don't have to pair up, you can go as three or go alone..." Nick decided to keep his options open until the lights went up.



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“Hi Nick.” The feminine voice startled him. When he swung around his heart sank. “Oh, hi Helen.”

She was Nick’s age, kind of plump in a sweet way. Her blonde hair was twisted into a Ukrainian braid around the crown of her head. It might have been appealing on another woman but on Helen it evoked the mustiness of a grandmother’s attic.

“Who the hell is named Helen anymore?” he asked himself as his brain furiously tried to invent an exit strategy. Yet he didn’t want to be mean. Helen was the last girl from his grade school left in the neighborhood. For that she merited politeness.

He wanted to say “What are you doing here?” but he already knew the answer from her blush. Instead, he said “I didn’t know you were into plants.” She wouldn’t look him in the eyes and sucked at her breath as if she was having difficulty breathing. “I saw it in the paper and thought it might be fun.” Nick could feel her nervousness and it fed his ego. “How’s your mom?” he asked, his eyes locked on her lowered face. She didn’t look up but said, “Oh, she’s good. A little more achy but she gets around. How’s your mom?” Nick didn’t say anything. He wanted to force her to look up at him. She had attended the event with a weak plan to engage Nick like she had two years earlier at Joe Purachenko’s wedding. All that she had rehearsed in her mind since reading the Thismia notice a month ago had evaporated in less than a minute. She was now in unpredictable territory and had no clue of what to do next. The only thing that stood between her and abject humiliation was Nick taking pity on her and giving her an escape hatch with some of her dignity intact. The pause went on for 10 seconds, 15 seconds and Helen finally succumbed to the awkward silence and picked her head up.

“My mom?” he acted surprised. “She’s good. Feisty as always.” He smiled. Something in his tone told Helen that he wasn’t going to make her suffer. She had been infatuated with Nick since the third grade. She was an overweight girl and it was apparent to her that she hadn’t a chance. But as the years fell away, the demographics of the neighborhood changed. All of the familiar white faces turned to brown ones, brown ones who spoke another language. Her rivals for his attention in grade school had moved away and their replacements kept shyly to themselves. There were few opportunities for a neighborhood roue to investigate.

Nick suddenly had a brain storm. Why not Helen and Steve? It was perfect, like grafting a rose, Helen’s blossom with Steve’s mangled root stock. Yet, almost as suddenly, a gray cloud of warning loomed behind the brilliance of his idea. The warning wasn’t articulated like the idea, more of just a feeling. It lasted a moment then the sunny part of his head whispered “What could go wrong?”

He blurted out, “Wanna do the survey with me?”



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He had seen her naked once, the night of Joe's wedding. He vaguely remembered the glow in her face when they laid together on the hotel bed. It was nothing close to the look in her eyes now. Again, the clouds loomed and just as easily he waved them away.

"Yes." She said quickly. Her eyes were happy but also held a suspicion that his offer might be some sort of trick. It wasn't beyond him.

"Great. I might bring Steve" he said casually. She felt less anxious that he would purposely hurt her with Steve there. Steve was not part of the crowd that took sport in humiliating girls. "That okay?" he said. "Sure. I like Steve. It's been awhile."

Bingo, thought Nick, he could share that line with Steve tonight and get him thinking. "Great. See you Saturday." He turned around to listen to the rest of the lecture.

The bus was packed. Someone always offered him a seat but he usually declined it. Not tonight. He was brutally tired and not looking forward to the four block walk home. "I should've taken a cab" he thought. He could feel the grit from the air when he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. Sweat was constantly trickling down his spine and the back of his arms. The bus air was humid and barely keeping the temperature under 80 degrees. Despite the unpleasant conditions thoughts of Yolanda kept him content. Lithe and sinewy, she glided rather than walked through the office. The olive dress with just enough yellow in it to harmonize with the mocha of her skin and just enough green to catch the spark of her eyes. He debated whether she wore a white or black bra. The bus hit a bone jarring pot hole that shook him from his dream. The next block was his stop.

It was always a chore to mash his way off a crowded bus with crutches. Young people with earbuds who didn't move until he bumped them, middle aged folks buried in their newspapers and the heat all conspired to amplify his poor mood into a seething rage.

"Coming out." He barked with an irritation that surprised himself. It was a relief to be on the sidewalk despite the heat and long trip home.

He had walked this street thousands of times. He could even remember a time when he ran down it. But he no longer felt it was his. He passed a pretty bungalow with a tiny front yard. His memory of it was thick venetian blinds on the front windows. Today, in the heat of August there were curtains tied midway in a knot and a thin line of tiny lights across the eave like Christmas lights but hung all year. The Lombardi's had lived there since before Steve was born but had moved out a dozen years ago. "Why



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would someone hang Christmas lights all year?” he thought as he passed the house. “Kristy Lombardi was hot. I wonder if Nick fucked her.” A dark haired woman looked out the window suspiciously at Steve and he moved on. His hips ached and his back was tired from moving on crutches. The thought of plopping down on his sofa and stretching his toes was appealing. “That’s the best that I can expect from life” he thought.

He knew he was falling into one of his black moods but he couldn’t stop himself. He knew the pattern, it would continue like this for 10 days, each day a little lower. At first it’s just sporadic moments during the day – he could handle that. It’s when it invaded his sleep and left him with a debilitating sadness when he woke that he feared the most. The worst dreams were the ones where he could walk again and then someone, usually faceless, would remind him that he’s crippled. It was then he would wake, usually between 3 and 4 in the morning. It happened so often that he had long given up the effort to fall back asleep. In those cases, he’d drag himself to the chair next to his bed, light a cigarette and turn on the radio low to wait for dawn.

The back of his shirt was soaked with sweat. He told himself that reality was all in his head that he could pull up from his mental fall if he focused on positive thoughts. Just then he remembered his dad working on his model railroad in the basement, the radio tuned to an oldies program and he heard the song as distinctly as if he were there, “Try Counting Your Blessings”. It made him feel good for a moment, especially thinking about his dad, those goofy trains and the ever present bottle of hootch. But the memory was ephemeral. The thought association of “blessings” was children. He was nearly 37 years old and as distant from a relationship as an Eskimo is from a sun tan.

