

# RIDES FROM STRANGERS



MICHAEL J. SAHNO

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Thank you all.

~ *Mike*

# **RIDES FROM STRANGERS**

So I'm walking down State Road 76 about ten miles west of Amarillo. There's just a couple of houses off the highway, at the tail end of the little cul-de-sac they built about nine years ago, and I know it'll eventually be a subdivision with a bunch of little cookie cutter brick houses. That'll expand until it's just one big suburb. Just like every place else.

I'm home from the latest Gulf war, finally, and I'm thinking, it's strange: this road hasn't really changed in thirty years. Not much on it then, not much on it now. Like it always was, really, except for those two houses down on the end there, like I said.

Part of me is glad to be home. But after what I've been through, part of me wants to get away, to go somewhere no one knows me and just think about things. Think about what it was like here thirty years ago. Or what it was like before that, before I was even born.

I'm just taking a walk, getting my daily half hour of contemplation. And out of nowhere comes this great-looking car: it's a '42 Studebaker, beautiful as a prom night virgin in a white dress. Brand new whitewalls, a vintage paint job, baby blue, and chrome you'd have to pay just to see at a local car show. The guy driving it is about my age, thirty-five or thirty-six: a Mexican guy, which doesn't surprise me, but something about the way he slows down and looks at me gets my stomach all funny. In sort of a good way, even

though I'm not queer or anything. He looks familiar, but I know I've never met him.

"Hey, amigo. How you doing?"

"That's some ride you got there, pardner. You live down here?"

"Yeah, the house on the left. You wanna drive 'er?"

"Me? Oh, no, I —"

"Chure, take 'er for a spin. Come on." I laugh nervously, and he jumps over to the passenger side; slides, actually, the big bench seat like a church pew wrapped in vinyl. "Come on, man, I'm not going to bite you." He holds his hands up.

"No, really...." But he can see how much I want to, and he knows he doesn't have to twist my arm.

"Ay, caramba. Hop on in, buddy." He sees me caving, and waves me in. I get into the car.

"Original engine?"

"Huh? Naw, man, it's a five-o-two crate engine. About eight years old. Sweet."

The radio is playing Ella Fitzgerald. "That a tape deck hidden somewhere?"

“No, that’s the radio, man.” I put my foot on the accelerator and it feels like what I’d expect a race car to feel like. Incredible power.

“I’m Ray, by the way.”

“José. José Rodriguez.” He grins, and his eyes are friendly, but the smile looks false. The sky seems to have darkened since I closed the car door.

“Good to meet ya, José. Did you say that’s the radio?”

“Yeah.”

“Must be community radio, then. I’ve never heard stuff like this around here. It’s all country, top forty. Maybe some rock or R&B. Nothing like this.”

He leans back. “Yeah, it’s really nice.” The song ends, and Sinatra comes on next. Singing about Nancy, his daughter.

“Holy cow,” I say. “That’s local? What station is that?” The radio is original, so all I see is an AM band.

“I don’t know. Just a local station, I guess. So, you from around here?”

“Yeah, I grew up about five miles thataway.” I point east. “About five miles from Amarillo.”

“Let’s go that way.”

“Well, I don’t want to burn up too much of your gas.”

“Naw, that’s all right, man. I got a day off every once in a while. You just get back from the Gulf, eh?”

My stomach goes icy. “I don’t remember mentioning that.” I look calmly across the plain, but my hands tighten on the wheel.

“Lucky guess, man. The hair, you know. You look like a soldier. So, how long were you over there?”

“Too long. Two years, six months and eight days.”

“But who’s counting, eh?” We both laugh, but I still feel jumpy.

“Yeah,” I say. “The pay in the army, they say it’s mighty fine. They give you fifty dollars, and take back forty-nine.”

“That’s a good one.” He slouches down in the seat more, smiling.

“What about you? What do you do?”

He glances out the window. “Me? I’m a buyer, man.” He shrugs the way rich people do when they don’t want to talk about money.

“A buyer, eh? Of what?”

“The ultimate product,” he says, and flashes the amigo grin again. “The ultimate product. So, you like the car?”

Since he's changing the subject I don't feel too comfortable pressing the point. I resolve to forget it for now. "Yeah, it's amazing. What kind of engine did you say?"

"I dropped a five-o-two crate engine in here," he says. "Had to customize a bit to do it, you know? All sorts of fabrications. But what the Hell."

I nod, saying nothing.

"You believe in Hell, amigo?"

Sweat beads up on my forehead. I decide to change the subject a little myself. "Yeah, I just came from there," I say, and glance over.

He gets the drift, and laughs. "Just came from there. That's good, man. That's real good." He slides down in the seat a little more, getting comfortable. He closes his eyes and I wipe the sweat off my brow.

"We're only about four miles from Amarillo now," I say.

"Mm-hm."

"Nice day for a drive."

He mumbles something about it being a great car, and I hear it, but I'm suddenly preoccupied by my surroundings. This stretch of highway is pretty bare but I always recognize certain landmarks, in order, from having driven it so often. We've just passed one, a big old boulder, and I realize

something is drastically wrong with the landscape: not just the absence of the state lottery billboard I see every time I pass this way, but the absence of the building just beyond it, an office complex built fifteen or twenty years ago. I slow down.

“What the...? Something’s wrong, man. What the Hell’s going on?”

“Hm?” He opens an eye, fixes the stare on me, like a lizard squinting.

“The whole—there’s a building gone from here. It’s just gone.” I pull over and park.

“Yeah, that urban renewal can be a bitch. Well, easy come, easy go, eh?” He grins lazily, closes the eye.

“No, man, you don’t understand: the building’s gone, the parking lot ... it’s like it was never here.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Hell, yes. Jesus. What in the Hell is ... oh, man, I don’t feel good.”

He sits up. “Here, let me drive. Sit back and relax.” He gets up and walks around to my side while I slide over.

“This isn’t right,” I say to myself, even though I’m still talking out loud. “It can’t be. But that big boulder ... I know we’re at the right spot.”

He mashes down on the accelerator and we pull away in a cloud of dust. “No problema, chico,” he says. “We’ll see more interesting sights down the road.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the car, man. It’s got cojones, eh?”

“That it does. Jesus, how fast are you going?”

“Only about seventy, bro. This is nothing. With the five-o-two in it you can push this baby up around one thirty, maybe one forty.”

I’m nodding, still shell-shocked. My ears are ringing suddenly, as if someone had just thrown a mortar near us. Then I see it: Amarillo.

I almost pass out at the sight. No skyscrapers, no towers. No big antennae. Nothing. It’s like a movie set from the 1940s. Like from the year this car was made, maybe, 1942.

“Oh my God.”

“That’s Amarillo, man.”

“What the f— who the Hell *are* you?”

He laughs. “You like that word, eh? Hell. You like the car, too, eh? Tell you what, you want it?”

“Want? I want my life. I want it to be today again. What the Hell have you done?”

“It’s the car, my friend. It’s a goddamn time machine. You jump in this car, it’s nineteen forty-two. Just like you thought.”

“Who are you.”

He laughs. “I told you before, amigo, I’m a fucking buyer.” I realize I can’t move: like when your foot falls asleep, only it’s my whole body. And then he laughs again, louder, and the sound is like a door creaking open in an empty tomb. The sky above is red, the city awash in crimson light. On the radio Billie Holiday is singing *Let’s Call The Whole Thing Off*.

“What do you want from me?”

“You like this music, huh?”

“Yes, I do,” I say.

“You like the car?”

“Yes.”

“You’d like to be able to drive it any time, wouldn’t you?”

I try to stop myself but I can’t. “Yes.”

“You want things to be like they were before, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Like when you were little, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Like maybe even before you were born, eh?”

I look at him and his eyes are red as the sky. Clouds crash into each other above the city and I swear I see lightning flash in the corner of my eye. I can feel myself slipping away and I try to hold on but I can't manage it. I ask the question in spite of knowing the answer in advance.

“What do you want me to do?”

# CREATINE

Creatine Philips tested the waters often.

“I’m not much of a joiner,” she’d say, gingerly stepping into a kick-boxing ring or Tai Chi circle. And though it seemed obvious that she was constantly trying something new or signing up for another course, there was no mistaking that her smile was tentative, and her grip on things a trifle loose.

Some would blame it on her name—of which she was continually trying to find the source, flipping through health food books in search of the word among the polyunsaturated fats or the essential amino acids (*histidine, valine, tryptophan...nope, no creatine*).

Her parents had always explained it away as a whim: they’d been unable to decide among the -ine names, Josephine, Nadine, Madeline...and then one of them had said *Let’s be creative*, and the word *creative* simply led to... of course! *Creatine*. But she knew it was something more, someone had seen it somewhere in some book on—was it cholesterol control? —well, it was something like that. One thing for sure: it wasn’t in her *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, no matter how many times she went back to recheck it.

