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TIOGA

by

Charles Ford

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

**UNIVERSITY HONORS
WITH DEPARTMENT HONORS**

in

English

Approved:

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1995

It was the place where the smaller river gave itself to the larger river, which then continued on in its long journey to the ocean. The people found it to be a good place, a place where the annual floods left fertile muds, which enabled a great forest to grow, which in turn provided forage and cover for a wide variety of animals, including beaver, opossum, deer, and elk.

The smaller, shallow river became the Chemung, easily crossed by foot after the floods of spring. The larger river, before and after the joining, became the Susquehanna, a deep river too wide to throw a stone across, rich with fish. The people prospered, and called themselves Iroquois, and called the confluence of the rivers Tioga, or "at the forks."

"Family Ties"

Some say the town is dying. Others say it's dead. Both are probably right. It's not like those Westerns on TV on Saturday mornings, with tumbleweeds rolling past rickety buildings whose wood is the grey color of a dead possum lying by the side of the road, their painted signs proclaiming "Saloon" or "General Store" almost unreadable now. Tioga isn't quite a rotten corpse yet. People are moving out, though. The mines don't hardly operate anymore. The strike's been hard on us. Gas is cleaner, those public service announcements tell us. The death of coal was the death of Tioga, though some still might not realize it. The strike only brought on the inevitable.

Some work at the Wal-Mart about twenty miles away, and a few really lucky ones work at the IBM plant up in Owego, a fifty mile drive one way. What else is there? I hear this used to be good farmland, but the two rivers aren't exactly pure. The Company has seen to that. Personally, I think everything's contaminated. There's a fire in an old mine section about five miles outside town, and it stinks the place up to high heaven. It's almost like you can reach out and grab a chunk of dirty air. There's a constant haze because of the fire. A lot of trees look yellow, and more are just plain dead.

The Company says that they tried to put the fire out, but that it's just too deep underground. They can send the miners miles down, but they can't put a fire just below the surface out?

I think they're just letting it burn. It's cheaper that way.

Me, I don't work, not even part-time. I mooch a beer whenever I can. I'm just hoping I can get through my senior year without getting killed. Maybe I'll join the Marines. Move up and out. Get to travel a little bit, and I'll get out of this town. Ain't much left now. I don't think I'll ever be able to work here, thanks to my father. See, he's a scab.

My old man told me it would be bad, but I didn't think...who would've thought? They were my friends. We all grew up together. But my dad became a scab. That changed everything.

Mike and me, we were best friends. We did all kinds of crazy stuff together. Two years ago, before the strike, we got suspended together. We were smoking in the bathroom, just talking about what we were going to do when we got out of school. After I finished my smoke, I started chewing on the paper end of a match. When it got all soggy, I just sorta threw it towards the ceiling. It stuck there, a black streak against the cracked green paint the color of phlegm. Mike looked at me, and I think we got the same idea at the same time.

"Give me one of those matches," Mike said. I gave him one, and stuck another in my mouth. We chewed excitedly on our matches for a minute or so. I pulled mine out first. I looked at Mike.

"Do it," he said.

I lit the business end of the match, inhaling the sharp

sulfur smell you get when it first flares up. I love that smell. It clears your sinuses. I looked at the match burning down towards the pulpy end, soggy with my spit, then whipped it up at the ceiling. It stuck, but the flame died out as soon as it hit.

Mike grunted, took the match out of his mouth and lit it. In the dull afternoon light seeping in through the frosted glass of the bathroom's window, the match Mike held seemed to hold us brightly for a second. Then Mike threw it. The match traced a quick bright path up to the ceiling. It stuck, the flame sputtering. Then the flame began to quickly spread. To me, it almost looked like the black cracks in the paint glowed for a second before the fire ate it, like little rivers of lava moving over land, blazing over everything near. Mike and I stood there, amazed. We might have burned the school down if Mr. Kleague hadn't come in right then.

Mr. Kleague is the civics teacher. I used to think he was pretty cool. He's the football coach, too. He was always telling me that I could get a scholarship to play somewhere, but I don't know. But damn, can he scream. Always goin' on about how we need to beat Sayre and Chemung, cause they're a bunch of rich fags. I don't know about them being rich and all. Their towns look like ours. I still like beatin' them, though. At least I did, before I quit the team. We call him Killer Kleague. I guess they called him that back when he played football for Tioga. I hear he was pretty good. He played down at the state

college, then came back here, back to the old hometown. If I was him, I would have stayed away.

So there Mike and me are, caught big time. We're staring at Killer Kleague, and he's got us holding our sacks, if you know what I mean. Killer hardly even looked at us. He ran over to the sink and turned on the water. I didn't know what the hell he was doing. He cupped his hands, got some water in them, then ran over to the area beneath the fire. Killer throws this little handful of water up at the ceiling, like its gonna put this fire out or something! Then he runs back to the sink to get more water.

I know we're busted, and the fire's getting bigger, so I figured I should do something to get some slack from the principal. I ran out of the bathroom and down the hall a little bit, where there was a fire extinguisher. I grabbed it and ran back into the bathroom. There was smoke all over the place, and the ceiling was glowing. The fire had spread to an area about ten feet wide. Good thing the school is built of cinderblocks, or else my old man would have gotten a huge bill for a new school. Anyway, once I started using the extinguisher, the fire got under control pretty fast. It took about a minute of spraying, but I put it out. By this time the bathroom is just full of smoke. All three of us ran out of there, coughing and rubbing our eyes.

"Boys, I don't think I even need to tell you where to go,"

was all that Killer said as he bent over, hands on knees, coughing and gagging. I liked seeing Killer in that position, after all the times he ran us ragged at practice. When I told Mike that in the principal's office, he almost died laughing. Unfortunately, that's right when the principal came in. We got hammered. Fifteen days suspension. It wouldn't have been so bad if we didn't have to scrape the black stuff off the ceiling and repaint it with paint we had to pay for. Plus, the district charged us to recharge the extinguisher. Cheap bastards.

The strike happened about a month after we got suspended. For about a year and a half, everything was okay. Then my dad crossed the picket lines, one of only a few to do so. He says that the unemployment office wouldn't pay benefits any more, and there was nothing else he could do. I don't know. All I know is that almost no one else crossed the "line" that looked more like a permanent campground. Dad always told me to follow the union no matter what, that they were the only ones to look out for the miners. Now look where he is. He's part of the company that's trying to bring this town to its knees.

Like I said, my old man said it would be bad. I didn't really believe him. Mike and Ted and Ski and Wo...Jesus, I grew up with 'em. We've been together ever since we were little kids. How could they do it?

I knew I was in trouble when they all filed into the bathroom at lunchtime, one after the other, about ten all

together. I zipped up, then kind of slid over to the stalls. I wanted something against my back.

"Your dad's a scab," Mike said. He wouldn't look straight at me, but instead looked somewhere in my chest.

"Damn, Mike, so what? What does that have to do with me?" I asked.

"My old man says it has everything to do with you," Mike returned.

I had no response to that. I silently cursed my father for doing this to me. Mike looked at the rest of his group, and they all moved towards me. I landed a few punches, but it was hopeless. Once they got their hands on me, I pretty much gave up. I got knocked in the face, and I just fell back against the wall. I'd been in more than a few fights in my life, but I'd never been beaten by a group of guys. Until then. You don't know what's going on. You just try to cover up and hope the beating stops, at least until you black out. I wasn't really feeling the blows anymore, but I know my body was, cause I couldn't help twitching every time I got hit again.

Since I was so dazed, it took a few seconds to realize that the punches had stopped. Everyone was turned towards the door, where Killer Kleague stood, his arms stretched out in front of him as if he were the one trying to ward off an attack. Even in my condition I realized that Killer thought the group of guys would turn and kick the shit out of him if he interfered. Slowly

he walked the few steps back towards the door, then turned and all but ran out of the bathroom, leaving Mike and his group to return to their business.

Return to it they did. I don't remember too much. I remember looking at the white ceiling, thinking how the new paint was an improvement on the old green, and how I wished the school had burned down that day. I also damned my father for crossing the line.

When I woke up, slumped over the toilet, it took a while to move. A new drop of blood fell every few seconds, adding more color to the already red water. My head throbbed and rung all at once, and my body hurt all over. After a few minutes I sat back against the stall, my arm draped over the toilet. I grabbed some toilet paper and tried to keep some blood in. I read the writings on the toilet's walls for a few more minutes, then slowly walked out of the stall. I went to the sink and turned on the water.

Looking in the mirror, I saw that they had messed me up pretty bad. My face looked like roadkill, all bloody and messed up so you don't know if it's a dog, cat, or something else lying there. It didn't look like me in the mirror. My left eye was swollen shut, and the white of my other eye was all bloody, like some comic book monster or something. A few teeth were also missing, including my front teeth, which really pissed me off. We can't afford a dentist, so I'm still looking like my eighty-

year old grandpa. I cleaned myself up as best as I could, then turned and walked ever so slowly to the bathroom door.

I walked out into the hall. As I made my way down the hall, I passed Mr. Kleague's office. As I looked in, I saw that he sat at his desk, his head in his hands. I must have made some sound (though I couldn't really know it, as I later found out that both eardrums were punctured), because Kleague looked up.

"Jason, I..." he began to say.

I don't think I could have talked, even if I wanted to. All I could do was raise my middle finger to him, and give him a look that I hope said he was the biggest asshole in the world. Then I turned and kept walking down the hall and out of the school, ignoring everyone staring at me. Like I said, the strike's been hard on all of us.

"Sanctuary"

They were eating dinner when someone walked into their house. James was just thinking that he wished for something different, anything besides beef stew, and then he heard the front door open and close. James' heart thumped heavily in his chest, and he met his wife's eyes. At that moment, James wished he had a dog, a child, a gun, people over for dinner--anything that would take away his responsibility of going from the living room out into the entryway, for James was not a brave man. James also silently hated his wife for making his possible last meal beef stew.

But James did do his duty, as he later put it to his circle of friends. Or rather, acquaintances. He wanted them to be his friends, although he once overheard Frank say to Dwight that James was not really a friend, but instead an acquaintance, always good for a free drink or a late addition to a foursome when someone cancelled. When James heard Frank and Dwight talking in the clubhouse, he had been busy on the toilet. James just wanted to hit some balls off the practice tees, but his bowels began acting up; Frank hadn't known he was there. James felt like he had been kicked in the crotch when he heard Frank's comment. Somehow, to James, it was even more shameful to have heard such comments while his pants were around his ankles, sitting on a toilet that wasn't even his own. He felt let down, but he never let on that he heard, for James hated

confrontations.