### **August 6, 1912**

*Norma arrived at the lab at 7am. She arranged the tiny glass bottles across the top of the hard black counter. The building was languidly quiet. She opened the large window to rid the room of the smell of ether. She was anxious to get to work and particularly curious about the tiny translucent plant. She looked at it again to reassure herself that she hadn’t imagined it. She held the jar in the early morning light and turned it slowly around. A smile crossed her face at its oddness. “I’ll leave you for last.” she said out loud. She set it down at the end of the line, pulled a lab stool across the linoleum and picked up another bottle. It was a beautiful morning and she reveled in her solitude.*

*“Hi’ya, Norma.” His voice went off like a gunshot. The tiny bottle she was holding bounced off the counter and broke on the floor. A jolt of adrenaline gushed into her*



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*bloodstream. The hair on the back of her neck bristled. She swung around and before she could contain it, a bolt of anger burst from her mouth.*

*“Goddamn it! Don’t do that.” This was an era when coarse expletives rarely came from young ladies of a certain social class. To hear it, one knew either it was from an extraordinary event or an extraordinary woman. Jacob felt it was the latter. He had come to the lab especially to see her, to talk with her but all that he accomplished was to irritate her.*

*Jacob immediately bent down to gather the bottle shards. He first picked up the tuft of green and squinted at it. “Selaginella?”*

*“Yes.” She snatched the bit of moss from his hand and threw it in the waste basket. She was aware of her anger and knew it wasn’t because of the broken specimen. Jacob had been mooning over her for months. Creeping about while she studied at the library or showed up at the lab early in the morning. Sometimes he’d come in and only nod to her and sit in his corner pretending to work. He wasn’t bad looking. It wasn’t his religion. He was a student at the University of Chicago so he wasn’t poor. It wasn’t the first time Norma confronted these questions. It was simply that she wasn’t interested and it irritated her that she wasn’t interested. And it irritated her that she was expected to be interested.*

*“Where’d you find it?” he asked. The first answer that came to Norma’s mind was “What’s it to you?” but instead she took a breath and said “Beyond the end of Torrance.” She turned to her journal and began to read as if to say the conversation is over. Jacob picked up another jar from her specimens. “Must have been mesic.” She took the jar from his fingers and placed it back in the line. It was apparent that he wasn’t going to leave unless he was utterly rude to him. Doing that was more distasteful to her than putting up with his intrusion.*

*“Yes,” She said, “it was very wet.” Her voice softened. “Why not share with him?” she thought. Despite his mooning, he’s been the only one at the university to treat her as a peer. “I found something that I’ve never seen before.” She showed Jacob the jar but pulled it back as he anxiously reached for it. “I’ll hold it while you look.”*

*Jacob adjusted the glasses on his nose and peered at the tiny translucent flower. “Wow. An orchid. No green at all. Did you preserve it already?”*

*“No. This is how I found it.” She brought the bottle closer to her eyes, looking at it with admiration. “I can’t believe I saw it. It’s so tiny. Any ideas?”*



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*Jacob leaned in to the bottle, his face just inches from Norma. "Kiss her!" a voice screamed in his head. As if she could hear his thought, Norma quickly swiveled on her chair and put the bottle back on the table.*

*"Jacob. I have a lot work to do."*

*"Can I help? I could start at the far end..." He moved down the counter as if it was already decided.*

*The irritation welled up again. "No, not today. I need to organize my thoughts alone." She took a deep breath. "But thank you for the offer."*

As usual, Steve was at the couch first. It was after nine and the light in the sky barely registered in the west. There was a pleasant cool breeze off of Wolf Lake. Dots of orange lights bejeweled the power plant across the water. A few bullfrogs occasionally croaked but the drone of summer insects owned the night.

Steve took a long draw on his cigarette. This moment was one of the few that he cherished out of the days, months and years of tedium. He wished that Nick wouldn't show up. A few stars were able to peek through the glow of Chicago's light. It was a short reprieve from his constant self-assessment, constant belittling of himself. It was pure joy to sit on a moldy couch along the shore of a polluted lake and draw in the noxious fumes of a cigarette that most likely would kill him one day. Then he heard it, a strong voice from inside his head "I gotta' get outta' here." It hit him like a thunderbolt and he knew that his life would not be the same after this moment. He had to move and start a new life. He made a mental note to review his savings the next day. And like an enlightened Buddha, he felt the pain lift.

Nick emerged from the darkness swinging a six pack of beer. "What ho' little buddy?" Before he sat down Steve held his hand up. "Wait." He leaned closely over the other side of the couch. "I nearly sat on a needle when I got here." Nick's smile slid away "Fucking crackheads. This is why we can't have nice things." Steve patted the cushions gingerly then leaned back. "I think it's okay."

Nick carefully sat down and popped two beers. He sank into the moldy cushions and his innate good nature returned. "To a great day." He held up his beer can to clink with Steve's. "Fuck you." Steve said staring out to the inky lake. "C'mon man lighten up. I got news that's cool for both of us." A train whistle blew and suddenly the clackety-clacks rumbled behind them. It was impossible to talk until it passed.

The faint ding-dong of the crossing gate was Nick's cue to continue. "Guess who I saw tonight?" Steve took a sip and silently stared straight ahead. He knew he was



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being an asshole but couldn't help it. All of his solitary well-being had evaporated when Nick showed up and the bile began to flow. It was a certainty, he thought, that whatever Nick had to share would have utterly no bearing on his life. "C'mon guess." The question and Nick's bright tone pierced his skull like a hat pin through the ear. He struggled to stand. Nick hadn't anticipated Steve's mood and dialed back his enthusiasm. "Helen Tymenko. She's still here" he said quietly. "C'mon man, what's eating you?" Steve sank back into the couch. He closed his eyes. "So?" Nick bounced closer to Steve. "Get this, she said 'I like Steve' and 'it's been too long.'" He was aware that he fudged the truth on the second quote.

The last tiny flicker of hope sparkled a bit in Steve's mind. He thought "He's lying but maybe not..." The spark grew no further but gasped for any oxygen available. His face made no indication of what he was thinking, yet Nick somehow knew. "He thinks I'm lying" he thought. Moving closer to Steve, he whispered "That's a quote, man, so help me God." There was an urgency in his appeal that Steve seldom heard from him. Nick sensed that he was turning certainty to doubt and like any good liar backed off to let the lie catch fire on its own.

"Helen Tymenko, the ukie?" Steve said not moving any muscles but his lips. "The one with the braids?"

"Yes!" thought Nick. He leaned back into his corner of the damp couch. "Yeah, the same. And get this. She wasn't going to go on the Thismia search until I told her that you were going too."

Steve opened his eyes "I didn't say that I was going."

"Well, thank me for being quick thinking." He held his beer can out for a toast. Without turning his head toward him, Steve held his beer can up and Nick stretched to clink it. "Saturday morning, 8am. I'm driving."

"We'll see" Steve said, then took a long swig of his beer.

"Now, listen to this." Nick could barely contain his excitement, "I fucked the most beautiful woman that I've ever seen." He waited for a response from Steve. None came. "At the blue motel," he added.

"I hope you brought penicillin."

Nick ignored the comment and continued, more to himself than to Steve. "We went to the room to look at the A.C. and before I could even set my tools down she opened her blouse to the sweetest set of boobies this side of Victoria Secrets. Man! I couldn't breathe. She didn't say a word and let me finish unwrapping her."



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“Sounds skanky.”

“Yeah. It even sounds skanky to me but it wasn’t. I’ve been thinking of her all day. Not about the fuck but about her.”

