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1

Town Name's Part-time mayor Dennis Richardson stood behind the borrowed card table that today would serve as both podium and ceremonial signing desk and delivered the one-line speech he had practiced for the past four days: "Folks, we're about to embark on a new and exciting chapter in this city's history- its final chapter."

The people gathered outside city hall, also known as the double-wide municipal trailer, waited patiently for Dennis to continue, unaware that his oratory was essentially complete.

"Well, there's no use in standing around," the mayor said eventually, his round face beaming in the dappled afternoon sun. "Let's get to it before it starts raining again. All in favor, say 'yea.'"

There was no need to go through the fine details of the deal, or even an overview of the situation. The crowd threw up an eager chorus of yeas.

"All opposed?"

"Nay," said Cecilia Beaumont quietly.

Dennis happily banged his ball peen hammer, signaling the official passage of the measure and leaving a quarter-sized dent on the surface of the table.

When it registered that she had been the only one to dissent, Cecilia became furious. "Wait a minute. Nay! Nay! What's wrong with you people? Don't you see what StarMart is going to do to this place? Everything you ever worked for, everything you ever loved is about to be paved over to make way for some ridiculous temple of capitalism, just like the one just a few miles down the highway. How can you let them do this to us? How could you do this to us?"

The clouds had started to roll in again, darkening the scene. Standing beneath the weakening sun, the people of the town looked like children gazing up from a Christmas stocking full of coal. Their once eager faces had suddenly grown sour.

Almost instantly she regretted saying anything. Her anger over the mega-retail chain's offer to swallow the tiny farm town whole had been building for months, but this was not the time or place to make her move, and now she knew it.

Her entreaty had moved no one, and now all that remained was the slow crawl back to her hole, hoping that she could once again become invisible.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Beaumont," said a voice behind her, sweet like ice cream and battery acid. "I think that you might be a little confused here. You don't own any property named in the StarMart buyout offer. You've never really been involved in the community, and you don't even vote, if I'm not mistaken. I'm sorry. What was it again that you wanted to educate us all about?"

Cecilia knew the source well enough not turn to acknowledge it. Marlene Hausman, widow of Karl Hausman and the de facto owner of the town's only large employer, Hausman Athletic Supply Company. Her boss.

The crushing silence said enough. Cecilia could see it all in their sunken expressions. Many of the assembled Townnamers were too afraid of the woman to openly defend Cecilia, but there was something else. Loathe as Cecilia was to admit it to herself, Marlene was only saying what most of them were already thinking.

The StarMart deal was their best option, a shining gift from God that fell out of the dusty blue Illinois sky. Who was someone like Cecilia to refuse it?

"So, now that we've all paid attention to you," said Marlene, "why don't you go sit down somewhere and leave us to our business."

Cecilia shrank back into the circle of people, nearly tripping over less-than-tall Louise Peterson. In spite of herself, she tugged nervously on her shaggy bangs as she watched her neighbors, each in their turn, sign the letters of intent necessary to begin the process of killing the only town most of them had ever known.

According to a marketing brochure produced in the early 1980's, Town Name, Illinois was the ideal place for any thriving business to relocate. The town boasted a variety of dining options (two, three if one includes eating at home), a vibrant night life between the hours of six and nine PM, and a business friendly local government promising generous tax abatements to any firm willing to move in.

The marketing plan was hatched during a particularly rough economic period after the area's primary employer pulled up stakes. Circling the drain since shortly after its founding in 1836, Town Name had gone through one bad patch after another, each making the one previous seem like a golden age of sorts.

People there had a saying: "In Town Name, folks only prosper in the past tense."

The citizens had good reason to greet optimism with suspicion and disdain. Every time a community-wide sense of well being took hold, it only served as a portend of some horrible calamity just around the calendrical corner.

In the mid-1970's, Town Name was poised to make a name for itself as the world headquarters for inanimate companion products. Pet rocks were all the rage, and the factory on Oak and Main was pushing out thousands every month into a hungry marketplace. New businesses were coming to town to supply the factory's voracious appetite for containerboard and geological raw materials.

After more than a hundred years of struggling to exist, citizens of Town Name suddenly had good jobs and disposable incomes.

When Jameson Homes came to town to build new state-of-the-art houses with attached garages and trash compactors, people mortgaged themselves to death to get a piece of the action. According to the full-color circular stapled to the town's handful of telephone poles, the homes would be the very epitome of the American dream. Just six months later, once a few homes were complete and the local economy had once again collapsed, folks found themselves back where they had started- but with fifteen percent APR loans on homes that were now essentially unsellable, worthless.

For three decades they waited as the town disintegrated from the inside and people worked two and three part-time jobs to pay the bankers and keep the dwindling town running at the same time. All the while, they kept well hidden their greatest dream: to bust out of Town Name like a cat with its tail on fire and never look back.

On the back page of the brochure, a phone number for the Town Name Chamber of Commerce offered to answer any and all questions about the town. Not counting the occasional wrong number or random crank call, the line in the mayor's office trailer rang only once.

So long had this gone on that when he picked up the phone on that fateful afternoon a few months earlier, Mayor Richardson did not expect to hear a sober adult on the other end. But he did.

Only after hanging up with the StarMart people, his heart ready to explode, did he realize that they never asked the one trivia question he had expected to hear: "how did your town get its unusual name?"

This might have been for the best, though, since Dennis did not have a plausible answer ready for them, anyway.

No one could quite agree on how the place came to be called Town Name. At times it seemed there were more theories than there were residents.

Some said that Town Name came from two men named Towne and Newman who allegedly founded the place and then disappeared shortly afterward. Others insisted that it came from a Kickapoo word meaning "desolate hellhole," although that might have been a joke of some kind.

The most popular explanation was that the town drunk named the place after winning a competition of some kind: poker game, knife fight, or "name this town" essay contest. No records exist, at least ones that anyone has bothered to find, and so the mystery continued to grow with each passing generation.

"StarMart is going to put this place on the map," said Mayor Dennis when the signings were complete. "And if it doesn't, who cares? None of us are going to be here to get dragged down with it!"

The proposed Super-StarMart was designed to be far larger than any other retail outlet of its kind, a genuine feat of modern engineering. Compared to this new Super-StarMart, former size champions like Super Target and Mega Wal-Mart were merely huge. In fact, the plans were so big and the town was so small that the entirety of greater Town Name would only make up the Southeast corner of the store, an area encompassing housewares and appliances.

Tim Bailey's spread North of Town would take up a

larger chunk, from electronics all the way through sporting goods and into automotive. Naturally, he was quite proud of this fact, but people had already tired of hearing about it.

"The groundbreaking is on the 15th, June 15th, so we've only got a few weeks to get the place ready for dismantling, demolition or whatever," said the mayor.

In the crowd, Cecilia spotted her friend and older cousin Patti Mueller and slunk over to her in hopes that her pregnant belly might hide her from the piercing stares of her neighbors. Also standing in Patti's swollen shadow was her nine-year old son Ryan, looking more than a little bored by the whole thing. Ryan's thicket of pitch colored hair shot out from under his ball cap, the spitting image of his father.

"Rough crowd," said Patti.

"I'd love to tell that old bat to go self-penetrated, but you know how it is," said Cecilia. She suddenly felt the urge to change the subject. Patti had a reputation for being brutally honest at moments like this, and brutal honesty was the last thing Cecilia wanted at the moment. "So, how's that basketball you swallowed treating you?"

"Fabulous," Patti replied, smiling broadly. As usual, there was not a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"I still don't get it," said Cecilia after a moment. "Why StarMart? Why here?"

Patti adjusted the straps on her overall-shorts, rubbed Ryan's shoulder, and thought about it for a moment. "From what I understand, these guys don't measure retail space in square feet so much as they do acres. Can you think of anyplace else in Central Illinois willing to sell big blocks of

land like that any cheaper than us?"

"I guess so. But we're completely cut off. How are people going to get to the store?"

"StarMart's lobbying folks are working on getting an I-72 offramp for us. I'm surprised you haven't heard."

The ceremony was over by that point and the people were now milling around, unsure whether to head home or stick around and wait for the world to end.

Cecilia rubbed the back of her neck, reaching for something that would explain the whole thing for her. "But how are they going to deal with K12? What are the school-aged kids supposed to do, roam the streets?"

"Well, school's already out if you haven't noticed," said Patti, glaring at her son. "They began roaming the streets just after Memorial Day."

"This rots," fumed Cecilia. "I know I'm the last person who should be making a big deal over this, but this really sucks. StarMart is going to screw this town sideways, and we all know it."

"I understand that you hate all of this, but relax. I know for a fact that it's going turn out okay. Okay?"

"Okay. How are you so sure?"

Patti rubbed her belly slowly. It was obvious Patti's baby was kicking her, but she did nothing to indicate that. "I just know," she said.

Still, Cecilia remained convinced that the buyout was a bad deal. The fact that everyone else in town loved the idea

only served as more proof for her unstated argument.

Cecilia had made up her mind. She would have to save the town, from itself if she had to. This might have seemed odd, even hypocritical, due to the fact she had been desperately trying to flee *Town Name* for most of her life.

Cecilia Beaumont had a name one would normally associate with a debutante, and perhaps in another life she might have been one. In this life, however, there was simply no time for that sort of thing.

To look at her, it became clear that she regarded much of the frou-frou of femininity as more than just a necessary evil, but evil itself. Fond of wearing her mouse-brown hair piled up and threaded through the back of an old hat in a disheveled cerebral explosion, she often claimed that she did not give a hoot what anyone thought of how she looked. Still, she was a handsome woman, though few people, including herself, seemed to acknowledge that.

Her desire to escape the place was a hallmark of her young life. Her mother Linda Beaumont used to tell a story that Cecilia would occasionally walk the five miles to State Road 67, flag down passing motorists, and offer to join their family.

At 16, Cecilia placed a personal ad in the *Springfield Journal-Register* in an attempt to lure an abductor to her home, and it nearly worked.

She stayed awake those nights dreaming of another life in another city. Perhaps he would take her all the way to Memphis or Chicago where she could start over and finally begin living.

She fantasized endlessly about walking down the eclectic urban streets into an upscale bookstore and chatting with brilliant young people- after shaking off the creepy 50-year-old pervert, of course.

The problem was that Town Name did not appear on any road maps, no matter how detailed. Even though she wrote to the anonymous abduction candidate with detailed driving instructions, complete with sketches of useful landmarks, he never made it. He might have gotten within five or six miles of her house and never known it.

By the time she wrote him back with another set of directions including compass points and photocopied aerial photographs, the faceless suitor had moved on.

Though twenty-two now, most people in town still treated her like a brooding teenager, and her general demeanor did nothing to help that reputation. She proved herself a continual annoyance to the citizens of the sleepy rural town, circulating petitions every few weeks on farm-friendly issues like "ranching as genocide" and "child labor on the family farm."

It was clear to her now that she had engaged in one pet project, one wolf cry too many.

2

Still soggy from her morning shower, Cecilia stood for a moment staring into the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. Out of habit, she shook her head disparagingly at her reflection. She carefully critiqued her body looking for some glaring flaw, but all she saw was a perfectly normal, healthy woman.

Still, there must be something wrong with me, she thought. It would make it so much easier to explain the complete lack of a romantic life.

Cecilia had only ever had one boyfriend, and that was back in high school. As if that weren't enough, she recalled

that didn't even like him very much.

She caught herself thinking about it again and pinched her wrist to make it stop.

It was then that she noticed that hers were not the only pair of eyes looking back at her that morning. Without moving her head or neck, she carefully tilted her gaze out the window and into the clump of bushes beyond. In the dim dawn light it was difficult to make out more than a fuzzy shape, what looked to be a human head and shoulders very close to the ground.

She took this to mean that her Peeping Tom was a juvenile or better yet a short person, an exotic. That fantasy dissipated when the figure stood upright and broke into a full sprint through the yard and off down Pine Road.

"Whither will you go, sweet prince?" she muttered to herself. No such luck, she thought. It was probably just a dog.

Covering the walls of her room were posters depicting glamorous locales from all over the world. When Town Name Travel closed shop a few years ago, she bought them up on the cheap: Milan, Beijing, Paris, New York, someplace, anyplace. Some mornings she would get lost in landscapes, imagining the sweet air of the Alps or the musty smells of a Moroccan market, but there was no time for that today.

Her jeans and T-shirt pulled on and her hair still heavy and wet, Cecilia shambled into the kitchen to talk to her mother, but Linda was not there. Double shifts at the factory again, she thought.

"I would have left a note," she said to herself disapprovingly, realizing just then that she herself had not left a note the last two times she had the good fortune to rack up some overtime.

This was the state of their lives together. They did not so much converse as they complained to themselves about the other. Each would discover evidence of the other passing through the house and grumble while picking the other's underwear off the soggy bathroom floor.

Thinking about it too much made her laugh. What had she to be envious of in the loveless, zombie-like marriages of her friends and cousins? She was already knee-deep in one- and with her very own mother no less.

The Hausman Athletic Supply Company sat on the corner of Oak and Main streets in the heart of Town Name, the three-quarters mark on the life journey of most residents.

Most folks born in Dr. Lauer's storefront office on the Northeast corner and got their education at the Elmer Watson School for Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade (known to the locals as K12) on the Southeast corner. They went to work at Hausman's on the Southwest, and when their work was done they found their eternal rest at the graveyard adjacent to the Town Name Church of God on the Northwest corner.

The Hausman Athletic Supply Company made bowling balls. More specifically, Hausman made soft polyester balls, a style of rolling implement that fell out of favor three decades before.

Unable to do the sort of sliding curves most modern bowlers demand, Hausman products were known primarily as beginner's balls, a good reliable roller to use until you learned your way around a lane. Still, Marlene said sales were brisk enough to keep the doors open, but only just.

In spite of this home grown industry, there were no admitted bowlers in Town Name. Curiously the test lane at the Hausman factory was the only bowling facility within 30 miles.

"Watch yourself," said Clark Stevenson as Cecilia walked onto the plant floor and nearly tripped over someone's errant lunchbox.

"Thanks," she replied, but he had gone.

Cecilia walked up to her molding station and paused a second before pulling the lever to begin her shift.

Let this day be different, she prayed to no deity in particular. Let something, anything, interesting happen. Please.

The trick in molding a good ball is to make sure the cover stock goes in evenly. Areas where the density varies can cause the ball to wobble slightly, rendering it worse than useless. Air pockets were the most dangerous ball irregularity and, for Cecilia, the most common.

With one near perfect ball already on the curing rack, she began to sense someone standing behind her.

"Good morning, Cecilia," said Craig Phelps. "You look, um, nice today."

Not that, she thought, rescinding her earlier prayer. That

wasn't what I meant.

Craig Phelps was a large man with white-blond hair. In a crowd it was nearly impossible to lose him. But even with his imposing size, he could be very quiet when he wanted to be. He could, and did quite often, sneak up on Cecilia at odd times saying even odder things.

Years ago, he had been her high school social studies, history, and gym teacher at K12. As if that were not dull enough, he was now her immediate supervisor. It was almost as though she could not escape him. She admitted to having nightmares where she would die and find herself buried next to Craig in the churchyard across the street.

When he resigned at the end of the previous school year, there was no real reason for speculation or worry. He gave the simple explanation that he could make more money working at the factory, and most everyone accepted it because that part was true. Still, rumors persisted that he had been pushed out, that he had lost his temper with an unruly student or something worse. It was this "something worse" that Cecilia thought about now.

"By the way, I agree with you about the StarMart thing," he said at last. "I don't want to say anything too loud here at work, but I'd do just about anything to save the town. I just don't know what to do."

"I don't, either, Craig," said Cecilia shrugging. "I wish I did."

She wanted to brush him off, but she needed to keep him around, interested. If historical romance novels had taught her anything it was that devoted, bookish men could be

quite useful in times of need.

When she turned around, a sticky note had been taped to the just finished ball. "Please come see me," it said. Even with no name attached she could tell right away from whom it had come.

Another note had been stuck on the underside. "Please recycle defective ball," it read. "Pulls left."

"Ms. Beaumont, I know you've been working very hard at improving your quality numbers," said Marlene Hausman in her sprawling under-lit office. "And I really appreciate that. I really, really do."

Marlene Hausman was not a small woman by any measure, but sitting behind her husband's old desk she looked like an impostor, a little girl swirling round and round in her daddy's big office chair. Perhaps for this reason, Marlene remained completely immobile whenever she sat there, as though any movement at all would cause her deceased husband great pain.

In fact, she rarely used the office, preferring instead the smaller secretarial office nearer to the factory floor so she could keep a closer eye on her slacking employees. It was only times like these, moments when she wanted to remind someone who was in charge, that the old man's gargantuan desk came in handy.

"I think, though, that you're going to need to pick up the pace a little," said Marlene. "Of the twenty-five balls you made on Monday, only fourteen were usable, of those only six passed the bowling simulator."

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do," began Cecilia.

She had intended to follow up with two minutes of well-rehearsed complaints about antiquated molding equipment and uneven filling compounds but never got that far.

"What do you think you should do about it?" asked Marlene reflexively.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want to know what it is that you want me to want you to do. What is that, Cecilia? What is it that you want me to want you to want to do?"

"What, I don't understand. Am I being fired or something?"

"Not fired. No. You're just under a kind of suspension—the kind where you still get to work but don't get paid as much for a month or so."

Marlene was still smiling, her teeth set and her lip upcurled. "Yeah, well, I'm glad we had this little talk," Marlene said to break the silence. "Girl talk, you and me."

Cecilia left Marlene's office feeling drained, confused, and somewhat dizzy.

By the time she returned to her station, there was another surprise visitor waiting for her. This time it was, of all people, Mayor Richardson. By now Cecilia had resigned herself to the idea that, in spite of her current probationary status, she was not going to get any further work done until people stopped lining up to bother her.

"I'm getting the town's records organized and ready to ship off to Springfield, and I'm having a hell of a time," he said.

She waited for him to get to his point, but he appeared to have none. She gestured at her station to indicate that she had work to do.

"Oh!" he said. "I could really use your help."

"My help?"

"I talked with Craig and he said of all the former students he knew you had the most talent for organization, a natural for this kind of thing."

The thought of Craig's recommendation concerned her. People were saying things about her when she was not there, but at least they were good things.

"What are you needing me to do?"

"Mostly just alphabetizing and sequencing paperwork. It's pretty straight forward, but there's a lot of it and we've only got a few days to get it all done."

It turns out this plea for help was actually a job offer. Of course, it was a short-term part-time job offer, but the money couldn't be any worse than Hausman's and she figured the change of scenery would keep her from bashing her head against the wall.

"My civic duty demands it," she replied.

"I don't- um, did you say yes or no?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll do it."

Seeing the mayor this close was odd for Cecilia. Dennis served as the closest thing the town had to a celebrity, and being right up on him, having him ask for help like that, was more than a little strange. She noticed his pores for the

first time. They were enormous, like a thousand greasy suckers stuck to his face with sweat.

"Meet me at City Hall tomorrow morning. I already spoke with Marlene, and she said she could manage without you for a few days."

"I should have known."

3

If Reverend Daniel Meyr had a single talent, it was his ability to aggressively ignore things, to fervently let things slide. From difficulties in his marriage to his ever-failing comb-over, Daniel remained happily, even resolutely oblivious. The upcoming revival meeting was an excellent example of this. The event, put on by one of the region's many traveling freelance preachers, had no affiliation with the Town Name Church of God other than the location, but he was still obligated to make an announcement, such as it was.

"I'm pretty sure that you already know all about it, so there's no reason to go on and on," said Daniel in his signature monotone. "The tent revival, for anyone who wants to go, is this Wednesday night in the parking lot. In a tent."

He shifted his weight behind the pulpit and scanned the eyes of the congregation, trying to gage their reaction to the idea. He felt he should have said more about the event, but once he saw the spark of recognition in their faces, he regretted mentioning it at all.

"If you remember the last time, they drove their tent stakes into the pavement, and those kids of holes don't repair themselves," said Daniel sadly. "That's bad, just downright disrespectful. Let's not do that this time, m'kay?"

Like most weekends Cecilia found herself there out of habit, and although she lamented that her jeans and stained baseball jersey were not particularly churchy, the outfit blended in with the congregation all the same. For her, church was more of a people watching exercise, and today she was watching Stella Copper.

"Everyone is really excited about the potential for this to be the best fundraiser yet," said Stella. For most people, the announcements segment of the service is a barren gulf between the end of official church solemnity and the joyous event of getting the hell home, a time for rustling through bulletins and reaching for car keys. Stella however, did not see it this way. At that moment she was recounting a recent meeting of the youth group car wash committee. "Russell had a really good idea to reschedule it from the end of next month to later this week since there may not be a next month for many of us. It's all very exciting."

It is common knowledge that at any given church, eighty percent of the work is done by twenty percent of the people. Factor that down to the actual number of people in Town Name, and that twenty percent would come in the form of

Stella Copper. She ran the Sunday school program, youth group, vacation Bible school, and in her spare time she offered to organize the church's volunteer program in which she was, more or less, the only volunteer.

When a ministry needed more money, she would often organize a bake sale in which she would make all the items, put up the fliers, run the register, then make and subsequently buy half the items herself.

The only problem was that Stella was actually Catholic. Although the Town Name Church of God was officially a Baptist institution, Reverend Meyr wisely elected not to broach the subject directly, keeping the issue on a "don't ask, don't tell" basis.

Stella's husband Paul had died five years earlier during a particularly angsty period in Cecilia's life when issues of mysterious death, intentional or not, fascinated her.

From Cecilia's recollection, Paul had to have been one of the most pathetic people she had ever known. For one thing, she never heard Paul finish a single English sentence. Habituated to being interrupted by his wife or anyone else, Paul tended to mumble a lot, beginning phrases and then trailing off before his point could be made.

Like the expressionless Lincoln statue in the center of town, Paul Copper's face appeared lifeless. He was not happy or sad from what Cecilia could figure, simply there. His biggest accomplishment, folks said, was that he always seemed to be around. Either standing next to his wife at an event and looking at his shoes or sitting at his desk at Dennis Richardson's feed store pretending to read an implement catalog, Paul Copper was never hard to find.

That was why, as odd as he may have been to have constantly around, his absence was far stranger.

When Cass County sheriff deputies found a car belonging to Paul Copper up-ended in the dried muck under the Mucilage Creek Bridge, the incident seemed fairly straightforward.

Jim Pollard snapped his pen onto his clipboard and marched up to sheriff Downey's patrol car. "Slam dunk, sir. One-car accident and vehicle abandonment. Possible 502."

"There don't appear to be any footprints," said Downey.

"They were probably washed away during last night's flood."

"Or maybe the body was washed away."

"Pardon my frankness, sir, but I'm not seeing it." He could see already that a full-on argument over the matter would not profit him. "I'll inform the local blues."

"Make that 'blue.' They've only got one guy, Jim. If our man doesn't show up in a week, it's an accidental death. I know these people, Jim. I don't want to make a big deal out of this without a good reason."

So, in this way the official version of events solidified. Paul Copper had died in a car accident. His body was thrown from the car in the force of the impact and was never recovered.

However, that was not what Paul wanted people to think at all.

It is a scientific fact that Sundays are the most depressing

24-hour period on the modern calendar- or if not a fact, at least a widely-accepted assumption. The segment of time beginning just after church lets out and before dinner has been served has the ability to ensnare people in a melancholic sort of laze.

In Town Name, this phenomenon was all the more dangerous, even deadly. If someone wasn't careful, they could easily spend their Sunday joylessly avoiding the tedious demands of their lives (spouses, chores, and lawns), waiting the demons out until Monday morning when they would once again be free of them. Then around five in the afternoon on Sunday, when the prospect of an equally dull and tiresome work week loomed, they would begin the cliched countdown to the weekend, and run the cycle of tedium once again.

A fully qualified psychiatrist would probably have said that Paul Copper was afflicted with an undiagnosed psychological disorder in which he could not differentiate between the sensations of boredom and a desire to end his life. Be that as it may, he was having a particularly bad Sunday afternoon five years before, a lifetime of Sundays culminating in a singularity from which not even light could escape.

It began for Paul while he watched football in the family room, a musty, claustrophobic place painted in the sort of deep earth tones that would remind even a well-adjusted person of the color of dried blood or feces. The Bears and the Vikings faced off in a pre-Thanksgiving brawl, one of the tightest contests in recent memory.

In truth, Paul hated football, but he never let that tidbit

slip out of fear that it would spur unfortunate rumors. He also believed in his heart that if he forced himself to watch enough of it, he would grow an appreciation for the game or at least learn enough to more effectively fake it.

As Minnesota's Gary Anderson squared up on the ball for what would be the winning field goal attempt, Paul practiced his routine for the next day at work. "Did you see that cheese head nail that kick in overtime?" Wait a minute, he thought, Cheesies are Packers fans, right? He was not sure, nor did he really care. The outcome of the game did not matter; neither team was in contention, just fighting to stay above 500.

He was just standing up to put away his chips and rinse out the red salsa mush at the bottom of his bowl of salsa when he said it. "I've done all I'm going to do in this life," he heard his mouth say. "I'm done."

It was true. He would not pass on a fleshy legacy in this lifetime. And the idea of becoming famous or notorious at the age of 52 just seemed silly and presumptuous. Stella had been so busy for so long with her two jobs and work at the church that she didn't think she had room in her life for children, even if she weren't too old to have them in the first place.

Paul had harbored an ill-advised pipe-dream for most of his life of sailing around the Florida Keys and somehow making a living at it, but since piracy was not a practical option, he was stymied at step one.

All the interesting things he had wanted to do, vague and unnamed, were unavailable to him now. Perhaps they had always been, but the sobriety of age brought that fact to

clear focus.

There it was. Paul Copper would not do anything significant with his life.

The realization of it made him dizzy, a sensation that did not abate when he sat back down. The days were passing faster now. The ceaseless cycle, the rhythm of it was hypnotic: wake, eat, work, eat, work, eat, TV, sleep, repeat. The only thing that really upset him anymore was disrupting the routine. Six months before, when the local IGA ran out of generic Crunchy Bran cereal, he nearly lost his mind with grief.

He read an advice columnist once posit that people with messy houses and no time to clean them should not spend a great deal of time looking at their carpets. "The numbness of sight, the ability for piles and messes to become invisible over time, is a valuable coping tool," she wrote. Paul was now looking hard at his anonymous future, unable to go back to not seeing it.

"At this point, I guess I'm just waiting around to die," he said. The pain in his stomach bent him over. He swallowed another handful of chips to quell it, but the stinging in the depths of his belly only grew sharper.

* * *

On an average Sunday at the Washin' Tub on Three Points Road, all ten washers and dryers would be humming from the time the doors opened at 8am until 6pm when the machines stopped operating regardless of their laundering status. Competition to secure an appliance was stiff, and people would usually set up camp for hours to get a decent

spot.

The place was generally dead every other day of the week, and in spite of the sign advertising "Wait-Free Wednesdays," the uneven usage schedule continued.

Cecilia and Patti had successfully secured washers 3 and 4 on this particular Sunday, nice ones with plenty of water pressure and a view of the empty street.

She could hear someone cuing up behind her, jostling their items onto the sorting table, making their presence known.

"I thought you and Linda had a set at home."

She turned around and found the oddly imposing visage of Louise Peterson, the only person known to occasionally use the Washin' Tub on its many off days.

"The dryer's okay," replied Cecilia, "but the washer's been busted for about six months."

"At least that way you don't have to pay to dry everything." Louise leaned closer to whisper hoarsely. "The driers are for crap- it's how they screw you sideways here. Consider yourself lucky, honey."

Although Louise Peterson made it a point to never accurately give her age, other women who knew her well judged her to be around 63. After discounting for the natural cattiness of age guessing among elderly women, that placed Louise Peterson squarely at 61.

She was at her happiest, she said, when spinning a pot in the shed behind her house, and after doing it nonstop for more than a decade she had become quite proficient, and

prolific. At some point a year or so earlier, Louise decided to turn her hobby into a business of sorts, selling the unique creations in front of her tiny bungalow on the corner of Pine and Illinois.

Each pot had a charming, but unmistakably phallic quality to it, almost medical in their detail. No one else in town seemed to notice the similarity, or would admit to it, but when Cecilia first saw what looked like veiny ridges running down Louise Peterson's clay creations, she could no longer ignore the phenomenon.

Before long, Louise had assembled quite an inventory, rows and rows of terracotta peni standing rod straight in the golden sunlight. It was enough to make a decent woman blush and a man feel vaguely inadequate.

The righteous and God-fearing people of Town Name fully intended to politely ask Louise to cease and desist, or at least move her commercial operation indoors and away from curious young eyes. Folks would often cringe at the sight and quietly say that someone ought to have a talk with her, if only they could craft a polite way to bring up the subject. So far nothing concrete had been done about the so-called "Louise Peterson problem."

Needless to say, she sold very few of the items. Still, her will to make them far outstripped her business acumen, and soon her front yard was overrun with an army of helmeted soldiers, ready and waiting to do Louise's bidding.

"I don't like that Luke Reynolds, do you?" said Louise after a moment.

"Who?"

"The new fella from StarMart, he's supposed to be in charge of hiring new people and whatever. I am not enamored."

"How do you mean?" asked Patti. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's a bit too '24' if you know what I mean."

The Jeff Gordon reference did not go unnoticed by the other women in the Laundromat. By this Louise meant to insinuate that Luke Reynolds was a slick out-of-towner disguising himself as a down-home boy. Under his folksy exterior he could be anything: a corporate lawyer, a hustler, perhaps even a Californian.