But James did go out to the entryway. Trembling, ready to turn back, brushing his fingertips across the walls of the hallway for a reminder of something normal, cowardly James walked slowly towards the entryway. He remembered the look on his wife's face, stricken, violated--how James wished he could have grabbed Lois about the waist, whispered something brave to her, then strode ruggedly down the hall, his hall, to meet the intruder with a burst of confidence, the confidence of a man threatened under his own roof, while dinner sat on the table (a boring dinner, eaten every Tuesday of every month of seemingly every year, but dinner nonetheless).

Instead, James timidly made his way down the hallway, and when he turned around to see his wife watching him, he dared not even motion to her to get back in the kitchen, for fear the intruder might hear him. He uncharitably thought that his wife deserved whatever she got if she wasn't even smart enough to quietly make her way upstairs and lock herself in the bathroom. James knew that is what he would have done if he had a choice.

The last thing James thought before he peeked around the corner was that a rock through the window or a threatening phone call, anything, would have been preferable to an intruder. Then, with a bravery he didn't know he had, James looked around the corner.

Fearing roughneck strikers from the mines eager to get at an

administrative worker for Krager Mining, Inc., no matter how inconsequential, James was surprised to see an old man, looking around the foyer and muttering. The man must have been about ninety, James thought as he looked over the frail, wizened figure. Blue veins pulsed under pale skin dotted with brown spots, and James saw that the old man's hands were bent almost double with arthritis. Folds of loose skin created a deep furrow from the chin to the top of the old man's yellow shirt, folds which trembled like the comb on the chickens James saw whenever he drove past the farms surrounding the town.

James edged around the corner. The old man stared at him uncomprehendingly from filmy brown eyes.

"Who are you?" James asked, unsure of what the situation called for.

"Mary?" the old man queried.

"What?"

"Mary?" the old man moaned, holding his hands out. James drew back against the protective reality of the wall.

"Lois," James called out. "Call 911. It looks like we've got a lost senior citizen."

James heard the whisper of cloth behind him, and turned to see Lois staring past him at the old man. "Who is he?" Lois asked.

"Well if I knew that, I wouldn't have asked you to call the police, now would I?" James said. James thought how much he

would rather be at the office, sequestered among the reassurance of his ledgers and journals full of numbers. "Just call the police."

Lois' face disappeared. James turned back to the old man.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Mary?"

James thought for a second. "Is that your wife's name? Mary?"

The old man lapsed into mumblings. James stood there, totally unprepared for an intruder on beef stew night.

"Lois, did you call the police?" James yelled over his shoulder, back into the recesses of the house.

"Yes, I'm on the phone with them right now. They want a description."

"Well I don't know," James yelled, flustered. "Tell them it's an old man...he's wearing brown pants and a light yellow shirt. It's not like he's going to outrun them or anything."

James heard his wife talking. "What does he look like?" Lois yelled.

The old man turned towards the door, opened it, and shuffled through it.

"Mary."

"Tell them that he's going outside," James yelled. "I'm going to follow him."

James walked to the door, flipped the outside porch light

on, and stepped outside. The cold winter air hit him hard after the warmth of the house. The old man stood stationary on the walkway, halfway between the house and the sidewalk. Shivering, James walked towards the man, but stopped about five feet behind him, unsure of what to do. Headlights appeared about a hundred yards down the road, and as the car passed under the streetlight, James saw it was the police.

As the sound of the approaching car grew louder, the old man began walking across the yard, towards the tree on the right side of the lawn. The old tree, which James had sworn he was going to have cut down this year, as soon as the weather turned, bared empty branches towards the stars filling the cold black sky. With James behind him, the old man reached the tree just as the police car pulled up to the curb. Two officers exited the car, shining powerful flashlights on the situation

The old man touched the tree and mumbled.

"What's the problem here?" one of the officers asked.

"This old man walked into our house," James said. "I don't know who he is, but he keeps asking for Mary."

One of the officers shined his light on the old man. Under the light, James could see the heart carved into the gray bark of the tree, a heart he had looked at often but never really seen. Inside the heart were the initials MF and DF.

"Mary" the old man moaned.

The officers moved as one towards the old man, walking around him to shine their lights in his face.

"Hey, this is Dale Flickinger," one of the officers proclaimed. "Him and my Grandpa were friends. Damn, I thought this old guy was dead."

The officer turned to James. "What was your name?"

"James Askew," James replied.

"Well, Mr. Askew, this old gentleman used to live in this house, up until, oh, about ten years ago. That Mary he keeps on asking for was his wife."

James looked at the figure in the light, touching what had once been his. "He lived here?"

"Mary's family had some money. They owned a store downtown. After they married, Dale quit the mines and took over the store. They had some kids, but they've all moved away. Dale and Mary stayed here. I know Dale sold the store after Mary died, but I don't know where he moved to afterwards."

The officers conferred for a moment, mumblings James wasn't privy to. One of the officers went back to the cruiser. The other walked over to the tree.

"Mr. Flickinger?" The officer touched the old man on the shoulder. "Mr. Flickinger? Come on, sir. Let's go home."

The officer looked at James, his face half hidden, half shining in the light from the porch. "We'll get him taken care of, sir. Thank you for calling us. Come on, Mr. Flickinger."

The officer gently took the old man's forearm and turned him towards the street.

"Mary," Mr. Flickinger said.

"Yes, sir, we'll take you to Mary," the officer said.

"Would you like to go home?"

"Home. Mary. Mary home," James heard as the old man was carefully helped into the rear of the police car.

"Thanks again for your help, sir," the officer said as he entered the vehicle. Not knowing what to do, James held up his hand in a wave as the police car pulled away from the curb, leaving James in the cold half-darkness beyond the porchlight.

With a start, James realized he was cold. He turned and walked up the pathway. Entering the house, James turned off the outside light. The last thing James saw before he closed the door was the branches of the tree, pointing like arthritic fingers towards the dead winter sky. James thought of the old man and his Mary, and wondered if someday he too would be a senile old man wandering around for his long-dead Lois. With a sigh, James closed the door and walked back into the kitchen to resume the interrupted dinner.

The wrestling room was hot. The walls, padded with old blue wrestling mats, seemed to emanate heat, as if there were boilers behind each section of mat. The boy stood in the center of the room. He had on a one-piece wrestling suit, but with the shoulder straps down around his hips, so that his upper torso was naked. The boy, caught between childhood and adulthood, had the unfinished build of an adolescent, but his muscles stood out like rubber bands under his skin, with the promise of future development.

The boy took several deep breaths with his hands on his hips, concentrating on a section of mat at his feet. Then the boy began practicing takedowns, stepping down towards the mat, then dragging his other foot under him until he came to a standing position, all the while clasping his imaginary opponent. The boy moved from one end of the hot room to the other, quickly, efficiently practicing his moves.

A sound at the door caused the boy to stop. He looked over to the door, where a man stood watching the boy.

"I thought I heard someone down here. Practice is over. Why don't you go home and get some rest?" the coach said.

The boy said nothing. The coach moved into the center of the room, next to the boy. The coach hesitantly put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You could be so good if you only wanted to," the coach said. Suddenly the coach was behind the boy. He placed his arms around the boy, hugging him from the rear. "Oh yes, so good" he moaned.

Startled, the boy stood still for a moment, then smoothly ducked down and off to the right. The boy's left foot shot out behind the coach, and the boy pushed against the coach's legs. The man fell backwards and hit the mat hard, exhaling sharply. The combined sounds

echoed for a second in the small hot room, then faded.

The boy quickly stood up from his crouch and moved a few paces away, staring intently at the man lying on the mat. Then the boy turned and slowly walked over to the door, with his back to the coach. When the boy reached the door, he turned and looked at the coach. The boy casually reached up and turned the lights to the room off, then walked out of the room and up the stairs, into the cool hallway. His footsteps faded down the hallway as he left the hot wrestling room in silent darkness.

The Headhunter

"Kevin, check that out!"

Murphy gestured with his head over to two men, sitting together in one seat in the near-empty subway. One of the men wore a lavender jumpsuit, open at the chest. The other man wore black pants and an orange silk shirt. Kevin could see what upset Murph. The two queers were holding hands. The queers kissed, and Kevin knew what was going to happen. Kevin knew that the beers Murph and him had already had were sure to spur Murph into one of his rages. He almost pitied the fags.

Murph stood up. A big guy, Murph's muscles rippled under his black T-shirt. Kevin knew Murph was pissed off, because his scalp was bright red under the regulation Marine Corps haircut. Kevin slowly stood up and followed Murph as he walked steadily towards the queers. When he reached the seat, Murph stood over the men. When neither looked up at him, Murph cuffed the one with the lavender jumpsuit on the side of the head, hard. It made a hollow sound, and some of the other passengers turned around.

"Parlez-vous English, you faggot motherfuckers?" Murph said. Kevin saw a bright red handprint on lavender man, whose moussed hair had hardly moved. The other guy had jet black hair, cut short, almost like theirs. The thought gave Kevin pause. He hoped no one ever mistook him for a fag.

Lavender man looked up at Murph in shock. "What do you want?" he asked fearfully.

"I want all you faggot French motherfuckers dead. What the hell do you think you're doing, making out? Don't you know there's kids around. You goddamn faggots." Murph cuffed the guy again. It made the same hollow noise, and people started looking at each other, Kevin saw. But Murph was right, Kevin thought. No one should have to watch fags making out.

The black haired man suddenly got his voice. "Va tu faire ankule, putain!" he shouted at Murph.

Murph turned to Kevin, his muddy brown eyes dangerous. "What'd he say?"

"He said why don't you go fuck yourself, whore."

"Holy shit, I don't believe it. I don't believe it! You're telling me to go fuck myself, you little asshole?" Murph, totally red in the face, reached across lavender man and picked the other guy up by his pretty orange shirt. Kevin saw it as no match. Murph weighed two-hundred and fifty pounds; the queer couldn't weigh over a hundred thirty, Kevin saw. Murph lifted orange shirt up into the air and over the red vinyl seat. Orange-shirt's eyes were now huge in their fright.

Murph tossed the guy across the aisle, into the closed door. Orange-shirt's head struck the glass with a thonk. He slid down and laid at the base of the door. Murph looked over at Kevin with a triumphant expression.

"Let's teach these assholes a lesson."

Kevin began to get uneasy. Slapping fags around was one thing, but really hurting them was another. He looked at lavender pants, who quailed in his seat, afraid to do anything. Murph walked over to orange-shirt, and kicked him in the stomach twice. Lavender-man shot out of his seat and rushed by Kevin, who made a failed effort to grab him. Lavender-man reached his

companion and slouched over him protectively. Murph looked at him in disgust.

"Please, Mssr., just leave us alone!"