“I bet.” Steve deadpanned.

“No guy. This is different.”

“What’s her name?”

“I don’t know.” Nick said quietly.

“Uh huh.”

“She’s married to the owner but he looks old enough to be her grandad.”

“Jesus, Nick, the more you talk, the skankier it gets.”

Lightning flashed to the south and the wind picked up.

“This isn’t the first fuck I’ve had on the job but there was something different this time.”

“You’re going to get fired.”

“I didn’t even fix the unit. It was over fast but we just laid there.”

“What’d she say?”

“Nothing. Just held my hand tight. And thinking about it now that was better than the sex.”

Steve rolled his head, “Oh, come on. She didn’t ask for money?”

“No. She got up and started dressing. So I did the same. I tried to kiss her but she wouldn’t let me.”

“And you didn’t ask her name? Nothing. Just skeedaddled?”

“She went to the bathroom and locked the door.”

“Man, you dodged a bullet. You’re lucky to get out of it so easy.”

“I want to see her again.”

Steve turned to Nick for the first time. “Are you nuts!” A raindrop hit his cheek. “You’d put your pecker in a light socket given the chance.”



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Nick smiled. "I've been giddy all day. Thought it was just the fuck but talking about it now makes me want to see her again and talk with her. Find out who she is."

"Well, you'll get your chance when her husband calls your boss that the A.C. is still broken."

More drops fell and the wind came in gusts. The whirr of insects had ceased. Steve struggled to stand and started to hobble away. Nick gave him a muted call "I'll catch up." Steve continued his way down the gravel path.

The boy sat on the edge of his bed reading a book. He tried to concentrate on the pictures but the muffled, angry voices beyond the blue cinderblock walls of his room kept intruding. He couldn't make out the words except for the times he heard his name spoken. The sharp sound of slaps made his eye twitch.

He turned a page and said out loud, "I have only one ma." He turned another page so forcefully that it ripped. He quickly turned the next page and it too ripped. His placid face was a contrast to the violent motion of his hands. He purposely torn the remaining pages, one by one, letting them fall to the floor.

It was 3am. The rain fell with a violence. Lightning flashed and Steve saw that the gutters on Nick's house were overflowing. The smoke from his cigarette wafted out the window. "Held her hand" Steve seethed to himself. "What a crock of shit. He got a blowjob for twenty bucks and he wants to spin it out into a romance." The thunder crackled and set off a car alarm down the street.

"He's always rubbing my nose in it. Taunting me with his lies. Dangling Cheryl, Helen in front of me. Here you go little pup. Jump!" he sneered. The bitterness welled up in him. It poisoned his soul. The Buddha light of a few hours before turned into a black hole of roiling hate. He stubbed out the cigarette and laid down. The rain lashed at the window. He knew there was no way that he would sleep between then and when his alarm would sound three hours later.

Nick gave the horn two quick beeps and watched the kitchen door through the cascade of water over his windshield. Steve pushed the door open with his crutch and hunched his shoulders against the downpour. Grace followed him holding an umbrella over his head. On the first step from the small concrete porch, Steve turned and said something to his mother that Nick couldn't hear. She stopped, the umbrella still



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extended from her body. Steve tottered through the rain. He and his mother were both soaked by the time he reached the van.

Nick and Steve drove in silence. The windshield wipers barely kept up with the deluge. Steve stared out his foggy window. Nick felt Steve's hostility and kept his focus on the road. The sound of his phone startled them both.

"Hello?... yeah, it's Nick. Who's calling?" his voice was defensive and brusque. Suddenly, he sat up straight. "Hey..." a smile erupted across his face. "How'd you get the number?" Steve gave him a sidelong glance then turned back to his window.

"Uh huh, uh huh... I'd love to but I'm on my way to work... What!?" the smile dropped from his face. "Where are you?" Nick pulled the van into a muddy lot along the highway and swung it back the way they came.

"What are you doing?" Steve barked. "I've got to get to work."

Nick frowned and held the phone closer to his ear. "I'll be there in 10 minutes. Try to find shelter." Nick fumbled the phone into his pocket and hit the gas. "That was the girl from the blue motel."

She was walking on the shoulder of the highway. It was a good five miles from the motel. The rain was still falling hard. Nick pulled the van in front of her and jumped out. All that she was wearing was a tee shirt, jeans and flip flops. She was shivering when they got into the van. It wasn't until he looked at her through the rearview mirror that he noticed her bruised face.

"Jesus Christ! What happened?"

She sat on a milk crate just behind the front seats. It was difficult for her to talk with a fat lip and swollen jaw.

"Started last night."

"Because of me?" Nick asked. She shook her head.

"We've got to go to the emergency room."

"No!" her voice was almost a scream. "I'm okay. No doctors, no police. Please."

"There's a blanket back there. Put it on."

Steve looked at her and then at Nick. "C'mon man, I've got to get to work."

She pulled the dirty blanket over her shoulders. Her hair was matted to her face.

"What's your name?" Nick asked.



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“Aditi.” Her teeth chattered and she held her jaw.

“This is Steve.”

She tried to smile through the chill and pain.

“What do you want to do?”

She gave him a panicked look. “I don’t know. Can I just ride with you?”

“Nick... this isn’t cool.” Steve whispered. Nick ignored him.

“It’s a company vehicle. I can’t have passengers.” He glanced at Steve. “Isn’t there a shelter in Hammond?”

“How the fuck would I know?”

“Well, google it.” He said sharply. He looked at her again in the mirror.

“I’ll take you to a shelter. It’s run by nuns.” Fear and confusion welled up in her face. “Religious ladies,” he assured her. “They don’t try to convert or anything. Just give you the room to think.”

“It’s in fucking Crown Point.” Steve slapped his phone. “Nick, I’ve gotta get to work.”

“Give me a break, Steve. Look at her. We’ve got to do something.”

“Why ‘we’? I didn’t fuck her.”

Aditi looked down at her hands. She began to cry.

“Real sweet, dude. Thanks.”

“This is complete, total bullshit. You don’t know her. It doesn’t concern you. This has disaster all over it. Take her to the police. Let them handle it.”

“No!” This time she did scream. She scrambled for the latch on the sliding door.

Nick jerked the van to the side of the road and grabbed her arm.

“We’re not going to the cops. Close the door.” She pushed it shut. “We’ll drop off Mr. Charm and just ride.”

“Hey, Nick,” Steve had a malicious smile, “why don’t you show her how you can talk like an Indian.”

“Shut up, Steve.”



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Steve turned to Aditi. “Where’s your dot?” Nick pushed him hard and the van swerved.

“Knock it off!”

A brilliant ray of sun broke through the clouds. The asphalt in front of the Employment office steamed. Steve limped to Nick’s window. “If she was white, I’d say this was some sort of Hoosier scam.”