Patti let out a barely audible gasp.

"I haven't met him yet," replied Cecilia, pulling a wet pair of old jeans from the washer. "I wouldn't know."

"Neither have I, honey, but I do know. He's a snake."

"He's just like anybody else here," said Patti. "You need to give him a chance. You could try talking to him."

"Mark my words, this guy has come here for something he won't come right out and say- and he won't leave until he gets it."

Louise said the words slowly, as though she meant the others to take them as prophesy, and waved her finger meaningfully in the air.

Unfortunately, Cecilia and Patti did not know what to make of her statement, and hours later Louise would admit to her own cats that she wasn't too sure, either. She felt that

her larger point still stood, however. Reynolds was on the hunt for something, be it human blood, souls, or the virginity of every blossoming female in West-Central Illinois. Either way, it was bad.

Cecilia crammed the rest of the soggy load into her baskets and waited for Patti's dryers to finish. Suddenly remembering something, she began rummaging through the sopping items.

"What are you doing?" asked Patti.

Cecilia held up several pairs of grandma panties. The initials "LB" were Sharpied onto the waistband. In the other hand were a few "CB" undergarments.

"Actually, I've been losing stuff recently," said Cecilia.

"Losing? Like what?"

"Well, that's the weird part. It's underwear mostly, a pair a week usually. And not all of our underwear, just mine."

"Weird. So, what are you going to do about it?"

"Well, duh. Buy more underwear, of course."

Cecilia yielded her washer to Louise with a nod, gathering her dripping baskets before strapping them to her bicycle for the ride home.

"I'd do just about anything to kick those bastards out of here, you know," said Louise.

"StarMart?"

"I know you feel the same way, honey. Don't worry, I've got a plan."

Cecilia shuddered at the notion. "I was thinking of a large-scale protest at the StarMart in Jacksonville," Cecilia said by way of interruption. Patti looked over in disbelief, but Cecilia continued. "We could notify the regional media, give them a real story to chew on: local residents protest as mega-retailer swallows small farming community."

"Did you just pull that out of your butt, Cessi?"

"What does that matter?" asked Cecilia. "It's still a decent idea."

"Do you really think you can scrape together enough people to mount a 'mass' protest?" asked Patti, "Like some kind of million hayseed march or something?"

Louise was by now fully charged up about the idea and would not be dissuaded. "I'll start getting people together, honey. I think you'll be surprised."

"So, Louise, what was your idea?"

"Oh, I was just going to make something up, you know."

Linda Beaumont's bicycle was a classic, both in terms of its age and decaying state. Laden with sopping laundry, the thing could barely move, let alone turn. She managed to make progress toward home by punting through the streets like a Venetian gondolier with her feet dangling along.

There was a bright side, of course. At least it was no longer snowing. Winter was a horrible time for this kind of work-around. As she cruised along the City Square at the center of town, she noticed something strange going on in front of the shops there.

Nadine Lauer, wife of the town doctor, stood insecurely

on a ladder in front of her beauty salon, struggling with something on her sign.

"You gonna let me help you with that, Nadine?"

"Sure," she said looking down. "Hold this stupid ladder while I unhook the sign."

By the time she found a wall on which to prop her unbalanced bike, it was all over. The two hundred pound chunk of aluminum and glass fell to the ground with a terrible crash. The resulting sound ripped through the quiet brick corridors of downtown like a bowie knife.

"Oh, well," said Nadine. "I can't bring that with me, anyway. I'll go get a broom."

While Cecelia waited, her interest percolated. By the time Nadine returned, she was rabid with curiosity. "Where?" she asked.

"Where what?"

"Where is the place you can't take this sign?"

"Oh, Rushville. Karl's just got his hands on a double-slot in a strip mall. There's loads of highway traffic there, too. People from all over just walk in."

Cecilia held the dustpan while Nadine pushed several pounds of glass shards onto it. She straightened herself, unsure where to dump it.

"Where are you and Linda going? Please tell me you've looked at Rushville."

Nadine snapped a black garbage bag and opened its mouth. "Well, we hadn't talked about it much." Cecilia

shook out the pan and stooped down for another go.

"Oh, you really should. It would just be super if Linda and you and a bunch of the, well you know, better folks in town moved up to Rushville. It's beautiful there."

Just inside the glass doors, Cecilia could see the neat row of barber chairs sitting still shining in the dull afternoon light. In spite of the overhaul Nadine had performed when she took over the shop years before, the place still looked the same as it always had, at least along the far wall. The line of overhead hair dryers and manicure stations did little to lend an air of femininity to the shop.

As a girl she accompanied her father to the place known only as Barber and watch the apron-clad man shave off most of Peter's pepper-colored hair. On slow days she was allowed to sit in the chair next to him, swiveling slowly around and around. The place always smelled of the blue hygienic liquid the cutters stored in tall decanters along with long black plastic combs.

The practice of going in every few weeks seemed silly to Cecilia since he would tuck it all up under his old worn-out hat, anyway. Regardless, the barbershop had a magical, almost spiritual quality to it, as far as she could tell. Her father always left the place saying he felt like a "new man." He never said that about church, and he went there every week.

In another couple of days the bulldozers would make short work of this place, she thought.

After another load of glass, she was done. By then people from the surrounding neighborhood came running, thinking

(and perhaps hoping) the worst had happened. Cecilia climbed back onto her rickety ride and pushed off again.

Nadine called after her. "You and Linda can't put this off forever, Cecilia."

She wondered for a moment about the sudden tapping noise. It had begun to rain.

4

Fourteen years earlier, when Dr. Lauer delivered six baby boys between September and June, the women of the town made no effort to hide their collective feeling of dread. Here were the makings of the first all male class at K12 in the history of the town, and in their estimation nothing good could come from it.

To many the births were a sign, a harbinger of ill fortune for the town. However, six is not a Bible-friendly number. So, a rumor spread that a seventh boy had been born on the fringes of town and hidden from view until his unholy terror could one day be released onto the people. Even the more rational folks had to admit that it had a nice ring to it and explained a great deal of the region's misfortune.

From the beginning, they were the inseparable six: Tom Gibson, Randy Meyr, Harold Fletcher, Zeke Lawson, Jim Clemmens, and Billy Peterson, Louise Peterson's grandson.

Smitten with the oddity of this single gendered mini-generation, their parents encouraged them to do everything together- as a pack.

Partly out of boredom, but mostly due to their unearned reputation as hellions, they eventually molded themselves into what passed for hellions in a small rural town. Cows were spooked; knobs with clear "do not touch" signs were turned; windows were soaped.

Eventually, they came to be known as The Town Name Six, or more simply The Six.

In truth, it was probably unfair to set them up for misbehavior like that, but to a one the boys seemed to enjoy their preceding reputation. Besides, it was something to do.

Even without the pressure of being one of The Six, fourteen was a dangerous age, a time when young men choose their ethical paths and when women had the least guiding influence over them.

On this particular evening, the boys were enjoying a few rounds at the batting cages behind Mike's on Main Street. Without the appropriate pocket change, though, these young self-starters decided to create their own fun, crawling up over the fenced-in area and tripping the machines by hand.

In the furthest slot, Cecilia was working through her tenth round of the night. The lump of quarters in the pocket of her jeans made her stance uncomfortable, but as she burned through the coins it bothered her less.

With each pitch she felt herself relax a bit more. The satisfying cracking sound, the solidity of the hit, the feeling

of the bat recoiling slightly in her grip, she drank it all in.

Between pitches, she could see people passing on the street beyond. Occasionally someone would recognize her and wave or, more often, shoot her a nasty look and keep walking.

"What?" she shouted after Katie Munsen as she performed a drive-by glaring. "What do you people want?"

Exasperated, she turned again to see what The Six were up to. The fences were all shaking now as five who were not actually batting found new ways to amuse themselves.

Her eyes off the pitching machine for almost half a minute by now, she was completely unaware that a freak ball, high and inside, was ready to spit out of the chute.

She waved her bat at them menacingly. "Get down from there, you morons!"

[Thunk.]

The ball bounced off her plastic batting helmet and fell onto her towel nearly a full second before her collapsing body met it there.

Suddenly she felt weightless, floating through a field of possibility, deep in the future. Up ahead she could see a shining box of concrete and glass, a retail outlet covering the horizon and blocking out the sun in its mile long shadow. The houses that sprouted up around it were smallish and sickly like mushrooms in a climax forest. An army of orange vested minions scoured the remaining landscape, on what mission only God could know.

Then as she crossed over into parking zone Q-27 and

slammed into a weather balloon, the whole scene winked out to blackness.

The fuzzy shape that helped her to her feet turned out to be Zeke Lawson.

"Well, you're an unlikely gentleman," said Cecilia.

"You could just say 'thanks,' you know."

"Thanks."

"No problem, ma'am."

As Zeke pulled away from her awkward stare to return to his cohorts, Cecilia noticed the mud and matted vegetation smeared into his pants.

The boys had taken another field trip to The Resort.

Generally, Mucilage Creek flooded once or twice every year, moving just enough water to warrant its name. These events usually triggered a week or so of decent swimming at a shallow dimple of land called Lake Pond. Most of the year, though, it was neither a lake nor a pond.

Six years before, Mucilage Creek underwent what geologists would call its "hundred year event," ruining most of the area's crops and keeping Lake Pond full and true to its name for nearly an entire summer. During this time Old Man Olaf Kramer hit upon what would one day be regarded as the worst business idea ever hatched in a town known for its horrible business ideas.

Kramer's Pondsides Resort opened in July of that year with a campground, recreation center, and playground all built around the pond. The place did brisk business from

both locals and outsiders for nearly two months before it closed for the season and never reopened. Mucilage Creek's hundred-year event was followed up by a two-year drought, killing the ill-conceived resort once and for all.

What remained was a ten-foot wide hole in the mud where rainwater would occasionally gather and form a swimmable area. Inside the hole was a colony of several hundred starving leeches waiting anxiously for their next meal. Outside was a quarter mile radius crater of mud so sticky and deep that it could easily suck tightly laced shoes from a person's feet in a matter of seconds.

"Hey, Zeke," Cecilia called after him. "Stay away from that place, okay? One of these days someone's going to get hurt."

"Okay, mom," he said laughing as he met his friends.

Cecilia could not tell whether this was a warm laugh of someone flirting with an older woman or the acrid sarcastic laugh of a know-everything teenager. Either way, she decided to ignore it as best she could.

Her ear still throbbing from the impact, she tossed the offending ball back into the hopper and pumped another pair of quarters into the machine.

Somehow the particular movement of her hands, the light of the street and the bloodthirsty pitching machine brought to mind a similar evening years before, a memory of something vague and horrible. She tried for several seconds to bring it into specificity, but soon the balls were coming again, sweet, hot, and right across the plate.

The people of Town Name do not have a feel for history

as much as they do a keen sense of *deja vu*, an unarticulated understanding that certain things happen over and over again in a kind of endless loop, only spread out far enough that the pattern is hard to recognize.

The town's clockwork boom-bust cycle is one important example of this. Every twenty years, almost to the very day, something comes out of the clear blue sky to whip the people of Town Name into a froth, imbued with that most dangerous of human mental states: optimism. It usually starts realistically, the promise of good-paying jobs, then instant wealth, investment opportunities and finally the disappearance of the aforementioned promiser along with one or two of the town's prettiest and perkier.

In 1985 a convoy of semi-trailer trucks rolled into town offering good money to any of the struggling farms in the area if they would be willing to use their property for the purposes of disposing of "unpleasant material." It was not just a good idea, said representatives from the unnamed waste management company, it was a great idea. A proposed incineration facility would generate good jobs, even union jobs if that was what folks wanted. The more the landowners hesitated, the better the idea became. Soon the company was offering stock options and wads of under-the-table cash if, under plan B, they just buried the barrels of toxic muck for them, no strings attached.

Not legal in the strictest sense or altogether sensible considering the damage it would probably do to surrounding lands, Nick Lawson and the others politely refused.

Besides, the company did not really have the money,

anyway. One night Tim Bailey approached the outsiders on his own and agreed to accept the material but slyly asked for a portion of the money up front. The trucks were gone by the time the sun rose the next day.

Tim told the story the next morning at Mike's like a conquering hero. He had called their bluff and they had slunk away in the night. End of story.

But some people felt he had taken too bold a step and frightened them away. Most of the other people in town were not so sure about Bailey's story. The trucks had disappeared, and their farm had acres of recently tilled land. There would be no easy way of knowing whether he had just accepted their money and done the deed.

One night in June of that year, the anger of the town boiled over in the ugliest way it knew how. Isolated and largely despised, Tim had begun drinking more or less like a full-time job and was, on this particular night, lit up like a Christmas tree.

Cecilia, just a child at the time, remembered hearing the sound of shouting coming from Mike's. She ran out to investigate, and before her mother could pull her away and scold her for her curiosity, her eyes drew in the vengeful tableaux. Behind her the building a crowd of Townnamers circled in around the trembling figure of Tim Bailey.

As her mother dragged her back to the town square, Cecilia could hear Tim Bailey beg for his life.

"I didn't do it, guys," he pleaded. "You have to understand. It was all a scam, seriously. They were swindlers."

Hours later, Rick Fruer, the town constable at the time, found Tim trapped in the pitching cage, bruised and bloodied. In the police report, Rick estimated that the machine had been charged up with as much as twenty dollars in quarters.

In the years that followed, Tim Bailey continued to maintain his innocence. To his credit, he was consistent honest if not completely honest. If he had accepted thousands of illicit dollars, he never showed it. His clan still showed up to Sunday school in hand-me-down clothes, and he still drove that old broken down F-100.

Though no one would come out and say it to his face, many people still believed he had done something shady on his land. If he never seemed to spend the money, perhaps he was just too ashamed to make a show of it. Even without evidence of seepage into his neighbor's property, Bailey became the defacto root cause of every crop failure for miles around.

5

The mob of people Louise had promised turned out to be quite a bit more intimate that Cecilia had anticipated. That was not to say that she expected much more than a dozen people. A cadre of only four protesters, including herself, that was another matter.

Louise had begged out of the field trip since her due date was looming, claiming that Dr. Lauer would call it "unnecessary travel."

The four of them stood outside Louise's car for more than an hour waiting for stragglers. There were none.

"A group that can comfortably fit in a Ford Fiesta is not what I would call an intimidating show of force," said Cecilia dejectedly.

"Once we get there, we'll spread out," said Louise. "We're just the seedlings of this thing, anyway. People will join our cause once they hear our story. You'll see."

To Cecilia, it was obvious why Stella resisted the buyout offer given her attachment to the church and the fear of starting over. On the other hand, she was not sure at all why Craig and Louise came.

It was then that she asked the most obvious question in the world: "If you all hate StarMart so much, why did you sign those letters?"

Their answers were slow in coming. Craig said he did not think he had much of a choice. Stella indicated that she did not want to ruin it for everyone else. Louise admitted to not really thinking about it much at all until Cecilia spoke up that day.

Along the trip to Jacksonville, Stella Copper was delighted to see a series of small antique shops along the highway, sprouting out of the crumbly shoulder like dandelions. She begged Louise to stop just for a few minutes.

"Antiques my ass," grumbled Louise. "For your information, 'antique' is the French word for 'junk.'"

Stella was appalled. "I'll ask you to be more careful about your choice of words, Louise."

Stella had played her turn, and now it was time to wait for a response. Louise never took her eyes from the road.

"Stella, I love you, but stick it up your ass."

In an attempt to keep the group from disintegrating

before it even reached its destination, Cecilia stepped in. "Everybody calm down," she said. "Nobody's going to jail."

"Actually, that law doesn't really count since we're outside of Town Name," said Craig Phelps who had, until that moment, been completely silent sitting next to Stella in the back seat with his thick legs pulled up against his chest.

"What?" asked Stella.

"What 'what'?"

"Stick what up my ass?"

"She said it!" shouted Louise with delight. "She said it!"

The temperance movement hit Town Name like a crate of illegal whiskey when Francis Willard came to speak on the square in July of 1896.

Like any other temporary and intense social phenomenon of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the people of Town Name jumped on the wagon with full abandon. In this case, the city council passed a whole slew of morality laws, covering everything from swearing in public to chewing gum in the presence of a reverend.

For once Town Name was ahead of the curve, a fact that eluded no one. Prohibition did not catch on in the rest of the country for more than two decades.

By the turn of the century, the place had locked itself up drum-tight. Proud of their accomplishments, women of the town council auxiliary wrote to Ms. Willard seeking praise but in return got a terse note indicating that the woman had died of a rare form of anemia nearly two years earlier and that perhaps they could have kept in better touch with their

inspirational leader.

In a town with little else to do but go to church or get drunk, limiting these options further soon proved unpopular, and eventually Town Name's local Temperance laws faded away.

The anti-cursing law, however, stayed on the books and enjoyed vigorous if not zealous enforcement for more than a century.

Fifteen minutes later, the red hatchback reached the border regions of the fifteen-acre parking lot for the Jacksonville, Illinois, Super StarMart.

"Where should we park?" asked Louise.

"Anywhere, I would think," replied Cecilia, just hoping the car would stop. "Here's good."

"I didn't wear that kind of shoes," complained Stella. "I wish someone would have told me that we'd be doing a lot of walking."

Louise asked, "Did you want me to carry you?" Stella did not mention her shoes or feet for the rest of the outing.

Once Louise had found a parking spot a bit closer to the entrance, she popped the trunk and hopped outside to look in. "Okay, who brought the signs?" she asked.

"Signs?" said Cecilia blankly.

"So people know what we're so honked off about," said Craig. "We each need a sign or two to wave around. That's how this sort of thing is done, I think."

Cecilia admitted that she had not thought that far ahead.

"This whole thing was your idea," countered Louise. "You're supposed to prepare for stuff like this."

Stella chimed in with an innovative idea. "Well, we are at a store that sells cardboard and markers. I suppose we could go inside- and buy some."

The other three stood around the car dumbly, unable to respond to the logic of what Stella had suggested.

"It is decided then," said Cecilia, laying out the x's and o's. "Stella and Craig will go into the town-swallowing retail outlet, the enemy, to purchase the very supplies we need to mock them."

Craig remained dumbfounded. "That's, um- that's beautiful."

For several minutes Cecilia and Louise waited outside the store, pacing the area where they would soon be picketing. Another half hour passed with no sign of their co-conspirators.

"Maybe we should chant something," suggested Cecilia. "Hey, hey! Ho ho! StarMart has got to go! Hey hey!" She stopped. "You're not doing it."

"There's just the two of us," said Louise. "It's stupid."

"Not nearly as stupid as just me doing it."

"Without signs, there's really no point in standing out here."

Cecilia agreed. They could cause more of a disturbance inside the store, anyway. Besides, the sun was beginning to set on them.

They breezed past the greeter without waving back, a clear sign to corporate establishment know that these women were not to be trifled with.

"I need to speak with the manager," said Cecilia to one of the cashiers.

"Um, you're not even in the right area, lady," she replied through snapping gum. "You need to go, um, back there, behind you."

After wading through the line at the customer service desk, they asked again to see the head person on duty, but the clerk just pointed them down to the line on the other end of the counter.

"We need to speak with the manager," insisted Cecilia after another line's wait. "We need to speak with this person right away."

"Is this regarding a merchandise return?" said the attendant.

"No."

"I can't help you then."

"Is there a manager I can speak with?"

"Well, there is no manager here, per se. We don't work like that."

Suddenly it occurred to Cecilia why StarMart had been so hard to stop in other communities. The corporation is a self-managing biological organism. It has no head, no central brain that can be attacked, but each part is knows as much or as little as every other part. Perfectly mobile and

adaptable, it corrupts everything it touches. My God, she thought, they must be stopped.

"You know what? Forget this," said Louise in frustration. "Let's go get some lawn bags."

She later explained that, while she could get them at Richardson's Feed & Seed, StarMart supposedly sold them for half the price and their proximity to so many other useful items made them much more convenient to buy.

"Considering what we're here to do, I don't think this is a good idea," warned Cecilia.

"Suit yourself. I think Hansel and Gretel have gotten themselves lost, anyway. We might be able to find them if we go looking."

The mission was deceptively simple. In the lawn and garden department, there was no sign of the paper yard waste bags. Louise even asked someone wearing an orange StarMart vest who suggested they check in the area where trash bags are sold, half a mile away.

On their way to the housewares department, Cecilia became overwhelmed with the enormity of the place. Looking down the center aisle separating frozen foods and girls' apparel, she could see her field of vision tilt down at the edges due to what she supposed was the curvature of the earth.

"This place is even bigger than I imagined," she said.

"And the one in Town Name will make this one look like a five and dime, at least four times the size."

Just then she noticed a plume of what looked like dusty

white smoke over the infant accessories area. It turned out to be low-level fog. This place had its own climate.

Once in the housewares area, they sought out trash bags, and looking all around found no paper lawn bags, not high, not low, nothing. By now there were no orange vests around, either. Panicked, they scanned the nearby aisles but could see no one at all.

There was also no sign of Craig or Stella.

"Maybe we should page them over the intercom," offered Cecilia.

"Like we're they're parents? I don't think that would work so well."

"What if they're outside right now looking for us? Waiting by your car to go home?"

That could be true, but that meant they would have to find their way out themselves, a trick that proved all the more difficult when the lights went out a minute later.

"I thought these places were open 24 hours a day," mused Louise.

"I thought so, too. Maybe we changed time zones or something."

Exhausted from the hike and weary from the lack of food, the two decided to settle down in what turned out to be the outdoor sports department. Feeling their way to the tent area they crawled inside a display model and rolled out a pair of demo sleeping bags.

After several minutes of pressing silence, Cecilia was

suddenly possessed of an idea. "You know what this place needs? Remember those Global Positioning things?"

"Yeah, at the Lawson place they have one in the combine to keep the tires along the same tracks. It's supposed to maximize yield or something. I don't know."

"Anyway, they should put those things on the carts here so that when you need to know where something is, someone could just say it's at -89.654 degrees longitude and 39.853 degrees latitude."

"That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

Before long, the Cecilia fell asleep amid the price tags and signage, completely unfazed when the lights came back on a few minutes later.

Needless to say, they were each quite surprised to see the crowd of people around their borrowed tent when they unzipped the front flap some time later. Most notably, Craig and Stella were standing nervously next to a pair of security guards.

Cecilia tried to explain what had happened, the lights going out, etc., but it made even less sense once she put it into words.

"Parts of the store go dark all the time," said a sandy haired man emerging from a stack of Coleman lanterns. "It has to do with the electrical system, I think. Anyway, it's not technically trespassing. So, I guess everything's okay."

"It is most certainly not okay," said Cecilia as she finally remembered her purpose in being there. "Stores like this one swallow communities whole and push out local

competition. In return you offer crappy part-time jobs and broken lives. StarMart is at the center of a growing empire of evil sweeping the planet, and it must be stopped."

She looked at Louise for support, anything. "Yeah," she grunted. "What she said."

He looked at Cecilia sideways. "You might be surprised to hear that we get that a lot," he said. "If you came to protest, you should probably do it outside. If you need picket signs, you can pick up the supplies a quarter mile down aisle 22."

The guards backed off and left Craig and Stella to stand there dazed under the bright florescent lights.

"Oh, by the way, where are the damn lawn bags?" asked Louise, still inside the tent.

The man leaned in to respond. "For yard waste, grass clippings, stuff like that?"

"Yes."

"They're in with the trash bags."

"A ha!" Louise said, pointing menacingly. "We've been there."

"Oh, you probably looked for them with the trash bags in housewares. You should try the trash bags in grocery."

He produced a small printed map of the store and pointed to the area in question, but he kept covering up the dot with his finger.

"What time is it?" asked Cecilia, suddenly electric with panic.

The man checked his watch casually. "It's about seven thirty."

"PM?"

"No, ma'am. AM."

"Oh, excrement!" shouted Cecilia.

"What?"

"I'm going to be late for my first day at the mayor's office."

"That wouldn't be Town Name, would it?"

"Uh, yes," she said.

"That's funny. That's where I'm headed today, too. Do you all need a ride?"

It was him. Cecilia did not know how to react to the smiling man. Louise stiffened in her sleeping bag, looking as though she might feign sleep until he went away.

Cecilia shook her head wordlessly.

"Hi," he said, reaching out his hand for a shake. "I'm Luke Reynolds."

6

Cecilia threw herself out of Louise's car before it had even rolled to a stop. Due to her speed she stumbled through the front yard but managed to recover before slamming herself into the screen door.

The trailer where the mayor worked was just quick three-block walk, but today it would be a sprint. She grabbed a fresh outfit at random from her closet and jumped backward on the bed to pull her old jeans off and her new ones on. Shower? No time. Thinking fast, she grabbed a stick of deodorant without having to look and swiped each armpit as she buttoned with the other hand.

Shoes tied and, bam, she was done and ready to go. She was out the door so fast that she did not register what she saw in the corner of her eye until she heard the spring-loaded door crack shut behind her.

Linda was there, staring at something on the table and so engrossed in it that she had not even said anything to Cecilia when she came in.

Cecilia turned around, waving through the screen. "Hey, mom. I'm off to work. And, don't worry. I know that it's my turn to make dinner tonight."

"We need to talk about this," said Linda, her ashen face peering out at her from a cloud of pale smoke.

"I'm late as it is, though. Can we do this later?"

"I guess. It's just that the phone, gas, and electric bills are due. Between the two of us we have to get this figured out."

Linda Beaumont had worked multiple jobs for most of her adult life: cashiering at Richardson's, waitressing at Mike's, even some cleaning at the Hausman estate on occasion.

Linda was by no means unusual. In Town Name most folks worked at least two jobs during the year, more during the summer if they could swing it.

Most of that was a practical matter. As the population of the town dwindled over the years, it took more people doing more things to keep the place operational. Also, as the economy continued to slide, it took more and more jobs to make ends meet. So, it worked itself out that way. As Stella would say, the Lord provides.

Between her double-shifts at the factory and a late night closing job at Burger, Linda had a very full plate these days. Still, it was getting so that even this was not enough.

The cash flow was always sufficient to keep her in

cigarettes, though. Sometimes Cecilia felt tempted to harass Linda about her expensive habit, but she had no room to lecture about financial matters. Her job at the factory barely made a dent in the combined family budget, such as it was.

Linda took in a deep drag and breathed it out as she spoke. "I heard that Marlene's going to cut your hours."

Cecilia noted that Linda was not looking at her. "I'm going to be busy for the next week or so getting stuff ready for the town's shutdown."

"What's he paying?"

"I didn't ask."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. And if I don't go now, I'm going to lose that, too. This is office work, mom. It's got to be better money than Hausman's."

"Let's hope."

Suddenly Cecilia was a kid again, but not in a good way. When the chips were down Linda always seemed to talk as though she was the adult while Cecilia was the carefree and irresponsible woman-child, a pattern that had always annoyed her.

She's making too much of it, Cecilia thought as she shuffled her feet. Linda was forgetting the current brouhaha.

"None of this is going to matter in another week, right? The buyout is supposed to get us enough to buy a new place in Beardstown or Jacksonville. Right?"

"I'm not so sure." Linda handed her the StarMart letter of intent, warped and grimy with dried sweat. Circled in faded pencil at the bottom of page two was a perfectly innocent looking paragraph. After reading it aloud twice, she came to realize that the letters meant nothing. StarMart could pull out any time during the project, paying for each property only upon demolition.

Linda snatched it back and tucked it in with her worrisome stack of papers. "I'm not doing a damn thing until I get a check and that check clears."

"But I just saw Nadine closing up shop and getting ready to move to a new place in Rushville."

"Nadine is a foolish woman," said Linda sternly, "and you know it."

By the time she knocked on the brindle brown trailer on Elm and Illinois, Cecilia was out of breath. The blood in her head was rushing so hard she could not have heard Dennis Richardson welcome her to his office, bidding her to come in and have a seat.

She waited for a moment, then knocked again.

"Come on in," he said.

"Oh," she mumbled to herself, pulling open the metal door.

From floor to ceiling, mayor's office was full to bursting with boxes of all kinds: simple RSC's, laminated boxes, and double-wall bulk shipper boxes.

"Good morning," he said.

Cecilia struggled to reciprocate the greeting. "Good [breath] morning." She found a chair and waited for instructions.

Dennis pulled a box from the top of a stack and opened it up. Inside was a tornado of paper. Tax documents, deeds, and birth certificates, spilled out the sides and static-clung to the lid.

"Basically, what I need you to do is go through these boxes of records and get everything in order. Match up the birth records with state, put all the surveying documents with county, and generally make less of a mess of it."

After the explanation she had even less of an idea of what was expected of her here. From the current state of affairs, it seemed to her that even he was not sure.

"Do you think you can handle that?" he asked.

"How long is this going to take me?" "I don't rightly know," he said. "I guess that's up to you and your fast fingers. No matter how many hours it takes you, it all has to be done by next week."

There was no way that in less than seven days she could do all of this. There simply were not enough hours in the workday.

As if he had read her thoughts, he then reached into his pockets and pulled out a spare key.

She decided that it was time to get tough, all business. "How much are you-

"Twenty bucks an hour sound okay?"

It was more than okay, more than fifty percent more than she was making from Marlene. "That sounds fine," she said calmly.

"Most of that's coming out of my own pocket, you understand. The city can't pay for this kind of thing, of course, but we really don't have much of a choice."

Wasting no time, she gathered up the stray papers and got to work on the unlabeled box she soon nicknamed "Box number One." Most of the files in this box turned out to be records relating to the school. At first she tried sorting the random files by social security number within each container, but a peek in an adjacent box told her that would not work.

