

One Hundred Fifty-One Days of No Regret

By Michael Broh

ACT 1: Regret Takes a Holiday

To Better Days

The super at 1047 W Altamont was a drunk. If he hadn't been related to that no good wife of his, the landlord would never have hired him in the first place. But he *was* related to that no good wife of his, and the job, after all, wasn't *that* complicated. There was still the possibility that all the kid needed was a chance to get on his feet. So the landlord kept him and fed the disease in the way only a blind and foolish, or at least careless, employer can.

Well, good intentions and all that.

On the night that Horatio Porter locked himself out of his apartment and his cell phone *in*, the cell phone of his building's super, Theodore Clyde Mitchell, was lost in a desk drawer, drained of its battery. Mr. Mitchell himself, or T-Clyde as his so-called friends knew him, was laying about his basement apartment in various states of inebriation, depending upon which portion of the night he was considered.

The morning had started out well enough. Rarely. Sunshine came through his basement window, the air conditioner was working, and he felt well rested. That morning, after cooking an actual egg, he determined *this would be the day*. He would check the boiler, replace filters, make a list, and finally, at long last, get his life in order. It wasn't such a bad job, after all. He had a free apartment and not a lot of responsibility. If he could just get some motivation and do a little bit of work, he might just find he had things pretty good. Yes, this would be the day.

He looked about at the mess that was his apartment and mentally tried to calculate how long it would take to do a minimum of picking up. It was more than a little overwhelming, hard

to even know where to start. Quietly, a voice whispered in his ear.

If only you had picked up a little bit at a time.

Such a thought was not unusual for T-Clyde, but given his brief but sunny outlook on the day, he pushed it aside for better ones. After all, he *could* pick up later. Shower, dress, pick up the few things he needed at the hardware store, and make the rounds. That was the key to the first step. The first step to a new life. Job first, personal life later.

He showered, dressed, and got as far as the door when he remembered he didn't have the purchase code for the hardware store. If that pretty young thing had still been working there, he might have had a chance. What was her name, anyway? Opal, maybe? Always flirting with him at the counter. She knew him, knew his account. *She* would have faked it for him, and he could have got on with his day. Too bad she wasn't around anymore. That son of a bitch who worked there now wouldn't even give him the respect of a fake smile. Some nothing clerk who acted like he owned the place. Probably would someday. T-Clyde knew how this one ended. He'd been through it enough. That guy wanted his ten digit code and a purchase order number or you could, in the parlance of that particular son of a bitch, *ride a pogo stick to Timbuktu and suck on a roasted shit stick.*

T-Clyde did not know the code by heart.

If only you'd memorized it.

Well, no matter. He had the code in his phone. Well, his *lost* phone. His *maybe* lost phone. His phone he hadn't seen in, well, in a while, anyway.

If only you'd looked for it last night.

Well, no matter. Maybe the thing to do was a little cleaning after all. Maybe the phone would turn up and he could yet save the day.

Theodore Clyde Mitchell, his spirit not yet at its usual low, took a deep breath and jumped in to the seemingly impossible task of cleaning his apartment. He gathered clothes into a pile for washing later. He piled papers and mail onto what passed as his kitchen table for sorting later. He emptied a trash can and refilled it. In an hour, he had not yet found his phone, but there was a view of the floor he had not seen in weeks. For the first time in recent memory he was feeling as if he had accomplished something. As if he brought value to the world. It was a good feeling. He smiled at himself and settled in for a ten minute break, viewing his morning's work with pride.

He made a cup of instant coffee, poured in a little whiskey, as was his wont, and put his feet up with a dated magazine from the new pile of paper goods.

Alas.

After another hour and three drinks had passed, he was frantically tearing apart his apartment for the phone, doubling the mess he had so thoughtfully begun to clean up not two hours before. The clothes pile became a morass along the floor once again. The papers spilled off of the table. Drawers were opened and closed, including the one that claimed the phone, obscured by mail hastily stuffed on top.

By lunch, any hope that the day had previously held was far distant, as T-Clyde worked his way through a second bottle of whiskey in front of Judge Judy and her friends. By the time Horatio Porter, in need of help from the one man with keys to his apartment *not* locked inside of it, might have called him, T-Clyde was passed out on his couch, snoring loudly. By the following morning, the pain of his hangover was such that, even had he found his phone the day before, T-Clyde would not have regarded its rings.

When Theodore Clyde Mitchell finally *did* wake up, throbbing in his head, churning in his stomach, and shame in his heart, he needed no attention from Regret.

Regret came by anyway, and joined T-Clyde for his first drink of the day, this one not so much in celebration as a desperate attempt to stave off the pain. As T-Clyde lifted the bottle to his lips, Regret, unseen in the corner, raised his own glass and whispered in his ear.

To better days, my friend.

A Pinch of Salt

It's important to remember that Regret was a bit of a son of a bitch. I say that because there will be moments in the story ahead when you might feel a little sympathy for the heartless bastard. You'll say to yourself, *he's not such a bad guy, he means well, he's had a hard life, he really is trying to do the right thing*, and a lot of other such crap meant to make yourself feel better for liking him. Because he *is* likable. He's always there for you. Wipes your tears, gives you a shoulder to cry on. When you are having a really bad day, he puts his arm around you, tells you he understands, lets you share your troubles with him, lets you confess.

He does almost everything a good friend ought to do. *Almost*. But he is not your friend. He is not there to help. Not there to make you a better person. He commiserates with you, comforts you, makes you feel like you are not alone, but always as you wallow in pain. He has no interest in your success, takes no part in your joy, cares for naught but your suffering. When you say, *"I'm a terrible person who ruins everything,"* he doesn't say *"Don't worry, friend. Things will get better."* Not Regret. Regret says, *"There, there, old friend. I know how you feel. Sometimes everything just sucks, doesn't it?"*

He thrives on your pain.

And because this day was a good day for Regret, pain was abundant.

To say he felt joy is to misunderstand this particular god, but it is more than fair to say he felt fulfilled. All about him he saw old friends in need of a sympathetic ear, broken souls looking for a shoulder on which to lay their tear-streaked faces. Where he was absent, he knew they were waiting, susceptible to his charms, primed for his whispers, anxious for his return. He

had made himself invaluable. He was needed, desired, and proud to serve.

He visited one friend after another, pulling each one deeper into the darkness, all the while feeling their gratitude for his visits. He was the only one who understood them. The only one who really knew how worthless they were and came back anyway. The only one who knew the truth. His friends needed him. Needed someone to smile sadly as they judged themselves, as they admitted to their mistakes, their faults, their failures. Someone to confess to. One friend after the other thanked him. One friend after the other told him he was the only one with the courage to see them for who they really were. One friend after another shared their pain. One friend after the other told him he was the only friend they really had.

It was a good day.

As Horatio Porter's super slept off two bottles of whiskey, as the rain did its best to wash the filth embedded in the city streets, as Horatio himself dressed for dinner, Regret gave some small attention to Horatio's young woman across town, another old friend always ready to welcome him. Donatella Purcell held a pinch of salt in her left hand and tasted the sauce with her right. She hesitated. Regret waited. It mattered not a bit to him, of course, whether she dropped the pinch or not, for he had her either way. Should she drop the pinch he would convince her she shouldn't have, and should she not, he would make her wish she had. From the moment Donatella Purcell considered the extra touch of seasoning, she had lost.

He stood behind her, loomed really, as she struggled with the decision, her hand poised over the sauce, salt held tightly between her fingers. The moment she dropped it, and she did drop it, he stood back on his heels, shook his head, and sighed his disapproval, just under a whisper. She felt it in every part of her

body, felt it rushing up into her now tensed shoulders. It had been a mistake. Of course it had been a mistake. Dammit.

As she tasted the now perfect sauce, she had no doubt but that she had ruined it, had ruined dinner, had ruined her relationship, had ruined her life. Why couldn't she do anything right? Why must she always push everything one step too far? Why did she always sabotage herself when things were going well?

She didn't deserve nice things. Didn't deserve good fortune. Didn't deserve to be loved.

Stupid.

Stupid stupid stupid.

With grief in her heart and depression coursing through her veins, she gave in. Convinced that she had already ruined everything, she now did her best to make certain of it. She poured the contents of the pot into the sink, threw the vegetables into the trash, and turned off the oven. It was over, and she'd might as well face it. Why would he want to eat her stupid food anyway? She texted Horatio the usual lies.

She was not feeling well.

She would rather be alone tonight.

Maybe they could have dinner next week.

If only you hadn't ruined everything as usual.

She slumped down against the cabinet under her kitchen sink, fell to the floor, and cried.

It was a glorious moment for Regret, the sort he thrived on. Not the little bread and butter wins that sustained his existence. He needed those as well, it could not be denied, but he could do those in his sleep. Tiny wishes. *Darn its.*

If only you hadn't hit the snooze button.

If only you had shaken one more time at the urinal.

If only you had looked where you were going.

If only you hadn't bought the red one.

If only you had taken that parking spot the first time around.

Such were the little visits that filled most of Regret's days. Not a lot of margin in small sales, so to speak, but they added up. They were reliable, made good business sense. Lot of work, though, when the margins are small. What he really preferred were the big ones, the ones that tore open the souls of his friends. *Those* at least gave him some semblance of achievement. Of importance. He could *feel* them. Of course, the big ones of yesterday weren't big enough for today. They had to keep getting bigger to continue to have meaning for Regret. Like an addict who must continually increase the dosage just to feel anything close to that first high, he needed increasingly powerful achievements. Needed to crush his weaker clients harder each time, just to feel *anything*. These days, the crushing was all that kept him going.

Such was his experience with Donna. To go after an upsell on an oil change and end up selling a new car, *that* was a good day. A banner day.

As Regret watched his friend sink into a whirlpool of depression, break from the tiniest choice, tear herself apart from the least hint of a mistake, he glowed with pride. In the old days, she would have just been angry. Maybe kicked the wall and hurt her toe and become even angrier. In the old days, she would have added a little water to tone it down the sauce, making it worse, of course, maybe screamed out loud to get it out of her system. In the old days she would have called herself an idiot but moved on. She would have thought about her mistake again at the first bite and forgotten about it by the second. In the old days, she would have let the boy come over, hope he didn't notice the less than perfect sauce, and the boy would play his part by telling her how wonderful he thought it was.

He really was in the prime of his career.

As Donatella Purcell waited for a response to the text she had just sent Horatio, sure she had passed up her last chance at love, that she would die lonely, that nothing would ever change, Regret gave her one last hug, a long and beautiful one, before leaving her behind for other friends.

It was turning into a very good day.

Exercise 1: The Flower Shop

Here.

The gentleman Donatella Purcell so peremptorily dismissed from the evening of dinner, drinks, and lovemaking he had been so looking forward to, had intended on bringing a surprise with him. The construction office where he held a desk job had recently hired a new estimator with whom our gentleman had become friendly. Over a beer after work, they realized that they had another friend in common, someone our gentleman had not seen in some time but with whom he had once been on very friendly terms. The assistant supposed that this mutual friend was likely to be at a very large party out in the country the coming weekend, as well as the estimator himself, and suggested our gentleman come out and join the fun.

Normally, our gentleman would not dare venture to a party without a formal invitation, but the estimator convinced him that the host loved to meet new and interesting people, and that the party would be so large anyway as to negate any chance that the gentleman would stand out in any way. The gentleman accepted the kind offer and intended to convince the lovely woman, with whom he was beginning to fall in love, that the two of them should have an adventure together, go out to the country to dance the night away with a new crowd, pitch a tent and spend the night making love under the stars.

Such was his surprise.

It was a bold move on his part. He was shy by nature, *introverted* in the parlance of the day. His lady friend fell into the same category, though to a much greater extent. By way of comparison, she made our shy and introverted gentleman look like an outgoing socialite destined to be the life of the party. The two of them together were hardly the types to go, relatively uninvited,

to a party where neither of them knew more than a couple of people. Yet, our gentleman saw this adventure as a way of binding the two of them together, where these two lonely people could be alone together, could rely on each other, and could, perhaps, taste a little of what the normal people enjoy, while still in the safety of one another's company.

Our gentleman could hardly have come upon a more romantic gesture. The idea filled him with anticipation for the night ahead, and a future where the two of them might be forever bound to each other in love. From the moment he had dared to think of it, joy had filled his heart. Not only did he look forward to the coming evening with his lady, he looked forward to what might become a weekend to remember, years from now, as they grew old together.

When Donatella Purcell texted to break their date, the gentleman was heartbroken. The growing anticipation now leaked out of him, leaving him disappointed on the edge of angry. She assured him she was just not feeling well, and that he had best stay home and let her rest. Of course. Everyone gets sick. Sometimes you just need to rest. It would be the epitome of selfishness to be angry with her for that. And what is love if not selfless?

Yet, he had heard such excuses before. He was no fool. It wasn't just that she had rejected him. He could take that. He was used to that. It was that she thought so little of him as to use such an obvious lie. It was that he had ever trusted her. It was that he had been such a fool as to fall in love. That he had dared to look forward to the evening. That he had dared to dream of an adventure with her, to take her to a place where they were strangers and had only each other to rely upon. That he had dared hope.

If only you hadn't gotten your hopes up.

He gave up, uncapped a bottle of moderately inexpensive bourbon, and settled in for what he had every expectation of be-

ing a short and lonely night. Some part of him knew he should not let her beg out so easily, but he was a coward, afraid of rejection, afraid of looking a fool. Suppose she *was* telling the truth. What a fool he would look for whining and pushing and begging his way over to her apartment.

If only you weren't such a coward.

He sunk into himself, knowing he should take action, but fearing the consequences. Instead, he poured himself a glass and opened a book he failed to focus on. He sipped and stared, not comprehending a word as his mind raced in circles.

It took only one drink.

Less than a finger in, courage and hope now coursing, however artificially, though his veins, he stood up, determined to seek out his love. He would either win her back, if his instincts were correct, or comfort her in sickness should her story prove to be true. Either way, he would have *done* something. As the god in the corner knew so well, it was better to regret something you *have* done than something you have *not*. With that thought fresh in his mind and a little Dutch courage to push him along, he made up his mind. He rushed out the door, praying to the god he did not believe in that the flower shop around the corner closed in seven minutes, and not fifty-three minutes ago. It was not until he closed the self-locking door behind him that he realized his keys were still in the apartment.

Turning back to his apartment door, he hesitated. The super never answered his phone, but you could sometimes get him to come out if you banged on his door long enough. To do that, however, meant no chance at all for flowers. Of course, if the super wasn't around, at least staying meant some small chance he could track down the landlord, though, and here his mind pushed dread into his stomach, none at all that he could prove his love to Donna. Leaving meant showing up at Donna's door,

poorer for the cost of the flowers and taxi fare, and no place to go if she sent him home. If he was wrong, if she really did prefer to be without him tonight, what would he do then?

If only you hadn't taken your keys out your pocket when you sat down.

Seven minutes had turned to five.

The flower shop was still a three minute walk away.

He took a deep breath, let the bourbon do the thinking, and rushed toward the flowers.

Regret turned after him, scent of the kill sharpening his senses.

One hour and twenty-seven minutes later, neither flowers in his hand nor money in his pocket, his wallet, phone, and keys locked together in his apartment across town, looking ragged and miserable from the nearly four mile walk in what was left of the evening's storm, he rang the buzzer to his girlfriend's apartment.

Good idea or not?

The Buzzer

Regret walked the streets of the darkening city, consoling one old friend after the other, small strokes thrown with confidence. He could feel his strength waxing as, with each whisper, his friends sighed in concession. They knew they were wrong, knew they had failed, needed only the sad nod of Regret's head, the slightest whisper, the briefest taste of commiseration to admit it to themselves. He smiled to himself as he wandered the streets, feeling his growing strength. He attended to friends out for a night on the town or staying in for a quiet evening. Commuters and revelers. Where he went, second guesses followed, and rarely with pleasant feelings to accompany them.

If only you had worn comfortable shoes.

If only you had called before that first drink.

If only you had stayed at work and finished the project.

If only you had worn the black dress.

If only you had the courage to ask her out.

If only you had left him.

If only you hadn't quit piano.

On and on he went, waxing with confidence. Barely a nod was enough to push his friends to unfulfilled wishes. The world was one he had made, and it was spiraling in a whirlpool of depression fueled with *should have's*. With *dammit's*. With *I'm kicking myself for*. With *if only's*. He ramped up, lengthened his streak with small but solid sales. He tapped lighter and lighter, using the quietest whisper to break the most susceptible, laughing at how easy it was.

Circling back to check on T-Clyde, now passed out on his couch, he was pleased to find Donna's sometime boyfriend, Horatio Porter, staring at the text on his phone. A little too pleased with himself, Regret toyed with Horatio, goading him into the

rain where he might have easy pickings for a while before checking back in on Donna. He hovered close, whispering into Horatio's ear, filling him with doubt, consoling him for his failures.

Regret would bring them together only to tear them apart.
What fun.

Horatio Porter had been dating Donna Purcell for close to a month. He hadn't intended to fall in love. Child of a loveless marriage that had fallen apart too soon, dragged from one town to another by a mother who resented her life, and by extension, his, Horatio had grown-up to believe love was a prison to be escaped, not a joy to aspire to. A quiet man lacking the self-confidence of seemingly everyone around him, he pretty much kept to himself, satisfied with quiet nights in his apartment cultivating the arts of cooking, reading, and, to some extent, philosophy. That such solitude might forever keep him from the ecstasies of love bothered him not.

Donna, too, had not intended to fall in love. She wanted to. She hoped to. Wished to. But she never believed she was worthy of it. She, too, spent her nights alone, and, like Horatio, was learning to become comfortable with herself. For while she felt worthless with others, she felt less so when alone. With herself, she was free to feel as she would, try if she could, and fail if she must. When there was no one to judge her, there was nothing to judge. That such solitude might forever keep her from the ecstasies of love saddened her, but it was a sadness to which she was slowly becoming reconciled.

That such solitude failed to keep them from finding one another, then, was a blessing not to be taken lightly.

She sat not twenty feet from him for two weeks, a temporary fill-in for a young woman on medical leave, with no more than a brief introduction on the first day, and *good mornings* on the rest. They spoke to each other when necessary, but no more. Not

until her car broke down did he speak a complete sentence that involved anything more than work. His offer to drive her home changed that. Time alone in the car, away from the judgmental eyes and ears of the others in their office, was all they needed.

They made awkward conversation along the way, and better ones as they drove together for the next few days. A month later, they were sometime lovers, wary of commitment, uncomfortable with idea that they were worthy of one another's love, though quietly grateful for their change in fortune. Each night, each date, was in many ways as awkward as the first. Each night had them question if the other really cared for them, if the love they felt was reciprocal, and always, if they were worthy.

This night was no different.

Sauce down the sink, tears down her face, Donna had cancelled for fear she was not good enough for Horatio. Horatio had come anyway, his stomach turning with his fear of the same. He was without his keys, without his money, without his phone, and without much of the courage that had brought him to this door in the first place. His feet were sore and his knees were beaten from the four mile walk that should have been a taxi ride. He was soaked through from the rain. Save for Donna, he had no one to turn to, nowhere to go. If his goal had been to gain Donatella Purcell's sympathy, however, it was hard to believe that he was not already halfway there.

"Yes?"

She sounds sick. Maybe she is sick. Maybe this was a bad idea.

"It's, um, Horatio."

"Horatio?"

No flowers. No warm cup of soup. Just a unwanted person burdening her with his presence. You shouldn't be here. This is a mistake.

"Um, yeah. I, um, I thought, maybe, um, maybe since you weren't feeling well, um, maybe I could make you dinner or something."

Silence. *This was a bad idea.*

"That's really sweet, Horatio, but the thing is, I kinda...I guess I just kinda wanted to be alone."

Heart sinks into stomach. *If only you had trusted her. Dumb. Dumb dumb dumb dumb dumb.*

"Oh. Um, ok."

Silence.

Horatio should leave. Just leave. He knows he should, but he is frozen with disappointment. With indecision. *Where do you go now? There will be more rain before the night is done. If only you hadn't forgotten your keys. The sooner you leave the more likely you can...*

"Why didn't you call?"

A chance. *Don't blow this. Tell her how much you've suffered, but, y'know, not too much.*

"Long story. Locked my phone in my apartment."

Silence. *Ok. A little more.*

"And my keys."

Wait for it...

"And my wallet."

Because she had not depressed her button, he did not know that he had made her giggle. It would have warmed his heart to know, but as it was, he was crumbling from what he saw only as rejection. She calmed herself before speaking. Forced herself to be a little angry. Indignant.

"And you...how did you get here?"

"Walked."

"Walked? From your apartment?"

She believes you. You're almost in. Almost.

Horatio dared to have hope, dared to allow some small amount of optimism creep into his heart. He believed he had bought her love with suffering, had earned a night in her arms. He was happy.

For a moment.

Then she crushed him.

"Oh my god, Horatio. That's really sweet. But I..."

And he could feel it in her voice. It was time to face facts. She didn't want him there. This was a mistake and there was no more to be said. No more to be done. It was over. He would have to go back into the rain, walk home the four miles and pray the super was in his apartment. If not, he'd be sleeping on the street. In the rain. Ok, probably in the vestibule of his own apartment building, but then he'd probably get picked up as a vagrant and...he looked down at his finger, dripping blood onto the floor.

The buzzer, too, was smeared with blood, a small rivulet now drying on it's way down the intercom. No surprise, really, given how the night was turning out. He laughed to hear the rain picking up outside. It never rains but it pours.

If only you hadn't pushed so hard.

He hardly thought before speaking. He had given up on Donna. Had given up on himself. All he thought was, *geez, Ray, you'd better take care of this.*

"Um, could I just, um, do you have band-aid?"

Silence.

"I won't stay. I just, I must have cut my finger on the buzzer and I'd stop at the drug store but my wallet, y'know, and..."

And...

And the door buzzed.

And Regret slipped in to join in the fun.

The Family of Misfortune

Watching from the wings, another god looked on.

As usual, she rolled her eyes at all the talking, talking, talking. Why would he not shut up? *If only* this, *if only* that. She watched as the object of her attention whispered nothings into one ear after another, watched them deflate with disappointment as he convinced them of their follies, and watched them rise up again with renewed confidence after he left. He was just like all the rest of them, all talk and no action. Here today, gone tomorrow. Regret may have made a career from dwelling on the past, but once he turned his attention away from you, he was as forgettable as all the rest.

In spite, she lashed out at each of his victims. A broken umbrella. A splash from the bus. An unplugged phone. A locked door with keys behind. A heavy rain. A sharp and jagged broken buzzer. This was Misfortune's way. Make them learn the hard way. Teach by action. Unlike Regret, she had little love for the masses of ignorant trash that wandered the earth about her. Of what they thought of her, she cared not. For their friendship, she cared not. As a species, they were arrogant, self-serving, and in great need of the harsh lessons she was only too willing to provide.

You shouldn't judge Misfortune too harshly. To come from a family such as she, surrounded by sisters as little like her as sugar to pepper, a *purveyor of problems* in a sea of blessings and bounty, could hardly fail but to lead her down darker paths. Not that they didn't try to set good examples for her. They did. A good example, however, is not a friend, and among the at least fifteen sisters she knew of (she had more, one could not but doubt), she had, at best, only one.

Whether they tried to befriend their creepy sister, mentor her, love her, is not clear. To hear Misfortune speak of the sisters she despised, who came and went without care, who stole peace from her home and replaced it with vapid chatter, and who never sufficiently replaced the mother who repeatedly failed to bless them with her presence, you would hear naught but disdain.

Joy was ignorant.

Happiness was vapid.

Glee was dazed.

Delight was distracted.

Amusement was mean spirited.

Wonder was stupid.

Rapture was blind.

Gay was selfish.

Frolic was insensitive.

Tickle was lazy.

Laughter was a thief.

Felicity was empty.

Ecstasy was fleeting.

She had other sisters, the true number unknown, though knew little of them. Of Solace, she only heard stories, though she sounded tolerable in comparison to the rest. Of the sisters she did know, however, only Satiety gained any amount of her trust. Satiety who showed wisdom beyond all else. Satiety who, among all of them, was the only one to show her care. Satiety who, in a home absent of a mother, took on the role laid upon her with elegance and aplomb.

As far as Misfortune was concerned, however, the rest were as insufferable as her mother, and she gave them little quarter. Whether she spoke from her heart, however, or her head, I will leave to better minds than my own.

Her mother, on the other hand really *was* insufferable, and a girl can only do so much to shed the oppressive shadow cast by someone as well loved as she. Whether it is inevitable that a child will strive in all her beliefs and actions to be the antithesis of her mother in every way is, perhaps, not relevant. What matters is that in this case, with this child, with this mother, she did. With Misfortune, the world gained balance to the unbearably good life it might otherwise have had by her mother alone.

Misfortune was not evil. To call her so would be unfair in extreme. She was just sad, really. Everywhere she went it was her mother who captured the light, her mother to whom all eyes turned, her mother who brought smiles to even the darkest souls. It was enough to drive anyone to despair, let alone someone with such natural tendencies as the *mutant of mishaps*.

Her mother.

Imagine a dollop of whipped cream. It sits atop something, perhaps a hot chocolate, perhaps a piece of pumpkin pie, perhaps a milkshake. A treat of some sort. It looks delightful, tastes delightful, but does not detract from the beauty of whatever it accents. It is a little something extra. A little joy that, while not integral to the base upon which it rests, makes the whole experience a little bit brighter.

Without it, your treat is still delicious. Losing the dollop does not ruin your experience. You would not likely miss it were it gone. Yet, add it atop, and you have something special. Something to write home about. The dollop is not just another sweet atop your sweet. It is a smile meant only for you.

When your treat is gone, when you are sated, you don't really remember the dollop. You remember the taste of chocolate easing down your throat. You relish the last of the savory autumn flavors lingering on your tongue. The dollop was forgotten before it hit your stomach, soon to be smothered in the treat it

decorated. Yet, the smile in your heart is as much from the little something extra, that little warm-up atop your treat, as it is from anything else. Perhaps more so, for, after all, it is the specialness that holds memories in our hearts. The moment is forgotten, but the feeling lingers on.

Such a one was Misfortune's mother.

Bliss never remembered your name, never joined you in reminiscences of your last adventure together. Such courtesies were not possible for her. It was her blessing or her curse, depending on your point of view, to live entirely in the present. Every time she met you it was for the first time. Every time she listened to you it was for the first time. Every time she saw your face it was for the first time.

You always forgave her forgetting. You reveled in your second chance. Your third chance. Your umpteenth chance. You were grateful that she did not remember you, that she did not remember your mistakes, your failures, your betrayals. And you allowed yourself to pretend right alongside her, as if, in that moment, for just that one tiny second, the world was fresh and you were new.

There are those who call her lazy, but I think that's unfair. How can you be lazy when you don't know what is expected of you? When you are unaware that you have a job? When you simply *are*?

When Bliss did happen upon you, when she did happen to whisper in your ear, it was likely to be no more than, *isn't this nice?* If you disagreed, if you fought her, refused her quarter in your soul, it mattered not. Regardless of you, soon enough she would be somewhere else just as nice, your own joys forgotten forever. You might take her, or you might leave her, but mistake not: she will not wait.

Yet, for all the love she encouraged in the world, for all the happiness she brought attention to, her care for the world and for her daughters in particular was so close to zero as not to be worth counting. It was not that she was selfish. She did not care for herself at all. It was more that she did not know how to care for anyone who was not directly in front of her.

Of course, like all daughters, Misfortune fought for her mother's attention. As a child, she sometimes tagged along, unbidden. When her mother would whisper, *"Isn't this nice,"* into some stranger's ear, Misfortune would come behind with, *"Oh is it?"* followed with a bout of mayhem. She was not trying to undermine her mother. To think so would be to completely misunderstand her. She was simply trying to join her, be on her team, show her value in the only way she knew how. Afterward, smiling back from her destruction, proud of her work, looking for some small recognition of her value, she would look about her, only to find her mother gone. Not disappointed, not pleased. Just gone.

Every time.

This mother cared as little for her children as she did for anyone else. Misfortune was not special in this regard, though she did take it harder than most. So it was that Misfortune, who only ever really wanted to be loved, was left adrift with nothing but a shining and distant star for a mother, a den of insufferable sisters who only drove home the point further, and little hope of any guidance in the world. She was left to find her own way in the world, should she dare.

She dared.

She became everything her mother was not. Where her mother brought good feelings, Misfortune brought miserable action. Where her mother brought the idea of peace, Misfortune brought the reality of war. Where her mother turned the tiniest

dying embers of lost hope into a warm hearth of faith that suffused the soul, Misfortune doused them with the sad remnants of last night's cold tea.

Misfortune did the best she could to make her way in the world with a turbulent soul, and without the benefit of a mother's guidance. That her mother loved to teach, to show people the way, was the irony of Misfortune's life. She was a student in her mother's classroom, ignored by her teacher for fear of showing favorites, suffering for her mother's simplistic notion that a daughter inherits, rather than learns. Bliss left her daughter to her own devices, to fend for herself. Maybe it was because Bliss did not understand her. Maybe it was because Bliss did not like her. Or maybe, and this is the far more likely answer, Bliss just lost interest.

The answer unknown, the result was the same. Without guidance, without Bliss, Misfortune did what she could. And what she could was not particularly pleasant.

Still, I like her. Not just in an *I feel kind of sorry for the poor girl* kind of way. She saw the world for what it was and, like her mother, thought she had something to teach. Unlike her mother, however, she was not so starry eyed as to think she had all the answers. Or worse, had the *one answer*. Her way was to teach by showing, not telling. Why tell someone how to feel when you can *make* them feel? She was the best of mentors, putting a challenge before the people to see what they might do with it. On their own. Without her help. Saddle them with adversity and leave them to fend for themselves, as she had been left to fend for *her*-self. She was a tough love coach, hard to like, but always inspiring, even in the worst of pain.

This was the sad sack and bitter god that watched Regret as he reveled in his skill. This was the dour and arrogant god that came behind him, walloping his so-called *friends* as they dis-

missed his overtures and forgot their troubles the moment he had left the room. This was the lovelorn and brokenhearted god watching with envy as the love of her life plied his wares, oblivious to just how much he needed her.

Buried in the Junk Drawer

The moment Donna buzzed in Horatio, she knew it was a mistake. Had she not, had she held to her story and kept him out, she might have salvaged some small semblance of hope that he might come back another day. Instead, she would have to either feign sickness or confess, either of which would lead to suspicion, would lead to fear, would lead to alone. Which always led to alone. She would always be alone. Alone, alone, alone.

Her stomach twisted as he came up the stairs, unseen.

Well, nothing for it now but to turn her focus to Horatio and the coming bloody finger. She let him in, avoiding a kiss under the pretense of being sick, and proceeded to search for something to staunch the bleeding. Horatio waited awkwardly, holding his finger, not sure of what to say.

Donatella Purcell didn't actually have a bandage. She should have had one. She thought she had one. At least, she had at one time. She searched her bathroom. Her kitchen. She pawed through three different junk drawers. Pushed aside old pens and toothpicks and rubber bands. Dug through a pile of wooden matches leftover from when the matchbox broke. Set aside expired medicines and creams no longer useful. She didn't need a whole box. *Just one. One stupid band-aid. How is there not one band-aid buried in all this mess?*

As Donna worked herself up, Horatio's own thoughts conspired to take him down. *If only you hadn't come. What are you even doing here? She probably is sick after all, and you're just making it worse. She should be resting with a warm cup of soup and an old movie, and, instead, she's running around the apartment, getting all stressed, all because of you. If only you weren't such a selfish asshole. No wonder she hates you.*

The fear running through him made him even more attuned to her stress. Every grunt, every drawer slam, every loud noise only served to convince him he was adding to her misery. He could see her tensing up, getting in her head. Her search got louder and louder. As she got worked up, he thought, *this was not the plan. You came here to...why did you come here? You're certainly not helping her. She definitely doesn't want you here. Why would she? She was comfortable and you basically just wedged yourself into her life. What are you doing here?*

Donna said, "I'll drive to Walgreens."

If only you had bought band-aids. You're so lazy.

Horatio said, "It's not that big of a deal, Donny. I'm sure it'll stop on its own."

If only you'd stayed home.

Donna said, "I'm sorry. I'm such an idiot. Stupid stupid stupid."

If only you hadn't broken your date.

Horatio said, "Y'know, I don't think I have band-aids at my apartment either."

If only you'd grabbed your keys.

Donna said, "I'm sorry."

Horatio knew it was over. He'd lost. Even winning at this point looked pretty bad. She clearly didn't want him there. Go he must and go he would. First, however, he needed to do something about his finger. He was about to spend the night sleeping on the street, without even enough money to buy a bandage. Sadly, he scanned the apartment for something, anything to get him out of there.

He walked over to where Donna was searching the kitchen junk drawer for the fourth time, washed his finger again, wrapped it with a piece of paper towel, and taped it on with a piece of masking tape from the roll halfway back in the drawer.

He smiled at her as he prepared to leave.

Donna looked at the improvised bandage, falling into memory.

The roll of moderately gummed up masking tape in Donatella Purcell's drawer that temporarily staunched the bleeding finger of Horatio Porter had no business in that particular location. When Donna moved into her apartment, it had recently been repainted, and the remainder of a roll of masking tape, lost and forgotten, lay on the sill of her bay window overlooking the street. She had left it there.

Three months later, several boxes still unemptied in corners of her now not so new apartment, the tape continued its vigil on the sill, slowly gathering dust. Six months after that, when Donna had finally *really* moved in, the tape had yet to move. It had become, in some ways, an old friend waiting to greet her each time she came home. On several occasions, Donna had even lifted it up to dust underneath, only to replace it again in the same spot, almost out of superstition.

The roll of masking tape had lain in what increasingly looked to be its permanent home for over a year when it was moved for the first time from its home on the sill. Veronica Sayer, Donna's sister, came into the city to see a show with her husband, and left her daughter, Gwendolyn, in her sister's willing arms. Donna and Gwen played games, read books, drew pictures, and generally had a wonderful time playing together until Gwen was too tired to stay awake.

By the time Veronica returned to retrieve her daughter, Donna and Gwen were asleep in each other's arms on the couch, the floor riddled with books, games, crayons, drawings, and a few creations by Gwendolyn that Auntie Donna would not have dared to name. Donna woke groggily to answer the buzzer, and was still not more than half awake when Veronica and her hus-

band came through the door. Heedless of Donna's insistence that she would happily clean up in the morning, and worried about how Gwendolyn would react to not having her various toys and books and crayons in the morning, Veronica tidied up.

Both Veronica's husband and Donna watched, helpless, as the obsessive Veronica went further than she should have. Not satisfied to clean up only her daughter's mess, she spread her fingers wider, and in the midst of doing what she considered to be not only her motherly responsibility but also a good deed, she touched nearly everything in the apartment. In the midst of this obsession, she whisked away the masking tape from the window sill, and tidied it away into what looked like the most likely place, a kitchen drawer filled with junk.

Veronica put it there because she didn't want to bother her sister with questions when she could barely keep her eyes open. Because she wanted to get the job done quickly. Because, as strange as it may sound in the midst of a housekeeping job that could have been avoided altogether, she was looking for the easy way.

By the time her sister and her family left, Donna was once again asleep on the couch.

In the morning, the sill looked strangely bare, and she assumed her niece had mistakenly walked off with it. *Well*, she told herself, *it's found a good home*. When she first found it in the junk drawer, nearly a week later, she was half tempted to place it back on the sill, with the respect one might show an old friend. She then cursed herself for a fool, and shut the drawer.

As the days and weeks and months went by, her desire to rekindle the superstition waned, until the tape seemed to belong in the drawer. It was silly, she knew, but she had harbored a sense of betrayal each time she saw the tape, as if she had let it down. Imprisoned it.

And she would curse herself for a fool.

Now the tape came to represent the shedding of childish daydreams for logic and reason. *Now* when she saw the tape, she did not think of it as a living friend. She no longer saw it as the key to some imaginary adventure which was the life the roll had lived before coming into her possession. *Now* it was only a metaphor for the prison she increasingly believed herself to be in, as she embraced a lonely adulthood.

When Donna watched Horatio use the tape to staunch his bleeding finger, the symbolism did not escape her. It had been the first time since coming into her possession that anyone had dared to use the tape that had become, perhaps, her most private possession.

Horatio said, "I should go."

You shouldn't have said that.

Donna was silent.

You should've told him to stay.

Horatio said, "So...I, um...I hope you feel better."

You should've offered to get her something. Cook dinner or something.

Donna was silent.

You shouldn't have told him you were sick. Why do you do this to yourself?

Horatio said, "Well, ok. Um...see you later?"

She doesn't even want to see you. This is over. Why do you even bother? She obviously doesn't want anything to do with you.

Regret smiled. He had done good work, and it was time to move on. He knew the effects of his work would wane without him, but he was well sated. They had been more than generous with him. Perhaps in the morning he could come by for a healthy breakfast treat. He walked away, satisfied with a job well done,

sadness, fear, regret, and just a spot of despair dancing about him, driving him confidently into the night.

Horatio, too, thought he had best leave.

Donna said, "Wait."

No. No. No. Just let him go. You don't deserve him.

Horatio said, "Yes?"

Too eager. You looked too eager. Idiot.

Donna had yet to speak again, but felt as if she already had. The deed was done, and she already knew it was a mistake. Knew she would regret it. Yet, here they were. She looked again at the tape. Wondered if she could ever be happy again. Why was this so hard? If only she were worthy, this would all be so much easier. Instead, it was like she had lured him here by pretending to be sick, and now she would have to pretend to be sick all night so he could comfort her, as if that were the only way she could be worthy of him, which, as she had already established, she was not. She was in a spiral of choose don't choose, paralyzed with the fear of what might happen next. How would she feel about her choice in ten minutes? In an hour? In the morning?

Horatio said, "Donna, are you ok?"

I should stay. If only I was stronger. I'm such a coward.

Donna stood, her mind frozen, her body stiff, her eyes focused on some imaginary spot in the distance, overwhelmed by her own fear, tears slipping from her eyes. Horatio took Donna's hands.

And looked into her eyes.

And held her.

And Donna cried in earnest.

Little Nudges

Not far, and yet worlds away, Regret settled in at a suburban tavern, more than a little slow for a Friday night. An old friend was tending bar, bemoaning the slow night, prematurely counting up the poor haul in tips she was likely to go home with. Not that rain like this ever helped business, but even so, you expected to do better on a Friday. The old friend was nodding appropriately as a lonely customer burdened her with his life story. She was not interested, but had not the wherewithal to come up a plausible reason to excuse herself. An excuse to excuse. Nisha wished again that business would pick up just a bit, this time not for the tips so much as for a distraction from the bore in front of her.

If only you had excused yourself before he got going.

"I mean, none of us are getting any younger, are we? Now I'm, well, old *enough*, anyway. Who's gonna hire a guy my age? We cost too much money, 'cause, well, a guy becomes *accustomed*, if you know what I mean. And even if we *will* work for less, nobody actually believes we'll work for what some college kid will take. And they figure we're just too set in our ways anyway. I mean, you can't even get in the door if they don't already know you."

If only you'd taken that job downtown. Even with fewer hours you'd probably be raking it in by now.

"I mean, what? I'm gonna learn a new skill? Suddenly become some computer guy? This is it. This is my job. If I quit, I might as well just retire, which, let me tell you is more expensive than I can afford. I still owe money on the house, and that no good layabout certainly isn't going to put his mother and I through our old age. These kids. They think you're gonna take

care of them their whole lives. They never consider that maybe *you* might need *their* help. Lazy ass layabout is all *he'll* ever be."

If only you'd stuck it out in college, got the psychology degree.

"I guess I was too busy making a living. Should have prioritized better. Well it's too late now. There's no way he could even lighten my burden, let alone put me in a comfortable retirement. Not that it really matters. What the hell would I do in retirement? Sit around and work crosswords all day? It's not like I could afford to travel. A guy needs something to keep him occupied. Something important. A guy needs a job."

If only you hadn't fallen for that creep. Kept your focus.

"Although, it's not like I'm *miserable* or anything. And the job is rewarding. I mean, a lot of the time I...there are definitely good days. Definitely good days. A lot of the time, even, I think I'm pretty important there. Like they're lucky to have me. And I like those guys. I don't want to let them down. They'd probably hire some kid who'd come in and fire all the old timers. And if *I* don't have a chance at getting another job, you damn well know *they* don't. A bunch of schmucks if you ask me, but I can't just let 'em get kicked to the curb, can I?"

If only you'd done it earlier. Now..."

"Now I could never pull it off. Who needs another goddamn consulting firm? I'd be lucky to make half what I do now. And there's not a snowball's chance in hell I could make enough to hire any on of the old timers. And why would I, anyway? It's not like they ever get anything done."

If only you had the guts to tell this guy to shut up.

"I gotta take a leak."

Nisha tried to shake it off. She wasn't a negative person by nature. Something about these dark, lonely, suburban bars, though, that just depressed her. Listening to that old shlub

kvetch about himself for half an hour wasn't helping, anyway. Nor was the rain. What she needed was a little music. Something upbeat and catchy, something to liven the place up a bit. Turn the volume up just enough to discourage more conversation.