Nick twisted around to Aditi. “Come up front.” Then to Steve, “Get your own ride home tonight.” He rolled up the window.

Aditi watched Steve hobble to the building as they pulled away. She didn’t know why but she felt as if she just reconnected with a lost twin.

Steve knew he crossed a line with Nick but, at least, he did it with precision. People were gathered in the back of the office. He felt lucky that he could sneak in without anyone noticing that he was late. Just as he reached his desk, someone called out to him from the group.

“Steve.” It was Yolanda and she was walking toward him with arm extended. “Look at my ring.” She beamed with happiness.

“Wow. That must have set you back.” He said while trying to feign interest. She gave him a quizzical look. “It’s an engagement ring.”

“Oh. Congratulations.” He gave her a weak smile. He sat at his desk and then watched as she walked back to the group. In a million years, he was never, ever going to date her, much less be intimate with her yet this was another stone of disappointment on his heart.

When the sun popped out from a cloud, it burned with a summer intensity. Nick had the heat on high and the interior was hot. “You gotta get dry.” He couldn’t resist a glance at the shape of her breasts under the wet tee shirt. He cracked his window for air. “I know where we can go.”

“What about your work?”

“Fuck it. Sorry about Steve. He’s usually not a dick.”

“Was he born like that?”



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“A dick?” he smiled.

“Crippled.”

“Car accident when he was thirteen. Killed his dad.” The sun beat down on the dashboard. “His dad was a drunk. Nice guy though.” Nick opened his window all the way.

“I’m crippled too.”

“Where?” Nick said, looking her over.

“Inside.”

“Do you want to talk about what happened?”

“No.”

“Why me?”

She said very quietly as if she were ashamed, “No one else.”

Nick left the highway and drove along a refinery wall. Black stacks loomed over the landscape like prayerful demons. The wall gave way to a chain link fence that protected a lake of reeds. Rusted oil drums lay in the ditch before the fence. The road narrowed and had more potholes. The reeds changed to a gnarly forest. Folded mattresses shoved between tree trunks, piles of rubble dumped at night, and the shell of a burnt out automobile were manifestations of a region soaked in 20<sup>th</sup> century industry.

The few houses were ramshackle, wooden frame fire traps. A guy on his porch stood up to watch Nick’s van bounce by. If Aditi had any doubts about where Nick was taking her, she didn’t show it. He pulled into a short gravel driveway that ended at a high chain link fence with a sign warning trespassers. It was full of rusty bullet holes.

They crossed the road and climbed down the embankment to a ditch. A rolled up carpet provided a soggy bridge over the grimy water. Nick held down the barbed wire of a fence for Aditi to climb over. The opposite side of the ditch was a steep hill covered with waist high bushes. The intense sunlight made the back of Aditi’s shirt steam. At the top, they stood over an expanse of field and water. A heron squawk once and lifted effortlessly into the air.

“It’s beautiful.” Aditi said between deep breaths.

“The mills bought the land a hundred years ago and kind of forgot about it.”



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They walked down the hill and among the profusion of flowers; purple, blue and orange. Butterflies wafted from one bloom to the next. The surface of the shallow ponds were covered with water lilies and darting dragonflies. The banjo twang of a frog echoed across the water. To the west were the refinery stacks, distant but close enough to not be forgotten. Directly south billows of smoke rose from US Steel's Gary Works. And one lonely abandoned factory with a collapsed roof and orange streaked walls sat on the east border. Like ever watchful, silent giants they towered over the garden.

"This is how all of it used to look like." They descended on a narrow sandy path. "You're the only one that I've brought here."

"Not your friend?" she asked.

"We've got a spot near our houses to hang. Nothing like this."

The clouds had disappeared and the sky was deep blue. Nick's phone rang. He turned it off and put it back in his pocket.

He let Aditi take the lead. The path leveled off at the edge of the pond. They heard the kerplunks of frogs as they passed. She walked with her head erect. She turned once to smile at him. He was shocked by the bruises on her face. Nick wondered what she was thinking but kept quiet, proud to show off his spot. A gentle breeze felt good against the heat and shook the leaves of the few stunted oaks.

"Over here." Nick indicated a side path to a tree. They sat near its shade. Nick leaned close to her face. "Wow. He really did a number on you."

"She, mostly." Her expression darkened.

"Mother-in-law?"

"Sister. In. Law." She said each word slow and carefully, like she was handling poison.

Nick gently touched her swollen jaw. "I don't think it's broken. How are the teeth?"

Aditi stuck her finger in her mouth. "Nuhhin oos."

"Why don't you leave?" he asked. She took her finger out of her mouth.

"My son." She crossed her arms over her knees.

"You have a baby? ..." then it dawned on him. "That boy!? He's gotta be ten..."

She dropped her forehead to her arms.



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“That’s fucked up.” Nick thought but kept it to himself. He was just beginning to understand the complexity of her situation. He thought it strange that he had been with her an hour and hadn’t tried to make any sexual contact. His eye caught some movement in the grass. He lurched forward and pulled back his hands tightly cupped together.

“Hey, take a look.” She picked her head up from her arms. Nick carefully opened a crack between his hands to reveal the warty face of a toad. “*Bufo fowleri*. Otherwise known as a toad.” Nick gently held it between his thumb and index finger under its tiny forearms, its legs kicked in the air. He counted, “seven, eight, nine ...” Then quickly extended his arm. A thin stream of water shot out from under the toad’s fat, cream colored belly. “It’s like clockwork. They always do it.” Aditi laughed like a self-conscious teenager. Her laugh was an elixir to Nick and he wanted more of it.

The toad wriggled in Nick’s fingers. “He’s missing something.” Nick pulled a sharpie pen from his pocket protector and uncapped it with his mouth. With a quick, deft motion, he placed a tiny black dot on its belly. “All toads should have belly buttons.” And he placed it back on the ground. Aditi laughed again. The toad sat brooding where Nick had placed it.

“Oh, no, you’ve embarrassed him.” She wrapped her arms around her bended legs and set her cheek on her knees.

“Good. That’s what he gets for trying to pee on me.”

“He’s so ugly that he’s cute.”

“Do they have toads where you’re from?”

“No, just people.” She dug at the sand with her flip-flop. Suddenly, she looked up at the scenery then at Nick. “I hope you never lose this place.”

“Fat chance. Nobody knows it’s here. Besides, it’s protected by ugliness.” Nick picked up a stick and drew a circle in the sand around the toad. “It’s survived the worst but now it’s trapped with no way out.” He drew little lines out from the circle. “If this little guy tries to leave here, he’d get smooshed on the road.” Nick leaned back against the tree. “Where are you from?”

“Patna.” Her face brightened.

“Where’s that?”

“India.” She squinched her face at him as if everyone knew where Patna is.

“How long’s it been?”



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She turned her eyes up thinking. “Three years.” Then started to rock forward and back. “I want to see my pita again. He would know what to do.”