Murph kicked him in the face, then went ballistic.

"Motherfuckin' fags! Goddamn frogs! Teach you to mess with me!" He began stomping both men alternately as Kevin watched, helpless to do anything.

The train suddenly burst into a lit platform area, and Kevin saw that the platforms were full of people. He looked down at the two queers, lying bloody on the ground, and said, "Murph. Murph! That's enough. Dude, we're gonna get busted. They ain't worth it!"

Murph stopped kicking them as the train lurched to a stop. The doors opened with a hiss of air. The people standing on the platform looked in at the scene, and began shuffling to another, more distant car. Murph reached over and grabbed lavender-man. "Get the hell off my train, fag!" Murph said as he dumped the guy onto the platform. Then he picked up orange-shirt, holding him with one hand as he stared into the dazed, bleeding face.

"Tell me to fuck off, huh?" Murph hit the guy full in the face. The body slumped, and Kevin knew Murph had gone too far. Murph threw the guy out on top of lavender-man. There was a dull snap, and Kevin saw orange-shirt convulse. His arm had broken in the fall. The doors closed with another hiss of air.

"Kopfjaeger, kopfjaeger!" Murph bellowed as he turned to look at the other passengers, defying them to denounce him. "I'm a fuckin' hardass kopfjaeger!"

Kevin turned from the spectacle of Murph and looked at the retreating platform. As the train plunged into the darkness of the tunnel again, Kevin saw lavender-man bent weeping over orange-shirt, who suddenly sat upright. His broken arm, raised towards the ceiling, bent once at the elbow and again at the forearm. Orange-shirt tilted his head back at the ceiling, and Kevin imagined he could hear the howl as the train was enveloped in the dark tunnel.

* * *

The walkway teemed with people. Kevin sat at the table, waiting but not really wanting Murph to get back from inside the café's bathroom. The sun shone down on Kevin, making him feel even more drunk. He twisted the umbrella jutting from the center of the table, and moved his chair so he would be in the shade. Satisfied, he looked down into the courtyard, twenty feet below. All kinds of freaks down there, he thought. There were jugglers, and artists, and mimes, and all kinds of other lowlifes. Kevin didn't care. He just wanted to get drunk and forget the subway. He looked across the courtyard. The Georges Pompidou Center rose about a hundred feet, with pipes going every which way. To Kevin it looked like a building with its guts on the outside. Some kind of statement, Kevin guessed. The square over which Kevin sat looked like a huge empty pool. On the north side the walkway and courtyard met. The courtyard then sloped down towards the south, so that a drop of about thirty feet occurred from the walkway to the bottom of the courtyard.

Kevin turned back towards his beer. He often came here, to watch the different kinds of people flow by. He wished he hadn't brought Murph. Murph scared him sometimes. Kevin looked up and tried to catch some girl's eye, but he wasn't into it. Kevin liked looking at everyone walking by, and guessing where they were from. The Americans were easy to spot. They hung together, and almost always spoke loudly, as if to hide their unease at being somewhere foreign. Sometimes, when a group of Marines sat together, young American girls, students at the

Sorbonne or University of Paris, would hear the Marines as they sat around, talking and drinking. Inevitably the girls would be invited to the Marine House for a party. Kevin laughed softly, just as Murph sat back down. Back home, the same girls wouldn't look twice at him. Kevin knew he was beneath their station. Here, though, he was a connection to the homeland.

Kevin sipped his beer from the big one-liter mug. The Marines that came here always bought the big beers, and left a good tip. That way Jean-Paul didn't mind them taking off with the mugs every now and then. A good waiter, Jean-Paul, Kevin mused; he always made sure they had a seat and a beer as long as they wanted it. Kevin laughed softly again. Back home he wouldn't have been old enough to drink.

Murph took Kevin's soft laugh for a desire to talk.

"Hey Kevin, you going out tonight?"

Kevin leaned back in his chair, looked around, then took a long pull from the beer in front of him. There were some good looking girls walking by, but Kevin didn't really pay attention. He wanted to get lost inside himself.

"Yeah, I guess so. Not too much else to do."

"Whattya mean? There's always something to do. You know how these French chicks love us Marines. Our shit don't stink here."

Kevin took another long pull from his beer. Murph was always going on about the Marines. He lived for that shit. He always had on some logo or another: "Death Before Dishonor"; "The Killing Fields"; "Marines--Awesome." All Murph's shirts ill fit his huge frame. Kevin knew he lifted constantly. Murph said it helped him carry his sniper rifle. Kevin thought Murph lifted because he was too dumb to lift a book.

The shirt Murph had on today said "Kopfjaeger." Murph always went on about how he was a sniper. He was always screaming out, "One shot one kill" at the worst of times. Kevin remembered once when he had tried to pick up this French girl. Murph had snuck up behind her, grabbed her shoulder, and screamed, "One shot one kill!" at the top of his lungs. Kevin had thought the girl was going to pass out.

Another time, when Kevin had only been in Paris for a week, Murph and a bunch of guys had asked him if he wanted to go out. Kevin had agreed, and for his first night out in Paris they had taken him to an American-style pizzeria on the Champs-D'Elysees. Kevin remembered that there had been a girl staring at him across the bar. He wanted to buy her a beer, but didn't speak the language, so he asked Murph for help. Murph spent fifteen minutes teaching Kevin one of the only three phrases he knew. Confident, Kevin had gone up to the girl and said, "Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ses soi?" The girl slapped him. She hadn't wanted to sleep with him, which is what Murph taught him to say. The guys had laughed. Murph laughed loudest at his cleverness. Kevin knew then what a mean-spirited sonofabitch Murph was, but Marines were supposed to stick together. Weren't they? Kevin mused.

Murph always thought stuff like that was funny. Kevin had once asked Murph what Kopfjaeger meant. Murph put one meaty finger to Kevin's head and said softly, "Pow. You're dead. I'm a headhunter." Murph kind of scared Kevin like that.

"What're you so quiet for?" Murph asked. "You pissed off about the Metro still?"

"Murph, jacking them up is one thing, but sometimes I think you're crazy. You're too hardcore. Can't you take it easy sometimes?"

"Hell no. It ain't my fault those two fags were making out. Hell, you don't see that shit back in Wisconsin."

Well, we're not in Wisconsin. This is Paris, and stuff like that happens."

"What're you defending a bunch of fags for? You love fags now or something?" Murph asked, beginning to get red.

"No. Hell no. It's just that you can't go around beating the shit out of all the queers here, you know?"

Murph looked Kevin straight in the eye. "Oh yes I can."

Kevin turned away.

"Kevin, you want..." Murph started to say, when a shout went up across the courtyard. Looking over, Kevin saw someone standing atop a pipe on the Pompidou Center. The man looked down into the courtyard, more than a hundred feet down. Suddenly Kevin realized that the purple jumpsuit and pouffy hair belonged to one of the fags from the train.

Murph realized it too. "Look, it's one of the fags."

The man on top of the eight-story building wailed for a few minutes. When someone else came onto the pipe, the queer in purple began gesturing wildly.

"Jesus, Murph, it looks like he's going to jump."

"So what. One less queer in the world," Murph said, raising his glass to his lips. Suddenly, the guy jumped, down into the tourists and freaks in the courtyard. Kevin watched the man fall. Everyone on the sidewalk around had stopped their conversation to watch the man in purple, wishing to fly. In the silence, Kevin heard the thump when the guy hit the deck, then rebounded into the air.

"Jesus," Kevin breathed. "Jesus Christ."

"Dude!" Murph yelled. "Didya see that guy bounce? He must have bounced three feet!" Murph looked around ecstatically. Kevin looked around at all the other customers, and saw his horror mirrored in their eyes.

"Want another beer?" Murph asked jovially. Kevin couldn't stand the sight of him suddenly, and rose up quickly.

"I gotta go," Kevin said over his shoulder, ignoring Murph's questions haunting the air behind him and the body down in the courtyard to his left. He left Murph to both beers.

Later that evening, as Kevin sat raging drunk at the bar, a whole group of his fellow Marines, including Murph, came in. Murph was talking wildly.

"Kevin, tell 'em. I made that fag kill himself when I kicked the shit out of him and his pretty little boyfriend. Tell 'em."

"That's right, Murph," Kevin said quietly, not looking up from his beer. Kevin didn't think he could stand to turn around.

The late afternoon sun cast a red-orange glow over the hills, but the light didn't penetrate the entrance to the mine, which stood like an abscess against the green of the land. A dark hole slashed into the side of the hill marked the beginning of the descent into the earth. Fluorescent lights greeted anyone entering the mine, as if a reminder that all things from that point ^{were} ~~was~~ artificial: the air, the light, the supporting beams, life itself. The hum of machinery was the only sound emanating from the mine. The air all around the hills was always heavy with dust, as if a throng of cars had just passed through, leaving particles suspended in the atmosphere. The dust made it hard to breathe.

Suddenly, from somewhere inside the mine, a horn sounded. The sound seemed muffled, as if it came from somewhere far off. After a few minutes, a group of men was disgorged from the black hole. Black coal dust covered every part of their bodies. One man, walking with a slight stoop, brought up the rear. He quietly returned the goodbyes of his fellow miners and slowly walked to the parking lot. He stopped when he reached an old truck, its tan color faded after many years of service. The man removed his goggles and gloves, revealing hands and a band around his eyes which were startlingly white against the black dust covering the rest of him. The man paused for a second near his truck, running his hands through his hair. Then he turned and spit. He looked down at where his spit lay on the ground. It looked black against the gravel. He coughed once, a short, dry sound, like a paper bag being crinkled, then opened the door to the truck. The upholstery on the driver's side of the vehicle was stained black, while the passenger side remained tan. The man retrieved his keys from his pockets, then wearily climbed into the vehicle. He held the wheel with both hands for a few seconds, staring straight ahead at the mine he had just left. Then he started the truck and slowly drove out of the parking lot, away from the mine. The dust kicked up by the truck seemed to hang in the air for a long time after

the man left, adding to the haze surrounding the hills.

"Song of the Locusts"

I got to know Projo when we were both twelve. Just before we were released from school that year for summer vacation, I began talking to him. Before long, we began hanging out together. Maybe it was the thought that together we had no limits on our activities. My parents both worked, and his dad was a drunk. Was he really such a bad kid? I don't know. We did some pretty cruel stuff, now that I look back on it, but aren't kids inherently cruel? I always hear about how kids are innocent and all, but those aren't the kids I knew growing up. I'm not saying Projo was completely normal, but he wasn't a Nixon or Jeffrey Dahmer or anything. He was just a kid trying to make some sense of what he was.