Of course, others blamed the infamous Creatine flightiness on the fact that the family moved so many times during her childhood. One friend had joked, “Just be grateful they didn’t name you Samsonite.” Friends and

boyfriends through the years speculated that the nomadic existence of the Philips family made Creatine and her sister Ursula a rare species, like some freakish tropical birds that flew from zone to zone, seeking different climates. And in fact there seemed to be some credence to this view. Before settling in Florida, she had lived—voluntarily, without even the influence of her parents—in Colorado, Alaska, Texas, Ohio, Maine, and North Dakota. She'd even considered Montana, but of course the Unabomber changed all that.

In Florida, she appeared to have found a resting place, at least, if not a place to settle. She'd only been there three years, and with her history it was too soon to tell. Her sister Ursula had moved out of Florida a year before Creatine moved into the small, rustic efficiency apartment in the northwest corner of Land O' Lakes. When Ursula complained to Creatine about Florida (*too friggin' hot, and the goddamn lizards run around in the bushes like chipmunks*), Creatine had thought it sounded great. Like being on summer vacation about two hundred and ninety-five days a year. Besides, she'd been living in North Dakota, and the thought of enduring another winter there was unbearable.

She made the move.

Of course she suffered through the inevitable temp jobs: six months working for a real estate developer,

three months selling pharmaceuticals, and ultimately—combining the clerical with the medical, the secretarial with the technological—a full time permanent position in the reception area of a large orthopedic clinic called ASPRN. The acronym stood for American Spine and Pain Rehab and Naturopathy, but no one really called it that, and in fact there were no naturopathic physicians in the facility, since Florida state law made the practice of naturopathy illegal. Creatine even suspected that the only real reason for the n in the name was so that people would refer to the place the way they did now, as “ASPIRIN.”

She brooded on this all afternoon one day, the last day of July that year. It was ninety-six degrees, just as it had been every day for the past two months (*Heat, glorious heat*, she’d think to herself), and when the woman tottered into the cool air conditioned office, Creatine felt sorry for her right away. She was an elderly woman, and her light cotton dress clung to her like a thin nightgown, damp with perspiration under the arms. Tiny beads of moisture rested on the down of her upper lip.

“Hi,” Creatine said with sympathy. “Hot out there, huh?” She’d picked up a slight drawl since moving south.

“Honey, it’s hotter’n a monk’s underwear out there,” said the woman. Creatine laughed, looked more closely at the woman. And realized she didn’t need an ounce of pity.

“Can I get you a glass of cold water?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” the woman said. “Just let me use the ladies’ room.”

“Last door pm your left,” Creatine said, and the woman thanked her before moving off.

Creatine watched the woman inching down the hallway. She remembered as a child how her mother had talked incessantly about Elvis Presley, and how all the Elvis talk had given her a strange dream. Every once in a while, Creatine would dream she was a spectator at an Elvis concert: not a fan, just someone moving wraithlike through the crowd... more like a ghost or an angel than a spectator, really. It was an early Elvis concert, not long after the Sun sessions, and the setting was intimate; almost small. Elvis would throw out a sweaty towel or handkerchief to the crowd, and each time one of the screaming girls caught one, she’d clutch it to her breast and sigh.

But toward the end of the show, when Elvis threw out his last (and, to all appearances, most expensive) monogrammed towel, there stood Creatine’s mother, a teenaged Creatine’s mother, just as she’d looked in photo albums, catching the towel Elvis had thrown right at her, which would have hit her in the face if she hadn’t caught it. And when she did, and Elvis’ sweat danced in the air around the girls with their outstretched arms, Creatine’s

mother grimaced as though she'd just been hit in the face with saliva, and without a word she threw the towel right back. Elvis caught it, just as Creatine somehow knew he would, and in the shocked silence that followed (for all the other fans were astonished) Elvis smiled his best *Aw-shucks* smile and said, "Thank you, ma'am."

She thought about the dream for a few more moments while she waited for the elderly woman to return. She'd had the dream again that morning for the first time in a couple of years, and it lingered with her like the taste of an espresso.

At last, the woman's drawn face appeared at the far end of the hall. She was walking at a pace that was probably brisk for her, but it was still slow. Her great eyes stared from behind a pair of powerful bifocals. At that distance, they looked like TV eyes, like the kind of eyes you'd see on an alien in a Friday night movie. Creatine glanced down and away, ashamed at the thought.

Creatine asked, "Did you have an appointment with one of the doctors?"

The woman was nearing the desk, still walking with a steady paper-slipper shuffle. "No," she said. "I wanted to find out more about naturopathic care. My chiropractor recommended acupuncture for my bursitis, but I've always been scared of needles." She smiled weakly.

Creatine blushed. “Actually,” she said, “they apparently no longer have any naturopaths here in the practice. I wish you’d called, I’m sorry you had to come all the way down here. Most of our doctors are orthos. They might be able to help you....” She let it trail off. The woman was staring at her over the thin lines of her bifocals, reading the name tag on Creatine’s white blouse.

“Creatine. What kind of a name is that?”

“My parents made it up.” She smiled, brief and formal. “I think it’s French.”

*“I think it’s an amino acid.”*

She raised her eyebrows and said, “I used to think so, too. It’s not. I mean, I looked up the essential amino acids in a book and it wasn’t in there. I still think it’s a word. Maybe it’s got something to do with protein.”

The elderly woman nodded sagely. She seemed to realize something, and when she spoke again her tone was confidential, almost secretive.

“May I ask you a question, Creatine?”

“What’s that?” Her head was tilted to one side, like a tiny bird.

“Have you ever seen this man?” She pulled a photograph from her wallet and handed it across the counter.

Creatine studied it. “I don’t think so. I mean, he looks kind of familiar, but I don’t know. I see so many people, working here. Is he a relative?”

“Grandson,” she said. She took the picture as Creatine slid it back across to her. “He’d be twenty-two. Or is twenty-two, if he’s still around. Michael.”

“He’s...is he —?”

“Missing for the past two years. Vanished just like that.” She snapped her fingers.

“I’m so sorry.”

“He may turn up yet —”

“Oh, I hope he does....”

“But since he hasn’t, I sometimes show people the picture.” There was an awkward silence.

“I’m very sorry, ma’am,” Creatine said.

“He was the biggest Elvis fan I’ve ever seen.”

Creatine eyes widened. “I just had a dream about Elvis last night.”

The old woman looked at her significantly. “You know, Elvis—Elvis was the king.”

“Yes, he was,” Creatine said.

“And my grandson...well, he was a prince.”

“I’m sure he was.” She reached out to where the woman’s hand rested absently on the counter and gently covered it with her own. The hand moved in response, a silent thank-you.

“Well, you have a good afternoon,” said the woman after withdrawing her hand.

“You too. Stay cool.” The air conditioning system kicked in as if on cue, and the woman began to shuffle toward the door. But before she could reach it, Creatine found herself calling to her, first quietly, then louder when she realized the woman hadn’t heard: “Ma’am? Ma’am?”

The woman turned and looked back as Creatine walked from behind the desk to the black rubber mat in front of the exits. “I’m sorry, Mrs....?”

“Wilson,” the woman said.

“Mrs. Wilson.”

“Hattie.”

“Hattie,” she said tentatively. “Hattie, is anyone trying to help you—is there like a group of relatives looking for your grandson? I mean, I guess what I’m saying is, I’d like to help, if I can —”

“Oh, yes, there’s a group of people...friends of Michael’s, some relatives. His ex-girlfriend. Well, she was his girlfriend when he disappeared.”

“I’m not much of a joiner,” Creatine said, “but maybe I could do something. Maybe I could help, somehow.”

“That’s very sweet of you, dear,” Hattie Wilson said.

“I just think it’s such a shame.”

“Well, why don’t you give me your telephone number, and I’ll have them contact you?” She started to pull something out of her purse.

“Here, wait,” said Creatine. She ran back to the desk, and scribbled her number on one of the center’s business cards before returning. “Here.”

“Thank you, dear. That’s very sweet,” she repeated.

Creatine smiled. “You take care now. And don’t worry about your grandson. He’ll turn up.”

“Thank you,” Hattie Wilson said, and smiled.

Creatine watched her as she walked slowly down the sidewalk, and she almost failed to hear the doctor calling to her from back behind the desk.

“Ms. Philips?”

“Oh. Dr. Patel. I was just seeing someone out.”

He smiled politely. “Would you put these out here somewhere on one of the shelves? I just got them in the mail, and I don’t have room in my office.” He gestured to three large hardbound books on the counter.