To do it right, she would have to empty nearly all of the boxes and sort them at the same time, placing everything back in the boxes and re-labeling everything. And that was just for one kind of document.

She spun her head around and tried to get a quick count of the number of boxes. Her spirits beginning to fail her, she was nearly ready to give up preemptively.

"Is this all?" she asked sarcastically.

"Um, no. The rest is at the U-Store on 67."

"Oh."

She poured out the contents of one box after another, until the floor of the trailer was covered in a thick carpeting of official documents. She then very carefully sorted pools of paper, little islands of order in the chaotic landscape, wondering all the while how city records could get this

disorganized in the first place.

It occurred to Cecilia that Dennis could have, or should have, started on this months ago. The amount of filing, re-filing, fixing, and proofing that needed to be done by the end of the week was stupefying.

Still, it was inside work for decent pay. It beat the hell out of spending the summer shucking corn all day and molding bowling balls all night.

Apart from being the long-running mayor of Town Name, Dennis Richardson owned and operated Mucilage Creek Feed & Seed on the corner of Main and Willow. The store took up two of the standard store fronts along the city square, making it the largest retail outlet in town- soon to be surpassed by Super StarMart.

Like a lot of the serious entrepreneurs in Town Name, the name of the place had always been a sticky issue for Dennis. On several occasions, he and other members of the city council had come quite close to officially changing the name of the town to something more palatable. To honor the Germanic heritage of the area, some wanted to call the place New D'sseldorf a few years ago but did not prevail. Similarly unsuccessful efforts involved names like Affable Valley, Ilinopolis, and even Hausmanville.

The most plausible proposal in recent years had been to name the city after the closest geographical landmark, Mucilage Creek.

So sure was Dennis Richardson that Mucilage Creek was a suitable name for the place, he renamed his store in that mold to set an example ten years before.

Dennis was an unsuccessful pied piper, however, because no one followed his lead. Mucilage Creed Feed & Seed often needed as much explanation for outsiders as the moniker of Town Name itself.

But now that no longer mattered, he continued to remind himself, because neither name would survive to the end of the month.

By now Cecilia had nearly sorted out her technique for the job. She would take the bigger problem, shrink it to size, and then do it again and again. The key, it seemed, was not looking up at the rows and rows of boxes but to concentrate on the specific tasklet at hand.

It was around this time that she began looking for the monkey wrench that would ruin her momentum, an excuse to take a break. It came in the form of a misfiled memo. The fact that it was not where it ought to be was not surprising. However, the Environmental Protection Agency letterhead was.

"Mr. Mayor?" she asked, realizing too late that she still talked like a schoolgirl with authority figures.

Dennis Richardson looked up from his Case/IH catalog. "You know you can call me Dennis, Cecilia."

"Dennis," she continued, holding up the memo. "What's this?"

He looked at it for a moment, held his half glasses up to it, and then waved it off dismissively. "It's nothing. You can toss it."

Cecilia scanned the document more closely. "But it says

here that the Bailey land tested negative. How come we never know about that?"

"So, it doesn't change anything. No big revelation there."

"It means that Tim Bailey never buried the waste on his farm. It also means that any problems the surrounding farmers were having had nothing to do with toxic waste."

"I guess so. Either way, your job is sorting and packing not snooping and peeking. So, please. Sort. Pack."

Outside she could hear a scuffle, what sounded like two grown men taking turns dragging each other around the gravel lot. Quickly she buttoned up her work and poked her head outside.

As it happened, there was no scuffle to speak of at all. Kyle Pfeiffer was struggling to carry a passed out farmer into the side of the doublewide municipal trailer that served as also the town's jail.

Being Patti's brother and her own cousin, Cecilia did not see anything wrong with having a casual visit.

The police station was remarkably similar to the mayor's office, its mirror opposite, with the possible exception of the 5' x 5' jail cell in the far corner. In his ironed blue uniform and mirrored cop sunglasses, Kyle was lowering his perp onto the cot when he noticed Cecilia walk in.

"Hey, Cessi. Just a minute. I've got to get this down while it's still in my head."

Kyle picked up the tape recorder and turned it on, looking off into space as he spoke. "I picked up the suspect on Three Points on his 1973 Farmall doing a speed well

under the legal minimum for city streets. While I have not woken the suspect to perform a breathalyzer test, and without the equipment to do so anyway, his slurred speech and current state of unconsciousness are a clear indication of his inebriated state. He's also being charged with using the 'S' word in public."

She thought about how sad it had been, seeing so many farmers and townspeople disintegrate over the past two decades as their generations-old family businesses went bust. And now more than anything everyone wanted out as fast as possible.

"Sounds official, don't it?" he said after signing the paperwork.

"Very."

"I'm practicing up for a job interview in Beardstown next week. They've got a police force of at least six guys. It'll be nice having better radios and an actual patrol car, but I'm certainly going to miss this place. I kinda like working alone."

"Alone is good."

Kyle continued scribbling on his clipboard as though his life depended on it. Perhaps still thinking of next week's opportunity, he tried to record every single detail on the arrest report lest he appear unprofessional: the tractor's wheel base, the song playing in the suspect's vehicle, and the relative humidity at the time of arrest.

At the moment the suspect dressed in dirt-grey jeans and a lined shirt that also worked as a jacket was beginning to stir. With a weary groan he rolled over in his sleep and

suddenly his face was visible.

Of all people it was Tim Bailey.

7

Town Name Little League was not much to speak of. In spite of having a company in the area with the words "athletic supply" in its name, the loose confederation of coaches and players had been without a sponsor for nearly a decade.

The town barely had enough eligible kids to field a league. In fact, even to have a pair of teams to make games possible, a few age rules were bent and other rules were outright broken.

The diamond was a mess. The outfield featured only occasional clumps of grass, and the rest was peppered with divots. On the infield, frost wedging had dredged up rocks from deep underground. While not big enough to block the view, the objects proved just big enough to trip over on the

way to first base.

So, every night during the spring and early summer, the Reds would battle it out with the Blues, taking turns as the "home" team. Locals liked to describe the monotonous schedule of the Town Name Little League as something akin to an five game Yankees v. Red Socks series, played over and over again all year only to culminate in a Yankees v. Reds winner-take all single game World Series.

Without the money for uniforms, either as a league or as parents, players were simply encouraged to wear red or blue to match their team.

"Where's Bobby?" asked Cecilia when she found her seat in the bleachers next to Patti.

"Working again. Two shifts."

Though it had been warm in recent days, an unseasonably cold June wind had settled on Town Name that day. Cecilia noted that Patti still wore Bobby's old FFA jacket on days like this. She looked like a cheerleader waiting for her quarterback beau to finish playing.

Up until five years ago, Bobby grew soybeans and alfalfa on a small spread a few miles North of town. Once prices dropped and loans came due, there was nothing for him to do. He sold off his sexy New Holland tractor, but it was not enough. Soon everything, a life's worth of aspiration and perspiration, was gone. The resulting bankruptcy meant nearly a decade of credit problems and a lifetime of living it down.

The jacket made Cecilia want to talk about it, though she knew Patti would not want to.

"You would not believe all the crap the mayor has me doing," said Cecilia. "There is no way on earth that I'll get it done in time."

Patti did not seem interested. "Quiet," she said. "Ryan's batting."

Ryan Mueller ambled up to the plate with a confidence beyond his eight years. A crowd favorite, Ryan had something spectators really wanted and needed in a little league batter: a sense of drama. He would face the pitcher with a cool face, rotating the bat behind his head in tiny circles. When he hit the ball, his face would explode with emotion.

That was not to say that he was terribly good at actually hitting the ball.

He smacked the ball hard and high. Unfortunately the direction was all wrong and it flew back behind his head, over the row of parked cars, and directly through the windshield of Loretta Clemmens' Ford F-150 pickup truck.

It seemed that the field could also have used a backstop. So common were incidents like this that play did not stop.

"I've got an idea for a sponsor," quipped Cecilia. "Chip's Auto Glass in Rushville."

After a few wild pitches, Ryan knocked the ball solidly down the first base line and directly into Zeke Lawson's mitt. Inning over.

"He doesn't need me anymore," said Patti through her smile, not looking at Cecilia. "Ryan, I mean. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Not really."

"I hope this one's a girl. A girl who hates sports and wants to hang out with her mom all day baking pies and ironing drapes."

"But you hate that stuff."

"I'd learn."

Cecilia had to smile. The idea of Patti inflicting her clumsy kitchen skills on a defenseless little girl might constitute child endangerment. Bobby was not the cooking sort, either, even during the rare hours when he was home. As Patti herself was fond of saying, if it weren't for the microwave, nobody at her house would eat.

"That's the hormone's talking, girl," said Cecilia.
"Besides, it's not like I'm spending a whole bunch of quality time with my mom these days."

"Yeah. What about your savings account. Do you have enough yet?"

"Um, I'm close. But I've been close for a while."

Cecilia had begun setting aside seed money about two years earlier, cash for a deposit on an apartment, a new start. Though she had started with fervor, her pace dropped off after a few months. It was Patti's idea, what she called "a positive solution to a negative situation." For reasons Cecilia never quite understood her heart was not in it.

The Reds were in the outfield now, searching for a ball lost in a thick clump of brush while the runner rounded the bases in a functional home run.

Cecilia noticed something new about the field that day, a neatly printed wooden placard on the third base line. "FUTURE HOME OF STARMART FIELD," read the sign, along with a small map of how the lot fit in with the retail outlet's plan.

According to the attached schematic and artist's rendering, the new diamond, complete with dugouts and chain-link fences, would sit in the StarMart green space between the North-end dumpsters and the loading dock.

"So, that's it, then," muttered Cecilia, not sure at first if she had said it aloud. "Luke Reynolds and his ilk aren't just buying us out, they're buying us off, too."

"You should have been here when they unveiled it yesterday," muttered Patti. "People were going nuts over the idea. I thought some of them were going to collapse."

"But who's still going to be here? What's the point of a little league field for a nonexistent town?"

"Lots of people are going to hang around, Cessi. That Luke guy was talking about how there would be loads of decent-paying jobs there."

"You have to be kidding. Work? At that place?"

"I wouldn't blow it off so easily. I've been telling Bobby he should apply, but he gets pretty mad whenever I do."

"I'd like to see that Luke Reynolds and let him have a chunk of my mind."

"Why not? He's right over there," said Patti, pointing to the knot of people on the other set of bleachers. In pressed white shirt and flawless khakis, Luke Reynolds held court

while the Town Name sycophants threw themselves at his mud-free feet.

Nearby Cecilia could hear other folks talking about their new good fortune.

One: "After paying off the credit cards and buying a new truck for Henry, I think we'll take a vacation somewhere warm and sandy."

After another: "As soon as I get the money from the house, I'm going to invest it. You know those TV shows about investing without any money? I'm going to do that. They play them really late at night so the big stock exchange monkeys don't catch on to it. It's got to work."

After another: "Once we're free of that dead pasture, I'm not going to plant so much as a daffodil for the rest of my life."

Word spread through the crowd that preliminary hiring for the new StarMart store would begin the next day at noon. The excitement continued to brew.

"It's like he's the reappearance of Jesus Christ or something," said Cecilia disgustedly.

"I wouldn't go so far as Jesus," replied Patti. "Moses, maybe."

"Or worse. Abraham Lincoln, Jr."

Patti glanced over scoldingly. Invoking the name of Lincoln in a Central Illinois town was like sending up the Bat Signal or shouting "fire" in a theater. One did not do so lightly.

But the similarities were clearly there. Luke was unusually tall, a bit awkward looking at first. With a straight face he promised a better life to people who had sworn never again to fall for such rubbish, and they believed him.

Unlike the Great Emancipator, Luke was not married to an alleged nut-job. Patti felt the need to inform her that Mr. Reynolds was, according to local rumor, "available."

State law did not explicitly mandate that every municipality and incorporated hamlet in the state of Illinois had to come up with a bit of Lincoln lore, true or not, to titillate tourists and pseudo-historians. Regardless, every town in the state, small and large, had at least one tale of America's 16th President. He schooled here. He dueled with machetes down there. He walked twenty miles to return less than a dollars change up yonder and birthed a three headed calf someplace else.

In Beardstown, folks tell tales of the famous "Almanac Trial" that took place in 1858. Two years before his run for the nation's highest office, Lincoln represented Bill "Duff" Armstrong on trial for a murder committed the previous year.

Charles Allen, the prosecution's primary witness placed Armstrong at the scene, claiming to have seen it all by moonlight. Lincoln deftly produced an 1857 almanac to show that he could not possibly have seen it that night since, according to the book, there was no moon at all on that particular evening. Lincoln secured an acquittal and coined the legal term "slam dunk" all in a single day.

The rub came years later when scholars matched the

almanac used in the trial with weather logs for that year and found a mismatch. There had been a moon on that night.

Had the star lawyer deliberately mislead, or even forged the almanac to help the son of an old friend? In Beardstown, the answer to that question depended upon what would make you buy the most souvenirs.

Town Name had a doozy of its own. According to old timers, who claimed to have heard the story from other old timers who had actually experienced the events, Lincoln lost his virginity at a party in 1828 held at the home of Ms. Virginia Beaumont, or rather in the bushes just outside it.

A variety of alternative versions also circulated, each including a handful of highly descriptive, yet altogether unwelcome, details about Honest Abe's performance that night.

There are, of course, several holes in the story. In Ms. Beaumont's diary, there were no records of hosting such a large-scale social event that year. As to the theory that Lincoln was distraught over the death of sweetheart Anne Rutledge, the two did not meet until five years later. Ms. Rutledge died two years after that, in 1835.

Still, Townnamers point to the obligatory Lincoln statue in the City Square that has appeared to frown for more than a hundred years. Many people in town said that the thing was a sign that the place was cursed. And while that might explain a lot, including a century and a half of horrible luck, Cecilia never bought it. Even if such things were real, it did not seem to make sense for a man to curse the town that got him laid.

A few minutes later the game was called when two outfielders for the Blues collided head-on, necessitating a call to Dr. Lauer. Neither boy was seriously injured, but it served as an excellent excuse to break for dinner.

"How's the thing with the mayor going," asked Patti in parting.

"Great," she said, deciding to not get into it again. "It's the best job I've ever had. It'll be a shame when it's all gone."

"We'll do lunch."

"Yes, lunch."

8

In the harsh light from the pole-mounted lanterns, Cecilia could see the pale canvas of Dr. Billy Yarbrough's Spiritual Awakenings tent shake with the rhythm of shouting and clapping.

Once she heard the music, felt the boom of the organ in her gut, she stopped asking herself why she had wandered in. There was no doubt that she had never intended to come that night. In fact, in the years of traveling tent revivals rolling through town, this was her first outing.

Billy wore a flashy navy blue suit as he strode around on the apple boxes that served as a stage. But even from where she stood, she could see that it had been worn a few too many times, a casualty of harsh road life.

Not what one would consider a large man, Billy had the

speaking style of the youngest child in a large family, one who grew up having to scream in order to be heard. His vocal chords were worn and tattered like the seats of a carnival ride.

"I see a lot of people here tonight. Yah. Who have never known the love of God. Yah."

Billy Yarbrough and his family of singers were, in a sense, surrogate believers. Folks paid them good money to simply have faith, to express it in ways they never felt comfortable with. She could see it in the faces of the assembled crowd, a sense of genuine rightness. Cecilia wanted to feel right.

"You people here tonight are about to be redeemed through the light of Christ! Yah," he grunted. "He's gonna lift you up! He's gonna lift you up and take you home!"

Billy was so certain, so sure of what he was saying. Cecilia had never been that sure of anything.

While she refused to sing and rhythmic clapping did not appeal either, she was sufficiently moved by the experience to mouth along with the songs.

There were no chairs. Seating, as it turned out, was the responsibility of the host church, a detail they had completely forgotten about. Earlier on, Reverend Dan had apologized for the inconvenience.

The tent itself pointed out over the churchyard, and since she was more comfortable in the back of any crowd, she stood out with the overflow crowd in the graveyard.

She glanced down at her feet and noticed that she

happened to be standing on the marker for Paul Copper.

It was time for testimonies now. A few local farmers took the stage to thank the Almighty for last year's failed crop and pray for better luck this year. It was only a matter of time, everyone knew, before Stella stood up.

"I'd like to thank God for all the blessings in my life," said Stella into the microphone.

"Amen," urged Billy.

"Mostly, I'd like to thank Him for taking my husband Paul away."

Billy looked shocked and uneasy. "I'm sorry to hear that ma'am," he said softly. "But you know the Lord has a plan for you."

"The Good Lord saw fit to take him from me, and years later I see His wisdom. Paul was so depressing to have around, like a grey cloud that followed me everywhere I went. I mean, who needs that?"

The details of her life, things she had never told anyone, she was now spilling before the whole town.

"Hallelujah!" she shouted. She carefully replaced the microphone and returned to her seat with folded hands.

Billy signaled the organist to change the subject, to start grinding through another song.

Sick of standing around like an idiot, Dan Meyr wandered outside to check out the show's setup. Billy Yarbrough's trailer was parked behind the church with the official Yarbrough Ministries logo emblazoned across its

side.

"Dammit!" Dan said to himself.

They had put their long iron spikes right through the newly blacktopped parking lot surface. He felt around the hole, puffed up around the foreign object like an infected wound.

"Look at this, Wanda," he moaned. "I mean, these people have no respect at all."

Standing at the refreshments table nearby, Wanda Meyr did not kneel down to investigate. She knew all along that they would do this. She also knew that with a bucket of pavement patch, the holes would be fairly easy to repair.

"I can have Randy fix that tomorrow," she said. "It's not a big deal."

"That's not the point."

Wanda walked around the tent flap to where Dan still kneeled and touched his head. "You've been saying for years that you wanted some time off, a chance to let someone else preach for a change."

"Yeah, but this is different," he muttered.

"How? How is it different?" "I mean, look at them. Just look at them!" she shouted. Being so near the lanterns, Dan received a face-full of insects as he stood. He brushed off his shirt and spat. "I give them 104 services a year, and they sit there like lumps. Billy What's-his-face blows into town, and he's all Gospel and glitter, hellfire and hairspray. They're eating it up."

A square of light fell on his sweating face as he glared at the captivated throng.

"Why is that so bad, honey?" she asked. "You give them what they need every week just like you said. But Billy-well, Billy can't do what you do."

He grunted, still watching the crowd hatefully.

"Well, he can't organize a choir and keep a dozen nosy matrons from picking each other to death in the coffee klatches," she continued. "That's you." He leaned down again, pulling on the tent stake and trying to wiggle it out. He was grunting like an animal, crouched over the stubborn iron rod.

He was becoming hysterical again. She had seen him like this before a few times but not nearly this bad. She grabbed him by the arm, trying to pull him away to someplace quiet and dark.

"Danny," she said, stroking his hand. "There's no reason to stick around. Stella and I'll clean up. You go home and get some rest."

"I will not!" He yanked his hand away as though she were a hot stove.

"Do you think it's fun to be me? Stella does so much around here, I feel like I can't keep up anymore. People treat her like she's the preacher's wife, Danny. Her, not me. Have you ever thought about that?"

The crowd was moving back and forth now, undulating to Billy's call and response as the organ bashed and boomed its way through a show-stopping rendition of "The Old

Rugged Cross."

"That man is on my property wooing my congregation," he spat. "It's like watching another man have sex with my wife!"

"That's a funny thing to say, Danny," she said, fuming. "Especially since you haven't touched me in over a year."

Just then she noticed that the music and clapping had ceased and that every eye in the tent, even Billy's, was on them.

It was true, though. Dan had not made a single attempt to have, in her words, "relations" with her since the last summer. She secretly suspected that age and his steady diet of caffeine had taken its toll on his appendages.

Wanda pulled him bodily from the scene, out into the cool darkness.

9

"You've been making some progress I see," said Mayor Richardson as he sat down at his cramped desk with his morning coffee.

The bit of encouragement, while welcome, was completely unwarranted.

"Mostly, I've just made the mess bigger," she said from behind a pile of boxes. Like a child unwilling to eat her vegetables, Cecilia had spread the documents around the floor of the trailer. She had kept moving them until, for whatever reason, they formed a kind of organized pattern.

In truth, she had made some progress since Monday and was beginning to feel the ground under her feet, so to speak. The freedom to set her own hours would have been a wonderful blessing had it not been for the looming deadline. Today she had hit the grindstone early, just after

six in the morning, with a sack lunch so she could keep at it as long as possible.

Without a watch she was unable to say for sure how late Dennis was. That was understandable, of course, given his other mayoral duties and his responsibilities in getting the feed and seed ready for the move. But what did not make sense to Cecilia was how little he seemed to work when he was there.

Mostly, Dennis would sit at his desk and watch Cecilia work while pretending to do something else. He would make an occasional phone call, go out for more coffee, but the business of the doomed town weighed little on his rounded shoulders.

"Um, is there anything I could do to help you?" he asked after a few hours.

"Actually, yeah," said Cecilia wiping the sweat from her face. "I'm going to need to move some completed boxes, only a couple. I could use an extra set of muscles."

The business-friendly outfit she'd elected to wear in case anyone official happened by was a bad idea, and now it was plain to see. The closest thing she owned to a suit was now covered in Dalmatian spots of perspiration and grime. She would have given anything to have her old Callahan Seeds hat or a pony tail holder.

"And a couple rubber bands," she said brightly. "I could use some of them."

Without a word, Dennis obediently rooted around in his neglected desk and produced a selection of elastic rings in a variety of sizes and colors. "Try the red one," he said. "I

think it makes a bold statement."

He was eating out of her hand, apparently helpless to deal with the paperwork situation himself. Again, she resisted the temptation to ask how the city's records had gotten this way in the first place.

"What do I do if stuff is obviously missing?" she asked.

"It depends," he said. "Like what?"

"Surveying documents and property records. I just went through all of them- since I knew there wouldn't be many, I figured it would be a good place to start. The trouble is the Garner place on Three Points down Carrolton. There's nothing here for it."

"It must be in a another box," he said. "It'll turn up."

"This is the only box like this. I've looked in dozens of them. Maybe it'll be in the next load."

Dennis agreed to go fetch the remaining boxes that night so they would be ready for processing in the morning.

"Could they still be at the house somewhere?"

"The old Garner place? Anything's possible, I guess. But I wouldn't worry about it."

"I want the work to be complete," she said.

"What do you care? It belongs to no one now."

"For some reason I do, though. It doesn't match up."

"I said don't worry, Cecilia. Are you worried?"

"No. Not worried."

The air in the room suddenly felt colder. For the moment her curiosity was outweighed by a willingness to keep what was turning into a manageable if not lucrative job.

A crack of thunder rattled the trailer just then. Soon after came the fortissimo pizzicato of hard rain.

Once onto the next kind of unlabeled, unorganized file box, Cecilia found a series of financial statements, many with crudely erased numbers and jumbled figures. One in particular, an invoice for back property taxes on a spread West of Pine Road, held particular interest for her. Without thinking about it, she knew the total under the long column of quantities and amounts was wrong.

"How's it going?" said Dennis offhandedly.

"This invoice," she said holding it up for him to see. "It doesn't add up."

But Dennis did not take it from her hand or show any interest at all in the faded sheet of paper.

"If you spend all your time chasing down math errors, we're never going to get this done."

He was using "we" again, a habit that no longer amused her. "But it doesn't make any sense," she said.

"It's not your job to worry about that."

"But it can be fixed. It should be fixed."

"Again, let's get this clear," said Dennis, his face darkening. "It's not ... your ... job."

Again the concussive thunder rocked the mayor's metallic office, punctuating the end of the conversation.

Blessed with a prime position on the North side of the city square, Burger had stood for decades as Town Name's "other eatery," solving the dilemma of what to do if you didn't feel like cooking two nights in a row.

Long ago, Burger had been a Burger Chef franchise, ensconced with shiny aluminum griddles and bright chrome accents. When that company went under, Burger changed affiliations to Burger King rather than McDonald's since it offered a better financial package and required the least expensive signage change. Three years later when franchise fees went up while receipts for the tiny fast food joint continued to decline, owners had no other choice but to go rogue.

To that end, the word "King" was removed from the large sign over the front door, generic unbranded napkins and cups were ordered, and uniforms were altered to be just different enough not to violate any trademarks.

Cecilia bellied up to the order counter and scanned the overhead menu. "I'll have a Burger-Shake, large Burger-Fries, and a double Burger-Burger with cheese, mom."

Linda stood behind the counter wearing a lime green uniform and a shoot-me expression. "And what about Patti?"

"Actually, I'm not really hungry right now," said Patti, holding her belly again. "I'll just have some fries."

In spite of their rain ponchos, both women were soaked through to the bone. Tiny puddles formed at their feet wherever they walked.

"When's your due date?" asked Linda, looking a little

ashamed that she hadn't remembered.

"Any day now, actually."

Linda wiped her brow and sighed. "That's some crappy timing, honey."

"You know it."

"That'll be \$6.73, Cessi. You sure you got the money?"

Cecilia shrank again, hiding her face behind her hands, hoping Linda would just not be there when she removed them. "I'm not going into that with you again, mom. I didn't ask for this."

"I don't need to remind you who's the one with the paper hat in this situation. You came in here."

Cecilia handed her mom a ten-dollar bill. "The mayor's paying twenty an hour."

"Not bad work as long as it lasts."

Patti and Cecilia sat at a table near the window with their tray covered with an array of greasy items. Hungrier than she had been in days, Cecilia tore into her Burger-Burger like a lion into carrion.

"Lord and land, girl. Slow down," said Patti.

"It's just that I've got so much I need to do, I've barely got time to eat anymore."

"Well, compose yourself a little. I've got a glass stomach these days, anyway."

"I think I'm going back to work after we're done here. I've got a key."

"At least be glad he's paying by the hour."

Patti nibbled a fry and stared out into the streaky rain. The streets were covered with at least two inches of standing water, and the rain showed no sign of abating. The storm sewer system that could have prevented that kind of flooding never came to pass since vote after vote in the city council rejected the idea on the basis of cost, but now, of course, that no longer mattered. The area from Birch to Pine, Three Points to State Street would all be under roof very soon.

"What're you thinking about?" asked Cecilia.

"Bobby," she said still staring out. "He's supposed to take another load out to the U-Store tonight. In this."

Just then a knot of giggling teenage girls piled in, their drab rain gear covering expensive mail-order clothes. Each made a show of how little they were ordering, prefixing each item with "oh, I don't know" and "maybe I shouldn't."

Five years earlier, Cecilia had sat in that very seat, her eyes closed and her knees drawn up into her chest. She was stewing over some bad news.

When she looked up her father was sitting across from her in the booth. How he seemed to do that, to her it was like a magic trick. However, she knew that somewhere across town someone's car was being ignored, and his boss was wandering the yard grumbling about where Peter's lazy ass had gone to now.

"Are you okay?" he asked, trying to read her face through her overgrown bangs.

"Yeah," she said. "Just surprised is all."

Richie was her first and only boyfriend, an awkward young man two years her senior and like her, a bit of a misfit. But other than misfit-hood, they had little in common. Their "dates" usually consisted of gloomy walks along back roads and trips to muck-laden Mucilage Creek.

Cecilia was not even aware that they were seriously going out until he told her one night. Without anything better to do, she agreed.

In the spring of that year, Rumors circulated that Richie had traveled to a jewelry store in Jacksonville, that Cecilia was about to be engaged whether she knew it or not.

If she had thought about it more, she would have stopped the whole thing before it got that far, let him down before he had a chance to humiliate himself further. But that was not how it happened.

A few weeks passed and nothing happened. Amid all the engagement rumors, there was only one thing missing, her alleged fianc?e. Not only did he not propose, he failed to show up at all.

She even went to his house, something she had never done before since he always seemed to find her, and found that Richie had gone. She tracked down his mother who could not, or would not, explain it.

Peter folded his blackened hands on the table and did his best to listen. She could tell that his nose had itched recently, indicated by the giant greasy streak across his gentle face.

Peter cleared his throat. "Well, I don't know if this makes it any better, Ceebee, but I never liked the guy."

"Actually, that does help a little," she said, straightening herself slightly in her seat.

Never completely comfortable with her first name, Peter had accumulated a thousand or so nicknames for his daughter over the years and liked to use them randomly in conversation.

"Yeah, he never seemed to me like the kind of fella who could- well, actually do things. I know he's loaded and all, but go out with a guy like that and you're changing your own tires."

"I don't mind changing tires, dad."

"Yeah, I know you don't. But you know what I mean," he huffed. "He's not a practical man."

He was struggling with the words, unsure. She looked at him strangely, trying to parse out what he had said.

"I don't care where he comes from, where he's going. He's not good enough for you, Cessi. He's beneath you."

The more she thought about the situation, it was this part that upset her most. Richie was supposed to wait around to be abandoned by her while she lit out to explore the world, not the other way around. That was the plan, anyway.

"You know, if you want me to, I could kick this guy's butt for you."

The corners of her mouth turned up in a half smile. "I don't think that will be necessary."

"He's a scrawny guy. I could take him."

Cecilia laughed. "No, dad."

"Okay. Hey, I wasn't actually going to kick his butt, you know," he said with mock concern. "Don't tell your mother that I was going to kick his butt. She wouldn't like that."

He reached across the table and ruffled her hair like he did when she was six. It felt good to her, comforting, even though she knew it would take at least three washings before the grease came out.

One of the very few Townnamers to successfully leave the place, Richie went off for college that fall and did not return for holidays, summer breaks, anything. The lucky bastard.

She never saw Richie again, and over time she convinced herself that it did not bother her.