His real name was Timothy, but everyone called him Projo. I asked him about it once, and he told me that his father had called him that since he could remember. When I asked him we were "flying" insects. What I mean is, we would catch those little cicadas, which we called locusts, cause we didn't know any better. I've read that these cicadas only came out after seventeen years, but anymore I don't believe half of what I read and almost none of what I hear. Anyway, those locusts made an awful racket. They just sat in trees and screamed like a bunch of drunks drying out at the Betty Ford clinic. They were ugly, too. They have these huge bulbous eyes on either side of their squarish head, eyes which have this little black spot in them, so

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you know they're staring at you. Projo and I used to catch them (they don't fly so fast) and tie a string around their body, just behind the locust's head. Then we'd fly them in circles for awhile, like those motorized model planes you see people flying. When we got bored, we would jerk on the string, and the locust's head would come off, only, it's body wouldn't realize it. The string would go slack, and the black body of the locust would continue to fly a few feet, then drop. You could hear the plop when it hit the ground. Without any head, you could look down into the body of the locust. It was all white, and I could stick my pinkie into the hole where the head had been. It felt weird, though; slimy, like when you pick up spaghetti that's been sitting in water too long. I only stuck my finger down into a decapitated locust's body once. That was enough.

So we were flying insects. The sun was so bright that you couldn't really see the locust; you just knew it was there by the little tug on the string, the need for the insect to escape. I jerked my string, watching the body fall. Plop.

"Why does everyone call you Projo?" I asked. I saw his arm jerk, then heard the body hit seconds later. Plop.

Projo turned towards me.

"What?"

"Why do they call you Projo?"

He walked over to his bike, lying on its side in the driveway of our house. He got on his bike and started pedalling,

without saying a word. I ran over to my bike and pedalled after him. I followed him down to the river. He got off his bike and dropped it, then walked over to the embankment and sat down. I copied him. We sat in silence for a while before he spoke.

"My dad's called me that ever since I can remember. I asked him the same question."

Projo picked up a stick and began drawing in the dirt. He drew a bullet.

"My dad drew this. He said I looked like a projectile, so he calls me Projo."

When I looked at the drawing, I didn't say anything. Projo didn't have shoulders, at least in proportion to the rest of his body. His shoulders sloped sharply down, and with the roundness of the rest of his body, Projo did look like the drawing. I never told anyone else how he got his name, though.

Projo's dad scared me. I know he scared Projo too, though he wouldn't admit to it. His father had been in Vietnam. Projo said he never talked about it, and though curious as to what he had done over there, I certainly wasn't ever going to ask him. Projo didn't have a mother. When I asked him about her once, all he said was, "She left a long time ago." It was just Projo and his father. They lived in a trailer about two miles outside of town. There weren't any other trailers around, or houses for that matter. Just trees and fields. The paint on the trailer would come off if you brushed up against it, a white chalky

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powder that resisted all efforts to brush it off. You could get lost in the grass surrounding Projo's trailer. The grass came up to my stomach. I don't think they owned a mower. Thinking back, I never once knocked on the thin wooden door to the trailer. I never once went inside that trailer. Projo was always outside, waiting for me to arrive. Since they didn't own a phone, I always said something like, "See you tomorrow around noon." Projo would just grunt, or nod, and go sit against the trailer as I left. For all I knew, he sat out there all the time, day and night.

Once Projo and I were sitting in the shade, against the side of the trailer. The noonday sun beat down around us, causing everything to be seen indistinctly, hazily. The cicadas seemed to be the only things alive. They filled the air with their metallic buzzing, calling to one another, letting each other know they weren't alone. Projo and I, too hot to talk, listened to their calls.

Projo's father lurched out from the inside, shirtless, his huge hairy gut hanging over his jeans. His hands held a beer and a pistol. He took a swig of the beer, then raised the pistol and fired two shots at the woods about thirty yards away.

"Damn bugs! Shut up!" he screamed towards the woods, quiet now. He fired one more shot, for emphasis I guess, then without a word or a glance down at us, he disappeared back inside the trailer. I looked at Projo, but he stared at the woods, jaws

clenched. His fingers, dirty and cracked, unconsciously played with a hole in the leg of his jeans. The cicadas were silent for a few minutes, but resumed their songs, hesitantly at first, then louder, as if to reassert the dominance of their noise. Projo's father never came back outside. After about another five minutes, during which neither of us spoke, Projo got up, grabbed his bike, and started riding down the dirt road, away from the trailer. I silently followed. Neither of us said anything until we got down to the river.

"I think my old man is crazy," is all Projo said that day, staring at the greenish-brown river slowly passing us by. I left him down by the river, not knowing when I would see him again, his shoulderless body curled up, arms around his knees, like a living ball.

I didn't go back to Projo's place for two weeks. As July threatened to turn into August and the awful promise of returning to school, I began wondering about him. I made some lunch in the silent morning of my house, and put it in my backpack. I rode my bike the mile to his trailer, wondering all the way if I would have enough courage to knock on that door. It turned out I didn't need to. Projo already sat against the trailer, not offering a word as I pedalled up. I dropped my bike in a clatter and shudder of metal, just like he always did, then sat next to him.

"Want to go down to the bridge?" I asked after a few

minutes. With a shrug, he said "Yes." We retrieved our bikes and began the three-mile trip to the bridge.

The black metal bridge, about two hundred feet long, allowed trains to cross the river. The tracks themselves were about twenty feet above the river. The bridge was about thirty feet wide. On both sides of the bridge, black metal beams raised themselves about twenty-five feet above the tracks. The beams looked like someone had taken huge staples, pulled the two legs out to forty-five degree angles, and stuck them upside down on the railroad tracks. Sometimes we went down to the bridge, and jumped, feet first, the twenty feet from the tracks to the river below.

Whenever I jumped from the bridge, the fall always amazed me, especially the sinking feeling in my stomach until my feet slapped the river, plunging me down, down into the murky water. Once I tried to keep my eyes open as I went under, but I had grit in my eyes for the rest of the day, so I always kept my eyes shut after that. Keeping my eyes closed as I fell and plunged almost breathless into the dark water made me scared, which made me enjoy jumping so much more. Somehow, the thought of losing my direction, and going down, deeper and deeper, until I touched the slimy mud of the littered bottom, appealed to me. But always, maybe sadly, my head would break the surface after I jumped.

On that day, we dropped our bikes in the normal spot, off to the side of the bridge before the embankment plunged away, down

to the river. I began walking across the bridge, but Projo stopped me.

"Wait," he said. He walked back to where the bridge began. He touched the metal beam. "I want to climb up here."

I looked up at the slanting beam. It didn't look too bad, but I was wary.

"I don't know, Projo. What for?" I asked.

Projo just looked at me, his eyes murky, like the river below. Uncomfortable, like a disobedient dog not wanting to make eye contact with its master, I looked away. I heard a rustle, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Projo beginning to ascend the beam. He gripped the black beam with his hands while keeping both feet against the steel, so his back arched out like an inchworm moving forward slowly. I hesitantly followed. The hot metal burned my hands, but the fear kept me from noticing too much. I just followed behind Projo, too scared to look down. I kept my eyes firmly planted on his shoes, his legs, his shorts, his back, on anything to keep from realizing what I was doing. I don't think it took too long to get to where the beam straightened out, but it's hard to tell. When I made it to the top, Projo was about fifteen feet ahead of me, standing straight, with his arms out to his sides, walking further out on the bridge. I stayed put. Projo walked about halfway across the bridge, then slowly turned until he faced the river. Then he sat down, seemingly not bothered by the fact that he was almost fifty

feet above the river. He didn't even look at me, just out at the river, flowing as always far below.

I didn't think I could do it, but somehow I convinced myself to stand up. Then I wondered how I was going to get back down, and I almost started crying. Biting my lip, I slowly, oh so slowly made my way towards where Projo sat. He made no effort to encourage me, and at that moment I hated the silent bastard with a crazy for a father. But somehow, I wished I was like Projo, too.

I finally made it to where he sat. Scared more than I ever had been, or have been since, I gently eased myself down. I didn't want to dangle my legs over the edge, like Projo, fifty feet up in the air, but I did. When I finally looked down, I saw that the track platform extended out wider than the beam did, so that if I fell straight down, I would hit the tracks, not the river. The thought did not comfort me.

Projo still hadn't said a word. He just stared out. I wondered what he saw. I tried to follow his gaze. Looking downriver, I saw clouds of mud billowing in the water. Carp were feeding in the shallower water downstream, rooting in the mud for something to eat. A bird swooped down further upstream, rippling the water for a second before pulling up sharply into the white-blue sky. In the distance the locusts sang. A little blue dragonfly suddenly appeared before us in a whirl of wings. Hovering with sudden ease, it dipped up and down once or twice,

studying us, then suddenly departed with a fading whisper.

"Man, I hope a train doesn't come," I said.

For the first time since we had ascended, Projo looked at me. His eyes held scorn. "You're a puss, you know that?"

Stung, my eyes watered. I looked away, anywhere but at him. I noticed a dark shape moving upstream through the water. A carp swam slowly towards us, now only about a hundred feet downstream. Eager, desperate to be accepted, I pointed towards it. "Check that out," I exclaimed. "It's a carp," I added unnecessarily.

Projo didn't bother answering me. He stared at the fish intently. It kept on swimming upstream, oblivious to our presence high in the air. Its direction would bring it right beneath us.

We sat and watched the carp, until it was about fifteen feet downstream. Suddenly, Projo stood up. I looked up at him, but the sun just made him a dark shadow looming above me. I couldn't see his face. He spread his arms out, and raised himself up on his toes. He was like a dark, indistinct crucifix against the lightness of the sky.

"Projo?" I stammered. "What's up?"

He stayed that way for a few seconds. Then, almost silently, he was gone. I say almost silently because--I believe and hope--I heard a whispered "goodbye."

His arms never moved in a windmill. His feet never parted. He fell, headfirst, towards the river, towards the carp, which

swam directly beneath us. I saw Projo hit the water and heard a sharp smack, like the report of a distant rifle shot. I stared at the water, at the bubbles furiously coming from somewhere deep down in the river, but Projo never came up. I saw the dead carp float to the surface a little downstream. I watched it turn over slowly. I watched it float downstream, a darker shape against the dark river, until I could make it out no more. I noticed that the sky was blue, and that the far off trees on either side of the embankments looked black in the distance, not green. I noticed that Projo left no evidence that he had sat there beside me, on top of the black steel bridge. I noticed that the locusts had stopped their singing. Then I wept.

I don't remember how or when I got down. I don't remember climbing down, though I must have. I don't remember riding home, and finding my house empty and still as always, both parents at work. I don't remember riding my bike to the police station and telling them my story. Everything that happened on that day, after Projo jumped, is black. I do remember the next day, and the next, and every day after. They dredged the river for miles downstream, but his body was never found.