Creatine picked them up and read the spines. Two of them were bound medical journals, but one was a medical dictionary. Without thinking, she flipped it open.

*Creatine*, she read. *A white crystalline substance, an alkaloid or amino acid, present in the muscle tissue of vertebrates: also written kreatine, kreatin.*

Well, it didn’t matter, anyway. She sat and looked out the window at the yellow afternoon light, smiling, and a warm glow slowly filled her from top to bottom. No, it really didn’t matter much at all.

# **PATHOLOGICAL LIAR**

My name is Rich and I'm a pathological liar.

That's how they do it in all those twelve-step groups, right? "My name is so-and-so and I'm a such-and-such...'  
Drug addict, compulsive gambler. Purveyor of kiddie porn.

"My name is Dan and I'm a hedonistic sonofabitch."

"Thanks for sharing, Dan. Would anyone else like to share?"

Actually my name isn't really Rich, but since I've already told you I'm a pathological liar, it doesn't make any difference, does it? I could probably tell you anything I wanted and you'd still believe me. Not because it sounded reasonable, but because of the way I tell it. That's what I'm good at, see? It's my avocation, my sole talent. My *raison d'être*.

For example: I've got this really hot cherry red Mustang I like to drive down Bayshore Boulevard on Saturday nights, right? And usually there's not much to see: yuppie couples out with their yuppie children for a stroll, elderly matrons with bags from some rainforest/organic/alpha-hydroxy facial boutique.... No babes. It used to be you could drive down Seventh Avenue and see these unbelievable twenty-year-old college girls with names like Fawn and Courtney and skirts up to here, but ever since they closed down that section of Ybor City to through traffic, there's not really

much point going. At least on Bayshore I can stay in my car, anonymous and safe, even if there ain't much around in terms of bimbettes.

So there I am on a Saturday night on Bayshore in the candy apple Mustang. Well, okay, it's really a Geo Prism, I'll admit I embellished on that part a little. But anyway, I'm just about to cross the intersection of Bayshore and Gandy and here comes The Babe: she's 5'9" or so – I'm only 5'10" myself – and she's got platinum blonde hair halfway down her back and this little peppermint-stripe tube top thing and a skirt like an atom bomb. I mean, legs you would die for, even kill for. And hooker lipstick, the kind you can see on a nice pale white face like hers from half a mile away. And heels! Black like the skirt and three inches high. Maybe higher. And she's walking down the sidewalk real sweet and slow, like some Hollywood producer's fantasy of what a hooker looks like (they never look this good, trust me, not even in Nicaragua), and all I can think of, looking at her, is that old song where the guy goes, "Boom-boom, yeah." Every switch of that tail of hers is like that atom bomb going off. Boom. Boom. I feel my breath get real shallow and my throat sort of close up. I'm slowing way down, so slow I can lean over the side of the car – it's a convertible – and before I even have a chance to say hello in my most studied Tom-Cruise-casual voice, she says, "You're going my way."

Now, you have to get the picture here: I am most definitely *not* going her way, I mean, I am going in the exact opposite direction. And she doesn't say it like some snazzy broad in one of those forties' movies, you know, *Going my way, big boy?* No, this is a statement so direct and confident, she knows it's true: not because I've slowed down the candy apple Mustang, looking at her like I'd follow her through the Bermuda Triangle and thank God in Heaven for the privilege. She's making this statement and looking at me coolly, in a sort of appraising way, because even as I'm pulling the car up alongside her and braking to a complete stop she is taking the gun out of her little black purse and leveling it at my forehead like I've got a bull's-eye painted there.

It's a .38 or a .45, I'm not sure which, and when I see it I almost lose control of all bodily functions right there on the spot. I put my hands up in the air.

"Don't shoot, lady, please. Don't shoot. I'll take you wherever you want to go. I got a tank full of gas, and —"

"Shut up." She gets in, still pointing the gun at me, but lower now, like she's concerned someone might see it. "Drive."

"Please, lady," I say again, "I'll take you wherever you want. Just don't shoot me." A real tough guy, right? After all the things I seen in Managua, you'd think I'd be cool as

dry ice. But to tell you the truth, when someone's got a gun pointed at you, groveling and begging makes good sense.

We drive on. She orders me to turn here, turn there. Very quiet and deliberate.

No small talk. We're heading north, far away from the most populous areas. After a while we're travelling north on Gunn Highway into the boonies. We pass an orange grove that's got to be at least fifty acres, maybe more, and at the next side street she says, "Turn here."

During the drive I've sneaked a few peeks at her, nothing she would object to or even notice, necessarily. She's got high cheekbones, a small nose, full lips. A perfect face. Angelic. And with all the rest of it, the red and white striped top and the black skirt – unbelievable, with those legs, when she's next to me in the car – with all of her there in such close proximity to me, so close that her perfume drugs me for the first few miles, I feel myself swinging back and forth between the feeling that I'm the luckiest guy on earth to have this beautiful babe next to me and the almost unbearably real thought that I'm about to have my nuts blown off.

We pull into the orange grove at her command. She tells me to kill the lights, and I do. It occurs to me that out here, in only the light of the moon, I could probably overpower her. I could turn the wheel real fast like they do in the movies and grab the gun. I start thinking about it – which way I'd

have to crank the wheel in order to slam her against her door, and which way would make her slam into me – but before I can figure out all the physics of it, she says, “Pull over up there.”

So here we are. It’s probably nine o’clock or so on a Saturday night and I’m in an orange grove in the boondocks with my fantasy girl, who would be very appealing to me right now if it weren’t for the fact that she’s got a gun pointed at my head.

Even though I’m so frigging terrified I can’t move, I still manage to ask the question: “What are you going to do to me?”

She scoots over my way a bit, and in the moonlight I see a little smile play over her lips.

“The question,” she says, “is what you’re going to do to me. Not what I’m going to do to you. What you’re going to do to me.”

She cocks the gun and I swear to God I almost stain my shorts. “Jesus Christ.” I feel myself flinch and put my hands in the air again automatically. “Listen, lady. I got no beef with you, I don’t want to hurt you, you don’t want to hurt me. Please. Let’s not anybody get hurt. Let’s talk sensible here.”

“Who said anything about getting hurt? I said you’re going to do something to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you *want* to do to me?”

I look at her. It is a very ambiguous question. Her look is all challenge, and I go back to square one.

“I don’t want to do anything to you. You don’t want to do anything to –”

“Shut up.”

She waves the gun and I close my eyes. When I open them it’s still in my face: I’m looking right down the barrel.

“You want to fuck me, don’t you?”

I hesitate just a little too long. “N-no, I don’t –”

“Don’t lie to me, you son of a bitch.” She waves the gun around again and I make a sound which even in my own ears sounds like a dog whining. I wait, avoiding the question. “You know you want to,” she says. “Everybody wants to. Don’t they?”

“Sure,” I say, “Of course.”

“So let’s go,” she says. She gestures with the gun toward my pants. “Get ‘em off.”

“You can’t mean this.”

“Get ‘em off.”

I see the gun waving again, and I know she means business. I take off my shoes and then the pants. I’m sitting there in my own car with no pants or shoes. I know she’s just toying with me before she shoots me, but for just a moment I imagine she really does expect me to have sex with her, and the realization that I’m so terrified I couldn’t possibly get it up makes my schvanz shrink back even more than it already has in the past ten minutes.

“The boxers too,” she says.

“I don’t want to die.”

“Shut up. You’re not going to die.”

Since that’s the third or fourth time she’s told me to shut up I decide to just shut up and stay shut up. I remove the boxers.

“Don’t move,” she says.

She gets out of the car, still keeping the gun on me. With one hand she wriggles out of her little skirt. She peels down her little white panties. She’s naked from the waist down except for the heels. Like a *Penthouse* model.

“Move a muscle and you’ll die,” she says. “I can see through this fabric.” And with one hand she pulls the tube top up over her head, her face blocked from view for only a

second. She still has the gun on me, and besides, she's too far away for me to grab her arm. She'd kill me while I was in midair. Maybe I'd take her out, too, but I would definitely die. I wait.

"Take off the rest of your clothes. And hand me your shoes." I oblige. "Give me the keys." I take the keys out of the ignition. "The ignition key open the trunk, too?"

"Yeah, it does."

She takes my shoes and throws them in the trunk, then closes it. "Get out of the car," she says.

I've heard a lot about rape. Like how for women it's their worst nightmare and for men it's sometimes like some big fantasy for them. Me, I could never see it. Even someone as gorgeous as this, I'd love to make it with her, sure, but at gunpoint? Insane.