Nick took a guess a ‘pita’. “Miss your folks?” She nodded.

“You’re lucky to be where you were born.” She turned to Nick, “if you could go anywhere, where would you go?”

“Wow. Nobody’s ever asked me that. I don’t know.” I guess nowhere. I don’t want to get smooshed. I like it here.”

“Do you like movies?” she said suddenly.

“Sure.”

“My favorite is ‘Princess Bride’. Have you seen it?”

“No. Must have slipped by me.”

The sun and heat had dried Aditi’s clothes. Nick caught wafts of her body smell and he felt a stir in his loins.

“What do you want to do now?” he asked her.

“I have to go back.”

He sat up straight. “No way. You can’t do that.”

She stood up and brushed the sand from the seat of her pants. “I’m better now.” She walked into the pond up to her ankles and cupped the water to wet her face. Nick’s mind raced to think of a reason for her to do anything but what she had stated.

“Just check out the shelter. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll try something else.” She turned and smiled at him. Despite her discolored and swollen cheek, his heart swelled with a feeling he didn’t recognize. He thought he knew love but this was new.

She approached him and held out her hand. “You’ve been wonderful but the longer I wait to go back, the worse it’ll be.” He took her hand and rose. Any other woman he would have put his arms around her and kissed her but what he felt now was confusion.

And worry.

They walked silently, hand in hand, back the narrow path.

The toad waited for their shadows to pass. Then hopped out of the circle and into the grass.



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Instead of a smoke, Steve reviewed his financial status. It was awkward with no privacy and people walking behind his desk but it was easier than using his phone. Fifteen years with the state and paying next to nothing to his mom had left him with a small fortune. He could go almost anywhere but didn't know where.

"Whoa. That's a hunk of change." George was over his shoulder. Steve hurriedly exited the page.

"Do you mind?"

"If had that kind of dough, I'd be long gone." he wheezed.

"Yeah, where would you go?" Steve challenged him.

George stood up straight. His florid face searching for an answer. "Well, anywhere but the fuck here." He waddled away.

Steve brought the page back up. He had the means but not the guts to leave. He looked around the smudged and worn out office. "This is it until I'm sixty." He shuddered. He opened a drawer and took out an index card. "Indy" he said then wrote it down. "Milwaukee." Wrote it down then crossed it out. "Too close. Cleveland." He wrote it down, paused and furiously scribbled out both cities. "What the fuck am I doing? If I'm going to leave, I'm going big." He brought up Google Maps and typed in 'Europe'. He remembered that his dad still had cousins in Europe but he couldn't remember where. Then it occurred to him that he only knew English. He sat staring at the screen and felt his resolve for a new life ebbing.

"What about mom?" he asked himself. Another pillar of his scheme collapsed. "Even if I found the most perfect spot, I'd never convince her to move." He left the page and tossed the index card into the trash.

His break was over.

As they drove toward The Great Lakes Motel, Nick tried every possible argument for Aditi not to return. He even suggested that he talk to husband. She laughed but not like ha-ha, more like spooky and it unsettled him more. He pointed out that if anything bad happened to her that he would be to blame so her safety was his responsibility. She didn't even bother to address that argument. He drove purposely in an indirect route, taking roads that led in circles until she became impatient and annoyed at his driving. He did get her to agree to text him if he promised not to text her.



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He stopped along the highway about a mile from the motel. Aditi sat in silence trying to collect the strength to open the door. She knew what to expect but not what to do. Her only option was to just ride it out. She made a move toward the handle. Nick blurted out, "Aditi?" She stopped and turned to him with a surprised expression as if he had just appeared to her.

"Have you slept with other guys at the motel?" he asked her.

She gave her head a little shake like she didn't understand the question. The tears came immediately and seemed out of place with the angry look in her eyes. It occurred to Nick that she might hit him.

"You," her voice quavered, "were as close to a wedding night that I will ever have." She opened the door and was gone.

"What the hell did that mean?" Nick thought as he turned his phone back on. He had a dozen messages. He began with his boss, snowjobbing a story about van troubles. He called his morning customers with apologies and then the afternoon ones to reschedule. He put the van in gear and began to review his life; 37 years old and living at home with his mom. He felt embarrassed.

"I'm going to marry her," he resolved to himself but with no plan how he could accomplish it. The idea occupied his thoughts in a pleasant way throughout the tedium of the afternoon. He checked his phone every ten minutes for Aditi's text but it never came. By 6:30 he was worried and even took the chance to drive by the motel after his last appointment. It sat there just as scuzzy as ever but with no sign of discord.

His thoughts bounced around like a pebble caught in a fan, from worry about her to self-reflection on his own fucked-up life and then back to how he could extricate her from the blue motel and make a life as a couple.

"I'd have to adopt her kid." The idea seemed incredible and he knew his head was buzzing with the impossible.

"I should go back to school, Get my degree, maybe teach." The image of college girls popped into his head. He twisted in his seat. "I've got to stop thinking like that."

He checked his phone again. Nothing.

"I can't sit at home like this" he thought. "I'll go nuts."

He passed Murphy's Saloon with its little shamrocks dancing on the window. He made a u-turn and went inside. It was crowded for a Tuesday night. A dart play-off was going on. Nick sat at the bar.



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“Hi’ya Nick. How’s things?”

“Hey, Stush, a little agitated. PBR.” He checked his phone.

The bartender was a big man with a big moustache. He set the bottle in front of Nick. Nick took another peek at the phone screen and left it on the bar. He had the sense of someone staring at him. He turned and looked across the room.

“Oh, no.” he cringed. It was Cheryl. He bunched himself up thinking if he looked small enough she might leave him in peace. But he could feel her hate boring into his back. A hate born of a love deferred.

She sat at a table next to a skinny guy with buck teeth and greasy long hair. Nick didn’t recognize him. Cheryl had a knockout body but the grim, mean look of West Virginia.

Nick took a pull on his beer and saw her approaching him through the bar mirror. Stush watched quietly with the bartender’s sixth sense for trouble.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, more as an accusation than a question.

“Hi Cheryl.” Nick tried to seem cheerful then looked at his phone.

“Waiting for someone?”

“Just a beer after...”

“Where’s your gimpy shadow?” she interrupted.

“Let’s be nice.” He took a swig of beer.

She turned to Stush. “Do know how much he likes flowers?” She gave Nick a vicious smile. “What a homo.”

Nick understood that she was blindly stabbing, looking for his tender spots. “Mmmm. Right.” He looked up at Stush and shook his head. He looked at Cheryl. “We don’t have to do this, Cheryl. You’ve got a new guy...” Nick nodded toward her table.

“Yes, I do and he’s a man” she interrupted him.

“Okay, then go back to him.”

“He’s got a real job,” she paused thinking, “and a house.”

“Then why are you bothering me?” he pleaded. She knew she was getting closer with the pin pricks. He looked at the phone and pretended to ignore her. It only made her angrier.