She put a five in the jukebox, and paid extra to push her songs to the front. As she walked back to the bar, she heard the first one come on, and felt a warmth push through her body. Good music always helped her relax. Made her smile. She took the remote from behind the bar and turned up the volume, livening up the atmosphere a bit. It was a miserable job in a miserable place on a miserable night, but the music was her own, and she would make the best of it. Closing time was only a few hours off, and given the small crowd, maybe things would die off early.

A young and loud woman came up to the bar and asked for something, though Nisha couldn't quite understand her. Clearly more than a little tipsy already, her speech was a little slurry. Nisha asked her to repeat.

"A what?"

The woman repeated, this time louder. Something like, "A Car Sweet Corbit Sweet."

Nisha sighed. Why couldn't people order anything normal anymore?

"Sorry. What?"

And louder again. "A Marvin Cold Twist."

Her stomach sunk. Some specialty something. Now she would have to ask the drunk girl how to make it, and the drunk girl would get it wrong, and she would complain about how stupid Nisha was for not knowing how to make whatever the hell it was the girl had probably seen posted the night before as it made the rounds of the internet. Well, nothing for it but to ask. "I'm not sure I know that. What's in it?"

This time, over enunciating one syllable at a time, at the top of her voice. "Ba-Kar-Dee. And. Coke. Bitch!"

Nisha's stomach dropped out.

If only you hadn't made the music so loud.

"Sorry. Yeah. Of course."

Nisha, more than a little embarrassed, made the drink and passed it over. She watched, sadly, as the drunk turned and walked back to her table without so much as a smile, let alone a *thank you*. There would be no tips from *that* table tonight. With the rain in full swing outside, though, they would probably stick around anyway, taking her time, giving her the stink eye, and leaving her a mess to clean up. Defiantly, she left the music loud, that she might have at least something to give her some joy.

If only you hadn't volunteered to take Sue's shift tonight. It's not like you're going to make anything tonight anyway.

The shlub came back from the bathroom, wiping his hands on his pants, and sat back at his stool. Though Nisha, blessedly, could not quite hear him, she understood from his ridiculous hand motions that was asking for another. He shouted something at her, but she could still not hear. Admitting defeat, she turned the music down and came back to the customer.

"Out of paper towels in the men's room."

"Yeah, ok."

Nisha dragged her feet back to the storage room, then made her way to the bathroom. Inside, the mess made her gag. The toilet was clogged up, and water was on the floor.

If only you'd left the music up and ignored him, you would never have come in here.

She went back to the storage room for a mop.

If only you'd listened to your mother. Stayed in Harrisburg. That boy must be rich by now.

Nisha shook her head and sighed.

Regret, a little too pleased with himself, wandered off into the night to bother someone else. Nisha was always a nice stop for him. She wasn't the most challenging of his friends, but she did take a little work. She had a tendency to accept her lot, not complain too much. Without his whispers, she might never think about her past at all. Such people needed little reminders, little nudges. Regret had put just enough in her head that she would think about her mistakes awhile without him. Ten minutes of bathroom cleanup would reinforce that. Maybe even through the night. He had done well.

By the time she got done cleaning up the bathroom and had left an out of order sign on the stall, there were several customers waiting, impatient and increasingly angry. By the time the shlub had finally left, her songs had come and gone, and the jukebox had moved on to an art-rock set that put her in a sour mood for the rest of the night, wondering just what the hell she was doing with her life. Regret would lay heavy on her soul well into her dreams.

Well, at least she had tomorrow off, and plans with her friends. Nice to have something to look forward to, anyway.

A Night without Regret

A wine bottle sat empty on the windowsill. Below, on the floor, Horatio Porter and Donatella Purcell sat with their backs against the wall, half full glasses beside them, both more or less looking straight ahead, rather than at each other. Regret busy elsewhere, the two of them got a rare break from their fears. Every once in a while, Horatio would turn to enjoy the beauty of Donna's face, shift himself to lean on his hand and stare. The rest of the time, he would sit next her, on the floor against the window sill, staring ahead. She was not quite ready to speak to his face. He was grateful just to be in her presence, and occasionally smiled quietly to himself. Mostly, he listened. She had much to say.

"I don't know, Ray. I just feel like I'm constantly disappointed in myself. Like I have these moments, all the time, right? These moments where I think, 'Ok, I'm finally gonna do this thing right. I'm finally *not* going to screw something up. And it'll be perfect, right? And I do the thing, this small stupid thing, whatever it is, and look back with this ridiculous hope that I will see it with pride, but it's just bad and horrible and stupid and I think, 'God, I can't even do *that* right.' And then everything else seems so much bigger and more impossible and I just...I don't know, I...I just sorta...*sink into myself*, y'know?"

Donna took a sip of wine, giving Horatio the opening he needed to say something nice. Something supportive. Something right. An opening he did not take advantage of. Many thoughts came through his mind, though never far enough to exit his mouth.

Horatio thought, "*I feel that way, too, sometimes.*"

Horatio thought, "*You just have to shrug those feelings off.*"

Horatio thought, "*No one can be perfect. You just have to be yourself.*"

Full of thoughts though he was, however, his voice remained silent, his mind frozen with indecision.

Donna continued, as if she had not expected him to speak. True, she would have liked to hear something supportive, something that showed he cared, but she had little hope of it. She was in her own head, thinking of herself, doubtful that the boy next to her, the boy that said he loved her, the boy that said he cared, would still say so when he really knew her. Fearful, she did her best to quiet her thoughts with the sound of her own voice.

"I just wish I could do something *right* for once. Just wish I could, I don't know, be *worthy*, I guess. Everything I do is wrong. Every decision I make is wrong. And I'm surrounded by people that do everything right. I mean like, look at my sister. She's got a beautiful daughter, a happy marriage, a huge house outside the city. Her house is perfect. She's an amazing cook. She has all this energy. And I'm like, I can't even make effing spaghetti."

Horatio thought, "*I don't care if you can cook.*"

Horatio thought, "*I don't care if you are like your sister.*"

Horatio thought, "*You're beautiful and smart and funny and I'm head over heels in love with you.*"

"I did make dinner, y'know. Or *ruined* dinner, more like. I couldn't even do *that* right. And then, my god, *then*, I was so effing embarrassed that I threw it out and lied to you about being sick. Because I..."

She took a deep breath and looked straight down into her nearly empty wine glass. The deed was done. She hadn't expected to do it, but she had, and there was no turning back. She had made her confession and put herself in his hands. It was up to him, now. Would he leave? Could he stay? Could anyone love such a loser? Her voice dropped to nearly a whisper.

"...I..."

She closed her eyes.

He should be saying something. Oh god.

"...because I thought....think...thought...oh god, if he, you, see what a...what a shitty cook I am, I guess, then you wouldn't...I mean why *would* you? Why are you even here? I mean...why would you even..."

Her heart rate crept higher.

Why doesn't he say something?

"...what kind of loser would give a crap about me, anyway? I mean...not that you're a...that's not what I..."

Horatio, taken over by a boldness he didn't know he had, took his chance. It was his time, and he knew that if he didn't take it, he would regret it for the rest of his life. Forcing his thoughts out through his mouth, he dared.

Horatio said, "Maybe I *am* a loser. Maybe we both are. Maybe I don't care. You are not all the horrible things you say you are. Or, I don't know, if you are...then...then maybe I am too, and...and we're meant to be together. There is no place I'd rather be, and no one I would rather be with."

I said too much.

Neither of them were looking at each other. They sat, side by side against the wall under the window, not daring to touch each other, letting the silence hang in the room. Letting it surround them. Embrace them. Horatio finished his wine before he spoke again. Without turning, he reached and took her hand. Though they had made love many times during their courtship, this touch, this marriage of hands was, perhaps, their most intimate moment.

Horatio took a deep breath, wondering why he was being so daring. Still holding her hand, he turned to her and kissed her.

"I'd rather be a loser with you, than perfect with anyone else."

And they sat on the floor, side by side, staring ahead, holding hands in silence, love warming their hearts.

The Hovel

It happened like this.

As a young professional, two centuries before our story takes place, Regret was having a hard time making a new friend. His work was not going well, and he was taking a little time with his thoughts. The man in question, Israel Kasterfink, had been sunning on the roof of his secret hovel in the woods, not a space for regret in his heart. Regret, below in the damp and shadowy hovel, wondered how a god that could not gain the trust of a simple farmer could ever make his way in the world. Feeling more than a little sorry for himself, Regret hardly noticed when a shadow somewhat darker than the rest filled Israel's so called doorway. He assumed that a surprise rain had driven the farmer from his roof, disturbing his afternoon nap in the sunshine and driving him into the hovel. As he had increasingly done throughout that day, Regret wondered if the farmer needed his services at all. Perhaps some men were best left alone to wallow in their own contentment.

Regret thought about what it meant to fail. Whether one failure meant *always* failure. Whether it was acceptable, sometimes, just to cut your losses. Just forget him and move on. Maybe a god did not need a perfect record. Maybe a god's existence was destined to be dotted with occasional failures. Maybe all gods felt this way, and none of them ever spoke of it. Maybe he should just get over it. Get used to it.

Get used to failure.

It was not an idea that sat well with him.

Well, he was still young.

When he looked more closely at the shadow, his intent to study more closely this man so unsusceptible to his charms, he was shocked to find not a man at all, but a young goddess he had

never before seen. She was dressed, if not entirely in black, then at least substantially so. Her presence exuded a sadness that could not be missed, mixed with the sort of arrogance that so often accompanies those young enough to still know everything.

She hardly knew where she was, had been wandering aimlessly for what felt to her like hours, angry, despising herself, and feeling for all the world that she was, in a word, unworthy. With her came a summer rain, hard and sharp. Soaking wet, she moved through the doorway and fell onto the floor, her tears mixing with the rivulets of rainwater now making their way into the poorly constructed shelter.

Regret watched her without speaking, intrigued, but not quite willing to break the spell of his own contemplation by admitting to the presence of this stranger. He observed her as best he could with her face to the dirt floor, and judged her to be fairly young. To estimate the age of a god is tricky business, for what is a year to a god? If we must compare her to ourselves, we might call her fifteen. Fifteen in human years. Just old enough to make her way in the world, still young enough to run back home if she must. In truth, she was hundreds of years old, but to better understand her, fifteen will do. Regret was older. Let's call him twenty-three. Just old enough to suspect he might not know everything, after all. He did not speak. Did not cough. Did not move. He did all he could not to make his presence known. He simply observed her from the apparent privacy of his corner. For the girl's part, she seemed not to notice.

How long they stayed like this, it is hard to say, but at some point, unexpectedly, the girl turned herself over onto her back violently, and with a loud grunt. The change in position seemed to express a distaste for her former one, as if to say, *ugh, what kind of idiot would lay with her face in the dirt. You disgust me.* As she did this, she screamed. Not because she saw Regret. Not

yet. At this point, it was merely the scream we all make when trying to exorcise the demon within us. To shout it away.

The scream, however, was not without consequences.

It all happened very fast. Her unexpected flip caught Regret off guard, and he made an involuntary guffaw. This was covered by the movement and the grunt, but allowed him to break the spell of silence that had previously held him. Now, having broken the spell, his own sadness giving way to the silly girl before him, he laughed again. She screamed. He screamed back, as in a game. She heard his scream and, not expecting that anyone else was there, she screamed again, this time in fright as she sat up and turned to see who had made the noise.

Regret did not scream again.

Neither did the girl.

And the two of them stared at each other in silence as the heavy rain turned to drizzle.

Regret, his calm once again pervading him, spoke.

"The humans generally knock before entering a private residence. Not that I've ever put too much stock in their traditions, but one does get used to the benefits of a quiet place of one's own. You are, however, as welcome as if you had asked permission before entering."

Misfortune stared at the god in disbelief. He was, though nowhere close to old enough to be her father, whomever that might be, certainly old enough to be one of *them*. One of the pompous aged so convinced of their own superiority they never bothered to question it. Arrogant to the point of hubris, this one was no doubt just another in a long line of self-absorbed gods, like her mother, unwilling to see that sometimes the younger generation actually has something to contribute. Like her mother, he would no doubt dismiss her out of hand, see her limited experience as being of no value, her insights as childish, her feel-

ings as insignificant. Like all of them, he could hardly be worth her time.

With what might best be described as a pout, though meant to sound sardonic, she said, "There *is* no door."

Regret assessed her in a moment.

"I had, for a moment, considered the possibility of friendship. If you insist on treating me with disrespect, however, you can walk yourself out into the rain and find your own quiet hovel, where no one will disturb you."

Misfortune would have none of it.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Did I invade your private property? Do you own the world? Let me prostrate myself before you and pledge my eternal allegiance. You are so obvious. All of you. Stodgy bentbacks who think you're in charge but really have just pretended to be for so long you no longer know the difference between actual power and play acting at it. I hate all of you. You think you know better, but you never even *try* to understand someone like me. Someone who's *different*. You don't know what to do with me, because I don't fit into your tiny little box. Well, I'm sorry I walked into what you seem to think is your personal property, as if you were one of *them* or something, but it doesn't really matter. You all hate me, wherever I go. I might as well be hated here as anywhere else."

If Regret had begun with benevolent patience, it was gone now. Older than her he was, but he refused to believe he was a *stodgy bentback* or whatever the hell she had called him. These kids thought they were the only ones to ever have a bad day. The only ones with feelings, just because they are experiencing them for the first time. On another day, he might have toyed with her. Might have played along to learn her fears, seep into her mind, tease her long enough to crush her before she could walk out the

door. Today, however, he was tired. Today, he was on the verge of giving up. Today he would brook no such fool.

"Child," Regret began with no absence of disdain, "I have no patience for your games. I have been patiently seeking solace here in this miserable cave, a place I have no desire to call my own, but which, for present purposes, I do. You are not welcome here and are asked to trouble me no further. If, as your dress and demeanor suggest, you are a young but tortured soul in search of your own solace, you have come to the wrong place. This one is taken. I encourage you to seek peace and solitude to better know yourself, or, if you prefer, the company of others sympathetic to your plight, but not in this place. Here you shall find only embittered resistance."

Misfortune rolled her eyes. "Good luck finding *her*. Like she would even care, anyway. Also, it's not a cave, it's a hut, or a...I don't know...house or something."

"I'm sorry?"

"Whatever. I'm not your child and I'm not going anywhere."

"I said go."

"No you didn't. And if you had, I would have refused. You said I wasn't welcome here. What else is new? Let's put it on the long list of places to which I am not welcome. Story of my life. Go stuff yourself."

And the two of them sat, fuming at each other, without words, without action.

Misfortune let her anger grow as her mind spun in circles, arguments coming and going, shouts filling her thoughts, her eyes piercing her new enemy. She spoke not a word, but knew she need only stay to show her strength. Regret wanted to leave. He had no need to stay in the hovel, no need to suffer this fool. Yet, before she had arrived he had been struggling with the idea of taking a single loss, giving up on the farmer as a no good busi-

ness and moving on with a minimum of shame. To suffer two indignities before he had even left the woods was too much. To admit a second failure so close to the first was unacceptable. Instead, like this intolerable child before him, he dug in his heels, refusing to surrender.

He sat, returning her glare, prepared to stay for as long as it took to leave with dignity.

Soon enough she turned her head away, knowing that it only took the presence of her body to win this particular fight. Her own troubles had brought her to this door, and, though this *bentback* seemed to add insult to injury, she still needed some semblance of quiet for herself. Turning her head back to the dirt, she once again found her tears, making puddles of mud beneath her face.

Regret cared not.

By the time the gray rain had turned to black, Misfortune was asleep. In the corner, a curious Regret watched her without pause. As he did so, the anger with which he had previously seethed, waned. Time took the strength of it from his heart. He watched the girl for hours as her anger led to tears, her tears to resignation, her resignation to sleep.

Regret, too, felt resignation taking him over. He left the goddess behind and visited his other friends, reminding them of their pain, and himself of his purpose. Soon enough, however, he was back in the hovel, shamed by his cowardice and a job left undone, but not yet confident enough to go back to the farmer for another try. Maybe some people were just not made to be his friends.

The goddess had hardly moved. Regret watched her sleep and wondered why he had been so cruel. Wondered if it was his own fear of failure that had turned him into a *stodgy old bent-back*. Perhaps he was not angry at her so much as at himself. As

she slept, he considered giving her a break. Maybe she was as angry at herself as he was at himself. Maybe she just needed a *friend*. By the time she awoke, Regret was ready to sympathize.

She was still lying on the ground, though clearly awake. He spoke to her while she still faced away, an opening volley in some effort to gain her trust. Not a whisper, not an arm over the shoulder, but a sigh laden and honest handshake, so to speak, meant as a show of respect. The words, *I'm sorry*, were not, as a matter of honor, a part of his vocabulary. Respect, however, was not beyond his ken.

"You are not a child, of course. I won't call you that again."

Misfortune, insecure in the way only a half-woken person, still half in dream, can be, her mud encrusted face still facing away, said only, "Thanks."

"As to this cave in which we both sit, you are right. It is not mine to give, though I am pleased to share it with you."

She sat up and turned to him, seeing him for, perhaps, the first time. The two of them sat like that for some time, considering each other. Before the silence took them both over, she broke it with, "Hovel."

"Pardon?"

"The word I was looking for. Not a cave. Hovel."

"Very well. Hovel."

Regret considered his next move. Sitting in silence, he waited for his moment. When it came, he spoke quietly. Not a whisper, but with the warmth of sympathy that can only come from a *friend*.

"I know what it is to be hated by the world. I understand your pain."

Misfortune, however, was not so simple.

"First, I couldn't care less if the world hates me. Second, I have no pain. Third, maybe I don't want to share *my* hovel with *you*."

"If only you'd found an empty place where you could be alone."

"Like I couldn't make this place empty any time I wanted."

At the moment she said it, a small piece of rock, a chip, really, fell from the ceiling onto Regret's shoulder. Not big enough to hurt, but certainly enough to make her point. Regret, unable to search her heart, swung wildly.

"If only you hadn't cared so much."

Misfortune grunted. "Ugh. What are you even talking about? What are you even still doing here?"

Regret felt water creep in through the floor, soaking his pants through.

Misfortune put on her sardonic smile and turned to Regret with, "If only you hadn't sat in the leaky corner."

An hour later, they were both still on the floor of the hovel, too stubborn to leave.

Nisha Eikenboom

"Well none of us saw it coming, did we? You just, I don't know, *felt* better. It wasn't like you...like, ok, so there you are, about to make some decision, maybe just a small one, like should I hit the snooze button again or just get up right now and face the day, right? So you make your decision and hit the snooze button again. And again. And again. And then you're all rushed to get to work on time, and maybe even get there a little late, and all day you're feeling a little frazzled and stressed, like you just can't catch up. Ok, so that's all normal, right? Except what used to also be normal was that all day you'd be thinking, *if only I'd woken up earlier*. Like there was this connection between the snooze button and the crappy way you felt. And every time you said, *if only I'd just gotten the hell up*, you felt a little worse, because instead of just feeling crappy, you felt like it was your own damn fault that you felt crappy.

"Am I making any sense?"

"The thing was, though, during the DNR..."

"What? Oh, sorry. Days of No Regret.

"Right, so...where was I? Oh yeah. The snooze button. During the DNR you were just as likely to hit the snooze button, and just as likely to have a crappy day because of it. The difference was you didn't spend any time blaming yourself. You just *accepted* it, right? So even though maybe you were tired and stressed and whatever, you just never felt like it was really your fault. More like, *ok, that's just life*, or whatever. As in, *what a shame that I'm having this terrible day*. You didn't feel like you had any control over it, so you could just, y'know, roll with it.

"Or maybe...maybe it's like this. Yeah. Like, say you wake up in the morning feeling crappy and sick to your stomach a little and maybe a headache. You feel like crap, but you kinda tell

yourself that it happens to everyone, and that even though it sucks, it's just your turn to be sick or whatever. Ok. Now let's say you wake up feeling exactly the same way, but it's because you're hungover. Now, instead of just feeling like you're the mercy of forces beyond your control, you feel like it's your own damn fault, like you could have avoided it if you'd bothered to try, or made better choices or whatever, and you feel like three times worse because of the blame or whatever.

"*That's* the thing that was missing during the DNR. It's not like the next night you didn't think twice about drinking. You still thought, *jeez, I bet if I drink tonight, I'll feel like crap in the morning.* It's just that in the morning, you didn't sit around wishing you hadn't tied one on or going around in circles like, *if only I hadn't done this, or if only I hadn't done that.* You just didn't make the *connection.*

"That's what I mean, what I try to tell everyone about what we can *learn* from it. It wasn't like it directly changed what you did. It wasn't like you went around making all these different choices because there were no consequences anymore. The consequences weren't going anywhere, and you *knew* it. But you *did* make different choices. Not better, not worse, but *different.* I think it was, *maybe,* because you were in a different mood. Does that make sense? Like when you stopped feeling bad about stuff all the time, when you stopped spending your life wishing you had done different things and just, I don't know, focused on the present, I guess, you just felt better. *Luckier,* maybe. And feeling that way made you a little more carefree in your choices.

"Like...ok. Here's one more. When I was a teenager, I got super sick this one time at a carnival. You know, I ate too much crap and then the rides made me sick and I just barfed all over myself. I was super embarrassed and spent a week kicking myself for eating all that crap, and doing the rides when I wasn't feeling

it, and just, y'know, playing too hard, I guess. After that, I was super scared of those rides, and like, wouldn't even *go* to fairs or carnivals or whatever. The feeling of regret was strong enough to affect my future decisions, right? Became a *deciding factor* in what I did.

"Ok, so later that year, there was this boy I was totally in love with. We weren't exactly a couple, probably, though I thought we were. We had kissed and, for me, that was pretty much all it took, right? Well, all my friends decided to go this carnival and I was all like, *remember what happened the last time*, and they tried to talk me into it, but I just told them to go without me. Payton went with them, and by the next morning, he was going with another girl. Teachable moment number two, right? If you take the safe way out, you'll lose out on the good stuff, or whatever.

"Sorry. I know I can...but I *am* getting to the point.

"So, during the DNR, Sal and I were walking to a movie and there was this pop up carnival in the neighborhood we were passing through. Sal totally wanted to go, but I was torn. On the one hand, I had this feeling I would regret it if I went, and he would end up with puke all over him and would never want to see me again. On the other hand, if I didn't go, I had this paranoid feeling he might go without me and fall in love with some other girl. Just like Payton, right? Or, like, if I talked him out of it, he'd figure I was just some basic stay-at-home who never wanted to have any fun and I'd lose him *that* way. Like a no-win situation, right? See, regret hadn't failed to affect our choices. It was still there, from the old days, reminding us of what *could* happen.

"Anyway, damned if I did and damned if I didn't, I went for it. We did the whole carnival thing, corn dogs and funnel cakes, ate too much, did the stupid rides, the whole thing. And, yes, sadly, I totally got sick to my stomach again, though at least I didn't puke on *myself* this time. Afterward, though, I never

wished I hadn't done it. Didn't wish I hadn't eaten too much, didn't wish I hadn't gone on the tilt-o-whirl and whatever. I hardly considered the decisions themselves at all. If anything, I was like, *man, that sucked that I got sick last night*. I certainly never felt like, *man, if only I hadn't gone to the carnival, everything would be so much better right now*. See, it wasn't that a lack of regret led to some bad choice. I mean, I made a bad choice, but it wasn't because there was no regret. That had nothing to do with it. What was different was that it didn't haunt me afterward. That's what I'm trying to say.

"Regret comes *after*, right? You still thought maybe you *would* regret what you did, so it still affected you and all that. I mean, it wasn't like anyone knew what was going on. At least not at first. We just felt better, and whatever. That's what I mean when I say nobody saw it coming. It crept up on you.

"And then it was fucking gone.

"Boo."

Exercise 2: The Cable Guy

Here.

A gentleman with the unfortunate name of Lorry Diesel is lost. He shouldn't be. He has a small electronic brain attached to the inside windshield of his company van in constant contact with a global positioning satellite in orbit some 20,000 kilometers above the surface of his, and in fact our, planet. He also has the address of Nisha Eikenboom, the next of his company's clients on his route, within one meter of his person. To find his way to this client's abode, all he need do is input the address into the electronic brain and follow her instructions, which she will give in a soothing and non-confrontational voice, well suited to Lorry's state of mind.

This task accomplished, Lorry Diesel drives without thought to his destination.

Sadly, our hero has input the address incorrectly and now finds himself at the correct number on the correct street in the incorrect city, a village to be precise, just beyond what could reasonably be called the suburbs. Because this particular location, although matching his official destination in number and street, is clearly a house and not an apartment building, Lorry now knows that he is in the wrong place, with little hope of finding the customer no doubt anxiously anticipating his arrival.

At this point, the obvious course of action would be to pull the client's information from his clipboard, realize his mistake, and input the address again, this time with more care. He might then proceed to the client and attend to her concerns. Such a course, sadly, is forbidden to our hapless friend. The address, although nearby, is, alas, hidden. It is under the van's passenger seat and will not be found without a systematic and careful search of the vehicle.

It is late in the afternoon.

Let us consider Lorry Diesel's options.

He might phone his supervisor, a grouchy curmudgeon who deplores working on weekends, considers all of his employees to be brainless idiots not worthy of his attentions, and has more than once threatened to terminate Lorry's employment if he screwed up *just one more time*. This curmudgeon had in fact, during his most recent tirade used the words, *just give me a reason*. Such a phone call might prove Lorry to be a responsible if absent minded employee, who, although mistaking an address and losing important documents, still desires to clean up his mess and finish the job. Such a phone call might also prove him to be a careless employee unable to clean up his own messes without requiring intervention from his supervisor, something his supervisor clearly preferred to avoid.

Or.

He might search the van for the address he fully believed to be at the last stop, still attached to the clipboard that by all rights ought to be sitting on the passenger seat and was clearly not. The vision of the clipboard resting on the kitchen table of the last customer haunted him, for he could not for the life him remember picking it up with his other equipment before leaving the job site. To Lorry, this meant that in addition to finding the address of his next client, he also had to track down the last one, that he might recover the lost documents still attached to the clipboard.

Although he does not yet know it, he is wrong in several respects. He had, in fact, left the clipboard sitting on the customer's table, but that is no longer where it resides. The customer had found the clipboard, thrown it in the garbage, and left an angry message with the cable company about the carelessness of the technician who had left it behind, as well as having come late, as well as having taken too long to fix what should have been a sim-

ple problem, as well as exuding a none to pleasing odor throughout his visit. Lorry is also wrong in thinking that the page he is looking for is attached to the clipboard, it being, as we have already noted, beneath the passenger seat unnoticed.

Or.

He might attempt to think through his predicament logically, determine the likelihood that his route would include a location so remote, and drive back to the city to see if a nearly identical address with the appropriate apartment number exists. As his electronic lady friend had already let him down, however, such an approach would require visiting a service station in hope that they might have what in the old days would surely have been a spinning rack of paper maps, one of which he might use to guide him back into the appropriate part of the city.

Or.

He might embrace the confidence that at this point he had already effectively lost his job, again, decide to quit on the spot, without telling anyone of course, and continue his trek away from the city, pointing himself toward an old farmhouse he knows about that is throwing an all weekend rager. Come Monday, he might go back to the cable company with their van, his tail between his legs, and concoct some story about a breakdown, knowing full well that he will lose his job, but hopeful the company will not press charges against him for grand theft auto.

The loss of his job would cause problems for him, of that he has no doubt. At the same time he knows that things have always worked out before, and surely will again. His asshole roommate will kick him out the first time he misses rent, but who cares about that? He has other friends who can put him up while he gets back on his feet. Still, the job he has is pretty cush. He spends most of the day driving around, getting high, and generally en-

joying himself. The prospect of odd jobs and ubers is already filling him with stress. Why blow a good thing when you got it?

In the city, his client wonders why the hell he is taking so long. The afternoon is gone, and the window of time given to her by the cable company rapidly closing. Had he come two hours ago, she would already be with her friends. Instead, she is finishing the book she'd been sucked into, and wondering if she dare start the next in the series. It would be the death knell for her, of course. If she starts the next one, she will spend the night curled up on the couch, telling herself she never wanted to go out anyway. She has, at best, thirty minutes left before any remaining courage she had will be forever gone, with no chance of driving herself, alone, wherever the hell her friends are waiting for her.

As Nisha Eikenboom sits at home, kicking herself for staying behind, wondering how much fun her friends are having without her, deciding whether to give up on the elusive cable guy or settle in for the night, Lorry sits in a distant suburb, considering his options.

Call. Search. Quit.

Call. Search. Quit.

Call. Search. Quit.

Lorry, unwilling to make a decision without extended deliberation, reaches into his messenger bag, pulls out a small pipe and fills it with a fresh green herb known for its deleterious effects. It will help him to relax. It will help him to think. He sparks up a lighter, holding it to the bowl as he takes a deep breath.

Good idea or not?

Salton Christiansen

"The word you're looking for is entitlement. That's what we all felt, though few of us would have admitted it. A feeling that we had *earned* it. That our good fortune *belonged* to us, a result of our good deeds, or hard work, or some other *thing* we had done. Karma.

"We all know entitlement is looked down upon, but we always talk about it as if it was *unearned*. We talk about it as if there are all these people out there, *other* people, who get undeserved gifts, and they are taking hard earned winnings from the rest of us. That's no secret. We love the idea of men like my father, men who supposedly pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, and hate guys like me, who reap the benefits of someone else's hard work. Trust me on this.

"At the same time, though, we play this game with each other where we have to pretend we don't deserve our success. We love the man who works his way up from the bottom as long as he never forgets where he came from. We love humility. Love the guy who says, *I didn't do this by myself. I was just lucky. It was all these other people around me that put me where I am.* The moment you express the sense that you are owed anything the world turns on you as if you were a spoiled child. That's especially true for silver spoons like me. No matter how you feel, you have to speak like you're humble, especially when you're not. In a world where everyone pretends to despise entitlement, there is no other choice.

"I use the word *pretends* on purpose, though. In reality, everyone actually does feel entitled to what they have. Everybody works harder than their neighbor, and everybody is sure they deserve more than their neighbor because of that. If you have more, you earned it. If you have less, you deserve some help. Not

because life is fair, but because you actually think you deserve it. We actually embrace entitlement, but use different words, or better yet, no words at all. It doesn't matter. In the end, everybody thinks they're entitled to what they have, if not more. We tell ourselves we've earned it because, if we haven't, we'd have to start giving back what we have. Nobody wants to give up a thing, and, in fact, pretty much everyone believes they deserve the next thing on the ladder. The thing they don't have yet. That's the world we live in. No secret there.

"In the *Days*, then, we were primed to believe that those miraculous feelings, that sense of well being, the infinite luck, the warm blanket of contentment that wrapped us all in its warm hug, were ours by right. That we had struggled through life, always trying to do the right thing - and let's face it, everyone thinks they're trying to do the right thing - and that our hard work had finally paid off with this new life where everything finally felt pretty damned good, thank you very much. It wasn't the stroke of random good fortune we were required to call it in public. It was an overdue payment for services rendered. In other words, we were *entitled* to the blessing we received.

"That was the amazing thing about the *Days*, at least for me. I think if I had felt guilt at the new feelings I had, it would have been a sour gift. As it was, though, it felt good and true. Earned and deserved. Righteous. It was *because* we felt entitled to our good feelings that they had such an impact on us, at least at first. I suppose you get used to anything, and take it for granted, eventually. I know I did. I've often wondered whether the end came as a result of our apathy. *Because* we came to take it for granted. Maybe that's the real problem with entitlement. Once you think you've earned it, you stop working for it.

"When the end came, when all of the joy we had come to take for granted was shown to us only by relief of its sudden ab-

sence, we were indignant. Indignant, but powerless to do anything about it. Maybe we were just spoiled children. Probably so. But we were not spoiled children throwing a tantrum for something we desired and could not get, screaming for the teddy bear we just saw in the store that Mother refused to buy. We were spoiled children righteously furious when our favorite teddy bear was taken away. The teddy bear that was *ours, dammit*. The problem, of course, is that the pouting only made it worse. The more you feel you *deserve* something, the harder it is when it gets taken away.

"And let me tell you, it was *hard*.

"When regret came roaring back into our lives, it was as if our republic had, without warning, dissolved into a tyrannical dictatorship, and we were all left wandering about in a haze somewhere between the fond memories of how things had been, profound depression at how things now were, and increasing guilt for not having taken better advantage of our opportunities when we had them. Not only were we all suddenly seething with regrets we had thought would never trouble us again, but we added this whole other layer of regret for having forgotten our regrets for so long.

"Ok, that's confusing. Let's go back to the republic metaphor. Imagine we had, without really trying, gone from a mildly oppressive government to a wonderfully benevolent one. We tell ourselves the better government is overdue, something we deserve, something that is somehow a result of the good deeds we had done, or hard work, or maybe just because we have been good people. We didn't *actually* do anything to change the government, but when it changed for the better, we assumed we had. Then, with just as little impetus from us, the government goes back to being oppressive again. Now, not only do we feel all the pain that such oppression brings with it, but the pain is increased

by the knowledge of just how much better life could be, a knowledge that had eluded us before.

"What amazes me is how quickly we adapted to our oppressive dictatorship, if I can continue the metaphor. When we all realized we had only been experiencing a run of luck that had inevitably come to an end, when we were infused with the surety that our lives were the results of our own bad choices and fell back to wishing we had made different ones, when we began to believe, once again, that actions had consequences, we pretty much just accepted it as our fate. We became as complacent in our pain as we had previously been in our lack of it.

"To me, it comes back to entitlement, to what we think we *deserve*. The truth is that it goes both ways. We're just as likely to think we deserve our bad luck as our good. Perhaps more so. When the good times ended, when we were reluctantly dragged back into a world of wishes, second guesses, and regret, we told ourselves we were now paying for our good times. What goes around comes around, and all that. We might not *like* the hang-over, but we *deserved* it.

"I suppose going back to real life was ten times harder than never having left it to begin with. I'll tell you this, though. I'm glad for it. They were good days. I wouldn't give them back for anything."

A Ripple in the Eggs

The lingering scent told Regret everything he needed to know. She was here. Again. Not that it bothered him very much. In some ways, he was buoyed by her attentions, however shy she might be about it. Yet, he had little patience for Misfortune. Their time together had been lovely, had taught him much about his life, about his work, but it was long past. He had put her behind, and could never quite understand why she could not do the same.

It had come down to an intolerable difference, philosophies of existence so diametrically opposed as to be irreconcilable. Misfortune, the *Duchess of Disaster*, insisted it was action that changed the world, *event* that drove mankind. She watched as the young Regret struggled with the hapless and happy farmer, only to sweep in with her gift, break the man until he had no strength left to resist Regret's charms. Victory, she claimed, was hers, was *always* hers, for how can there be regret without misfortune?

Regret, however, did not see the world as she did. True, he had struggled with the farmer. True, his whispers had little effect until Misfortune had nearly broken him with one catastrophe after another. Yet, it was the whispers that had ultimately destroyed the poor sot. She had primed him, but Regret had come in for the kill. Misfortune can be hard, Regret was willing to admit, but all of her work came from without. Without fault, without shame, without *regret*, such work had no meaning. If his friends ultimately failed to take it within themselves, the disasters became no more than the random occurrences of the world. Without making it personal, what value could her work ever have?

Their philosophies had driven them apart.

Well, driven away *Regret*, anyway. Misfortune had never quite given up. To this day, to this morning, she pursued him. Never quite seen, her face hidden in the shadows, if her scent still discernable, she came after his friends, one after the other, as if to show, again and again, just how meaningless his work was without her. Relentlessly pursuing him with one *I told you so* after the other, although never quite to his face, she could never quite give up.

Regret laughed to himself as he made his way to the apartment of Donna Purcell. The *Captain of Calamity* was harmless. Let her do her worst. With or without her, his friends needed him. Needed comforting. Needed to feel fault. Feel responsibility. Feel regret. What did it matter whether she came around or not? Once again, he would prove that actions mattered not. That regret came either way.

Donna Purcell stood naked beside the bed and smiled at her lover, just waking. How things had turned out so well, she wasn't quite sure, but she was happy. As she stood before him, he opened his eyes and took her in with hunger and pride.

"Oh stop it."

She turned and dressed, aware that he was watching her every move. Horatio moved to get up, but she stopped him with a caress of his shoulder. "Stay. I'll make some breakfast." And she turned to face what could only be her doom, waiting for her in the kitchen.

Regret watched the residue of hope hover about her as she stared inside her fridge, considering her options. Hope, herself, was nowhere to be found, though the residue was unmistakable. A sickly sweet flavor, the aftertaste of artificial sweetener, pleasant, but never quite right. No matter. Hope was not exactly persistent. She had a tendency to fill vacuums, but struggled to create them herself. It would not take much to blow away the re-

maining wisps of Hope, and fill the vacuum with something heartier.

Donna, still breathing those wisps as they swirled about her, felt a rare confidence about the task in front of her. Still undecided, she considered her options. She wanted something easy but a little luxurious. Something that would feel indulgent without being impossibly fancy. French toast, maybe. She had bread. She had milk and eggs. She had syrup and powdered sugar. Perfect. As she pulled the eggs out of the fridge, however, she lost one to the floor

Regret scowled. The *Matron of Mishaps* was still hovering about somewhere.

As Donna looked at the mess and leaned over to clean it up, a voice rang loudly in her head. Not a whisper from Regret, but her own voice, from her own mind. *Why can't I be more careful?*

She pulled out a bowl in which to mix the eggs. It was a scratched plastic bowl she used all the time. It would do the job, but...she kind of wished she had something a little...nicer? Cooler? Something a little special. That blue ceramic bowl she got from her grandma would have been perfect, but...

If only I hadn't given it to Ronny. It's probably sitting on the perfect counter filled with perfect apples that her perfect kids will probably actually eat while I stuff myself with sugar.

Once again, her own voice had beat Regret to the punch. He hardly needed to whisper at all. She was practically doing it to herself.

She cracked the four eggs left in the carton. They were a little old, but probably fine. They *were* in the fridge, after all. And they didn't smell bad. Did old eggs smell bad? Were they dangerous? How old were they anyway? When was the last time she...wasn't there a trick? Oh yeah, put them in water and see if they float.

Again. *If only I'd thought of it before I cracked them.*

She added what was left of the milk. Just barely expired.

And again. *If only I'd checked the date before I poured.*

In the bedroom, Horatio stared at the ceiling, a smile on his face, and love in his heart. Regret should have known better than to leave him alone, but he was increasingly distracted by this old friend who seemed not to need him after all. He settled down in a corner, wondering what would happen if he didn't bother at all. Since the moment he had arrived in Donna's apartment, he had yet to whisper a word.

Donna put a pan on the stove. The handle embedded with old grease.

If only I'd cleaned it better along the way. Now I'll never get it clean.

She pulled out three slices of bread. Four. The bread was a little on the old side as well, but at least it wasn't moldy. Or was it? It was so hard to tell with this stupid wheat bread. Was that a seed or mold? She looked closely and determined it was a seed, but pulled it out anyway, just to be sure.

If only I got normal bread like a normal person. He's going to think I'm a stupid health nut or something. Who makes French toast with seven grain wheat bread?

She put the bowl of mixed eggs next to the stove, and reached for the salt. Just an impromptu plastic container filled with salt, something to reach into and grab a pinch. She took the top off and prepared to take a bit between her fingers.

And Regret smiled. This was his moment. He stood up, ready to sidle up and commiserate with the poor girl, give her a shoulder to lean on, sympathize with her. Halfway to her ear, however, he was beaten again by her own voice.

Didn't go so well last time.

Donna looked at the salt and was filled with memories of the night before. Should she even bother? Better no salt at all than another disaster. She looked at the eggs, wondering if they had gone bad enough to have a flavor that could only be covered up with the salt she didn't dare use.

Why am I such a terrible cook? Can't clean either. If only I could stop trying to be something I'm not. If only I could stop pretending that I could be worthy. Last night was nice, but...it can't last, can it? Not with me. Why am I such a loser?

She dropped the pinch back into the container and looked back at the eggs as the few grains stuck to her fingers escaped and fell in. Tiny but unmistakable, a single ripple formed in the yellow goo. She stared at it, troubled without really knowing why. Something wasn't quite right. A ripple in the eggs. A ripple in a mixture that should be too thick to...

I didn't deserve last night. As if a little sex was going to be enough to hold him. Now that he got what he wanted, why should he stick around? So I can poison him? How long am I going to keep trying to fool him?

Too much milk. Fuck. And out of eggs.

I tried to fool him with that sob story, and now he's going to see right through me. If only I hadn't let him in, maybe now we could be meeting for breakfast. Instead, he's going to watch me ruin another meal. No fooling him this time.

Why does the bread keep falling apart? Christ, this is a mess.

Not enough eggs, dammit. If only I'd left well enough alone.

Donna took the ripped up pieces of bread sopping with eggs, and dumped the whole bowl into the sink. It splashed back onto her shirt. *His shirt. His ruined dress shirt.*

Why did I even put this on? Who even does that? I look completely ridiculous, and now I've ruined it.