Of course I assume I'll never be able to get it up, but somehow she manages it. First she rubs herself against me – I'm on the ground on my back, and she's straddling me – then she tugs at it a couple times, and sure enough, gun or no gun, I feel the old boy rise to the occasion. To my own amazement. She stays on me for a good long while, very cool and just looking down at me, pointing the goddamned gun, but after a while she gets into it, and it starts to turn into the best sex of my life. Part of it is just her, of course: the face,

that incredible body, even her voice as she urges me on. But before long I start to think it's the gun, the extreme fear of death and the novelty of knowing that I still may get shot to pieces any moment here. After about ten minutes she gets really into it and the gun is just hanging down, pointed at the ground. If I closed my eyes I could lose myself in the sensation of this great sex I'm having, but somehow the fear keeps them wide open. Besides, I can't grab for the gun now, I have to at least get off before I can even start thinking about escape.

But somewhere along the line she regains control or her mind wanders back to the gun and she slows down. "Don't get cute," she says out of nowhere, and points the gun back at me. This delays my orgasm, of course, and we are at it for at least another half hour or so before we finally collapse.

So then the fantasy part is over and it's back to the nightmare. "Get up," she says, and throws me the boxers. She makes me do some other stupid shit – kiss her foot and whatnot – and then she's done. "Get over there," she says. She motions with the gun toward one of the trees.

"Listen, you're a very beautiful –"

"Shut. The fuck. Up." I freeze. She may still kill me, and since she's got the gun, she's in charge. "Get up in that tree."

"What?"

“Get up in that tree. Now.”

“Hey, now, wait a minute....”

The gun goes off with a loud crack and some dirt at my feet scatter over my shins. I jump back.

“Now,” she screams.

I scramble up the orange tree as fast as I can – it’s a small tree, tiny branches, so I’m still only six feet off the ground – and before I can even think about it, before anyone can respond to the gunshot or the loud scream of *Now*, she’s gone, tearing down the road in my convertible like she was meant for that car.

So that’s what happened to my car. I know it’s pretty unbelievable, which is why I didn’t want to bring it up, but that’s what happened. I’m sure I’d recognize her if I ever saw her again; you don’t forget a face like that. But to tell you the truth, I got tired of looking at mug shots after I filed the report, and besides, I’m sure she’s on her way to Key West by now, tooling down the highway with my shoes rattling around in the trunk.

# FATHER'S DAY

*Dear Dad,*

*I was going to send you a card for Father's Day, but then someone at work showed me this Dear Abby column that suggested sending a letter. I don't write letters too much, but I figured I'd give it a shot.*

He taps the pen against the table top, looking out the window at the long line of palms.

*I guess the idea of this letter is to say more than just "Happy Father's Day." It's to say thank you for all the things you did for me throughout the years.*

He remembers a cold winter day, riding in the back seat of the old Volkswagen, his brother Jim beside him.

*I want to thank you for teaching me how to ride a bike.*

It's Christmas Eve and Dad has had too many highballs at the Davisons'. Mom has started an argument, and now Dad is finishing it: "You want to go home? Fine. I'll get you home."

*I remember how we used to sit out in the woods, watching the river flow by. How Jim and I would run past you with Bandit, like wild boys with their wild dog.*

The Volkswagen careens down the icy hill, the engine humming louder and louder.

"Dan," she shouts, "you're going to get us all killed."

“You think I can’t drive, huh? You don’t like the way I drive? I’m showin’ you some driving right now.”

*I remember days in December when we threw snowballs at each other while we were shoveling the driveway. I remember springtime in Ohio, going to see the Reds play. Remember the year they beat the Red Sox in the World Series? I thought Jim was going to cry. He was such a big Red Sox fan.*

He pauses and takes a sip of water. Outside the dark room two great sandhill cranes dip their long beaks into the grass, looking for food.

*And I remember all those nights when Mom was back in school getting her degree, and you used to make us those great potato pancakes.*

The car whips around a corner, tires squealing. He and Jim sit rigid in the back seat, holding onto the vinyl grips. They do not cry. They remain immobile as statues. They try to look unperturbed.

*You know, Dad, it’s funny. I’ve sent you some serious cards through the years, and some pretty silly ones, too. I think I like this better, though.*

Now the night is almost over. He and Jim lie on their bellies on the cool hardwood floor, safe behind their bedroom door, listening to the argument down the hall.

*Bullshit*, he hears his father scream. This is a man who never swears when sober. When was he last like this? Six months? A year?

*Bullshit*, he screams again. *Bullshit*. The voice is strangled, as if he were choking on hot gravel. As if all the anguish and rage of all the years were roiling up in that one bitter word.

*I hope everything's going well for you in Minnesota. I'm sure retirement is a big change of pace for you. I'll bet you're adjusting to it well.*

He feels once again how his heart pounds in his chest. How he fears for his mother's safety. His brother's eyes are big in the dark room. They look at one another without a word.

*I guess I just wanted to say thanks for being there, Dad.*

He taps the page with the pen over and over, searching for an out. Across the bay the cranes fly into the sky, barking like geese.

*I know you had a lot of challenges to face, and if I ever have kids of my own, I hope I can face my own challenges.*

*Take care.*

*Love,*

*Joe*

He watches the cranes as they sail out of view. He does not know if they have found anything to eat below his window.

**BILLY**

Billy Powell, aged six, squatted by the side of the large lakelike puddle, studying ants. The late afternoon sky overhead brimmed with clouds that reflected themselves in the murky brown puddle, rippling a little with the wind. Billy put a finger into the puddle. The clouds disappeared, wavered, reappeared. He put an ant into his mouth and ate it, quickly and without thinking.

The sound of his brother's boots across the patio made him stir. Clop, clop. His brother sounded like a slow trotting horse as he came striding out to the big shiny blue pickup truck. His name was David. He was seventeen, tall and godlike as a tree. Billy trembled, and put another ant into his mouth deftly. The clouds in the water wavered and smoothed.

"C'mon, you," Dave said. Billy stood up, allowed himself to be lifted and swung through the air and into the cab of the blue pickup. It was very dark blue, a cobalt sort of blue, and inside it were two bucket seats of some smooth gleaming metal, also painted blue, but glittery, like one of the rings he had once seen in the window of Mr. Nye's store. Mr. Nye ran the pawnshop in downtown Asheville. The seats of the truck were cold and unforgiving, but they gripped your back and buttocks like a hand. Billy had an idea that they had been somehow taken from an old army jeep and magically transplanted into the pickup by his brother Dave after they

were painted blue. Big people could do anything. There were even paints still in the truck, little bottles and brushes on the floor. Dave put the truck in gear, coasted forward, then popped the clutch, revving them out of the yard in a cloud of grey smoke. The smoke smelled like burnt rubber.

*“I would walk all the way from Colorado to Burlington, just to see you again,”* sang the song on the radio. “That’s Emmylou Harris,” said Dave. “Sing it, Emmylou.” He sang along with the radio, loud and off-key, but Billy thought it sounded terrific. He wished he knew all the words too.

As the truck boomed down the hill into Asheville, a stand of pines came into view. Beyond them stretched acres and acres of apple trees, an orchard full. They had been his father’s before he died. His father had a heart attack when Billy was two. Billy remembered him only hazily, like a face glimpsed in a dream.

The truck pounded down one hill and up the next, bumping hard on potholes, whining in protest when Dave shifted gears. The grownup seatbelt held Billy loosely in place, and he rocked with every bounce of the truck. He reached down and picked up a paintbrush. It was a very thin brush, like the ones his mother used for watercolors. Billy could write and draw very well. He was the best in his class, much better than the others, but he knew he could be better still. He wanted to practice. On the floor among the

jumble of rags and tiny paint bottles lay a bottle of blue paint, a gun-metal blue that was like the blue of the metal seats, only darker. He twisted off the cap and set it down on the seat beside his right leg, then dipped the paintbrush into the bottle. The truck lurched, and the tip of the brush went much farther into the bottle than he had intended. But he pulled it out carefully and managed to wipe most of the excess on the glass lip of the bottle before applying the blue tip of the brush to the triangular space of seat between his legs.

Dave was looking out the side window then back through the windshield again and again, distractedly, and did not notice that his baby brother was painting the seat. Billy made an “L,” an “O,” another “O,” then a “K.”

He had decided on writing a little story, if he could manage it in such a small space. What he was planning to write was this:

“Look at the sky. The sky is blue and the truck is too but the truck is bluer than the sky.”

He would write more, of course, provided he had room, but that was as far as he had gotten in his mind. His brother glanced over at him as he was painting the word sky.

“Hey, what the hell are you doin’?”

Billy cowered in the seat. “Nothin’.”