"Filing work okay?" asked Patti to break Cecilia's thousand-yard stare.

"Yeah. The mayor's getting weird, though."

"How so?"

"Well, for one, they guy is a complete slob. I know the city can't pay for a filing clerk. I get that, but he doesn't seem to care at all that bunches of documents have been misfiled, trashed, or just wrong."

"Well?"

"Well, he got really mad at me, twice, just for suggesting that we fix these things."

"You're wrong."

Cecilia stared at her wide-eyed. That was not the reaction she had expected from Patti.

"Come on. You hate this place, Cessi. You've been trying goofball stunts to get out of this town since you were six years old. Now that StarMart's giving everyone an way to get out and start over, you suddenly have a problem with that?"

"It's not like that."

Patti leaned in. She had obviously been thinking about this. "It's not? Are you saying you'd stay here if you had the opportunity to go?"

"Not exactly."

"Explain it, then. I just don't see it."

This was not like her, thought Cecilia. Maybe it was the hormones talking. "Patti, you're supposed to defend me here," she said. "You're supposed to listen to me whine and occasionally say 'that's horrible' and 'what a jerk.' That's your function here."

"Have I known you all your life?" "Yes."

"When you were fourteen and you thought you were in love with Kyle, did I not convince you that it was gas?"

"Yes."

"When you wanted to quit school and run off with carnies, didn't I knock you senseless so you couldn't go?"

"Yes."

"If there was anyone in town who was going to be honest with you about anything, who would it be?"

Cecilia shrugged. "You." "Then I'm telling you that you're wrong about this. You've got a good job that pays great. You and Linda are going to be all set as soon as the buyout checks come through. There's even new boy-meat in town. You have nothing to worry about. This other stuff is just noise, dangerous noise."

Cecilia let a long silence pass between them, eating vigorously as though that were the reason for the pause.

"It's all going to be okay, you know," said Patti at last.

"But how can you be so sure what's going to happen? You can't."

"I don't. That's different. Whatever does happen, though, it will be okay in the end. That I know as much as I know anything."

Here she was, Patti the cheerleader who couldn't find the darker side of life with a flashlight and a map.

"That's my point, Patti. You are in denial over this whole thing. I, for one, am a realist."

"You think you know what's real? Realism and cynicism are different, too. Face it, Cecilia. I'm probably more of a realist than you."

Touch?, thought Cecilia. She noticed Patti's face change, her eyes tracking something she could not see as it approached.

"Ah, the trespassing radical," said a familiar voice behind her. "Hi," he said reaching out to Patti, "I'm Luke Reynolds."

"Patti Mueller, and I need to be going," said Patti, suddenly rising. "I've got, um, really important, er, stuff to do."

"Well, so do I," protested Cecilia. But it was by now too late. The chair opposite her at the tiny table was now available.

"Mind if I sit?"

"Kinda. Yeah."

Luke pointed to the group of girls over his shoulder. "It's just that I've got this wicked allergy to giggling. If you must know, I swell up like a Georgia peach."

"That's nice."

"I vomit uncontrollably, and I bleed from the ears."

"Hey, I happen to be- well, I was eating."

Still chewing, the girls tossed their wrappers in the general direction of the trash can and giggled through the doors and into a waiting extended cab duelly with halogen accent lights and neon appointments, definitely not a Town Name chariot. Their dates aren't local, she thought.

By the time Cecilia worked up a decent amount of anger over the litter, Luke had retrieved the girls' errant wads and placed them in the garbage.

"So, when are you going to come down and talk to us about getting a job at the new store?"

"You mean StarMart?"

"We've got loads of positions to fill, full-time some of them."

"Thanks, but I had my sights set a bit higher. I really don't see an orange vest in my future."

"I had you figured as more of a front office type, record keeping, managing, HR. No vests."

Full-time work did sound interesting, though: medical benefits, a retirement program, and the best part: only needing to work one job.

"That's nice, but joining StarMart would sort of, well, undermine my principles."

"Oh, I almost forgot the evil empire thing," he said affably. "Well, it's not like we're the trade federation or anything. I'm no Darth Vader."

"Darth what?"

Luke's half smile flatlined. "Don't tell me you've never seen Star Wars. That is impossible for me to believe even in Town Name."

"Star- what is it again?"

"Star Wars," said Luke again, examining her face carefully. "My parents back in Austin must have seen the first one a hundred times. They say my name was just a coincidence, but I never bought it-"

Registering the blank look on her face, he stopped himself in mid-anecdote. "Of course, that would make no sense at all to you."

In fact, Cecilia had seen the first three Star Wars films several times in her youth. Watching him squirm was far more interesting than just cooing "ooh, Star Wars" and

making the too-obvious reference to his first name.

"See you around, Luke Reynolds." she said rising to leave. "Or not."

10

In these final days before its destruction, *Town Name* fell into a kind of suspended animation. People stopped planning things, looking forward to things. There was no point in it anymore.

Orders at the Hausman plant were still filled, though there were fewer of them with each passing day. The productivity at other businesses in town also dropped precipitously, like the last day of school before a long break when the teachers switch into movies-and-slideshows mode. People wandered the pale sidewalks aimlessly, unsure whether to do anything at all because, again, it would soon no longer matter.

Still, the idea of preparing for the move seemed premature to many. While some folks like Nadine had

already scoped out neighborhoods in Beardstown and Rushville, others resisted the idea of such preparation before the town itself was dead.

The single exception to this was the annual Scrackle Festival. Caterers could be canceled. Guests of honor can be uninvited. But when a parade is involved, there is no going back. Floats, already built long before the StarMart buyout become common knowledge, could not simply be destroyed before taking their walk down Main Street. That would be uncivilized, Barbarism. No one in town, even as busy as they were supposed to be in getting ready for the tear-down, brought up the idea of canceling the festival. No one.

The show would go on this Saturday. Rain, shine, or bulldozers.

To Cecilia the scene of the nearly abandoned rain-soaked downtown was eerie enough without considering where she was headed. Shops were closed early, if not for good. With nothing but streetlights reflecting off the slick streets and puddles, she could imagine that she was visiting the ruins of her Atlantian hometown as it sat on the bottom of the sea.

Jacques Cousteau narrated in her head as she floated from one darkened retail reef to another. What a shame, said Jacques, that this place would have been so cruelly cut down, her people drowned or frightened away by some unknown and powerful force.

Abraham Lincoln stood guard in the center of it all, now a home to thousands of exotic fish. Colorful veins of coral festooned his drab bronze exterior.

The gurgling sounds of the undersea grotto were suddenly replaced by the throaty wail of a Suzuki Bandit as it roared past Cecilia, dumping a gallon of dirty water on her already soaked dress.

"God, I hate this place," she muttered to herself. "And, truth be told, I always have."

The home of Phil and Tess Garner stood several blocks South of the City Square, and while it was technically on the other side of Town Name from her own home, on foot the trip would only take a few minutes.

The Garners had lived in Mucilage Estates, built by Jameson Homes during the town's geological companion boom of the mid-1970's. The development itself only consisted of a handful of houses off of Three Points Road, but it featured something found no other place in town: curvy streets. Jameson even offered a cul de sac for more select homebuyers looking for a bit of seclusion.

When the model home opened that year, folks came from far and wide just to look at the streets, to drink in the almost erotic quality of their turns and twists. To live at Mucilage Estates meant having something limited to a select few. It meant prestige and an ambiance of class. Most notably, it meant a strangling mortgage on a home worth roughly half the sales price.

The old maxim applied very well in this case: the more grandiose the development name, the punier the real estate offerings therein. While Bakers Square in nearby Rushville was a truly upscale neighborhood with pools and fences and a strict homeowners association, the homes of Mucilage Estates were nothing like the name implied. In

other words, it contained no actual estates.

The houses were nearly indistinguishable from those outside the development's white horse-country fences, save the one on the rounded corner of Carrolton Avenue. There was a pall of permanent gloom over that place even in full daylight. All manner of weeds had grown up around it, swallowing the place whole. The brass house numbers had long since decayed and half of them lay impotent on the collapsing front porch.

As Cecilia approached the front door expecting to have to jimmy it open with a butter knife she had brought, but it fell open listlessly at the slightest touch. She could feel stale air of the house rushing past her face, struggling to get out of the place. The smell of dust and dead insects filled her nostrils.

Even in decay, the Garner home was a busy place. Schoolbooks lay on the coffee table. A Newsweek magazine from 1991 sat on the kitchen counter opened to an article about the upcoming presidential election. It looked to her like the frozen last moments of Pompeii. She stood there for a moment, unsure what she was looking for and where she might find it.

Cecilia tried hard to block out her memories of the Garner family, who they were what everyone said happened there. A whole family murdered, went the legend, without a single body found or bloodstain discovered.

Even after being told the truth, the whole episode never made sense to her.

The decision to go, while it had been forming in the

Garners' heads for months, happened like the snap of a twig. They left no forwarding address, no contact information. Even their friends were shocked when they heard the news. For months rumors that they had been murdered boiled over in the town's gossip circles even though their car was never found or reported missing.

Years later Kyle Pfeiffer had a friend at the Highway Patrol run the plate numbers he happened to still have from an old speeding ticket. According to the database, the Garners had registered the car in Springfield the following year. Since that information was not legal for public consumption, Kyle told only a few people, folks he knew would not spread it around. Cecilia Beaumont was among that select group.

Like the rest of them, Cecilia did not believe the facts as they were presented to her. She continued to believe that the Garner family was murdered and that their attackers assumed their identity, starting up life again in the big city.

It was perhaps all for the best that so few people knew the truth of the Garner's harrowing escape from Town Name. If they had, the place may have emptied soon after.

Thanks to Bankruptcy attorney Chip Holland the Garners started over again completely. Phil's retail experience at Richardson's feed & seed helped him land a job at a department store. Tess found work, too, at a local driving school.

Over the years they built up their savings, keeping their noses clean and paying their bills religiously on time. They were eventually able to buy a small house in the Goosetown section of Enos Park where they entered into a happy kind

of semi-retirement.

Though they had always intended to go back and visit, even fix up the old place as a second home of sorts, they never did. Tess continued to talk about returning even for an afternoon, to see Stella and reminisce, but somehow Phil knew it would break her heart. So, he obliged her unstated plea and made excuses for not going. When Tess passed away a few years later, the idea of making contact again in Town Name died with her.

In the flashlight's dim circle, the common everyday items on the shelves and in the kitchen cabinets seemed far more sinister than she knew them to be. Noises seeped from every floorboard, every half-closed door.

I really should be at work, she told herself.

She rounded the cobweb-ensconced corner and found herself in the bedroom, the moldy sheets on the bed still crisply made. The closet doors lay open, empty.

She heard something odd and shot the light at her feet. Water. She glanced up at the doorjamb above her, felt around but did not find a dripping source. Looking back to the half-dried puddle, she saw tracks. Her own, she surmised.

She reminded herself that the possibility of seeing anything supernatural here would be laughably small because it would mean that something interesting had happened in Town Name where, as everyone knew, nothing interesting ever happened.

Reassured, she trod back through the hallway and into the living room. The television, a monstrous wooden box

with a ten-inch picture tube, sat along the far wall. She checked under the side table and around the tall brushed aluminum lamps. Nothing of interest.

Behind her was a shallow closet, a promising spot. Once she got up on it, however, there was little else in the space but mold-infused carpet. She reached for the dangling light pull, not thinking that the power had been out for more than a decade. When she did so, a pair of shoeboxes fell on her head.

The boxes themselves held nothing of interest other than a few faded photographs of people she assumed were the Garners, but in looking up she saw the faint square outline of an access port to the attic.

Quickly she ran back to the kitchen for a chair that wasn't already half apart and returned to the closet. With shaking legs, she climbed up to the square and pushed the lid from its frame. But that was all, her hands could barely reach the lip of the hole and her arms were nowhere near strong enough to pull herself up like that.

She scrambled up the wall for a moment, struggling to find purchase on something horizontal and rigid. After a few tries, her whole body weak now, she landed her right shoe on what felt like a bookshelf and pulled herself up enough to rest herself somewhat on another shelf behind her. From here she would be able to see the entire attic, if she had remembered to bring her flashlight up with her, that is. Blind and unsure what she might find up there, she felt around frantically and considered herself lucky that she could not see.

Her hands caught a pair of corrugated boxes, heavy ones,

too. Moving her body as far out of the way as she could, she knocked them through the hole and crashing onto the uneven floor below.

Shuffling forward on her buttocks, she worked herself free of the high shelf. But she descended from her precarious perch too quickly when her stable foot slipped beneath her. She could feel something, a nail probably, catch the pocket edge of her jacket and rip the bodice of her ruined dress.

She might have broken her leg had the boxes not crushed under her, absorbing her potential energy as she landed. Battered and bruised in the deepest darkness, she reached out for the flashlight just to know where her other limbs had gone.

Wiping the dust, cobwebs, and general mung from her body as she rose, she inspected the pair of misshapen cartons. In them she found a variety of rather dull things: fireplace tools, spare furnace parts and several baseball cards of indeterminate value. She also found a series of heavy hardcover books with bizarre printing on the inside cover of each. "Town Name Public Library" read the labels. This was doubly curious to Cecilia since there had never been a Town Name Public Library.

Fascinated, she skimmed through a few of them.

"Dag nabbit!" she shouted as the flashlight went out. She emptied the C cells into her hand, rubbed them for no good reason at all, and reinstalled them. The light came back on but was far too dim and unreliable to do any serious reading.

She consolidated the items into the less destroyed box and made off to the kitchen where the light was better.

Greedily she opened the books one after another, leafing through the ancient pages like an Evelyn Wood archaeologist. The most interesting ones were the books filled with nearly indecipherable longhand. The date headings on the pages went back as far as February of 1824.

Though exhausted and unsure whether she could carry the load all the way back home, Cecilia felt something like an electric charge run through her.

Summoning her strength, she snatched up the box, threw open the door, and then suddenly came to an abrupt halt. Something was in her way now, a thing that looked a lot like the dear departed spirit of Paul Copper.

"Um. Boo?" he said backing up into the front yard.

"Mr. Copper?"

"No, it's Paul. There's no need to be so formal since you're an adult now and I'm, well, dead."

If he had said that to confuse her, he succeeded. Cecilia looked at him sideways for a moment. Paul decided to start over.

"Hey, Cessi! How've you been?" Paul Copper, the strangely morose man she had known as a teenager, stood before her now bathed in angelic moonlight.

Oh, excrement, she thought. Something interesting just happened.

As it happened, Paul Copper decided to end it all that

Sunday seven years earlier. He had it all planned out, the how's and the why's.

Like any man about to die, Paul wanted to make his death to mean something. If his life had not accomplished much, then by God his life's end would make the world stand up and take notice. He thought about it for quite a while during the third quarter. He wanted it to be memorable, something noble and perhaps even heroic.

Unfortunately for Paul, that sort of thing usually requires a burning building or a war. Instead he opted for the second best thing under the circumstances: petty revenge.

He began composing a suicide note in his head, a real hum-dinger of a missive. Stella was responsible for everything, a wild assertion but one that she would never have the chance to rebut. Pretty soon he had the muse in him, a chain-smoking bitter hack of a muse, and he ran off to the kitchen to get pen and paper.

Stella was at a function (big surprise) and that gave him at least another two hours to finalize the wording of his note and to do the deed.

"It's all your fault," he began. "If you would only have loved me, really loved me, I would be alive right now."

Paul did not realize until just then that he loathed Stella, even more than he hated pretending to like football. The venom leaked from his hand onto the page. Never before had he found writing, longhand at that, so easy and natural.

"You did not marry GOD, Stella. You married me. Maybe if you had, you'd be ignoring Him right now the way you have always ignored me."

Pity that I can only do this once, he thought.

He needed a coda, a suitable post-script for his first and last magnum opus. "And you screw like a beanbag chair," he scribbled. "You really do."

Perfect. Done. He meticulously arranged the sheet of paper on the counter so she would see it as soon as she came home.

Now to the business at hand. He knew just where Stella kept her prescription insomnia medication, the bottle she had kept hidden for reasons he had never been curious enough to investigate. In the third dresser drawer, in the back under stacks of bras, he snapped up the pills. Reading the warning label gave him an idea and he ran downstairs to get a bottle of something amber colored and potent.

Moments later he stood at the bathroom sink, a bottle in each hand and ready to end it all. He unscrewed the cap on the whiskey, but the safety cap on the bottle proved far more troublesome.

After a trip back to the kitchen, he poked feverishly at the bottle with a pair of dull scissors with no success. The hacksaw from the garage finally did it, slicing through the plastic bottle's neck, and subsequently his finger.

"Dammit!" he shouted, running his hand under the sink and rummaging around in the medicine cabinet for a bandage.

His cut covered, he got straight to it. He did not pause at the mirror, bemoaning his fate. Paul steeled himself and swallowed the pills and the booze with aplomb. He had impressed himself with his willingness to go through with

it.

Finally a thing done right and thoroughly, he thought. Done by me.

Unused to chemical alteration, Paul felt the effects almost immediately. He figured it would be a good time to arrange himself on the bed, folded hands and the whole bit.

Before he could even exit the bathroom, however, he felt himself slipping into the void. Suddenly his legs became overcooked pasta. He fell to the tile floor with a crash.

Just as Paul Copper died, as he seemed to loose this mortal coil and his entire existence on earth condensed into a point of infinitely bright light, a single thought skittered across his collapsing cerebrum: This isn't what I wanted at all.

"I've been okay," Cecilia heard herself say. "And you?"

"Never better."

The afterlife, or whatever it was, had been good to him. His ethereal spirit appeared to be wearing flip-flops.

"How's your mom?" he asked.

"She's okay. The whole StarMart buyout has her worried."

"Yeah, I know. The whole thing is messed up."

It was difficult for Cecilia to tell whether the bizarre bluish light surrounding Paul was reflecting off him from the moon or coming from inside his body.

"You're working with Dennis, right?" he asked.

"Filing, yeah. How did you know about that?"

"I'm your guardian angel, remember?" he said sarcastically. "I'm supposed to know these things."

"Then you know why I'm standing in the doorway of an abandoned house?"

"Not really. And this isn't abandoned, legally anyway. This place officially belongs to the First Bank of Springfield, the holders of Phil Garner's mortgage."

She did not know how to react. If what he said was true, that fact could certainly prove useful. If the bank didn't want to sell for whatever reason, the StarMart deal would die.

"I had no idea," she said. "I mean, everybody always figured that nobody owned the place."

She had never heard Paul Copper put so many words together before without mumbling to himself and walking off, his sentence half finished.

"So, what have you been up to?" she asked out of genuine curiosity.

"You know, knocking around in the astral plane. That sort of thing."

"Are you in the wish granting business, then?"

"Not especially. Do you have one ready?"

"I'm trying to save the town."

"But why?" Paul looked shocked, and perhaps a little disappointed. "What is there to save?"

"When you put it like that- well, I don't really know."

"Forget about it and get the hell out while the window of opportunity is open," he said in a patronly way. "Besides, this town is probably saturated with PCB's."

In life Paul had been the quiet member on the town council. He was there when they voted down to the waste disposal twice.

"But the land tested negative for toxins, and I talked to Tim Bailey just the other day. He swears up and down that he had nothing to do with it. I looked into his eyes, Paul. I believe him."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Don't ask me how, but I know for a fact that money changed hands, and that's never a good sign."

Cecilia fiddled with the hole in her jacket and discovered that she was bleeding. She struggled to remember if her tetanus boosters were up to date.

All the questions she had wanted to ask him, the how and the why, it all escaped her now. "So," she said sleepily, unsure now whether she was conversing with the dead or just playing along. "Any other words of wisdom from the other side?"

"Yeah," he said. "Try to get a decent amount of sleep."

That reminded her. It was already after ten. She wouldn't be heading back into work that night, meaning that she would have to work more hours tomorrow and the next day to make up for this little field trip.

"Please be careful," he said and then was gone.

Whether Paul disappeared or simply turned sideways and walked away was hard to tell with the harsh street light shining in her eyes. Either way, she decided it was time to get out of there. She grabbed her box of goodies and tore off limping for home.

11

Over the next few days at work, Cecilia's confidence grew and so did the mess. Numbered documents now sat in piles on every flat surface in the trailer. Arrest records in one corner, property tax documents in another. In spite of the way things looked, she was finally seeing an end to it.

According to the calculator in her head, if she worked late again that night she might be able to afford a few hours at the festival the next day.

Cecilia was still kneeling in a pile of pulp when Dennis swaggered in, a bottle of Diet Coke tucked in his armpit and a manufactured housing catalog rolled up in his hand.

"It's going well, right?" he said as he sat at his paper-covered desk. "At this point I can only guess."

As was his custom now, Dennis spent the next half hour watching Cecilia rummage around in the piles on all fours pretending to do "mayoral stuff."

"Hey, I've got a question," she said to break the silence.

"Shoot."

"Was there ever a library here?" she asked.

"A library? Well, not really. There were plans for one years back, but plans are plans, right?"

"Well, I came across this box of archives a while back, and from the looks of it they belonged in the Town Name Library."

"Sorry, no such place. I do have an idea, though. We should send it all to Springfield with the rest of the boxes. I know some folks at the state museum who would take great care of it."

"Maybe. I'll see if I can get it before the shipment goes out on Sunday."

"No, not maybe, Cecilia," said Dennis, leaning down over her. "You should do it. Where's the box right now?"

"Home, I think. Listen. Forget I mentioned it. I just thought it was interesting."

She knew immediately that should never have mentioned it. The issue with the Garner place, the unknown owner and all that, would have to wait. It was her only trump card left, the only way she could still affect a change, and she was not about to waste it out of anger.

"By the way," he began. "Where did you find it? You

didn't go digging around the abandoned lot did you?"

"Well, no." The way she said it, her statement sounded more like a question.

"Who do you think you are, Nancy Drew?"

She decided not to answer the question directly, her anger rising again. "I found out some interesting stuff about that house, though. You may not want to hear this, but somebody owns it."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter because whoever it is doesn't know about the StarMart buyout and could manage to block the whole thing."

"It wouldn't be the First Bank of Springfield, would it?"

"I don't know," she said coyly. "Maybe."

"Interesting. I got word that they signed their letter of intent a week ago."

Cecilia could not move or speak. Her only chance at reversing the doomed history of Town Name now foiled, she felt a sickness rising in her stomach.

"So, I guess the sale is still a go," she said in an attempt to break the conversation. "That's good news, right?"

He raised his eyebrow in suspicion.

She checked her watch again. Somehow an hour had slipped by without her noticing. "Dash!" she said, embarrassed by her antiquated substitute swear. "I'm late to see Dr. Lauer."

It was a good time to get out of there, anyway, she thought. Even though she had not made up the appointment, she now wished that she had.

In the tiny waiting room outside Dr. Lauer's office, facing the double entrance doors, was a simple round fish bowl with a single gold fish. The fish had not changed size or aged since she could remember coming here as a child, back when his father ran the place. She knew academically that the fragile aquatic animals died every year or so only to be replaced by a nearly identical one, but that did not stop her from wondering how old and wise such a fish would be.

The fish, which to her knowledge never had a name, had seen her and a hundred or so other people walk in and out through those office doors every few months. Did he (or she) keep track of them or wonder at how much they had grown since their last checkup, how they had healed?

Just then the doors burst open. From behind her she could see Bobby rushing in with Patti in his arms. She was breathing heavily and clenching her fists like a pensive prizefighter.

There was no conversation between Bobby and the nurse. He simply carried her into Dr. Lauer's office and deposited her on the examining table. Cecilia shuffled to her right to get a better view, but the door closed on her.

Even through the walls, she could still hear Patti's hard breathing. The huffing and puffing soon became groaning and shouting, and Cecilia suddenly wanted to be anywhere else, even the Garner place. She thought for a moment about what her cousin must be going through then, her stomach turning, decided to distract herself.

She went back to staring at the fish. All the while, she counted the minutes of work she was missing, how late she would have to stay that night to make up for the lost time.

"The doctor's going to be a while maybe," said Nurse Loraine. "Y'all might want to come back later in the afternoon."

That was just what she needed with a deadline looming, another reason to break momentum. "It's just a stupid scratch," she said lifting her shirt. "If it weren't for that nail I wouldn't be here bothering anybody."

"One tetanus booster coming right up," said Loraine as she disappeared behind a bank of metal cabinets.

"So, you can help me?"

"Oh, yeah," she said, returning with a syringe and a vile.

Behind her Cecilia noticed an odd sound, silence. The examining room that had reverberated with sound just moments before was now deathly quiet.

Oh, Christ no, thought Cecilia as the needle entered her arm. Not again.

The death of a child, even in utero, could do terrible things to a woman, to her family. There had been women, and Cecilia knew of a few, for whom losing a child like that was a tipping point, after which nothing seemed worthwhile.

Cecilia would never forget the day Patti lost little Isaac at just three months old. New life and hope mingled with despair and bitterness in the form of a tiny body wrapped up in a white sheet. How Patti got through all that without

losing her mind or her soul was a mystery to Cecilia, a Herculean feat of either raw perseverance or willful naivete.

The idea of losing this one, so nearly ready for its debut, was too heard to bear.

Patti opened the door just then, followed by Bobby, each looking winded and a bit disappointed, but by no means distraught.

"Hey, Cessi," she said distractedly. "False alarm."

Cecilia could feel the blood returning to her extremities.

Patti paused to look at her. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not sure."

"Do you want to talk?"

"I've got to go," said Cecilia. "Seriously."

Cecilia moved to leave, but Nurse Loraine grabbed her unencumbered arm. "That'll be twenty dollars," she said.

"I thought you'd bill us or something."

"Cash, please."

Luckily, Cecilia happened to have a ten and two fives in her purse. She paid and took off in a sprint, not for work but for home. She cleared the corner of Oak and Main before Bobby even got the truck started.

Productivity at Hausman Athletic Supply Company on an average Friday afternoon was bad enough. Add to that the fact that workers there still did not know if they would have jobs the following Monday, and the idea of getting anything done goes completely out the window.

The place was a mess. The line had all but shut down. People were chatting, hugging, saying their preliminary good-byes. Standing in the middle of it all was Clark Stevenson. His chest sported big black letters on a simple white T-shirt: TGIO.

In spite of her better judgment, Cecilia acted on her curiosity. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"It stands for 'Thank God It's Over.'"

"Do you really feel that way?" she asked. "What are you going to do when this place no longer exists? Where are you going to live? How are you going to make a living?"

"I don't know. The StarMart cash will buy us some time. Besides, the groundbreaking is only the beginning. Most houses won't see a bulldozer for weeks."

Cecilia glanced around and saw no one where they ought to be. "I'm looking for Craig Phelps," she said. "Have you seen him?"

Clark pointed to the cafeteria, and Cecilia shot off in that direction, dangling a nylon duffel bag. She darted in and out of the milling crowds looking for Craig, but instead found herself nose to nose with Marlene Hausman.

"What on earth are you doing here?" hissed Marlene.

"I'm here on other business," said Cecilia.

Marlene grabbed the hem of her jacket like a teacher preparing to haul a child to the principal's office.

"I don't know if you realize it, but this is a place of work," she said in the sweetest imaginable voice. "If you

want to socialize with your little friends, perhaps it would be best to do that on your own time."

"Perhaps."

She managed to break free of the old woman's grip but not of her gaze as she dashed among the round wooden tables, finally landing at the place where Craig sat reading a book.

Marlene was clearly watching them, and though Cecilia had no concrete reason to be paranoid, she felt it best to keep the exchange low key.

Cecilia handed him the bag, and his hands dipped under the sudden weight. "Good gravy, this is heavy."

Please do something to make this look less like a drug deal, she thought. Anything.

Craig zipped open the bag, felt around and pulled out an antique leather-bound volume. After leafing through the pages for a moment, he looked back at her with wild, eager eyes.

"That's not the half of it," she said. "I've got another batch back at my house. I can't explain where I found them or what they are exactly-"

"Don't try. That's my job." Craig carefully zipped the bag and placed it under his legs for safekeeping.

"How's the town saving business?" he asked.

"Not so good, actually. I thought I had something for a while there, but it fell apart."

"I'm sure you'll come up with something," he said

reassuringly.

"Soon, I hope. I'm starting to run out of ideas."

12

According to the twenty-foot banner slung between light poles at the intersection of Elm and Illinois streets, that year marked the 147th annual occurrence of the Town Name Scrackle Festival. This, in spite of the fact that the event did not exist prior to 1981.

Around that time local entrepreneur Chuck Fruer noticed an interesting phenomenon taking hold in the region. People with discretionary income from all around were spending their spring and summer weekends at tiny folk festivals like the Rushville Grape Stomp, the Renaissance Festival in Exeter, and even the Bluff Springs Carnival of Potted Meat. He saw an opportunity there not only to broaden the horizons of the isolated people of Town Name and enrich the culture of the region, but also to vacuum wads of cash from the pockets of strangers.

In its first few years, the festival was an unqualified

success, helped in no small measure by a favorable write-up in the Springfield State Journal-Register in which the reporter merely reprinted everything Fruer said.

Unwilling or unable to find bits of genuine local history that might motivate tourists to buy hand-painted saw blades and other Central Illinois chachkas, Chuck Fruer molded a new, more interesting backstory for the area.

One hundred and fifty years earlier, read the press release, the founders of Town Name huddled together for warmth in a tiny cabin on the spot where Lincoln's statue now stood. The season had been harsh, and the children had grown sickly. It seemed as though the tiny settlement was doomed when a group representing a local band of the Illinois Nation visited them one day. After leaders of the two groups exchanged respectful greetings, the Townnamers described their plight.