A few weeks before school started, I rode my bike to Projo's trailer. The locusts fell silent as I rode down the dirt road until the trailer revealed itself, as always, alone and faded in a field of stomach-high grass. Only now, the trailer stood totally silent. Projo did not sit in his customary spot against

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the trailer. No sounds came from the inside. I wanted Projo to be there, waiting for me as I rode up the dirt road. He was not there. It was then I really understood that Projo was gone. As I turned my bike around and left forever the dead white trailer, the locusts began to serenade me with their songs. I wondered, and wonder to this day, what they were saying.

The men stood around the barrels crossing the road, talking quietly among themselves. The barrels blocked the entrance to a fenced-off compound. A sign on the fence read "Krager Mining, Inc." Near the fence a group of signs proclaimed the group to be on strike.

One of the men seemed to find a barrel out of place. He touched another man on the arm and spoke quietly to him. Together, they walked over to a barrel which stood just on one side of the road. Together they tried to roll the barrel so that it was further in on the road. They struggled to tip the barrel on its rim, as it was full of concrete. The two men were finally able to roll the barrel on its edge about five feet further into the roadway, so there was less gap between the obstacles on the road. Then the men returned to the main group, which numbered about thirty.

The sound of approaching vehicles caused a hush to fall over the men. Down the road a convoy of vehicles appeared. In the group of men around the barrels, weapons which only a second before had been hidden now appeared. The trucks, all of them carrying men, continued down the road until about fifty feet from the group surrounding the barrels. When the trucks stopped, the men, with weapons of their own, climbed down onto the road. Both sides stood staring at each other, chains, baseball bats, and other weapons held out for the other side to see. The group of men who had just arrived on the trucks suddenly began moving towards the barrels. No words had been spoken. The men around the barrels waited for the larger group to reach them. When they did, the fight began.

Cries of pain and anger began to fill the air like some medieval battleground. The strikers refused to yield to the newcomers. Suddenly a shot rang out. The fight paused for a second as if transfixed by the sound. A man lay on the ground, his blood mixing with the dust to make a dark chalky paste. As if some command had just been shouted, the group from the trucks

turned and ran back to their vehicles, one man half-carrying, half-dragging his wounded companion. As they retreated, stones thrown by the strikers filled the air, pelting the strikebreakers. With a roar, the trucks started up and returned from where they came. As the dust settled, the strikers tended to themselves. The barrels still stood.

"The Star"

The wind blew harshly across the valley, but he hardly felt it. The crust of snow he sat on had dug into him earlier, but it was melted now, causing his rear to ache. Pain is good. Extreme pain is extremely good. That is what he had learned in the service. He didn't know if he could do it. What of the effects? Not that he cared. What had the town given him? The sharp pitchy smell of pine alternated with the dull smell of fermenting leaves. He decided he would miss the hills, their smells, their substance. The sun was slowly fading, casting a large shadow over the valley as it descended behind the hills. It looked like a dark sheet, pulled over a still-warm body, to give the dead dignity. He snorted. The image was apt.

He stared at the star in front of him. It stood there, twenty feet high. It was constantly lit, to mark the Christmas season. The generator hummed softly. He could smell the exhaust from it, a smell which didn't belong in the hills. His T-shirt made him want to itch, but he ignored the desire. Must be strong. His jacket was too thin, but it was all he had. He held the box in his thin, almost skeletal fingers, loving the power of it. He followed the wires to the star, knowing they were his. Glad and scared they were his. This was to be his legacy. He dreamed without sleeping.

Once, when he was six, he sat in his room, looking out the window at the sky above, wishing he could see and know everything, like God. Suddenly the star appeared on the hill across the valley. He excitedly ran to his father.

"What is it, Devon?" his father asked.

"There's a star on the hill. Come look!" he cried as he ran back to his room. His father followed. His father looked out at across the dark valley, up at the star.

"Ah, yes, God gives that to us every year, because we're special," his father said.

"Really?"

"Sure," his father said as he went back to the living room. "This is a special place."

Devon believed his father. Then, in sixth grade, he saw the star on a trailer being pulled by a truck full of Mexican laborers. The star looked spindly and fake, not something God would want a hand in. Devon recognized one of the laborers. His son was in Devon's class at school. Later they would be deported for being illegal. Tioga was a special place, all right.

A chittering sound off to his left interrupted Devon's thoughts. A squirrel stood on its hind legs, eyeing him. Little gray tufts of fur poked up from the squirrel's ears. It chattered in the clearing, the only sound except for the wind.

"Go away, little squirrel. You don't want to be around here." Devon thought his voice sounded funny, alone and tinny in the winter dusk. The light of the star was beginning to be more noticeable against the ground as the short winter day came to a close. Devon saw the headlights of cars down in the valley. Light. Pretty soon there would be one big light, then nothing more. The power of destruction. Devon sank back into his fleeing memories, before they were so far ahead he could never catch them. Not much longer now.

She liked to watch him soap himself up in the shower. It bothered and embarrassed him. Whenever she drew the shower curtain aside, he held himself with both hands. He couldn't seem to stop the urge to cover himself. She never stepped into the shower; instead sitting on the toilet, just watching him. Usually they had sex afterwards. Once, after sex, he grabbed her hands with his. When she looked at him, he said, "I love you."

"You don't have to say that," was all she said. He left soon after.

He never said it again.

Devon felt his head nodding towards his chest. He stood up, stamping the pins and needles out of his feet. March. He needed to march. He knew how to do that. Devon began stamping around the rapidly darkening clearing, crusty snow crunching under his feet. It sounded like eggshells breaking. But he knew how to march. Just before he graduated, the guidance counselor told him, "I don't think you're college material. Have you ever thought about the Marines?" The shoulders of her blue dress were covered with dandruff. The sight had sickened him. Her breath smelled sour, yet sweet too, like an onion or carrot dug up in the spring, missed in the fall harvest, soft and slimy after spending too long in the ground. When he replied "No, not really," the counselor handed him a card embossed with a tattooed bulldog. "Here's the number. Give them a call." He had taken the card, and all but run out of the office. He dropped the card outside the office, imagining it stunk of rotten vegetables. The number to the Marines turned out to be in the phone book anyway.

It wasn't a way out. They made it sound so good, but it wasn't. Before he left, Devon had enjoyed going down to the airport and watching the planes take off. He wondered what you could see from so high above. Now he knew. It was the same everywhere. When he came back to the town after a five-year hitch, his parents were gone. They had never written. Neither had Devon. The mines had closed while Devon was gone. Devon's father had been a miner. The day after he returned to the town after five years, Devon went to the airport and saw a father with his young son, watching the planes take off. He wanted to yell, to scream at them, tell them it was all a lie. It was the same no matter where you went. The towns, the people, the events, had different names, but it was all the same. But he just turned and walked away. He never went down to the airport again.

Every year, he waited for the star. Waited for something, but he didn't know what. Now he knew. The star beckoned to him, mocked him. The star spoke of a special place.

Once there had been a special place and another woman. He often took her there. Together they sat on the hood of the car, looking up at the dark, cloudless sky. They rarely spoke. Devon didn't like the sound of his voice.

A shooting star shot across the night sky, white turning to red as it fell to the horizon. Then it was gone. She sucked in her breath, and Devon knew she saw it too.

"That was something," she said. "This is great. I can't think of anything I would rather be doing." She squeezed his hand, and Devon cautiously squeezed back. He didn't answer her.

"There's no way this comes from some big bang," she said suddenly. Devon drew inwards protectively. There was always something.

"There's no way to prove it did or didn't," Devon said. "I guess we'll never find out."

"We will someday."

"Maybe."

"How can you look up there, see so many worlds, and not believe in God?" she asked, turning her head towards Devon. Her eyes were there, darker than her face. Devon felt them on him, and turned away. He didn't like people staring at him.

"It just takes more than blind faith for me." The words came grudgingly.

With that, she turned her head away again. Devon let go of her hand. She made no effort to reclaim it, ever.

"I guess that's the difference between you and I," she said.

Devon never responded. The stars had always seemed so bright before then.

Devon looked up at the now dark sky. Hunger caused his stomach to ache, but Devon had no need for food. Suddenly he saw a satellite, far above, tracking brightly across the sky. For a moment he wished he could see what it did, then laughed bitterly in the silent, dark opening. He knew what he would see. It was the same everywhere.

Devon hoped he had rigged the explosives correctly. He had used the last of his money on them. With a groan, he stood up. His body ached after sitting in same position throughout the cold day. He walked stiffly over to the star. He followed the wires to the bundle of explosives. They were still connected, of course. The skin of his hands looked translucent in the light of the star, his veins standing out like little rivers of dark. He slowly walked back to the tree and the black box, sitting coldly where he had left it moments before. Devon sat back down on the ground, slushy from the warmth of his body. He rested his head against the tree, feeling the cold smoothness of the detonator box. The town lay quiet and twinkling in the valley below.

"Here's hoping you have a merry Christmas," Devon said aloud to the night. As he pressed the button, Devon was unafraid. All he could think of was how he hated the sound of his own voice.

The reception hall held almost one hundred and fifty people. The hum of conversation almost drowned out the music being played. Long tables against the far south wall held a variety of food and alcohol. A large cake, one small wedge cut out of it, stood on a solitary table near the entrance to the hall. On the middle of the dance floor, the bride and groom danced slowly, oblivious to those around them. When the music stopped, the couple exited the dance floor. The bride was immediately accosted by a group of women. The groom spoke in the bride's ear. The bride nodded, and the groom disengaged himself from her. He walked over to the tables and poured himself a drink.

An older gentleman in a thin dark suit touched the groom on the shoulder. The groom turned around.

"Congratulations," the man said.

"Thank you, Father," the groom replied.

"What are your plans now?" the priest asked.

The groom paused. "I think we're going to head out West. I hear there's a building boom on, and I think I can get work as a contractor."

The priest looked at the groom sadly. "So we lose another, eh?"

"Afraid so, Father. Pretty soon there's not going to be enough people to give Mass to."

The groom started as his new wife touched him on the arm.

"Hello, Father," she said.

"Hello, my dear. You look lovely."

The bride whispered something to the groom.

"Sorry, Father, but we're leaving now. Thanks for everything."

"Goodbye, you two. Congratulations to you both. Good luck in all you do!" the priest

called out to the couple, already retreating, eager to begin their new lives together. The priest watched them as they trotted to the front door, acknowledging the cries and hugs of well-wishers. The priest watched them as they disappeared out the door, then turned back to the table. He poured a glass full of vodka, then stared morosely at the table as the hall emptied of people wanting to see the new couple off.