“Nothin’? You’re painting the friggin’ seat? Jesus.” He snapped his hand in the air, a foreign gesture which made Billy think of Mr. Salvatore at Rivers’ Deli. Billy said nothing. He still had the paintbrush in his hand. He held it there awkwardly, not knowing what to do with it. He put the little metal cap back on the blue bottle and put it back on the floor. He said nothing. There did not seem to be anything to say.

“Well, what the hell did you paint there, anyway?” Dave said, and sighed. He leaned over to see. They were at a traffic light downtown.

“I was gonna write a story,” said Billy.

“You were, huh?” He smirked. “What does that say? ‘Look at the sky?’”

“Mm-hm.” Billy looked down. The letters were beginning to dry.

“‘Look at the sky?’ You know how wooden that’s gonna sound?” He shook his head. “It’s like writing a sentence that says, ‘The boy fell down and hurt himself.’ Typical six-year-old sentence. It says nothing. You can’t start off a story like that. It’s lame, little man, very lame.”

Billy looked at the floor, saying nothing. He thought about Mr. Nye’s store, its rings, watches and necklaces, its starched skirts and leisure suits. He thought about the word

*lame*. What did it mean? He had an idea it meant something to do with having a bad leg, like old Mrs. Andersen, the waitress at the Rivers' Deli. But Dave must be right. He knew everything. He knew about girls and guns, cars, electric guitars. And he could talk. He was talking now, but Billy had lost the thread of the conversation. He tuned back in, as if he were waking from some watery dream state, to hear Dave saying, "Boy, Mom's gonna kill you for messing up that seat. Hah."

Billy looked out the window. The taste of an ant was in his mouth. His lower lip quivered a moment, but slowly his face grew solemn and expressionless. He did not blink. Behind him, acres of apple trees lifted their branches to the sun.

**DANIEL**

Daniel sits in the far corner of the room beside a ceramic rocking-horse lamp, beneath the window ledge, against the wall. He fiddles with a pen bearing the legend Constitution Health Network.” It’s a grey day, and he gazes out the window.

There is never anyone home this time of day, which is nice. Nothing to do, no questions to answer; only dreams to construct. From across a fathomless abyss of time and sensation, a memory beckons Daniel forth. He smiles at it and is there instantly.

*A dark summer day, the sky purple and black with choking clouds. A storm approaching. Yellow leaves tremble in vibrant air, squirrels scurry for cover. The sound grows louder, raindrops pattering the dry cornfields, everywhere, everywhere....*

*Daniel stands in the middle of the meadow, arms upstretched in a gesture of supplication. He is smiling as hard as he can, laughing and shaking in the downpour until Munson and Caleb drag him away to the house, where it is harsh and bright with warmth, smothering him with scolding, angry love.*

A light snaps on from somewhere beyond the rocking-horse lamp, and the sound of a thrown newspaper echoes from the porch, thunkthunkthunkthunk. The sound dies slowly away like the fading sound of a brush against a

cymbal. Daniel stands slowly, wiping invisible dirt from the front of his jeans – force of habit. Ambling across the bedroom, his eyes as empty as those of a blind man, his smile tightens into a grimace. He glances about, bird-like, until he reaches the porch.

Minutes pass before he opens the screen door. The handle is cold, smooth to the touch, yet it seems to carry with it some deep sense of foreboding: as if opening the door were potentially fatal – as if one quick turn and push might let in a tempest of agonizing pain and fear, a scorpion leaping into the face and stinging to death the whole mad world, screams tearing every throat with the desperation of paralysis. As if the spring breeze could make of the body one great raw nerve-end.

Summoning every ounce of courage he can, Daniel turns the knob. A pause. His breath is labored, eyes wild, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. He pushes the door open, braced for the shock which never comes. Dust flies in and around his feet, a whirligig, and a dog somewhere far away begins to bark insistently. Nothing more.

He picks up the newspaper slowly, carries it back into the house like a trophy. He sets it down on the kitchen table with the same ceremonious care, drawing away from it as if in fear. He stiffens, forcing another sheepish grin. This has been another victory. Finally, he sits and begins to turn

pages, consciously imitating Mother's scowl. He looks down at a curious picture, wondering what those men in bird suits are doing dancing around a Christmas tree.

### Green Blob Mystery Solved

Yuma, AZ (AP) A green blob feared to be radioactive material was yesterday determined to be a mass of frozen waste from an aircraft's lavatory, officials said.

The blob, discovered on a local farmer's property several weeks ago, has since been stored at the Yuma County Jail, where researchers tested it for uranium content. Yuma County Sheriff Art Cedric said yesterday that the waste had been declared harmless.

"It sure is a relief," said Cedric. "We didn't know *what* that thing was."

Daniel reads headlines: Confusion Gone Above; Yellow Leaves Raining; Cedric Caleb Munson to Wed; Blind Mass Firetruck Gift Screaming Out **OUT! OUT!**"

He looks out the window again, smiling at the steady approach of Mrs. Kinney, tutor, social worker, miracle worker and saint, a pruny woman with a smell of liniment and woodsmoke about her, tottering up the rickety wooden stairs with her shawl and book satchel.

And oh, the magic of those books! Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat*, *Stuart Little* by E. B. White (pictures by Garth Williams), the musty old book with the dancing clock, the one where the print blurs and begins to move off the page when I stare at it long enough, fun with Dick and Jane and Spot.

“Hello, Daniel.”

Struggling up to the surface. She is blurry.

“Hel-lo, Miz Kinney. How are you?”

“Oh, I'm fine, Daniel, just fine. And you – why, you look so happy today, I do declare you're up to something. Are you up to something, Daniel?”

“Yes'm. I mean, no'm.” Hyacinth and raindrops fade, sunlight breaks from a chink in the grey, spills to the floor, filled with wheeling dust motes.... “Look at the tree, Miz Kinney.”

Outside the wind whips at a tall blue spruce, making it bow and nod, bow and nod. It looks friendly, like Christmas time. Daniel's eyes blaze for a moment, a piece of sky in those huge grey orbs, and then they go blank again as memories call.

Christmas time. Daniel stands in front of the tree, his arms half lifted. His head is cocked to one side, hands hanging limp.

“Daniel.” No reply. “*Daniel.*”

“Yes, Mama?”

“*What* are you doing?”

“I’m a scaredy-crow.” He grins, cocking his head the other way.

“Sit down, Daniel. Please.”

“Okay.” He sits in the same spot. The grin recedes. “Where’s Peter?”

Mrs. Isaacson sighs. “I don’t know, Daniel. I think he’s upstairs.”

“Peter’s my friend.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Peter’s my *best* friend. Peter protects me.”

She glares at her son for an instant over the rims of her glasses. With a forced smile of approval, she pushes back her chair, looking haggardly at the pile of coupons on the table before her. Standing, she calls again across the room, “Daniel.”

He looks about, bewildered. “What?”

She is crossing over to him in one fluid motion, leaving in her wake an endless series of images of her walk, frozen instantly, then fading. He looks up at her, trembling.

“Wha- wha- what? What?” Tears fill his eyes.

“Nothing, honey. Nothing. It’s okay.” She presses his frail body against her bosom. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’m not mad at you. Why don’t you go upstairs and look for Peter?”

He brightens, the fear forgotten. “Okay, Mama.” And with several hard blinks and snuffles, the room is clear again. He leaps up and runs awkwardly up the stairs, almost bumping into his eldest brother.

“Whoa, hey there, sport. Where are you off to in such a big hurry?”

“Hi, Caleb. I’m gonna go – I’m gon’ go look for Peter!”

Caleb smiles as if this were some great revelation. “Oh, you’re lookin’ for Peter, huh? Well, I think he’s up in your room, buddy.” He tousles his little brother’s hair, and descends.

Peter, a two-and-a-half-foot high teddy bear, made of brass and modeled after Winnie the Pooh, stands like a sentinel next to Daniel’s bed. He has been there for years, surrounded by softer, fuzzier teddies, but none as big as

him. He is Daniel's favorite toy and best friend, and no one could replace him as king of Daniel's world.

"Peter." Daniel's gleeful cry pierces the air as he leaps onto his friend, raining kisses on the cold smooth brass until it begins to warm under his child's touch.

"Peter. Peter, I love you." Daniel smiles through a new veil of tears and Peter smiles back, a wavy grimace. And from somewhere far above the clouds, across an abyss of longing, groping and forgetting, a memory dies, an echo of laughter rises from a rocking-horse lamp, a keening wail of laughter that stretches across the meadows and into the heart of a summer storm. It rolls over and over, twisting like a dolphin, before it disappears.