"What you need is an arts and culture festival," allegedly said the Illini chief. "And you should hold it right here where I'm standing."

Immediately the children flung off their outer-garments and began dancing long-forgotten steps and singing music even people in the 19th century no longer bothered to listen to. The wise natives showed the local women how to make small functionless items from surplus string and straw that they could turn around and sell for a week's wages to a hapless Springfielder wearing a beaver hat.

Town Name was saved.

Fruer liked the fictional account of Town Name's origins because no one could disagree with the accuracy of his

research. Besides, the obvious falsehoods in the history made it all the folksier.

Thus Scrackle, and the festival that bore its name, were born.

"147th annual?" mused Cecilia as she strolled down the sun-lit sidewalk. "I thought last year was the 141st or something."

"I don't know, sounds right to me," said Patti, surveying the subdued carnival setting for something that would interest young Ryan.

There was, however, one new thing this year. Fliers attached to nearby telephone polls advertised a dance party of sorts, a first for the festival. According to the K12 students who organized it, the event would feature a disc jockey from the "big city," all the way from Terre Haute, Indiana.

"DJ Klem's Krazy Rave 3pm - ?" read the golden-hued photocopy.

Cecilia thought it odd that the flier sported clip-art of vinyl LPs and old-fashioned phonographs on the margins of the page. She wondered: how hip could the guy be?

She could tell in an instant that the question mark would raise concerns for certain residents of the sleepy town. Not only did it fail to tell parents when to pick up their young, but most folks would assume that the question mark had to be some kind of code to indicate to the initiated that crystal meth and PCP were to be handed out during the dance party like so much hard candy.

Rows of artisans had set up shop along the street. The town's only policeman was out in force. Carnival game operators stood ready to test strength and wallet thickness. For the first time in a decade, even the weather cooperated. The scene was set for a well-attended and lucrative Scrackle Festival.

But where were the people? Everyone, it seemed, was on the other side of the game tables and concession booths. The entire town had turned out to work at the festival, and since no outsiders happened to show up, the only festival-goers were Cecilia and Patti.

Partially hidden under a large plaid golf umbrella sat Louise Peterson, holding court over her folding table of folksy wares.

"How's that baby of yours?" asked Louise when she noticed them.

Ryan sighed and rolled his eyes. Another fun outing had turned into a girl-oriented shopping excursion.

"Not ready to move out yet," said Patti, holding her belly. She had been noticeably uncomfortable all afternoon, and Cecilia worried that all the walking around in the sun wasn't helping matters.

"Honey, you look like an overcooked Jiffy Pop," said Louise as she regarded Patti's shape. "You're going to blow any day now."

"Let's hope."

Cecilia was already busy examining the items for sale. This year's offerings were quite unusual in terms of just

how usual they were. The very same strawberry preserves and cornhusk dolls could be found at nearly every other streetside stall.

"Where are your pots?" asked Cecilia as she poked at the unfamiliar clay figurines. "You've got thousands of them, don't you?"

"Something like that."

"Why didn't you bring them to sell?"

Louise pointed to the Town Name of God booth where Stella Copper managed the annual "Ring Toss of Redemption" fundraiser. "Well, Stella asked me nicely to keep them at home this year. Plus, they're not selling the way I'd like for some reason. In other words, they're not selling at all. So, decided to go along just this once."

"But this stuff. It's-"

"Crap?" prompted Louise.

"Not you. It's not you."

"Sometimes an artist must make compromises for commerce," said Louise casually. "Besides, I've moved on. I'm into silk flower arrangements now. More like collages, but there you go."

She pulled out a green felt display board covered in strange clumps of silk and wire. Delicate layers of silk sprayed out from a pair of vertical ridges, soft to the touch but rigid and vibrantly colored.

Only moments later as they turned to make their exit did Cecilia notice the unmistakable labial quality of the pieces.

She elected, quite wisely, to not mention this resemblance to anyone as long as she lived.

"Tell your mother I said hello," said Louise after them. "She's working at the Scrackle booth, poor girl."

The Scrackle itself was a tomato-based stew with chickpeas and venison. A half dozen other ingredients also made it in the mix on occasion, depending on what was on the verge of spoilage.

When outsiders asked what was in the stuff, local old timers were fond of leaning in and whispering, "the secret ingredient ... is Bambi."

Properly prepared, Scrackle can serve as a hardy and tasty respite on a cold winter's night. Made by bored teenagers and left to slowly curdle on an unseasonably warm afternoon, the stuff could be downright dangerous.

The biological affects of Scrackle were something to behold. Consuming even a small bowl of the chewy stew would result in flatulence so violent and so pungent as to make a ten-year-old boy blush. Eating any more meant running the risk of something called "stage four explosive diarrhea" and complete intestinal failure.

Locals knew this, of course, but not the out-of-towners. Dr. Lauer had reported treating several Scrackle Festival guests over the years with gas pain so acute that they feared they would pop.

So, over time Scrackle became less of a food and more of a dare or an inside joke, a gastronomical Snipe hunt.

As the festival dwindled in later years, fewer and fewer

outsiders came to partake in Scrackle, and so demand for the cagey stew dropped as well.

Very few native Townnamers would touch the stuff. In fact, Cecilia had never tasted Scrackle, on purpose anyway. When she was twelve she took a bite thinking it was tomato soup. She never made that mistake again.

Orbie Kraus, on the other hand, ate Scrackle every year and never complained. As a result, no one liked to stand too near Orbie Kraus for any length of time.

Linda Beaumont had been on her feet for ten hours straight and her face showed every minute of it. Positioned in front of the steaming vat of Scrackle and behind the cash register, she stood at the ready to ladle the brackish semi-liquid into small foam cups for brave visitors or slightly larger ones for the braver ones.

"I know," shouted Cecilia. "I have an idea of how to get that slacker baby of yours to come out."

"Should I ask?"

"Scrackle. Eat some. I've heard that spicy food, anything that irritates your bowel, can trigger baby birthing."

"Yeah, I heard that, too. All the same, I think I'll pass."

"Honey, you really should try it," said Linda, her voice so tired as to make Cecilia's knees buckle. "What do you have to lose other than two dollars and fifty cents?"

Louise had not tasted the stuff since she was four years old when her brother Kyle goaded her into it. He had teased her about her lack of "guts" and her skinny birdlike legs until she broke down and sucked up a whole cup in one

nightmare-inducing sitting. Her body violently rejected, and subsequently ejected, the stew on her grandmother's 1969 Ford Fairlane. The way Kyle told the story, the material ate through the chrome on the car's bumper, though Patti dismisses the claim.

For Patti the incident underscored a valuable life lesson about peer pressure. Scrackle was a wonderful teaching too that way.

For reasons she would later not understand, Patti paid her money and received in turn a cupful of burbling hot Scrackle. The smell was incredible, as though it had been recycled from unsold product of the previous year, which it had.

The stuff had barely touched her lips when Patti's face went sheet white then green. Possessing the modesty of a properly raised woman, she dashed off behind the striped face painting tent to throw up the stew she never actually ate.

Cecilia offered to hold her hair or some other sisterly service, but Patti declined. Patti glanced over at her silent son. "Hey, buddy, I guess this our cue to head home."

Ryan looked disappointed but not surprised.

"I'll walk you back," said Cecilia. "I insist."

"No, thanks, though. Bobby's over at Lawson's straw market. We'll catch a ride back with him."

Before Cecilia could mount an argument against it, Patti was gone. She wandered down to the City Square where she could hear loud music and shouting, finally some

action.

She rounded a corner to see Dennis Richardson performing his mayoral duty at the pie toss. The temptation to buy a few pies was almost overwhelming. She could feel a ten-dollar bill burning in her purse.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Mayor," she said by way of introduction.

"Hello, Cecilia," he said. "How are things?"

"Things are good."

"I hate that you're going to have to work this weekend to finish up the filing job," he said. "Maybe you should be there now."

"Watch yourself, Dennis. You're in a very vulnerable position."

"That reminds me," he said, motioning her to come closer. "I need to ask you about something."

Cautiously she approached, unsure what he might say.

"I've been meaning to ask you," he began. "About that box of old books you found."

"Oh, yeah. I'll get those to you. Soon, I promise."

Just then he seemed to notice someone else he needed to speak with and broke off, heading in that direction. When she turned around to see who it was, he had disappeared. She looked behind the makeshift hut, down the wide aisle of booths, around the corner into the City Square. There was no sign of the mayor anywhere, and no one to run the Pie Toss.

"Hello? Is somebody back there?" she heard someone say, a faintly familiar voice.

She peered through the hole where the mayor had just recently stuck his head. Luke Reynolds had placed his five dollars on the counter and now held a fully loaded lemon meringue pie on his right hand.

"Oh, I think you misunderstand," she said. "I'm not the-"

Cecilia was still explaining why she was not the pie target when the sun-warmed foam splashed on her unsuspecting face. Sticky rivers of ooze were already seizing up when she pulled her head from the hole with hornet-like anger.

"Luke Reynolds, what is wrong with you?" She realized, after noticing the sudden stares from everyone around them, that she had been shouting.

Luke seemed unable to explain himself at first, soundlessly rehearsing what he was about to say and counting his fingers. "You're working at a pie throwing booth," he said at last. "I bought a pie, and I tossed it."

Cecilia shot him a look through her matted wads of hair that told him he should probably quit while he was behind, slink away like a good boy and pretend it never happened, but he did not.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said. "Really. Let me get some paper towels or something."

"Actually, I've got a better idea," she said. Grabbing a hose from under the concession stand, she thumb-pinned the nozzle for maximum pressure and then dipped her

encrusted face into the stream.

The effort was only half successful. She had freed up the sticky mess so they could run in thick rivulets down her neck and chest.

"Okay," she said dejectedly. "I could really use those paper towels now."

A few minutes later Cecilia was relatively dry again and no more sticky than she had been before the pie tossing incident. Luke was still apologizing profusely, something she decided that she quite liked.

Still, it was getting late in the afternoon, and she once again felt the tug of unfinished work. Cecilia scanned the crowd, hoping she could find another StarMart exec to foist him on but saw no one of that type. Suddenly she was stricken with a far better idea.

"Mom," she said as they approached the Scrackle counter. "I don't know if you've met this young man, but this is Luke Reynolds."

He reached out to shake Linda's frail, bony hand. "Hi," he said.

"He's a big muckety-muck at StarMart, and it would only be fitting that he partake of our biggest local tradition—especially since this place will be nothing but auto parts and vacuum bags in six months."

"Scrackle?" he asked naively. "That smells pretty good."

"Seriously? Well, you'd just love some. Mom, can we set this gentleman up with a cup?"

Linda silently waved her off, shooting Cecilia a glare of motherly disapproval.

But the daughter would not be dissuaded. "Small or large?" she asked.

"Neither. Sorry, but I just ate myself sick on the hot-battered corn at Lawson's market."

Cecilia was bound and determined not to let him get away with what looked to her to be an obvious dodge. She carefully considered her goading options: appealing to his sense of machismo, regaling him with the completely fictitious history of the dish, and force-feeding by means of a turkey baster. Soon, however, Luke received something of a reprieve.

"Everybody back!" shouted Kyle, clearing the streets with his gestures. "The parade's about to start."

The few people not behind the various counters parted for him and calmly sought the sidewalks. "Dang, Cessi," said Kyle when he saw her. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing, really."

"But you've got-"

"Seriously. Nothing."

"-A big wad of lemon goop on the back of your head."

Before she could register what he had said, Luke reached over with a damp towel and wiped away whatever it was.

This is how monkeys groom one another, she thought. I just hope I don't have any insects back there, too.

Miss Town Name led off the parade, waving genially

from a rented convertible Thunderbird. Her court followed close behind in matching red Fiestas. It seemed unfair for the runners up to be so poorly treated, but since the ragtop had not properly opened on the Thunderbird, their fates were more or less equalized.

One after another, local gardening clubs and bible study groups strode past in their post-Easter finery, tossing a mixture of hard candies and tiny copies of the New Testament to onlookers. It wasn't until Cecilia noticed Sarah Clemmens crying into her daffodil bouquet that she realized that these people weren't just waving at the sparse crowd, they were waving goodbye to the town where they, and a dozen or so previous generations, had lived their whole lives.

In years past, floats would carry banners along their sides with slogans like "Town Name: America Proud" and "Town Name: the tiny city too tough to die." This year the tractor-pulled entry from the senior class at K12 wore a slight variation on the old theme. "Town Name: the place too tough to die- but then went ahead and died anyway."

The last float, sponsored by the Town Name VFW, was by far the most complex in both design and execution. Representing the history of Town Name, both the genuinely fake and the fictionally fake varieties, the twenty-foot-long paper mache masterpiece rolled majestically down Illinois Street.

Pioneer families trudged through the mud on their way to their Promised Land on one side of the float. On the other side, in a Thanksgiving-like tableau, Native Americans offered gifts of decorative corn and antique toys to their

pale skinned brethren. And all around the thing a maquette of Abraham Lincoln raced on a metal track, chasing a young maiden around the circumference of the float.

Cecilia glanced over at Luke who by now was hooting and clapping. He wasn't just whooping it up to impress the locals, either. It was apparent to her that his enthusiasm, misplaced as it might have been, was genuine.

"Go, Abe, Go!" he shouted.

"You know this is all BS," she said. "Right?"

"Of course," he said. "But it's great, tons better than the ones we had back in Elroy."

"Elroy?"

"Texas. Just South of Austin. That's where I grew up."

"Never heard of the place. Is it small?"

"Small enough to give Town Name a run for its money. Population 125."

Cecilia hid her shock poorly. She remembered after a moment to close her gaping mouth. By now the parade had already rolled through, leaving its snail trail of litter and paper mache debris behind.

Suddenly, a scratchy voice boomed over the loud speaker. "All freaks are hereby instructed to report to the dance floor." The announcement was followed up by the boom-boom-thwap of overdriven bass, a sound Cecilia had heard in recent years rattling through car windows around town.

Stella was not amused by the stunt. Cecilia could see her

in her booth, shaking her head disapprovingly at the brazen act of self-promotion.

"Am I a freak?" Cecilia asked. "I don't understand."

Without discussing it, the two of them began walking away from the festival, neither quite sure of where they were headed.

13

The half-consumed six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon sat on the nearby receptionist's desk next to two neatly arranged pairs of sneakers.

"How in hell am I supposed to bowl in socks?" Luke asked as he slid his feet on the test lane's smooth wooden planks.

"Actually, it's probably better this way," said Cecilia. "You could get hurt bowling too aggressively with a polyester ball."

"A what?"

She happily handed him a ten pound red spheroid and placed it carefully in his hands. "Polyester. Like the leisure suits, only in bowling ball form."

"I get it," he said in a way that indicated that he did not. "They're plastic, aren't they? I thought they made balls out of Lucite or something."

"Well, they're not fancy like your urethane balls, but on a dry, unoled lane like this one you couldn't do better than a Hausman. They don't hook, they can't. In fact, that's why pros don't use them. They lack the finesse of your modern reactive urethane roller."

"You really know your stuff," he said. "They must be glad to have you."

"And I'm the worst employee Hausman ever had. Did you know that? I set records."

Luke plugged his fingers into the holes, stepped forward and flung the ball at the pins. Unfortunately, the Hausman polyester globe wobbled horribly, wandering aimlessly into the gutter a few feet away from the pins.

"That was probably one of mine," she said apologetically. "The best part is that, from what I heard, Marlene isn't even going to relocate the business. She's just going to sell the remaining inventory and get out. Isn't that horrible?"

"That's her prerogative, I would think."

"I guess. Anyway, we're two of the last people who will ever be in here. Kinda creepy isn't it?"

She grabbed the other ball and, caught up in thinking about what she would say next, rolled it down the lane in a perfect line quite by accident. The ball made contact just left of center, plowing through the clump of pins. A strike.

"Maybe we should switch," she said. "It would only be fair."

As she reassembled the pins, Luke said that he felt the better option would be to share the ball. On his next turn, he rolled a seven-ten and left the spare open while Cecilia racked up another uncharacteristic strike.

"My mom would die if I told her I got two strikes in a row," she said giddily.

"Your mother looked pretty stressed out this afternoon. Is she okay?"

"She works four part time jobs. Anyone would be."

"What about your dad?"

She made uncomfortable eye contact just then. She had spent years not having to explain the situation since everyone in the small town knew all about her father. "There is no Mr. Beaumont," she said at length. "He died about ten years ago."

"That was really stupid of me to ask that," he said somberly. "I don't know what got into me."

She shrugged and said it was okay, but it was obvious that the subject was a sore one. She thought she had made it fairly clear that the subject was closed. Apparently she was not clear enough.

"Do you miss him?" he asked.

"Him who?"

"Your dad."

"Well, some days not at all. Other days I miss him like

hell, like a phantom limb."

Without the luxury of an automatic pinsetter, Cecilia had volunteered to play pin boy for the evening. She pulled each wooden club from the pool behind the lane and placed them back, racking them with a frame like pool balls. Cecilia looked back at him now and realized that they had stopped bowling and were now officially talking.

"Well, my dad. He left when I was about ten," said Luke.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Not half as sorry as she was, my mom. It was really rough financially for a few years. We nearly lost the house. But she never let it show, not to us."

"She sounds like a strong lady."

"That's just it. I was ten and bitter as hell about it all, but not her. No matter what happened, she never turned cynical or sour. She would always tell us that it would work out okay somehow. She said it so much that she came to believe it herself, I think. And after a while it did."

"I have a friend like that."

"Then you're very lucky."

In the half-lit showroom, Luke's face looked strangely serious. She thought about the loneliness of being a stranger in a small town, far from the people you know and estranged from the people you don't. Very soon, she would be in the same situation.

Luke picked up his beer and took a sip, wincing.

"I thought you liked Pabst," she asked.

"I used to. Anyway, it can't be anywhere near as bad as that Scrackle stuff you were trying to pass off on me today."

"Of all the dirty rotten underhanded..."

"Rotten underhanded me? You were the one trying to poison me."

"Yes, of course. But that's not the point. You pulled the standard 'I'm full' crap in front of my mom, but you were in on it all along, weren't you?"

Luke shook his head, laughing. "Not exactly."

"Who clued you in, then? I'll have their head."

"Actually, I happened to catch a glimpse of your friend Patti having some. She didn't seem to like it."

Cecilia noticed the clock on the wall, and to her shock it was now past ten in the evening. She had no sense of that much time going by, nor did she feel hungry in spite of not having had dinner.

Though she could hardly believe it, a quick check of her watch confirmed the clock's accuracy.

Luke broke the silence with a rumbling shot down the lane, taking down every pin but one. His next roll, though a valiant attempt, found the backstop before it could pick up the spare.

"This is the most fun I've had since I left Elroy," he said laughing. "Isn't that sad?"

"Yes, it is," said Cecilia. "People don't come to Town Name to have fun."

Through what must have been a trick of the light, Cecilia

could have sworn she saw the spirit of Paul Copper standing outside the showroom window. He appeared to be mouthing the words "kiss him now!"

Luke leaned forward, whether to pick up the ball for another frame or to embrace her she was not sure. She could feel his breath on her face. Through the corner of her eye, she could see his lips approaching.

Suddenly the phone on the reception desk began ringing. She thought she'd let it go, ignore it, but it kept ringing and ringing.

She wasn't sure what to say when she picked up the receiver, whether she should use the standard Hausman "how may I help you?" greeting or just admit to whomever it was that, yes, she was trespassing.

"Hello?" she said cautiously.

She did not recognize the voice at first, interrupted at odd intervals with grunts and groans. "Get ... here," said the voice. "Now!"

Without so much as a formal goodbye, Cecilia rushed out the front door towards Patti Mueller's home. But as she reached the corner of Oak and Main at a dead sprint, she noticed the couple's blue pickup truck in the lot in front of Dr. Lauer's office and readjusted her bearings. Unfortunately in turning her body sharply, she smacked her face on one of the town's only four-way stop signs.

Shaking off the pain, she tore off across the street and, expecting to push the door open in dramatic style, slammed into that as well. Locked, she thought as she rubbed her smarting shoulder. She looked around for a sign of what

was going on and noticed Patti hanging half out of the truck. The pay phone across from her was still beeping annoyingly, its receiver dangling below.

Cecilia looked around for an authority figure. "And the doctor is?"

"Stuck in a muddy patch on Three Points," said Patti. "Bobby's out there trying to push him out."

Cecilia wondered what her neighbors would think if they happened by, her standing there talking to a woman with her long cotton skirt up around her chest and her legs splayed over the door panel.

"Okay, what am I supposed to do?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Patti. "Just stand there."

"Stand where?"

"Anywhere. In a few minutes, if it isn't happening already, I'll be going into the transition phase. I'll say a bunch of crap about 'I can't do this' and whatever. You just stand there. I'll probably curse at you say a bunch of stuff I don't really mean, and maybe some stuff I do mean. Either way, just stand there."

"That sounds pretty easy."

"It drove Bobby nuts when Ryan was born."

The stars were out that night, clear like Christmas lights. The air had turned cool, though, and Cecilia wondered if Patti wanted something warmer to wear. She gestured at her coat, but Patti waved her off.

"You're a hard woman to find," said Cecilia.

"I could say the same for you," replied Patti, laying back along the seats with her legs pouring out the driver's side door. "It took six calls to find you. What were you doing at Hausman's?" she asked, her pained expression morphing into a wry smile. "Anything interesting?"

"You forget. Nothing interesting happens in Town Name."

Patti was breathing harder now, slow and rolling but urgent. She was still looking at her cousin, waiting for a proper answer.

"Just a little illicit night bowling," Cecilia said dismissively. "With Luke Reynolds."

The revelation caused Patti's face to open wide, as though the seriousness of her condition had melted away. "You're kidding, really? Tell me about it. Come on."

"I think you've got me beat in the fascinating anecdotes department right now. I'm trumped."

Patti's eyes shut hard as she tried to relax through the oncoming contraction. She drew her knees up a little in search of a more comfortable position but dropped them once it became apparent that it wasn't working. The pool of mystery liquid on the floorboards indicated that her water had broken recently.

"How do you know this is the real thing," asked Cecilia.

Even in the midst of it, Patti managed to roll her eyes at her cousin. "I just do."

Cecilia started to ask about possible names, but could not get the sentence out.

"Shut up, Cessi." Patti's voice contained no anger, only urgency.

"But I-"

"I said shut up!" By now she sounded desperate, pleading. She turned to Cecilia, her eyes now filled with hot tears. "I don't want to do this, Cessi."

"But you said you would say this."

"No, shut up. It hurts ... I can't do this. I mean, I really can't."

Cecilia offered her hand, and Patti clenched it with a knuckle-cracking grip she had never felt before. Moments later, the wave passed.

"Boy or girl? Do you want to know?" asked Cecilia.

"We don't."

"But if you could, would you?"

"I like surprises," she said, wiping the sweaty lock of hair from her face. Especially if it's a girl surprise."

Cecilia laughed. "You're going to feel terrible when it's a boy."

"No, because I really want another boy. Either way, it's just exactly what I want." She paused for a moment, grabbing the door handle with one hand and digging into the foamy passenger seat with the other. "Oh, here it comes..."

From Patti's reaction, it seemed that this contraction was smoother than the last, deeper and longer but more rounded.

Cecilia would never forget the moment she heard of Ryan's birth. The happy news permanently burned that day into her brain. Where she had been when he was actually ejected from Patti's body she could not remember. Now she had an exclusive front row seat to the miracle of life and it was nowhere near what she had expected.

It occurred to Cecilia that Patti possessed a superhuman strength, hidden all this time. The idea that she might one day be doing the same thing, though perhaps not in the same circumstance, was completely foreign to her.

As the next contraction rose up, she seemed unsure again, her face changed. "This little turd has been standing on my bladder for two months! It's time to get out!"

In spite of more than nine months of a somewhat difficult pregnancy, Cecilia never heard Patti complain about it until now.

"Evan Michael Mueller or Amy Lucinda Mueller, You are being evicted!" shouted Patti. "Get the hell out of my body!"

Patti clearly needed encouragement. Though not a cheerleader at any time in her life, Cecilia decided now was a good time to give it her best shot. "Push 'em out! Push 'em out! WAAAAY OUT!"

Patti, a former cheerleader laughed in spite of herself. "I don't know if I'm supposed to push yet," she said nervously. "The doctor should be here before I push, right?"

"I don't know, either. Do you want to push?"

"I can't help it. I've got to!"

In her mind, Cecilia could see Dr. Lauer's car rocking back and forth in the mud out on Three Points. Push. Bobby set his feet in the sludge and leaned into the bumper with all his strength at the apex of the car's swinging action. Push.

"It's going to be okay, Patti."

"How do you know?"

"I just do," said Cecilia, smiling. "So there."

Patti held her shaking knees up to her chest now but was unable to keep focused. Cecilia stepped in and kept her in position during the pushes.

"One two three..."

On the next swing, the tires caught a little traction and lurched the car forward. Dr. Lauer put it in gear and kept moving, afraid of getting stuck again. Bobby ran through the mire until he was even with the car, opened the door, and they were off.

"Oh, my God. I see it!" Cecilia shouted, now in position to witness as much as she could. "Hair, loads of it too!"

Patti smiled for a moment before the next wave hit her. Another push and the infant slid from her into Cecilia's trembling arms. The tiny human reached out with its impossibly small fingers, each perfectly proportioned. Instinctively, Cecilia reached her finger into the child's mouth to clear the airway, and it began screaming like high hell.

"Toes and fingers?" Patti inquired.

"Ten and ten," said Cecilia excitedly over the child's shrill newborn cry. "And one!"

"A boy! Evan."

To her horror, Cecilia heard a sharp snapping sound. "Oh, God!" she shrieked. She imagined all the things that could be breaking or tearing in Patti's body: flesh, tendon, and even bone.

Soon afterward, she felt a strange pair of gloved hands weave between her arms with a pair of scissors. The cord had been cut. The baby was free.

"Where's Ryan, honey?"

"He's with my mom," said Bobby, covered in thick brown mud. "I'll call her when you've had some rest." Careful not to get her even messier, Bobby leaned down to kiss her.

Dr. Lauer bulbed out the boy's air passages and held him up for Bobby to see. "Evan Mueller, meet your dad."

From there the four of them moved inside, but not Cecilia. Bobby scooped up Patti's limp body and carried her through the lighted doorway.

"I'll clean out the truck," she offered.

"Don't bother," said Bobby. "My mom's got a detailing kit and a shop vac. Thanks, though."

The door slowly closed, shutting out the light from inside. Cecilia walked slowly home, unsure why she was crying.

14

In movies and television when a person is shot, the death sequence usually begins with expressions of shock and pain, a fall, and then a short gasping period followed by still silence. The next morning Cecilia Beaumont woke in exactly the reverse manner.

After the gasping, pain, and shock, she shot out of bed with three definite resolutions in her head. Firstly, she would finish up her work at the mayor's office. That made sense since the groundbreaking was the following day, Monday.

Secondly, she would have to do something about Luke Reynolds. The way things broke off the night before, she felt tempted to apologize, to meet him again. At the same time she did not want to make him think she was interested,

especially since they were all about to be scattered throughout Central Illinois any day now. She thought long and hard about what she would do to let him down easy and decided completely ignoring him would be the most mature thing to do.

Thirdly, there was simply no way on God's green earth she was going to church that morning. With entirely too much to do in the first place, the idea of getting church dressed seriously disagreed with her, especially since she had burned through her better outfits for work during the week.

As soon as she got up, she felt tempted to call Patti and ask about the baby, but she did not want to impose. She decided that she would wait for Patti to call her, whenever that would be.

She opened the hamper to toss in the T-shirt she had worn to bed and added a fourth item to her list: soak the blood and other unidentified stains out of these clothes.

The fact that there was no sign of Linda was hardly a surprise and perhaps even a little welcome considering their less than cordial relationship in recent days.

One interesting thing did happen, though. She looked at her brush and noticed that another small clump of hair had come out, the second such incident in the past week. Nerves, she thought.

When she got out of the shower, she was disappointed to not see anyone lurking in the bushes. On the other hand, the phone was ringing, and that had to count for something.

"Hello?"

"Hi," said the smooth male voice on the other line.

"Luke, hi." Let him down easily, she thought. Ditch him in the most merciful and adult way you can.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go to dinner tonight," he asked.

"Why don't I make you dinner?" she heard herself saying. "Actually, since we're both busy, maybe lunch would be better. How about that?"

"You don't have to do that."

"I insist. I sort of ran out on you last night."

"Okay. I'll meet you at the Lincoln statue downtown. Half past eleven sound alright?"

"Sounds great."

By the time she clicked off the phone, she was banging her head with it. That was not what she had planned at all. And what was she going to make him? Cecilia was only marginally better than Patti at culinary matters.

Rummaging around in the pantry she found a La Choy chop suey kit, chicken, vegetables and rice noodles all packaged together in a series of aluminum cans. A can of Sterno from the garage and a combination bottle-and-can opener made the set complete. She tossed the whole ensemble in her bulging purse and still managed to close the zipper.

All the way to the mayor's trailer, all she could think about was how much she would have to do to have the whole job complete by the next day. City laws, zoning

ordinances, minutes from city council meetings, all of it had to be indexed, filed, boxed, and shipped by the time the shovels dug in the following day.

Before she could unlock the door, though, she heard an unearthly noise coming from the South. Banging interspersed with shouts and whoops reverberated through the town. She walked toward the source of it. Once she guessed the origin, she ran.