Why couldn't she do anything right?

If only I'd put on my own damn shirt. Well, no surprise. It's not as if I don't ruin everything I touch.

She saw herself dumping salt into the tomato sauce. Saw herself dumping *that* into the sink as well. Saw herself burning roasts and making messes she couldn't clean up. Saw herself a mother hated by her children, fighting with her husband in a filthy, smelly, joyless home. Saw everyone around her suffering for her inadequacies.

"Fucking loser!" she shouted as she took a handful of sopping bread and threw it across the room. The sticky mess hit the wall just beside the doorway where the forgotten Horatio had just emerged, still rubbing his eyes.

Regret was more than a little lost. He had still not spoken a word, and was starting to wonder if he ever would again. What was the point of reminding your friends of their regrets, when they did a better job of it themselves? If they don't need you, why waste your time?

He looked over at Horatio, waiting to see if he, too, would do Regret's work for him.

Ok, wow. She is looking more than a little crazy right now. Maybe this was a mistake.

"Um...you alright?" *And I locked myself out of my apartment for this?*

"Oh god, I..."

Regret hung his head, hardly listening.

Did he see everything? Why am I so stupid? If only I could hold my temper.

"It just slipped, that's all."

"Ok."

Horatio hesitated as his own voice filled his head.

Maybe I should have taken the hint last night.

"And, I...I don't really have anything for breakfast. It's...I need to go shopping."

Horatio thought he should take her out to breakfast.

How's that gonna to work out? Gonna ask her to buy me breakfast? If only I hadn't rushed out without my wallet.

My keys.

My phone.

"Oh. Ok."

Good one, Ray. Should've said something nice. If only I had half a brain.

"You should go."

If only I had any guts. Why do I always send them away?

"Yeah, ok."

Horatio went back to the bedroom and changed. Donna, now embarrassed before him, took the spoiled dress shirt off in the kitchen, and covered herself up with a winter coat. Sheepishly, she went into the bedroom and handed it to him.

"I kind of...ruined it. I'm sorry. I'll buy you a new one."

If only I hadn't thrown a tantrum like a little baby, maybe it would still be clean.

"Oh. It's ok. No big deal."

If only I'd got up first. Made breakfast. That would've been impressive. Instead I just laid on my ass as always, waiting for someone else to take care of me. No wonder she wants me to leave.

"So...thanks."

If only I hadn't tried to be so great, we could still be snuggling in bed. Why can't I handle situations like a normal person?

"I should...um, get into my apartment and all that."

"Yeah." *Should've offered him a ride.*

"So...bye." *Should've kissed her.*

"Bye."

As she stood in her bathroom, alone, staring at the nearly full bottle of aspirin that might at last free her from the hell that was her life, Regret sat in the corner, wondering if he, too, had any worth at all, and just what would happen if he left his friends to fend for themselves altogether.

Waiting for the Cable Guy

The storm from the previous evening continued to trouble Nisha Eikenboom the morning after her miserable shift. The storm brought lightning, the lightning took a tree, the tree took a wire, and the wire took her internet. Not a big deal, but a girl's gotta have her internet. Had she known just how many trees had brought down just how many lines, she might not have bothered. As she did not, however, Nisha Eikenboom did her responsible best to solve what she saw as a very local problem. She called the appropriate numbers, got routed from robot to robot until she finally made it to the queue in which she was told the wait would be approximately thirty-five minutes. Lies. After an hour and fifteen minutes she heard her first human voice who, sadly, was unable to help her. After more re-routing and another twenty-three minutes, she received her first small glimmer of hope. Yes. Help was on the way. She need only wait.

So Nisha Eikenboom stuck around her apartment as requested by the cable giant responsible for her connection to the world, and waited to be rescued.

And waited.

And waited.

By the time Regret stopped by, depressed, lost, and wondering just what the hell he was doing there, half the day was already gone.

It was a Saturday. Not normally a day where one could expect service from the people-hating behemoth that occasionally deigned to bless their customers with access to pathways for which they alone held the rights of passage. Yet, help *was* on the way. It was, after all, an emergency. Even the cable company knew that. Sadly for Nisha, because the emergency was a result of a storm, she was far from the only person affected, and in conse-

quence found herself in the midst of another long metaphorical line of others in a situation not entirely different from her own, with no idea where she stood or when she might be served. It was out of her control.

Listening to her, Regret began to feel better. Here was a friend who needed him. Not just a whirlpool of depression who would wallow in her missed opportunities with or without him. This one needed a little push. A little encouragement to remember that the world was not an accident, that life did not happen *to* her, that she was responsible for her own fate, that, sometimes, it was *her* fault.

Misfortune had done her level best, but it was not enough. Regret leaned in to whisper.

And her own thoughts stopped him short.

Why did I even call these guys? It's not like I can just blow them off, now. If only I'd just waited, it probably would have fixed itself. Why do I even care about the internet? I have better things to do today anyway.

Regret sat back down. Maybe she did not need his help, either. Maybe none of them did. Maybe he was wasting his time. Maybe he was wasting his existence.

Unaware of the god in the corner, Nisha continued to spin in her head.

Why did I even agree to go to the stupid party? Now I have to choose between internet and being what they all think I am, a stupid stay at home who never wants to do anything and only goes out when I'm paid to sell the rest of them drinks. Why am I such an idiot?

Regret mused to himself, imagining the whispers he might send her way, if only they would matter. Out of hearing, she made up her own.

He thought, *"If only you told them maybe instead of yes."*

She thought, *"If only I hadn't committed."*

He thought, *"If only you weren't such a stay at home, maybe you could go five minutes without internet."*

She thought, *"Why do I even care about the stupid internet. I wish I weren't so addicted."*

He thought, *"If only you had shared an apartment, you'd have someone else to help."*

She thought, *"Why do I even live alone? I'm so tired of having to do everything myself."*

Regret sighed. She could do this all day. Why not just leave the girl to her own devices. She didn't need a friend. Not a friend like him. She was her own task master, her own worst enemy. What needed she a god? What needed anyone a god?

Nisha looked at the clock, wondering if the cable guy would possibly arrive before her friends came to take her to the farm party. She was not particularly social, though she did have friends with whom she occasionally went to parties, movies, or joined in some small adventure. Because this was not the focus of her life, a typical Saturday was likely to see her at home, sleeping in, perhaps looking forward to meeting up with someone in the evening, perhaps dreading a coming shift at the tavern. More likely, the quiet Saturday would turn into a quiet night, curled up in front a movie. To spend such a day waiting for the cable guy to arrive was no huge hassle, save for the lack of internet to keep her occupied as she waited.

Today, however, was one of those occasional days when she *did* have plans.

If only I didn't have any friends.

She wasn't a farm girl herself, had never been. Nisha was a suburban girl. Farms for her had always been something she passed on long drives, not places to stop and visit, let alone make a life. However, she had fallen in with some friends who had, like

so many generations of young people before them, attempted to put the busy life of the city behind them, come closer to the land, so to speak. Friends who had taken the plunge and done their level best to learn a trade most people learned from their fathers, by books, research, and trial and error. They saw a nobility in this ancient profession, and sought to earn their way into its ranks.

If only I was more like them.

They were proud of their work, fell in love with the land, and, even in the midst of grueling physical labor, loved their adopted rural lifestyle. Yet, when your nearest neighbor is half a mile away and your old friends are still in the city, it can get lonely. It was a long drive, and it was rare that they had visitors beyond their new friends in the farming community. Sure, they saw the old gang when they came into the city to deliver farm shares to wealthy condo owners on the fashionable side of town, or to high end restaurants capitalizing on the trend toward locally grown ingredients. Still, they wanted to entertain from time to time.

If only they actually liked me.

The occasional party, bonfire, sleepover kept the group together, but nothing could compare with the potluck out at Kasterfink's farm. He had inherited it from his family, though he himself had grown up in the fashionable exburbs, and then moved to the city. Like his expat friends, he had ultimately left the city. Unlike his friends, he was not starting out in the country from scratch. The community knew his grandfather, and were grateful someone from the family had come back to save the farm. As he had come to know the community, he had also brought together this new generation of organic farmers, helping them to feel more welcome in this strange rural world.

If I do go, it will probably be completely awkward.

Each year Timothy Kasterfink hosted a potluck that soon became the biggest event in the area. A strange mix of fifth generation farmers, expat *organics*, city kids slumming it out in the country, and any number of local families who, while not farmers, had such deep roots in the community it seemed hard to imagine they would ever leave.

If I go with them, there will be no way out.

The party had become legendary, an annual event Nisha and all of her friends looked forward to, and one that had grown every year. There were bands from the city playing out in the open, kids running around everywhere, a pig roast to keep everyone fed, a potluck of food plentiful, exotic and mundane, and pretty much everything you could expect from a big party out on a farm, thrown by the younger generation. It was far from the city, but well worth the drive. Everyone was invited to set up a tent, or sleep out under the stars, or crowd into the farmhouse overnight if the weather was inclement.

As if anyone's going to care about my stupid deviled eggs.

Drugs and alcohol were prevalent, but so were horseshoes, lemonade, and Rice Krispies treats. Of course, many of the families left after the fireworks, before things got too wild, but it was a nice mix of people coming together from different lifestyles, pleased to make new friends and enjoy the company of old ones.

They'll probably know the eggs came from a store. If only I'd gone to the farmer's market this morning.

In addition to the party being an all night affair, things often got started early in the afternoon with tours of the farm, yard games, and no shortage of nostalgic and childish games at dusk before gathering around the bonfire. Kids and adults alike would play capture the flag as the sun went down, fighting for vision as the wooded shadows obscured even the most brightly dressed revelers. Nisha and her city friends were always eager to join in

the fun of the games, so it was no surprise when they rolled up to Nisha's apartment mid-afternoon, ready for the beautiful drive to the country.

The cable guy still had not come.

Nisha was disappointed and nearly decided to just blow off the cable altogether. In the end, however, sure she would regret the choice, imagining how miserable she would be when she got back and there was no hope of internet for perhaps the next few days, Nisha decided to wait. She promised to follow her city friends out to the farm in her own car as soon as she could get away. It broke her heart, but she felt like she had no choice. At least she would still be able to join in the fun by the time the bonfire got going.

Regret, nearly catatonic from watching his old friend do his work for him without so much as a hint, stumbled to his feet and fell from the apartment, lost as he had ever been, not sure how he could ever have thought his existence mattered in the slightest. Like a drunken madman, he pushed his way out of the building and into the street, where the world was full of former friends who had not given him so much as a handshake before kicking him out the door.

Two hours and forty-seven minutes later, having finally given up on the cable guy she no longer believed would be coming, what small amount of courage she had rising in her heart, Nisha found herself driving alone on an unfamiliar country road, vaguely lost, and wishing she had just gone with her friends in the first place. It wasn't regret, exactly. More like a feeling of disappointment that she was on her way, rather than already there.

If only I'd gone with them, I could just be along for the ride.

If only I hadn't put the stupid internet in front of real people, I'd be laughing in the backseat, instead of alone and...shit, am I lost?

Still, she *was* on her way, which gave her some semblance of joy.

She had been using her phone as a navigator, but the roads were not up to date, and the cellular service was so bad that she could not get consistent guidance. Sometimes the phone would talk to her, sometimes it would remain silent far too long. During one of these silent spells, driving along a road that seemed unlikely to have any hazards, she found herself looking down at the phone, checking to see if signal had returned, more often and for longer stretches than was safe. With her estimated arrival time still fourteen minutes distant, she looked up from her phone that had once again lost signal, only to be surprised by a deer coming across her path.

It was too late to slow down, leaving her with two choices. She could follow her long forgotten training, in which she was advised to hit the deer rather than risk greater injury by swerving into unknown conditions, though undoubtedly leaving significant damage to her vehicle she could not presently afford. The other choice carried more risk, but greater reward: she could follow her instinct and avoid the creature at all costs, hoping for the best. The training dated back to before she turned sixteen, a driving class in a suburban environment where interactions with deer were not the foremost thought on anyone's mind. It was a necessary part of the training, but a part that neither the instructors nor students took too seriously. The information had been covered, but never repeated. It was perfunctory.

Now, faced with the situation for the first time, the light fading on an unfamiliar road, less than moments to react, she saw the choice simplistically. Hit the deer and she would probably need roadside service, be stuck in the middle of nowhere without cell service in a car that wouldn't operate, and no help on the way. Swerve and she might avoid trouble altogether. She wasn't

supposed to swerve though. She knew it. Still, it seemed to make more sense.

Hit or swerve?

Hit or swerve?

Hit or swerve?

Had Regret been there, he would have told her it did not matter. Had Regret been there, he would have told her that *all* choices are wrong. Had Regret been there, he would have told her that all choices lead to regret.

Regret, alas, had left his friend behind.

Horatio Porter

"It's been hard, y'know? I, uh, I think about her every time I, I think, *what did I do wrong*, which is, y'know, uh, just what he wants me to think, I guess, but I don't know I, I just can't help it. Is that regret? Is that what regret is? Does it even matter?

"When Donny...

"It's like, maybe if none of it had happened. Maybe if life had just been normal, maybe we could've, y'know, *faced* it. Maybe we would've had to *rely* on each other instead of that beautiful fantasy bullshit that seemed so perfect, but, I don't know, came too cheap, I guess. It was like we never really had a chance, y'know?

"Maybe it's like this. Like you grow up poor but work really hard so that someday you can get out of the ghetto or dangerous neighborhood or whatever, and it pays off. Not right away, though, right? It's like it comes in these tiny increments. You get a college scholarship, but you still have to work your way through and the college isn't that good. You get a job that could maybe be a career if you work hard enough, but you have to work your way up, the hard way, and there is no promise of a promotion any time soon. Like...y'know...when you're doing something that you wish was already over, and you check your watch every ten seconds to see if you're close yet, which you never seem to be. You know that you're making progress, but it feels like it's taking *forever*.

"The thing is, though, you *are* making progress, right? The clock *is* moving forward. As long as you don't stop working as hard as you can, as long as you don't stop trying, as long as you just hold your breath and keep swimming, you'll keep making headway. It's hard, but good, right?

"Ok.

"Then you get some big break that means you don't have to work so hard anymore. Maybe some investment pays off or, I don't know, you win the lottery or something. The point is you now have whatever it is you wanted without having to work for it anymore. And you think, ok, this is a miracle, but I kinda earned it. I worked hard before and now this great thing happened to me, so it must be fate or karma or something. Somehow it must be related to all the work you did before. And you just *bask* in it, right? Just *enjoy* it. For a long time, you just sit and reap the benefits of whatever blessing is upon you. The other side of that, though, the insidious thing is that the less you *have* to try, the less you *do* try. The whole time you're just basking in *winning*, or whatever, you get lazy. You forget how to work. How to *earn*. Then, and this is the thing, then, one day it disappears. Like the lottery money gets stolen, or you make one really bad investment, or you gamble it all away, or, it doesn't really matter. The only thing that matters is that the miracle has disappeared, and now you're poor again. Now all the hard work you did before is useless, and you have to start completely over. Start *earning* again.

"Can you do it? Do you have it in you?"

"I don't think many of us did. I think most of us got broken. Like...ok, maybe this is the better analogy. You know how when you're playing poker with your friends, and you're not really winning or losing but just kind of going back and forth, but it's ok because you keep thinking that, even if you don't win big, at least you're not *losing* big? Life before the *Days* was like that. And the *Days* themselves were like that great part of the night when you can't lose, and your pile just won't stop growing, and you're like, *finally*, right? But when the *Days* were gone, it was like that point in the game where you have to buy in again to keep playing, and instead of feeling hopeful, you start to feel desperate.

"I'm not saying that some people didn't have it in them. Some people saw their pile of chips dwindle to nothing, and that's the thing that drove them to win it back. Some people are *motivated* by loss. Not most of us though. Most of us just break. Broke.

"I certainly did.

"And Donny...

"I'm not saying Donny didn't suffer from...y'know, it's not like she was that *rare* or whatever. Her level of depression was not...I mean...she was one of many, right? From the moment I first noticed her in the office, I could see she was...I mean...I don't know. She was so much closer to the line than I was. Am. Maybe that was part of the attraction. Like I thought she needed me more than I needed her. Like with her I would have this *value* or whatever. She was beautiful with this beautiful smile that was mostly hidden, but would light up the room when it came out. I would just stare at her and think, *maybe I could make her smile more*. Maybe she's the damsel in distress and I'm the knight and...

"It seems so obvious now, but at the time I couldn't see it, right? Like here was this girl who was even more self conscious than me, with even more anxiety and fear. I think a big part of me just wanted to feel good about myself in *comparison* to her, but mostly I just thought...I don't know...like I could *fix* her or something. It sounds terrible when I say it like that, but I did love her. And then she was fixed. All that anxiety just washed away. *The Miracle Cure of the Days of No Regret*. I think I just...like the guy who wins the lottery and just stops trying.

"Once I stopped feeling like I had to keep working for it all the time, working not to feel miserable all the time, I mean, I stopped caring about anything. Didn't care about trying. Didn't care about losing. I was completely, like when you're, what's the

word, *atrophied*, I guess. During the *Days*, I learned to stop worrying about the consequences and just enjoy life. I felt like it didn't really matter what I did, because everything would turn out alright. It was great, but in this artificial way.

"After the *Days*, when the easy good feelings were gone, it was almost like the same atrophy, just with pain. I felt like it didn't really matter what I did, because everything would turn out wrong, so why bother? Like the same apathy that took over in the good times had such a stronghold it wouldn't let go. The *Days* taught us how powerless we were, maybe. Taught us how our feelings were out of our control. I think I was pretty normal in that I, y'know, just kinda gave up. Accepted my fate.

"Donny, though. She...I don't know she...she couldn't afford to. She didn't have the space to...she was just so close to the edge. The idea of starting over, of going back to the depths of her depression was just too much for her without...or I mean...she had no hope of doing it...alone. If only I'd been there for her. If only I hadn't given up on myself. If only I'd cared more about her than about myself, maybe I would have paid more attention and...I don't know...could have *saved* her, I guess. I mean...I know that sounds arrogant or whatever, but it has to be at least partly true, right?"

Salton Christiansen

"I've tried to channel it. Tried to remember what those days were like and force myself to feel that way now, the way Nisha thinks she has. It's a journey, though. You can't just turn it off. At best, you can ignore it. Ignore the feeling that you should have done something differently. But it's still there, that feeling. It stands behind you and pokes at you relentlessly, just under the shoulder. At first, it doesn't matter, or at least it doesn't hurt. At that point it's just annoying, like your little brother who only wants to goad you into turning around so he can say, "*Made you look!*" The thing is, though, that it keeps going long beyond the point that you can expect it to go away. You think you'll get used to it, like the noise of the air conditioner, but instead you just keep noticing it more, hearing every little pop and crack. Instead of becoming background noise, it becomes the only thing you can hear, drowning out everything else. Pretty soon you feel like you would do anything to make it stop.

"Of course, there is no stopping it, but you never really believe that. All you want to do is turn around to that annoying little brother who won't stop poking you and scream at him, maybe punch him in the face to teach him a lesson. You know it won't help, that the moment you turn around he's won. Still, you do it anyway, the way you can't stop yourself from scratching an itch, even when it's already bleeding.

"So you turn around and he smiles sympathetically, puts his hands on your other shoulder, looks at you with this smug expression and says, "*If only you hadn't turned around, maybe we could have forgotten this little episode.*"

"At that point, remembering what it felt like before that asshole started poking you is pointless. It's like trying to think the itch away, trying to remember a time when you didn't itch, and

hope you can convince yourself that the itch isn't real. At best, it brings you a moment of nostalgia that makes you forget the pain of your bleeding arm that still itches so much that all you want to do is dig into it deeper. Then the moment is gone. And the pain and the itch mix together into this inseparable and irresistible mess. It's worse than if you hadn't had that moment of forgetting at all.

"This is not some revolutionary idea. Remembering the good times always makes the bad times worse. It's human nature. We experience everything by way of comparison. Ask my mother if she's rich, and she'll talk about how little she has in comparison to her friends at the club. Ask her *how* much money she has, though, and she won't be able to tell you. Like all of us, she'd be happier if she had no one to compare herself to. At least then she could enjoy what she has, instead of always thinking about what she doesn't have.

"That's how I feel about regret.

"At some point, you have to admit those days are gone. At some point, wishing them back is like pining for your high school days when you were the star quarterback and everybody loved you. Looking at old pictures and talking about the old days feels good for a bit, but soon enough you have to get back to real life. At some point, dreaming of the past is just as bad as the feelings you're trying to avoid, if that makes any sense. Worse, really. Let me put it this way. Regretting that you are not living without regret is the height of hypocrisy. Sorry for the double negative.

"Nisha thinks you can wish it away, as if spending all your time remembering how great things were in high school will make you great again today. I suppose there is *some* truth to that, in the way that maybe your memories of success can rebuild your confidence. In the end, though, you have to move on. She thinks she can ignore regret indefinitely, if only she can be strong

enough. I think she's wrong. I don't think anyone is that strong. And when she fails, the crush we felt at the end will feel like a carousel ride compared to what she'll feel *then*.

"Still, the Days were nice. I can't blame her for wanting them to last.

"I'm working on mindfulness. Not exactly meditation, but not exactly *not* meditation, if I can burden you with yet another double negative. What I mean is, I'm trying to embrace some aspects of meditation that might help me find better focus in my life. Help me live with the burden of regret, now that its presence is so much more burdensome. It's eyes-wide-open stuff. Stop ignoring that tortuous poking finger. Embrace it. Notice it, recognize it, examine it, and then gently, lovingly, put it aside and focus on your breathing. So to speak.

"It's a little hokey, but sometimes it helps. I'm not really cut out for that kind of thing, but it seems to be helping. So far it's the closest thing I've been able to find to the peace I found during the *Days*. Nisha would probably tell you that I'm full of it. That I'm just ignoring the lessons I should have learned, sleepwalking through my privileged life, taking the easy road and failing to examine the world around me. She's wrong, though. It is not I who ignore the world but *she*. I've come to believe that regret makes me stronger. It was lovely to have a break from those feelings, but I would not want to spend a lifetime without their influence. Then I really *would* be sleepwalking through life.

"Whether or not Nisha has really been able to put it behind her, I don't know, but I'm suspicious. I can hardly talk to her anymore. Somehow it all seems so phony.

"Still, there are days when I miss her."

Grains of Regret

Misfortune smiled at her work as Nisha Eikenboom, contrary to her teenage training, swerved a deer and went off the road into a mess of thorny bushes and young trees. It was good work, solid work, the kind of work that kept the ignorant masses on their toes, made them learn from their mistakes, woke them up and kept them on their guard. True, some other god would swoop in soon enough and take the credit, put their arm around the girl's shoulder and tell her how to feel about it. It was the story of her existence. Still, *she* knew. She knew why they were happy or sad or scared or hopeful or, yes, even full of regret. It was not the whispers, not the friendly hand stretched out for advice and sympathy. It was *her*.

She watched the scene from above, waiting for one particular god to slip in and pick the fruit she had so thoughtfully lowered for him. The girl was an old friend of his, she knew, so there could be little doubt but that he would smell his opportunity. Take her in this vulnerable state and accompany her to the depths of disappointment. Whisper in her ear something about her choices, about what she could have done, what she *should* have done. As if words could possibly make a difference.

If only you hadn't swerved, could just as easily be, if only you had swerved.

It was the deer that mattered.

She told herself he would be grateful for her contribution. She told herself he would be humbled by her skill. She told herself he would quietly admit defeat, if not to her, then at least to himself. She told herself he would see her value. She told herself he would come back. She told herself he would...well, she told herself a lot of things.

What Regret might or might not do, what he might or might not say, what he might or might not think, however, became increasingly irrelevant. For Regret was not there.

And Regret was not coming.

Regret was back in the apartment of Donatella Purcell, watching her demise unfold as one might watch a worm eaten by a bird. Interesting, perhaps, but of what meaning to him? He had not provided the bird, the hunger, or even the water that had driven the worm from relative safety underground. He was dissociated, disinvested, and increasingly disinterested.

As she lay on her bathroom floor in a spiral of depression, aspirin cocktail making its way down her throat, Regret should have been on top of the world. Should have perched on the roof, lit up a rare cigar and basked in the glory of a job well done under the warmth of a midsummer sun. Should have toasted himself with a glass of rye. Raised his glass to the world about him. *To better days*, and all that.

Instead, he sat in the corner feeling sorry for himself, caring not what happened as Horatio pushed the not quite locked entry and made his way upstairs to Donna's apartment door. Horatio should have been on his way home, had left with the intention of doing so. After several blocks, however, he cursed himself for a fool. Not only was he without his keys, phone, and wallet, but he still had no way of getting into his apartment.

If only I'd thought to make a call from Donna's phone before I left.

He felt an impending sense that he would regret coming back, but also felt as if he had little choice. Still too early to wake what few friends he had, none of whom were very close, all of whom were too far to walk to in any case, he finished the walk back to Donna. He passed through the first entry door as another

tenant left. By the time he made it to her apartment door, his stomach was turning sideways. Timidly, he knocked.

"Donny?"

Donna could have answered. She was not yet that far gone. The aspirin was dissolving, but not yet coursing through her system. Chunks of white tablets clung to her throat. Bile was just beginning to tickle around the edges of those that had made it all the way down. She was just tired. Tired of body. Tired of spirit. Tired of life. Yes, she could have answered. She just chose not to.

Another timid knock on the door that was still cracked open from where neither Horatio nor Donna had given the door the extra push needed to engage the latch that was in worse condition than the buzzer, though not nearly so old.

"Donny? Can I come in? I'm so sorry. I'm just, um, well, I guess I, if I could just, um, maybe use your phone or something. I don't know I..."

What am I doing here? I'm going to regret this.

Cautiously, Horatio made his way into the apartment.

"Donny? Are you here?"

He walked into the kitchen, then toward her bedroom. Regret watched dispassionately.

"Jesus Christ, Donny. Are you ok?"

And Regret watched as Horatio discovered the empty aspirin bottle.

As he attempted to shake Donna out of her trance.

As Donna looked at her savior with love and misery.

As he pulled her half over the toilet, her feet dragging behind her.

As he stuck his own finger down her throat until her gag reflex brought up a surge of bile and vomit pushing with it much of the detritus lining her throat and stomach.

As he held fast, her vomit dripping over his arms and onto the floor, no hint of the need to clean up, to brush himself off.

As he pushed in his finger again, vomit now dripping onto his trousers.

And again.

As he held her close, squeezing the wet and chunky vomit between them.

As they cried together.

Feeling a little too sorry for himself, Regret sat, watching the scene unfold before him, wondering if he should do anything at all. Sat and wondered what would happen if he just stayed out of it. If one could be brought to the edge of suicide without the whispers of Regret, what need for him there could possibly be. Sat as his clients shed their filthy garments. As they held themselves in the shower, staring into each other's eyes. As minutes turned to hours with no whispers of regret to disturb them.

By the time it happened, Regret had already given up. He needed only the slightest push to stand him up and get him moving toward the door. A nudge to wake him from his near catatonic state. To shake it off and walk away. It came in the form of a little plastic container of salt. The same salt that had twice driven Donna to despair. The salt that had broken her utterly and decisively, with no help from he. That salt had fallen off the counter in Horatio's panic to save her, spreading its contents across the floor.

It was just a moment. Just an image. Just a little mess on the floor. But it struck him in that moment, in the waves of that image, that perhaps those tiny grains were all the other moments. The whispers in his clients' ears, the nudges toward despair, the thefts of hope he had spent a lifetime dedicated to, meaningless mess that would soon enough be swept up with the trash. He thought of his little granulated contributions seasoning the world

and wondered if he too had added a little too much. Or not enough. Or, and this was thing that broke him, if the soup was fine either way. That the lesson Donna failed to learn was really a lesson for himself. That the seasoning did not really matter.

Awoken with epiphany, Regret heaved a sigh and walked away. Away from his work, away from his friends, away from his way of life. Away. By time the sun had set, he was sitting near the edge of a small tourist village, on the back porch of his grandfather's lake house, listening to the ripples in the water. He was determined never to come back.

ACT 2: The Great Cornucrapula

Regret There Was None

There is an inertia at play in the universe. Not only with mass, but also with actions. With ideas. We become used to who we are, what we do. When we are in motion, we tend to stay in motion. When we are at rest, we tend to stay at rest. We allow life to carry us along. We find changes in speed and direction difficult. Put another way, change is hard.

When change is thrust upon us, we do not always see it, do not always give it credence. We allow our memory, our habits, to carry us forward, as if that change was not well and true. We do all we can to pretend the change away until it becomes too obvious to ignore. We spend our lives so comforted by the whispers of Regret that we fill in the gaps in his absence. He has trained us, and we, like good dogs, continue to do our tricks long after the treats have disappeared.

But we are not dogs, and nothing lasts forever. It is only our inertia carrying us forward, an inertia that must, at some point, be acted upon by an outside force. Without the whispers from our friend, how long do we continue to speak them to ourselves? Without our friend by our side, how long before we let them fade altogether, coast to a stop and contemplate a new route?

Not long.

Nisha wasn't hurt. Not badly, anyway.

Her car had rolled through the culvert into a stand of young trees that kept her from hitting the fifty year old oak they obscured. This bit of mixed fortune brought her, instead of to a sudden and violent stop, to a slightly more gradual one. There was significant damage to the body of her car, and there was no backing out without help, but her airbag deployed, her seatbelt

held her firmly in place, and the only major injury was to her pride.

Whether the tears shed by Nisha Eikenboom were of joy and relief, or anger and depression, we shall not dare to say. She was a swirling storm of emotions so intermixed as to make it impossible to separate them out.

The cost of the repairs are going to kill me.

I'll never make it to the party.

I'll be stuck out here forever.

At least I'm not hurt.

That deer came out of nowhere.

Maybe if try to start it one more time, it will work.

Who do I call?

My friends are probably already too drunk to help.

The list continued and continued, even as she made her way out of the car and walked her way around it, surveying the damage. Questions came in and out of her mind, her feelings waxed and waned. She was happy and sad and anxious and relaxed and hopeful and despondent. Yet, something was conspicuously absent, an old passive aggressive friend who hadn't bothered to show up in her time of crisis. An absence of the myriad of thoughts that might otherwise have plagued her. That *should* have plagued her:

If only I hadn't swerved.

If only I hadn't waited for the cable guy.

If only I hadn't checked my phone.

If only I hadn't been driving so fast.

And, and, and.

There was anger, there was despair, there was relief, there was hope, there was loneliness, there was abandon, there was anxiety, there was fear, there was peace.

But regret there was none.

She did not notice his absence. Not yet. Not really. Such an observation would not come until well into the following week. Today, she merely felt better than she had any right to given the circumstances. Better than terrible, though pretty lousy overall.

Hope falling, she sat on the ground, in high grass, leaning up against the back wheel of her car. Her phone was in her hand but she was not using it. She merely stared off into the distance, not really thinking at all. Overwhelmed by the experience, she just sort of sat there, staring, absorbing the peace of the countryside.

Salton Christiansen, driving at speeds that would frighten a seventeen year old boy, came barreling toward the scene, the only car within a mile. As he approached, however, he slowed down to better see the car in the ditch up ahead, and to evaluate if it had been there for days or might contain someone in need of help. By the time he saw Nisha sitting on the ground, leaning up against her rear passenger tire, he was going slow enough to pull over and offer assistance.

When Nisha first realized someone was nearby, let alone had pulled over, she had been sitting peacefully, her phone in her hand unused, for something like twenty minutes. She did not even turn her head as the car slowed to a halt and a gentleman approached her through the grass.

She must have looked catatonic.

"Miss? You ok?"

"Well, I, uh..."

"Are you hurt?"

"I, uh..."

Salton pulled out his phone and dialed for help. The phone conversation did not last long. Then he kneeled down beside her.

"It's ok. Help is on the way. They said you shouldn't move."

She began to wake up. Assess her situation.

"I'm uh...I'm not hurt...I don't think." Nisha started to get up. Salton gently put his hand on her shoulder and encouraged her to stay seated.

"That's great news. Still, you should probably just sit until they get here."

"Yeah, um...ok."

Salton wanted to help. He really did. He just wasn't sure what to do. The lady on the phone told him to keep her still and wait. He thought maybe he should check her for injuries or something. Or get her away from the car maybe. The lady on the phone had not given him much to do, however, and he was afraid to do anything on his own, for fear of hurting the girl in some way.

So he sat where he had been kneeling, determined to wait with her.

He smiled, still not quite sure what he should be doing, and awkwardly tried to make casual conversation. He thought asking her about the crash might raise her anxiety, so looked for something less intimidating.

"Where were you headed?"

"I, um, well I, actually I'm headed to a party. It's on a farm about fifteen minutes from here, if I'm not completely lost."

Salton laughed. "The Cornucrapula?"

"Yeah, actually. You too?"

"Timmy and I went to high school together. I've been meaning to come to this thing for years, but somehow it just never happens."

Nisha did not say anything.

"It's really funny to me, Timmy becoming a farmer. Back when we were kids, he never even wanted to leave his room, let alone go outside. He was more of a hole-up-in-the-house-and-play-video-games-all-day kind of guy. If anything, *I* was more of

the farmer type. My mother had this huge garden, and I used to love working in it. I'd spend all my free time there, to the point it was hard to believe that Timmy and I ever really became friends. If he hadn't been my nearest neighbor, I'm not sure we would have been. I even tried to get him to help me sometimes, but he always wanted to go into my basement and play the...see, we had a G3, and he always wanted to come over and play with me, which was fine with me. It's nice to have friends and all that. Still, I tried to get him to hang out in the garden with me, but he never really wanted to. So, how weird that he became a farmer, is what I'm trying to say. The place was his grandfather's, you know. Well, sort of. I don't think his grandfather farmed it, though his great grandfather definitely did. I think his grandfather leased the land or something. Timmy used to go out there sometimes with his family, but I don't think he ever really enjoyed it. Not back then, anyway. I guess everybody changes over time. I know I certainly have. Though in some ways, I haven't. It will be nice to see him again. What I mean is...we don't see each other much now, but it is nice to see old friends, talk about old times and all that. And he's been trying to get me to this Cornucrapula thing for years so..."

On another day, Salton would have cut himself off much sooner. He would have heard himself going on and on as if anyone cared what he had to say, realized he sounded like a vain and pretentious idiot more concerned with telling people about himself than listening to others, and promptly shut himself up. The whispers in his ear would have egged him on, made him self-conscious about his bad habits:

If only you could quit while you're ahead.

If only you could stop thinking about yourself for a minute.

If only you could shut up and listen for once.

If only you could at least pretend to care about someone beside yourself.

The whispers always served him. He listened closely and learned his lessons, if only for a moment. On another day, the whispers would have done their work. He'd have got in his head, wished he'd stopped talking sooner, and sort of shaken his head in a way that said, *sorry, I didn't mean to go on like that. You were saying?*

Today, however, he did not. Today his wishes were in the future.

Today, regret was nowhere to be found.

Nisha did not mind. As she waited for the ambulance or police or tow truck driver or whomever to arrive, she simply smiled at her good fortune in making a new friend.

At the Kasterfink Farm

Fifteen minutes or so away by car, tucked away in the rolling hills far from the city, a usually quiet farm was thrumming with life. The horseshoe pit was deserted, but only recently so. Children were everywhere, some in their parents' arms, some playing a sloppy pickup game at the aging basketball hoop, and most running around, engaged in an activity reminiscent of tag, though seemingly more complicated. Adults abounded. Some on picnic blankets, some at tables, many on fold out camping chairs they had brought with them. The ubiquitous crowds hung close to the beer kegs in the shed and the potluck table in the house. Further away, some musicians had just unloaded their gear, though not quite ready to set it all up just yet. On the fringes, the light dotting of tents could already be seen.

It was the seventh, or perhaps the ninth, of the Great Cornucupulas. Like the Olympics, the tradition spread back much further, though with a long enough gap between ancient and modern times, so to speak, that they hardly seemed the same tradition. What had begun as a memorial of sorts for Timothy's great-great-great grandmother had fallen away when the family had more or less abandoned the farm, some eighty years ago. Timothy, on reclaiming the farm for himself, had brought back the tradition, such as he had understood it, but more as a celebration of community than of memory.

For the last seven, or perhaps nine, years, Timothy Arnold Kasterfink had hosted revelries in honor of what he thought was his great-great-great grandmother's birthday, and used them to bring together his new friends in the valley with his old friends from the city. Each year word spread. Each year more came. Each year Timothy knew fewer of the revelers. Not that it bothered

him very much. He was pleased to bring joy, as well as make new friends.

They had been wonderful in the past and would be wonderful in the future. Sometimes it rained, sometimes not. Sometimes the bands were great, sometimes not. Sometimes there were great stories, sometimes not. But always people had a good time. Always people came back for more the following year. This particular weekend, however, the weekend Regret turned his back on his friends and went off to wallow in his own pity somewhere far, but not too far, away, would become legendary as the greatest of all the Great Cornucrapulas. It was not, and this is important, it was not that anyone behaved particularly recklessly, or at least any more so than they had in previous years. It was an occasion to let loose, and everyone did. Everyone always did. For that, this year was no different than the others.

There were no more nor less hookups than in the past. No more nor less dancing. No more nor less injuries. No more nor less nakedness. Some made love, some did not. Some danced, some did not. Some did stupid things, some did not. Some took their clothes off to swim in the river or dance around the fire or run through the corn fields, some did not. The weekend was special, it was true. People did things they would never do anywhere else, yes. But that was why people came. It was why they *always* came. It was what they *expected*. It was almost predictable in its specialness.

What made this particular weekend memorable, what made it the party of parties was not what happened, or what *did not* happen, but how so many of the revelers remembered it later.

Kendrick Jefferson drank too much and vomited inside his tent. In the morning, he was not ashamed. Or proud. Admittedly, he was none too pleased at the smell, but he just cleaned it up as if someone else had made the mess and got on with his morn-

ing. When he thought back on the evening, he never wished he had done anything differently. No regret.

Georgia Fetter joined the naked revelers dancing around the fire along the river, her clothes lost in a pile in the dark, psychedelics coursing through her brain, no doubt but that Dame Fortune was on her side, and found herself face first in the fire. The burns were not serious, but she did spend much of the rest of the night with helpful revelers cooling her skin in the river. In the morning, her mild burns still sensitive to the touch, she failed to associate the physical pain she still felt with the joys of the previous evening. They were two different but seemingly unrelated experiences. No regret.

Dante Cobb seduced and made love with his best friend's girl. In the morning, he greeted his friend and was found out. The incident would ruin that friendship for years to come, and the girl would leave both men behind. Although Dante sometimes misses his best friend and wishes the two of them could hang out again like the old days, he never thinks that he should have done anything differently. Never second guesses the hookup. It was as if he was not responsible. Water under the bridge and all that. No regret.

And our cable guy. Lorry Diesel. Lorry wandered off into the woods and got so lost it took him two days to find his way back to the farm, more dead than alive. He was a fool to do so and ought to have known better. By all rights he should have spent the days, weeks, and months afterward kicking himself for going off into the woods alone in the first place. Yet, such feelings never bothered him. He was lucky to be alive, yes, but there was nothing to change what had happened. The choice to go into the woods alone was in no way connected with his memory of the pain that followed. No regret.

Accidents and betrayals and bad choices happened as they did every year. There were variations on themes, of course, different stories with different punch lines, but overall, pretty much the same thing as other years. The choices people made were not exceptional. What made this year different, what made it so memorable, was that even where there were feelings of shame mixed in, those feelings failed to stick. It was not that everyone was suddenly proud of the fools they had made of themselves. Not at all. Rather, they saw those fools as funny and interesting people different from themselves. Separate. They saw the past as the unchangeable thing that it is, with no advantage in wasting the present dwelling over it.

Perhaps the universe did not desire Regret, after all. Perhaps Regret was, himself, the outside force acting upon an inertia all too pleased to take over in his absence. Such answers are beyond my ken. What is certain, however, is that without the whispers of Regret, without his gentle nudges, his friends ceased, after a time, to do his work for him, and settled comfortably into a regret-free life.

As the *Days of No Regret* marched on, they came to expect such a healthy outlook. They took bigger chances, greater risks, sure that they would never wish they had done otherwise. Eventually, the certainty that Regret was not coming, was perhaps gone forever, affected the way in which they all chose to live. Joy and apathy and foolish choices would abound, bring change to everyone that felt them, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Soon enough they would tire of it. Soon enough, they would become complacent.

On that first day, however, before anyone knew what they were in for, when no one had yet even noticed the change, on the day when no one saw it coming, it was more like a first love.

They were all blindsided by a confidence they could not name.
They could do no wrong.
And it was good.