**GOTH**

If I really wanted to kill myself, I'd be able to do it pretty expeditiously with an insecticide cocktail. Of course I'd have to mix the ingredients just right. It would be like one of those drinks you can't tell is going to kill you. Like a Long Island Iced Tea. I don't know what the hell is in one of those but somebody told me once, and it's a nasty concoction. Shot of this, shot of that, shot of this, this and this. But it doesn't taste particularly alcoholic.

An insecticide cocktail would be possible only if you mixed in a little of the stuff the lawn care people use these days. It has a nice bouquet, a slightly sweet, sap-like aroma. No matter what you did, the thing wouldn't taste like a Long Island Iced Tea, but that's hardly the point. The real question is who would make the thing? Not me. No way. Not unless I wanted to kill myself. Which of course I don't.

I thought about this stuff yesterday after my stupid ex-boyfriend Brad called me. God, what an ass. I'd like to give *him* an insecticide cocktail. Or maybe a Molotov cocktail. He told me I was a heliophobe, and I asked him what that was supposed to mean. The little bastard wouldn't tell me. He made me go look it up in the dictionary.

*Heliophobe, one who fears or shuns sunlight.*

Arrogant prick. I know that about myself. I'm a goth, for Christ's sake.

But oh, boy, old Brad doesn't like the darker side of things.

Listen, Brad, I said. Darkness rules. You want to slather suntan lotion on yourself and fry for two hours every day, that's your problem. When a melanoma the size of Rhode Island shows up on your little hairless chest, then you can be a heliophobe, too.

All this is just a long way of saying I don't want Mr. Sweetness-And-Light back in my life. He can have his God and his stupid fetishistic rituals. I want to sit in dark, smoky cafés, smoke cigarettes and drink cappuccino, and if he doesn't like it, he can fuck right off. Where does he get off saying Suzie and I should go into therapy? We didn't kill her parents. We weren't even there. But since the murderer drove stakes through their hearts, we come under suspicion. Like a goth is going to kill somebody that way. Get real.

Suzie's been through therapy, anyhow. All she got out of it were bad memories of some whitebread dick, with a Ph.D. hanging out his ass, telling her she needs to get in touch with her feelings. How's this for feelings, doc? I'd like to strangle you with your own intestines. Besides, if Suzie and I had anything to do with that murder, wouldn't we have failed the stupid polygraph?

Of course we would.

But oh, no, Brad knows best. Mr. Sunlight wants to heal us. Play some shitty new-age music and burn some incense. Well, fuck that. I'll take my Bauhaus CDs any day.

So I told him, listen. I don't want to kill anybody, Brad. Not myself, not even you. And certainly not anyone close to Suzie's family. But I also don't want to keep going out if you're going to ram all this emotive therapy crap down my throat. And I know you're not going to change, so just forget it. So now he's like my stupid ex-boyfriend instead of my stupid boyfriend.

Before the murders, things were different. We'd go to Empire on a Saturday night and dance until dawn. But then all those kids started dying at raves from mixing Ecstasy with too many other things. The whole scene just started to suck. Suzie would call me up and say, "Sarah, you've got to check out this new club with me: it's the bomb." And we'd go and it would turn out to be all the same people we were trying to get away from, people from all the other clubs. Like Evan, a guy who's got so many body piercings, when the wind blows, he whistles. Or parts of him do, anyway.

And then of course there was Brad.

Brad was different before Suzie's parents got killed. He had fun. He still liked to dance, and he always had something cool for us. He wouldn't try to slip a roofie in your drink. But after the murders, he got religion or

whatever. Turned into Mr. Love-Is-A-Flower. And things have gone downhill ever since.

Here's what happened. On the day of the murders, I go over to Suzie's in the early afternoon. We've been at The Castle in Ybor City the night before, and after the bar shuts down we go to this after-hours club called Gothica. Really cool, not trendy like the others. We don't get home until the sun is almost up, so I sleep until about one in the afternoon. I get up and change—just one basic black outfit for another, actually—and walk down to Suzie's. The broiling sun makes me sweat, and I have to stop off and get a stronger pair of sunglasses. My wraparounds aren't cutting it.

Suzie's still asleep when I get there. I have no way of knowing anything weird is going to happen. For me it's just another Saturday night. I wake her up by pounding on her parents' front door. No one else is home.

Suzie. Wake up. I pound on the door some more. Suzie.

She comes to the door in a little baby doll. Mascara on her cheek, like a streak of coal.

What time is it?

I smile up at her. It's at least one. Come on, Miss Lazybones. Time for your margarita.

This is a little joke between us. Suzie likes to drink margaritas, and I always offer her a morning hair-of-the-dog drink. Not that she ever takes me up on it.

Come on in, she says. I'm gonna jump in the shower.

While she showers I sit in the living room and flip through her parents' magazines: *Vogue*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Southern Living*. Shitty-ass magazines. Nothing I'd want my friends or my kids' friends to see. I look out the window. The goddamn sun shines on and on, cheerless as an old hooker.

Suzie bounces back out, looking like Gwyneth Paltrow with wet hair.

Hey, I say. Let's go to Alternative Music. She pulls on some flip-flops and we leave.

The store is in a really scummy section of Nebraska Avenue, right near where the picturesque Adult Theater used to be. It's a good neighborhood to get whacked on the back of the head by a crack addict at three in the morning. But at two on a Saturday afternoon, it's a cool place to be. The music is usually electronica, and the AC works most of the time.

Jim slouches down behind the counter, looking at incense and CDs. He's friends with Brad, and it shows: shaved head, lots of patchouli. An eyebrow ring. But he's still pretty cool.

How's it going, ladies?

Hey, Jim. What's up.

Not much. You see this new Hanging Puppies CD?

I smirk. Nice cover.

Hey, what are you two doing later?

I look at Suzie for confirmation. I think we're going to Gothica again tonight, right?

Suzie looks at me, expressionless. Yeah.

You should meet me at Empire first, Jim says. Peter and Evan are gonna be there with Peter's cousin, Cindy. You ever meet her?

Not sure.

We hang for a few, then wander back out into the heat. We head back to my place, since my parents are out of town again and I can do whatever I want. We decide to take Jim up on his offer. After watching some stupid show about mud-wrestling, and smoking too many clove cigarettes, we leave for Empire about eleven. My head hurts, and I wonder if I'm getting my period.

Jim is already there, dancing to some weird kind of space mambo thing. I let Suzie join him on the dance floor. I get an Alabama Slammer for my headache. It starts to get wild

after one o'clock. Some of the people with Jim and Peter turn us on to some crystal, and by one-thirty I'm so bugged out I can barely stand.

Now, I don't remember everything from that night, but I've got an airtight alibi. Because when Brad joins us, Suzie and I are so out of control that we somehow talk him into driving us to Pensacola. I guess I get into a fight at some point before we leave Gothica. I don't remember, but there will be blood on my hands the next morning. A lot of this is guesswork. But since Brad and Suzie are both with me all night, like I said, there's no need for a better alibi.

When the police bring us back from Pensacola, Suzie acts guilty... almost as if we did it. But I can't help thinking it's just she's in shock. Hell, I'm in shock too. Who would have thought her parents...? One night they're there, the next they're gone.

Brad acts weirder than anybody. He looks down whenever someone speaks to him. He talks to us as if he'd never met us before. Or as if he'd never truly known us until last night. I wonder what embarrassing thing I might have done, other than the fight I apparently got into, but he doesn't want to talk about it. Doesn't want to talk about much of anything, as a matter of fact.

The evidence is all circumstantial. We do our time, get released. Nobody really believes we did it, but the cops act

as if they do. Of course Suzie's fingerprints and mine are on the stakes: we helped her parents plant the tomatoes in the first place. But the three of us have our alibi. We all pass the polygraphs. And besides, it's not like they didn't have plenty of enemies. No further questions, your Honor.

So when Mr. Sunshine Daydream calls me back today to apologize for the heliophobe thing, and to try to get back with me, I feel empty. I feel nothing now. No anger, no sadness. Just that it's time to move on.

I tell him that. Time to move on.

That's what I've been trying to say all along, Sarah. That we need closure. But together, not apart.

I stub my cigarette out. What closure, Brad? We didn't do anything.

Sarah.

We didn't kill anybody, Brad.

Sarah.

No. We didn't do it. You know we didn't do it.

He says nothing, then sighs. You really don't remember anything from that night.

No, I don't. And I don't want to, okay? It's over.

Sarah.

No, Brad. It's over. All of it. Goodbye, Brad.

Sarah, he says again, but too late. I hang up. I sit back and light another cigarette. I sip my coffee. Outside my window the sun goes on and on, and I pull the blinds tighter.