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“You’re pathetic.”

He continued to look at his phone even though the screen went blank.

“You’re just a little boy who doesn’t know what he wants.”

Bingo. She found it.

He looked directly at her. “You didn’t think that while you were on your knees wetting my knob.” And immediately, he thought, “Oh shit, I shouldn’t have said that.” But it stopped her dead. Her mouth moved but nothing came out, like a fish on the dock. She looked at Stush who had discretely turned to arrange bottles. Her eyes were red. For the second time in the day, Nick thought a woman was going to hit him. Cheryl raced back to her table, whispered to the guy and they busied themselves to go.

Stush walked to the other end of the bar to tend to a customer. Nick picked up his phone for the hundredth time that day and then felt a tremendous thud on his head. The skinny guy and Cheryl rushed out the door. He found himself crumpled on the floor surrounded by excited voices.

“Nick, you okay?”

“Hit him with a bottle.”

“Fuckin’ mill rat.”

Nick heard the sound of a weird siren and tried to block it out by putting his fingers in his ears. He realized then that the sound was in his head. His fingertips felt moist and he saw that they were stained with blood. He tried to stand but fell back down.

“Stay down, Nick” someone said.

“Wha...?” he tried to push the words out but his tongue rolled in his mouth like a hank of dead flesh.

“Someone call an ambulance.”

It’s on its way” was the last thing Nick heard that night.

Nick had depressing and dreadful dreams. In one, he was sitting in a diner booth opposite Cheryl. She was chatting away happily like they were a couple. He remembered that Aditi was hiding in a closet at their home. Next, he and Cheryl were in the house and he desperately moved Aditi from one room to the next just ahead of



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Cheryl, knowing that eventually she was going to catch him at it. The other dream, his mom sat at the kitchen table slowly shaking her head at Nick in disappointment. He had the sense that his dad would enter the room soon and his mom would tell him what Nick had done. The last dream was the worst. He was at the blue motel in one of the rooms. It was dimly lit but he could see the outline of Aditi's body in the bed. Her back was to him and her hair was splayed over the coverlet. He knew something terrible had happened as he approached the bed. He reached out to pull back the blanket when he snorted himself awake.

"He's waking." Nick heard Steve's voice like it was coming from the end of a long tunnel.

Steve spoke louder. "You're at St. Anthony's, Nick. You got clobbered." He moved closer to Nick's bed.

Nick tried to sit up but it made his head ache. He fell back on his pillow.

"The police want to know if you want to press charges. They know who did it." His mom said.

"Damn right I do." Nick said, pushing the words out like cotton balls.

"Cheryl sounds like the girl for me." Steve chuckled.

"Where's my phone?" Nick said. "Steve, the closet."

Steve hobbled to the closet and rummaged through Nick's pants.

"What time is it?"

His mom answered, "about eight."

"I gotta call work."

"Nick, eight in the evening. It's Thursday."

"Where's the van?"

Steve handed Nick his phone. "I don't know, Nick. It's probably still at Murph's." Nick checked the texts. Nothing.

"Shit. I've gotta get outta here." He swung a leg out of the bed, paused then threw up.

"Dude, you can't go anywhere. You're really fu..." he stopped himself for Nick's mom sake. "You're badly hurt."



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Nick fell back on the pillows. "Steve, you've got to do me a really big favor."

"Sure Nick, anything." He was next to the bed.

"Go to the blue motel, tonight."

"Except that."

"You saw her. She was supposed to text me that she's alright. I got nothing."

"It's for the police, not me."

"Just lay eyes on her and text me. If you don't see her, I'll figure out what to do next." His head swam in an ocean of woosiness.

"Who's 'she'?" his mom rolled the wheelchair closer.

"She's a..., ah, ah, um." Sweet unconsciousness kissed Nick from the other side leaving Steve to explain what little he knew to Nick's mom.

"I'm a fucking idiot" Steve thought to himself from the back of a cab. "I've got my own problems." The ride had cost a fortune. "I hate Nick."

The Great Lakes Motel parking lot was empty. Steve asked the driver to wait. There was a full moon and it cast Steve's shadow forward as he approached the lobby doors.

"This is the stupidest up thing that I've ever done." His reluctance to enter the motel was tempered by the idea that everything that he had done in life until this moment had led nowhere. "So, what the hell?" he thought.

It was 10pm and still hot and humid. The motel lobby was even scuzzier than Steve had imagined. The stink was the first thing that he noticed. Mold and sweat. He felt vulnerable. Nobody was at the desk and Steve thought "I should just leave and say that I didn't see her. Throw the ball back in Nick's court. Where it belongs." He remembered her bruised face and then tapped the bell.

Aditi came out of the office door. Her forearm was wrapped in a bandage. The surprise at seeing Steve quickly changed to an expression of "help me". Everyone until this point had wanted to help Steve but this was the first time he felt that someone needed him. She quietly put a finger to her lips. The sister-in-law emerged just as Aditi turned to the computer.



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Like a predatory bird, the sister-in-law pushed her face toward the computer screen. Aditi instinctively winced from her nearness like an abused pet. The sister-in-law turned to Steve with an unctuous smile. "Meeting someone?"

Steve nodded. She made the odious assumption because he was alone and crippled. She gave him a knowing look, just short of a wink. "We have special rates for special customers. Forty dollars for two hours. Cash, please."

He could have walked out but something was opening up in him that he didn't know he had, a desire to help. He handed over the money. She put the bills in her pocket and gave Aditi a curt nod. Aditi passed the card to him without looking up.

Steve's imagination of what went on in the room prevented him from touching anything or sitting on the bed. He leaned against the dresser and waited. He sent Nick a text that Aditi was okay. There was a lot going through his head, fear being number one but also the feeling that he was needed and he liked it. Everything seemed accelerated and he looked forward to whatever was next. He was anxious but felt secure with his text link to Nick.

"They're not always good plans," he thought "but, at least, Nick always has a plan." He sent another text. "Yeah, Nick's a goof but at least he tries. Even with that stupid flower search, he gets up and looks."

Aditi entered the room as silent as a ghost. She handed Steve an envelope and kept watching the door. Steve was confused but took out the document. It was a life insurance policy. Aditi leaned next to him to point out her name on the form. He knew nothing about insurance policies but this one had her name next to a phrase with the word death in it. "What's it mean?" she asked him.

He looked at her for some clue that this was an elaborate scam. He only saw panic, highlighted by bruises, like someone lost in a churning ocean. "Nothing good," he said and handed back the envelope. They spoke for another three minutes, she nodded and left as quietly as she came.

The cabbie gave Steve a few glances through the rearview mirror but didn't say anything as they waited behind the motel. "If this is a scam," Steve thought "it's pretty damn good." He wanted a cigarette but felt safer inside the cab. He wondered why Nick didn't mention a kid. "But then again, he didn't ask for a rescue." Steve smiled. "A rescue. Is that what I'm doing?"