Buoyed by Misfortune's Despair

A long walk in the woods from where the revelries were waxing, a hovel sat hidden in the trees, lonely, forgotten, and fighting off the ravages of time. A hovel that had not seen a visitor in more than a century. A hovel that had a reputation for being haunted. A hovel where, something like one hundred fifty years earlier, two gods stubbornly sat, each determined to have the place to themselves, each refusing the other quarter. The elder of the two used silence as his primary weapon, determined to sit quietly, withstanding any barrage the other could throw at him, until she wearied of his presence and left of her own accord. The other, contrarily, sought to drive him away with an incessant blather so continuous, her nemesis would have no choice but to leave first, if only for a little peace.

Regret had not intended to listen, had not intended to give the young goddess any credence. Yet, it was in his nature to listen, and he struggled to block her out entirely. Born of Shame and Disgust, gods more concerned with imposing than accepting, he had long ago taught himself the art of listening, that he might use his friends' own thoughts to magnify those he needed most. Listening became his nature, made him great. It was not a quality easily dismissed.

On another day, the words of the incessant magpie across from him might have driven him to distraction as he tried to discern which words might be of future value amongst the massive amount of chaff that carried them. On another day, he might have put some effort into understanding her, if only to use her words against her later on. Today, however, Regret was determined to ignore the girl, if only to find the solace for which he had been searching prior to her trespass.

Try as we might, however, none of us can easily dismiss the habits of a lifetime.

It was, then, against his better judgment that Regret found himself attempting to discern her meaning. Such a task was not a simple one. Misfortune had a tendency of talking in circles, not so much repeating as iterating, each pass at the same story a little different, each opinion slightly askew from the last. Regret listened, but discerned little. For hours, Misfortune would tell of this injustice or that, circling around her misanthropy, embracing a distaste for the world without ever quite coming to the center. She would speak with arrogance about her own nature, and with disdain about everyone else.

If there was a point to the goddess's ramblings, Regret could not find it.

"The problem is everyone thinks you can just *tell* people what to feel. The whole idea is ridiculous. You whisper in their ear and tell them how happy they are or whatever and for this, like, second or whatever, they act just like you want them to, so you think it's all good and you move on to the next one, except it never really lasts, does it? Seriously, you all act in the same insane way, saying the same things to the same people in the same way, over and over again, and act surprised when they need you to do it again. The problem is that none of you *do* anything. You all act like you're working so hard but you're just putting in lots of hours without getting anything done, wandering around, pretending to work, but really just wasting everyone's time. I watched this guy go on his rounds, it was like a stupid job shadow or whatever, and this guy went around all day whispering, '*things get better*,' to everyone, but never actually made anything better. So he would come back to the same stupid people every day, saying the same stupid thing as if it could make a difference. What an idiot. I mean, like, why not just *make* things better?"

Trust me, they don't listen to anything you say. You have to *show* them."

And Regret would listen.

She would talk about her philosophy, how nobody loved her, how the world was stacked against her, and of course, of her mother.

"Of course, they're *happy*. They always feel good after she's drugged them with her hypnotic potions or whatever. They *love* her. Not that she really cares whether they're happy or not. She doesn't think twice about them after she's done. She just wanders off like she's changed the world or something, which of course she hasn't. She's like a candy peddler. Everybody likes candy. At least, everybody likes the *idea* of liking candy. And she's all like, *oh you poor person who doesn't have any candy*. So she just goes around *indulging* people, which is fine, I guess, except it doesn't last, does it? Then she's gone and the little present is gone and they're all even worse off than before she came. Except they don't see it that way, do they? They all pine away for her and dream of how nice it was that one time she came by, and wait around on the stoop for her to come back, instead of cursing her for leaving them for dead, which they would if they had any self-respect, which of course they don't. Seriously, if those people could see themselves bowing down before that careless child as if she thought ten seconds about them, which of course she does not, they would die in shame, which they will anyway, I guess. I mean, she doesn't even remember you like three seconds after she's bestowed her precious gift upon you. All she cares about is what is right in front of her, and they all think she's coming back to save them. Not that the gift isn't real. I mean, I get it. They're *happy*, but like who cares? It's like spending your life remembering that one orgasm you had that one time. Who even cares? Those people are pathetic."

And Regret would listen.

And Misfortune would speak. For hours.

If, during that time, you had asked Regret who it was Misfortune had been talking about, he would have struggled to answer you. If you had asked him *what* she was talking about, he could not have answered you. For Regret, she was a cacophony of ideas too jumbled to focus upon. More often than not, he became distracted, focused on himself and his recent failure with the farmer. Fell back into feeling sorry for himself again, so to speak.

After a time, however, she had circled back enough to form a picture Regret could not help but respond to. Beginning to feel that the goddess was just as stubborn as he, that she would never leave of her own accord, he thought of leaving himself. Give her the victory, and search for solace somewhere else. With an air of resignation, and a desire to at least get in the last word, he rose to leave, parting words upon his lips.

"You think too much of yourself and too little of the world. Well, no matter. So do I."

Spoken during one of the brief pauses between Misfortune's otherwise unending monologues, his words took her aback, left her silent for a short time. She looked up at him and considered him, too, as if for the first time. It appeared to her that he had been listening patiently, not interrupting, not fighting with her, but *really* listening to what was on her mind. In her experience, that sort of thing just did not happen. In her experience, he might be different. Maybe he wasn't like the rest of them, after all.

Now that he *did* speak, maybe she owed it to him to consider his words, if only briefly. Those words that might otherwise have been insulting, and were instead tempered by patience. He had apparently been listening. He had apparently taken her seriously. He had apparently agreed with her. Even in his insulting con-

demnation of her, he commiserated with her, as if he were down in the depths with her, instead of looking down upon her from atop his golden throne.

Does love need more?

She said, "Stay."

And he did.

She continued to speak, but now in shorter bursts. He worked harder to listen, now in greater depth.

When she had talked herself out, when she had come to see that Regret was not quite the *stodgy bentback* she had first taken him for, when, with weariness verging on exhaustion, she admitted both to herself and to her new friend that she wasn't sure if she had the energy to go on, when he, buoyed by her own despair and his ability to comfort her began to feel some of the confidence he had lost in his failure with the farmer, she laid her head on his lap. He stroked her hair and told her not to take life so seriously.

By then, she had already fallen.

Normal Isn't Always Good

"No, it's not like that, Ray. I'm not explaining myself very well."

"Donny, if you want to leave..."

"No, no, no. I'm just trying to...." Donatella Purcell was lost for words. "Let me try again. It's not that I wish I had never come."

"That *we* had never come."

"Well...that either, I guess. What I mean is, there is no part of me that feels like I made a bad decision or whatever, which believe me is *rare*. And I'm glad we're together, Ray. So glad. I can't tell you how nice it is to be with you right now. But..."

"What is it, Donny?"

"I don't know, Ray. It's hard for me to...what I mean is...ok. Everything I feel right now, every part of my instinct, my intuition, my...I don't know, just...y'know, all the *stuff* that you feel but can't really *define*. All that stuff feels completely wrong to me..."

"So..."

"No, wait. I'm not done. Everything feels wrong but that doesn't mean it *is* wrong. That's what I'm trying to say. Like, ok, I spend a lot of time in my head. A *lot*. If you don't know that about me yet...well...I guess you might as well face it. I spend like half my existence talking to myself, or talking to other people but only in my head, having these imaginary conversations, y'know? Like, I'm about to do something, and I think, *should I do this?* Then I have this whole stupid...*fantasy*, I guess, about what happens next. Of course the fantasy always turns out terribly and I don't bother to do the thing in real life, but sometimes I go for it. Afterward, whether I did or wimped out, I go into these other really detailed conversations in my head about whether or not I *should have* done it, and then all these fantasies about how much

better everything would have been if only I'd done the thing. Or *not* done the thing. Am I making any sense?"

"Sure, Donny, of course. We all do that. That's way more normal than you think it is."

"You are so sweet, Ray, but, I *know* I do it more. I tried to fucking kill myself this morning, Ray. That is not normal. That is not healthy."

"They were vitamins, Donny."

"But that's not...I mean...I know that *now*. The point is I didn't...y'know...at the time, I...ok, well maybe I...I don't know...it's just that..."

"Maybe we *should* go back. We could just watch a movie or something. This has been a really weird day, and maybe we just need a breath."

"No. No. Well, maybe. No. I mean, that's not what I'm saying. What I was trying to say before...about my instincts...how nothing feels right? I meant to say that by *right*, I mean *normal*, and for me, normal isn't always *good*, right? Like, maybe why I feel so weird right now isn't because we *shouldn't* be here. Maybe we should. I just can't tell. Normally I have these debilitating voices fighting in my head, one pulling me one way, and the other fighting back. There ought to be this idea in my head that adventure is calling and I'll regret it if I don't go to this party and take a chance. That if we don't go in, I'll wish we had, and kick myself and feel like an idiot for the rest of the night, if not the rest of my life. And in the other ear, I should hear this voice telling me that if we go in, I'll be miserable, that I'll have a terrible time, that you'll end up going home with someone else..."

"Oh, give me a break..."

"I know, I know. I'm not saying I would believe it. Well, maybe a little...that's not what I mean. Not what I'm trying to say. What I'm trying to say is that the voices are like...totally absent."

That's the thing that feels so wrong, and maybe is *good* by being wrong. Like I spend all this time feeling terrible, and now I don't, and even though that's a good thing, I'm so used to feeling terrible that it feels wrong. Does that make any sense?"

Donna was quiet, waiting for Horatio to answer. He took his time. Like Donna, he was struggling with indecision. Like Donna, fear of regret was strong. Like Donna, actual regret seemed further away than he was used to.

"I know you think no one understands you, but I have exactly the same feelings. Maybe yours are more pronounced, I don't know. This morning was...extreme. My feelings have never taken me quite that far, though close enough to be dangerous. But, Donna, losing the feelings that took you there *has* to be a good thing. If those feelings have left you, it has to be a sign of good things to come. Maybe we could learn to live without them. Together."

He reached across the front seat, and held her hand in his. They were in a makeshift grass parking lot, the car still running, not sure whether to turn it off and walk toward the revelers, or pull out and drive back to the city.

"It's funny," Donna said. "I've kind of lost interest in seeing anyone else. Maybe the party doesn't have to do with anything. Maybe it's just about being with you. Once we get out of the car, I'll have to see your friends, and they'll probably already be drunk, and I don't really know them so I'll feel awkward...and this really nice moment will be ruined, y'know?"

"I do know what you mean. Do you wish we hadn't come?"

"Ray, you saved my life. Well, I mean...you *would* have if...y'know...what I mean is, it's yours. It's not mine to have anymore."

"That is ridiculous, Donna, and you know it. I was there for you when you needed me, and you'll be there for me when I need

you. This isn't about that. This is just a party. We go or we don't go. It's really not a big deal. On another day, I might say that, given the choice, it's better to do something than *not* do something. Not that I don't chicken out plenty, but it seems like the right philosophy, somehow. But it's not the *only* philosophy. Love, care, togetherness, those are way more important to me. *You* are more important to me. I don't want to drag you into anything you don't want. Not today. If this isn't going to make things *better*, then we should get out of here as fast as we can. What matters is that we do this together or not at all."

Horatio hesitated. He was pushing too hard.

"Maybe we should just go."

Donna wondered if he was right.

"No. I don't feel much one way or the other about it. I guess today has been a watershed for me, because I suddenly just feel like I'm where life took me, and that I don't really have anything to do with it. Like it's out of my control. Almost like it always *has* been. For the first time, I feel that I might as well make the best of it."

"So you want to stay."

Donna thought hard again.

"I'm not sure. I feel like I would feel the same way if we left right now. That I would still be where life took me. That I would be in just as little control as I am right now."

Horatio absorbed and considered.

"I know what you mean, Donny. I feel the same way. Except maybe...I don't know, but maybe...maybe for me it feels like I'm where I'm meant to be. I know that sounds cheesy, and I don't mean it to. I'm not really someone who goes around talking about fate, or things that were *meant* to happen. But still, I...I don't know, I...I feel like there is no other place than here."

"And if we left?"

"I know what you mean. That if we left, I would feel the same way about wherever we ended up."

"Right?"

"Except...I don't know. Maybe not."

"So you want to stay."

Horatio tried to balance his own instincts and feelings with what he thought Donna really wanted. He turned his mind back to the events of the last twenty-four hours but struggled to connect dots. The rain, the bloody finger, the wine, the lovemaking, the awkward morning, the pills, the paramedics, the discovery of the vitamins, the embarrassment as the paramedics left, the long quiet afternoon, the decision to drive out to the farm party. He could remember all of the events, but had more trouble than usual using what had already happened to predict what should happen next. The past felt more like a series of unconnected moments than cause and effect.

When he tried to think of what the effect of his decision to stay or go would mean for Donna, all he could come up with was that she would accept any decision as the new natural state of the world. That no decision would be a mistake. It was a strange sensation that he saw as a result of his burgeoning love for Donna. Love has neither rhyme nor reason, after all, and will have its way, will you or no.

"Let's stay."

And Donna said, "Ok."

Ten minutes later, being introduced to Ray's friends, Donna could not have said that she was happy. She could not have said she was unhappy. There was only one feeling she harbored about which she had no doubt whatsoever. That whether or not she was in the right place at the right time, she was, without doubt, in the *only* place at the *only* time.

And that it was out of her hands.

Salton Christiansen

"Where do I even begin?

"It was, how can I put it? The thing you have to understand is that it so directly coincided with the beginning of the Days that I can't possibly separate one from the other. It was maybe the twelfth annual, though I may have that wrong, but even if it had been the twentieth, I can't imagine any of the previous ones lived up to *that* one. Of course, I'd never been to one before, and probably won't again, so you should probably ask someone else about that. What I *can* say, about that day you understand me, was...I suppose you would have to say that everything was just...exactly...perfect. It was like you could do no wrong. Or, well, anyway, like *I* could do no wrong. Then add to that the...

"Alright, let me lay out the setting a bit.

"This party, what Timmy called *The Great Cornucrapula*, was meant to be a sort of midsummer ritual celebration. A bacchanal. Music, wine, feasting, dancing naked around the fire. You know, hippie stuff. Well, I say that, but, it was also, I mean, more authentic, I guess. There was a pig roast sort of at the center of everything which had come from his farm, I think. The pig, that is. It was also a huge country pot luck with lots of his farmer neighbors bringing casseroles and whatever. Third, fourth, fifth generation farmers with their kids, white collars from the city, hippie college dropouts with their dogs, and everything in between.

"I think maybe it was because of Timmy himself. He wasn't really *from* that farm, though it had been in his family for generations. I think there was something about his family ties that allowed him to come into that community the way a true stranger never could. So, even though he brought all these city experiences and what not with him, he wasn't really a carpetbag-

ger. More like the prodigal son. The old timers could tell stories about his great-grandfather, and he undoubtedly had some fifth cousins or what not, still living in the area. In other words, though they might roll their eyes at some of the things Timmy said, it would have been because he was young, not because he was a stranger.

"Now, I'm making a lot of this up, you understand. I can't really say *why* everyone got along so well. What I *can* say is that they *did*. Strangers greeted each other like old friends, with trust instead of suspicion. There was an air of: *any friend of Timmy's is a friend of mine*, if you follow me. I suppose that is something that was felt every year at this party, though for me, it was a first. I'd never felt more welcome in a strange place. I think that was less a result of the *Days* than it was the *Cornucrapula* as a rule, though I suspect the *Days* exacerbated it.

"People were gathered around the lawn between the house and the nearest field, talking with old friends and making new ones. There were a few picnic tables, but also makeshift tables, camping chairs, picnic blankets, the whole bit. All the food was laid out in the house, so people kept coming and going. Here and there people played games. Kids ran around, there was a basketball game, horseshoes, I think, and a couple of games I didn't understand.

"There was a shed with some beer kegs in it, but also a whole variety of foods and drinks. Like a mini-potluck, but more focused on homemade stuff, or maybe I should say *farm* made stuff. *Artisanal*. Cheeses, sausages, wines, beers, brandies, all made by whomever brought them. There was some stuff marked *adults only*, and some stuff marked *for everyone*. You can imagine why.

"There were rotating bands on this makeshift stage. Or...I don't know. Was it makeshift? They were like these huge wooden

flatbed trailers in a clearing just below a hill, but they were, what am I trying to say, like they had been there a long time. Like they belonged there. No. More like they were stored there, instead of in a barn or shed or whatever. I didn't get a close look, but I wouldn't be surprised if they were all rotted from exposure. Maybe. Anyway, that's how they seemed.

"Honestly, I wasn't exactly myself that day, and I don't just mean because of the beginning of the *Days*. It was the sort of bacchanalian excess of...ok, that just sounds stupid. Sorry. What I mean to say is that in addition to the disorientation that comes with an environment like that, I drank more than I should have, and maybe had more of the *adults only* cookies than I was used to. That much was certainly true. But also...how do I...ok, this sounds a little naive maybe, but...it was like I was high the whole time. Like I was tripping on psychedelic drugs or...I don't mean...what I mean is I don't think anyone spiked my drinks or anything, and the cookies, well, the effects came and went as you would expect. It was not that. I was in this other world. Spiritually. I don't know how to explain it, but that's how it felt. Discorporate, maybe.

"Anyway, that was the setting. Somewhere between a country potluck and psychedelic music festival. A meeting of cultures, not just the two, but twenty or what not. Just the world, dancing and breaking bread together. Sounds stupid when I say it like that, but it was really nice. What I mean to say is, Timmy was, I think, doing something special there. Though I suppose he was just happy to have all his friends and relations in one place.

"What made the weekend so wonderful though, and not to...well, not to denigrate what had come before, or what will come after...that is...I'm sure the *Cornucrapulas* of the past had all been wonderful, at least when the weather was nice. But *that*

one, the one *I* was at, was, I think, different. Even though I have nothing to compare it to, I think that one was different.

"Everything was right. I had a beautiful stranger on my arm who was not instantly repulsed by my, let's face it, *overbearing* nature. I met wonderful people everywhere and never once felt like I had said something stupid. That I had made a mistake. I would stand over the...alright, you know how when you're at a big potluck, or buffet or what not, and you know you don't have room on your plate for everything, but everything looks good, and you get in your head about what you're going to put on your plate, because you know you won't have room in your stomach for the other stuff later? Do you try the asparagus or the green beans? The Rice Krispies treats or the chocolate chip cookies? The pork belly or the ribs? Sure, you make the best choice you can, but you always feel a little like you could have done better, and now you're too full to go back. Well, that happened, more than once over the weekend, you understand, except I never wished I had picked something else. Ever. I'm not saying I liked everything I picked. Or even that I always finished my plate. What I *am* saying is that I never sat looking at my plate wishing I had filled it with something else, dreading the line at the table, feeling disappointed about my choices. I just enjoyed what I ate without worrying about what I *could have eaten*.

"Of course, we all get it *now*, but *then* it was...well, we didn't really *know* it, did we? Life was better than it had been before, but you just thought, 'What a nice day. Life is good.' and all that.

"I think that was a big part of how Nisha and I fell in love. We both just felt so good, and we were with each other, and it seemed like feeling good and being together went hand in hand. Like being together was the *cause* of all those good feelings, instead of maybe just happening in the vicinity of each other. Correlation and not causation. Or not. It all seems so ridiculous now.

"Make no mistake, however. When I woke up beside her, her naked body half covered with the sheet, kids and dogs playing tag outside as the morning sun burned the dew off the grass, I thought the world need never change again. That I could lie happy there for the rest of my life.

"No. Maybe that's not quite it. I think I just laid there. Just. At most, maybe a thought swirled around my head. Something like, *Isn't this nice?*"

The Impotence of Whispers

Misfortune spoke too much and listened too little. You can fault her for that if you choose, but it was her way. Increasingly, Regret did not mind. He had his own troubles, and the noise floor of Misfortune's endless dribble allowed him some time to think. Occasionally, when he came to a stopping point in his thoughts, he would prick up his ears, perhaps even respond. On one occasion he even confessed his troubles with the farmer. Mostly, however, he just nodded his head and kept his thoughts to himself. As Misfortune laid with her head in his lap, speaking mostly of herself, he began to feel comfortable in the company of this misanthrope, even if he put little stock in her ideas.

It was just the opening those ideas needed.

On another day, Regret would have looked for faulty notions, would have relished the thought of debate, of tearing apart an argument, of humiliating an opponent. He would have listened to each word solely for the sake of using it against her, focused upon her weakness while remaining wary of her strength. Such is the nature of debate when the goal is only to win.

Today, however, Regret was not interested in debate. Not interested in argument. He was held hostage by his own thoughts of failure, of inadequacy, with little space left to consider the immature musings of the young goddess. He heard them, he just didn't bother himself with them. When her words slipped past his private thoughts, they were as a curious bird flying over head: interesting, worth considering, but not relevant enough to trouble himself with. Such was the case when she spoke of the impotence of whispers, an idea that should have set him off. At first, he hardly noticed it.

When she came back to it in yet another iteration, it began to take hold. An insidious adhesion of a dangerous idea too ri-

diculous to be taken seriously but holding fast nonetheless. He wondered that such an idea could gain purchase. He had built a career upon the idea that people made their own mistakes. That you need only remind them. The strength of the whisper was in making friends see their *own* mistakes. To help them see a truth in the world, a truth that was there all along, if only they might look. The idea that you could make their mistakes *for* them seemed to him a gross deceit. The very idea undermined his lifetime philosophy. For, if one does not make a mistake on one's own, how can one ever feel responsibility for it? Of what value is the lesson?

Out loud, he simply said, "The pain must come from within."

Hardly thinking, she replied, "And if it doesn't?"

Heavy in contemplation, Regret did not reply. Perhaps if there was no pain within, then the client was not worth his time. Perhaps some clients were just not worth pursuing. Perhaps leaving Israel Kasterfink to fend for himself was not surrender so much as it was Regret's own version of facing the truth. Seeing the world as it is, and not as he wished it to be. He was filled with thoughts, but no replies. In any case, even had he been considering an answer, she did not give him the time to share it. After a pause short enough to cut off even the most robust debater, she continued.

"Like your guy, for example. You keep trying to tell him how much he's screwed up his life and it doesn't mean anything because he doesn't really think he screwed up his life. You think you can drive him to wish he hadn't done this or hadn't done that, but he doesn't care. Why should he? He does this and life goes on. He does that and life goes on. You think you control them. You *all* do. But you can whisper to them all day long about how they should *feel*. Without *action*, they'll never really care.

Your farmer doesn't feel pain when you whisper because he hasn't been *hurt*. There's nothing *within* to come out."

The moment she said it, she knew she had gone too far. When he was no more than a *stodgy old bentback* to her, she could be as insulting as she wanted. Aggressive as she wanted. Treat him as one among many whom she cared nothing for, and with whom she had nothing to lose. Once she began to believe that he perhaps thought well of her, when she believed he was becoming her friend, her first friend, really, when she had begun to allow herself to hope for even more, she feared pushing him away like she did everyone else. This time she *did* have something to lose. This time her words mattered. Even without a whisper from Regret, she wished she hadn't gone so far.

The fear shocked her into silence.

The noise floor that had previously filled the hovel for the better part of a day and night disappeared. No longer did her incessant talking drown out every other sound in the woods. In its absence, the delicate songs of the wood crept in. The birdsong from a nearby meadow. Cicadas dancing about the shadows. Frogs shouting over one another on the far side of a pond. Yet, it was silence more than the wood song that enveloped the two gods.

Misfortune wondered how she might walk herself back. Ingratiate herself, that she might salvage the chance for a friend. Regret considered his new wound, wondered if he deserved it, envisioned the pain necessary to clean it.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Never be sorry," he replied.

Uninterrupted wood song allowed him the pause he needed to continue. He had always been one to see the world for what it is. If this ridiculous little girl saw something he did not, mustn't

he acknowledge it? Mustn't he give her credence? Was there anything to lose?

"Perhaps you are right. Perhaps he needs a nudge."

"I could do it," Misfortune said, a little too quickly. "I could, I don't know, make him ruin his crops or something?"

And Regret considered.

By the time the shadows of evening had turned to night, her ideas had gone from one to many. Against his better judgment, Regret did not fight the alliance that ensued.

It was, no doubt, her growing desire for his love that encouraged her to work with him, work *for* him, use her own gifts to help him out of his existential crisis, leaving him to love her as reward. Of course, such tactics never work. We cannot earn love from such gifts, but only resentment. Regret needed to succeed on his own. To succeed only with the help of some young goddess could only make him further question his ability. Could only devalue any success. How could it have been otherwise?

Yet, Regret *had* failed with Israel Kasterfink, and Misfortune *was* in a position to help.

Here.

Serephina Kasterfink had a favorite chair. Well, favorite not so much in that she loved the chair as in that she considered it to be the least worst place to sit in that shack her worthless husband dared to call a house. Like most of the furniture in their home, it had come as a wedding gift to help them make their new life, out there in the middle of nowhere, in some semblance of comfort. Unlike most of the furniture in their home, it had been hand-made by Serephina's uncle, a man with the eye of an artist and the carpentry skill of a drunken hobo. Still, it held together for many years and kept Serephina more comfortable than she might have otherwise been on any of the bone crunching sittables that dotted the rest of her home.

That the chair would someday break was, no doubt, inevitable. That it would break under her own weight, perhaps doubly so. That the destruction would be so complete as to bring with it permanent damage to her hip at a time and place where medical attention was so impractical as to be hardly conceivable, however, could only have been the result of meddling from a goddess in the woods.

It was a good volley. There could be little question but that the responsibility for the broken chair lay with Israel, as usual, too lazy to shore it up as the joints weakened. Regret followed through with a whisper.

"If only you had taken the least effort, your wife would not be injured, and you would not now be burdened with her own work in addition to your own."

With Serephina laid up, and the children hardly up to the task of taking over the myriad of jobs she normally had, the whisper had some small, though hardly noticeable effect. Kasterfink, sitting over a dinner as tasteless as it was burned, cooked by a child hardly ready for such responsibility, he thought nostalgically of Serephina's cooking and wondered if, just possibly, he had played some small part in her fate by failing to work a little harder. He shrugged it off, but the moment was palpable to Regret.

Quietly, to herself, Misfortune smiled.

Another volley involved a toy truck left in the way of the crippled wife as she made her way to the privy. This time, the weight Serephina had gained from her new sedentary lifestyle conspired to bring her down harder, doubling the damage to her hip, and adding to it a new fracture in her ankle. After that, it was the full invalid treatment, down to the chamber pot held by poor Israel when the spirit moved his wife, so to speak.

Cleaning his wife before emptying the pot, Israel Kasterfink heard another whisper.

"If only you had been more firm with the kids."

"If only you had cleaned up a little yourself."

"If only you had cared enough about your family to take a little more interest."

"If only you had thought more of them than of yourself."

This was all stock in trade stuff for Regret, hardly the type of thing to move a client as challenging as Kasterfink had been. Yet, with the help of Misfortune, with the impetus for change supporting the hope for change, his success went from just barely to moderate. The farmer began to feel some actual regret, began to work a little harder, clean a little more, pay a little more attention. He even began to welcome Regret as an old friend with a shoulder to cry upon. It was a change that, under other circumstances, might have been enough for Regret. Misfortune, however, becoming addicted to the attention she was receiving from Regret, beginning to believe that such attention was akin to love, was not remotely ready for their partnership to end.

She gave Serephina bed sores and atrophy. Itches and scabs. Aches and pains. With each new sufferance, Israel felt increasing guilt, became so susceptible to the whispers of Regret that he became the god's plaything. Kasterfink became a shell of the man he once was, no longer a happy go lucky layabout singing in the fields and dreaming on the roof of his hovel. To look at him now, one was reminded of Misfortune herself, head bowed, confidence crushed, sure that the world no longer thought of him at all.

The time came that Regret was satisfied, thanked Misfortune for the fun, and left to go about his merry way. He had made the friend he had set out to, and was pleased with his work, if a little ashamed for what he sometimes thought of as cheating.

He assured himself that he never needed help to begin with, but that it had been a nice distraction to partner up with the strange goddess in this circumstance. Convinced himself it was really *he* who had pulled himself out of his crisis, and not the friend who stood by him when he most needed it. Perhaps he was not so unlike the rest of us, after all.

Misfortune could feel his coldness, could sense his impending exit. Yet, not ready to see him walk away, she blinded herself to what she knew to be inevitable. She continued to act as if he would stay forever, continued to ply the farmer with pain in hope that Regret would drive home the point and keep their collaboration alive. Each subsequent disaster, however, only served to disgust him at a level that would have made his father proud. He told her so, insulted her work, openly shared his disdain. He plied her with words she ignored, unwilling to believe the god she loved could be so cruel.

His patience at an end, Regret walked away.

Upon leaving, he laid a final blow upon her head.

"Your work is ephemeral and without substance. You bring pain and suffering, but you fail to follow through. You are an anarchist bringing destruction without meaning. Some day you will see that pain must come from within to have value. What they can blame others for, they will. They may learn to fear you, but they will never love you. Farewell."

In a desperate attempt to get his attention, she lured Israel and his children out of the house with a roof collapse at the barn. As they stood outside, attempting to assess the damage, Misfortune encouraged a fire to start in the house from which Serephina could never survive. It was the perfect opportunity to draw Regret back, the perfect moment for a whisper in the poor farmer's ear. An opportunity she knew Regret could not resist.

In the distance, Regret looked back and scoffed. There was, even for Regret, such a thing as *too much*. It was time to walk away, focus on other friends, leave Misfortune to ply her wares how she chose. No longer did she concern Regret.

Israel, with no whisper in his ear, wondered at the tragedy before him, but failed to consider either the barn roof he had failed to fix, or the candle he had left burning by his wife's bedside.

Regret had moved on.

Misfortune made her way to the hovel and cried herself to sleep. The farmer, concerned for his invalid wife, in fear of the regret you and I know was not impending, ran headstrong into the house, full of hope, empty of regret. As he died of smoke inhalation, his children stood outside, warmed by the fire, wondering when their father would return.

Exercise 3: The Battle of the Bladder

Here.

Lorry Diesel was a city kid, and knew little of the deceptions hiding everywhere in the woods. It was no surprise, then, that with the aid of some disorienting chemicals, he found himself easily deceived by animal paths that, while possibly helpful for the animals, could only lead him further from the hope of returning to his tribe.

What happened was this.

In a small shed, Timmy Kasterfink, grand host of *The Great Cornucrapula*, had set up tastings of various spirits he and his wife had made by hand with *all natural ingredients*. He had invited others to show off their own wares, and by the time the party really got started, the shed was jam packed with spirits, wines, and malts, all made in the spirit of the so called *handmade* movement. There were also selections of artisanal cheeses, crackers, spicy cured meats, no shortage of pickled vegetables, a variety of marijuana edibles, and a plate of homemade cookies dosed with LSD. The cookies were well marked, and Lorry was under no illusion of the likely consequences of his indulgence.

Lorry was no stranger to the effects of mind altering substances and was well-prepared for the resulting disorientation. In fact, all would likely have gone well except for the wines. He knew many of the artisans personally and felt it incumbent upon himself to taste each of the concoctions, to better tell his friends how much he liked their work. As he was not a very experienced taster, however, he made the mistake of drinking more full glasses than was good for him.

Though the hallucinogenic drug tempered the deleterious effects of the alcohol, it did little to temper the more diuretic effects. As the wines crept through his system side by side with the

mild insanity induced by the cookie, a strange battle took place. It was a battle he had not expected, but a battle which found him nonetheless. A battle that would ultimately lead to two days wandering in the woods, fearing that he would never again find his way to civilization. A battle that would turn his weekend revelry to a nightmare he would not soon forget.

It began with the natural and expected result of his indulgence: A strong urge to pee. That was the Eastern Front. To the west was a Mad General that refused to let his lines be crossed. The Mad General used his mind control super powers to hold back the bladder and refuse passage.

The Battle of the Bladder.

Lorry tried to relieve himself in the port-o-potty stationed in the midst of the revelers, placed there for precisely that purpose. He waited in a short line for the single so-called bathroom, always keenly aware of the growing line behind him. By the time he found himself inside, the Mad General refusing to let his liquid waste pass, he was burdened with the thought of holding up the line. The pressure of the Eastern Front grew, but could not break through Western defenses. Increasingly paranoid that he was taking too long, sure that waiting longer would be to no avail, Lorry gave up and stepped out of the plastic box without having done his duty.

He then moved to the house and tried his luck at the more permanent fixture just off the kitchen. In this quieter atmosphere, Lorry now became convinced those waiting outside the door would be able to hear each drop of urine as it landed in the toilet. Afraid, on the one side that he was keeping everyone waiting, and on the other side that hearing nothing would be better than hearing little drops as he eased the burden from his bladder, he was unable to begin. Once again, the Mad General held the line, and the Eastern Front retreated.

Upstairs, where revelers were discouraged from going, and where no line of people pressured him with guilt, he thought he had, at last, found his miracle. He thought he might pull his pants fully down and sit quietly as if facing the need to defecate. Knowing that sign at the bottom of the stairs had requested revelers to stay below, however, he could not shake the fear of being caught with his pants down, so to speak. Though the tactic of the Mad General might have changed in that case, the result was predictably the same.

Lorry Diesel could not pee.

He felt that he was dying of bladder pressure with no hope of relief. His mildly insane mind told him that if he did not relieve himself soon, his body would soon be poisoned in some way that, though he did not understand the mechanism, would be no less fatal. If not death, then at the least, he would soon have clothing soaked in urine. The power of the Eastern front was growing, and sooner or later they would burst through somewhere.

That he knew the trouble was in his mind helped him not. The reality on the ground was that he had to pee and that he could not pee. His mind refused to serve his body. He began to believe that, before the day was done, he would be found in the middle of the dancing area, lying in the pile of urine which only freed itself after his mind was good and truly dead.

And so he wandered into the woods.

He stood behind a tree, at long last ready to go, when he heard a twig snap and felt the pee slide back up into his bladder.

He went further.

And again, a noise caused the Mad General to rally the troops.

Another tree, further in, this time dogged by mosquitos.

Another rally by the Mad General.

Finally, in a moment of prolonged peace far distant from the noise floor of the farmstead, the Eastern Front broke through the general's lines, flooding a pile of leaves and moss at Lorry's feet. The Battle of the Bladder had been won.

It's not hard to imagine the satisfaction Lorry felt as his body once again felt equilibrium. What man, woman or child cannot relate to the joy of such relief? Satiety herself could hardly give one greater peace than our hallucinogenic hero found himself at that moment. He sighed, he smiled, and he sat down by a large oak, embracing the joy that was the anticipated end to his long torture.

He was already lost by this point, but had he his wits about him, he might have found his way back by focusing on the now distant sounds of the party. Likewise, had he focused on the sound of the river, he might have made his way to the bend and followed it to a small beach where, no doubt, inebriated revelers were swimming in the dangerous currents.

Instead, he followed a deer path.

To Lorry, his tendency to daydream exacerbated by the drug flowing through his system and the wild joy that can only accompany the sweet relief he felt from the completion of his business, the path surely led to some fairy cottage buried in the woods. He had always believed that such paths existed, at least in times long past, and was ready to believe that the one before him was one of the rare remnants. His mind played a trick on him, told him that adventure laid before him. That there was yet magic in the world, and he need only heed the call. Regret's absence had little influence on his pending decision. Is it not, after all, better to regret something you have done, than something you have not?

True, the hallucinogenic medicine was having some effect on him, but a nascent dream that magic yet lived in the world, if

only one dared to see it, lived within him as well. It may be that the drug gave him the final push he needed. It may be that he would have gone anyway. It matters not. With the excitement of the unknown before him, confidence rising within, and some small remnant of the carelessness that always accompanies the wine, he turned down the deer path to seek his fortune.

Good idea or not?

Horatio Porter

"I mean, um, how do you look back on that and not think, um, well, what an asshole you are, I guess. It's like, for most of us I think, like looking back on middle school. It's kind of safe to look back, but still, you cringe a lot, right? Ok, what do I want to say?"

"Ok.

"There was this girl. It wasn't even middle school I don't think. Fifth grade. Andrea Cesarati. She was cute, right? And I was a total dork. Well, still am, but I guess I'm more comfortable with it now that...sorry. Getting ahead of myself. Andrea Cesarati. I could hardly speak to her in person, but she was cute and I thought, well, if she could somehow find out that I liked her, maybe she would like me too and it would all be wonderful, right? I mean, of course it never happens like that, but I was ten. That's the point.

"Anyway, I bought this teddy bear and flowers and wrote this card that said something dumb like *I like you. Do you like me, too?*' and I rode my bike over to her house and left it on her doorstep and rode away. That was my big plan. I spent all day worrying about what would happen next. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. I was a fifth grade wreck. Not that it mattered. In the morning, at school, either she would come running into my arms, or we would both pretend it never happened.

"In the morning, we both pretended it never happened.

"I was heartbroken, but that's life, I guess, right?"

"I actually got punched by another kid who liked her, too, but that's not..."

"What I mean is...at the time, my parents told me I would look back on it someday and laugh. It's exactly what they were supposed to say. What everybody says. But they were only kind

of right. The pain went away, sure. And sometimes, like now, I laugh a little when I think back on it. Mostly, though, when I think back on it, my stomach turns. I remember waiting to see what she would do, feel embarrassed all over again, and more than anything wish I had never done it. It was a long time ago, and I'm a different person. I've learned many life lessons since then, but I still can't look back without thinking, '*What was I thinking?*' y'know? That's how I feel about the days before the *Days*. Like I was not just young and naive, but also embarrassed about the choices I made.

"I'm a coward. I know that. I was a coward before the *Days*, and I'm a coward now. Whether or not I was a coward in the midst of...I mean...it just doesn't matter, does it? The measure of a man is how he acts when times are difficult, right? Who cares what we do when it's easy? I'm sure I was just as much of a coward during the *Days* as before or after. The only difference was I didn't *see* it. I was missing that voice that said, '*If only you had dared to tell her how you feel,*' or, '*If only you'd made the first move,*' or, y'know, really, '*If only you hadn't been such a chicken.*' When there is no reminder of how afraid you are, somehow you don't seem so afraid, I suppose, but it's like getting better at inane conversation after a beer or two. It's just *temporary*. It feels good, but it doesn't *mean* anything.

"After the *Days* were over, after she...I mean...it was all still there, wasn't it? Like that first day, the day I left her alone to...y'know...I mean, the minute I walked away she was sitting in the bathroom with a bottle of...well, I mean, of what she thought was dangerous enough...and no one to hold her hand. No one to pull her out. I tell myself there was no way I could have known, but I *did*. I could tell something was wrong, and I just...I mean...I just walked out when she...when she needed me most. I mean...ok. There she was, drowning in her pool of self-conscious

shame, and basically said to me, 'You should just leave now and let me die,' which I *did*. If I hadn't...no, if anyone had been back at my building to let me in, if the super had answered his phone, if the latch hadn't been broken, if she hadn't left her door unlocked, if any one thing had tried to reel me in, she might have...I mean, maybe she was never in any real danger, but....I mean....what I mean is, when she needed me, I was totally ashamed and embarrassed and full of self loathing and all that crap that...that kept me from...well, it's grade school all over again, isn't it?

"Not that she...I mean, I think part of her knew what she had swallowed. I don't think she really *wanted* to die. I also think, though, that she left the door unlocked on purpose. What she needed was for someone to come through it. Someone to care. Someone to see her distress and tell her she was not the worthless loser she was always telling herself she...and I was the guy. I *knew* that. I just...I was just afraid, I guess. Afraid I was overreacting, afraid she didn't want my help, afraid I was...that I was *not* the guy, I guess.

"Ok...I didn't mean to...the reason I say this is to show just how meaningless it all was. Once the *Days* were gone, everything just went back to how we felt before, only worse because now we knew what we were missing. Now, when the fear and the second guessing and the regret bombarded us, we had no strength left to fight it. There was no getting over the old regrets because they got pushed right back into our faces.

"It's all well and good to say we learned so much from the *Days*, from experiencing what life without regret *could* be. From having a taste of what a world without regret was, that we might create that world ourselves. But it wasn't a demarcation point. It wasn't a video game where you could save and move on to the next level. All that crap that happened *before* the *Days* still hap-

pened. And worse, because when the days were gone, all this crap we thought we had put behind us was right back there in our faces like that kid who punched me over Andrea Cesarati.

"After he punched me he said, 'Gonna cry? Little baby gonna cry?'

"Which of course I did."

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't learn anything from the *Days*. I may still be a coward in my own way, but I'm a different person now. I've grown up immensely. Not everyone did. But I haven't learned to put my regrets behind me. They are still there, the new ones of course, but the old ones, too. I still can't look back at the days before the *Days* without being ashamed of who I was. Of my lack of courage.

"If only I could forget altogether."

Salton's Defining Feature

The farm had been in Timmy's family since it was homesteaded, though in the last two generations it had become little more than a vacation home for a family that had found fortune elsewhere. When Timmy, against his father's wishes, dared to bring it back to life, there were only a few locals left who remembered the farm in its prime.

He worked hard to bring it back to life and gained the respect of his neighbors along the way. Eight years later, his children ran about the farm as if they had come from generations of farmers, and not from the wealthy suburban stock claimed by their father. His wife was a city girl that had always dreamed of getting away, and who blossomed in the exhausting and rewarding life of living off the land. The life of a farmer is a hard one, but Timmy's farm was thriving, even if it was admittedly not paying very well. All in all, there could be no doubt but that Timothy Kasterfink was happy.