# **CUERVO SUNSETS AND WATERWORKS**

We sat beneath the parasol in midday languor, sipping at Cuervo Sunsets, God knows why. Not Sunrises, they're made differently. Her blank gaze fixed itself on the bottom of her empty glass, those damn cold eyes of hers hidden by overdressed lashes. Mine was still more than half full.

"Waiter," she called without looking up.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, hurrying to her side with the decanter. "Another drink?"

"Please." He poured, walked away. "Thank you," she called after him, eyes still averted. "Well?" she said.

"Well, what?"

"What are we going to do?"

"We are not going to do anything. Why don't you tell me what you're going to do?"

"Are you just going to absolve yourself of the matter? Is that it, Francis darling?"

"My dear, I'm not 'absolving' myself of anything. Your decision, whatever it is, is fine with me." I took a long gulp.

She looked up, finally, flashed the icy orbs. "Don't you even care what my decision is?"

"Look. It's *yours*. Make it."

"It's *ours*, damn it!"

“No,” I said in a low voice, turning the glass around with my fingertips. “It’s yours. If you want to get literal, it’s ‘ours,’ but technically it’s *yours*.”

“Don’t you have any sense of responsibility?”

I laughed to myself. Bitch. “Sure, I do. I just don’t want to get involved, and you know you don’t want me to.”

“Your *are* involved, though.”

“Was. Past tense.”

“Look,” she began, almost pleading, “I can’t just give it away to some stranger.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? That’s all you have to say, isn’t it? ‘Okay.’”

“What do you want? ‘Oh, dear, you’re right. You can’t be giving it away to some *stranger*.’”

“Don’t get sarcastic...”

“Who’s getting sarcastic? I said ‘okay.’ Do what you want with it.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Then get — ”

“No!” She looked hurt and embarrassed. Her voice had gone up an octave. “No. I can’t. But — ”

“But what? Look, Ann, you’ve got three choices: keep it, give it up, or have — ”

“Stop,” she said, looking like tears were on the way. Christ, I thought. Women and their friggin’ waterworks.

“Sir, would you like another drink?” came the waiter’s voice.

“Yes, a double, please.”

“Very well, sir.”

“Thanks,” I told his back. I looked at her again. She was sulking, of course, upset because the waiter had interrupted her. “Well?” I said.

“Well, what?” She wiped her eyes.

“What are you going to do?”

“That’s what I wanted to know. Thanks for your support.”

“Look here. It’s not exactly *my* fault.”

“Well, whose is it, then? It’s not all mine.”

“All right, so maybe it’s both of ours. But it’s still *your* decision.”

“Don’t you care at all?”

“Of course I do. I said before, if I have to, I’ll pay for — ”

“No,” she said again, louder. Damned embarrassing. “I don’t want your money. I just....”

“What? What? You want to run off and get *married*? Is that it? You want me to get an overnight divorce? Quit my job? What do we do, flee to Mexico? Please.”

She started to sob into her dress, God knows why.

“Noooo... noooo.” She rocked back and forth. Damned embarrassing. It got me pretty disgusted.

“All right, listen,” I said. “You figure out what the hell you want from me, and when you do, let me know. Just remember, I’m not about to leave Jo and the kids and a steady wage for a *stripper*.” That one got her where it counted.

“Where are you going?” she asked, blubbering.

I looked back. “Taking a leak. Mind?”

“Oh,” she said, “go right ahead. Just go ahead,” still sobbing like a friggin’ ambulance. Christ.

I sneered. “Thanks.”

So I went into the little john there for the leak. On the wall it said, *For a good time, call....* Yeah. No fooling.

It made me think of that TV show. *The names have been changed to protect the innocent*. Ha. Tell me who’s innocent anymore. Take your time.

I went back out the table, dreading the guilt trip. Goddamned women and their goddamned waterworks, I swear....

“So,” she said, “what are we going to do?”

Here we go again, I thought, pulling up my zipper. “Don’t start that crap again. I’m leaving.”

“What do you mean? Where are you going?” She looked wild, like a caged animal. Those damn eyes.

“I’m leaving,” I repeated. “I’m going home. Remember? I have a home: a house, you know? You’ve seen them before, haven’t you? Windows with shutters, and a dining room, two baths with a nice little — ”

She exploded. “*Shut up.*” She was friggin’ hysterical. Every eye turned to her. Really embarrassing as hell. God almighty.

“Just go away,” she cried. “Go away and leave me alone, and don’t come back. It’s my damn problem and I’ll damn well take care of it.”

“That’s what I tried to tell you be — ”

“I know,” she said. “I know.”

I was turning pretty red. I hate having a lot of strangers stare at me. “So now you want me to leave, huh?”

“Yes. Please, just – just go,” and she cried some more. So damned embarrassing.

“Goodbye,” I said and kissed her on top of the head, I don’t know why.

She looked up at me with those icy little eyes, looking like she couldn’t decide between loving me and hating me. Who cared?

“Goodbye,” she said, eyes averted again. All that friggin’ mascara gunk running down her face. What a mess.

I set down my money for the waiter and left. Not even twenty feet away and I hear, “Frank.”

I turned around in time to see her pitch the little gold-fill bracelet I’d given her in my direction. It landed a few feet behind me in the sand.

I left it there. What the hell was I going to do with it, anyway?

# STRANGERS

“Strangers are nice because they don’t make a big deal about the fact that they can fly,” the little girl wrote. She was thirteen. “They usually discover it by accident, so they don’t brag about it or act like they accomplished something. They are usually humble: members of a club formed by sheer dumb luck. They are more grateful than proud.”

The girl was a Stranger herself, though no one knew it except the other Strangers she’d met. She was one of the fortunate few to have met Melvin B. Strange himself, and she and her brother, who was also a Stranger, actually met Strange during that magical year when he first discovered he could fly.

That day had started like any other. Melvin B. Strange walked down the sidewalk on West Main Street in New Britain, Connecticut, heading to the Greyhound station’s tiny store for a pack of cigarettes. The proprietor, a surly baldheaded man who looked like someone who might run a pornographic video store, greeted Melvin the same way every time.

“Pack of Old Golds, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Anything else for you today?”

“No, thanks.”

Melvin paid for the cigarettes and left. He hated going in there, hated the little fat man with his broad bald head and his colorless eyes, hated the same inevitable fourteen words spoken between them each time like a curse. He felt an oppressive weight against his sternum as he opened the door into moist October air.

He turned right instead of his usual left and headed away from his apartment, walking and smoking. Nothing compelled him to walk down toward Arch Street, but he did it anyway. The sky was overcast, and he had a lightweight black umbrella tucked under his arm. He didn't want to get caught in the rain, even with an umbrella. Still he walked, although the wind was picking up.

When he reached Arch Street he took a right and began to walk down what had once been one of the worst neighborhoods in town: a pestiferous strip of tenements and small, dirty shops. He could not remember the last time he'd been down this road. Years. Now it was completely changed, a long row of shops within one building, like a permanent cinderblock flea market. A tobacconist beside a shop that sold nothing but purses, a hobby shop, a shop where everything was a dollar. The wind howled, brown wet leaves flew past. Raindrops spattered him from above, like spittle. The wind increased.

And then something strange happened, something inexplicable. Although he was the only person on the street with an umbrella, and not the smallest man by any means, the fierce wind suddenly picked him and the umbrella up and lifted him off the ground. The umbrella blew inside out and several of the pieces that held it together snapped. He drifted slowly back to the street, as if the broken umbrella somehow slowed his fall. His heart pounded in his chest, and his breath came in short bursts. The cigarette lay on the street in a puddle, dead.

He walked further along the block, trying to put the broken umbrella to rights, and the next shop he passed solved the problem for him. They sold nothing but umbrellas. New ones, used ones. Antique umbrellas with wooden handles. State-of-the-art umbrellas with special features.

“Morning,” said the man behind the counter.

“I need an umbrella,” Melvin said. “Mine broke. Just about killed me.”

“Help yourself. Prices are all on ‘em.”

He looked around until he found a huge black umbrella whose metal reinforcements were thick and heavy as steel. He hefted it into the air with a grunt and looked at the price tag. Thirty dollars. He went back to the counter. “I want the best umbrella you got. Is this the best you got?”

“No, that’s a good one, but the best one is the Dexter, there on the wall. Comes with a lifetime guarantee.”

“How much is it?”

“Eighty-one dollars plus tax.”

Melvin whistled. “I’ll take this black one.”

Outside, the sky was clearing, but the wind was worse than ever. Melvin opened the umbrella just on principle, and instantly the wind pulled him upward again. He tried to resist, but the force was incredible, and within moments he was sailing straight up again, above the shops, holding the umbrella with both hands, terrified. People on the street below looked up at him, pointing, and he knew he was going to die. At a hundred feet, he could be plunged into a tree, a power line, a radio tower. Wind roared in his ears.