"Lessons"

Kevin closed the door to the truck and looked around. The dirt road stretched back for about a mile to where it joined with the blacktop. Kevin hadn't seen anyone else this morning. He hoped it stayed that way, but he wasn't too worried. The silence professed the isolation of the place. Kevin looked up at the hills surrounding them. The grey granite loomed over them, dotted by bright white patches of snow and green trees. The trees rose around them like sentinels, and the wind seemed to carry the last cooling vestiges of spring. Although the weather said it was June, the river would still feel cold, like March.

"Make sure everything's locked up," Kevin said as he closed his door. "We certainly don't need our truck stolen now, of all times. I don't know what we'd do. You might want to leave your window cracked. This truck's gonna be an oven when we get back. Oh, yeah, and take off your ring. Put it in the change thingy."

"Okay," Cathy said, smiling. "This is going to be great. Thanks a lot for bringing me with you." She paused for a second before she placed the ring in the ashtray.

Kevin knew how much she hated to remove her ring, about the only thing of real value they owned now, besides the truck. Other things, like Cathy's grandmother's antique china cabinet, and all the china, had been sold to help them along. The strike was hitting them, and hitting them hard. But Kevin had been taught that the town was blood ties, and that they all stood

together. The pain on Cathy's face as the cash for the china exchanged hands hurt him, but he had kept his doubts to himself. Doubts, like cracks, could spread in the foundation of the townspeople, and if that happened, the Company would win.

"Well, you might as well learn sometime. Can't see how we can be married and all, but you've never fly-fished."

Kevin looked at Cathy as he went to the back of the truck and opened the door to the shell. She looked so cute, with her green Timberland hat, tan shorts, and one of his "Catch and Release" T-shirts. Her hair glowed the color of dry wheat in the sun. He pointed to the green waders, borrowed from his brother. "It's going to be hot anyways for a while, at least until we get down to the river."

"Why do we have to put these waders on now? Can't we just put them on when we get to the river?" Cathy asked.

"No, because then our shoes might get carried off by some animal, because we'd just have to leave them by the side of the river. Plus, if we changed at the river, we'd either have to carry our shoes back, or our wet waders. I prefer to just hike in 'em. It isn't so bad," Kevin said.

Kevin began dressing. He quickly finished donning his chest waders, vest, and lucky hat. As he sat on the tail of the truck, lacing up his boots, Kevin spoke to Cathy.

"Man, I hope the river has gone down some. The last time I came up, it was too fast and high. 'Member when I came home

freezin'? We'll be lucky if we can have kids after I fell in. Go sterile or something," Kevin said, laughing lightly. He looked at Cathy, and drew in his breath. He felt himself a lucky guy, even though sometimes he felt half a man, not working and all. Cathy fumbled with her gear for a moment, until she felt Kevin looking at her.

"I can't get this," Cathy said.

"Here, like this." Kevin helped Cathy tighten the shoulder straps on the waders. "It gets easier after you do it for a while, believe me. There. A little big, since they are my brother's and all, but not to worry. No one will see you in your droopy drawers." Kevin laughed softly again, for no other reason than feeling the warm mid-morning sun on him.

"Don't laugh at me, hon. I don't know how to put these things on, and I *don't* have droopy drawers" Cathy said, mock angrily.

"Oh, I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing with you," Kevin said, the corner of his eyes turning up as he smiled.

"You're so cute when you smile. The bottoms of your ears go up when you do," Cathy said, grabbing and kissing Kevin.

Kevin returned the kiss for a moment, then gently pushed her away. "Come on, come on. We don't have time for that. We have fish to catch."

As Cathy sat on the tailgate, lacing up her boots, Kevin

kissed her on the forehead. "I do love you," he said, as he began pulling out the fly rods. "In fact, I love you more than my fly rod."

Cathy paused, then laughed. "Why, thank you sweetheart. I love you more than my, um..." She thought for a second, then brightened. "I love you more than my ring."

It was Kevin's turn to laugh. "OK, we've established that we're the most important things in our lives. Now can we get going?"

Kevin pulled their lunch out of the back of the truck, then checked all the pockets of his vest, to make sure he had everything. Satisfied, he put the tailgate up, then closed and locked the shell.

"OK, that's it. Let's take off," Kevin said. He sighed happily. The day stretched out brightly before them as they began walking side by side, kicking dust. The wind in the trees made the leaves flutter, making it look as if the trees were waving them on, leading them to a place of forgetfulness.

* * *

They arrived at the end of the dirt road, where a small trail led off into the forest.

"About a hundred more yards and we'll be there. I'll put this cooler in the river, so our stuff will stay cold, then we'll get down to business," Kevin said. They were both sweating in the mid-morning sun, Cathy more than Kevin.

"Okay." A sheen of sweat stood out on Cathy's forehead and upper lip. *She looks like she's glowing,* Kevin thought. As they walked, the sound of the river became more apparent, unblending from the slight wind around them. The closer they came to the end of the trees in front of them, the louder the voices in the rushing water arose in greeting.

"Okay, Cathy, let's stop at that boulder. If you just jump out in plain view, you'll spook the fish. And once trout are spooked, they won't feed again for a day."

"All right." Cathy slumped against the rock tiredly.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, just a little winded. It's getting hot."

Kevin looked at Cathy, then shrugged it off. It was getting hotter, and she wasn't used to walking nearly a mile in waders. Kevin placed the flyrods against the rock, then slowly walked to the edge of the river, kneeling before he reached the edge. He always put in at this spot so he could wade to the deep pool a few hundred yards upstream, where he usually had the best luck of the day. Trying to splash as little as possible, Kevin put the cooler in the river, then moved a few rocks around it so their lunch wouldn't go floating off downstream. Then he slowly backed away, rising from his crouch about ten feet from the edge to turn and walk back to Cathy.

"Let's get these rods set up, so we can get started." Kevin

picked up Cathy's rod, twisting the two parts until the line guides looked perfectly straight to him. Pulling several yards of the green line from the reel, Kevin began threading the guides until he pulled the line through the very top hole.

"Since your setup is new, I have to put a leader and tippet on before we can get started. Mine already has 'em, so we don't have to do it twice," Kevin said.

"Leader and what?"

"Tippet. I know, it sounds complicated. I was confused at first too. Only I didn't have anyone to show me, so I had to learn everything out of a book. Ever try to tie a knot from pictures?" Kevin pulled a bag out of his vest. "This is the leader. Basically all we're trying to do is fool the fish into taking our fly."

He held up a fly, which looked like some fur tied to a tiny hook. "If we tied the fly right to this big green line, we'd never catch anything. It's so thick 'cause it has to float. So we use connecting lines that taper down in thickness, until we get down to the end of the tippet. See how thin this is?" Kevin held up a spool of super-thin line. "That's the business end of the line. It's so thin that the fly doesn't look connected to anything, so the trout takes it. Pretty simple when someone shows you, huh?"

Cathy watched Kevin work with the lines for a few moments, then said, "I'm sorry no one was ever around to help you out."

Kevin looked up from tying the fly onto the line. As he did, he jerked the line slightly, causing the rod to fall to the ground. The line tightened, and the fly dragged across Kevin's hand until the hook buried itself in his forefinger.

"Goddammit!" Kevin yelled, pulling the hook free. He looked at the blood welling up, then stuck his finger in his mouth. "I don't want to talk about it. You know I don't like to talk about my sonuvabitchin' father," he said after popping his finger from his mouth. "He was never there, and that's that. End of story. Now can we get going?"

Cathy looked down at the ground, then back at Kevin. He saw that a film of tears shined over her brown eyes, and Kevin cursed inwardly. He hated snapping at her, hated himself so badly when he did. If only she wouldn't always push at him, begging to be drawn into his memories. She had no place there. If only he could tell her that without getting angry.

"Honey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap. It's just that...you know I don't like to talk about it. You never met my father, and you don't know what he's done. I prefer to leave it that way."

Cathy closed her eyes for a few seconds. When she opened them her eyes no longer brimmed with tears any more. Softly, she said, "I know. I just wish you would let me in sometimes. You can get so angry so quickly, and I hate seeing you like that. You scare me when you get like that."

I scare myself when I get like that Kevin thought. My father was like that. I would sooner leave you the only love of my life than put you through what my father did to everyone around him. But he couldn't tell Cathy that.

"I'm sorry," Kevin said, though there was so much more he wanted to say. Something in him guarded that private area like an animal defending its kill, allowing nothing past an unseen line.

"I don't like it when you won't share with me. It's as if I don't know who you are sometimes. We're supposed to be partners, remember? How about holding up your end of the deal sometimes. And I'm not just talking about dishes or something," Cathy said.

Kevin stood up and walked over to Cathy. He put his arms around her and gave her a short, hard hug. "I'm so sorry. Me and my temper. Let's start all over. Let's not waste a perfect day. OK?"

"OK," Cathy said against his shoulder. She looked up and smiled at him, but Kevin could see the smile was forced. He smiled back at her, though he hardly felt like smiling. Kevin slowly disengaged.

"All better?" he asked.

"All better," Cathy replied, though Kevin could see a tightness in her face.

"Then let's get going," Kevin said with a light air he didn't really feel. Cathy paused for a second, as if she wanted to say something, but then almost perceptibly thought better of it.

"OK, Davy Crockett, king of the wild frontier." Cathy half-sang the ditty from the old TV show. "Lead on!" Kevin couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not, sticking him with that title.

Kevin finished preparing his fly rod. When he was satisfied with his setup, Kevin picked up Cathy's rod from against the boulder. "Here, hold this upright, please," he said. Propping his own fly rod against his shoulder, Kevin took out a vial of clear liquid the consistency of glue. "I'll just put some of this gink on, and we're outta here."

"Gink?"

"Stuff that makes the fly float, so you can see it. If you didn't put it on, your fly would sink, and that just isn't fly fishing."

"You're the boss," Cathy said. Now Kevin knew she was still mad, though she showed it in different ways. Rather than explode with anger, her words attacked subtly. Kevin decided to let it go. After all, he started it, and deserved whatever he got.

They walked to the edge of the river, Kevin leading. The stream ran clear and fast. The rocks on the bottom were red and grey. As Kevin entered the water, a black shadow shot upstream,

zigzagging crazily.

"Well, there went one," Kevin said, pointing unnecessarily with the long rod. He carried the rod in his right hand, and the line about six inches above the fly in his left. Cathy, mirroring his actions, looked to where Kevin pointed, but the trout was long gone.