Timothy Arnold Kasterfink was still relatively new to his way of life. In his time, he had been the wild one, the wealthy playboy little more than a rogue who despised the quiet life and anything that looked remotely like hard work. Eight years into his new adventure, however, his former life mostly behind him, he was now a fairly settled family man. It was true he was wild at heart. His thoughts continued to fly free, and his failure to conform continued to define him. Yet, he had found a home, married, was raising children and livestock, and, in every way that mattered, living the life of a committed farmer and father.

Timmy did not live in the past, nor did he fear it. When old friends came to call, he always made room for them, both in his home and in his heart. Though he had put his suburban life of privilege behind him, he never denied it, never failed to welcome

the memories. With regard to his old friend Salton, Timmy had invited him out a few times, but had put little effort either into following through or staying in touch.

While it was true that Timothy Arnold Kastenfink had known Salton Christiansen in childhood, then, it could not truly be said they had known each other *since* childhood. They had seen each other from time to time over the years, in person as well as online, but in the time that had passed since they were children, they had decidedly *gone their separate ways*. Where Salton had reluctantly accepted his fate as a rising member of the privileged class, his boyhood friend Timmy had rejected his own entirely. Where Salton was living the life of a playboy, Timmy was seeking a home. Where Salton had sought leisure, Timmy had sought authenticity through hard work. Where Salton continued to think of his adventurous old pal and wonder if he was on to something, Timmy hardly thought of his old pal at all.

Nevertheless, when the two of them came together at the festival Timmy called *The Great Cornucrapula*, they hugged like old friends truly grateful to be in one another's company. They reminisced about the old days. They laughed at the dumb adventures they'd had together as kids. Soon, they were able to put the growing up behind them and speak again like old friends, free to speak their minds, free to be honest, free to share their feelings in the way only old friends truly can. They hiked up the bluff and sat overlooking the festivities, now past the obligatory *catching up*, and on to more important matters.

"So the girl?"

"Nisha?"

"Yeah, right. Nisha."

"She seems cool, right?"

"How the fuck would I know, Salts?"

"I think she's *the one*, old friend."

Timmy took in a deep breath along with the scene. His farm was filled with his friends, the sun was shining, music was playing, kids were dancing, and everywhere he looked, life was good. He thought of his wife, the woman who had made him complete, the woman whose smile filled him with a joy rivaled only by what he felt with his children. He thought of the times he hated her and the times he loved her. He thought of how much work he had put into making his life with her work. How wonderful the result.

He turned to Salton as if to a friend who had been his constant companion through life, an old friend looking for advice from the person who knew him best, rather than the stranger he had become. In that moment, it made no difference.

"Here it is, Salty. There's a billion girls out there for you. Every last one of them is perfect. Every last one of them is *the one*. That's just the way the world is. Every woman you've ever looked at that made you feel the slightest bit good, every woman who ever made you smile inside, every woman that turned your eyes as she crossed the room is the woman you've been waiting for. Every last one of them will make you happy. Every last one of them will fill you with love. And every last one of them will make you miserable if you stick around long enough."

"Is that how you feel about Echo?"

"Sure. Yeah. Of course. She's the one. Absolutely. No question."

"And she makes you miserable?"

"Sometimes, sure. Sometimes she does something that drives me crazy, that has *always* driven me crazy, and I get all frustrated because, like *'Why do you still do the thing? Why can't you learn to be different?'* My point is that it is not particular to Echo. Sure, I hate the way she acts around her sister. I've told her a million times and it doesn't change anything, ok? My point is

that I would be a fool to think I could do better with someone else, because that someone would be super cool around her sister and do something else that I hated, something that Echo doesn't do at all. There is no perfect mate, Salts. It only matters if you love her enough to look past the all the crap."

"I'm not talking about getting married..."

"Not the point, Salts. The point is if you want her to be the one, then she's the one. If not, then it doesn't matter. And if you stick around, soon enough you'll know all her stories, all her habits, be able to finish her sentences for her and cringe at half of them. Because here's the deal, Salts, you *will* get sick of her. You'll get sick of *anybody*. The deal is that it doesn't matter who she is. It matters who *you* are. If you like whatshername..."

"Nisha."

"Right. Nisha. You act like she's a new car you want to show off to your friends so they can accept you for being better than they are. Or a new suit. She got that perfect tailored fit? She gonna impress your dad? Really? If you like her, who the fuck cares what I think of her?"

"I do, Timmy. I care what *everybody* thinks of her. And, yeah, I care about what you think about my car and my clothes, too. If you think I'm trying to show off, though, you've forgotten more about me than you ever knew to begin with. I'm not trying to impress you. It's just that I make bad choices all the time, and sometimes it's good to get a little feedback on whether I'm blowing it again."

"You think I forgot *that*? It's your defining feature. That's what makes it so easy to get at you. You never could think for yourself. Never could look past what was *popular* to see what was *right*. We haven't sat next to each other for almost a decade, but you're the same pussy you always were, hiding behind that stupid mask of *casually perfect*, the whole time scared to death that if

you don't do what everyone expects, we'll all see through you. Well, *wake up*, Salts, because we already do."

Salton looked across the mass of revelers below and wondered if he really *did* care. If it mattered to him at all what people thought. For the first time he could remember, it didn't seem to matter. The girl was nice, whether or not anyone else thought she was. And if she turned out not to be, if she made him miserable, then he wouldn't waste any more time on her. For the first time he could remember, life just didn't seem that complicated.

He tried to spot her, down amongst the crowd. He assumed she was over with her own friends, but where they were he had no idea. He knew she was something special. Something more than just another conquest. Maybe she was *the one*, after all. Timmy *sounded* profound, was probably trying to, but to Salton, in this place, on this day, he was just a blowhard.

"Wow, *Kastenfuck*, it turns out you're an asshole."

Timmy looked back at Salton and considered his words. He had never shied away from saying what he thought, though he usually came to regret it. Echo always told him he spoke too bluntly, too impulsively. He knew she was right. Could hear it in his own words the moment he had spoken them. He hardly spoke a word without thinking, "*Yeah. Shouldn't have said that.*" Weirdly, today he didn't feel that way at all. Today, he heard his words, even felt a little bad for Salton's having to hear them. Not for a moment, however, did he wish he could take them back.

Timothy looked at his old friend, thoughts of self-reflection coursing through him. He said, "Huh. Ok. I guess so. So are you, kinda."

Salton knew he was right.

"Yeah. I guess I am."

Smiles came across both of their faces. They put their arms over each other, as only old friends can. Their words had been harsh but true, and neither of them seemed to mind.

A Hovel in the Woods

The hovel in which Regret and Misfortune had met was built by the farmer, Israel Kasterfink, as an escape from the nagging of his wife. She was a good woman, and she meant well, but there were days when she, for all her best efforts, *could not* hold her tongue. It wasn't that she meant to hurt Israel. She did not. Rather, she simply wished for a life different than the one she was living, and felt that it was her duty to speak about it at every opportunity. Her husband, a dreamer at heart, would surely lead the farm to ruin if she did not. Such was her belief, and I dare say she was right. Whether or not she was justified in trying to make life better for her family and herself, however, was of no importance. In the parlance of the day, she henpecked, and it drove her husband to distraction.

For all of his faults, and, in a farmer, none can be greater than a tendency toward sloth, he had a good heart and a temperate soul. He never drank, never caroused, never raised his hands in violence. Chores not imminently important had a tendency to be forgotten, it was true, but they were never left undone in their entirety. He always found a way to get some semblance of a crop to market, always managed to keep his wife and children fed, always managed enough wood to keep them from freezing in winter. It would have been unfair to say he did not live up to the minimum of responsibilities required as a husband, father, and steward of the land, though more than fair to say he did not excel at them.

What kept him from rising to the man his wife wanted him to be was an unrelenting desire for peace. Just a little time to himself where he could do nothing at all, where he could forget the needs of the world, where he could allow his mind to wander. It was not much to ask, he believed, but more than he was, on

most days, able to find. He found some semblance of tranquility as he worked his fields, singing to himself in the sunshine, day-dreaming as he worked. What peace he could gather was, however, predictably stolen from him when he returned to his house only to be chastised by his wife for one of the hundreds of chores still left undone. Or when she came upon him in the fields. Or when his young children ran her never ending requests to him at all hours of the day. His search for contentment was stymied by circumstance. Fishing was no good, as he was so easily found in the best spots along the river. He desired a quiet hideout where he might sneak off from time to time and not be bothered.

To this end, he built a small hovel of stone and wood, deep in the woods, where he might sit and contemplate the nature of the universe without risk of discovery from his wife or children. Sometimes, when the weather was nice, he would sit on the roof of his hovel and stare at the sky. On days when the rain came, he would sit inside, close his eyes, and listen to the raindrops patting the leaves around him.

It was his home away from home. His sewing room, so to speak, or in modern parlance, his man cave. If his children ever discovered it on adventures through the woods, they never spoke of it. His wife certainly never knew of it. At the time of his death, it was known only to the farmer and the gods that had brought his demise. In time, neighbor farmers and those who lived in the growing nearby village would speak of a haunted place in the woods, somewhere near the Kasterfink farm, where even fairies feared to tread. A place sometimes sought by thrill seeking children, but never found.

His children never discovered it.

His grandchildren never discovered it.

The farmers who leased the land from the generations that followed never discovered it.

The throwback progeny who dared to return and farm the land once again never discovered it.

His children who explored the woods and played in the fields, who learned new games from city kids who visited once a year for a party their father called *The Great Cornucrapula*, never discovered it.

For though it was less than a mile from the house, attentions from a melancholy god unable to put the past behind her kept it from being easily found.

When Lorry Diesel happened up on it, nearly one hundred fifty years after his friend's great-grandfather had constructed it, he knew nothing of its history. He was simply lost in the woods, his thirst for adventure waning, his dream of magic in the woods all but gone. What had begun as a private fantasy that folk tales might just be real, that mysterious paths might lead to magic and riches, if only one believed, had collapsed under the weight of hunger and fatigue. What remained of his fantasy was now only the simple hope for some food and perhaps directions back to the party. When, hopelessly lost, he spied the hovel through the trees, his dream of a magic savior waxed again, and he bush-whacked his way toward it. That a stone shelter buried deep in the middle of the woods, choked by thorny underbrush and nearly inaccessible, had no chance whatsoever of delivering on his fantasy was a thought our psychedelic friend refused to entertain. He merely pushed his way in, optimistically believing he was saved.

Inside the empty hovel, he sat upon an ancient chair, looking at a view through the window the old farmer must have known intimately in his time, but which was now so overgrown as to be nothing but a tangle of green. Tired, hungry, and more than a little dejected, Lorry gave himself a short rest before daring to begin anew his search for a way back to civilization. He let

himself sit in the chair and dream, his eyes half open, as the old man before him must have done thousands of times, though without the aid of the psychedelic chemicals now roaring through our present day dreamer.

Though our hero, exhausted and worn, no longer dreamed of magical fairies in the woods, there was indeed a god approaching, and she cared not. She wandered, forlorn, through the neighboring woods, wondering just when she might finally put her memories behind her, stop pining away and forget *him* once and for all. The presence of the old place wasn't helping, of course. Instead of helping her to forget, it only brought the memories closer. Any idea she had of purging herself by revisiting the scene of the crime, so to speak, was so far misplaced as to be laughable. Nevertheless, here she was and here she would stay. She meant to purge herself and was determined to suffer what she might in order to do so.

She did not yet know that Regret was gone. She had seen him, less than a day before, ignoring her as usual. She was merely fighting the perennial battle of hope and despair as she considered the love she had not the courage to declare, and the god who would surely never reciprocate. What had, for Israel Kasterfink, been a refuge of peace, became, for Misfortune, a melancholy reminder of what could never be, but for which she nevertheless wished with all her heart. It was a place she visited when her darker self seeped out. When what little hope she carried with her seemed to dwindle altogether. Toward the hovel she moved, preparing herself for a night of quiet contemplation, memory, and pain.

What followed, then, was not a dream. Was not an hallucination. Lorry Diesel did in fact meet an angry god in the woods, displeased with his trespass. His fate was in fact determined by a creature not believed by most to walk the earth. Sadly, his history

of drug use, his lack of seriousness in direction, and his, shall we call it *unsophisticated* attitude toward life, kept his friends and relations from ever believing his tale of near death. No matter. Soon enough he would be ejected from his refuge only to be lost more deeply in the woods, a fate from which only Dame Fortune could save him.

He need only wait.

The Morning After

On the morning after The Great Cornucrapula, bodies were strewn about the yard, the barn, the beach along the river, and even in the fields. Those who had not planned ahead and brought a tent, or at least a sleeping bag, were covered with dew. Of those who *had* planned ahead, many were still covered in dew, a result of the previous night's intoxicated revelry, an optimism which led them to leave their gear in the trunk and take their chances, so to speak.

Damp, stiff, and hungover, their eyes opened against their will as a given piece of shade wandered off to leave them in the waking light of the morning sun. Too far from the house to smell the welcoming scent of the large breakfast to come, they should have shaken their heads, closed their eyes, and said something like, "Ooooh, I really overdid it last night," as they dared to sit up and begin the desperate search for a civilized toilet.

Imagine the scene if you will, from above. The groans of the first former reveler wake the second, tumbling one domino after the other until everywhere you can see are groans, squints and sour looks. This ought to be the scene of unhappy people, the setting of a well known morning after. A morning of headache and nausea. A morning of sore bodies from sleeping on the ground. A morning we have lived before. A morning made all the worse for our knowledge of having caused it ourselves. A morning of regret.

On this morning, however, regret was nowhere to be found.

Nowhere did anyone say, "If only I hadn't drunk so much."

Nowhere did anyone say, "If only I had brought a foam pad for my sleeping bag."

Nowhere did anyone say, "If only I hadn't invited her into my tent," or "had gone home early," or "hadn't eaten so much," or even the perennial, "If only I had listened to my mother."

Instead, they all, every last one, saw their suffering, their uncomfortable fate, perhaps, as no more than a stroke of misfortune, or, in some cases I suppose, fortune. How they felt, where they lay, whom they were with, was all simply a matter of what *was*. It wasn't that cause and effect had ceased to exist. Had they chosen to study the matter, to analyze their situation and search for solutions, they might well have made a connection between the previous night's revelries and their current state. In fact many of them did. But it was an intellectual exercise. A scientific study without meaning. Regret there was none. There was naught but a resignation to their fate, as if nothing could be done about it anyway, so why bother about it?

Some got up slowly, blessed the new day, and followed their noses to the house. Others rolled over, ignoring the light but grateful for the warmth it brought with it, confident that another few minutes sleep would cure all their ills. Plastic cups were strewn about the yard, as was the odd mason jar or beer bottle. No shortage of plates, both disposable and indisposable, littered the tables and the ground, their leftovers largely cleaned away by the roaming dogs that had come along to enjoy the party with their owners. Blankets covered some revelers, while others lay crumpled next to fallen over camping chairs. A few thoughtful friends wandered about the scene, cleaning up the detritus as best they could. Along the beach, revelers were few, with those that had remained for the night cursing the sand in their mouths and the bug bites on their feet.

On a damp blanket lying in a small bare patch in the corn, two of these revelers clutched each other's naked bodies for warmth. They were Donatella Purcell and Horatio Porter. As

they woke up, cold, damp, stiff, and more than a little hungover, they felt only joy at being in one another's arms, far from the groaning masses, the world to themselves.

Horatio Porter

"It had been a bit of a whirlwind, I guess, but it seemed like we had crossed this line. This *barrier*, y'know? Like Donna and I had been through all this, just, ok, just all this *shit*, and somehow, I knew, *knew* that it was behind us. And she knew, too. No question. Not that we...

"Ok, it's not that we thought all of our problems, all of...ok, *her* problems, could be solved by one night of fun and sex and, I don't know, *love*, I guess. It wasn't that. We were both smart enough to know it can take a lifetime to work through the kind of...just *shit*, I guess, that leads to...well...I don't know. The *good life*, or whatever. I don't mean like being rich or even comfortable or anything like that. What I mean is that we all have this hope that someday we'll shed all the feelings that hold us down, that keep us from getting close, that make us *unhappy*, and we know they don't disappear overnight. It takes a lifetime, right? I mean...even *then*, we knew that.

"But there, in that place, after that night, on that morning, it all just felt different. *Possible*. Somehow we felt like we could face it, whatever *it* even was. That the past was somehow...I don't know...*irrelevant* or something. That we had this chance. I guess everybody did, but we didn't know that. We just knew that we felt this *thing*, and that we both felt the same way, and that, finally, for real, there seemed to be some hope in Donna's eyes. In our looks at each other. In our hearts. All that doubt was, what's the word? Repressed, maybe? Something like that.

"We thought it was love. Maybe it was. Maybe that's what love is.

"Anyway, we were fairly disgusting. We were laying on this blanket we must have borrowed from someone but which was definitely not ours, and definitely, um, let's call it *well used*, ok?

Not exactly Donna's speed, but there we were. We were naked as the day underneath whatever of the blanket we could fold on top of us and holding each other to stay warm in the middle of this corn row, and we couldn't let go because it was freezing. At least, it was freezing where we were. As soon as you got into the sun it was this glorious day full of warmth and promise. But where we were, it was still cold and wet.

"Our clothes were somewhere, but we didn't know where. We'd been running through the field throwing them off them off wherever, sure that we would be able to find them in the morning and not really caring if we did. Well, now it was morning, and we had no idea where they were. Still...there was that thing. That thing that said it wasn't really our fault. That thing that made it seem like it was someone else's fault. Or no one's fault. That sometimes, you just woke up in the middle of a cold and wet cornfield and had to spend the morning searching for your clothes. Sometimes, that's just the way it was, right?

"I woke up and thought the gentlemanly thing to do was to gather what I could find, so I kissed Donna quietly, told her to wait, and covered her with the rest of the blanket. Then, I started to wander down the row, still completely naked. This was not an easy thing. It's one thing to run barefoot when you're drunk and you can't feel anything. It's quite another when your feet now smart from the night before, and the ground is harder from the cold of night, and nothing's quite flat or smooth, and little weeds stick up trying to poke through your feet that have spent so much time inside shoes they don't know how to take it. I mean, walking naked and barefoot through a cornfield might sound cool to a city boy like me, but it was *painful*. Just when I was starting to get discouraged, though, I found my hat, this old thing of my grandfather's I wore with pride around that time, and put it on. I must have looked, ok, well, anyway, there I was wearing

nothing but my hat when I heard Donna laughing behind me. I turned around and just stared.

"My god, I had never seen, will never again see anything as beautiful. A goddess stood before me, perfect in every way, not dressed up, nothing special to her hair, just...just *her*. No, not just. Every inch of her was *her*. As in...she exuded this thing that...what the hell is that, anyway? Is *that* love? The pain disappeared, the cold flew away. Even my mission became irrelevant. I stood there, washed by this immense beauty, unmovable.

"Suddenly, I was back in that moment of the night before, when throwing off our clothes in a strange cornfield seemed completely natural. Of making love through the night, under the stars. Of the moment I kissed her before heading off to suffer in search of our clothes. Of every moment we were together when we could drop the worry and just *be*. I was overwhelmed.

"Her laugh turned to smile, and the two of us stood staring at each other, naked as the day except for my hat, breathing in each other's love.

"I took my hat off, put it to my heart, kneeled in the dirt and said, *'Be mine forever.'*

"I hadn't considered proposing marriage before then. Not really. I knew that I might someday, that when I did, I had some vague responsibility to plan it well, make it romantic, memorable. I figured that, when the time came, whether it was Donna or anyone else, I would do something really clever. Hide the ring in a brownie or an unexpected present, or even in junk drawer. Y'know, something fun.

"When I proposed to her there, in that field, I didn't even have a ring, but I knew that there would be no better moment.

"And she said yes.

"And we...well...by the time we found the rest of our clothes, we were already dressed in mud."

Exercise 4: Family Values

Here.

In a small tourist village, well north of where a farm party was waxing with revelers, sat a cozy house on a quiet lake. The house had, in one form or another, sat on the shore of that lake longer than anyone could remember, kept by generations of a family no one really knew. The owners were quiet people, kept mostly to themselves, when they bothered to visit at all. Like most of the homeowners along the lake, they were absentee, visitors more than residents, coming up to vacation from time to time, though mostly leaving their home away from home empty and waiting for the next visit.

On the back porch, overlooking the lake, sat a god feeling more than a little sorry for himself. It was not his wont to feel this way. A lifetime of teaching others about regret had taught him never to embrace such feelings himself. Yet, sitting at the old place, nostalgia flooding him with thoughts of his youth, the thoughts of worthlessness that had driven him there mingled with thoughts of his family.

He was *embarrassed*. Even without his sister to remind him how the world would laugh at him, he cringed to think what she would say. *Little Reggie, thinks he's so great, goes around pretending he has friends, whispering in their ears like a child playing at being grown up. Little Reggie, pretending at being a god, sitting in the passenger seat with his hands on the plastic toy steering wheel, actually believing he was driving the car.*

He was *ashamed*. Even without his mother to chastise him, he hung his head, knowing he had not lived up to what he could be. He could hear the ghost of her voice, gentle but firm, slipping into his ear. *Not so proud of ourselves today, are we?* How long had it taken him to see the truth? How long had he whispered in

the ears of his so-called friends, telling them things they already knew, reminding them of what they already believed, like sitting next to a tree, telling it to grow, and thinking he made the difference when it did.

He was *disgusted*. He looked at himself and could hardly stomach what he saw. A weak god not worth the space he took up, not worthy of his family legacy. Even without his father to sneer at him, his stomach turned with nausea. His sister he could ignore. She was vapid. His mother he could accept, nod at sheepishly as if to say, *I'll do better next time*. She was kind. But his father. His father suffered no fools. His father gave not second chances. His father, had he been there to see it, would not have bothered with a whisper. Would not have been forgiving. He would have told his son to move on or get out.

It was *disgust* that turned his stomach.

Regret knew what must come next. He had spent too much time under his father's mentorship not to know what to do with such feelings. You can accept what disgusts you, make it your friend, learn to live with it, embrace it. You can reject it, run away, close your eyes to the truth, ignore it and hope to forget it. Or you can change it, fight the object of your disgust until you wrestle it into something you can live with, something you like.

Accept.

Reject.

Change.

Such were the thoughts Regret struggled with as he sat on his father's porch and watched the sun set over the lake. Accept himself as an unimportant, worthless waste of space, an embarrassment to anyone who had ever believed in him, admit defeat. Reject his fear entirely, pretend nothing was wrong, go back to work and close his eyes to the reality that his friends just didn't need him. Or change. Change his approach. Change his friends.

Change his ways. Give up on everything he knew and start all over. Make them listen. Force them to. Head into battle.

There was only ever once choice.

Yet, knowing something and believing it are two different things entirely.

The idea that he must reject everything up to this time in his life and begin again just did not seem plausible. Just didn't *make sense*. Unwilling to take any one thought too seriously, unwilling to begin anything resembling follow-through, unwilling to face a truth that would deny everything he had ever been, his thoughts waned. The chair was comfortable, the weather was warm and cool in the same breath, the waves lapped on the shore like gentle kisses, and what clouds still hung about grew sharp as they began to glow with peach vanilla. To his left, a glass of rye, rocks, dash of bitters. To his right, an ancient cigar from his late father's humidor. In his ear, a sweet nothing not so much erotica as cozy, not words so much as a thought riding on the breeze that tickled his neck.

Isn't this nice?

Maybe pretending his troubles away wasn't such a bad idea, after all. Regret settled in to forget, to take some pleasure in the peace that surrounded him. Maybe he would return tomorrow. Maybe he would stay here forever. It mattered little. Right now, he just wanted to sit.

Once the sun had set in earnest and the tokes of his cigar had turned from warm smoke to hot, Regret sipped the last of his drink, melted ice really, and walked to the kitchen to make a simple dinner. Food could, he knew, do wonders. There would be time enough for existential study in the morning.

No one had stocked the kitchen in an age, but it was by no means empty. The old god pulled out a box of stale pasta and some olive oil, thinking that a simple dinner would suit his mood

nicely. When he reached into the cupboard for the salt, however, he was distressed to find it nowhere. No big box of salt. No tiny leftover salt packets. Nothing but rice in the salt shaker. Not a grain of salt to be found in the whole house.

Now, pasta can be made without salt. Can be eaten without sauce, without butter. He had a little olive oil, which could have been enough. The oil, however, was old. Not rancid, but old. Old enough that it needed a little help. Not a fancy recipe. Just a little salt. The irony did not escape him, and he wondered if some god hovered nearby, waiting to see him make the pasta anyway, then wish he hadn't.

No fool he.

Instead, Regret picked up his walking cane, stepped out into the dusk, and wandered toward town in search of a proper dinner. It was a long walk, but the evening was pleasant, and he had nowhere to go. Memories of summer visits with his grandfather filled him with a feeling of a more pleasant nostalgia, and he looked with pleasure at the size of the trees he remembered as saplings. He might have spent the night simply wandering about, but his stomach was rumbling. The thought of a warm meal drove him on. In the morning, he would buy some groceries.

The village was a long walk, but not far. Within half an hour, Regret was strolling through the tiny district geared toward tourists and summer folk, a few restaurants dotting the curio and antique shops that made up the bulk. As a little one, of course, nothing had been here at all. His grandfather had built a lovely cottage along the lake that was never quite seen by the natives, and they were all able to enjoy the peace of the wilderness. By the time he was ready to make his mark on the world, this area had still been hardly more than dry goods store. Today, it was a village. Not the big city by any means, but without doubt catering to those who had left it for a short vacation in the country. A lit-

tle something for everyone, but surely nothing that stayed open in the winter.

Regret made his way to the family restaurant at the end of the block. Clearly more of a breakfast place, it was mostly empty, though, according the sign in the window, still serving. The food would be poor, of that he had no doubt. On the other hand, he wasn't sure he cared. Just a quiet simple dinner in an uncrowded diner. It would do.

He stood in the door, taking in the lay of the place, behind a sign that said, "Please Wait to be Seated." With a respect for the directions, he waited in the entryway for the waitress's attention. A waitress who was not what she seemed.

Here she is playing at waiting table.

To a group of four friends in their early twenties, she is bringing an order as incorrect as it is perfect. It wasn't her memory at fault, for, having none, she had written down the order on a small slip for the cook. Rather, when she had written down the order, she had done so from what she determined these patrons would like, rather than from the words that had issued from their mouths. Needless to say those things were different from each other. The friends are confused. One suspects a prank. Another an honest mistake. Bliss is not concerned. She simply delivers the meal as if it is desired. She has no doubt of her instincts.

The mood at the table is strange.

"I'm sorry, Miss. This is not my order."

Bliss smiles as she continues to distribute the unrequested meals.

The friends look at each other, quizzical looks invading their faces.

"Um, Miss?"

Bliss looks up with a glow in her eyes, indelible smile swimming under her lips. "Hi."

"Um..." The young man isn't quite sure where to start, the situation being more than a little unusual for him. "Um...I think maybe this stuff is for another table?"

Bliss exudes loveliness in his direction, and he swoons.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, honey. It's all just food."

"Um..."

The woman across from him laughs. After all, the cherry waffle smells wonderful, and seems to suit her mood better than the meat loaf she ordered. Carelessly, she digs in.

"Mmmmmm."

Bliss loses her focus and stares across the table through the window beyond. The night is beginning to fall, and tourists walk past in light clothes, carefree. Another of the friends digs into his own meal, crispy bacon and eggs over easy, something he had once loved and now forgotten. Bliss turns to him with a bottle of Tabasco.

"Hot sauce for your hash browns, honey?"

He takes the bottle and douses his potatoes, something he has never done, but which infuses him with the spirit of adventure.

The first friend gives up and bites into the patty melt he didn't order. Actually maybe better than the spaghetti and meatballs. Kind of just right, really.

Bliss finishes pouring the coffee and wanders back toward the kitchen, her presence lingering in the minds of the diners, a whisper in their ears pushing smiles onto their faces and sparkles through their eyes.

Isn't this nice?

Regret, standing just inside the doorway, curious as to what just transpired, looked awkward, and considered turning about

and leaving. Maybe this was not what he needed, after all. On her way to the kitchen, however, Bliss spotted him and, with a smile, said, "Just sit anywhere, honey."

He took a seat at the counter.

Good idea or not?

An Angry God

It is difficult to judge whether Lorry Diesel acted in a reasonable way or not. For, although he never lost sight of the truth that his mind was subjugated to hallucinogenics coursing through his body, it is never easy to tell your mind that what you see, hear, touch, is only pretend. Just *knowing* something is not real does not make you *believe* it is not real. Lorry became increasingly sure, as his hallucinogenic evening progressed, that the world was illusion, and in that surety, accepted those illusions for his new friends. His only other choice would have been to dismiss the world entirely, an act of faith he was not yet ready to embrace.

So it was that when Lorry, sitting in ancient Israel's hovel, was visited by what appeared to be a fairy of the woods, he had no reason not to take her at her word. She was just one more part of the illusion from which the world was made. He was not amazed, nor was he afeared. He simply took her at face value.

He should have been more wary.

She came in like a whirlwind.

"How dare you profane this house!"

Lorry, still looking for a lighter, and not quite looking up, said only, "Tsup."

"Get out!"

Finding what he was looking for, he lit up a small pipe and silently offered to share with the angry maiden in front of him. She did not understand his meaning.

"I am an angry god who will destroy you if you do not obey. Leave now."

Lorry, who did not really believe in her, slowly inhaled the calming substance and looked across the dark hovel for a better

look. He could not quite see her, but she was clearly standing, and exuded a negativity that was palpable.

Misfortune began to suspect that the human before her failed to comprehend her language. For the sake of further study, she tried one more universal. More practical. First, she encouraged his body to fight the smoke coming in, resulting in a painful cough. Then, she allowed the man's hands to mis-grip the pipe, so that the heat of it might gently burn his fingers, ultimately causing him to drop the pipe on the ground, spilling it's contents where they might not be recovered. She also touched him with hunger, thirst, and a lack of blood flow causing his lower limbs to fall asleep.

Instead of standing up, or even searching for the pipe from where he sat, Lorry Diesel merely left it at good enough, and smiled at the maiden.

"So you're not like a person or whatever?"

"No, I'm not *a person or whatever*. What I am does not matter. What matters is..."

"Oh...I know. You're like a wood dance...dinth...chance...fance...what's it called? Like a fairy or whatever, except...my mom used to talk about you guys. Can't remember a damn thing though. Must be that mead shit I was drinking. I wonder if...wow, this all makes sense now. When they drank that shit back in olden times or whatever. It probably just made them *think* they were seeing you guys, and now it's happening to me. That makes total sense."

"We're not talking. You are leaving."

"Or...and this is actually way more interesting, I think, you and your fairy friends are like, I don't know, like somehow attracted to the mead stuff, or like to the effects it brings, or something, so that when someone drinks it, you guys start coming around. So like, old timey people actually *did* see you guys a lot,

and now nobody does cause nobody drinks that shit, which, I can understand cause it's really weird. I won't say bad, cause, y'know, you've got to have an open mind for stuff like that, but not really, like, *to my taste*, or whatever."

Misfortune sighed.

And she remembered the children, left to fend for themselves upon the death of their father and mother. Wondered what might have become of them. Of their progeny.

"Are you a son of Israel?"

"Well...I'm not really into religion, if that's what you mean. My parents weren't really either, though my sister is like a crazy evangelist or whatever now."

They remained silent for some time. She, frustrated, standing in silhouette at the doorway, he sitting against the wall across from her. He broke the silence.

"So can you grant me wishes or something?"

Misfortune smiled. "Yes. Yes I can. What would you like?"

"Well, it's a good question. I'd kinda like super powers and all that, but, I guess, maybe that would be too weird. I kinda like being left alone and whatever. Could I just have a ton of money? Like, be super rich or whatever, but where nobody knows but me? That would be super cool."

Misfortune stepped out into the woods and pointed into the depths. "Here is a path. Follow it to bring your dreams to reality."

Lorry, partially because he wanted to believe, but also because, well, why not, stood up to see the path. It was more of a deer path than anything, but it was still visible by moonlight, and it did seem promising somehow. Maybe there was a treasure chest or something. If not, at least he might be heading back toward the party.

With a shrug of his shoulders, he said, "Alright," and wandered off into the woods, hopeful that a great treasure laid hid-

den just out of sight. Under a, shall we say *misfortunate* lack of direction, he found himself wandering for two days before once again finding civilization, as poor as ever he was, hungry, thirsty, and unpleasantly sober.

His wood fairy remained in the hovel, awash in memory, pining away for a god who had long ago left her behind.

Nisha Eikenboom

"It *was* nice. I'm not saying it wasn't. I would never say that. And I *do* miss him. Really. It's just that, well, it was, I don't know, an *adventure*, I guess, and when it ended, it was like, *ok, that thing happened, and it was fun and whatever, but now it's over, right?* Not that we didn't, I mean, it wasn't like when the world came crashing down and whatever that we just, y'know, we didn't just drop each other. It wasn't like that. We tried. We really did. But it was like, I don't know, a summer romance maybe. Like we had this amazing summer romance but then had to go back to our normal lives.

"That was part of it. The other thing, though, that was maybe tied in with that was, like, how during the summer romance you can pretend to be this other person, but at some point you have to revert back to who you were. It doesn't matter whether you liked that person. You can just only pretend so long. And when you *do* stop, when you start to show off who you really are, this different person from the one they fell in love with...y'know...that's when it...

"Like you see some friend from high school who you thought you knew really well. Someone you really opened up to and all that. Someone you were close to, or whatever. And then when you see them a bunch of years later, they're not that person at all. And you're not that person either. And both of you want to remember who you were back then but you're just *not* anymore, right? Because you've had these different experiences and are now all grown up or whatever. And you're all like, *wow, what a bore*, or, *what an asshole*, or *what did I ever see in that person?*

"I guess that's how it was with Sal. Our time together was amazing, but during the *Days* we were both totally new people. Not that we didn't *grow* or whatever, but it wasn't like the people

we were before the *Days*, the *old* people, totally went away either. *That* was the real me. And the real Sal, too. Not that we liked those people very much, but...y'know...they were *us*. The thing was, though, we only got to know these *new* people, the ones who *weren't* real. Like we fell in love with this *image* of what we *could* be. Once it was gone, all that was left was the real us, and...honestly, I just don't think we liked each other very much.

"Maybe what we liked was the *absence* of the real us.

"Like all that business with his parents. During the *Days*, he didn't care at all about what they thought. If they liked me, if they didn't like me, none of it mattered. Like he just let himself off the hook, right? Like we all did. And let me be clear about this. They did *not* like me. Not that they were, y'know, *overtly* racist or anti-Semitic or whatever the hell it was they had up their collective asses. They were way too sophisticated for that. They never even asked Salton about my, y'know, *origins* or whatever. Not even in private. At least, not that Salton was willing to admit. And I believe him. Really. This is the thing I'm talking about. If they had called the question, so to speak, I know Salton would have shamed them. Wouldn't have hesitated. That's who he *was* during the *Days*. He didn't worry about what they might think of him, if what he said was hurtful. He just accepted the fact that his parents were assholes and moved on, right? Like his ethics, his *values* mattered more than any supposed loyalty he owed his family.

"But later, when the walls came tumbling down, he got all apologetic for them. Not that he dumped me for them or anything. And he certainly wasn't racist like, I mean, y'know, at least, not like *them*. It wasn't like that. Not at all. He was committed to standing by me no matter what they said. It's just that during the *Days* it was more...I don't know...real, I guess. Like whatever they said or thought was their business, and had nothing to do with

us. Like we were *above* that. The problem came *after*, right? When the *Days* were over and he, y'know, started making all these excuses for them, trying to get me to see things from their point of view or whatever. As if somehow they were not the assholes they consistently showed themselves to be. Because they *were* his parents. He *was* loyal. He *did* worry about whether his words were hurtful. Not that...or he...

"...what I mean to say is, it wasn't really the thing about his parents that drove me away. It was more that...I guess...see, I kind of *liked* the person I had become. It was like this new world that had always been foreign to me, which I was now, like, I guess, *invited into*, or whatever. When it all ended, I still wanted to be that person, right? I mean, who didn't? Except I would watch fucking Salton Christiansen get all up in his head, and worry about how he would feel tomorrow, and how everyone else would feel tomorrow, and I immediately knew that I was getting all up in my *own* head, and I just couldn't take the reminder that I wasn't really who I wanted to be. And every time I got angry at him for not being the person I fell in love with, I knew I was really angry at myself for not being the person *he* fell in love with, and I...

"...so when I say I miss him, what I think I mean is that I miss *me*."

Dancing by the Fire

When Salton Christiansen finally found the supposed girl of his dreams again, she was naked head to toe, dancing around a fire on a moonlit river beach.

How it happened was this.

After Nisha and Salton arrived in Salton's car, they walked around together, getting the lay of the land. For a while, neither saw anyone they knew, but soon enough, the two ran into Nisha's friends, who had been at the party all afternoon. Nisha, of course, knew her friends to be good and thoughtful people with whom she had been through times good and bad over many years. Some she knew better than others, but on the whole, she was proud to call them her friends. What Salton saw, on the other hand, was a group of obnoxious women three sheets to the wind, slurring their words and stumbling, looking for all the world like bawdy drunks, what his father would have called *bimbos*. Intellectually, he knew he would likely not look far different were he to drink a little too much, and he *did* like this girl, so he did the only thing he could to salvage his good opinion of her. He excused himself.

"I really should say hello to Timmy."

"Oh...yeah...right."

Nisha was torn between staying with her friends and going with this nice boy, and waited for him to take the lead. If he invited her, she would go, if not, she would stay. Her friends, after all, weren't going anywhere.

"Maybe I'll catch up with you later?"

"Oh. Ok."

And something came over him. He took Nisha by the hand, pulled her close, and kissed her. It was an impulsive move, but Salton had been waxing nostalgic for his adventurous host, tel-

ing himself that he, too, had an impulsive streak. It was not entirely out of character for him, not in that he made a habit of kissing women he had known for less than an afternoon, but in that he did not always shy away from adventure. Not always. And so it was today. They kissed. They smiled. They went their separate ways. As he walked away in search of his friend and host, his new love at his back, he didn't fret about what he had just done, did not worry about whether he had just made a fool of himself. He simply smiled at what he perceived to be his good fortune.

Nisha's friends teased her of course. Who was this boy? How long had they been seeing each other? Why hadn't she told them about him before? As her friends learned the story, she did not blush. To blush would have been to show embarrassment, shame. These were things she did not feel. Whether, like Regret, they too were absent, or instead that their power was merely diminished by his absence, it is difficult to say. What is clear is that without Regret to pursue her, she merely accepted her state. She had experienced a beautiful moment with a nice boy and was now experiencing another with her good friends. Life in the moment was good, and she embraced it.

Her friends showed her about, and, as a matter of course, brought her to the punch that had brought with it such deleterious joy. Inevitably, she was soon caught up in the wave of inebriation that had seemed to capture the village of revelers all around her. By nightfall, Salton still absent, they had danced by the bands, feasted at the smorgasbord, played with dogs and children, and met and talked and schmoozed with friends old and new. For Nisha, what had started as a miserable day had turned into a beautiful evening.

Whose idea it was to go down by the river, Nisha never knew, but go down to the river she did. Though night had fallen,

it was still warm, and, unlike in her city cage, out here on Kasterfink's farm there was no air conditioning to be found. Nisha and the people she found herself with felt themselves drawn down to the river, where a cool breeze might wash over them. If not, they could always go for a swim.

The river wasn't exactly inviting. There was some semblance of a sandy beach, it is true, but the banks were mucky with tangled growth along the edges, the breeze non-existent, and the mosquitos out in force, beginning their evening feast. It was either turn around and give up hope, or dare to wade into the muck toward the clear water beyond. Someone, a boy Nisha didn't know, began the chain. He disrobed without talking and walked right in. Another boy followed. Then a girl. Then a mass dropping of clothes and movement toward the river. Nisha joined in the fun, and was far from the last to dive in. Several people stayed behind to drink beer on the beach and start a fire to help ward off the bugs.

The moon rose behind the trees as the swimmers held hands and sang songs. When the water had sufficiently cooled them off, when they had tired of the water, they made their way back through the muck to the sandy shore where they, unshamed of their nakedness, sat on shared blankets, waiting for what little breeze came by to dry their bodies as they warmed by the fire.

Someone played music from their phone, and a couple of Nisha's friends from the city stood up and danced. Others joined them. Soon five or six naked revelers were joyfully dancing in the moonlight, naked as the day they were born, not a care in the world. A night to remember. As a quiet and soulful love song dropped the tempo and the naked revelers turned toward the fire to seek their clothes, Timmy and Salton broke through the trees at the end of the path leading to this secluded spot.

Salton and Nisha locked eyes as they were drawn toward each other. Gently, Salton took Nisha's bare body in his embrace and danced romantically with her at the edge of the fire. He was still wearing the clothes he had on when he came upon Nisha's wrecked car. She wore not a scrap.