Sure enough, workers were tearing down the Garner house. These were no ordinary laborers, either. This was none other than the Town Name Six, each with their own sledgehammer slashing through walls like paper.

Cecilia marched over to them and shouted as to be heard over the sounds of destruction. "What do you guys think you're doing?"

"Demolishing this here house," quipped Randy Meyr.

"On whose authority?"

The boys stopped hammering for a moment and looked at one another. Clearly, they had not just grabbed tools from home and elected to do a little vigilante demolition to cure their boredom. Had they?

"The mayor says StarMart wants this house down first," he said. "He's paying us fifteen an hour."

"Each or for all of you?"

"That's a good one," said Zeke Lawson, removing his baseball cap to scratch his scalp. "I hadn't thought of that. I thought it was each, but he didn't say it like that exactly."

"You'll want to check," she said. "He's slippery like that."

The rest of the boys were still hammering away at the decaying structure. The once orderly Garner "estate" was now reduced to a series of irregular puzzle pieces of recognizable origin, torn bits of wallpaper, cabinetry, and furniture. The bits seemed to fly off the house and into the nearby dumpster as if a cyclone had touched down in the living room. An errant chunk of drywall zoomed past Zeke's ear, barely missing him.

There was no telling what other historical treasures might have been hidden away up in there, she thought. She scanned the surface contents of the dumpster but saw nothing of immediate interest. She considered diving in there like a fireman going into a burning building, but the exposed nails gave her pause. Unsure whether or not her recent tetanus booster gave her proactive immunity, she vetoed the idea.

"You look tense, Ms. Beaumont," said Zeke, smiling warmly. "You want to take a swing?"

"Oh, no thanks," she said, slinking away from the dumpster.

To her, the boys had crossed a line from demolition to wanton destruction. Through the open wall, she could see Randy Meyr in the family room smashing random items. He could have simply walked the old television out to the dumpster, but instead he slammed a hole through the tube. For fun, she thought, or to impress his buddies.

"You're not trained for this kind of thing, you know," she shouted loud enough for them to hear. "The roof could cave

in on you if you're not careful."

The boys seemed unfazed by her deft introduction of doubt. Their fathers had taught them years before that a man's job is to do and a woman's is to express misgivings and warnings about the doing. If said doings happened to land one in the hospital or cost hundreds of dollars in damages or litigation, that was simply a coincidence and would not validate the womanly doubt or make the aforementioned doing any less right.

"We are careful, ma'am," said Harold Fletcher, resting his arm on his sledge. "Besides, we're only breaking down the drywall right now. We're not touching the studs until the other guys get here."

As he reassured her, she could see the rickety roof shaking with each sledge blow. The pace of their demolition was building. She could tell that they were pushing to the point of frenzy, but as with nearly everything else recently, she could do nothing about it.

"Well, okay then," she said, ready to move on and forget she saw any of this.

She noticed Harold pulling out some wiring in the kitchen. "The breakers are shut off, right?" she heard him say under the din. Someone must have muttered something in the affirmative because he soon returned to his ripping in earnest. In spite of her willingness to go, she remained, transfixed by the distinct possibility of bodily harm. Harold pulled as much as he could, reaching the end of a wall and a dusty outlet box. He pulled his sledge behind his body in a monstrous backswing. It appeared that he intended to knock the electrical box onto a fairway somewhere. Cecilia tensed

her jaw as the hammer came back around, connected with the box, and hot white sparks lit up the place.

The boys immediately panicked, scrambling around in the ankle-deep mess for signs of fire. Luckily, however, the sparks failed to ignite the piles of dry timber and paper pulp.

"I thought you shut off the breaker?" demanded Herald.

Randy looked shocked. "Well, the house has been abandoned for years. I just figured that-"

"Where is the breaker you were supposed to shut off?" he demanded.

Cecilia could see Randy pointing to a misshapen gray box behind one of the walls. Since they could no longer open the service panel, shutting off the house power would be impossible until the professionals arrived.

Cecilia smiled. The house was defending itself now, and no longer needed her help. "Have fun, boys," she said as she began her hike back up Three Points, to work.

Days later Cecilia would regret not attending church services that morning. By skipping she missed what eventually became known as "The Great Meyr Meltdown."

He had promised Wanda that he was not going to mention the revival because he knew it would embarrass her. He must have talked to her about it a dozen times since the event, but still she found a way not to be there when he cleared his throat to begin his sermon. She knew him too well.

"I don't normally do this," he began, pulling out a small

hand mirror and aiming it at the congregation.

He knew it was a gimmick, and he hated the idea of acting like a "prop preacher." All the same, he wanted to make his point. "I want you to see what it is that I see every week. Your still, lifeless faces."

The congregation appeared surprised by his open resentment. Eyes that had been shut in contemplative prayer or a light doze were now open.

"You may not know this, but I work very hard every week to come up with some kind of message for you, something to help guide you through your week. But it hardly matters what I say up here because it makes no difference to you at all. I could stand on my head and sing 'Lady of Spain' and I don't think most of you would notice or care."

To his surprise, people were getting up and walking out. One by one, starting with the back row of pews, families were quietly exiting the church.

"I know some of you complain about how dull my services are," he said. "I know because I hear you all the time. But here's something you may not know. You have no idea how dull it is for me looking into those dead eyes every Sunday."

The steady exodus continued. Even Stella slunk through the line of pews, down the aisle and out the door.

"Go on!" he shouted. "Go!"

They were listening, he thought. Good or bad, he had affected them. He felt energized suddenly, his heart beating

like a stag.

Now utterly alone in the church, Dan decided to wait there for a few minutes, unsure what to do about the strangely familiar sensation in his pants.

No sooner had Cecilia rounded Oak and Main when she heard the unwelcome voice of Marlene Hausman connected to the equally unwelcome pointy-fingered body of Marlene Hausman.

"There she is!" shouted the woman. "Arrest her, officer!"

Cecilia immediately surmised, from the cracked smile on Marlene's creased face, that it must be something very bad.

"What's going on, Kyle?" she asked, but Kyle appeared unsure of what to say.

"What are you waiting for?" demanded Marlene. "Do I have to arrest her myself? Give me those cuffs!"

Kyle smacked her hands away from his belt and cleared his throat. "Cecilia, were you hanging around the Hausman factory last night?"

Caught without a good comeback, Cecilia opted for the most glib and clever thing she could think of at the time, the truth. "Yes," she said.

"That's trespassing!" shouted Marlene. "And breaking and entering, too, maybe."

Kyle regretfully pulled his handcuffs from his belt and prepared to clasp them around Cecilia's wrists.

"Not if I work there. I opened the front door with my key."

Kyle folded his cuffs up again and put them away.

"It's very cute how you pretend to know the law and everything," said Marlene sweetly, "but it's an established fact that former employees, even ones who use their keys, cannot legally reenter the premises after business hours."

Not wanting to contract carpal tunnel syndrome from all the repetitive motions with his handcuffs, Kyle pulled them back out and held them over Cecilia's hands waiting for the women to resolve the issue.

"There is one little flaw in your argument, ma'am," said Cecilia with an utterly straight face. "You never bothered to fire me, Mrs. Hausman."

"Is that true?" asked Kyle.

"Well, strictly speaking yes," said Marlene angrily. "But she knew she was going to be fired, anyway."

Cecilia seized the conceded point. "And there's not even going to be a Hausman's in a few days, so what's the point, right?"

In spite of what must have been a defeat, Marlene Hausman continued to shine her broad evil smile at Cecilia as though she had really won, or was about to.

"Why do you always act like I'm supposed to be afraid of you?" said Cecilia. "I'm not. I can't even pretend to be. You have absolutely no power over me."

In spite of the rare act of defiance, Marlene's face did not change. "Still, Ms. Beaumont, I would be more careful if I were you."

This whole episode was designed as a contest, Cecilia suddenly realized, in keeping one's cool the longest. Seeing no way to win, she elected to quietly walk away.

"You know, you weren't good enough for my Richie then, and just look at yourself now," Marlene called after her.

In spite of herself, Cecilia turned around and let the words beat her about the face. Marlene had her right where she wanted her. It was time for the killing blow.

Neither woman was aware until just then that everyone within two blocks had stopped to listen. "And now you're whoring yourself to that Reynolds character because you think he's your ticket out of here," sneered Marlene. "Pathetic."

Blindsided, she struggled with how to respond. She formed something in her head about how she had broken up with him, but she knew now that it would be a lie.

Her head rolling on the end of her long neck like that of a snake, Marlene continued. "You and your mother working a dozen jobs between you, and for what? You're on a ridiculous treadmill of poverty and humiliation. I couldn't let my Richie get involved with that sort of trash, now could I?"

Her town, her home, and now her own past were being obliterated. Cecilia felt suddenly dizzy for a moment as though the earth had slipped off its axis. She could sense her cool slipping away.

"You and your mama's boy," she began slowly, her voice a low growl. "You threatened to cut him off, didn't you? I

bet the one or two times a year he calls, he really thanks you for that."

"He does, actually."

That was it. In Cecilia's head, the cord that held her suddenly snapped, and now she was careening down a hill, screaming her head off. "I really hope you like the life you've made, you horrible dried-up, shit-brained, putrescent bitch!"

Cecilia felt the cold metal of the handcuffs clinching around her wrists.

"It's time, Cessi. Let's go before you say anything else."

She had never before used the word putrescent in a sentence and was unsure if she had used it right. Kyle slowly led her away toward the makeshift police station, the opposite side of her intended destination.

"Oh, by the way," said Marlene slyly. "You're fired."

15

The booking process was simple and straightforward: fingerprints, a brief yet thorough police report, and a Polaroid mug shot of the offender all fit into a legal-sized file folder and stamped with that day's date.

"From I understand of the schedule and such, you'll end up filing the paperwork on this in the last box to go out, anyway," said Kyle. "So, I'll just leave this here for after you're released."

He placed the folder on the edge of his desk, waiting for Cecilia to walk freely into the open jail cell. She wouldn't take the hint, though. She was stalling.

"When will that be?" she asked anxiously.

Kyle realized he was still wearing his standard-issue mirrored sunglasses and hastily removed them. "When you see the judge later today."

Cecilia pulled up a chair, Kyle's own desk chair, and had a seat. "I'm sorry, Kyle. I've never been arrested before. I don't really understand the procedure here."

"Oh, right. That's fine. There'll be an arraignment, then a trial, then sentencing. You planning on pleading guilty?"

There would be no point in contesting the charges, she thought. No one in recent memory had been convicted under the local anti-cursing law alone. Often it was used to thicken the docket of charges in a more serious case. Of course, that did not mean the law was going to be easy on her.

"I can't see how I can deny anything," she said, "even if I wanted to."

"It'll be much simpler, then," he said, resting his hips against his desk. "You'll probably get a small fine, maybe some community service. We'll have you out of there before dinner."

"I was hoping I could get out before lunch."

"Sorry, Cessi. The wheels of justice move slowly, especially in Town Name."

"But I have a luncheon appointment."

"Well, you probably should have thought about that before you..."

"Before I what? Am I being charged with trespassing or cursing?"

"...Before you said those things to Marlene Hausman."

He motioned for her to get up and into the cell, but she

pretended not to see him. Faced with the prospect of spending the whole morning behind bars, Cecilia became quite chatty. She asked about his kids. "Fine" was all he would say. She asked about his golf game, and he replied that he hadn't had the time to play in nearly four years.

She then hit upon a subject she knew would eat up a few more minutes, one in which she was genuinely interested. "So, how did the interview with the Beardstown police go?"

"It's not until Wednesday," he said. "Aw, but I'm not sure anymore. I've got some buddies on the highway patrol, and they're putting in a good word for me up there. Now that the offramp is almost done-

"That can't be right," she interrupted. The I-72 offramp was just a proposal, the carrot that StarMart had dangled in front of Townnamers to get them to sign on the various dotted lines. If the lucrative highway access had always been in the cards, people might have felt differently.

"Well, they're supposed to get started in another week or so. It's weird, though. It was supposed to say Town Name on the exit sign, but it just has a bunch of gas station logos and a space for StarMart. Go figure."

She could imagine it all now, the brand new offramp depositing thousands of cars into the blacktop-covered town. She could see the shiny glass doors opening wide to greet them all as they trod over one hundred and fifty odd years of history crushed neatly beneath their feet.

"So, which came first," she asked. "The StarMart proposal or the offramp?"

"I don't rightly know. It's just that a highway project like that usually takes a long time in the planning and funding stages before anything gets done."

"So, could it be that StarMart chose Town Name because they knew about the offramp and they knew that if they kept news of it quiet, they could buy up all the land cheaply?"

"It could be that you're already in enough trouble already without tossing around a bunch of conspiracy theories."

Kyle fiddled with his keys and motioned toward the cell. The time had come. "Hey, before I put you in there, I need to ask you a personal question."

Cecilia shrugged cautiously, unsure what he might say.

"Do you have to pee or anything?" he asked, wincing slightly.

"Not especially."

"Well, I've got to go to a barbecue with the wife and kids- can't get out of it, you understand. I'll be probably two hours give or take. So, I'll ask you again. Do you need a port-a-potty break?"

"No," she said. Of course, no sooner had she said those words than the urge to urinate began to build in her.

Kyle escorted her into the cell, fumbling with his keys for a bit before locking her in.

"You want me to bring anything back for you?" he asked helpfully. "A rib or something?"

"A soda, maybe. Diet."

He grabbed his jacket and sunglasses, nodded a goodbye and was gone.

Remembering her manners, she called after him though she knew he was halfway to his truck by then. "Thanks for offering."

The cell itself was on the far side of the trailer. That was unfortunate because it prevented her from knocking on the inside wall and alerting her employer, who was probably not there anyway, as to her legal predicament.

As the moments passed, her anxiety about finishing her filing work mounted. The still unfinished boxes were scheduled to ship to the capitol building and the Cass County seat the next morning, and with each wasted hour she calculated how much extra work it would take to complete her task on time.

In spite of all the trouble it had caused her, she regretted nothing she had done that day. However, she desperately wished that she had worn a watch. For all she knew, Luke could be wandering the City Square looking for her that very moment.

"Cecilia Beaumont, where the hell are you?"

Luke Reynolds was growing impatient. For more than half an hour, he had waited for her on a bench directly across from the Lincoln statue. A half hour wasn't that long, he told himself again, especially on a Sunday- especially on a Sunday in Town Name.

After a while, though, this self-reassurance technique faded in its effectiveness. Yesterday was so unexpected, so different. He was unsure how he felt about all of it in the

big picture, but he was sure that he had enjoyed himself and the company he kept. He had assumed, perhaps wrongly, that she felt the same.

The flowers he still held tightly in his sweaty hand were beginning to wilt. He wasn't so surprised about the wilting, but thought long and hard about why he was sweating so much in the cool sunless afternoon.

More time passed, as did a number of locals who stared at the man as though he were a visitor from another planet.

With a few choice words that could have gotten him arrested had Kyle not been in the middle of his barbecue, Luke finally gave up on Cecilia ever showing up. Dejected and humiliated, he walked back to where he had parked, his brand new tent purchased at Richardson's place rolled up under his arm.

In spite of Kyle's thoroughly professional police work, the town constable had neglected one tiny detail. He was too busy, or too afraid, to confiscate her purse. Not that any of that mattered, she thought. She did not think there was anything in there that even remotely resembled a weapon or lock-picking equipment.

But one never knows for sure. She poured the contents of the bag onto the floor of the cell: keys to places she no longer worked, to cars she never owned and no longer drove; lipstick she never remembered to apply; and the makings of the crude meal she had planned to make for Luke.

She also reviewed her limited knowledge of the television show *MacGyver*, concentrating on how various

combinations of objects could add up to a mild explosive or some kind of lock-melting laser. Alas, her fried brain could come up with little more than repeatedly throwing the La Choy cans at the wall in hopes that it would bust through. No luck.

Suddenly, the idea of relieving herself very soon became a high priority. Like a flash of lightning, her bladder was instantly full to bursting. Suddenly imbued with the power of X-Ray vision, she could see the portable outhouse just a few yards from where she sat.

The walls of the trailer were thin, but not quite flimsy enough to make escape possible. The ceiling, however, looked different. If she could just claw her way through a layer of thick plastic, she might be able to get onto the roof and out from there.

She took another look at the can opener and was stricken with what she would later recall as the best idea she had generated in more than ten years. Standing on the cell's tiny stool, she reached for the ceiling with the tool, sticking it in the soft plastic surrounding the air vent. With a wrenching motion, she worked the can opener until her wrists ached. It looked as though she was making no progress, that the whole thing was just an exhausting waste of time until she saw it. Dim daylight.

Spurred on by the sight of it, she continued to work on the tiny cut, making it slightly larger with each twist of the can opener.

Between breaths, she could hear excited voices and movement outside, something odd for an abandoned workplace in the middle of a Sunday afternoon. It sounded

a bit like laughter.

Soon, she had done enough to peel away the vent assembly and look outside. She had two problems. First, she could not get high enough to pull herself up. Second, even if she could, the hole was fairly small around and she, regardless of the information stated on her driver's license, was not.

She placed the dented La Choy cans on the stool and tried again. Although she was completely unstable now, she had gained nearly enough height to do the job. She reached up through the hole to get purchase on the area around it. Careful not to grab anything sharp, she pulled herself up and through. That is, she pulled her head up and through. The rest of her was going nowhere.

She looked around for a sign of what was going on outside. She saw nothing of significance other than the mildly interesting one-ton wrecking ball attached to the crane parked on the other side of the trailer.

Lowering herself back down, she went back to work with the can opener, trying to widen the hole a bit. The sounds grew louder now, definitely a diesel engine and the laughter of multiple individuals.

She knocked out as much as she could and stood again on the cans, pulling herself desperately as far as she could. Her waist still stuck on the hole on the roof, she looked over at the crane. The Town Name Six had moved on from destroying the Garner house and were now goofing around with heavy construction (or more accurately destruction) equipment.

The ball was moving now, slowly away from the trailer. Away is good, she thought at first. Moments later, as she continued to wiggle in the hole, she realized that the ball gaining height was the opposite of good.

With her feet, she kicked at the walls of the cell, trying to find some kind of friction there to push her out a bit more. One try and then another, all the while the ball continued toward the apogee of its pendular curve.

"Hey, stop!" she shouted, but the tight squeeze constricted her breathing and what came out sounded more like husky speech at normal volume.

The laughter and talking continued to grow in intensity as the ball floated in perfect stillness over the crane's cab. Kick, kick, and Cecilia broke free, tearing the pocket of her jeans. The ball was now moving, gaining speed as it spent its potential energy.

Cecilia ran down the length of the trailer as the ball ripped through the makeshift structure behind her. As she reached the end of the roof, she jumped onto a knot of grass and instinctually covered her head. Splinters of wood, torn sections of vinyl siding, and even chunks of cell door sprayed throughout the lot where the municipal trailer once stood.

Papers littered the ground and peeled through the air like graceful birds. All the hours of work filing those documents, including the lives and stories behind them, all wasted.

By now, the wrecking ball had swung back around for another go but found no resistance. Ready to deck the first

fourteen-year-old boy she saw, Cecilia marched over to the crane's cab looking for trouble. There was none. The boys had vanished.

16

By the time she reached the City Square, she could tell that she was too late. She scanned the faces of passersby, walked up and down the sidewalks between Main and Illinois streets, but could find no sign of Luke.

Finally, she plunked herself down on the bench across from the Abraham Lincoln statue. She noted that the seat still held the warmth of another pair of human buttocks, probably Luke's.

In her exhaustion, she pleaded to the statue for guidance. She stared at his half-frowning countenance, concentrating on what the Great Emancipator might have to say.

To the amazement of her woozy brain, the dark metallic lips began to move. "From what I'm sure you've read about Marry Todd," he bean, "you probably already know I'm not the guy to be asking for relationship advice. Besides, I've

been dead for a hundred and forty years. Modern relationships are a mystery to me."

She shrugged. The floor seemed open for questions now. So, Cecilia seized the opportunity.

"So, what's the deal with you and Town Name?" she asked. "Have you cursed us? And if so, why?"

Honest Abe appeared to consider the question for a while, but soon it was apparent that he was just waiting for her get bored and move on. Cecilia made a rolling motion with her hands to indicate that he needed to speed things up.

"Aw, leave me alone, will ya?" he said, returning to inert bronze.

She waved a hand in front of her face, pinched herself lightly on the cheek and felt herself waking. She needed to keep moving.

As a fugitive, it probably made sense for her to move around in the shadows of buildings, but under the current overcast sky there were no shadows to hide in. All the same, she decided to head over to Dennis Richardson's home and tell him about the disaster in person.

Half way down South Street headed West, Cecilia lifted her eyes to see something that nearly stopped her heart with fear. Johnny Law was headed her way in his pickup that served as the town's unofficial patrol car. She imagined how much her escape would add to her sentence. This would very likely mean real jail time, and no matter how good a cousin he was, Kyle would not let this go. He could not.

But his face was not angry and stern, when he rolled up beside her. He appeared to be crying. Over and over, he kept repeating the words "you're alive ... you're alive."

Kyle removed his cop sunglasses temporarily and ran a tissue over his eyes.

"Oh, Lord, I'm so sorry," said Kyle through his window. "If I had any idea the place was going to explode, I would have never left you there."

"It didn't explode," she said. "Somebody blew a wrecking ball through it."

"Oh, God. Who?"

Cecilia sensed that she was now at a point of decision. Would she rat out the Six for nearly killing her or could she somehow use the information later to her advantage? She opted for the latter, though not knowing what that advantage would be and how long she would have to wait for it.

"I'm not sure," she said at last. "I didn't get a good look at them."

"Them? There was more than one perpetrator?"

"Again, I'm not sure."

The engine was idling impatiently. He waved his hands in the accepted "do you need a ride" gesture, but she shook him off.

"Oh, I brought you a Diet Pepsi and a rib."

She accepted the paper cup and napkin-covered meat and continued on her way as Kyle sped off looking for suspects

unknown.

Cecilia found Dennis Richardson in his back yard happily watering a bed of lilies. Given the amount of rain they had experienced in recent days, she wondered if he might be drowning the poor things. When he saw her fractured expression, he shut off the hose.

"Dennis, I have some horrible news," she began. With all that work down the tubes, there was no doubt in her mind that he would be furious. He would certainly yell and throw a few things, maybe even at her. The only open question was whether he would still pay her.

But he did not sour as she expected. All she could see was his well-practiced look of empathy and concern. "I already know," he said. "Kyle called me. I'm just glad to hear you're okay."

She wondered if he was so distraught that he had not fully comprehended what she had said. She decided to spell it out more clearly. "The documents, the boxes, it's all ruined," she said, her voice and knees shaking wildly. "And we've got no time to fix it."

"Now I'm confused. From the way Kyle told the story, I figured you were only there because you'd slipped by work to check on the progress."

"Well, I tried to."

"If you had, you would have noticed something had changed- more specifically, you would have seen that all the boxes were already gone."

Dennis escorted her over to the truck in the driveway and

peeled back the black plastic cover to reveal stacks of file boxes tucked neatly in its bed, each meticulously labeled. She beamed at them like several dozen returned puppies. But something was still not right about all of this.

"I packed them up this morning so I can drive them out tomorrow morning after the ceremony," he said. "So, there's nothing to worry about."

"But I saw papers flying all over the place."

"Did you check it out up close, examine any of it?"

"Not specifically, no."

"It was probably just some stuff from my desk, nothing important. I don't know if you caught on to this yet, but I'm not the tidiest person. I keep loads of junk in there."

His theory of the events of that day reassured her somewhat, but she knew he was wrong about one very important issue.

"I wasn't actually done," she admitted. "I still have a few more hours of work to do."

"Don't worry about that," he said genially. "It'll all even out in the wash."

He went on to explain that the folks from County and State were merely going to store the records in case anyone needed to search through them, and the chances of anyone needing to see the specific files that remained unsorted were astronomical. She hated to hear him talk like this, as though she had overestimated the importance of the work. She felt small again, nerdy and unnecessary.

The documents she had so carefully packaged were mostly just copies of items already in the files of other agencies. He said that the organization effort was something that needed to be done well enough to look good. In the end, the measure of success would be measured more in pounds than in accuracy.

She looked at the boxes with disdain now. There it was, the lost-again-found-again, unfinished-yet-finished work that had nearly driven her mad, all just for show.

Dennis seemed eager to put a period on the whole affair as quickly as he could. "Say, how much do I owe you for all of this?"

She hadn't expected him to do that. She had kept track of her hours, just a little over 100, but his question seemed aimed at intimidating her. Having worked so many part-time and odd jobs over the years, she was used to people subliminally asking her to shortchange herself. She would have none of it from the likes of Dennis Richardson. Though her number was at least ten percent pure guess, she read it to him as though it had come from the Gospel of Matthew.

The total, sans withholding, stood at well over two thousand dollars.

He pulled his checkbook out of the front seat of the truck and quickly scratched out the amount, payee, and date. He ripped it out with much fanfare and placed the yellow paper rectangle in her hand.

"You forgot to sign it," she said flatly.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." He grabbed his pen again and quickly

dragged it across the page in a lazy wiggle, the esteemed mayor's autograph.

Now let's see if it will clear, she said to herself.

"Now where's that box of archive stuff?" he asked.

Cecilia had thought, mostly hoped, that he had forgotten about the stupid box full of old books. "I don't know, that stupid thing? I thought you just said this archiving thing wasn't all that important."

"It's not for us to decide what's stupid and what's important," he said. "That's for the State Museum people to determine."

"I think it's at home," she said. "Do you want me to drop it by tomorrow before the groundbreaking?"

"No, I want you to get it now." His face was now an unpleasant shade of rose.

She was stalling again, and it was beginning to show. The box itself was there for sure, but the contents were still with Craig Phelps. Lord only knew where he might be keeping them. She needed to run down the clock as much as she could.

"I can go right now," she said. "I can be back in about fifteen minutes."

"No, I've got a better idea," he said, grinning. "We'll both go."

Reluctantly she got in the truck and the two of them sped off toward her house. Behind her she could see the unsecured tarp flapping in the wind. The lid of one of the

boxes slipped half off and she could see folders and papers begin to rattle around inside.

The odd part was that they were all blank.

She struggled to contain her shock. She turned back around and kept her eyes straightforward for the rest of the trip. To Cecilia, nothing made sense anymore.

Another surprise greeted her when she arrived home. Linda was there, watching television and smoking furiously.

"Hi, mom," she said as she entered.

"Hey, Cessi," said Linda, her eyes still glued to the set.

Linda asked nothing about where she had been, the near-death experience that by now the whole town had heard about, or why the mayor was waiting impatiently for her outside like a polite axe murderer.

When she got to her bedroom, she could hear the engine idling in the street outside the house. The box was there on the chair next to her bed, mostly empty save a few Town Name Library fundraising pamphlets and a stray bandanna.

Keeping in mind that weight was all that mattered, she opened the decaying corrugated box and began pouring items into it.

She immediately grabbed at the nearest sources of book-like heft: cherished hardbound copies of *The Borrowers*, both *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie*, and the first four books in the *Boxcar Children* series.

Even though she hadn't read the books in more than a decade, the idea of just ditching them like this ate at her. But at the moment she had no better ideas.

Dennis honked the horn to underline his urgency as she emerged from the house carrying the box in her arms.

"Put it in the back with the rest," he said.

"Shouldn't I label it or something? I've got a Sharpie."

"Write 'Library' on the top. That should do it."

17

Cecilia lay on her bed staring up at the ceiling. She wondered how many times she had tried to count the tiny dots on the ceiling tiles or traced odd constellations with them over the course of her life. The old moldy house in one corner of an old moldy town. All that was about to disappear, but for some reason she could not muster any enthusiasm about it.

Something very rotten had transpired, she thought. In the waning hours of the town's official life, she hated herself for not working harder to save it.

She could feel Dennis Richardson's check in her back pocket. The thought of it back there made her squirm like a foreign object stuck under her skin. All of the work, all of the worry, none of it mattered in the end. It all seemed like

an incredible waste of her time.

But maybe that was the point, she thought. She shot upright at the thought of it. The whole job was just a rouse, busy work to keep her from working up some scheme to kill the deal. Had she been so dim as to be duped by, of all people, Dennis Richardson?

When she hit him with what she thought was the best plan for killing the buyout, he had seemed relieved. But could it have been that easy? She lost her balance and her body tipped over onto the floor. Even with the bump to the head, she could feel the acid in her stomach churning.

Woozily, she ambled into the kitchen in search of something cold to drink. Nothing in the fridge interested her, though. Linda was still on the couch, slowly flipping through the channels- all four of them. With all that was going on at the moment, the last thing Cecilia wanted was another argument with her mother. She put on her best Ms. Sunshine face and sat down next to her.

"Hey, I got paid for all the filing work," she said brightly as she held out the check for display. Cecilia expected her to be impressed, at least a little, by the relatively large number, but her mother wrinkled just her nose as though she were smelling something rancid.

"Deposit that thing right away- before Dennis has a chance to skip town," said Linda. "I guess that'll help with the deposit on the new apartment."

"Where have you been looking?"

"Everybody seems to be headed to Rushville, and I don't have any real quarrel with that place. I'm probably going to

do some legwork on Wednesday, probably put some money down."

Another decision made in her absence, the idea of it angered Cecilia. Once again she was sitting at the kids' table while the adults talked strategy and logistics.

"What makes you think you can make that decision for both of us?" she asked defiantly.

"Because you've shown no interest whatsoever in it, that's why."

"It's just that I'm sick of it, mom. People treating me like I'm twelve or something. And you, you're the worst of all of them."