And then came the great miracle of his life. He grew calm. Red and yellow treetops flashed beneath him. The wind, loud and cold at a hundred feet, vanished at two and three hundred. He realized he was not about to die. He floated like Mary Poppins above the city, looking down on people and cars and houses, and no one looked up at him. He could fly. He folded the umbrella and floated all the rest of the day over Southington and Farmington and Hartford, standing erect and calm on the air of the new day.

By sundown he was ravenous, and he returned to New Britain, following the sun. He did not know the layout of the entire city, but he knew well enough how to get back, and he followed the landmarks he recognized – the old Stanley Works sign, Friendly’s Ice Cream – and at last he reached home. He did not fly like a bird or like Superman; he merely turned his upright body in the direction he intended, and willed himself forward or up or down. As he neared his apartment he opened the umbrella, and at a hundred feet the wind came up, his velocity increased, and he landed roughly on the ground, like a first-time parachutist. In the morning his ankles would be sore.

The following weeks and months were like a dream. Each day he went to work in the stinking factory where he’d smelled nothing but polyvinyl chloride for twenty-one years, and each night he headed out at dusk and found an open field where he could launch himself. He soon discovered that at about a hundred feet, when the wind died down and it seemed as though he were in a vacuum, he somehow attained the power of invisibility. But it did not take long for someone to spot him either during his takeoff or landing, and though no one ever accosted him, a newspaper story reported that several people claimed to have seen a UFO that looked like a man’s body. The story quickly came and went, but he learned to be careful.

The best and safest places to take off or land were in the woods, so he began to plan weekend flights that originated in one town and ended in another. Nothing could be better than starting at the Barnes Nature Center in Bristol and landing, say, at Kent Falls, almost forty miles away. Even through the winter the only difficult part was the first hundred feet. After that, unless he tried to travel higher than several thousand feet, the effect was like being in a dream, floating in a vacuum warm and silent as the womb.

One day on a flight from the Barnes Nature Center, an amazing thing happened. Spring was in full bloom, and he was flying above Shrub Road, less than a mile from the Nature Center. He must have miscalculated the altitude, he thought, because a girl and her brother spotted him above their house. They lived at the crest of a hill near the end of the road and they both looked up into the sky and pointed at him. He wavered a moment, unsure how to respond. He noticed the woman across the street from the children's house. She, too, looked up, but seemed to see nothing. She shook her head and went inside. Melvin B. Strange beckoned to the little girl and her brother, and to his astonishment the little girl began to rise into the sky. She floated up to him like an angel while her brother stood below them in the yard with his arms folded as if he were trying to decide something.

“I can’t believe it,” said the little girl when she reached him.

“Neither can I.”

“Are there others?”

“Evidently,” he said, pointing to her. They laughed.

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Months,” he said. “You?”

“I just found out three weeks ago. Has anyone seen you?”

“At a certain height, no. Not until now. I thought I was too high to be seen even now.”

“We both saw you.”

“I don’t think the lady across the street from you did, though. She just shook her head and went into her house.”

“Maybe only the people who can do it can see the other people who can do it.”

“Maybe,” he said. “So that means your brother can do it, too?”

“I’m gonna find out. He doesn’t know I can. Well, he didn’t.” She looked down. Beneath them stood the brother, tiny against the house and the green bright lawn. The girl beckoned to him. He ran into the house and slammed the door.

“Be right back.” She did not wait for an answer. He stood there in the air while she floated back home. She came back with her brother. For the rest of his life Melvin would remember the sight of the little girl and her brother walking into the yard again from the close-shuttered house, standing in the yard for just an instant before she took his hand and they floated up into the sky toward him.

“Hi,” Melvin said.

“Holy moly,” said the brother.

“Pretty cool, eh?” He folded his arms and smiled at the girl. She let go of her brother’s hand.

“Holy cannoli,” said the brother.

“Let’s show him the Nature Center,” Melvin said to the girl. “We’ll fly over the sandpits.”

“Okay,” she said.

A blue jay flew past, so close to Melvin’s head he had to dodge it. It sounded in his ears the way a helicopter at a distance would sound.

“Jeez, even these birds can’t see us,” he said.

“Holy cow,” said the brother. Melvin and the little girl laughed again. “Let’s go,” they said.

So it started with just the three of them. But then on one of his longer flights, Melvin met a man in Mexico, and two days later he met a man in Germany. The German had long droopy mustaches and shocked blue eyes, and kept saying, *Gott im Himmel*. He reminded Melvin of the young girl's brother. Melvin laughed and shook his hand. He didn't know German, so all they could do was exchange absurd non sequiturs: *American. Deutsche. Schnell*. Nonetheless, he knew they shared something more. He came back to America and told the little girl about it.

"But you're the first," she said. "You were the original. We call ourselves The Strangers now, after you. We're like a club. And you're the president and founder."

Melvin smiled sheepishly and looked down at the bright green tops of the trees. "No, I'm not president of anything. We're all equals up here."

"But you were still the first," she said.

"Maybe so," he said. "Maybe so." He looked down along the long rows of houses to where sparrows were gathering on a high tension wire, flapping their wings. He pointed them out to the girl.

"Look," he said.

She looked down at them and smiled too. "It's funny seeing them from up here, isn't it?"

“It always is.”

“I never really paid attention to birds before,” she said.

“Exactly.”

“I never really paid attention to a lot of things before, actually.”

“Exactly.”

They fell silent, and then he spoke as if they hadn't paused. “That's just it,” he said. “For years I was stuck in this hellhole of a factory breathing in nasty fumes every day. And when I got out of work the outside world didn't seem much better. It didn't really seem all that different, to tell you the truth. Now it's like the whole world's changed. But it hasn't. It just looks so different from up here that now it looks different down there too.”

She waited a moment, holding her breath, it seemed. In the time he'd known her, she'd never heard him make such a long speech. “What do you do?” she asked. “In the factory.”

“I'm a setup man,” he said. “But it's not important. This —” he held up a hand and cast it out to one side, indicating the world above, beneath, beside them “— this is what's important.”

She nodded, smiling. “Let's go back,” she said.

“Mm? Oh. Yeah. Let's go back.”

Melvin worried about the little girl. What if life in the air turned out to be more or less like life on the ground after all? What if there were murderers and child molesters and kidnappers up in the sky, too? But the more he met others on the way to Rio or Johannesburg, the more convinced he became that the world at two hundred feet was indeed a different world than the one he knew below.

Two more months passed in aimless flights to countries he'd only dreamed of visiting before he discovered what he needed to do. He was on a flight to Rwanda, and the weather was oppressive. Even at two hundred feet, normally a vacuum of mild silence in winter and summer, the air felt moist and heavy. He was floating high above a village when he saw a pregnant woman collapse in the street amid a swarm of women and children and mosquitoes. Without thinking, he landed.

He'd seen accidents from the air, but had chosen to ignore them. Fear of being caught and turned into a freak show kept him in the air, invisible and safe. But somehow in this devastated land, the risk of being apprehended seemed insignificant. He came to the woman's side, barely aware of the strangers backing away in a circle, most of whom had seen him land. A tiny bubble of saliva formed at the edge of the woman's mouth, and she was breathing hard through her nostrils, eyes clamped shut.

“She’s going to deliver her baby right here,” he said aloud. He realized none of them spoke English. The woman began to wail, a high keening sound that split the air like a siren. Melvin began to shift the woman’s prone figure into a more comfortable position. He knew nothing about delivering a baby. But he moved her feet so that they were far apart, flat on the ground, her knees bent, and several of the onlookers took the hint. A great black woman of about thirty moved in to help him. She weighed around two hundred pounds, it seemed, though in fact she was merely swollen from malnutrition, not really obese. She flashed a yellowed smile at Melvin, and he smiled in return.

They delivered the baby there in the dust of the village. Melvin’s heart was beating hard, and sweat poured down his back, but he felt an elation as great as he’d felt on that first flight over New England. And he realized that this was what he had to do. Not to be Superman, but to go where he was needed, even if just for a moment, wherever that might be.

He stood up to a round of applause, and he blushed. He bowed and nodded, thanking them for thanking him, and the crowd backed away again as he ascended. Some of them fell to their knees, but most just looked up in the air, open-mouthed. He waved goodbye before he was invisible to them. He flew higher and higher, across the darkening

## STRANGERS

land, across the sea, over clouds and trees. In the distance he saw another man in the sky, a man with an umbrella. He realized the man was himself. He saw another and another, hundreds and hundreds, men with umbrellas floating like dandelion seeds all across the sky.