And neither of them cared.

Melancholy in the Hovel

How Misfortune came to discover Lorry Diesel desecrating the old place was this.

She was at the top of her game and feeling good. Where she went, she led feet into puddles, tree limbs onto houses, and, well, both metaphorically and literally rained on parades. Whether she enjoyed her work was not relevant. That she excelled at it, that she put effort into it, that she continued to challenge herself, *those* were the only metrics that mattered to her. It had always been her way, from her youngest days, her way of rising above the lazy gods for whom she felt nothing but disdain.

Where Misfortune went, misfortune abounded, and she kept herself busy. This day, her focus was upon the roadways. We have already seen the results of her meddling with Nisha Eikenboom, and the incident with the deer. Elsewhere, potholes caused similar swerving, slippery conditions left over from the rain caused trouble, and even the best drivers found themselves challenged by circumstance.

At the moment, she was taking a rare moment of relaxation. She had just distracted a young driver who subsequently pulled out onto a rural highway and was blindsided by another, older one, similarly distracted. There were injuries no doubt. Perhaps fatalities. It mattered not to Misfortune. To her they were just damage, and it was in damage that she measured her worth. Or, put another way, if she was having a good day, someone, somewhere, was having a bad one.

The task had been a moderately challenging one. The younger driver struggled to find a song she was looking for, just long enough for her to avert her eyes from the road. Such was the easy part. The older driver, safety conscious, her phone turned off and in her purse, took more effort. Misfortune allowed an

unusual sound to emanate from the chassis below, followed by an innocuous warning light on the dashboard. The older driver, her attention briefly distracted by the combination, looked to see what light had come on, just as the younger driver, still searching for her song, entered the roadway in front of her. The result was predictable.

Misfortune was pleased.

As anyone is wont to do following the successful completion of a moderately challenging task, she sat back, briefly, to admire the fruits of her work. She had done well. Reveling in her sense of accomplishment, taking a well earned moment to herself, she breathed in the world, herself proudly atop. It was at this moment that a sickly sweet smell came upon her, a twisting nausea in her stomach. A strange mixture of joy and foreboding swished around inside of her as she tried to make sense of this simultaneously pleasant and disturbing feeling.

That it was mixed up with her still confused feelings about Regret was something she was not quite able to admit to herself. Nonetheless, she knew. As sure as she knew her victims below would undoubtedly blame their misfortunes upon each other, she knew from what the smell emanated. A scent that led her to memory. Not the scent of Lorry Diesel, though the boy could certainly have used a good wash. It was the scent of the woods and the hovel and the mushrooms blooming all about it. It was a scent of love and shame and hope and embarrassment and desire and misery and most of all of regret. It was a scent of memory, of melancholy nostalgia. It was a scent she knew well.

Dazed, she followed her nose to the old place, never quite admitting the memory into her heart. She had dreamed of those days so often that she could not be sure that what was in front of her, what she saw, what she smelled, was truly the old place. Dreams play games with us. They turn our memories on their

heads, change the shapes of buildings, the colors, the size. Yet, we know they *are* the buildings, are *meant* to be. As Misfortune found herself back in the real place, the *source* of her dreams, she could not quite convince herself that it *was* the place. Perhaps it was just some random place reminiscent of what her dreams had turned the source of her memory into.

Once she saw the hovel itself, she no longer fought the feeling. She allowed the memories, pleasant and painful, sickly and sweet, to fly back, allowed herself to be transported back to a youth she sometimes preferred to forget. And she thought, as usual, of Regret.

Not quite in full control of herself, she grew a vague intention to walk into the old place, meditate on the old days for a bit, reminisce briefly before getting back to work. Her memory of that time with Regret, how she pushed him away, clung too close, still shamed her. At the same time she was as drawn to him as ever. Her hope that he might be drawn to *her* had become a peripheral hope, just out of view in the corner of her eye. She had feared facing it directly, that it might not really be there. The hope was a demon that haunted her. Perhaps she was trying to exorcise that demon by facing it in that place.

If so, she had not yet admitted it to herself. What she knew was that she needed some quiet time with herself to explore her feelings. The idea that she still pined for the old god was shameful, but if it were true, she must face it. That someone might lay witness to that shame was a thing she could not abide.

When she saw that the place was occupied, embarrassment led to shame, shame led to anger, and anger led to action.

Such was the misfortune that befell Lorry Diesel.

After she had sent the hapless cable guy into the woods where he as likely as not would be given up for dead, she spent the rest of the night brooding. The good feelings, the confidence,

the surety of one who sits atop the world were all gone. The good day had become a bad night, and she was left to cower from herself in the place she had avoided for nearly a century, facing a truth she had hidden from since...well...just *since*.

It's tempting to feel sorry for her. Don't.

Lovesick though she may be, she cares not for you. She is not deserving of your pity. She would just as soon burn down your house the day after your insurance expired as sip her morning coffee. Sooner, as she would undoubtedly gain more pleasure from your misery than from the smell of the warm roast rising from her cup.

Let us watch her brood, then. Take some small amount of pleasure in seeing this selfish misanthrope wallow in her *own* pity. Watch her sit in a dark corner of that stone hovel, cold and damp, lonely, feeling sorry for herself, suffering through a night as full of regret as that of the nearby revelers was without. Feel her relive the night Regret first walked away, of the years afterward when she had watched him from the distance, offering her help without request, wishing herself into a love that could never be. See her imagine what came of the Kasterfink children, small people deserving of a helping hand but left, instead, to fend for themselves, a legacy of her selfishness. Of her indifference to everyone save herself.

The night was a roller coaster of emotions for her as she looked back for the first time on what she had done. She was not proud. Ashamed, however, was not quite right either. Distance had provided her some perspective, and she felt, if anything, embarrassed for the follies of her youth. Perhaps Kasterfink, the long dead farmer, was just another soul, no better than the rest. His wife as well. And his children. Perhaps Misfortune's need to give them more emotional weight was just her way of pining for another time. Nostalgia. Then, just when she had convinced her-

self to discount those feelings, to put them away, she would be drowned in memories of Regret.

Up and down.

Up and down.

By morning, exhausted, she began to feel better. A good cry, so to speak, can do wonders. She had not solved anything, had not changed, but she began to feel reconciled at least. When the sun at last began to poke through the trees, she was more or less at peace with herself, ready to face another day. She stood up, stretched, and told herself she would think about it another time. She would, once again, put him away, into the corner where she might sense some semblance of hope without quite facing it. That was for another day. With one last deep breath, she took in the scent of memory, and, like the grown man who finds himself walking through the boyhood home he swore he would never return to, wandered about to see what had become of the place.

The Progeny of Kasterfink

When she saw the first body sleeping off the previous night's revelries, her mind was still in the past, filled with visions of the great fire that had destroyed Serafina Kasterfink and her husband, Israel. Images of the children, orphaned and homeless, waiting for a father who would never return from the burning wreckage, dominated her mind. When Regret had left her, she had done her worst, leaving the children to suffer in misery as a reminder of her power. Of her strength.

As the years had gone by, she knew she had gone too far, and did her best to put them from her mind. Now, a century and a half later, she wondered at what had become of their legacy. She thought, perhaps, that the sight of a long standing house built upon the ashes of the former, of Israel's progeny running about the yard, the crop and livestock increased, would ease the burden upon her heart. That the orphans might have gained strength from their adversity. That her worst of deeds might have turned to the greatest of challenges. That there might be some redemption from not destroying the children in the fire as well. From leaving his family alone that they might thrive. That there might be some evidence of their perseverance to make up for the roaring selfishness for which she struggled to forgive herself.

That evidence abounded.

Sort of.

The farmstead was a little dilapidated it was true, yet there could be no question that the Kasterfink family had thrived. Not only did a welcoming sign with the words *Kasterfink Haven* sit at the front of the drive, but it had clearly been replaced or freshened up within the last few years. The crops reached further than they had back in Israel's time, the buildings were larger, and the place exuded a scent of joy and success. Nor was it a lonely place.

She saw young men and women about, some sleeping, some walking about with coffee in hand, apparently engaged in pleasant conversation. Evidence of feasting, celebration, and community abounded. Everywhere she looked, the results of her absence seemed to show a thriving community awash in contentment.

It seemed that her worst deed had become her best, after all. She should have been pleased. She should have been relieved at least. If there was any redemption to be had, surely the evidence was right in front of her.

And yet.

Something was wrong.

If there was redemption to be found from the aftermath of misfortune, if her value to the world lay in how her client's rose above their misery to persevere and strive, perhaps her hope for such redemption was premature. With a clearer mind, she began to focus on the evidence about her. Evidence that the surviving progeny had ultimately been ruined by laziness and comfort. They had survived, it was true, but perhaps her long absence had made them a little too comfortable. Evidence of *that* was also everywhere to be seen. The roof on the house was long overdue for replacement, the barn was not square, a broken piece of fence looked as if it had been untouched for years.

Trash and layabouts abounded.

She wandered among the people who seemed to be everywhere, smelling for any sense of purpose, fearing they had all become lotus eaters, drained by contentment. What she found, however, was a fairly normal group of people, ambitious and apathetic in typical proportion, some relaxing, some cleaning up, and, with one notable exception, an unremarkable community. If there was no redemption to be found, at least there was no curse.

And yet.

Something was wrong.

The notable exception.

As she wandered about this unremarkable community, as she took in the scent of people around her, she shuttered at the presence of a little too much bliss. They were a little too happy. A little too contented.

And it wasn't her fault. For although she had stayed away from this place for over a century, she had seen many of these people before, recognized many of her former victims. These were not all Israel's progeny. This was a *party*, a collection of revelers shaking off the previous night's indulgences. They were not strangers to Misfortune. They were not evidence of what happens when the *Angel of Adversity* absents herself. Some she had visited as recently as the day before. These were people who had their share of luck good and bad. Of ups and downs. Of tragedy and bliss.

Maybe just a little too much bliss, though.

Or joy.

Or happiness.

Or glee, delight, amusement, wonder, rapture, gay, frolic, tickle, laughter, felicity, or ecstasy.

Her sisters were here somewhere.

Her many sisters.

Such was the result of millennia of her mother's charms.

Bliss was old. Old in the extreme. Don't get me wrong. She still *looked* young and beautiful. In every way but one, in fact, she *was* young and beautiful. Whether she paid a price for that beauty I will leave for better minds than my own to decipher. She was happy, she exuded joy, and people were generally pleased to be in her presence. All this was good.

The only mark on the darker side of her ledger, depending on your perspective, was her innocence. *Naïveté*. Innocence in one who is young can be inspiring. They have not yet learned the

hard lessons you know that, inevitably, they shall. You feel a kinship with them from your own life. You wish you could find your own lost innocence, feel as hopeful as you did before life beat you into submission with a teaspoon. Such is innocence in the young. Innocence in the old, on the other hand, is infuriating. Insufferable. It is willful ignorance that can be naught but disingenuous. Naive is what you are before you learn your lesson. A fool is what you are if you *don't* learn your lesson. Bliss was such a fool.

She talked about peace and love and friendship and joy and sunshine and rainbows and unicorns and ponies and catchy tunes and, well, kindergarten stuff. Nothing wrong with that if you are raising children. Nothing wrong with dotting more sophisticated thoughts with the ideals of youth. But to make them your sole thoughts, to see people as exclusively good, to take seriously the idea of heaven on earth, well, such an outlook must, after all, be naught but a pose.

And so it was that, while she made the world a better place, or at least a happier place, there were those who saw through her with disdain. Dumb stoner hippie chick who has no idea what life is like for real people in the real world. A Pollyanna who had never experienced pain. A preacher without empathy. What value could such a one have? How could one take her seriously?

Her great age, then, gave strength to her detractors' greatest argument.

Her great age also gave the world many children.

A long life living in the moment had brought about many nights of, if not passion, then at least nights of bliss. She loved to hold others in her arms, loved to feel intimate, loved to feel the oneness of the world. She lived from moment to moment, and over a lifetime as long as hers, many of those moments brought her into physical closeness with others. The results were predictable, as evidenced by her progeny that now dotted the earth. That

she saw no connection between the joy of sex and the joy of childbirth only gave her enemies more reason to despise her.

That she embraced the pain of childbirth gave them pause.

She bore only females. Such was her fate.

Most of them were like her. Little hippies dotting the earth, sharing the gospel of peace and love and joy wherever they roamed. They brought laughter, contentment, reverence, infatuation, giddiness, and a world of other like joys. They adored their mother and wished only to be more like her. They saw her as a beacon of truth, a leader to change the world for the better. A model to emulate.

Misfortune, as we have seen, was not so impressed.

She saw through her mother's flimsy facade. Knew her to be selfish, egotistical, and proud. Knew that if you were not in her immediate presence, you meant nothing. That the moment you were happy she would leave you behind and forget about you forever, even if moments later you were plunged into despair. Knew she cared not for anyone. Not really. That she cared only for the moments. For her work.

And Misfortune knew, above all, that Bliss cared nothing for her children. Not once she had left the room.

Maybe Misfortune was simply a rebellious child. Maybe she was only contrary so that she might become her own person, bring herself out of her mother's shadow. Maybe we should forgive her for being no better than the rest of us, we who condemn our parents for being old-fashioned. Who think we can do better.

Or maybe we should blame Bliss for making her what she was.

Misfortune certainly did.

She thought of her mother often, and never in good terms. Of her sisters, she rarely thought at all. They tended to avoid her, as she made their work difficult. They preferred vacuums, places

where Misfortune, Despair, Pain, Suffering, and, of course, Regret, had not taken hold. If they were here, others had fled.

At least it was not her mother she smelled.

Her mother had an odor that was not easily disguised. That scent was nowhere to be found. Euphoria was here, to be sure, but that wasn't really a surprise, given the evidence of bacchanalian excesses about her. Misfortune never really loved sharing space with her sisters, but she had a soft spot for Euphoria. Unlike *Queen Bliss*, Euphoria seemed to take an almost mischievous pleasure in the ephemeral nature of her work. As if she was more interested in the crash than the ride. That by making the ride that much better, knew she was making the crash that much worse. Almost. She was a little hard to read, that old lady, but there was definitely some amount of kindred spirit lacking from most of Misfortune's other sisters.

Yet.

Something had caught her attention. Something that brought her mother to mind. Something *Bliss*-like. She wandered about the old place, memories of days gone by still swirling about, trying to suss out just what it was that bothered her so much. Along the way, her talent trailed absentmindedly behind her.

Alexa Payne stepped barefoot on a rock.

Jeremy Rodriguez lost his car keys while swimming.

Edith Stoller got sand in her eye, playing on the beach.

And so on.

She wandered about, mindlessly filling up on tasteless morsels, failing to discover what seemed so wrong about this place. No. Not wrong. *Blissful*. Her mother wasn't there, of that she was certain. Yet, Misfortune's lack of impact made it feel as if she were. More than once had she gone up against her mother. More than once she had tried to ruin her mother's work with her own.

In a way, she had always won. In all the ways that mattered, though, she always lost.

Picture this.

Young man goes about his business, not bothering anybody, not bothered by anyone either. He drives to work, slugging through heavy traffic on a hot day. Bliss comes. Bliss gives him a nice song on the radio. Bliss balances the air conditioning. Bliss adjusts his seat to help that growing crick in his back. And Bliss whispers in his ear. *Isn't this nice?*

Misfortune pounces. Young man hits the car in front of him. Not a major collision, but trouble enough in this heavy traffic. Now he has to get not only himself but the person whom he hit off the road. He'll be late to work. He'll have to deal with his insurance. He may have to pay for the minor damage to his own car.

At the side of the road, an attractive woman walks from the damaged vehicle. A breeze comes up to mitigate the heat. The young man watches the cars struggling through traffic, notices the trees alongside the highway, is glad for an excuse to be a little late for his work. *Isn't this nice?*

Duty done, Bliss moves on. The Young man thinks of his angry manager not accepting his excuse. Of the insurance payment that may be late. Of the oppressive heat. Of the lovely woman in front of him, the lovely wedding ring on her finger, the lovely daughter in the backseat whose safety he has just compromised. Misfortune should be pleased. Misfortune should revel in her victory. But what is victory if your opponent does not concede? If your opponent does not care? For Bliss surely does not. Bliss has moved on.

It did not take many such battles to teach Misfortune the futility of challenging her mother.

Today felt like one of those battles. Victories abounded, yet they were all empty.

As if Bliss had come and gone.

She hunted for clues. Some sign of what was different. What made her work so tasteless. She listened in on minds for some evidence of what she could not name.

She did not hear, *isn't this nice?*

She did not hear, *it's going to be a good day.*

She did not hear, *mmmmmm*, on the corner of a growing smile, though to be fair, evidence of Euphoria's work from the night before was in full supply.

Where Euphoria danced, of course, Blame feared to tread. This was known. The environment was usually more suited to self-loathing. It was no surprise, then that Alexa Payne failed to curse the rock that had cut her foot. That Jeremy Rodriguez failed to curse his keys for not staying in his swimsuit pocket. That Edith Stoller failed to curse her eyelids for not better protecting their charge.

Yet something was still missing. Something she'd never paid much attention to before. So often, her victims lashed out at themselves, rather than at the world. They shouted at themselves in disgust, as if they had been the cause of their own misfortune and not she. Blame had little to do with that one. No. The words she missed, the words that seasoned her work, the words without which her meals were bland enough to make them not worth eating, were nowhere to be found. Missing from every voice, from every thought were the words, *if only*.

Where the hell was Regret?

The Counterfeit Waitress

"How about a waffle?"

"For dinner?"

"It's never the wrong time for a waffle."

"I don't like waffles."

"Don't be ridiculous, Sugar. Everybody likes waffles."

"I don't."

"Well, maybe you just haven't had the right waffle."

"I have."

"You have..."

"Had the right waffle."

"And you didn't like it."

"I did not."

"You'll like this one."

"I will not."

"You will. I guarantee it."

Regret looked at his waitress with interest. She was pretty, it was true, but more from her expression than her picture. Her eyes said she was happy to see you, a look that made you feel welcome. It was impossible to look at her without feeling you were in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. Regret could not have said much about the shape of her body, her hair. He felt that he liked her, and more importantly, that she liked him. In truth, she was a little overweight, her long brown hair unkempt, her face one you would hardly consider were she not to consider *you*. Once the two of you looked at each other, however, she could hardly have been more perfect.

Perhaps it was this beauty that distracted Regret from seeing her for the goddess she was. Perhaps he was caught off guard by the strange boldness she exuded. Perhaps it was the complication of what becomes hidden as a god wears a human shell. She did

not hide it on purpose, nor did she confess. She saw Regret for who he was immediately, so there was no reason to hide. She simply did not care.

For the time, Regret simply saw her as a strange woman of beauty and pluck.

There were bold people in this world. Of that he knew intimately. People who dared, people who fought, people who demanded. He liked those people, though for his own selfish purposes. He liked to take a man so sure of himself he would risk everything on a hunch, and then break him like a living branch, still green from the tree. Not a clean break, not a painless death, but a slow, painful bend turning to cracks, with constant reminders of the pain from a not quite break as the man never fully recovered. Take a man who dared to risk and give him what for. Test his mettle. *That* was meaningful. That was *work*. The kind of work he always thought was needed. But this woman was not that.

Something about her gave him pause.

Her boldness reminded him of something, maybe *someone* he could not quite name. She was bold, yes, but not for herself. He understood this not from her words, but from *her*. He felt immediately that she was toying with him. That she didn't really care whether he ordered a waffle or not. That she didn't even care if he fought with her or not. It was more that, and this was the part he couldn't quite wrap his head around, she actually *believed* he would like the repugnant breakfast treat.

Had he made the connection between her unabashed confidence and the arrogant boldness of his old friend, Misfortune, things might have gone differently. He might have laughed at the strange similarity, seen through the shell, had an honest conversation with her. As it was, distracted by the beauty she could not help but exude, by the peace that surrounded her, he merely took

her at face value, one of the millions of kooks he had encountered over his long existence.

He told himself he shouldn't take the bait. That he was on vacation. That he should just forget about this woman daring to challenge him. But every part of him reveled in a challenge like this. He just couldn't help himself, vacation or not. He would egg her on, so to speak, and give her a small taste of what it was to wish she had never troubled him.

"In what way will you guarantee my enjoyment of your so-called waffle, Julieta?"

"Oh, my name's not Julieta."

"Then you have misrepresented yourself."

"Only the costume, Sugar. Behind on the laundry. Julieta was sweet enough to lend it to me." Then, in a conspiratorial whisper, "Honestly, I don't even work here."

For Regret, it was starting to come together. Just a little crazy. It happens. Not much, but it happens. Maybe she was the real thing, seething with madness. If so, the challenge was meaningless. Still, he enjoyed her presence and had no interest in driving her away just yet.

"If you don't work here, then..."

"Shhhhh! You'll get me fired." She beamed a smile his way. "Now how about that waffle?"

Regret considered his options. The waffle would make him sick, of that he had no doubt. He had learned that lesson long ago. Yet, he was enjoying the game with the beautiful waitress. He sought to stretch it out.

"In what way, counterfeit waitress who is not Julieta, do you propose to guarantee my enjoyment of this waffle? Are you simply offering to give back the money I have not yet paid for it, or some measure of more meaningful wager?"

"You're funny."

"A man who jokes about a wager is not to be trusted."

"So you wanna bet, then?"

"No. I would like to order the ribeye special, with my potato baked, and my salad dressed with oil and vinegar. It is *you* who wish to wager. I am simply asking your terms."

"One dollar."

"One dollar?"

"One dollar."

"That's not even sufficient to pay for the meal I will surely dislike."

"One million dollars."

"One million dollars?"

"One million dollars."

"Surely you are not good for it."

"You will like the waffle."

Regret liked her. He already felt sorry for what he would surely do to her after he gagged on the waffle. He really did hate waffles. It was not the taste, so much. That was easily covered up with sugary coatings. It was the texture. Something about the shape made his stomach turn. Too architectural for something meant to be digested. More of a scientific experiment in maximizing surface area than a true comfort food. He would be lucky if he could hold down a single bite.

At the same time, he did not want to disappoint this woman he was increasingly intrigued with. Did not want to show her he was afraid, or unwilling to take the smallest risk. Regret prided himself on being a good sport, and meant to prove it.

"Very well. Place the order."

Within ten minutes, chunky half digested waffle mixed with bile poisoned the counter.

Within twenty, Bliss had taken Regret outside for some fresh air and a walk.

Within an hour, they were sitting on the back porch of his family's lake house, watching the stars push through the remaining indigos, fighting off the coming darkness.

Love Without Regret

Not far away from the hopelessly lost Lorry Diesel, an easy find for someone with a more fortunate sense of direction, love is, it cannot be denied, in the air.

Love old and new, faded and fresh, is everywhere to be found. Old couples held together by little more than inertia feel once again the rush of their first kiss. Young marriages on the verge of collapse forget what their lives *might* be, and see only the wonder of their love *today*. Lovers who have only just met feel as if their love will last forever.

Old love, earned through trial and sacrifice, put through the ringer and hung out to dry so many times that it should be threadbare and faded, is vibrant again. Timothy and Echo Kasterfink, generous hosts of the Great Cornucrapula, lie in each other's arms. Their children have awakened, and the guests are surely rummaging through the kitchen, hungry for breakfast. Sleeping in is not something the farmers are accustomed to, certainly not when there is work to be done, but today, it seems not to matter. Today there is only today. Today they are content to let their guests fend for themselves. Today they need only love.

Middle love, too, is strong. Donna and Ray can feel their hearts entwined. They are one. They have not yet been through a lifetime of devotion and sacrifice, but they have been through enough. This is no fly by night romance. They may have only known each other a few short months, but their love is no longer young. They have seen their darker selves and feared not to see more. Today, however, the darkness is gone. Today, the darkness will *always* be gone. The hard times are over, they have earned their reward, and there can be no doubt but that it will stay with them throughout their lives.

After another round of lovemaking, this time not drunk with booze and passion, but infused with care and patience, tranquility and surrender, concession and devotion, they doubt not but that they have come through the darkness at last. Whether there was something special about the morning, something special about the place, something special about the time, we will leave to better minds than our own. Perhaps all they needed was a brief moment with nobody watching, nobody judging, nobody punishing, that they might see their true selves through the break in the clouds.

Let us take a short moment to enjoy it. To revel in the hope. It won't last, of course. Their love, like so many, is doomed to end in tragedy. What they cannot see, what they dare not imagine, is coming nonetheless, a freight train still miles away but no less unstoppable. For now, however, in this moment, there is nothing but the promise of *always*, a promise that, no matter how many times she disappoints us, suckers us right back in every time. Always. Let us watch Ray and Donna, a night of passion behind them and a new marriage before them, as they rise from their blanket in the corn, as they gather their clothing and make their way back to the city, their hearts warm in the embrace of true love, their minds absent of any doubt that it will stay with them forever.

For new love, let us look to our friends Nisha and Salton. Together, too, they lie, not muddy and exposed, but warm and dry in one their host's empty rooms in the bunk house. Nisha is nearly as we had left her, bare but for the light sheet that now covers her on a lower bunk. Salton lies beside her, fully clothed but for his shoes, cozy and content.

Here.

You've fallen for her. She's fallen for you. She's *the one*, of that you have no doubt, but you have lost her in the mass of rev-

elers. When you do find her, she has embraced a mad and drunken passion, is dancing naked around a fire. She shows joy at your return, holds you close when you approach. The moment is here. The moment is now. Your body says *take her*. The moment will not come again. Your mind says *wait*. A gentleman does not, after all, take advantage of a lady in such a state. Your heart says *seize the moment*. It will not come again. Your mind says *she is worth more than one night of passion*.

You throw a blanket over her and, hand in hand, walk back to the farmhouse where your old friend has offered you a place for the night. Her expectations are high, her heart passionate. She is anxious for the night ahead. You are not so sure. You show her to the room, and step out to lock the door. Upon your return, she is asleep. You cover her up and crawl off to sleep in the corner, so to speak.

Good idea or not?

For *new love*, it did not matter. Regret there was none. Come the morning, any choice would have been the right choice. There was only this moment, and *new love* was strong. As light pushed its way through the windows, Nisha made her way to Salton's bunk. There, they again neglected to make love, choosing instead to hold each other in their arms, love flowing between them, the best parts of the night still with them. There is no thought that it could ever have been otherwise.

The two of them will spend the day with their host, sipping farm fresh bloody marys and pitching in to put the vast expanse of his farm back in order. They know they are at the beginning of something special. They know they belong together and revel in their luck at finding one another. How could it be otherwise? Not for a moment do they question their choices from the night before. Not for a moment do they wish they had done otherwise.

And when does anyone ever feel of that, except when they have done the right thing?

Surely this was love.

Old love smiles at finding what was lost.

Middle love smiles as a moment becomes forever.

New love smiles at a future that might hold anything.

And Regret, far away, smiling in the arms of his own love, cares not.

ACT 3: Days of No Regret

Horatio Porter

"They weren't all good days, I'm not saying that. But they certainly weren't all bad days. They were just...I don't know...in a lot of ways they were just...same but different, I guess.

"Like, ok, Donny and I got married within two weeks of the party, right? It was rash, it was impulsive, and, ok, none of our family was there. We were so happy at being together, and, honestly, were a little relieved not to have our crazy families there. So that was all good and wonderful, right? At the same time, it was a little sad knowing they couldn't really share in our joy. Regret had nothing to do with that stuff. That stuff was just...I don't know...life, I guess.

"Trust me, you can do something that makes you sad without wishing you hadn't done it.

"Even moving in together. We did not for one moment feel a shred of regret. But that didn't mean...y'know...it's not like it was all perfect or anything. Like, ok, she had this thing about the plates, right? She always piled the little plates on top of the big plates. Not that...the thing you have to understand about Donna is that...*was*...was that...sorry, where was I? Oh yeah, the plates, and...right. I was gonna say that she wasn't a clean person. Certainly not obsessive. She must've just grown up putting the little plates on the big plates and it was, like, *engrained* or something. And it drove me crazy, right? Because, I mean, who even *uses* those little plates, right? So every time you need a plate you have to scrape it out from underneath this pile of..

"The point is, I guess, that there were things about living together that drove each of us crazy, but we never regretted moving in together. We just *were* living together. There was nothing *to*

regret. That's what I mean when I say it wasn't good or bad. It was both. There just wasn't any regret about anything.

"Y'know, I stack the little plates on top of the big ones, now. It's like I can't help it. Like it would be desecrating her memory or something to...y'know. I still hate it, too. Even more, now, because every time a get a plate, I think of her. But I just can't bring myself to...

"There were fights, too. During the *Days* I mean. Though, the thing about the days was that fights just didn't have the same impact. Afterward, I mean. The next day, it just didn't matter. You didn't hold on to it. *Couldn't*, I guess. If something made those days special, it was *that*. You just...we were all so in the present. Nobody held on to anything. I wish we could learn to do that now.

"I remember our first one, of course. I mean, everything felt so great at first, not because of the *Days*, though maybe a little. Mostly, I think, it was just the usual honeymoon thing most couples feel. We were just so happy to be together. Then her sister came to visit, and everything fell apart.

"She just got up in her head, was all. It was like, you know, how sometimes you just, what is it? It's like you feel this *thing* inside and you just can't shake it. Like something is *wrong*, and you somehow need to give it credence. She got like that all the time, really. Like she would decide that somehow nothing *she* felt was as important as what anyone *else* felt, and just, y'know, *give in*. Except it wasn't like a generous impulse, really. It was more like...

"I'm sorry. I just can't. I feel like I'm betraying her by...I mean, it's not like she can defend herself, can she? Here I am, getting the last word and I...

"Ok. In her defense, it was never malicious or even calculating. It was just, just this *thing* inside her that would come out

sometimes. And she would give in, but not really. She would say the words, but she didn't mean them, so we would be stuck there, desperate to make each other happy, but also to make *ourselves* happy, and our hearts would just, I don't know, get in the way or something.

"That's what that first fight during the *Days* was like. Really, I should have kept my mouth shut. None of it mattered. I just thought I was...I don't know, like, by being brutally honest with my feelings I was *helping* our relationship or something, which was totally wrong of course, but how was I supposed to know that? I just thought like, ok, if I don't tell her how I feel, then we'll be like all those weird couples that can't talk to each other and then, I don't know, just...I...like then it wouldn't work, or whatever.

"That was how I felt, anyway.

"Ok. What happened was her crazy sister came to visit. We had called our families before the wedding. I mean, we weren't trying to hide it or anything. But it all happened so fast, and no one was willing to, I guess drop their lives is the thing. Part of it was none of them took it too seriously, I think. Like it was just some whirlwind romance that was bound to fall apart in a few months, so why take it too seriously? Besides, taking it seriously would have meant expensive last minute plane tickets, skipping work, breaking engagements. Whatever. Nobody was quite willing to do that for us in the way that, well, like in the way they did it for Donna's, y'know, I guess, y'know, funeral. Memorial. Whatever.

"I suppose the other part was that we didn't really *want* them there. I think part of us just wanted the moment to ourselves. I mean, obviously, we could have pushed it off for six months or whatever if we'd really cared. Anyway, we just let them off the

hook, and invited them to come visit our new home when they could.

"Crazy Vicky's visit was the first of what we thought would be these sort of *introduce my new husband to the family* moments. There were going to be a bunch of them, we figured, and we were really nervous. It was a complete disaster, of course. Vicky would hardly look at me. Mostly she was trying to convince Donna that we should take some more time before we got married. I mean, that's what I mean. She kept talking as if we weren't already married. As if we were about to make some decision, and not already past it.

"And the whole time she was picking things up, organizing, cleaning. Not in a nice way, either. She exuded this sort of disdain for Donna's and my life together. For our apartment. For our love. She so obviously hated me.

"Except...ok...I guess, in order to be fair I have to...y'know, like, tell *her* side. It's like I'm reliving the whole argument and not giving Donna a chance to...

"You see, Donna really wanted her sister's approval, so she was willing to cut her all kinds of slack. And then there was her mother. She had not returned a single call since the wedding, and Donna was really worried about her. When crazy Vicky dropped the bomb that their mother had disowned her, I think Donna just went into rescue mode. Like maybe if she could calm the waters with her sister a bit, maybe she could get her mother to come around. I mean, she never exactly *said* that, but it must've been, I mean, it just makes sense, right?

"Except I didn't really put it together.

"Afterward, I just said, with clear sarcasm, 'Well, *that* went well,' which she did not like at all. She just started apologizing for her sister with that way of, y'know, what I was saying before. Like she wasn't *really* sorry. Like maybe some of the things her sister

had said were true. I tried to be magnanimous about it. You know. Telling her she had nothing to apologize for. That her family would come around. I really thought we would just be able to laugh her off. Y'know, like not take her too seriously or whatever.

"What happened, though, what got so ugly, was that Donna just started cleaning. This is weird, ok? Donna didn't clean. It wasn't her way. If anything, I was the clean one. So when she started cleaning, I knew she was getting bad. She kept saying everything was ok, but she was all in her head and just got weird about cleaning the whole apartment. And I tried to help a bit, but clearly I was just in her way, like she was on this mission or something and she had to do it all herself.

"I tried to turn on the tv, but I just felt like an ass *not* helping while she did all this work that did not need to be done. Seriously, the place was fine. It was not clean to crazy Vicky's standards. Not *white glove* clean. But it was fine. Really.

"So I tried to get her stop. Not to worry about what her sister thought. Tried to kiss her.

"But she was just all hard and cold and fake smiley.

"That's when I yelled at her. Told she was an idiot for caring about what that crazy bitch thought. God. I actually called her sister a crazy bitch. Bitch. That is a word I *never* use. A word I am ashamed to use. And she knew it.

"I told her grow up and find a little goddamn confidence. To stop letting her crazy family make her feel worthless. That they just wanted to bully her and didn't care about her, and she let them walk all over her anyway.

"I was pissed.

"She just ignored me. Cried as she cleaned. I tried to hug her and she wouldn't let me. All she said was, 'Go away.'

"So I walked around the neighborhood for like two hours.

"Those days were so weird though. I mean, when I came back, I didn't say sorry. She didn't say sorry. We were just happy to see each other like we had just come home from work. Like what had happened was no longer relevant. I didn't regret yelling at her. She didn't regret being cold. They were just these things from the past that had nothing to do with the present.

"I suppose we all felt like that. Like we were able to just, I don't know...*dismiss* the past. In a lot of ways, it felt great. The thing is, though, I feel like maybe we lost something without those feelings. Like there has to be some sort of *acknowledgment* of the past to bind us closer together. Like the *Days* were just about pretending everything was ok, no matter what.

"Still, it was nice while it lasted."

Regret and the Maiden

When Regret woke, the late morning light was just beginning to crawl across his bed. As a cool breeze brushed his body, he opened his eyes to see the beautiful maiden no longer at his side. With a remnant of the previous night's euphoria still under his skin, and relief that his coming day would be spent in solitude, he sat up to face the day. Well, it was a nice way to begin a vacation, anyway.

As he began to dress, a smell wafted in, one apropos of his mixed emotions. It was a complex smell that brought with it both joy and nausea. What *was* that? The pleasant scent of roasted coffee was there. Also toast. Those parts of the scent now inundating his bedroom filled him with hope and nostalgia. Perhaps the girl had stayed after all. That would certainly explain the sick feeling in his stomach. Or perhaps he wasn't the only member of his family to visit the old lake house this summer, a prospect he looked forward to even less.

That must be it. Not the smell itself, but the prospect of company.

When he came into the kitchen, however, the mystery of the sickly smell explained itself with astonishing clarity. Waffles. Not only was the girl still there, but she had filled his house with the one smell she already knew he could not tolerate.

Still, she *was* sweet, and she *was* pretty. Maybe a pleasant morning together and goodbye kiss would be just the right start to the day. It wasn't as if he had to *eat* the waffles, though, *confound it*, she *knew* he couldn't eat the damn things. What was she thinking, anyway?

"Good morning."

Bliss jumped. "Oh!"

"Did I frighten you?"

"No, I just...of course not. I just didn't think anyone was here."

"Didn't think...what?"

"Oh, don't worry about it, darling." She walked up to Regret and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm just making some breakfast. Why don't you join me? I'm sure you'll like it."

Regret wondered if he should say something clever. Something about another bet, about the previous night, some double entendre about not wanting to stain her t-shirt with his vomit. Clever phrases, however, died on his tongue. It was a quiet morning in his own home, and he had not the wherewithal for sharp wit. In the end, he said only, "I think I'll just stick with coffee."

"Have it your way, Sugar. Just leaves more for me."

With coffee in hand, he went to sit at the kitchen table and watch the lovely maiden sweep around his kitchen as if it were her own.

"So what are your plans for today? Impersonate another waitress?"

Bliss looked at him with genuine surprise.

"Well you *are* a funny one, aren't you, Sugar. Why would I want to do that?"

"I don't know. Why *would* you?"

"Oh, a joker. Ok, sure. We could go impersonate someone if you want. Could be fun. What do you have in mind?"

"What do I...? I don't have anything in mind. It was *your* idea."

"*My* idea? Oh, you are adorable."

Crazy. Maybe she was just a crazy one. Well, he had managed such friends before. Easy enough to push her out the door, wallowing in her own sorrow. He could take care of her soon enough.

As he considered whether now was the right time, she brought two plates, each with a waffle to the table. They were covered with strawberry sauce and butter, a dollop of whipped cream on top.

"Trust me, Sugar, your mouth will love you for the rest of your life."

Regret was aghast. "We are not doing this again."

"Doing what?"

"I'm not eating that. You *know* I'm not."

"You'll love it. I promise."

"You know I won't." Regret looked at Bliss with scrutiny. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what, Sugar? I just thought you might like a nice breakfast."

"And wretch again, like last night?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sugar. Were you sick last night?"

She dug into her own waffle as Regret stared at his coffee. This was more than the usual crazy. There was something seriously wrong with this woman. Lovely or not, he had to get rid of her. He determined to whisper in her ear, remind her to feel sorry for herself, to wish she hadn't forced the waffle on him last night, hadn't stayed up with him, hadn't gone home with him, hadn't given her love to him for however brief a moment. He abhorred the idea of working so soon after leaving it all behind, but business was business. The girl might stay all day if he didn't take his opportunity.

He slipped his mind behind her, and allowed the thoughts to slide into her own.

If only you had left him alone, he would never have become sick.

Surely he'll break your heart. If only you had walked away...

If only you had gone home early...

etc, etc, etc.

Then, with a graceful carriage that can only come with centuries of experience and success, he slipped out of her head and waited for the light to sink from her eyes. Waited for her inner darkness to take her over. He had seen it many times, and, though it took many shapes, the result was always the same. Thought would lead to realization would lead to regret. The light of hope would be consumed by the shadow of fear. He had surely done his work. He need only wait.

The light, however, showed no signs of receding.

He looked at her curiously. Perhaps a more direct approach was necessary, given the situation. He prodded again, this time out loud.

"Don't you feel any remorse for having driven me to sickness last night?"

"Last night?"

"Yes. Yes, godsdammit, last night. The wager. You pushed that damned waffle on me at the cafe and I vomited the contents of my stomach, such as it was, across your workspace."

"Oh, that sounds awful."

"It was. Well not all of it. But that part was definitely awful. And your fault."

Bliss considered. "Was the other part my fault?"

"The other part?"

"The part that wasn't awful."

Regret, too, considered. "Sure. Yes. That part was your fault, too."

"Tell me about it."

"About last night?"

"Yes. About last night. About the other part that was my fault but wasn't awful. I love a good story. Especially if it has a happy ending. Does it have a happy ending?"

Regret paused. There was more to this woman than met the eye. If she was a woman at all. The more he studied her, the more he became assured that she was not just another *friend*. It would explain his failure at the whispers.

"Don't you remember?"

"Remember?"

"Yes. Yes, godsdammit. Don't you remember what we did last night?"

"Oh, no. I never remember anything, Sugar."

"Nothing?"

"Well, not much anyway."

It took little to confirm the suspicion growing in Regret's mind. Not crazy. Something else. A goddess, perhaps. Immune to his usual charms, certainly. It was, however, the idea of forgetfulness that intrigued him the most. True, she might have only been toying with him. She certainly showed a penchant for it with the previous night's wager. Yet, something about her told him she was just as she seemed. That it was a lack of memory that made her who she was. A lack of memory that explained so much of her strangeness.

As Bliss dug into a second waffle, Regret wondered about her. To not remember was a gift he had never before considered. To let your pain go with the sunset. To put the past behind you so utterly that it may as well never have happened. To be so unconcerned with memory that the pangs of regret could never take hold. This was not the stubborn refusal of regret he had seen from Israel Kasterfink and others. This was innocent. Innocuous. Appealing.

He studied the face of loveliness before him, wondering if a woman without memory, who never bothered about her mistakes, never bothered about the past, never bothered with, well, *regret*, might just be what he needed after all.