As soon as she said it, Cecilia realized what she had done. She should not have described her mother as "the worst" anything.

Linda backed up slightly as she spoke, as though the words coming out of her mouth recoiled like a shotgun. "Maybe I'm treating you like a child because you refuse to act like an adult. Adults make decisions and then have to live with the results, Cessi. That is not something I'm seeing you doing."

Cecilia silently fumed. Her angry tirade had been quashed before it had a chance to work into high gear.

"Your future, honey," continued Linda sympathetically. "Do you really see yourself working four part time jobs and living at home for the rest of your life?"

"But I do think about the future, mom," insisted Cecilia. "For your information, I've been saving all my extra money

for about two years now. The last statement said I nearly have enough for a deposit on a place of my own."

Cecilia was utterly baffled by Linda's expression. Again, when she expected parental approval or praise, she received anger and resentment. Linda lit another cigarette and took a long desperate drag.

"Why do you have to be so sneaky about it?" she wheezed. "Did you think that you couldn't just tell me? Did you think that poor old mom needed your money so bad that you couldn't keep some of it to save?"

"Saving money like I failed to save this town?" said Cecilia, laughing a little at herself. "I wanted to get out so badly, and now I'm gut-sick over not keeping it alive."

"What right do you have trying to kill the one chance these people have? These folks deserve a chance to start over again, Cessi. Don't take that away from them. From me."

"But Town Name can't die, mom. It just can't." The voices from the television seemed louder and more annoying now. Cecilia reached out and it switched off. "This place has to be here so I can leave it, so I can come back once I've made something, anything, of myself. I need you to be here in this house, so I can come to you with my nice car and great job and maybe husband and kids, and you can pretend, for just one stupid moment, to be impressed with me. 'Oh, Cecilia, your house is so beautiful,' you'll say. 'Cecilia, how do you manage to do it all?' None of that can happen if this place is bulldozed and replaced with a florescent temple to the gods of retail."

Cecilia listened to the words as they left her own mouth, shocked to realize that she meant them all. Linda also looked at her strangely, perhaps more warmly, but then again, perhaps not.

The buzz of the broken doorbell broke the staring match. Who could that be, Cecilia wondered. She feared that Dennis had circled back around, realizing Cecilia's crude trick. A quick peek through the dusty kitchen curtains revealed a pale blue Ford F-100 parked in front of the house, its rickety engine still running.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," said Linda, wiping her face. "A man called for you while you were out. He said his name was Luke somebody."

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" Cecilia shouted in a hoarse whisper. Cecilia pulled at her torn clothes, pointed to her bruised head. "I can't see him now! Like this! Besides, I completely blew him off for our lunch date."

"You did what?"

"I didn't mean to, mom. I sort of got arrested this morning."

"Excuse me?"

"It's a long and, believe me, boring story. Seriously. It's tedious."

"But you are going to tell me eventually, right?"

Cecilia was shocked at her mother's sudden interest. "Are you saying you actually want to hear it?"

"I'm working the late shift at Burger tonight," said Linda.

"Come by and you can tell me then."

That was something new. Cecilia had never before felt the urge to tell her mother much of anything. It hardly mattered since so little of her life was not public knowledge, anyway. Linda usually knew about significant events in Cecilia's life long before her daughter could manage to confess them. The fact that Linda remained unaware of the bowling incident, much less the jail stint, was amazing to her. She was probably feigning ignorance, of course, but even that was remarkable.

"Um, you have your front door open, ladies," said Luke through the screen. "I can hear everything you say. Do you want me to go back to the truck?"

"No," said Cecilia covering her unpresentable self with her hands. "That's okay."

After one of Cecilia's patented two-minute-makeovers, she and Luke were sitting in his truck, staring blankly at the road ahead.

Cecilia attempted to explain the lunch situation, the confrontation with Marlene, the arrest, the whole thing. Miraculously, he appeared to buy the story, or was too amused by it to care.

"Let's go," he said, laughing.

"Where?"

"You'll see. I have a secret I'd like to show you."

Great, she thought, something to show me. She wondered how far he would drive out into the country before exposing his mommy-daddy bits.

It suddenly all made sense. She had spent the past week as the unwitting dupe of Dennis Richardson, and now the mystery man in her life turned out to be the pervert who had been peeping through her bathroom window all this time.

But none of that happened, at least right away.

In its day, the '77 F-100, with its wide bench seats and radio with both AM and FM bands, had surely been a chick magnet. As the truck bumped and jostled over the dirt roads on the edge of town, Cecilia attempted to read the chunk of plastic stuck into the dashboard.

Sensing her interest, Luke punched the large button below it, and the cab's tiny mono speaker roared to guitar-driven life.

"Ah, Boston's self-titled debut record," he said fondly. "The album that defined the format."

She knew the opening track in an instant, "More Than A Feeling." If it weren't a seminal rock classic, she thought, the title alone made it sound like a show tune. She opened the glove box and found another cartridge, Queen's "News of the World."

"I used to love this one," she said, examining smudged sticker on the back of the cartridge. "The song before 'Melancholy Blues.' What's it called?"

"'It's Late.' Yeah, I love it, but it's half melted," he said sadly. "You wouldn't believe how hard it is to find 8-tracks these days."

"Have you tried the Antique place on the highway?"

"Not yet," he said, making a mental note. "But I certainly will."

They passed the "Welcome to Town Name" sign as they rolled down Pine Road. Though it faced the other way, she could see in the rear-view mirror that someone had slapped an orange plastic board just under the lettering with the words "FURURE HOME OF STARMART" emblazoned upon it.

Cecilia decided the sign was only half right, that the text should read "FUTURE SACRIFICE TO THE GLUTTONOUS BEAST OF STARMART." Alas, she thought, it wouldn't fit.

The late afternoon sun was beginning to fade behind some clouds, giving the horizon a premature orange cast. Cecilia was beginning to wonder if Luke knew where they were going.

"Oh, they loved your GPS idea," he said after a while. "The StarMart folks, I mean. I forgot to tell you before. The guys at corporate thought it was great, a real win-win synergistic out-of-box whatever."

His deliberate misuse of corporatespeak amused her. "You're kidding," she said.

"Not at all. People have been complaining about that sort of thing for years. Putting limited GPS readers in carts could bump the company's favorable ratings and, in the end, boost sales."

"Boost sales," she repeated. "I hope you know I was making fun of you- your employers anyway. It wasn't a serious suggestion."

"That doesn't matter now," he said, slamming on the brakes and turning off the engine. This would be the moment he would either: a) flash her , b) kill her, or c) first a then b.

He got out as though they had reached their destination, but that could not be. She could think of no reason why he would want to show her something at The Resort. Standing on her toes, she could see over the knee-high grass and into the half-filled mud lake. The sound of blood-crazed insects hummed and buzzed around her head.

"I'm impressed that you found out about this place," she said.

"I bought it," he exhaled. He made a face just then that indicated that he hadn't meant to come out and say it so quickly, without the appropriate build up.

In the clearing just beyond lay a gigantic pancake of concrete, a foundation for what Cecilia could tell would be a fantastic house.

She instantly had a million questions, each beginning with the word "why." Why had he done this? Why did he not consult anyone credible before putting money down? Why was he such an idiot?

A hundred yards down the line, she could see the decaying boathouse used in the one and only happy summer there. Nearly all the windows were broken, and the shutters that had not fallen off were hanging by a single screw.

"Sure, it needs a coat of paint," he said spreading his arms wide.

"What it needs is a lit match," she said under her breath, perhaps too loudly because he then turned sharply on his heels to look her directly in the eyes.

"I'm staying," he said. "I got an opportunity to move on to the next store development site and, God help me, I turned it down. I'm going to manage the store here."

"But wouldn't it be better for you to do what they ask? I mean, isn't this kind of thing career suicide?"

"Depending how you look at it, sure."

The sun was deep red now, obscured by layers of cloud. The resulting light made The Resort look like the surface of Mars or someplace even more foreign and remote.

"Luke. I don't want you to stay here for me. I mean-"

"It doesn't really matter what you say, Cecilia. I'm going to make a go of it right here in Town Name."

In her most selfish daydream, she had imagined a man being her ticket out of Town Name. Never in all her richly detailed fantasy life did she consider anything like this.

"Then you're a goddamn fool, Luke Reynolds," she huffed. Unable to cope with discussing the idea any further, she elected to begin walking the two miles back home. Thank God I live in a small town, she thought, where a woman can make such a statement with her feet.

Luke stood with his truck and his new parcel of land, watching her slowly disappear down the darkening road.

18

As the sun began setting in earnest on Town Name on its last official day, workers scrambled under lights to clean the area where the mayor's office and jail once stood. In just twelve hours, business executives and politicians from around the region would gather here to celebrate StarMart, the corporate phoenix that would rise from the still-smoking ashes of the town.

As she walked by the site, she noticed that Zeke Lawson was among the laborers.

As soon as he caught sight of her, he came running over. "When those guys slammed that wrecking ball into the mayor's office, what- what did you see?" he asked nervously.

Cecilia wanted to laugh at his unsuccessful attempt at

being coy. "Everything," she replied sternly. "I've told Kyle just enough to keep him busy, but I could tell him a whole lot more."

"Listen, that was incredibly stupid, Ms. Beaumont. I'm awfully sorry about the whole thing." She examined his face and noted that he was either an incredible liar or sincerely regretful. Either way, she was not satisfied.

"You could have killed me," she said. "Do you recognize that? And you destroyed all the work I had done."

"What work?"

"Organizing papers, documents and stuff. It's stupid, I know, but your little stunt ruined a hundred hours worth of hard work." She knew he wouldn't understand how important the work was to her, how betrayed she felt by its destruction and the subsequent nullification, but she hoped at least that her glare would communicate her righteous anger over the whole thing.

"Everybody got carried away," he said. "Things are running down, and we figured nobody would care. I had no idea you were still in there."

"I looked directly into your eyes, or the eyes of one of your buddies, as you pulled the release lever. Don't pull that remorse crap with me."

"I'm eight kinds of screwed if my dad finds out."

"I'm sure you are," she said dismissively.

"If it makes any difference to you, I did find something when we were cleaning up," he said.

"Like what?"

He handed her a crumpled slip of paper, a brokerage receipt. It documented the transfer of two hundred shares of StarMart stock options dated six months earlier.

"Like I said, I know it doesn't make any difference. I'm just trying to make up for it, for going along with them."

"You're right about one thing," she said, stuffing the paper in her pocket. "It doesn't make any difference."

On the other side of town, Craig Phelps continued pouring over the diaries Cecilia had brought to him. However, his training as a historian went only so far. Parsing the shaky, elongated handwriting proved so difficult that he eventually found himself randomly flipping to pages until he found words he recognized. After several quick passes through the text, Craig could not find the word "Lincoln" in either volume.

So far, the books seemed to detail the life of an unnamed 19th century Townnamer with a penchant for detail and a love of fried foods. Every other odd numbered entry seemed to concern some new development in the fried dough industry, a renaissance of donuts.

Craig had been pecking away at the tomes since he received them, unable to determine what value, if any, they possessed. The price of lard and the advent of the pecan log might have seemed fascinating to some, but Craig was struggling just to stay awake. That all changed when he stumbled across the following entry:

May 25th, 1828

It was to be the social event of the season, a cotillion to rival the legends of the age. But it was not to be.

Just a day after the event, and already the ill word has spread. Instead of talking about the entertainment or the food (much of it exquisitely fried), the entire town is alight with speculation and gossip regarding the mysterious lanky stranger stricken with an almost criminal amorous streak.

I spoke with Edith Anne just this morning; she is as mortified by the affair as am I. The young man, flanked by his equally arrogant confederates, arrived unannounced and, more importantly, uninvited well after festivities began. They then displayed a tragic lack of tact by asking several ladies to dance, becoming quite belligerent when the young women in question refused, quite properly.

Though I am certainly no expert when it comes to matters of drink and drunkenness, I believe this man was seriously inebriated. He could barely keep his overly tall frame from stumbling over low objects and other dancers.

When I politely asked him to leave, this is what he said to me: "So, how's about some?" "Some what?" I asked. He went on to explain very explicitly the sort of "some" he was talking about, and I am too much a lady to repeat it- even to myself.

So humiliated was I by this exchange that I found it impossible to relate it to any of the finer young men in attendance who would have gladly thrashed the rogue.

It would have been for the best if I had because no more than fifteen minutes passed since I released him outside the house than I heard young Portia shouting in the courtyard.

After talking over current events for a quarter hour, the giant drunk in the stovepipe hat apparently attempted to mount her.

It took several strapping young men to pull the amorous stranger from the bushes that night, all the while a crowd of guests watched in horror.

"I curse you!" he shouted as the local beaus beat him savagely. "All of you! Crops will die. Businesses will collapse. This place will forever carry the dark stain of failure!"

It was especially odd that he said these things so clearly as a dozen fists showered down around his chest and face.

From Patti Mueller's front porch, Cecilia could see the whole panorama of Oak and main. Mist was settling over the church's graveyard, and the Hausman factory's pitch silhouette loomed large on the other corner. The flood light over Dr. Lauer's tiny parking lot attracted several million insects while an idle wind had caused a pair of swings in the K12 playground to move on their own.

Even though no lights emanated from the school, she thought she could hear voices echoing across the shallow valley, ghosts of basketball games and dances that would never happen there again.

The evening was unseasonably warm and the three of them, Patti, Cecilia, and Evan, sat on the creaky porch swing.

Patti offered her son to Cecilia to hold. "Holding a sleeping baby is easy," she said.

As Cecilia accepted the fleshy package, his warm body folded into her shoulders and chest. Swaddled in blankets, Evan felt more like a tightly packed bundle of laundry than a little boy. All the same, the feel of his breath of her neck calmed her deeply. The day had been a long one, and now she could feel herself slipping away.

"You're right," she said sleepily. "It is easy when they're sleeping. Just wait until he wakes up."

"Then he's awake. No big deal."

"You getting enough sleep?"

Cecilia could not have known it, but Patti had heard that particular question nearly twenty times a day since the boy was born. Though it clearly annoyed her, she refused to let it show. "I get as much as I get," she said, "which I figure is as much as I need."

Evan's knit cap had dislodged and his wispy hair found its way under Cecilia's nose. She sniffed. His head smelled so good, sweet like caramel candy.

"How is Ryan adjusting?" she asked.

"He's doing alright with it, once we can get him to sit still long enough to notice the little guy. He'll be fine in a few weeks, though."

"And Bobby?"

"Bobby is Bobby. He's working harder than usual, which was too much to begin with, because he's got another mouth to feed at home. I'm really hoping these job interviews pan out."

Cecilia straightened herself suddenly as the reality of the situation hit her. Where would they go after Town Name? Most folks seemed to be staying within a half hour or so of each other, but she had been so used to simply walking over to Patti's house for so many years, the idea of having to make a special trip to see Patti and the baby made her heartsick.

"I don't know if I ever thanked you for helping me out the other night," said Patti. "I don't know what I would have done if it weren't for you."

Cecilia flushed at these words she had waited to hear. "Shucks," she said. "'Tweren't nothin'. You would have done the same for me, I'm sure."

"Yeah, but all the same. Thanks."

She told Patti about all that had happened that day, about the demolition, and the arrest, and Luke, and her mother.

"So, what about the boy?" Patti asked at length.

"What boy? Luke? He's hardly a boy."

"Okay, then. What's going on with him?" "You know what that bitch Marlene Hausman said to me today, what really set me off? She said that I'm only interested in Luke because I'm expecting him to whisk me away or something."

"Are you?"

"Of course not," squealed Cecilia, a little offended. "Actually, that's the funny part. He's not going anywhere. He's building a house just outside of town, and I don't know..."

"You don't know what?"

"I think he's expecting me to stick around with him."

"Will you?"

"I don't think so."

"So, Marlene was right- at least a little."

"Just drop it, Patti." There was no point in girl talk any longer. Cecilia suddenly remembered the strange document Zeke had offered her and handed it over. Patti struggled to read it in the half light.

"The mayor should have said something if he owned StarMart options," said Cecilia. "He should have disclosed it."

"What makes you think he bought them on the open market? Isn't it possible that they were given to him somehow, maybe through a third party or something, in payment for services rendered?"

Evan roused a little just then. Cecilia motioned like she would give the child back to his mother, but as he settled back down she decided to keep him a bit longer. Relaxed and contemplative, Cecilia let fly a bit of resentment she had been carrying around with her for hours.

"The last day of Town Name has been just about the worst day of my life. I got paid a bunch of money for work that meant nothing, had a man appear to fall at my feet, and all of it stinks to high heaven."

As soon as she said the words, she could hear the ridiculousness of them. Cecilia felt the spark of Patti's

annoyance from where she sat. Even Patti's own son was no good as a human shield. She was in for it, and she knew it.

"You want to know what I think?" said Patti.

"Not really," she said, covering her face slightly.

Patti continued her train of thought unabated. "I think you are out of your damned mind, Cecilia Beaumont. For the first time in, let's face it, your life, you have a man who looks to be very interested in getting in your pants, or at least passing the time of day. You are ready to throw that away because you can't decide what it is you want- when what you want is staring you in your ignorant face. You bitch about your life so much, but in reality you're so lucky you make me want to hit you."

All the talking, perhaps the tone of it, woke Evan and sent him into a scratchy crying jag. Cecilia carefully handed the noisy bundle back to its mother.

"You know what? I could care less at this point. If this place wants to go to hell, who am I to stand in its way?"

She picked up the dented La Choy cans that had spilled from her purse and rose to leave.

"I'm going home," said Cecilia. "To bed."

19

Stella Copper was an efficient if not fastidious woman, a fact that annoyed her supposedly deceased husband to no end. She was famously peevish about not leaving lights on in rooms where no people remained. On this particular night, Cecilia was not at all surprised to see a single light on in the Copper home. In the orange glow coming from the house, she could see a single rounded shape intersecting the rectangle of the living room window. She knew in an instant who it had to be.

"You really should work on your ghostly technique," whispered Cecilia as she carefully sneaked up on the shape standing in Stella's rose bushes. "I thought you guys could walk through walls."

"Hey, Cessi," said Paul Copper as he turned to greet her. "How've you been?"

"Okay, I guess. How's the great beyond?"

"Fine."

Each stood there waiting for the other to say something or go away. Paul looked like someone caught red handed at something truly illicit, peering into the windows of his own house to get a look at his wife.

"Don't, Paul," she said.

"Don't what?" he said defensively. "I'm not here to bother her."

"Of course you are. Why else would you have come back?"

"I've got my reasons," he said.

Inside Stella was sitting in the single chair in the center of the living room watching episodes of Highway to Heaven that she had been smart enough to tape before the show was cancelled years before.

"Look at her," said Cecilia. "She's happy now."

He was hard pressed to disagree. Compared to the Stella he knew, the pale woman nibbling pretzels and feasting on Christian-themed television was happy-go-lucky, a free spirit.

In the flickering light, Paul's face appeared creased and severe. The sheer number of questions she had for the man overwhelmed her.

"So, what happened to you?" she asked. "Everybody says you died in a car wreck, but I always assumed that you had killed yourself or something."

He shrugged his shoulders and admitted that, as with most his endeavors, his noncommittal attitude prevented him from succeeding. He told her all about that Sunday when his sense of perspective left him, all about the pills and the note.

"So, what happened next?" she asked impatiently. "I can probably guess that it didn't take."

It did not, as he explained. He woke on the floor of the bathroom with a bruised jaw and the makings of a terrific hangover. He lay there for a few moments wondering how he had gotten there. But it all came rushing back when he heard the front door open and the familiar jingle and plop of Stella's keys landing on the kitchen counter.

How stupid had he been, how selfish and ridiculous.

The panic caused the blood to rush to his head, and he suddenly felt numb all over. For a second he thought he really would die just then. He listened intently for a gasp or a cry, but he heard nothing. She had not seen it yet, but she would, he thought, and soon.

He formulated a plan, cobbled together from half a dozen spy films and pulp novels.

Sneaking catlike down the back stairs into the side yard, he then crawled over to his white sedan parked behind the house and entered it soundlessly. He carefully placed the car in neutral and rolled it backward into the street so the ignition would not alert her.

Meanwhile, his wife had picked up the suicide note and, unable to decipher his deplorable handwriting threw it in the kitchen trash. But Paul did know that at the time.

Soon, his plan ran out of steam. Unsure what to do next and worried that someone might spot him, he ditched the car under the Mucilage Creek bridge, hoping that the intermittent flow might carry the vehicle downstream. From there he walked the fifteen miles to the highway and began hitchhiking.

"It took me most of three weeks," he told Cecilia. "But I made it all the way to Florida and until two weeks ago, I never looked back."

"What happened two weeks ago?"

"I heard about all of this, the buyout and all. There's no telling where everyone will go when StarMart kicks them all out. I figured this was my last chance to see everything—you know, Stella, too."

He went on to explain how he made a new life for himself, how he found modest success as a carpet distributor. "It's a great growth business since the state floods about once a month," he said.

He wanted to show Stella that he was okay, that he was happy, too. He said that he wanted something that daytime talk show hosts liked to call "closure."

Cecilia felt as Patti had just a half hour before. She did not want to lash out at his absurd indecision, but she felt she had to.

"If you had your head screwed on straight, you would have divorced her," said Cecilia. "As it was, you left her. Dress it up with whatever words you want, but you left her. You left everything. And you didn't just abandon her once. When it didn't work out the way you wanted, you made the

choice to leave her again."

Shame wiped across his face. He suddenly looked like the Paul she had known years before, downtrodden and melancholy.

"You can't reveal yourself to her, Paul. You shouldn't have shown yourself to me, now that I think about it."

He screwed up his face and asked why.

"Because you'd make her look like a damn fool," she said. "You might not have gotten closure, but she did. If you walk back in there now, you'll re-open what she probably struggled for years to close up. As it is, you gave her two things that finally made her happy: freedom and a tinge of martyrdom."

Cecilia made him swear on his own empty grave in the Town Name cemetery that he would not let anyone else know that he was still alive.

She insisted that he stop skulking around the bushes outside her bathroom window, and he looked at her blankly. It had not been him, either.

"Where are you planning on sleeping tonight?" she asked naggingly.

"Well, since they demolished my main hideout, I was thinking of taking up residence at the Mayor's office for the night."

"They got that, too."

"I know, it was a joke," he said flatly. "Don't worry. I'll be a good boy. Promise."

When she finally got home, she discovered Linda packing a suitcase, Cecilia's own suitcase.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Linda would not look up but continued stuffing panties and t-shirts into the underused travel bag. "You want to get out, then get out," said Linda bitterly. "I'm trying to help you."

"Mom, can we talk about this in the morning? I'm really tired and I-

"We're all tired," said Linda. "There's nothing special about that."

Linda's eyes looked bleary and bloodshot. Cecilia wanted to reach out, to empathize. "I know," she said.

"But you don't know, Cecilia. You really don't. And I pray to God that you never will. The sleepless nights wondering if we'd ever get out from under this mortgage, the desperation of knowing that the house where you sunk your life's savings isn't worth a cup of Scrackle. Some days you just don't want to get out of bed, but that would only make things worse."

Linda had stopped her furious packing jag. Cecilia cautiously sat down on the bed next to her. The posters in her room seemed so silly and girlish now. Cecilia regretted not moving out, or at least redecorating, sooner.

"Since your father died, I've done nothing but work these piddly little jobs to make some kind of a life for you, all so you wouldn't have to know what I know."

Cecilia racked her brain for something positive, a way to

reverse what Linda had meant by packing her daughter's bag.

"Have you ever thought about getting out on your own again, just you?" asked Cecilia. "Have you ever daydreamed about moving to a new city, going to college, maybe having a man in your life?"

"Where would I go? What would I do?" she asked. Linda looked up at her now like a woman trapped down a well. "The things I have, nearly all of it's gone now. This town, this house, Peter, all of it slips away." Cecilia felt her mother's hot tears on her shoulder. "I don't know what to do, Cessi. Without you, I don't know where I'd go."

Linda slumped over onto her lap, her shoulders shuddering as she cried. All the missed opportunities in her mother's life, the wasted chances and severed hopes, all shone in her desperate eyes.

"You're all I've got left," she sobbed, clutching Cecilia's arms as though she were about to fall. "You're all I've got left."

20

The events of the next three hours became fodder for legend in central Illinois. The story of how the Town Name Curse was finally lifted was nearly as mysterious, and dubious, as how it came to be in the first place. Of the several versions Cecilia heard over the subsequent months and years, none were strictly true all the way through, though most contained some piece of the real story.

From the stories of several different people, she was eventually able to cobble together what she eventually considered to be an official version of events, or at least a plausible one.

Marlene Hausman sat up in her bed surrounded by her half dozen pampered felines. Her sciatic was acting up again, usually a sign of ill doings. Something devious was

going on. She knew it.

Rising, she crept across the room and peered out the window. Lights, she pondered, at the school. It could only mean bad trouble.

She called Kyle Mueller at the police office, forgetting that the place had resolved into splinters that very day. She called his home phone, but again no one answered.

She made a tisk-tisk noise at Craig Phillip's battered Taurus wagon still parked outside K12. She always assumed he did that because he lived across the street, and his own driveway was far too narrow for his vehicle's substantial girth. Still, it was unseemly for the man to park at his former place of employment, especially given all the dark conversations faculty and parents still had about him.

She was sure that the parking job constituted an illegal act of some kind and that Craig was flouting the law in light of her lack of access to Kyle. She poured herself a drink and tried to move on to thinking about something else, something that would allow her to return to sleep, but the idea of the glib parking infraction continued to burn at her.

After staring angrily at the wagon for several minutes, she decided to take matters into her own hands.

Billy Peterson, Randy Meyr, Harold Fletcher, Tom Gibson, Jim Clemmens, and Zeke Lawson entered the Elmer Watson School for Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade through a side window just before midnight. On this, the last official night of the Town's existence, the Six had planned an evening of souvenir hunting and mild

vandalism. Armed with flashlights and other tools of the hell-raising trade, the boys began their spree with aplomb.

With a can of black spray paint, Randy and Tom marked a series of targets for the wrecking ball: the principal's office door, the detention room, and the lockers of various personal enemies.

Billy and Tom disappeared for fifteen minutes during all of this, returning with wide grins and no explanations. The others pressed them for details of what they had done, what super-prank they had pulled, but the pair remained mum.

"I don't want to spoil the surprise," said Tom.

The most prized item on the list was Buster Beaver, the school's mascot, but when they arrived at the glass display case in the front lobby, the intrepid taxidermy beaver was no longer there.

After obtaining the master key from the underside of the third drawer of the desk in the janitor's room as they had so many times before, they searched each classroom and broom closet for the coveted rodent, but came up dry.

Zeke offered a theory that someone even craftier than themselves had broken in earlier and stolen it before they had a chance to do so.

"That is low down," said Harold. "Low down and despicable."

Craig Phelps had fallen asleep reading the diaries again. In spite of his efforts, he had not learned much more about the sixteenth President's experiences in the area that eventually became Town Name.

Still mostly asleep, Craig woke suddenly and felt himself swimming in a sea of 19th century lore. Tales of machete duels, spare change, and almanacs filled his weary brain.

He became slowly aware of a rhythmic noise, loud and annoying in his ear. The phone. It had been ringing continually for almost a minute. Craig checked his watch and noted that it was no longer Sunday night but very early Monday morning. He carefully peeled the delicate pages from his face and reached for the phone.

"Hello?" he said.

He heard no reply at first, only silence.

"Move ... you're ... car," said the voice.

To Craig, the voice was unmistakable. Her tone, the timbre of her voice, and her half-crazy phone manners, they all pointed to none other than Mary Todd. But what was she trying to tell him? Was he to get moving, to move his car forward on a path to redeeming the town in her husband's eyes?

"Move ... the car... Craig."

"I'll do it," he said. "I'll do it!"

Craig rushed over to his recently acquired stuffed beaver and removed the set of car keys that now hung from its left paw.

After weeks of impotence in the face of the town's greatest crisis, Craig Phelps now had a workable plan, and nothing, not even good sense, would hold him back now.

The boys were growing bored, and the night was fading

fast. Their final hurrah looked like a bust until, rounding a corner in the media room, they saw the answer to all their prayers. Suspended from the ceiling by large cables, the shining glass tube measured twenty-four inches across diagonally. On a shelf next to it sat the real reason for their enthusiasm, a set-top descrambler box for satellite television, something so rare and precious as to inspire awe.

Jim rubbed his sheered scalp and reached for the "on" button. "I wonder if this place still has power," he mused.

Zeke was surer of their chances for entertainment. "If the Garner's had power, K12 has got to."

As the set faded up and the programming guide popped on screen, their hearts raced with excitement. They were young, dangerously hormonal, and the world was their oiled-up, hot-and-bothered oyster.

Their quest for hot, sweaty boobies soon petered out as channel after channel let them down. All their lives their parents had complained about the sex on television, talked about it as though it saturated the airwaves, but now when they needed it most there was none to be found.

Across the entire panoply of televisual options, the Six found World War II documentaries, infomercials and little else. There was always MTV, of course, the long-hyped home of all things fleshy and unnaturally hemispherical. But even this most reviled den of iniquity failed them that night.

There were more music videos on C-SPAN than MTV, a network now almost completely devoted to reality-based programming.

The boys eventually found themselves glued to a show concerning a group of college-age men and women driving across country for the expressed purpose of having loud arguments on camera.

"You don't go around disrespecting people like that," said Jim, reacting to a particularly nasty bit of on-screen drama. "I hope somebody slaps that Dana." The others agreed.