"This isn't really good fishing. Too fast. But I put in here so I can walk up to that hole I was telling you about," Kevin said. "Be careful walking." Kevin pointed at a large pinkish rock with green weeds wrapped around it. The ends of the weeds fluttered in the current, giving the rock the appearance of flying. "Those weeds make the rocks super slippery. Believe me!"

"I do," Cathy said. "I'll be careful."

"I know it's going to be hard, but try not to splash too much. Nothing spooks 'em more than that. They can hear you coming from a long ways away." With that, Kevin turned and walked towards the far bank twenty feet away.

"You stay on that side and fish that half of the river, and I'll fish this side. Try as hard as you can not to let our lines get tangled. That would be a bear to fix," Kevin said. The water came up to his crotch. It was cold, but felt good in the early summer heat.

"Remember what I taught you in the back yard? Nice and slow." Cathy had picked up casting very quickly in the practice

session behind their house, where she could practice all she wanted without spooking any fish, but now was the real test. Kevin watched as Cathy let go of the fly. It drifted quickly downstream, bobbing on the water until it was almost directly behind her.

"OK," Kevin said. "Start your cast. See that rock about twenty feet ahead of you? Aim for that."

Cathy lifted the rod tip by lifting her forearm, then whipped her arm quickly down. The fly sprang out of the water behind her and arced forward. When it reached about ten feet in front of her, Cathy brought her forearm sharply up. Too sharply, Kevin saw. The flyline made a snapping sound as the fly retraced its path through the air, until it was directly behind her again.

"Slow down," Kevin said. "Move your forearm up and down from the elbow, not you whole arm." Cathy brought her arm down, again too quickly, Kevin saw. The line landed in a heap about ten feet in front of Cathy. Cathy looked over at him with a frustrated expression on her face.

"Just slow down," Kevin said. "You're not going to cast it perfectly your first time."

"OK," Cathy said. She lifted her rod tip and began another cast. Kevin saw concentration in her very stance. For the next five minutes he coached her, helping her establish a rhythm. When he saw that she was beginning to get the hang of it, Kevin began to wade upstream.

"Let's move ahead a little. There probably won't be too many left here," Kevin said, wading slowly so as not to splash. "Go ahead and throw your line up there behind that big rock." Kevin pointed upstream to a rock standing about a foot above the water.

Cathy began another cast, and Kevin could see her concentrating on keeping her arm motion slow. The fluorescent green flyline traced a brilliant arc through the air, until Cathy let it fall softly just behind the rock. An absolutely perfect cast, Kevin saw with satisfaction. The tan fly was quickly submerged in the white frothy water just to the side of the pitted gray rock, then bobbed up in the rock's wake.

The fly, caught in the slower water behind the rock, weaved back and forth as the roiling undercurrents fought for its possession. Suddenly, something boiled up from beneath the fly. A trout, enticed, struck hard at the fly. One second it was just the fly floating alone and unthreatened, and the next a silvery shape torpedoed up underneath it, slashing up into the morning sunlight, then back down into the black water behind the rock.

"Set the hook!" Kevin yelled. Cathy stood for a second, unsure of what to do, then raised the rod tip to the sky, until the rod bowed towards the water, the green line taut. "All right," Kevin whooped, wading towards Cathy. "Start reeling it in!"

Kevin saw Cathy's left hand gripping the cork handle whitely

as her right hand began to turn the reel's crank, reeling line back onto the spool. "Easy does it," Kevin said excitedly. Cathy, grinning hugely, fought the fish inexpertly as it careened madly through the water, desperately fighting the inevitable pull downstream. Ten feet upstream, the trout leaped clear of the water, slapped the air as if trying to fly away using its tail, then burrowed back down into the water.

"Wow," Cathy said, momentarily stunned by the display.

"Keep the line taut, or else it can shake the fly loose," Kevin warned. He reached for the rod, wanting to help, but Cathy glared at him.

"I can do it," she said.

"Okay."

The fish suddenly veered downstream. The rod bent almost double, and Kevin hoped the knots would hold. Cathy stared intently at the line being sharply tugged by the trout, all the while slowly turning the reel's crank. Inevitably, the line came closer and closer towards them, until they could see the fish, exhausted, lying on its side, still weakly trying to break free. Kevin pulled his net from his side and walked a few feet downstream to the fish, which made one more futile attempt to break free as it saw him coming towards it. Then, totally spent, it gave up.

Kevin dipped the net into the water, encasing the fish in mesh. "Niiice fish, honey. Wow, nice fish. I can't believe how

well you did." Kevin held the dripping net out of the water. The trout didn't look silver now, close up, but instead a beautiful gold and brown, with red spots all along its flank. The mouth opened and closed, gasping for air. Kevin lowered it back into the water so it could breathe.

"Let's get a picture of your first-ever fish," Kevin said as he retrieved his camera from its waterproof bag in his vest.

"Hold it up."

Cathy held the fish up, and Kevin snapped two pictures. He wrapped the camera back up and walked back to Cathy. "You did a great job. A great job. You brought in that fish like you'd been doing this for years."

"I had a great teacher," Cathy said, smiling at him. A real, unforced smile.

Gently, Kevin reached into the net and grasped the line a few inches from the trout's mouth. He eased the fish out of the net, moving it back and forth in the current.

"This is to revive it. Try not to touch 'em, because they can get a fungus where you do, and it'll kill them," Kevin said. He quickly twisted the hook down and out of the flesh surrounding the jaw, and the fly came free. The trout floated downstream for a second. Then, finding itself free, it turned and rocketed downstream.

Kevin waded over to Cathy. "You did so well. Did you like that?"

"Yes. Very much so. It's pretty exciting when you get one, and it's tugging like that. No wonder you like this so much. I just hope it doesn't hurt them."

"Naw, not if you do it right. I've never had one die on me. You just have to care for the fish *after* you catch it," Kevin said. He turned and waded back across the river. The thought echoed inside him as he watched his fly being swept downstream, helplessly caught in the current.

* * *

They waded up to the pool, talking and fishing. Kevin caught several, while Cathy caught one more, although she lost two when she failed to set the hook tight enough. Every time Kevin hooked one, he wished that it had been Cathy catching the fish instead. He liked seeing the excitement on her face. They stopped a little after the sun was directly overhead, making the water like a reflected mirror, and waded back to eat lunch, talking animatedly about the morning. When they were finished, they headed back into the river. They waded up to where they had stopped, then continued on towards the pool Kevin pointed out. When they were about fifteen feet short of the pool, Kevin motioned for Cathy to stop. "Let's cast from here," he said.

The black water of the pool, shaded by an immense tree, calmly drifted in front of them. Bugs occasionally landed on the water, causing ripples to dot the surface. Cathy looked at

Kevin, then at the pool.

"Go ahead," Kevin said. "You cast first. I'll watch."

Cathy smiled in response and started her cast. The first cast fell in a heap, short of the pool.

"Easy," Kevin warned.

"Sorry. Kind of lost my rhythm after lunch." When the fly drifted past her, Cathy began another cast. This time she laid the fly perfectly in the middle of the pool.

"Beautiful," Kevin murmured. Just as he began to tell Cathy to lift the rod tip, the calm water exploded into spray. A huge trout shot out of the water, taking Cathy's fly down into the depths with it.

"Holy cow!" Cathy yelled. "Did you see that?"

"Set the hook! Set the hook!"

Cathy lifted the rod, pulling the line taut. The trout, unable to break free, gave furious battle. Kevin marvelled at the fight the fish provided. For almost five minutes Cathy fought, grunting occasionally at the strain, until both fish and fisher were exhausted. Finally, Cathy reeled the trout close to her. Kevin tried to net the monster, but it barely fit in the net. He needed three tries to get it. Once in the net, Kevin saw with a start why it had fought so hard.

The hook had imbedded itself through the trout's eye. The fish had taken the fly so hard, it had started to swallow the hook before Cathy had been able to set it. When she had, the

hook had pierced the eye. The black pupil, surrounded by a golden iris, stared painfully at Kevin.

"Oh, crap. This is going to be hard to get out," Kevin said to Cathy. She looked at the fish, but didn't look too horrified, just tired. Kevin gently lifted the fish under its belly, holding it at the surface of the water. Carefully he reached into the trout's mouth, pulling at the hook. When the trout thrashed, he stopped.

"I know this is going to hurt, big guy, but if you just sit still, I'll have this out in a jiffy," Kevin said to the fish. Holding the fish more tightly, he worked the hook out of the eye, then carefully extracted it totally out of its mouth. "There, see? That wasn't so bad." He held the trout up and turned around. "Look..."

Just as he turned around, Cathy fell backwards into the water. Her eyes were closed, and her red face looked too hot to even touch. Kevin dropped the fish and thrashed to Cathy, who was slowly turning over and floating downstream. Kevin grabbed her rod with his left hand, and her waders with his right. With her waders tightly in his grasp, Kevin began pulling her over to the bank. As he reached the bank, Cathy began protesting weakly. Kevin pulled her up onto the bank and sat her upright. He dipped his hand into the stream, then brushed Cathy's face with it, hoping to cool her down. She looked at him and smiled weakly.

"Sorry that you couldn't get a picture of the fish."

"To hell with the fish. You're so much more important. Are you okay?"

Cathy nodded, then paused. She looked into Kevin's eyes. Her face was losing its redness, but Kevin could see she was totally fatigued. He also saw that her eyes held tears.

"Hey, forget about the fish," Kevin said. "It isn't that big of a deal. Plenty more where that came from."

Cathy smiled again, then said, "It isn't the fish." She paused again, unsure. "I don't know how to say this. I...I'm pregnant. I just did too much, and felt faint. I'll be okay."

Kevin looked at her in disbelief. Then a smile crept its way across his face. "Pregnant? Why, that's great. That's just absolutely great!"

Cathy smiled again, then began crying. "I didn't want to tell you. No, I wanted to tell you. I was just scared to."

Kevin looked at her, then looked out at the water, slowly moving by. He spoke softly. "You know, my dad did take me fishing once. It wasn't fly fishing. He had a few old spinning outfits, and took my older brother and me bait fishing on this little pond. We had worms, and he yelled at me when I didn't want to put them on the hook. I didn't want to hurt them."

Kevin looked down through the water, remembering. "Anyways, I caught the first fish. It was a catfish. Not very big. I was so excited. I reeled that sucker in, so glad that I could do something right in front of the old man. But when I got the fish

on the dock..." Kevin stopped for a few seconds, remembering the sight.

"I had hooked that catfish right through the eye, just like you hooked that trout. Only, my dad didn't give a damn about the fish's eye. It was just a dumb fish, after all."

Cathy slipped her hand over Kevin's, helping him along.