Salton Christiansen

"It was in the second week, sometime. You just can't really understand what it felt like. You probably think it was all happy good times, which is, I suppose, laughable at best. If I had to name it, I would say it was something like striking it big at the lotto. At first it seems like the thing you've been waiting for all of your life. Like you've finally *won*. Not just the lotto, but *life*. Except, and this is the important part, we all know that people who win the lotto are, by and large, unhappy afterward.

"It's a strange thing, isn't it? People spend their whole lives wishing for something, and are almost always miserable when they get it. Of course, I know a lot of that is people with no experience with money suddenly saddled with this thing they don't know how to manage, friends and relatives trying to get a piece of it, the whole business. If you dig deeper, though, I think maybe it has to do with people not being very happy to begin with. They, *we*, tell ourselves that if we just get this *thing*, this *one thing*, whether it's money or a lover or a child or fame or well, who knows, then everything will be better. Then, for those of us who are lucky enough to get the *thing*, we find that the part of ourselves we didn't really like before still hasn't changed.

"Be careful what you wish for, and all that.

"I suppose change has to come from within. It's not something you can win. You have to earn it. That's how it was in the *Days*. I had won this gift, but I hadn't yet earned the change that by all rights should have come with it. On top of that, it was just another...

"Maybe it's this. Maybe, for me, I can't speak for everyone else, but for me, it was about the need to feel I had *earned* my life. Please don't laugh, because...because I think this is important. I know it's hard to take a guy like me seriously. I've had all the

breaks, could easily live off my father for the rest of life and still have enough left over to take care of my children, if I ever *have* children, which is...what I mean to say is...life has treated me well, *financially*, but even *I* understand the importance of a life well earned. That is something we *all* share. As a member of the so-called leisure class, I may have more time to learn the guitar, but I still have to practice.

"Stay with me here. Because, although the later *Days* were filled with apathy, that's not really what I'm talking about. I'm talking about how you can still be angry and mean and hungry and sour even when things *feel*/like they are going your way. Life without regret was not a life without sadness. You just didn't blame yourself for it.

"I'd been feeling pretty good for over a week. Unusually so. I figured it was Nisha. And it was. I mean, of course it was. But it was the *Days*, too. Undoubtedly so. Anyway, Nisha and I got in this big fight. I'd blown her off the night before, and she just laid into me. Told me she'd waited for me for hours before giving up on me and swearing she would never talk to me again. Pushed all my buttons. Said I was entitled. Privileged. Selfish. That I didn't care about anyone but myself and that I never would. That I didn't deserve her. She was right, of course. Story of my life, really.

"What was different, though, was that even though I knew what I was supposed to do, I couldn't get behind it. How do you apologize without regret? How do you say you're sorry if you don't *feel*/sorry. If you don't mean it? What's the point?

"See, instead of thinking, *gee, I was a real asshole*, all I could think was, *gee, the guy that did that to you was a real asshole*. Does that make sense? I actually tried to be sympathetic with her, which was ridiculous of course. What she needed was for me to take responsibility for what I'd done, but it was like I just didn't know how.

"Did that make me happier? No. In no way did that make me happier. It just made me different. Different in a way I didn't like very much, honestly. I mean it was...it was everything I always feared about myself coming true. Suddenly I *was* entitled. I was the rich kid who never had to take responsibility for anything and didn't care.

"Maybe that's why I saw it earlier than most. Because I was tuned into that *thing*. That thing where you know the world expects you to step up and admit your mistakes. Take responsibility. Because I had spent so much of my short adult life watching people watch *me*, wait for me to screw up so they could watch me squirm as I admitted to it. Like I said, story of my life.

"Anyway, I didn't really know what to say. I was so outside of my comfort zone. And there was this beautiful woman I was sure I was in love with bothering to give me a chance to apologize, to win her back with contrition, and I just couldn't do it. Not to save my life. I don't think I'll forget that moment as long as I live.

"That was when I knew.

"I literally, and I don't use that word lightly, fell down from the intensity of the epiphany. And sitting on the floor of my apartment, I looked up at her and said, 'I'm not sorry. I don't know why I'm not sorry, but I'm not. And I'm pretty sure you wouldn't be either. We could talk forever about last night, but there's no do-over coming. Apparently I was an asshole yesterday. I'm pretty sure I'm not an asshole now, though. I don't feel like one, anyway.' And the funny thing is, she knew. She knew immediately.

"She walked out on me of course. She disappeared and wandered the neighborhood, fighting with her own demons, I'm sure. I remember looking out the window wondering what to do next. I wondered if she would come back. I wondered if I should

go after her. Mostly, though, I just reveled at the idea that I hadn't felt the slightest pang of regret for close to two weeks. I was sure she was gone, and that made me sad. But she was just gone. Not gone *because* of anything I had done. It just wasn't my fault. *Couldn't* have been.

"She did come back. I'm not even sure if she was gone an hour. Because she knew it, too. She'd been feeling the same thing. She just needed someone else to say it. Soon enough we had opened a bottle of wine and were talking about regret as if it were a piece of nostalgia from our childhood. As if we recognized it as this thing that we *used* to have but didn't have anymore. We talked about whether it had ever done anything worthwhile for us. About whether we were better off without it.

"As we got deeper into it, as we got more philosophical, we wondered if we would miss it. If we would miss the pain. If there had been something about regret that had served us. Kept us honest. About just how much damage you could do to yourself, to the world, if you never felt sorry. Wondered if we needed regret the same way our bodies needed pain, to tell us when something was wrong. About just how easily you could destroy yourself without the unpleasant warnings that pain gives.

"That was when the fear really set in."

Exercise 5: A Fable

Here.

An apprentice worked in a bakery. His boss was a quiet man who believed that hard work was always more important than talent. Nevertheless, this man *did* have talent, and using that as a foundation upon which he grew his business alongside his hard work, created a bakery that was not only moderately successful financially, but which became honored by a base of customers so loyal, many of them would never again visit another bakery, regardless of their hunger and desire.

The apprentice was not a baker. He served customers, cleaned the kitchen, helped with the books, pretty much everything the owner needed short of actual baking. Nor did he desire to be a baker. He liked the smell, liked the customers, liked his boss. It was a fine place to work as he prepared for a life in business where he hoped to soon be successful in his own right. And, as any ambitious young person is wont to do, he observed closely this thriving business, curious to discover its secrets.

He made no secret of his study. Casually, but consistently, he would speak of his observations to the baker, proud of his skill for deductive reasoning.

"It is the light through the windows. When a customer comes in, the light gives them hope and confidence. It is summer, even in winter. It is natural, where other stores feel artificially lit in their otherwise dim spaces."

The baker did not listen.

"It is the smell of rosemary, subtle but unmistakable. Even for customers who desire sweets, that savory smell makes them feel as if they are in a place that is so much more than a donut shop. It reminds them of fine cuisine, expensive meals they can't

always afford, the memory of which buoys them long after the meals have gone."

The baker did not listen.

"It is the prices. Inexpensive enough to keep them coming back, but not so cheap that they fail to value the goods. We are more expensive than Perry's, but I suspect that makes customers think we are *better* than Perry's. We *are*, of course, but it is the price that settles the point, without being so high as to drive them away."

The baker did not listen.

On the apprentice went, day by day, noting the layout of the display, the balance between consistency of choices and occasional new items to explore, the cleanliness of the space, the old-fashioned feel of the decor. Each aspect of the customer experience he explored, out loud, doing his best to discover the formula for the bakery's success. Each time he discovered a new idea, each time he tried to impress his employer with observations, the baker would simply continue in his work, as if he could not hear.

But he *could* hear.

It drove him to distraction.

The baker felt blessed by luck and was afraid to question it. He thought that attempts to name it would drive it away. Even to *deny* the apprentice's observations would muck with fate. For him, the baker, it needed to be as if such observations never occurred. As if he never heard them. He drove them from his mind as we drive away ear worms or bad dreams. He shouted in his mind *I'm not listening, I'm not listening, I'm not listening.*

One day, however, the baker found that he could not keep out the noise of the apprentice. In a kind, but quiet and firm voice, he fired him, suggesting that the apprentice might now pursue his true career, and move on to the next phase in his life. The apprentice, not quite ready to give up the small but steady

income, pressed him on why. He had studied the books, after all, and knew the bakery could well afford him.

At last, the baker spoke his mind.

"There is a magic about the world, a blessing upon us that is dependent on our accepting it without question. It is elusive. Search for the secret if you must, but just when you think you have discovered the secret, the magic will change, and you will be left without either secret or magic. Dame Fortune is fickle, and if you dare to sneak peeks at her as she prepares her toilette, she will walk out on you forever. Or worse. Better to wait, and let her surprise you."

The apprentice left. The baker struggled to hire good help, and picked up many of the apprentice's former tasks, though not very well. The quality of the goods fell as the baker became more distracted with other things. The other things were not done well either, and the place became, somehow, a little less enjoyable to visit for his customers than it once was. Or maybe they just tired of it. The bakery survived, but it became second rate, and hard to keep going. The magic was gone.

Perhaps the apprentice killed it by questioning the magic.

Perhaps the baker killed it by *failing* to question the magic.

So.

The magic has blessed you, and life is good. Rather than bask in the present, you look to the future. You think, *I must understand why life is good, so that I can keep it that way*. You think, *I am happy today, but I must guarantee that I will be happy tomorrow*. You dismiss the magic as superstition, and seek to discover fortune's secret formula.

Good idea or not?

Today I Am Here

Twelve times Regret determined to rid himself of the goddess. Twelve times he failed. Sometimes he would suggest to her that he was tired, or busy, or had important work to do. At these times, Bliss would simply fail to take the hint. She would smile, talk about what a lovely day it was turning out to be, perhaps make vague plans not to be taken seriously, but which gave some hope for the day. It was almost as if she was intentionally distracting him, as a mother to a child on the verge of a tantrum, deflecting angst in the hope of showing a glimpse of something more attractive.

It was *not* intentional, of course. It was just her way.

Sometimes he would speak to her in no uncertain terms, tell her to leave his house, that she was not wanted, that she disturbed him. At these times Bliss would sidle up like an old lover, touch him gently as if he had just told her how beautiful she was.

He would say, "Go away. You bother me."

And, arms around his neck, she would whisper in his ear, "But I *like* to bother you," followed by a kiss on the nape.

He would say, "For the sake of Sanity, woman, *leave this house.*"

And she would reply, facing him from upon his lap, her legs wrapping the back of his chair, "Oh, but it's so beautiful, I couldn't possibly. Beside, I want to see the attic," and her hands would slip up inside his shirt with a taste of the joys he might feel if only she stayed.

These more vehement comments from Regret only served to bind her closer to him, usually resulting in another bout of lovemaking someplace they had not yet explored. The attic, the cellar, each of the bedrooms of course, the kitchen, the bathtub, the lake. Each time he would believe was the last, each time find-

ing it harder to let her go. He had expected something a little more predictable. One more bout of fun and then back to the real world. Like the old days. Spend a few beautiful moments with a lovely woman, followed by whispers and a wistful glance as she walks away. With this one, though, there was no feeling sorry. She could hardly regret what she did not remember. For her, there was only the present, and increasingly, the present was quite nice.

Of the twelve times Regret attempted, and failed, to get rid of Bliss, these moments accounted for some eight or nine. For those, we can blame the tenacity of Bliss. Or her tendency to be oblivious. Or her joy. Or her love. I don't suppose it matters. What we know is that in those moments Regret would have let her go, but Bliss chose to stay. Why she cared for Regret is hard to say. Perhaps she felt he needed her, and that was enough. Perhaps he just could not hold onto the moments of bliss she gave him long enough for her to seek greener pastures. Or perhaps she didn't know herself.

What *is* certain is that some eight or nine times, Regret determined to rid himself of Bliss, and Bliss refused to be rid of. He would say, *go*, and she would stay.

For the other three or four, Regret had no one to blame but himself. There were moments when, her work apparently done, she would begin to wander off in search of a new adventure. At these moments, Regret knew he had naught to do but sit back and let nature take her away. He need only wait, and his privacy would once again bring him peace. Such a victory, however, was not to be his fate.

As at the other times, he was determined to be rid of her, determined to put her behind him, get back to work, however much he dreaded the prospect, and back to his life. Time to face his destiny, whether or not he was ready. It was time to put her

away, figuratively, and he was determined. At these times, however, it was he, and not she, that caused his determination to falter. When her attention waned, when the world lured her toward the door, he would second guess himself. He would look at the beautiful woman over which he had no power, and wonder if he might spend just a few more minutes with her after all.

And he would call her back. Or follow her.

Against his better judgment.

She would say, "Isn't this nice?"

He would say, "If only it could last."

She would say, "It already does."

He would say, "You'll see. Tomorrow you'll be gone."

She would say, "Today I am here."

And minutes would turn to hours would turn to days. Life at the lake house would go on, and he would bind himself more closely to her with each passing day. And as days led to nights and back again, he found that she was pretty nice company, maybe even better than his own.

Exercise 6: Captain of Industry

Here.

Your grandfather builds a small business from the ground up. Not much of a business, perhaps, but enough to put food on the table and leave his three sons better off than he. With tenacity, sheer force of will, and little help from your uncles, your father parlays the business into a corporate enterprise valuable enough to bring the extended family up from the middle class into the three percent.

You are, in your father's estimation, a lazy bum, but you have made good marks in college, and, though you have not yet lived up to his expectations, show potential for someday joining him in that exclusive club reserved for *Captains of Industry*.

Well, you are still finding your way.

Although your father has kept his brothers from ascending to the highest tier of his empire, his suspicion that one of your cousins may well be the most deserving to be crowned prince and heir is growing. This cousin is a mean spirited climber more ambitious than you, works harder, and would undoubtedly serve the investors better. What happiness still lives inside the business would die under his control, but there is little question that profits would thrive. It's ok. You are well educated, have strong connections, and there is enough family money to keep you comfortable for life, though perhaps not for the life of the children you do not yet have. You may not be fond of your upstart cousin, but he *would* get you off the hook. After all, you are not sure you *want* to take on the family business.

Given the choice, you would prefer to live a life of leisure. Work has its appeal, of course, but preferably in small doses. Offering the occasional help with your one of your mother's charities, or business errands for your father, seem to you more than

enough work to earn the life of weekends you currently enjoy. Late nights with friends, travel about the world, dabbling in piano, pickup soccer, visits to your so-called *investments* in the arts, keep you more than content with your state. Life is good, and there seems little impetus to give it up for the prospect of long pressure-filled days at the office.

A man does not rise to the rank of *Industry Captain*, however, without a domineering will, and your father is no exception. He is disappointed in you, *Son*, and has decided to teach you lesson. You have diddled away your life and *his* money, long enough. It is time for you to put up or shut up. Should you desire to go into the family business in earnest, you will be welcomed. Should you desire to embrace the entrepreneurial spirit of your paternal line, you will receive limited backing and unlimited advice. Should you settle down with a nice girl and raise a family with a steady but moderate income, you can be sure your children will be well taken care of.

Do none of these things, and *you can go rot, Sir*.

The dilettante life is coming to an abrupt end.

As you consider your options, along comes a young maiden, and you fall in love. She is pretty and wise, but poor. Her parents are immigrants, but so was your great-grandfather. One day, she will no doubt inspire you to embrace the ambition that lays dormant within you. She will raise children with you, become a wise and caring mother, achieve ambitions in her own right, and always retain the vibrant spirit with which you fell in love.

Perhaps this is your moment. Perhaps she is the impetus that will drive you from your carefree, though layabout, life into one worthy of what your father calls the *American Spirit*.

Sadly, your father does not approve of this particular woman. She is not from what he would call a *nice family*, not really *one of us*. He avoids racial epithets, but the inferences are hard to

ignore. He tells you the children of this godforsaken union would be an insult to your mother, a rejection of your family's rise to the upper class, all the while carefully avoiding mention of her heritage. She is not worthy of you, has deceived you with her womanly witchcraft, wants only your money. A *gold digger*. She is a living example of everything wrong with your life. Just another dabbling in something that cannot possibly be serious. Ambitious for you? Of course she is. Ambitious for your *money*. For your *father's* money.

The maiden so angering your father has driven him to action. *Not in my house. Not in my sainted mother's family.* The time for spirited advice has ended. The time for solemn guidance is long past. Tough love has seized the day. He has gone from issuing vague threats to issuing an ultimatum. *Drop the girl and get to work, now, or here's \$1000 and a handshake, the last things you will ever get from me.*

Your father does not make such statements lightly. You know this to be true. He is a careful man who does not make promises he cannot keep. His way is to hold back, equivocate, play both sides that he might take advantage as it serves him. When he does make a promise, it is irrevocable. He had once promised his father to put the family business before the family. When the time came to do so, he betrayed his own elder brother with legal maneuvers. Business improved in his brother's absence, and the two never spoke again. This man does not make promises easily *because* he never breaks them. If you walk out of your father's house, it will surely be forever. It is a choice you will no doubt regret for the rest of your life.

On the other hand, regret seems to be something you have overcome. The idea that you could feel sorry for any decision at all seems laughable. You are no longer the man you once were, do not fear choices as you once did. Regret is a relic from your

past. Today is *all*. It is only this moment that matters, only how your words feel as you speak them, not as you might someday remember them. Your willingness to risk is at a new high.

You tell your father you are a grown man who can think for himself. You insult your father for daring to treat you otherwise. You tell your father only a cad would give up on love for his father's money. You tell your father he would not dare say these things if your girlfriend looked more *American*. You tell your father to stop fearing things he does not understand. You tell your father to think about other people for once. You tell your father he does not know what love is, or has forgotten long ago. You tell your father he is a domineering sonofabitch who never cared for you to begin with, as long as he had a tub full of gold he could bathe in late at night when everyone else had gone to sleep. You tell him to *go to hell*.

Good idea or not?

Where Did You Grow Up?

It is an obligatory duty among lovers to ask of each other's past. We expect it, and it therefore must be done. You must ask him about his past, his family, his job. You must seek to discover not only who she is, but how she became so. This is not a requirement for sex, though it is, it cannot be denied, an excellent strategy. Rather, it is a requirement for *relationship*. You must ask, you must care, you must remember. Or you can gather your toys and go home.

Bliss did not fail to ask, nor did she fail to care. She liked Regret and was genuinely interested in him. She liked hearing about his childhood, his job, his other loves. She did not tune him out when he spoke, did not ignore him. To remember, however, was beyond her ability. Sometimes she would ask the same questions, sometimes different. She was an adventurous person, not stuck with the same ideas, same questions, same pickup lines, if you will, day after day. The variation in her conversation, however, was not purposeful. She was not bothered by the idea of repeating old topics, old questions. Rather, her questions were inspired by the moment, by the conversation at hand. If a conversation was similar to the day before, then the questions following might be as well.

Where did you grow up?

The second time, he probably said something like, "As I said, it was what you might call *suburban* today. Not a very adventurous place, but we liked it at the time. Kind of a hard place to get excited about, but there it is." The third or the fourth time, however, he began to question himself. He talked about a neighbor kid he always liked and hadn't thought about in generations. He talked about a creek in the woods where he used to play war

games. He talked about hating his chores because nothing was ever good enough for his mother.

"Like sweeping out the cellar. Somehow, it always landed on me to sweep out the cellar. Not a bad job in the summer. I mean, if you have to do chores instead of enjoying the sunshine, at least working in the coolness of the cellar felt nice. On really hot days, I would take a lot of time down there, mostly just to stave off the heat. And I did good work, for a kid anyway. But it was never good enough. Looking back on it now, you can see why she got along so well with my father. She had such a sensitivity for *disgust*, her empathy for him must have been immense. She would come down and hold candles in every corner, picking up dirt with her fingers. Finding dirt where no other being could conceive of even looking. To this day I can hardly understand why she cared so much. I mean, it's not like she wasn't going to wash the potatoes before cooking them, anyway. I think she just couldn't help making me feel like I could never be good enough. The nature of *Shame*, I suppose. Maybe it made me a better person, a harder worker. Maybe she's the reason I put so much effort into my work today. Still, I don't remember it fondly."

Where did you grow up?

"Embarrassment, my sister, had a lot more friends than I did. She just had a way about her. Kind of naturally popular. Not that I wasn't. But where I was more...*introspective*, I suppose, she was more *social*. She would have birthday parties kids would fight to be invited to. Mine were more about a couple of friends doing something fun together. I wasn't jealous. I don't mean that. I never really desired to be more like her. It was almost the opposite. Her friends were really more frightened of her than anything. I think they probably just wanted to stay on her good side. You can imagine the sort of friends I'm talking about, little girls so afraid of what others thought of them that they would do any-

thing to appear *normal*. I got to experience a little of her world without having to live in it, which was better in every way. When I think about it now, it's hard to doubt that what I learned about people through her taught me most of what I knew when I started my work."

Where did you grow up?

"I remember this one time, I came back for a visit, and nobody was home. Suddenly it occurred to me that my folks spent all this time at home just because of us. That when they were given the choice, they preferred their work. That parenthood was a duty they took seriously, but maybe not more than that. I remember suddenly taking their work a lot more seriously, wondering what became of the world when they absented themselves. I wondered if they were even important if they could spend so much time with us. What happened in their part of the world when they were with us? A world without Shame. Without Disgust."

Over and over and over.

At first, Regret was frustrated by her repetition, to the point where his first thought would be *why bother?* What happened, however, was that he soon began to think of her questions as an excuse to remember his life. The questions were merely prompts for him to talk about himself, something he so rarely did. Repeating the questions allowed him to delve deeper, move past the easy answers on the surface. *Was your mother kind to you*, for the fourth time, became an opportunity to speak about his mother in a new way. A different way. And he reflected on the variance of memory.

How his sister, Embarrassment, was always more feared than loved. How her friends vied for her good graces not because they liked her, but because they needed her. How his mother, Shame, had no fear of breaking people so badly they could never

recover. How, as a matter of survival, she told herself she was needed, and refused to tell herself she was feared. How his father, Disgust, always pined for the old days, when people were more susceptible to him. How he, in his old age, had learned to focus on the easy targets, to turn his world into factions of *clients*, and *everyone else*.

All of his life, Regret had thought of his experiences, of the experiences of others, as unchangeable things. He had used that belief to drive his work. The inability to change the past, he knew, gave way to regret in a way that would not be possible otherwise. Yet, as he began to answer the same questions over and over, and answer them differently each time, he saw his life for the first time as changeable. Who he was, what he had done, was a matter not of fact, but of perspective. The idea was shattering.

And it made him smile.

If the past was changeable, if it was only what we *chose* to see, then it could not be denied but that it was only how we *felt* about the past that mattered, rather than the past itself. Actions were ephemeral. Misfortune was wrong after all. The moment an action had passed, it began to change. It became reliant on how it was remembered. How it was *felt*. If his friends had felt the pang of regret without his help, it was still a *choice*. A choice they had, perhaps, learned at his feet. Perhaps his work had some value after all.

As he reveled in this thought, he experimented on his lover. How might her past change, were she to revisit it? Following her lead, he, too, repeated his questions. He prompted her to see her past in many ways, to explore the variety of feelings that must surely accompany it. Not an easy task. If she had any memory of her childhood, she disguised it impeccably. He did not fail to ask, to care, to remember the things that she said. The things that she said, however, her answers, bore no relationship to his questions.

For when Regret attempted to do his duty by Bliss, she simply changed the subject.

Salton Christiansen

"I can't complain, really. Things turned out for the best. My time with Nisha was nice while it lasted, but it was never going to last forever. I have no doubt about that. Still, I would be lying if I said I didn't have *some* regret.

"There was a time when I might have said something like, *I don't regret a thing*. That time, however, is not only long gone, it harbored a lie I can hardly listen to today, let alone speak. When people say they don't regret a thing, what they mean is that they're happy at that moment. That they recognize their happiness is a result of the choices they've made. That if they had made different choices, they might not be happy. Not happy in that moment. That moment they said they didn't regret a thing.

"Does that make any sense?

"Or maybe it's the other thing. Maybe they're not happy at all, but they don't care. When they say *I don't regret a thing*, maybe they mean they would make the same choices all over again, even knowing how badly things turned out. That's not a lack of regret. That's just pride. Or hubris. Obstinacy, maybe.

"I guess I would have been in that first group. Glad to be happy and easy and all that. I mean, life had always been pretty good to me. I knew I had made stupid choices, but I honestly didn't regret most of them. I just believed they were part of who I was, and I *liked* who I was.

"Not today, though. Today, I regret *everything*. I make a bad decision, and I immediately wish I hadn't. I make a good decision, and all I can see is a future where it turns out to have been a bad one. I shouldn't feel that way, I know. I should think myself blessed for having lived in a world without regret. I should have used it to see what little value it holds for us. That's what Nisha did. She let it make her stronger.

"The *Days of No Regret* were like some wonderful drug induced psychedelic experience. We smiled, we learned, we had epiphanies. And when it was over, a few people took what they learned and figured out how to live it without the drugs. Most of us, though, just got back to our normal lives, with little more than a nice memory. Except now we were worse off, because we knew what we were missing.

"Can I say I regret *not regretting*? I mean, I don't want to be disparaging of Nisha. I think I might have really loved her awhile. A lovely while. But she was a drunken binge in which I said things I shouldn't have. *Did* things I shouldn't have. It doesn't matter whether I really meant them, because at any other time in my life I wouldn't have said them. I would have censored myself because I knew better. Not because I didn't want to hurt my parents, but because I knew that, if I did, I would regret it. Maybe if I'd been a little more sober, so to speak, it would have worked out.

"Here's the thing. It wasn't that my father could never have accepted Nisha. She was beautiful, smart, engaged...I don't know...just all that stuff, I suppose. She was also ambitious, in her own way. She might not have driven me to make my own fortune, but we definitely wouldn't have spent our lives sitting on the couch. I really don't believe it was the woman herself to whom he objected. Not even her...I mean, my father wasn't...to call him a racist is, at least for me, to miss the point. Racially insensitive, no doubt. He definitely has old fashioned ideas, but...had things gone a little differently, I think he would have learned something and...well...changed, I guess. Her...*exoticness*, I suppose, made it harder for him to see her as I did, but that was just this one little part of his...well, *problem* with her. My father believes that racism is wrong, is embarrassed by his...old fashioned feelings. He never allowed himself to use

blatantly hurtful words, though I know he was thinking them. Still, I really do think he could have looked past that if only...

"It was the *way* in which we were in so-called love. I don't think it was so much who she was as who *I* was. Or...who we were when we were together. We must have looked like a couple of infatuated teenagers to him, more concerned about the look in each other's eyes than anything resembling the future. On its face, our love was dismissive of his values. He wanted me to plan my life, think every decision through carefully. My romance with Nisha was an improvised whirlwind with no concern for consequences. We talked as if the future was of no importance. I think *that* was thing he could not abide.

"Granted, he was not exactly eloquent in his arguments against her, but in his own way he was just trying to tell me to step back and think with my brain instead of my heart. No. That's too generous. To this day, I don't think he ever thought it was about love. He was far more crass than that. He was convinced I was thinking with my...well...about sex and all that. Needless to say, he didn't take my arguments too seriously. And he shouldn't have, honestly. I was like a four year old having a tantrum because he wanted to take my blanket away. There's only so many times you can say, *but I love her*, without making it obvious that you haven't given real thought to anything else. Had I been more rational, had I allowed myself to see her faults and my own, admit to them, had I allowed myself to give serious consideration to what our future together would mean, how we would, *she* would, fit into our world, how our children might fit into our world, how we would *manage* that, my father and I might have worked it out. Had we shown any care at all for the future, we...well...we might have figured out together how to bring Nisha into our family.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm glad we didn't. Not...I don't mean I'm glad we didn't welcome her into our family. I do still love her. I suppose I always will. I just mean...I suppose I mean we were never any good for each other. Honestly, I would have been a disaster for Nisha, and she for me. We would have made each other miserable. We would have spent our lives *seething* in regret. Even her. Even Nisha would have finally succumbed and gone back to the bad old days when regret was her master. Without me, at least she has a chance.

"I know it looks like I chose my father over her. That I chose *money* over her. I know it looks like that, and I sound like an idiot denying it. Yet, I do deny it. It was never about the money. I'm way too cavalier about that. Always have been. And it wasn't about daddy issues either. He's a prick and I know it. He knows it, too. I would have no hesitation to stand up to him for something I truly believed in. I know that sounds disingenuous, given what happened, but I believe it, anyway.

"No. I didn't choose money over love. I did something many would consider far worse. I chose the future over the present. I chose *logic* over love. I chose to plan my life, rather than take what adventure might befall. I decided that I knew what would happen and acted on that knowledge, rather than taking a chance on what was in my so-called heart. A chance I *knew* would lead me to misery. Lead *her* to misery. And I was right. I have no doubt about that. I made the right choice.

"To say I don't regret the choice, though, is to entirely miss the point. I can't stop thinking of what might have been. At the same time, though, I know that, had I made the other choice, I would feel exactly the same way. That's why Nisha and I never had a chance. She bought into the idea that life can be lived without regret. That what is done is done. That we can put the past behind us as if we have no responsibility for it. That we can pre-

tend our circumstances are not our fault, are not the result of choices we made when we knew better. I can't do that. I couldn't before the *Days* and I can't now. I was never going to be the person she needed me to be. We would never have gotten past that.

"Letting her walk away was the best decision I ever made.

"And I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

Horatio Porter

"If only I hadn't gotten so complacent, y'know?

"I'm not saying I haven't learned my lessons. I have. It's just that...how do you...how do you lose the person, maybe the only person in the whole world who would ever really just love you for who you are...how do you...how do you not look back and think you should've done something...different?

"The ones that say they are different people, that living without regret taught them to live without regret? Those people are liars. I don't care how confidently they say it, I don't believe them. You can't just *choose* not to feel regret. Or nobody would. Nobody *wants* to feel that way. Nobody wants to tear out their soul, day after day, wishing for things that can never be. It doesn't matter that you know they can never be, it doesn't matter that you know regret only makes you feel worse. It's there, *inside you*. That thing. That thing whatshisname said. *It used to be a part of me and now it's apart of me*. That is such a load of crap, y'know? Because it doesn't matter if the devil is inside your mind or is just whispering in your ear. He's still *there*, and he isn't going anywhere.

"I remember, during the *Days*, Donna was going to make this special dinner for us. I can't even remember what we were supposed to be celebrating, but it was something. Maybe our one month anniversary? Something like that. The important thing was we were planning to have this dinner together, and Donna was going to cook something special.

"Now, I don't really know a good cook from a bad cook. *Not burned* was pretty much my mother's goal, may she rest in peace, so my standards have never been very high. Donna, though, she took it very seriously. She put a lot of care into cooking, and, of course, was always sure it was terrible. Needed a lot of reassur-

ance, y'know? I say this...I say this because I knew whenever she wanted to cook that there was a risk we would end up in a fight. Not a fight fight. More like a *not talking* fight, where she just felt bad because she thought she ruined my night by screwing up dinner, which I didn't feel, but never got to say, so I felt bad for making her feel bad, and she felt bad for making me feel bad that I made her feel bad and on and on and on. Regret had nothing on that.

"Anyway, work that day had been busy, and by the time I got around to lunch, it was already pretty late in the day. If I'd been thinking, I just would have skipped lunch altogether. Then I would have been hungry when I came home and devoured dinner, and she would have been the queen for making a dinner that I devoured, y'know? Instead, I just ate a big lunch when I finally got the chance, after which there was no hope of being hungry after work. I should've known better, but there it was. By the time I got home, I still wasn't hungry, and I just kind of picked at the dinner. When she asked me about it, I told her the truth, which must've sounded like an excuse for not liking her cooking or something, and she started going into the...y'know, the...spiral thing, I guess. Clearly I hated it or I would have eaten it, right? Probably I should've apologized, but the thing was that I wasn't sorry.

"So we ended up in one of those fight/not fights, y'know? Where what should have been a lovely quiet romantic evening turned into a night where we could hardly look at each other, and neither of us wishing we had done anything to fix it. Both of us knowing if we really got into it we'd end up in tears, and not daring to risk it.

"I think that's what I mean. About all those people who say we were better off without it. The thing is, while regret can destroy you, it can also make you stronger. I think it actually serves

a purpose. It makes you want to be better. Makes you care. It's not just about being more responsible or whatever. It's about learning from your mistakes. You have to be sorry sometimes for people to know you care about them. To show that you know you're not perfect. We all need to see a little weakness in each other to help us forgive *ourselves*. If you just go around never feeling sorry about anything, ultimately you're just a bully who won't give in. Or an arrogant child who can't learn from his mistakes. It's about growing up, I guess.

"The *Days of No Regret* were like being outside after dark, playing kick the can, and everybody's parents have forgotten about you. No one calls you in. You can just stay out playing as long as you want. Maybe you're getting tired and ought to go home to bed, but nobody's calling you, so you're off the hook. People who try to live without regret *now*, are like kids who just ignored their parents when they finally *did* call them in. Little arrogant brats who think they know better than their parents, and will defy them just for the sake of fighting back. Sometimes you just have to take your medicine, even if you dread it.

"I'd be lying if I said it doesn't consume me now. At least sometimes. I think about Donna and all the things I could've...y'know...done differently. If only I'd shown a little more empathy. Or care. Or courage, maybe. I'm sorry. It's just...y'know...been hard. How do you not blame yourself? How do you not let it take you over from the inside? If only I'd been there for her when she needed me most. Or, maybe, I don't know, just paid more attention. What happened...the night she died...what I mean is, it wasn't just that night. Donna was a mess. I'm not pretending she wasn't...but...it's not like we both didn't know that. I got complacent. A lot of people did.

"The thing that haunts me, though, the thing that keeps me up at night is whether...I don't know...whether *not* paying atten-

tion, getting too complacent or whatever, if that was just a part of my, y'know, not *caring* enough."

One Thousand Dollars and a Handshake

The day that Salton's father met Nisha Eikenboom should have been a good one. It was a Friday, which usually meant getting product out the door by lunch, followed by a slow winding down of the week. True, output always slowed down a bit as his workforce began to taste the coming weekend, but they also were increasingly likely to leave him alone. After all, who wants to risk working late on a Friday to solve a problem that can certainly wait until Monday? Distractions seemed to disappear on Fridays, and Pater was usually afforded a little time for more thoughtful work. He was able to put day-to-day troubles on the shelf, and study the future instead. It was a time for dreaming. For vision. Yes, it should have been a good day.

Instead he was dogged by one employee after the other, each with an idea, a complaint, or, in one case, a twenty-three minute bit of rambling to praise a co-worker of no importance. It was not that things had gone wrong. That would have given him some sense of engagement. Pater did not like problems, but he did like solving them. A day of problems held the potential for accomplishment. That particular day was not a day of problems. It was a day of incessant rambling as distracting as it was inane.

Regret had formerly kept these pests at bay. When Pater Christiansen's employees were ruled by regret, they hesitated to bother him. When they hesitated to bother him, things seemed to run smoothly, and more importantly, without interference from himself. Pater was not an easy man, and taking his time for anything save his direct self-interest often led to trouble for the troublemaker. His managers, his supervisors, his workers on the factory floor, all of them knew, soon enough, that to trouble Pater was to regret having troubled Pater. Formerly, fear of regret had tempered the masses, ensuring that only items of the greatest

importance took his time. On this particular Friday, such temperance was not to be found.

Suffice to say, the *Days of No Regret* were taking their toll.

What should have been a good day, then, became one more in a string of increasingly bad ones, and it put Pater Christiansen in a sour mood indeed. His humor was not improved when he arrived home, later than usual, hardly enough time to change for the dinner where he was to meet his son's latest whore. Needless to say, the dinner did not go well. By the time the night was over, he had argued with his son, insulted the so-called girlfriend, and shut down his wife so many times it would be a miracle if she ever spoke in his presence again.

On another night, the presence of regret might have tempered his anger. On another night, regret for one instant might have held back trouble in the next. On another night, he might have been inundated with whispers:

If only you hadn't said that.

If only you hadn't taken that so seriously.

If only you had insisted on a drink before dinner.

If only you had let Helena talk once in a while.

If only you had shown a little more faith in Salton.

There were, of course, no whispers to be heard that night. Regret was on vacation and showed no signs of coming back any time soon. Instead, there was a vacuum, a hunger for something, *anything*, to fill the void. Pride and anger did not disappoint, and came with a vengeance. Where regret is a *digestif*, pride and anger are closer to a main course with strong flavors overpowering everything in their path. They blinded Pater to the delicate tastes about him, and roiled his stomach with overconsumption.

Of course, even the *nouveau riche* have some semblance of taste and diplomacy. Pater Christiansen did not openly insult the girl to her face. Rather, he showed his contempt with a lack of

interest and suspicious eye contact. Comments by the girlfriend were met with snorts, and looks of distraction were pointed anywhere but at her. He spoke to her only when she specifically asked him a question, and even then it was only with the most curt of replies. When conversation turned its attention away from him, he studied the gold digger, hunting for flaws, looking for evidence to support his already formed opinion of her.

As a result, dinner became awkward and uncomfortable, with conversation increasingly forced. Father and son had much to say to each other, but held their tongues until they might speak more intimately. When dinner had concluded and the girlfriend offered to help clean up, Pater and Salton retired to the den for their opportunity.

"I would call you a no good lazy ass son of a bitch if it were not such an insult to your saint of a mother. Bad enough you expect me to support your layabout lifestyle, partying non-stop with your so-called friends and failing to even *pretend* to live up to your responsibilities. Bad enough. But now you want me to support your *whore* as well?"

This last, loud enough to be heard in the dining room, though not in the kitchen where the women now stood making awkward conversation.

"Dad, I think..."

"I don't give a shit what you think, Sal. All your mother ever wanted was for you to make good, find a nice girl, and give her some grandchildren. And this is the crap you bring home? You would make children with...with *that*? This is the trash you want to bring into our family? You insult your mother by bringing her into the house. You insult *me* by pretending you don't notice. It's time for you to grow up, Sal, and stop treating life like some kind of everlasting party with no consequences. Mark my words, Salton, consequences are coming. You need a career and a family,

not a lifestyle and a party whore. Christ, Sal, have I taught you *nothing?*"

Another day, another time, Pater would not have let himself speak in this way. Although he had a temper and was wont to speak his mind, this was further than he had ever previously dared go with his son. Previously, this was the sort of outburst he would have had in his mind as he lay awake in bed, unable to find sleep. Previously, when he finally came around to saying what was on his mind, it was more diplomatic. Previously, he was smart enough not to lash out in pride and anger. Previously.

So too with Salton. He was not a man who relished hurting anyone, least of all his father. He disagreed with him often, but held his tongue out of the consideration a son owes his father. Previously, he was deeply respectful. Previously, he showed appropriate embarrassment for his lack of achievement, his failure to succeed by his father's standards. Previously, he showed deference, both for the love he bore his father and, it cannot be denied, to keep the money flowing. Previously.

Like Pater's staff at the plant, however, Salton no longer seemed concerned with the consequences of speaking his mind. Precisely *because* his father had taught him well, he was prepared to fight back.

"I think you're being unfair to yourself, Dad. You've taught me plenty. You've taught me that listening doesn't matter. You've taught me to value appearance over substance. You've taught me to value money over love. To value class over care. You've taught me to insult a guest in my own home. You've taught me to bully the weak without giving them a chance to fight back. That as long as I don't say the actual words, I can be as rude as I want. You really think you were fooling anyone tonight? You think we all didn't notice your *disdain?* That you were actually hiding it until our little *tête-à-tête?*"

"My disdain is for a child who refuses to grow up."

"But we love each other. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"You don't know what love is. You insult the idea of love. You insult my love for your mother by saying so."

"I insult nobody. Maybe I don't have the words for it, but I *feel* it. She's *the one*, Dad. I can feel it in every part of my body."

"I think you feel it in one particular part of your body."

"I am in *love*."

"You need to grow up."

"I think *you* are the one who needs to grow up, Dad. You acted like a fucking child tonight. You should be ashamed. Nisha Eikenboom is the kindest, smartest, gentlest, and most beautiful woman I have ever met. That woman is going to be my wife. I won't dignify your disgusting old world attitude by bringing her heritage into this, other than to say *her* father would never bring shame upon his family as you have upon yours tonight. I am going to keep her with me for the rest of my life because she makes me a better person. You think I want to be like *you*? I spit on the woman who would make me like you. Nisha is a woman to make me better."

Pater did not pause before responding. Certainly, he did not think, although he did leave the room. Moments later her returned with a small stack of bills, one thousand dollars in cash he had just pulled from a safe in the study. He placed the bills on a side table. Nineteen thousand remained locked behind.

"This conversation is over. Your pampered lifestyle is over. Your childhood is over. We're done talking about it. The life before you is a life of decisions, and I lay before you your first. You're a grown man, and I owe you nothing. Should you desire a leg up, you may bid farewell to the whore and join me in business, with all the benefits commensurate with such a life. I would

consider such a decision a sufficient apology for the disrespect you have shown me tonight, after which we need not speak of it again. If you do not desire such a gift, and it is no less, you may fend for yourself. This is my offer. Drop the girl and get to work, or here's one thousand dollars and a handshake, the last things you will ever get from me."

Salton left without either. The money remained on the side table, awaiting his regret.

Little Miss Blunderbuss

Far from home, in the only open tavern of a small tourist village, Misfortune sat at a lonely table in the dark, itching for a fight.