Bored and out of options for amusement, Randy demanded to know what it was that Tom and Billy had done.

"Actually, it's not all that funny now that I think about it," said Tom. "I forgot what it was, to be honest." By that time, Billy had fallen asleep in his hard metal chair and was unavailable for questioning.

Craig's eyes were still wild and saucer-wide when he brought his car to a rocking stop in a shopping center parking lot just North of downtown Springfield.

In a shadowy corner on the edge of the green space lay a thicket of brush measuring no more than fifty square feet. On the ground below, nearly impossible to see without serious gardening equipment or a backhoe, legend told of a small but very significant stone marker.

On his belly, Craig crawled through the dark earth toward the center of the vegetation. After some groping and grunting, he found it. Tracing with his fingers, he noted the shape of an X.

This was the final resting place of Abraham Lincoln, not the grave site one could see for a two dollar donation in the

capital district or even the "real Lincoln grave" locals charged tourists twenty bucks to see. This was the real, real Lincoln site.

He heard of the place as a boy from men who had been told by older men who heard it when they were boys from even older men who claimed to have actually been there when they put the six-foot four corpse in the ground.

It was not that he had definite evidence to back this up, but more of an unshakable faith in it. Never for a single moment of his life did he doubt the veracity of the tale.

He crawled half way back out again and reached for his shovel. Back inside, he was able to manage a squatting position without getting pierced by the overhanging nettles. After sticking the shovel deep into the soil, he stood there numbly for some time before he admitted to himself that he could not go through with digging him up. It wasn't right for one thing, and logistically he could not seem to work out how to pull him out without raising attention. That was only plan A, anyway.

With the handle of the shovel, he thrashed frantically at the branches overhead until he had poked a hole large enough for standing. Streetlight streamed into the space like a shot from heaven.

Sensing the moment, Craig placed his hand over his heart and recited this impromptu oratory: "Abraham Lincoln, proud son of Kentucky, product of Illinois, our nation's greatest President, emancipator, husband to a bat-crazy woman, and all-around horny devil, I offer you tribute."

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of red cotton panties. They blazed under the harsh sodium lights as he placed them carefully next to the marker. On the waistband read the letters "CB."

Craig waited an appropriate time to allow a moment of silence to pass. He wasn't sure at first if the sacrifice had worked. He certainly did not feel any different. If the great man wanted more, he was going to have to issue instructions.

"Please leave my town alone," Craig said finally.

He emerged some time later with crumbly soil clinging to his shirt and pants. He remembered then that he had left his headlights on in his haste, and he became temporarily blind in their beams.

As he approached the car, his shovel in hand, he could see out of the corners of his vision a vague shape in the back seat. He tried to look at it more directly, but the hot spots on his retinas made that impossible. He continued to walk around the car, leaning sideways to try to get a look at whatever it was. Leaning in toward the rear passenger side window, he got up close enough to see something more detailed.

A skull, human without doubt, attached to a long lean skeleton.

His first instinct was to run away, to flee. But the ghoul happened to be sitting in his only means of transportation. Carefully, he opened the driver's side door and buckled himself in. Without turning around or even checking his mirrors he turned over the ignition and rocketed the car off

in the direction of *Town Name*.

It was by now nearly two thirty in the morning and Louise Peterson had not even begun to feel tired. She did not sleep much at all, as it turned out, and when she did it was usually during the day and, as she was fond of telling folks, usually while someone was talking to her.

A few hours before, she had begun the laborious task of packing up her delicate, and unsold, bits of pottery and other curiosities into segmented boxes for transport. The process reminded her of the painful fact that she was still not sure where she would go. She hated herself for signing that letter of intent, for going along with the crowd at the very time the crowd needed a good tear-gassing.

She heard the thump of a car door outside, and she got up from her pile of craft paper and boxes to check it out. As she peered through the windows beside the entryway, she saw the long and frightened face of Craig Phelps.

"Louise," said Craig through the screen door. "I need your help. You're the only one who won't think I'm nuts."

He led her out to the wagon where she saw the skeleton sitting there.

"Louise, meet America's greatest President. Abe, meet Louise Peterson."

She looked at him with utter disbelief.

Craig quickly explained the situation, the history of the curse, the eyewitness accounts, the grave site- everything but the part about leaving the sacrifice. He surmised that she had no need to know that part.

"So, what now?" she asked. "Is Abe looking for a little action or something?"

Craig shrugged.

The situation was too ridiculous for her to believe fully, but all the same, action was action. "Honey," she said, pushing him aside to get in the back seat with Abe. "Leave it to me."

Unwilling to stand outside the car looking foolish while she did whatever she was planning to do, Craig climbed in the front seat and tried to make himself useful.

"I'm going to need some music," she said. "Something brassy."

Craig scanned the radio dial. On a clear night, broadcasts from as far away as St. Louis could sometimes be heard. After a few tries he found it, a blues station run by a tiny college thirty miles away. After the drowsy voice finished reading the station break a new song began, a slow burn.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

By way of answering, she leaned forward and thrust her ample rump in the skeleton's face, bumping and grinding on his inert body to the pounding Delta beat.

"This reminds me a lot of my dear departed," she said. "He keeps his hands to himself like a good boy."

She turned around and smothered Lincoln's lifeless face in her bosom, pretending to take a bill from his spiny hand.

"You do that like a real pro," he said, apparently impressed. "Have you done this before?"

"I plead the fifth," she said coquettishly.

She looked down and noticed that the President's bones were held together with fine wire and appeared to be made from some kind of resin. No matter, she thought. It was all about the show, anyway.

Besides, she was having the most fun she had seen in months.

Soon the song was over, and presumably the curse was broken, if only a little. A chorus of angels did not descend on a golden chariot and sing a short four-second stinger to indicate this, but they may have.

"Feel any different?" she asked.

"Yes, actually I think so." He flashed his up-too-late mental patient smile.

"So, is it your turn now?" she asked playfully. What the hell, she thought, what have I got to lose?

Craig shrugged again. "Shouldn't we go inside for that?"

"Whatever you want, cowboy."

She got out of the car, expecting Craig to follow her up to the house. But when she turned around, she found him asleep behind the wheel.

Louise made a mental note to, for the sake of Craig's failing sanity, ditch the skeleton at the nearest opportunity.

21

It seemed that no one in Town Name was sleeping that night. Cecilia was having an especially hard time letting go of the eventful day.

After several hours spent staring at her ceiling waiting for sleep to overtake her, she gave up on the idea and took off for a stroll down a country road.

Though she had remembered to bring a flashlight, she didn't really feel the need to use it, not yet anyway. The tunnel of blue-black darkness that surrounded her, the overarching tree limbs and mysterious noises from all sides, might have been terrifying in another circumstance. But she had walked and driven these byways so many times in her life that the trip was no more frightening than a walk down the hallway of her own house to the bathroom.

She noticed the dark rectangle of the welcome sign and

stopped to examine its crude addition. The wide-headed nails that held the plastic board in place, roofing tacks most likely, stood out from the soft wood enough for her fingers to get in under them.

One by one she removed them, careful to keep the nails from spilling out of her hand and onto the ground. As she pulled the fourth one out and the sign finally fell down, the pressure of her grasp caused her to bear down on the sharp points in her hand. She yelped as the short burst of pain caused her to spray the nails over the ground in front of her.

She pulled out her flashlight and scanned the road ahead but could find no glinting to indicate where the awful things had gone. Resigned to her mistake, she flung the offending placard into the woods and tiptoed further down the road.

When she reached the muddy lakefront at The Resort, Luke's truck was still there. Nearby, between the truck and the new foundation, lay a small dome tent.

"I can't exactly knock on this thing," she said into the front flap. "So, I'm just going to stand out here like an idiot and wait for you to acknowledge me."

"Um, hello," he said without a hint of sleepiness, more proof that the sandman had taken the night off.

She stared at the silhouette of his disheveled hair, the line of his jaw peppered with a day's worth of stubble. He stared back, fully expecting this woman who had walked all this way to say what it was she had to say.

"Do you want to come in," he asked, "or do you want me to come out there?"

"It's a little cold," she said.

It was not much warmer inside the tent, but Luke did not feel the moment was right to mention that fact.

She climbed inside and sat across from him cross-legged in the darkness. Even in the dim blue haze she could see that Luke was dressed for bed, shirtless and wearing only a torn pair of jeans.

"This whole thing stinks to hell," she said, "and I can't do anything about it."

Luke looked at her oddly. This was not the line of conversation one would hop out of bed in the pre-dawn hours to pursue.

"Well, a lot of folks are excited about it," he said. "This is their ticket out. That's what they say they want, right?"

"Maybe. But I just can't trust that it won't go South, that we're not being hoodwinked somehow."

"You're a remarkably suspicious person, Cecilia," he said sternly. "In the past day or so, I've learned at least that about you."

"People here, well, we've been fooled so many times. We've been had by the best of them, and sometimes by the worst of them. To us, it's like hope is the most childish and silly emotion there is."

She could no longer see his face clearly to determine if he was following her or not, listening or sleeping.

"We're afraid of good things," she said. "Generosity, goodness, they scare the hell out of us. You, for instance.

You are the scariest single thing I've encountered since puberty."

"I'm not trying to scare you, Cecilia. I wasn't trying to come on that strong."

"It's not that," she said. "It's just that I'm from Town Name. I can't handle hope."

"That's sad," he said. "There's a lot to be hopeful for in this town."

"See?" she said, pointing at him in the dark. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Actually, the sale is probably going to be great for the town. You are probably going to be great for the town."

"Is that what you came here in the middle of the night to tell me?"

"No, I mean, I'm not sure anymore what it was I came here to tell you."

Whatever momentum they had built was fading fast. Luke decided to switch the subject. "Where are you and your mom going to go after the sale?"

"I don't know," she said. "That's part of what's got me wound so tight."

"It would be great if you stayed near here," he said. "I'd hate to get to know you and then see you zip off some place where I'd never get to see you."

Perhaps he had said too much. Luke leaned back on his hands and tried to act casual. "Then again, don't stick around here just for me," he said.

It suddenly occurred to Cecilia, the thing she had wanted to say. "You can stay here, and that's fine," she said. "You can move to Timbuktu for all I care. That's okay, too."

"I see," he said. The dejection was clear in his voice.

"No, actually, that's not what I was trying to say at all." She turned so she could look his vague shape squarely in what she assumed was his face, to explain this plainly and simply. "It doesn't matter where you go because, in spite of my better judgment, I want to be there, too."

He leaned into her and accidentally kissed her eye. Not wanting to lose the moment entirely, he reached up and felt around for her mouth. Instinctively, she kissed his finger until his lips found hers.

She felt herself leaning back onto his sleeping bag, his bare chest next to her bulky sweatshirt. She cursed herself for not wearing something more interesting or alluring.

"Wait," he said, scrambling through the zippered hole and out to his truck. Soon she could hear the muffled sounds of Freddie Mercury, his voice ringing out through the muddy flood plain.

When he returned, she suddenly felt foolish, a woman alone in a single man's tent, an out-of-towner no less. Then he touched her hand and lay down next to her, and she remembered nothing but the taste of his mouth.

She wrapped her arms around him, kneaded his skin with her fingers. He kissed her neck, and his nose tickled the tiny hairs at the nape.

She wanted to live there with him in that stupid musty

tent just to be around as he went about his daily life.

She sat up quickly and slipped free of her sweatshirt and bra. As she lay back down, her breasts spread out limply across her chest.

She suddenly remembered something her mother had told her about never letting a man see you lying on your back without a bra, but nothing mattered less to her now.

Outside the tent, she could hear the 8-track popping over to track one again. The less than romantic "We Will Rock You," was not the sort of song she had imagined making love to.

"I'll go shut that off," he grumbled.

"You'll do no such thing," she said, grabbing him again. "I'm not done with you yet."

22

The crowd of Townnamers now gathered around the spot where the municipal trailer used to stand had been slowly growing since dawn. Many of them, like Luke Reynolds and Cecilia Beaumont, took great pains to arrive separately.

They were certainly an eager lot that day, and for good reason. This was the final ceremonial hurdle to the big fat buyout check.

Along the edge of the empty lot hung a long banner: StarMart: A New Beginning. Tucked up inside it were several dozen balloons held there by a white nylon net.

Cecilia hung back, away from the dense clot of people near the groundbreaking area. She wanted to see their faces when it all happened, the relief of knowing that they could finally move on. That, at least, would be some kind of satisfaction from all of this.

"I found it," said Craig excitedly as he suddenly appeared beside her. "I discovered the real story of how the town got its name."

He handed her an aging sheet of paper, what appeared to be a Photostat probably made from the unknown original fifty years before. It was a letter dated 1840 to then governor Thomas Carlin asking that the town be renamed.

Dear Governor Carlin,

We wish you good health and happiness in this, the New Year, and we sincerely appreciate the work you and your predecessor have done for us in West Central Illinois over the years.

We have one problem, however. "Town Name" was never intended as an acceptable moniker for our fair city.

Unfortunately, the men of our town, hardworking and true, are not sticklers for detail. As they were filling out the incorporation paperwork, they skipped over the "TOWN NAME" box. The clerk in the State House, either through negligence, inattention, or a sick sense of humor, read the form literally and issued our tiny coalition of farm houses and shops the proper municipal certificates with "Town Name" all over them.

I must admit that we thought it was all a joke at first, far from funny, but a joke all the same.

Many folks in town were very interested in naming the place after our nearest geological feature, Mucilage Creek until someone learned that the word's dictionary meaning does not imbue a pleasant image for the town.

We beg you to intercede on our behalf. Give us any name you like that has not already been taken within our state's borders. We don't care, anything but Town Name.

Sincerely,

Martha Peterson

"I can only assume that the letter never made it or that Carlin just ignored it," said Craig. "Anyway, isn't that fascinating?"

"Not especially," she said.

After all that work, all those years of speculating, he finally had the answer, and Cecilia did not appear to care at all.

"To be honest, I like the poker game story the better," she said.

"But that's not what happened. I have proof."

"Proof can be debated," she said. "But it's a definite fact that the poker story is more entertaining and folksy. Therefore it might as well be true."

Craig looked bitterly disappointed in her reaction. "You're the fourth person I've told that to, and they all said the same thing."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Hey, did you find anything out about the curse?"

"Oh, that? Yeah, I think we're in the clear now," he said pointing back toward the city square.

She shrugged in confusion. There were still ten minutes or so before the ceremony was to begin, so he led her the

half block to the square.

She came up close on the bronze monument, examining his face. Craig was right, the Great Emancipator did appear to be smiling now. The edges of his lips were upturned ever so slightly, an effect she was sure was not extant just twelve hours before.

"Do you want to tell me how the curse was lifted?" she asked.

"I'm not actually sure," he said. "And if I were, it would probably be best not to say anything specific."

When she returned to the crowd, Cecilia could overhear Stella Copper talking to Louise.

"I had to tell you first because everybody else would think I was crazy," she said.

Louise rolled her eyes indicating that she had heard that phrase before recently.

"It was late, and I couldn't sleep." said Stella. "I heard a noise coming from the garage, and I saw a light moving around in there, so I went out there to check it out. There I was, standing in the driveway in my housecoat and slippers carrying an old baseball bat, and there he was."

"Who?" asked Louise, a bit annoyed at Stella's oblique storytelling style.

"Him. Paul."

She went on to describe the ghostly visitation in some detail: his casual attire, his speech about how wrong he had been, even an offer for "a close encounter," which claimed

to have refused.

"And here's the weirdest part," Stella said. "When I got up this morning, I noticed that his prized pair of golf shoes were missing."

"Wow, that is creepy. So you didn't dream it or anything."

"I knew exactly where they were. They had been in the back of the closet for years. I mean, he didn't even play the game much when he was alive."

As people continued to gather, the event was beginning to look more like a family reunion than a groundbreaking. People who had not spoken much since K12 were now hugging and laughing. Cecilia noticed at least three personal feuds resolved that morning as they waited for their gravy train to reach the station.

Soon, a convoy of luxury sedans and SUVs rolled up on Illinois Street. One by one, county and state officials, as well as StarMart executives emerged from their vehicles and grabbed the designated gold-plated shovels from their trunks.

StarMart vice president of business development Chip Reedy walked up to the center of the circle where a podium and microphone would have been if amplification were necessary. He began by apologizing for their tardiness. As it turned out, two of the vehicles blew tires just as they drove up Pine Road. Cecilia noted that none of their shirts or suits looked dirty.

I guess that's what drivers are for, she thought.

"I'm sure you're all excited, so let's get things started," he said loudly.

Running late, Luke rushed in and took his place in the back of the small crowd of dignitaries.

"First, let me say that I'm thrilled to have known you all," Chip said to the people he had, in truth, never seen before that moment. "Your town was such a beautiful place, and I wish I could have spent more time there. Very soon, you will receive your sale documents, closing papers, and your StarMart housing vouchers."

The air of electric excitement was suddenly replaced by a low murmuring in the crowd.

"Vouchers?" shouted Tim Bailey.

"Well, yes, of course," said Chip out of the side of his mouth. He was trying to regain control of the proceedings, but it wasn't working.

"I am going to have to call bullshit on that, sir," said Tim, removing his weathered baseball cap. "We were supposed to get cash on the barrelhead."

Kyle made no move to arrest him for his choice of words, mostly because he no longer had a place to put him.

"I think you misunderstand, friend," said Chip slowly. "These vouchers can put you in a brand new home built inside one of our very own factories right here in the U S of A and that house can be drop-shipped to any of our fine developments in Arkansas, Mississippi, or even right here in Central Illinois."

"Your people promised us cash," Tim repeated.

"Next summer," Chip continued, "we're planning to build StarMart Estates in an area just South of here."

Dissent in the crowd continued to escalate, and StarMart brass, as though they had been through this sort of thing several times before, huddled around their ailing comrade and pushed the ceremony forward.

An important-looking bald man stepped forward, waving his shovel in the air. "Without further ado," he said, "let's dig!"

The six of them readied their shovels, placing a foot on one edge and posing for photos. By now StarMart security personnel were holding Tim Bailey back, pushing him out of earshot.

"Three," said the bald man. "Two ... one!"

With a pull of the ripcord, the netting under the banner pulled away, but the balloons stayed put. Either due to static cling or helium, those things would not budge.

Their glinting shovels pierced the grey earth in unison, each man bringing up an inch or two of ceremonial dirt and posing for another round of pictures.

But something was not right. A small fountain of black liquid now sprang forth from the cut, spilling on several pairs of very expensive shoes.

"My God, Mike," exclaimed the bald man, "is that oil down there?"

He dug in further, clearing away another eight inches of soil. He had hit something hard and hollow. The flow continued, even harder now. His ruined shoes were now

beginning to smoke.

"Well, unless this is oil that already comes in barrels, then I don't think so," he said.

As the rest of them pitched in with their ceremonial digging implements, a row of decaying drums slowly revealed itself. Cecilia crept closer to get a good look at the liquid. It was not quite the brownish black of oil, either. This stuff had more of a blackish green color.

This is where they put it, thought Cecilia. It was here all along.

The same thought ran through the minds of nearly every Townnamer there. Somehow they had been foiled again, and their last, best hope for escaping the town had dissipated. They would all have a great deal of cleaning up to do: graffiti strewn walls, unkind parting words, and sexual entanglements, not to mention all that PCBs and whatnot.

A plaintive lament went up from the crowd in impromptu unison.

"Oh, excrement," they said.

Sensing the change in mood, Dennis Richardson slowly backed away from the ceremony, but as he turned to make a break for his car, he ran into a wall of people. They were asking all sorts of angry, uncomfortable questions about the dumping and his role in it. Someone even mentioned the word "fraud" which caused Dennis to jump like a skittish housecat. It was certainly convenient that George Pulaski, the Illinois Attorney General's best golf buddy, was among the honored guests that day.

Someone else was making their getaway at that moment as well. Cecilia could see a large man in a conspicuously inconspicuous hooded sweatshirt, the hood drawn in a tight circle around his face. The man she assumed was the supposedly deceased Paul Copper slipped out of the crowd and into a waiting car. Though she could not be sure, to her it looked like a taxi.

Chip tried to get their attention again, to regretfully inform them of what they already knew, that the sale was off, that the letters of intent contained a liberal out clause, etcetera. But none of them wanted to hear it at the moment. It was time to go back to their homes and unpack, repair the broken fences and everything else they had ignored since the sale process began.

Cecilia saw Patti on the City Square. She was holding Ryan's hand and trying to explain what had just happened while Bobby held Evan and tried not to listen.

"See," Patti said to Cecilia with a bright smile. "I told you everything was going to be okay."

"Are you out of your mind?" asked Cecilia.

Patti waved goodbye over her shoulder as she and her newly expanded family as they strode off to their truck.

She did not want to think about it anymore, but soon she would have no choice. As she walked into Mike's that morning, she saw Luke sitting by himself at a table near the back.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked.

"Not at all."

"You okay?"

"I'm just thinking," he said quietly.

He did not look depressed, only concerned. True, this abrupt change of plan probably meant a transfer for him, if he would be able to keep his job at all. But saddled with a new house built in a remote area and no one to sell it to, Luke Reynolds was now just as stuck as anyone else.

"You know," she began, "I have been thinking about moving out West. Austin is nice this time of year, right?"

"I told you I'm going to make a go of it here," he said after a moment, his jaw set. "And there is no way I'm going back on that now."

They had not even begun to think about ordering anything when Lorain the waitress walked over carrying a tray of something. It seemed as though all eyes in Mike's were targeted on whatever was on that tray. She picked up the object and placed it on the table in front of Luke.

It was a bowl, a large and very full bowl, of steaming hot Scrackle.

"Welcome to Town Name, Luke," said Lorain. "It's on the house."

23

"That'll be fifty-seven fifty, ma'am," said Luke as he punched open the drawer on the antique cash register.

The kind-faced woman looked around the table behind him, carefully scanning for any other last minute items she simply had to have. The sun was setting, though, and in the fading light under the market tent she could see very little. From her darting eyes, Luke could sense the pressure of tourist shopping at closing time.

After a moment, she relented and handed over her card. "You take credit, right?"

"Of course," he said, sliding the card through the machine. "We're a fairly modern outfit."

While Luke waited for the approval beep, he carefully bagged her purchases: half a dozen painted saw blades, three Lincoln bobble-head dolls, and one remarkably

unsubtle clay phallus.

Late spring was finally delivering on its tacit promise of warmer weather. Last June had been so cold and rainy, but now as the creamy breeze enveloped him he could hardly remember it.

At the sound of the beep, Luke ripped off her receipt and one for her to sign. She glanced at the vintage pen he had lent her, perhaps wondering if she could buy that as well.

"It's just funny," she said as she scrawled. "I live just over in Jacksonville, have for more than thirty years, and we had no idea this place existed until a few months ago."

Luke casually raised a leg up on the "flour" sack next to the register, one of the many quaint props scattered throughout the Town Name Market, and leaned in. "Well," he whispered, "we like to keep this pace a secret."

Luke was performing again, a role he had grown accustomed to over the past few months. As the market started to take off late the previous summer, he quickly learned that playing the part of the down home shop owner was all a part of doing business. And the customers, most of whom must have spotted the rouse, seemed to love it.

"Well, your secret is certainly out now," she said chuckling.

Luke laughed humbly as she left, another standard routine. From her desk behind the counter, Cecilia loved to watch him do his thing. He was in his element now. All the same, she could see the exhaustion in his face when he began closing up shop for the day.

In all her life, she could not remember having worked so hard as she and Luke had over the past year.

Starting a business would have been hard enough, but in Town Name it meant overcoming inertia. With all the permits, lease agreements, and outright begging involved, the process was like pushing a puddle up a hill. Thankfully, Cecilia took care of most of that.

Luke brought his StarMart management skills to the affair, applying all that the retail giants had taught him. In fact, most of the items for sale in the market originally came from his former employer's closeout department, after a round of folksy modifications, of course.

"What do the daily totals look like?" he asked.

"Very good," Cecilia said ripping the tape from the printing calculator. "Nothing like two weeks ago, though."

"Yeah, that was almost too much. Poor Louise couldn't keep up."

An unnerving spate of good luck had descended on Town Name, creating more than a little unease among the population. The glowing green underground river had finally put Town Name on the map. The EPA-driven cleanup also brought with it lucrative short-term work, complete with hazard pay, and now every weekend, the stream of cars filing off new I-72 offramp grew a little thicker. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to get a look at, and perhaps buy a piece of, the quirky little town with the unfortunate name.

Of all the booths at the market, Louise Peterson's unusual art display was, by far, the biggest draw. The deceptively

sweet old woman spinning ribald pottery became something of a regional celebrity. Although no one in town would openly acknowledge her success, the effort to hide her inventory quietly stopped earlier that spring.

Receipts for the church's baked goods booth were down again, but that was no surprise. Louise had finally succeeded in getting Stella Copper to loosen up a bit, and now her mind was not as focused as it had been. Rumor had it that she was now spending her Saturday nights in Jacksonville at a weekly Singles Bingo event.

The City Square was dark now, save the single streetlight across the way. Cecilia noted that even now Lincoln statue still managed a faint smile. No one seemed to notice or mind when Louise would occasionally freshen up the paint at the corners of his lips.

"If you can, help me to get these boxes in the truck," said Luke as he passed with an armload of merchandise. "I'll break down the tent in the morning."

As the market's bookkeeper, Cecilia found working with numbers again natural, even relaxing. She had enrolled in an accounting class at the Community College of Beardstown in hopes of one day earning her CPA.

Last summer, she helped Linda start a mail order business selling condensed Scrackle by the pint, quart, and even gallon. After a few months of operation, orders started coming in at a fairly brisk pace. Folks from as far away as Chicago and Memphis were daring their friends to play gastronomical roulette with the pasty red stuff.

The municipal lot remained empty, though Cecilia could

still make out the outline of where the trailer had been. Kyle passed his State Police exam and had moved on to Rushville months ago. The job of replacing him would have gone to the mayor, but as it turned out he needed replacing as well.

Dennis Richardson was eventually acquitted of fraud charges but spent so much on legal representation that he sold Mucilage Creek Feed & Seed for, well, chicken feed.

The StarMart stock options were not much good to him, either, since the incident caused the company's share value to dip well below the option price until they expired. He and his wife moved to Rushville where they found their true calling in what they called the "convenience business": selling photocopier toner to businesses who had not actually ordered it.

"So, I think I found a dress," said Cecilia as she slid a wooden crate into the pickup's rusty bed. "It's pretty without being too- I don't know."

"Too girly?"

"Something like that, yes."

Luke kicked in the folding legs to the table and with some effort shoved it sideways onto the bed.

"Now that I'm thinking about it, are your parents coming to town the day before or not?" she asked.

"I don't know. It's still three months off, you know."

Linda nearly fainted when Luke asked her permission to propose to Cecilia back in March. Although the catering and some other issues had not yet been nailed down, they

were sure of one detail: Scrackle would not be served at the reception under any circumstances.

"Hey, it's been a long day, and I know you're tired, Luke. It's not a big deal. I can stay with my mom tonight."

"But I want you to see this," he said eagerly. "We started building again."

Her face brightened, fondly recalling the last time he had said that to her.

On the drive out to the Resort, she rolled her window down, lolling her arm around in the warm night air. Above her she could feel the expansive purple sky peppered with clear white spots.

As the truck emerged from the dense woods, she could make out the vague shape of a two-story home in the half-moon light. They had framed the thing, and it was beautiful. Still, no roof yet, but it beat the hell out of a concrete slab.

"I was hoping you could join me for the first night in the new house," he said.

In the center of the skeletal home stood Luke's tent, lashed to the two-by-fours. "It's incredible, Luke. You should be really proud."

"Mostly, I'm just beat."

Hours later, Cecilia lay on the air mattress unable to sleep. The night was incredibly silent. She could not even hear the insects she knew were only inches from her head. Even with all the attention the town had received, the place still went into a coma after dark.

Luke was unconscious almost as soon as they zipped the tent shut. She stared at his chest as it rose and fell. His ease with things sometimes made her furious. How could he sleep with so much good luck going around? It just wasn't natural.

Like most Townnamers, she now spent her midnights troubled, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Some nights she wished it could all go back to being horrible and boring again. At least then she could count on it. As it was she worried about becoming too attached, too hopeful. She fretted about how awful it would all be when all the good fortune suddenly dissipated as it always did.

Just then Luke turned over, facing her. One eye opened in the darkness. "Awake again?"

She nodded.

He reached out his arm, motioning for her to come be with him. Over the past year she had learned that Luke was the type who warmed up as he slept. Consequently he usually slept shirtless, and so as he held her that night she could feel the slight furriness of his chest on her cheek.

"It's going to be alright," he said, rubbing his hand sleepily on her back.

"I know."

Still, she looked forward to the day when the bubble of hope would once again burst and she could, at long last, relax again.

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The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Ridfic website. The browser's address bar shows the URL <http://www.ridiculopathy.com/ridfic/>. The website header features the "Ridfic" logo in red and the navigation menu: NOVELS • STORIES • FABLES • TALES. On the left side, there are buttons for "main", "news", "contact", and "the rid". The main content area is titled "Titles:" and lists three items:

- Future Home of STAR-MART**: A novel by Mark Arenz. The image shows a street scene with a sign that says "Future Home of STAR-MART".
- The Narcoleptic Dialectic**: A novel by Mark Arenz. The image shows a purple-tinted scene with a person and a clock.
- The Big Oops**: A short story by Mark Arenz. The image shows a "HELLO my name is" sign with the name "msud" written in red, and a background of mathematical formulas.