The abrupt sound of the door opening made Steve jump. A thin, sleepy boy bundled in next to him holding a blanket. Aditi climbed in after him and closed the door quietly. "Where to?" the cabbie asked.



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“Crown Point.” he said.

“Ding!”

The phone signaled Steve’s text at 10:03 She good but Nick didn’t hear it. Between the concussion and pain medicine, he wouldn’t hear anything for another eight hours.

10:05 I say scam

10:11 WHOA SERIOUS

10:14 sHe got leave

10:27 kid?! WTF

10:29 on the road

10:33 doesn’t want shelter

10:35 hysterical. Advise!

10:42 Nick need to talk. Answer fone

The night nurse heard the dings and rings down the hall. She entered Nick’s room and found the phone under his hand. His snoring was worse than the phone but, at least, she could turn off the phone.

11:17 At shelter. She won’t go

11:24 This is your fucking problem. NOT MINE!

11:27 Come on man. Pick up.

11:33 What did u tell her about me?

11:36 Uncool

11:42 On the road. Call me.

11:48 Crying again

11:54 She hit me

11:59 She better. Need a plan!

12:03 Cab is alot \$



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12:07 Whats Patna?

12:16 Pick up the fucking fone!

The last text came at 03:23 Friday morning; plan change.

The boy was collapsed like an unstrung marionette against Steve's shoulder. It felt good to Steve to feel his weight and warmth. Aditi was asleep on the other side of the boy. The three of them were alone in the cavernous train station in Chicago waiting for the Zephyr to San Francisco. There was a lot to think about, a lot of uncertainty but to fling himself into the future left Steve with a peace that he hadn't felt since he was a boy.

### **December 23, 1938**

*A light snow was falling. Norma crossed State Street at Monroe. She joined the slow movement of the crowd that gathered to view the Christmas windows at Marshall Fields. She left the university early to shop for presents for her nieces and nephews. It was just like her to wait to the last minute. She loved the bustle of the Loop during Christmas week.*

*"Norma?" She instinctively turned and saw a short, well-dressed man with a graying beard. He was smiling at her and waiting to see if she recognized him. "Don't take too long or I'll be hurt" he thought.*

*"Jacob!" Norma beamed. He let out a breath of relief. She threw her arms around him and gave him a warm hug. "It's been 25 years. How did you know me?" It wasn't lost on Jacob that this was the first hug he ever got from her.*

*"Alumni News, the first woman PhD at the University of Chicago" he clasped her hand. "Congratulations. It was big news."*

*"What about you? Suddenly, you weren't around and such a good scientist."*

*"My father prevailed upon me to study law" he reluctantly admitted. "I work in Manhattan, corporate attorney. Married, two boys. I can't complain." He wanted to ask about her marital status but thought it would be indiscrete. Besides, he felt pretty certain she was single. "How did you do it? The article mention that odd orchid but I'm sure it was just a lot of hard work."*

*"Thismia. Thismia americana. It helped. I've looked for it a lot but never saw it again. Where in Manhattan?" It was her eyes that he remembered best. The way that they sparkled when she talked.*



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*“Jacob?”*

*“Hmm?”*

*“Where in Manhattan? Where do you live in Manhattan?”*

*“Oh.” His mind returned to their conversation. “Yorkville. Say, do you have time for a coffee, a drink?”*

*“No, I would love to but I still have presents to get.”*

*He took out his wallet and handed her his card. “If you’re ever in New York, please look me up.”*

*“Thank you.” She gave him the second and last hug that he would ever get from her. “I hope we see each other again.”*

*She had walked about ten feet when he called out “Merry Christmas, Norma.”*

*Norma turned and gave a little wave “and a happy New Year to you, Jacob” then disappeared in the crowd.*

Nick was a ridiculous sight; unshaven, unshowered, bandaged head with a tuft of hair missing where they stitched up his wound. He peered out the window of the Uber in Murphy’s parking lot. No van. They circled around the building once then back on Highway 12. A worrisome development to add to a list of unsettling questions.

He reviewed Steve’s texts. He was relieved that Aditi was okay but was baffled by plan change. What plan? All he had to do was lay eyes on her and report back. Simple. His texts to Steve remained unanswered.

He called his boss. The trick would be to get information without revealing too much. He had hoped that somehow someone from the company had heard about the incident and came to retrieve the van.

“Hey Frank. Nick,” he said with guarded optimism.

“Yes,” the voice was cold. “Uh-oh,” Nick thought, “this is trouble.” He was going to have to reveal more than he had wanted to.

“I had an accident.”

“How so?” Nick heard the anger behind the coldness and determined that his boss knew more about the van than he did.



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"I got knocked in the head," he said hoping for some empathy. "Was in the hospital since Tuesday night."

"And where did it happen?" his boss said with the tone that he already knew the answer.

"uh, at a...", Nick struggled to find words that would lessen the impact but there were none. "at Murphy's but I can explain."

There was a long pause as Frank waited to hear what Nick would offer. Frank hoped for a plausible explanation but the facts that he had were hard to get around. Nick decided to tell the truth about Murphy's but evade all that surrounded it.

"I had two sips of a beer when someone hit me with a bottle."

"What's the rule about the van and drinking?"

"I know, I'm sorry. I just stopped for one." The Uber driver looked at him through the rear view mirror. Nick frowned at him.

"Who was with you?"

"Oh, fuck" Nick thought, "this isn't going well." He shifted in his seat to be out of view of the driver.

"What do you mean?" his voice cracked.

"You were seen driving with two passengers."

"Who says... "

Frank interrupted him. "Doesn't matter. What's the rule about the van and passengers?"

"The guy is a crippled neighbor of mine, I give him a ride to work and..." Nick stopped himself.

"and the job at the Great Lakes Motel?" Frank asked. Nick noticed that his palms were moist and his mouth dry. Frank continued, "I went out there yesterday after they called. All that I had to do was reset the breaker. They said that you were there for a half hour," he paused, "and now, the woman who showed you the room has gone missing."

The hammer kept slamming Nick's brain and he couldn't keep up with the blows.

"Well, ah... missing?"



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“Yeah, missing. They filed a police report.”

All of Nick’s ideas of evasion had evaporated into real panic. “You don’t think I had anything to do with it?”

“I hope to God not, Nick. But here’s the last tidbit. The police found the van in Aetna stripped of tools, tires, windshield. I’m surprised that it still had paint on it.”

“Oh, shit, Frank. I’m sorry.”

“We have these rules for a reason, Nick. You’re not a kid anymore.” He said in measured tones.

“I’ll make it up. I’ll... “

“No you won’t. I’m letting you go.” He let the words sink in. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but keep it away from us.” He hung up.

“Who busted me?” he thought. It was quickly replaced with “What do I do now?” His world was collapsing around him.