"When I saw that fish, I started crying. I couldn't help it. When my old man saw that, he went nuts, him being a tough old miner and all. Couldn't have his kid acting like a baby. He hit me upside my head, calling me all kinds of names. I just cried harder. He tried to force me to take the hook out. I absolutely refused. So he took that fish, and yanked as hard as he could at that hook."

"I'll never forget it. The whole eyeball came out. It sat there swinging at the end of the hook, with my goddamn father standing there grinning like he'd just done something amazing. Just standing there, with this eyeball swinging. I leaned over the dock and threw up. So my good ol' dad threw me into the water, calling me a baby, and saying I wasn't his kid." Kevin looked sadly at Cathy. "I was ten years old."

Cathy didn't say anything. She began stroking Kevin's back. Together, they sat silently for about five minutes. Finally, Cathy said simply, "Thank you."

Kevin looked at her and smiled weakly, then turned back

towards the water. A piece of wood bobbed behind a rock, caught in the eddy, at its mercy until it let go. He looked back at Cathy, then slowly, gently, placed his hand over her stomach.

"This is going to be our baby," he said wonderingly. "Not the greatest of timing, but we'll be all right, I think. Don't know how we can afford it, but...we'll be all right," Kevin ended, trying to persuade himself.

"Yes." Cathy said simply, then stood up slowly, unconsciously brushing dirt off her waders. "Let's go home. We can always come back tomorrow, or the next day, or whenever."

Kevin stood up too. "How did I get such a strong woman?" he asked. Cathy smiled in return. Kevin turned and looked back at the river. The piece of wood broke free of the eddy behind the rock, and began drifting down the river again. For some reason, the sight of the wood rising and falling in the rushing river touched Kevin. He breathed the clear air in, sharply, as if to grab enough in his lungs to carry back to the other world, the world of strikes, the Company, and sold china. Kevin took Cathy's hand gently in his as they slowly began the long walk back.

I thought writing an creative project for an Honors thesis would be, if not easy, not hard. I was wrong. This quarter I learned what it is like to really write. Not just write, but care about what I was writing about. While I was writing each story for my project, I actually found myself asking, "How would this character react in this situation?" Although it seems so simple, something any writer would do, I had never done so intentionally before. This project forced me to. For once, I wrote with an audience in mind.

I have had both fiction writing classes offered at Utah State (English 302 and 502). I wrote, but I don't know if they were really stories. I think perhaps they were concepts. I had ideas, but it seemed so hard to put into words. What I did put into words seemed stilted, wooden.

This project marked what I hope is a turning point. Before, I would simply throw my hands up and quit on a story which wasn't taking shape. I hate to think of how many rough drafts were simply thrown away because I lacked discipline, the discipline I now recognize anyone who desires to write seriously (as opposed to simply as a hobby) must possess. For once, I sweated over my stories. They took on a life of their own. They were created, not just written. I think I found my voice, something I lacked in all my previous efforts. I now know that short stories require real work, not just an overactive imagination.

Tioga is a project I can say in all honesty I am proud of. I do not say this lightly. I have often complained to my wife that I felt I was sleepwalking through college. Find out what the professor wants, and do the work accordingly. Almost like a game. Play the game correctly, and good grades are the reward. This project was different. It isn't so much the need for a good grade on my project (although that would be nice). I found part of me in this work, something lacking before.

The process of writing, I found, can literally take years. This project didn't take that long, but the *ideas* I had formed and solidified over a long period. The outline of what I wanted to write about began to take shape after I got out of the Marine Corps. I joined at the age of seventeen, having just graduated from a small-town high school. Athens, Pennsylvania, with a population of roughly 4,000 residents, was all I knew at that age. A small farming community, Athens had once been a major hub of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, which was once a major carrier of the coal mined a bit further south (the actual coal mines were about 30 miles south of Athens). When people began switching from coal to other sources of energy, the entire region suffered. My grandfather worked for Lehigh for forty-five years, and he loved telling me stories about the "old days." I listened, not knowing that someday I would write about some of what he told me.

I served in the Marines for seven years. I left Athens in 1985, and didn't return until 1992. I was stationed in Hawaii for three years. While I was there, I don't think I wrote at all, except for letters to my grandparents. The real desire to write started in 1988, when I went on embassy security duty.

Beginning in 1988, I literally traveled the world. In the next four years I would be stationed in Belgrade, Yugoslavia; Paris, France; Shenyang, China; and Brazzaville, Congo. I gained a worldview I never expected to have. I began keeping a journal, and took notes on some of the events and sights I saw (perhaps fodder for another collection, who knows). I certainly didn't miss Athens, but I wondered about it. I wondered at its evolution, at how it came to be what it was. I wondered about the people, and what went on in all those lives. I wanted to know the story behind everything.

When I finally came home, it wasn't only Athens that had changed. So had I. I knew I wanted to write about Athens someday, I just didn't know how or when.

That is the story behind *Tioga*. Actually, *Tioga* is real: it is Iroquois for "at the forks." *Tioga* Point is where the Susquehanna and Chemung Rivers merge near Athens. I wanted the stories to have some historical basis, so I did all the research I could into the Native Americans of northern Pennsylvania. The second vignette in *Tioga* is a fictionalized account of a historical fact: the Iroquois

were forced to relocate to Canada by the colonists after the Iroquois sided with the British during the Revolutionary War. Then the colonists were free to take and clear whatever land they wanted to. Thus, I found out the story behind Athens, and proceeded to fictionalize it for my project.

So, the actual process of getting my ideas down on paper evolved over a period of years. This project forced me to write what I had always wanted, but lacked the motivation to. I still remember vividly how I sketched the basic outline of Tioga. My wife and I were in the car, driving to Salt Lake. This was in January, and I was contemplating whether I wanted or needed to do an Honors project, as I am not an English major, and in fact am headed off to law school this fall. We talked about my ideas for a while. My wife, Kristen, suggested I started throwing out ideas for a framework for my project. I complied, and by the time we arrived at Salt Lake, I had outlined seven or eight stories, all roughly based on Tioga (for some reason, I always just knew that Tioga was the title to this collection. I never considered another title). When we returned from Salt Lake, I drew up a proposal for my project, and my dream of writing a short story collection began to be realized.

The writing of the stories was so much harder than I envisioned. In my proposal, I suggested writing eight stories, with a minor character in one story being the

central character in another story. That quickly changed. It just didn't seem to work the way I had envisioned it. Instead, I wrote the stories I had planned without worrying about getting certain characters in certain stories. I wrote seven complete stories (writer's block struck hard on the eighth), but I only included six in my thesis. The seventh did not seem to fit. While it's not a bad story, I wasn't happy with it; the story seemed jarring to me when placed with the others, so I excluded it.

Sometimes I still wonder how I came up with my plots and characterizations. When I gave my oral presentation, I was asked this question. Honestly, I don't know. Sometimes, weird as it sounds, I dream my stories. My wife put a pad of paper and a pen by our bed, because sometimes I wake up from a dream and I remember it so vividly, it almost cries out to be written down. That's how "Song of the Locusts" came into being. I was dreaming about the bridge we used to jump off of back in Athens when suddenly my mind began dreaming the story. I woke up and wrote the story in about two hours. It was the easiest time I had with all the stories. I also feel it is one of the most powerful stories. It is a total fiction, but I identify with both major characters in the story. Need permeates "Song," both the need for acceptance by two lonely boys, and the need for love and worthwhile attention.

"Lessons" is another story I really identify with. I wanted to draw a realistic relationship between a man and

wife. I also wanted the collection to end on an optimistic note, a feeling that even though times are bad, relationships can help to get us through. Kevin and Cathy are essentially alone, beset by doubts, but still strong in their feelings for each other. The hooked fish, and the fly being tugged under the water by strong currents, are metaphors for Kevin's and Cathy's lives. Being tugged in so many directions, and close to being pulled under, still they float, together.

The order of the stories is important to me. I needed to begin with "Family Ties," because it sets the stage for a town divided by a bitter strike. I got the idea for the strike from the nasty strike Caterpillar had a few years back. I was watching news footage of strikers and strikebreakers fighting, and the images stuck with me. I extended the strike to a fictional coal mining town in Pennsylvania, loosely based on Athens. I imagined what would happen in this small town if someone crossed the picket lines and became a scab worker. Though fictional, I think Jason's plight is realistic. I wanted the reader to feel his sense of betrayal at being beaten by his best friends for something he couldn't help.

"Headhunter" is partly based in truth. I was stationed in Paris, and I did see a man jump from the Georges Pompidou Center. The rest is pure fiction. I wanted Kevin to realize just how wrong some actions are, how sometimes we see ourselves mirrored in the actions of some pretty

horrific people. I originally wrote this story for English 502. One person thought it was just a gay-bashing story, and was pretty hostile to me the rest of the quarter. I think he missed the entire point of the story. Kevin couldn't turn around because he saw himself in Murph, a frightening thought.

"Sanctuary" and "The Star" are both almost entirely fictional, except Athens did put a star up on a hill overlooking the valley every Christmastime. There's a sense of alienation in both stories, a sense that life just isn't as permanent or as good as it is made out to be. I also wanted to show just how transitory our mobile society has become. I believe people need a sense of roots, a sense they really belong somewhere, something I think is missing in our short-attention span society. It's an idea I've been tinkering around with for a while. I'm fairly pleased with "Sanctuary." It's understated, and I like that. "The Star" needs more work. I originally wrote it back when I was a freshman. It has changed considerably over that time (the original draft is terrible choppy). I tried to have the point of view in the third person stream of consciousness, but it's a technique hard to pull off. No matter how hard I work at it or how many times I revise it, the story still seems to be lacking.

Revising my stories was actually enjoyable. Once I finally wrote something on paper, making changes wasn't bad. A bonus was having Professor Stearman for my mentor. Her

comments and suggestions were invaluable. In addition, after having so many classes with her (five), she knew how I wrote, and could see if I was improving as I went on.

Professor Stearman commented that my more powerful stories were the ones in which I wasn't autobiographical. I find this statement to be true. I need to rely on my imagination more, and quit trying to think of my writing as some kind of therapy. The more I wrote the more I found that little experiences, fictionalized to a great degree, make pretty good stories, something I as a reader wouldn't mind reading.

Now that I've finished, I can say that I'm glad I did a creative thesis. It gave me more insight into the hardships of writing, but also the sweet feeling of accomplishment. Even if my stories were judged to be awful, I would still be proud. I finally did something I've always wanted to do. If the stories aren't good, I'll keep on trying until I get some that are. That's what this is all about: learning. I honestly feel that I learned a tremendous amount about writing this quarter. My only regret is that I didn't complete this project before I decided to go to law school. Who knows, maybe I would have tried to be a writer, instead of wasting three years in law school.