Nick felt a drop of sweat roll down the side of his face and he thought of the first time that he saw Aditi. He took out his phone to check messages. None. He even shook it as if they were stuck somewhere. He sent another text to Steve - *Where are you?*

They passed the blue motel. There was a police car parked in front of the office. Nick turned to watch it through the back window. He sent another text - *Just tell me ur ok.* He reread Steve’s texts.

*Whats Patna?*, stood out. He noticed that all the texts were within minutes of each other, except the last one. He tried to piece together the increasingly desperate tone of the first messages with the calm resolve of *plan change*. Nothing fit. His head swam with fatigue, medication and questions. He just wanted to get home and rest.

Nick was exhausted and never felt so glad to be home. He climbed the few steps to the kitchen door. When he entered he saw his mom and Grace at the table. Grace looked at him, let out a mournful wail and laid her head in her arms. His mom glared at him and said sharply, “what have you been up to?”

Nick dropped his smile. “Good morning to you, too,” he said sarcastically. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t hand me that. You know damn well what I’m talking about.” Grace’s wail had subsided into muted sobs. “What’s Patna?” his mom added. Grace’s wail erupted



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again. Nick's mom patted her arm. "There, there Grace, we'll get to the bottom of this." She turned to give Nick a searing look, "Well... ?"

"It's a city in India," he blurted out. "So what?"

"Oooooaaahhh" Grace screamed. She jumped from her seat and ran out the door. His mother rolled toward him, took her cane from her lap and like a snake strike walloped Nick's shin with it. "So, you do know!" she yelled. Nick yelped and jumped back but not far enough because she hit him again on the other leg. "You and your schemes." She wheeled after him as he raced out of the room. He made a stand behind the living room couch. His mom was constrained by both her anger and the furniture. She railed at him, waving her cane, "You sent him off with a married woman," she howled, "from your hospital bed." She flung the cane at him, breaking a stained glass window. "That sweet, innocent boy. And a cripple!"

Adrenaline mixed with medication left Nick feeling both cranked and bleary. "Would you mind telling me what's going on?"

His mom's eyes narrowed to slits. "As if you don't know," she spit. "He called Grace this morning. It's your constant meddling in that poor boy's life." She rolled toward the couch. Nick prepared to flee if she made her way around it.

"Me? You're the one that kept telling me to get him out of the house!"

"I didn't tell you to send him to India!" she yelled.

"What?" he released his grip on the back of the couch.

"I blame myself, letting you live here, instead of fending for yourself like a man. Girls, girls, girls. That's all it's been with you. I should've been a grandmother by now." Angry tears were streaming down her cheeks.

She pointed straight arm, "Go to your room!"

Nick tried to collect what little was left of his dignity. His mom picked up a bowl from the end table. "So help me God..." Nick darted from the room.

He laid on his bed. A million thoughts were firing on him from all sides. Yet, all that came out of his mouth was, "What the fuck?"

He sent Steve countless texts throughout the day. Some were angry, others pleading. All went unanswered. "What happened in those three hours?" he thought. "Did she go down on him?" he dismissed it. "Not with the kid there." He tried to shake the image from his head. "Was it him or was it her?" He put the phone aside.



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“Maybe it is a scam.” He picked up the phone again and shot off a text – Be careful. Then he thought of Aditi at the pond, “No way. You can’t fake that.” He continued to brood.

Late in the afternoon, his mom knocked softly on his door. “Nick, come out to eat.” He was famished but also enraged, sad and frustrated. He felt alone and wanted to be alone. “Anything from Steve?” he asked.

“No. Come out and eat.”

“No thanks, I’m good.”

He called Steve’s number and for the first time it connected.

“Hello?”

Nick sat up in his bed. “Steve, where are you?”

“Sorry, this is the Omaha Amtrak Lost and Found. Do you know the owner of this phone?”

Nick’s heart sank. “Yes.”

“Do you know how we can reach him?”

“I wish I did.” Nick took their information to give to Grace and tossed his phone to the floor.

“What the fuck?”

He slept poorly that night, waking every couple of hours. He drifted out of a deep sleep around 1am, seething. “That goddamn prick. He knew how I felt about her.” He rolled over and clasped his pillow. “What are they up to?”

At 3am he woke genuinely worried about Steve and wondered about what kind of plan they had hatched together. “She is beautiful.” He allowed himself a little laugh. Then he added out loud, “What the fuck?”

It had been light outside for an hour. Nick stared at the ceiling, “I can’t face another day like this.” He was glad that the Thismia search was in a few hours. He called Helen to pick him up at the corner. He couldn’t face his mom, so he climbed out of his bedroom window just as his plant lights clicked on.

The wound on his head had leaked overnight leaving a patch of pink on the bandages around his head. His eyes were droopy from a lack of sleep. When he got into Helen’s car, she gasped. “Nick, what happened?”



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“Accident. I’m okay.”

“Where’s Steve?”

He turned to her with a fury. “Do me a favor,” he said between gritted teeth, “don’t mention his name again.” They drove in silence.

At the Wolf Lake Education Center, Nick leaned against Helen’s car away from the crowd as they got instructions on the search. Helen had quiet misgivings about the day but still counted it as a win to be with him. The others avoided him.

“I’ve got our quadrant” she said brightly as the group broke up into teams. They got in the car and headed south on Torrance Avenue.

The fetid smell of the wetland took some of the edge off of Nick’s mood. It was a patch of reedy swamp beside the road. Helen had the identification key and survey form for the search. Nick carried the garbage bag that volunteers were given to pick up trash during the search. Nick had always suspected that the garbage haul was the real motivation behind the *Thismia* hunt.

Helen was excited to be in the swamp with Nick. He showed her how to pace off the sides of their quadrant and how to fill in the forms. Her enthusiasm helped to boost his mood. The ground was soggy. Nick noted that, in a weird way, braids went well with rubber boots.

He sat on a half-buried oil drum and listened to the morning birds. Helen paced off their search area. He was tired but the stress had eased up since they entered the wetland. “Nature, even cruddy nature,” he thought “can pick a guy up.” He felt a tickle under his nose and scratched it. There was blood on the end of his finger. He quickly wiped it away. He knew that if Helen saw it, she would insist on leaving and he desperately wanted to stay.

“I love this place, all these places around here,” he mused to himself “not in spite of the junk but because of it.” He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and chin in his hands. “It’s ugly but nature grows around it.” He watched as Helen made a right angle in her pacing. “Grows,” he said out loud. “I like that.”

He looked down and saw a beer bottle stuck in the muck. He bent to put it in his trash bag. And there it was. Nick had seen its picture a thousand times and knew instantly that the tiny, translucent flower in front of him was *Thismia americana*.

Helen looked up from her pacing just in time to see Nick jump up and fall backwards over the oil drum. He got up immediately, brushed himself off and calmly called to her.



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“Helen, can you come here for a minute?”