That she found herself there was predictable. Her darker days tended to find her drenched in melancholy, gravitating toward her old love. She would throw disaster about broadly and carelessly, with no satisfaction, and wonder why she bothered. She would sit quietly, wondering if there was more to her life than using pain to teach lessons the world did not deserve to learn. She would wonder about old Regret, and what he might be up to now. She would, seemingly without purpose, find herself in his neighborhood, watching him without being seen, wondering if she might dare show herself. Wondering if he might ever care for her again.

At these times, she might follow him around for days, creating havoc all about him. Predictably, he would smell her messes and come around claiming prizes. Where misfortune abounded, regret often followed suit, though it was not like the old days. They were not working together, hand in hand, partners in a symbiotic relationship akin to love. This was an altogether different relationship, the spurned lover quietly giving gifts without reward, the greedy object of her affection taking gifts without thanks. Yet, Misfortune got some small satisfaction knowing her work still inspired him, if only unconsciously.

Today had been such a dark day, and she had found herself looking for Regret, though not admitting it to herself. It hadn't been difficult to track him down. Few gods were as predictable as he. True, a respite from work did not fit his usual patterns, but there were only so many places her old friend might visit, this insufferable tourist village being the most obvious. Filled with

vacationers more concerned with what souvenirs to bring home than anything resembling the importance of life, layabouts who whined at the smallest dent in their perfect little vacations, it was not a place that fed her need to teach substantial lessons. She could cause pain, yes, but to what end? As she had looked about, then, she ignored the masses and was, instead, overcome with nostalgia. Carelessly, she sought out the usual haunt of her old friend.

When, peering through a window at the lake house, she saw her own mother walking about as if she owned the place, however, her melancholy was displaced with anger. The change took no time at all. Her dreamy thoughts of Regret turned bitter. She was shamed by her desire, by her love. She chided herself for caring for someone, *anyone*, who could fall for that huckster she was forced to call mother. Her respect for Regret vanished, and she seethed. With every ounce of herself, she wished she had never met him.

She thought to herself, *so this is what regret feels like*. It hit her harder than she cared to admit. She turned back toward the village, her anger growing with every step, mixing itself with sadness into a cocktail of which she loathed the taste.

Now, across the village, at a dark table in the same tavern where Regret sat at the bar, thinking dreamily about his love lying asleep in his family lake house, Misfortune was itching for a fight. She sat, quietly, wondering what in the world she would say to him. Why she would want to speak to him at all. She seethed, but spoke not, awaiting instead for her old friend to begin the encounter. He did not disappoint, speaking across the room from his stool at the bar.

"Well, if it isn't Little Miss Blunderbuss. What brings your pathetic little self into my home away from home?"

The room quieted.

The moniker had always held a mixed blessing for her. At once insulting and endearing, she had to silence the part of her heart that reveled in any attention at all. In the days when they first met, when he had come out of his existential crisis and begun to act almost as a mentor, he had used the name to inspire her. Her sloppy *shoot first and ask questions later* approach was all well and good in its way, but if she were to really excel at her work, she would need to hone her skills, focus her art, damage with intent. She had learned to do so, of course, but the name had stuck. Today it was a reminder of their long history, for better or ill.

She took it ill.

Misfortune held her anger at bay. Showed the control Little Miss Blunderbuss had eventually learned to master. Without rising from her chair, without raising her voice, she allowed her words to carry across the now silent tavern. "Pathetic? You call *me* pathetic?"

Regret wasn't anxious for a fight, but he *had* started it. She had a way of bringing out the worst in him. Still at the bar, uncaring of the attention now paid by the other customers in the tavern, he spoke, once again, across the room.

"Pathetic. Yes. As in *pathos*. As in all you ever really wanted was for everyone to feel sorry for you. As in your goal in life was never so much to suffer as for the rest of us to *see* you suffer. As in you have made your life's work the causing of hardship, not because it makes these miserable people stronger, or even because you enjoy watching them suffer, which would be admirable, I admit. Rather, you bring hardship to these people that they might be pitied. That they may get some joy from that pity. That such pity might actually be worth the pain. Because *you* desire pity, so therefore *they* must desire it as well. Yes, my young friend, you are unquestionably if not definitively pathetic."

The silence in the tavern was palpable.

Had his insights registered, she might have questioned just how much like her family she truly was. Wondered if she was just another Bliss legacy, like her sisters, finding her own strange way of bringing happiness to the world. Might have taken a moment for self-reflection, thought about why she had come, why she had stayed. Had his insights registered, she might have broken before him, opened herself up, dared to love. These insights did not register, however. She heard only anger and disappointment from a god she no longer respected. Words of disdain from a coward weak enough to be seduced by her mother.

Well, maybe something else. Maybe some small part of her *was* pleased to hear his voice again.

Misfortune spoke quietly from the dark into the now silent room. "Thank you for your confidence Professor Pompous. Your arrogance never ceases to help us poor ignorant masses in our struggle to compete with your greatness."

Regret smiled. "May I buy you a drink?"

"As if."

"Join you, at least?"

"It's your life."

Regret took his cocktail and walked over to the corner table. The few patrons in the tavern who had quieted for the sake of hearing the strange across-the-room argument now settled back into their former conversations. No doubt they spoke to each other about what they had just heard, would likely speak to others in the coming days about the crazy people who insulted each other across the bar before sitting together as friends. We shall let them be. Our concern is with Regret and Misfortune, not their eavesdroppers.

Regret chose the chair closest to Misfortune, looked intently into her eyes, sighed, and sipped his drink.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, what are you doing here?"

Regret knew damn well what she was doing there, but looked forward to seeing her squirm a bit. He was no stranger to her melancholy wanderings, was not fooled by the seemingly coincidental meetings. That she quietly sought him out, tried to make it look as if she was just randomly running into him, *just passing by*, was something Regret had seen through long ago. That it fed his sense of pride and arrogance, however, was something he would not readily admit. In any case, he enjoyed baiting her. Misfortune did not take the bait.

"Oh, I don't know. Just wandering through, I guess."

"A little far from home, aren't we?"

"I suppose *we* are, old man. I suppose *we* ought to be working. Still, I suppose *we do* deserve a vacation. *We have* been working very hard lately."

Regret tilted his chair back a bit and considered her. It had been many years since he had last spoken with the goddess, and to say it had not ended well would be a severe understatement. Eighteen dead, thirty-seven wounded, and 1.2 million dollars worth of property damage, depending on how you counted. Not that such damage worried Regret much. These people always found a way to pick up the pieces, so to speak. Still, one could not help but smell the possibility of where tonight's conversation might lead.

Well, best to get it out in the open and move on. "So what really brings you here?"

Misfortune hesitated. Part of her wanted to fight for his love, face off with her mother and win Regret back for good. The other part wanted nothing to do with him, wanted to make him hurt, torture his soul and leave him for dead. Still not sure where

her words would take her, whether she should would give up on the god once and for all, or bind herself to him more closely than ever, she gathered herself up to speak.

She chose her words carefully.

"Have I ever told you about my mother?"

The question was deeply disingenuous. She had told him of her mother incessantly, single-mindedly, repeatedly. She had told him of her mother so many times he could hardly imagine a new thought coming from this mother-hating daughter. Regret rolled his eyes and turned off his ears, preparing for the same old speech he had never paid attention to before, and had no intention of paying attention to today.

His hubris, however, would not last long.

Exercise 7: Misfortune's Revenge

Here.

You are a young goddess, just beginning your journey of life. Hardly an adult, but too old to stay on at home, you set off to seek your fortune. With each step, however, your cynicism grows. With each encounter, your anger expands. What little hope you had turns to pessimism, and then to bitterness. You become separate from the world you inhabit. Your disdain takes you over completely.

On your travels, an older gentleman surprises you. Not quite a kindred spirit, he shares an empathy with you that breaks a crack into your cynical shell. He sees into your soul, and you are pleased that he does so. Unlike the teachers of your recent past, he shows understanding for your unique outlook, gains your trust. He befriends you, though perhaps only out of some nostalgic desire to recapture his now fleeing youth.

He teaches you of the world, always as a knowing sage, learned and wise. He is not, of course. He is an arrogant fool, a pompous professor blind to his worst missteps. Still, he speaks with confidence and authority, and you are easily won. You are wide-eyed and impressionable, he, more than willing to fill your empty vessel with opinions and dogma. One fool leads another, and neither is the wiser.

You are a misanthropic thing, he an arrogant fool. Where you see a world not worth your time, he sees a world ripe for change. Where you go about your work in the confidence that actions speak louder than words, he tells you that change comes only from within. Where he sees the people as friends, immature in their youth and desperately in need of his wisdom, you see only insufferable hypocrites, old enough to know better.

Still, you are more like than not.

You fall for him. He has given you no reason to see romance in his attentions, but you need none. Though you are loath to admit it, love has taken hold of you and refused to let go. Though you have never believed that Love could wield her power over you, you are caught in her storm, and give yourself over completely. Young as you are, however, you do not hide it well. You pull yourself closer to him, drag him closer to you. He, you believe, is your true love, and you clutch him that he might stay forever. It is a dangerous thing, but you are young and know no better.

Your attentions are not reciprocated.

Whether because he loves you not, or because he fears attachment, or perhaps because he loves another, it is impossible to say. He hardly knows himself. What is clear to him, what is unmistakable, is that an enjoyable friendship has chosen to ask more than he is prepared to give, if only with unspoken impressions. He sees the writing on the wall and, perhaps a little *embarrassed*, determines to wean himself of you.

He gently suggests you seek adventure, go about on your own, see the world for yourself. You choose to seek adventure by his side. He encourages you to seek other teachers, broaden your horizons. You choose to learn only from him. He implores you to seek love. You love only he. Exasperated, losing patience, he begins to insult you. He condemns you for your immaturity, for your lack of strength. He kicks you off the pedestal he previously shared with you, and laughs as you fall to the mass of fools below. He is unhappy to treat you so, shamed and disgusted by his cruelty, but is nevertheless determined to be rid of you.

He shakes. You cling.

Perhaps he cares for you, perhaps not. Perhaps he loves you, perhaps not. It does not matter. He is determined to be rid of you and cares not how you feel.

You look and he is gone.

And you are alone.

You pine. You weep. You wail. Though he cares not, you never quite give up. Not quite. You find ways to move on with your life, seek new adventures, channel your hate into your work. As you walk through life, however, your desire for him never quite abates. Not quite. You watch him from a distance. Not all the time, but enough. You know where he is, what he is doing, who he spends his time with. Not so much a stalker as a lurker, you check in from time to time, sure that someday he will remember you, think of you, love you. You lie in wait, that, when he is ready, you will be there.

Between your own adventures, you wander back to him, like an old woman wandering the grounds of her high school in an attempt to recapture the excitement of her youth. Sometimes you allow yourself to bump into him, casually, where you greet each other as old friends. You do a little work together, but it always turns out badly. You cling again, he runs away.

Other times, you watch him in his work, come in afterward to follow Regret with tragedy, that his friend's feelings of regret might increase. Sit quietly in the shadows as he knocks his friends down, creeping out only after he is far away to give his so-called friends one more hard kick as they struggle to rise. It is not the satisfaction you desire, is not the partnership come love that you dream of, but it does give you some small sense of connectedness to the god you cannot quite forget.

He takes lovers.

You pine.

He drives you away to your own adventures. You cannot stay away. Each time you think you have shed him from your life, you come back. Each time you do, you desire him more than the last.

After a particularly long time away, at a time when you feel you might finally, possibly, almost be over him, you return for one last look. You hope to tell yourself it is over, that you no longer care for him. That you have moved on.

You are not surprised to see that he has a lover.

That she is your greatest enemy, a goddess you have sworn to hate for the entirety of your existence, a creature who hardly remembers you but would dare to call herself your mother if she did, is devastating.

The idea alone breaks you.

And you know not how to forgive him.

Anger in your heart, blinded by jealousy, you seek your revenge. You draw the insufferable goddess away with the insight that only a daughter could have. You cause her to wander off, distracted by new adventures, never to see, care for, or even remember her lover again. You steal his *bliss* and leave him to wallow in his own juices.

You break his heart like he has broken yours.

After your deed, you seek him out, claim your victory, rub salt into his wound. You show him the arrogance he has always shown you, and revel in your deed as he writhes in pain before you. You insult him as he has insulted you. You hurt him as only true love can, and pride yourself in the accomplishment.

You assure yourself that you have finally rid yourself of him. That you no longer love him. That you *can* no longer love him. That after a lifetime of pining, you have put him behind you. That your wish has come true, and he is lost to you forever.

And you watch him walk away. Again.

Good idea or not?

A Good Hand, but Not a Great One

Regret left the tavern drunk. He hadn't intended to. He had intended to kill a little time. He had intended to visit the village, perhaps spy on a few old friends, briefly remind himself of what he was vacationing from. He had intended to have one drink and wander back to the lake house where he had left Bliss sleeping soundly. The road from intention to action, however, is not well marked, and Regret quickly became lost. After Misfortune left him behind, he stewed contemplatively, wondering if her words had value. He stewed and he drank. He drank and he stewed. Seven ryes before closing is a little much, even for a god, and had him struggling to see straight, walking directionless, away from the dark neon light of the tavern, unsure of his way.

Such indulgence was unusual for Regret. Enough to take the edge off, yes. Enough to loosen the bonds of his old friend Restraint, rare at best. Yet, here he was, stumbling through this tourist village, the tavern locked behind him, as unsure of himself as he could remember since his youth. His brain fogged by a combination of liquor and the foreboding words of his old friend, Misfortune, he let his feet carry him he knew not where.

If he had any remaining intention, it was toward home.

His stomach churned, but not with the effects of the poison coursing through his body. Rather, it was with the butterflies that accompany the battle of hope and despair. Like a card player with a good, but not great, hand, and too much money in the pot, he was ruled by anxiety. Were his cards good enough? Was he throwing good money after bad?

On the side of hope was the beautiful goddess he had left sleeping, the first woman or goddess immune to his charms, and charmed by him anyway. The goddess who lived only in the present, who not so much shared his own disdain for the past as

dismissed it entirely. The goddess who loved him more completely than any woman he had known, and whom he just might possibly love in return. On the side of hope was the beginning of a new love, a new adventure, a new outlook on life.

On the side of despair were the words of Misfortune. That he was just one of many stops on the Bliss train, a wayside, a distraction, a dalliance forgotten as soon as he left the room. That, though to him she was a rare flower that bloomed but once a year, to her he was no more than a dandelion in summer. That try as he might to dismiss the claims of his dour little friend, the *Goddess of Goth*, a jealous rival with every reason to sow the seeds of doubt, he could not deny the knowledge all daughters must surely have of their mothers. That, waking in his absence, Bliss would not miss him, not even remember him. That by now she had surely looked about the empty house, found nothing to keep her there, and left. Moved on. On the side of despair was the loss of Bliss, to Misfortune, and the return of himself to the sadly predictable formula that had been, was destined to be, his old life, where he mattered little, and was desired even less.

Determined to play out his hand, he stumbled in a direction that reminded him vaguely of home. Along the way, still affected by the alcohol coursing through him, he allowed Belligerence quarter in his better self. She wrapped herself around his brain, and, as was her wont, encouraged him to shoot first and ask questions later. Better yet, she encouraged him to just shoot and keep on walking. Questions were for cowards, after all. Regret, weakened by anxiety and inebriation, plied his wares among the last call revelers wandering the dark streets on their way home. His aim was poor, his focus elusive, but his confidence was high. Without thinking, without reason, and little more than rhyme, he attacked whomever crossed his path.

To the pleasure of Belligerence, his work was sloppy at best.

He reminded Ella Cartwright that she had failed to walk her dog earlier that evening. He showed her the vision of the pee soaked carpet, the misplaced anger at a dog who had depended on her. *If only you had taken the ten minutes before going out.* It was a fine volley. Had he been more focused, it might have borne fruit. Rather than wallowing in regret, however, Ella Cartwright simply told herself there was nothing to do about it now. Water under the bridge, so to speak.

Regret tried again with another. He reminded Caesar Rosa about the stock purchase he had missed by less than an hour, which he now knew would have made him a small fortune. *If only you hadn't been so lazy while on vacation.* Rather than be-moaning his missed opportunity, however, Caesar reminded himself that those sorts of opportunities come up all the time, and, after all, what is the point of making all that money if you can't relax every once in a while?

Over and again, Regret made sloppy drunken casts about a sea of people who failed to take his bait. Like a basketball player in the midst of a slump, he missed every free throw, each miss bringing with it frustration, each time pushing harder, playing sloppier. With every miss, anger welled up inside, feeding his increasing belligerence. By the time he finally found the lake house, he was so angry he could not bring himself to walk in the door. He just walked around the side, threw himself in a near frozen lawn chair, and stewed until he fell asleep.

When he woke, cold, stiff, hungover, and just beginning to thaw, he sat up slowly to take in the situation. Visions of Misfortune invaded his mind, fear of Bliss leaving at any moment ripped back into his stomach, and shame at the failed attempts at work in his drunken stupor combined with the others to make him more than a little nauseous. Carefully, he stood up, hoping

to settle his stomach by sheer force of will. With quiet, careful steps, he made his way inside, looking for coffee and a long piss.

A day old danish made him feel a little better, and by the time the coffee was made, he felt nearly himself. Hardly daring to look for Bliss, he was relieved when he heard her waking up, footsteps down the hall, and the rushing water through pipes from the shower. Last night's despair was replaced with this morning's hope. True, she would inevitably leave him, and probably sooner rather than later. But today, *now*, she was here. Today, *now*, she loved him. Today, *now*, was all that mattered. That was the lesson Bliss kept teaching him. And he was learning. Misfortune may have been her daughter, but she had never really understood her. Only a lover could do that.

As the shower ran, he decided to surprise her. She would like that. He would walk in, fully clothed, spontaneous, and make love to her right there. True, the hangover made him less than his best self, but the best way to shake off yesterday was to get on with today. With one last sip of coffee, he kicked off his shoes and walked to the master bedroom. The sun shone through the windows, curtains drawn for the first time in a week. It was as if Bliss brought the sunshine with her, wherever she went. The bed was made, this too for the first time in a week, and Regret found it refreshing. A clean bright start to a clean bright day. Headache nearly gone, he walked into the bathroom and stepped right into the shower, fully dressed but for his feet.

The surprise, in keeping with its nature, did not go as planned. Instead, Embarrassment lay in wait.

"Christ, Reggie, you look like you just got outfitted at the Dad Store. Are you trying to look older and less distinguished? If so, I've *got* to say you are certainly succeeding beyond your own limited imagination."

She handed him the soap and turned her back to him.

Be a dear, Reggie, and get my back, will you?"

Regret dropped the soap and left the shower, leaving a trail of water behind him as he made his way back to the porch. His mind went many places at once. His sister, here. Bliss, gone. Had they seen each other? Had Embarrassment driven Bliss away? Was she gone forever? He sat himself down, cold and soaking wet, on a cushioned lawn chair now starting to warm with the autumn sun, and let out a deep breath.

He had lost the pot after all.

Soon enough, his sister approached.

"You might think about a more subtle approach, little brother. Wandering into a shower may show off what little spontaneity you have, but it does serve to carve away an environment of trust. A girl ought to at least feel safe in the shower, dear."

Regret, hardly able to find his voice, did not look at her when he replied.

"Cut the crap, Emmy. What are you doing here?"

"Same as you, little brother. Taking a weekender."

She stretched out a lawn chair for full tanning opportunity.

"Who were you expecting anyway? Reggie got a new girlfriend?"

Regret looked over at his sister. "Christ, Emmy, put some clothes on."

"Not until you take those off."

"Fine."

"Fine."

Minutes later, Embarrassment, dressed fashionably casual, skirt wafting in the warming autumn breeze, came back to the porch, coffee in hand. Regret lay out to dry in the sun in naught but his boxer shorts, the rest of his clothes hanging on the rail.

"So, who is she anyway?"

"Doesn't matter. She's gone."

"Yeah, well, no one ever sticks around our family for long, do they? No news there. Still, I am sorry. I wouldn't have come out here at all if my own place hadn't flooded with sewage. Honestly, Reggie, you can't *imagine* the smell. I just had to get out of there, and this place seemed like the obvious choice on short notice. Think I scared her away?"

Regret wondered. Had the presence of his sister scared his lover away? He thought not. Bliss had already stayed longer than he could have hoped. To keep her forever would have been unthinkable. She was gone, he could not doubt, but he could hardly blame his sister for that.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Emmy. I don't think you could have scared her away if you tried. She was never *really* here."

Just Passing Through

Regret showed a tendency toward privacy, secretiveness. He liked to work alone. Liked to *be* alone. He avoided social situations, cared little for consensus, and mistrusted the idea of a *common wisdom*. When he whispered into the ears of his friends, it was as they lay under the covers, or drove their cars. He sought out quiet lonely moments when they might be most susceptible to self-reflection.

His sister preferred more public settings. She was a social butterfly who enjoyed holding court. She never joined your table. *You* joined *hers*. She was most comfortable when surrounded by others, particularly if she could revel in their tributes. When she whispered in the ears of her clients, she never afforded them quiet contemplation or self-reflection. She caught them in public, where they might see the effects of indiscretion immediately, be publicly shamed for their foolishness, and, most importantly, lack the time needed to *laugh it off*.

Of course, one cannot be paid tribute to without being disliked. The most popular are often the most despised. And so it was with Embarrassment.

No one may desire Despair, or Misfortune, or even Regret, but there is a secret affinity with the sense of truth they bring with them. When Regret whispers in your ear, you say to yourself, "*Yeah, yeah, I know. You're absolutely right. I shouldn't have. What was I thinking?*" When Despair whispers in your ear, you say, "*I deserve this. I am worthless and weak. Still, maybe I can beat this if I can just find the strength.*" Even Misfortune encourages a sort of truthful acceptance, such as, "*I suppose these things happen to everyone, but tragedy can't last forever. Maybe tomorrow will be better.*"

You may not like them, but you admit them into your life. You *accept* them.

When Embarrassment whispers in your ear, however, you say, *"Oh, god, really? I can't really be like that. Ewww. Can we just forget the whole thing and pretend it didn't happen? I mean...really? I don't want to think about it. I looked like that? No way. Ugh. Never happened."* And so on. Yet, at the same time, you say, *"I will not be caught dead acting like that again. I will be perfect from here on out. I will do whatever she tells me, whatever it takes to avoid feeling like this again."*

You tie yourself more closely to her, that you might not feel her wrath again. You may despise the most popular girl in class, but you also understand the importance of being seen with her. Not that she minds. As it is in her nature to be secretly disliked, it is also in her nature not to care. She is as free of embarrassment as her clients are burdened with it.

It was a lesson well learned from her mother.

It was in Shame's nature to be ignored, to be secreted away in the hidden parts of the soul. True, she gained strength from it. She festered in the shadows, unseen, unnoticed, where she might grow in strength like mold in a dark, moist corner of the basement, soon too large to remove without taking a chunk of soul with it. "The longer they ignore you," she would tell her daughter, "the stronger you'll get." Embarrassment, however, did not want to be strong, any more than she wanted to be loved. She just wanted to be popular.

If their mother's true legacy survived, it was with Regret.

These were the two gods that met together on the back porch of their grandparents' lake house. The loner and the queen. Two gods who had known each other from their earliest memory, who, like all siblings, loved and hated each other. Two

gods who knew each other well enough to fight, and long enough to forgive.

Let's begin with the fight.

"What dragged *you* here, Emmy? Trouble in paradise? *Again?*" said he.

"At least I *have* a paradise," said she.

"So this time, you didn't drive him away? If only you had tried a little harder," said he.

"A little early to be on the clock, isn't it Reggie? It's like you don't even know how to take a vacation. All those *relaxation classes* and you still won't let yourself find a little peace," said she.

"I was a *child*," said he, taking the bait.

"And you still haven't learned your lesson?" said she. It was a dumb mistake. She was prone to make them. She played fast and loose, rarely with much attention to consequences. It was her way to throw out everything she could get her hands on - the clothes out of style, the joke offensive, the music trite - and see what stuck. Quantity over quality. It meant a high rate of failure, though not without a higher rate of success. Her lack of planning, however, often undermined her efforts, as it did in this case. True, Regret still felt embarrassment about the so-called classes he was sent to in his boyhood days, punishments, really, for being a little over aggressive with his studies. To remind him of being sent from the class into that special room, of the looks the kids gave him when he came back, was good work on her part. To suggest he should feel the same for how he was *today*, however, was closer akin to regret, a feeling to which he was not prone.

"There are so many lessons to learn," said he. "One lesson might be the value of not hurting the one who foolishly loves you, just to satisfy your addiction. Another might be to sacrifice some small part of your attention to someone else, some small payment for the undivided attention you demand they give *you*."

Another might be to face fear and risk loss, instead of running away and pretending to claim victory. These are all good lessons. How about you? Learn any lessons lately?"

Regret's strength was rising as the confidence of his big sister waned. It had been a good volley on his part. His sister had been through many breakups, and had consistently blamed herself. She was an easy target in this respect, though Regret got little satisfaction from the damage. Embarrassment, however, was no fool. Struck or not, she knew other buttons to push, and went after his biggest. She came up behind him and rubbed his shoulders. His lonely nature, his desire for privacy, made him uncomfortable with hands upon his body. She knew this, and exploited it. Awkward with his sister's touch to begin with, and doubly so as a result of his near nakedness, he shuddered and stood up to put on some dry clothes, her victory small but complete.

He went up to the bedroom to dress while his sister lounged in his chair, wondering why she always picked fights with him. She had been drawn to the lake house to clear her head after a particularly bad night. A broken water heater had led her to track down her husband unexpectedly, discovering him in an act of indiscretion. She had little tolerance for the weak, and would not easily forgive him. Unable to bear staying in his house another moment, she had gone to her place of solace. The companionship of her brother should have been a blessing. Instead, she had done her best to drive him away. As these thoughts swirled about her mind, her feeling of regret brought her to think of her brother in a different way, a hopeful way.

Regret, shaking off his anger upstairs, was coming off his own night of introspection. He, too, wondered why he feared to relax before his sister. They were different, it was true, but their difference had often made them stronger. There was no reason to compete with her. She was one of the few left in the world he

could actually trust. Not with a secret. It was not in Embarrassment's nature to keep secrets. Rather, he could trust her to understand him. To give him insight. To help him through a time in which he was failing to help himself.

By the time he had returned, they had both had enough, and were ready to give in.

"So there's this girl..."

Regret took a deep breath. Talking about his life was not something he did often or well. His mind was constantly full of voices expressing himself, voices which ever failed to manifest themselves outside of his mind. He told himself it was out of a sense of humility that he kept his thoughts to himself, though, when he was honest with himself, he knew it to be closer akin to superstition. Once you speak of yourself, of your feelings, he knew, you were beholden to them by others. If you kept them quiet, there was always a chance they might change for the better. Poppycok, of course. He would never have been fool enough to admit it, any more than admit to any of the other myriad of thoughts trapped in his mind. Yet, the knowledge was there, and he could not fail but to accept that it was fear that kept him quiet, not humility.

The fear was doubled by the presence of his sister. He loved her, it was true. Trust her to understand him, he did. Trust her to keep his secrets, he did not. It was in her nature to spill secrets, to haunt you with your own words, to remind you of the fool things you said when you were not careful enough. Today, however, he was broken. Or his shell was broken. Or whatever it was that held all those thoughts in his private place was broken. Being broken, the damage was done. Fear of further damage fell by the way.

"I'm not even sure if she's beautiful. Isn't that curious? I sit here, and can hardly imagine her. I can't see her face, her body, the clothes she wore. And yet, I see *her*. Not a picture, not an im-

age, but *her*. More of a feeling than anything else. As if, when I relax, when I, not so much think of her as not think of anything, I am washed over by the sensation that I am whole. Whole in a way I had not previously experienced. It is a beautiful feeling, Emmy, so beautiful that the *lack* of it is tearing me more deeply than I could have ever imagined."

Embarrassment looked almost sympathetic.

"She's gone, then?"

"Gone?" He had asked it almost to himself. "Gone? Big Sister, she was gone the day we met. She was gone every moment we were together. She was always gone. Never anything *but* gone. I think that's why I..."

"Why you love her?"

Regret wondered. He supposed love ought to be about giving, and he had given very little of himself of late. He liked being with her, it was true, but perhaps more because she seemed to like being with *him*. He liked being liked. Surely that wasn't love, was it? He broke his silence to answer her question with another.

"Do I? Maybe. Maybe I just love myself. This woman...she gave herself over to me completely. Every moment we were together she was so fully in my presence it was impossible to imagine she had ever lived anywhere else, or would ever again. The irony does not escape me. She was so present that she was *never* present."

"Ok, Reggie. Now you're just confusing me. Use your words."

Regret stared at the lake before him, the trees more than half bare of leaves, the remaining ones losing the fight to hold on. He wondered if he could dare speak clearly.

"Here it is, Em. I met this girl. Goddess. One of us. Bliss. She finds joy, happiness, peace, all that, in the moment. She takes away your thoughts of the past and future, and makes you con-

centrate so fully on the very moment you are living that you can't help but feel complete. It is her gift, as yours and mine are to make them dwell on the past. When I say I don't know if I love her, I mean that I love the way she made me feel, but that was all about *me*, wasn't it? I think, maybe I just loved the attention.

"When I say she was gone before I knew her, I mean that she just jumped from moment to moment. I got to live that for a bit, but it was always true that she could never understand the future. We could never have a future, or a past, because she had no way of experiencing those things. I was blessed that she spent some moments with me, but she was never going to stay. She was, will always be, just *passing through*."

Embarrassment fell into a rare moment of sympathy.

"But it was nice while it lasted?"

"I think not. The poet was wrong. It is better to never have loved at all, than to have loved and lost."

The two of them sat quietly, looking at the light waves forming on the lake rather than at each other. Embarrassment had her own broken love to deal with, another failed marriage doomed from the start, destroyed again by her own selfishness. She found herself speaking, against her better judgment, of the last year, how she had increasingly picked fights, found excuses to be cold, to generally do all she could to alienate the man who had bothered to care about her more than most. His indiscretion was merely an inevitable last straw she felt unreasonably responsible for.

"Maybe I just can't bear for anyone to know me that well. Maybe I just don't have the selflessness that love requires. Maybe I never loved him. Maybe I'm just afraid of being found out."

Then she said the words that inspired him at last. "If only I could learn to share myself."

And he woke up. Found himself. Got angry.

"Never say those words, Emmy. They are the foulest words in any language. They are my lifeblood, my living, my purpose, and I know them well. They will destroy you. True, you will be stronger for the destruction, *if* you can move past it. But if you can't, you will wallow in the mire, sinking deeper and deeper until your very breath is stolen from you. Say, *'I shall learn to share myself,'* or, *'I choose not to share myself,'* or neither. That matters not. But do not get trapped in a fruitless wish. There is no *if only*. It is a chimera."

Embarrassment smiled again. "Then why do you preach it?"

"Because, Big Sister, whatever doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."

"And you don't wish me to be stronger?"

"Well..." Regret considered his words. "If it does kill you, who would I have left to talk to?"

With those words, he stood up and turned to his sister, determined to give his farewell, end his vacation, and try once again with his *old friends*. She spoke first.

"You missed your fly."

Regret left with a smile.

Wringing Out the Pain

Across the water, far enough away to be unseen but close enough to feel his presence, Misfortune sat brooding on the shore. The water crashed upon the sand, cold morning fog now replaced by the warm autumn day. She sat against a tree, hiding in the still cold shade, staring at the beach of sand and dirt across the lake to where he, too, sat brooding. While he brooded over her mother, however, she brooded over him. She had spent a lifetime dreaming of Regret, a lifetime telling herself that she would make him love her, that they would be together someday, that tomorrow, tomorrow she would find him and declare her love. Courage had eluded her, but she had been playing the long game. Courage, she assured herself, would come. She need only be patient.

Now time had run out.

She had waited too long, and now he was spoiled goods. Not because he had been with another woman, but because he had been with *that* one. Whether or not she could ever forgive Regret for succumbing to her mother's charms, she did not know. It seemed unlikely. Love, in any case, now seemed beyond her ability, a childish fantasy she had grown beyond, a remnant of a different life now little more than a memory. She could remember the feeling, but she could no longer *feel* it. Rather than fantasizing about her soulmate intertwined with her forever - a lover that thought only of her, cared only for her - she could now see only an enemy. He had done the one thing that could truly hurt her. How could anyone susceptible to the mother's charms ever earn the daughter's respect? Worse, how could she have been so wrong?

It was over. Her life journey over. She knew it as well as she had ever known anything, even if it would take time to accept.

She brooded, chilled on the wet grass in the shade of a tree, even as the world warmed about her. Across the lake, two siblings parted ways, and Misfortune could feel Regret's presence wane. An emptiness took over as she told herself he wasn't worth it. Wasn't worth the heartache. Wasn't worth the pain. Wasn't worth *her*. She accepted the emptiness of her new life, a lonely one, though not one of her choosing. It was not her fault but his. He had betrayed her and left her to suffer.

So be it.

As she brooded, a shadow deeper than that of the tree fell upon her. There, across the lake from where a goddess had just bid farewell to her sibling, another one had come to greet her own. Satiety, Misfortune's elder sister, was patient.

She knew her little sister was quick to anger, was fiercely independent, and did not take advice easily. She, too, felt the absence of Regret, though only through his effect on Misfortune. Satiety could feel the absence growing in her sister's heart, and was filled with empathy. She wanted to help, but knew the key to doing so was patience. After some time, she sat herself down next to Misfortune, leaning against the same tree as her sister continued to brood.

Misfortune let her sit there, not speaking, the two of them sitting silently as the water calmed to a slap upon the shore. Had it been any other member of her extensive family, save for Solace, perhaps, Misfortune would never have tolerated such presence. Satiety, however, was one of very few she didn't immediately dismiss as vapid. Unlike the rest of them, Satiety always stood on solid ground. She thought for herself. Sometimes she questioned the supposed superiority of their mother, other times she followed in suit. The choice, however, was always *hers*. Of all of them, Satiety was the most independent of their mother. Of all of them, Satiety took Misfortune the most seriously. Though Mis-

fortune never fully trusted *any* of her sisters, she at least accepted Satiety as a somewhat neutral observer. As such, her presence was tolerated, perhaps even welcomed.

After a considerable amount of time had passed, Satiety spoke quietly.

"Boy trouble?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Lie number one.

Satiety had an insight rarely matched among the gods. To lie to her was foolish, and Misfortune knew it. Yet, her fear in charge, she pretended as if her false words could disguise her heart. Satiety chose not to play.

"Yes, you do. I can see it. You've got it bad. Every part of you is screaming it. Even Tickle could see it. You're fit to burst, like you drank this whole lake and are desperate for a place to pee. You might as well get it out. Sooner or later, Missy, you're going to talk to *someone*. At least you know *I* can keep a secret."

It was true. Of all the gods Misfortune had ever known, Satiety was the most trustworthy. She never talked about anybody, never gossiped. Never tried to manipulate anybody. She was just good at making you notice how you felt. In some ways, she had, of all her sisters, the most of her mother's legacy. Like Bliss, Satiety lived fully in the present. Unlike Bliss, however, doing so was by choice. She could remember the past and imagine the future. She simply preferred the present. It was not her lack of memory that kept her true, but her loyalty. Satiety kept your secrets because they were not hers to share. They were *yours*.

"It's no big deal. I mean, yes, it's a boy, but, y'know, I'll get over it and all that." Lie number two.

Satiety was patient. Sooner or later Misfortune would share her heart. Sooner or later, confession would come. Perhaps in a torrent, perhaps in a leak, but come it would. Of that Satiety had

no doubt. An overfull vessel will find equilibrium. This she knew as well as she had ever known anything.

Patience would win the day.

She need only wait.

And wait.

As the minutes crept by, Misfortune's mind filled itself with imagined conversations. She thought of what she might say to her sister. What she might say to her mother. What she might say to Regret. Each silent outburst was followed by an imagined response, each response with another. Each imagined conversation turned to an angry battle, each battle ending with a loss. She wanted to scream at her mother, at Regret, but had only a sister who deflected so well as to be impossible to hit. Seven, twelve, nineteen minutes of silence later, nineteen minutes of Misfortune spinning through conversations in her mind later, Misfortune burst.

"It's just...I mean...I'm not...I've just thought about him for so *long*. But it's not...I mean...I will not give Love the satisfaction...no offense."

"None taken."

"What I mean to say is...I don't know. Maybe I *am* in love. Maybe I always have been. Maybe that's what this is. I just feel like...like we could have been such a great team if only...but now he...I mean...seriously, Sat, how could I even?"

Satiety smiled gently, and put her hand on her sister's shoulder. Misfortune fell into the embrace, and felt her stress subside.

"It's alright, Missy. Love hurts, and she knows it. I'm sorry to say it's her greatest strength. Just slow down and tell me about it."

Deep breath.

"I thought he was the *one*, Sat. Not true love, I don't think. I don't mean that, though...I mean...like a perfect partner. Some-

one who could understand me. Work side by side with me. Someone who wasn't always cheery and upbeat. Someone who saw the world for...y'know...how it is, maybe. I guess I was just afraid, though. He sort of...I mean...he *actually* told me to go away, but I never believed him. I thought, y'know, he just needs time or whatever. Needs to see the *real* me. Not that I didn't...I mean...I have had, y'know, lovers and...I mean, it's not like I've spent my whole life lonely and pining for him...except...I don't know...maybe, in a way, I have. I don't know. It was like, even when I got in deep with someone, I was still pretty much alone, y'know? And I always thought, I don't know, that he would finally realize we were meant to be together, and he would come around, to *me*, and it would be different. Like, we would be this team, best friends and all that, relaxed and comfortable with each other, and maybe...I don't know...maybe then I would finally stop being lonely."

Satiety let the words sit. Let them float about her, seeking their own equilibrium. She gave peace time to fill the void left by her sister's angst. By her fear. She let the power of her sister's words settle into a wedge strong enough to hold open the crack in her sister's armor. Waited as the pressure from inside relieved itself. As the wisdom the armor had kept at bay crept in. She waited for the last remnants of fear to leak out.

She waited as the world, unbothered by the fears of men and gods, continued to turn.

As the water turned to laps up on the shore.

As a seagull landed and walked across the beach.

As an orange leaf became a little more brown.

As a sailboat came into view, hardly moving, and finally went out of view again.

As a turtle dragged his home across the sand.

"He's been with other gods, other women. It always bothered me a bit, but...I told myself it was none of my business, that it really wasn't my place to...y'know...no big deal, right? I mean, it wasn't like *I* didn't have lovers and...except..."

More silence.

The last remnants of the flood were stuck inside. A troublesome mess that must be cleaned. When you soak up the last of the dirty water in your basement, the soaking wet towel cannot be left behind. If it is, it will fester and breed mold. Yet, after the hard work of cleaning, it is easy to tell yourself you will finish the rest *tomorrow*. Though Satiety was patient, she also knew that sometimes a small encouragement was necessary. A bucket, perhaps, in which to wring the towel.

Satiety handed her sister the bucket.

"Just say it, Missy. You will feel better. I promise."

Misfortune accepted the gift, held the dripping wet towel over the bucket and began to squeeze.

"Gods, Sat, he fell in love with our sad excuse for a mother and now thinking about him just makes me sick to my stomach except I still can't stop thinking about him because I probably *do* love him except how could I love anybody that would take that flighty thoughtless child of a goddess who spends her life looking for suckers and breaking their hearts seriously except maybe I *should* be sorry for him and maybe it's not his fault, but if he was stupid enough to fall for her why should I even bother with him and how lame am I to care for someone that stupid and weak and he never loved me anyway so why do I even care at all?"

And they sat.

And sat.

And sat.

"Feel better?"

"A little."

"Alright, Missy. I'm going to do you a favor. I'm going to advise you in this matter. Whether you take my advice is a matter for you to decide on your own. I've never known you to take advice from anyone, so I am not hopeful. Nevertheless, the advice I give is well and true. You would be wise to consider it carefully."

Misfortune grunted.

It wasn't the first time Satiety had *offered her advice*. As the eldest remaining sibling in a largely motherless household, she had shown a propensity to lecture. That she was often, if not always, right, only made her the more insufferable. As a child, Misfortune had turned up her nose at every opportunity. She felt she would rather destroy herself with failure than be beholden to yet another grownup acting like they knew everything. A lifetime later, she knew better than to dismiss her sister's wisdom, though it was no easier to stomach.

"Forget about Mother. She is only a chimera. You have greater demons to face. There is a love confession inside of you pushing so hard to get out that everything else inside you has been crushed by it. It wishes to rule over you, to destroy everything of value. If you ever wish to be free, to feel, to experience life, you must let it out. You must find the boy and confess your love in clear and unmistakable terms, that he might accept you or reject you. Either may happen, and neither is better than the other. What matters is the confession."

"Tell him I love him?"

"Tell him how you feel. Insist that he responds and believe him when he does."

"And the pain will go away?"

Satiety took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She scooped up a handful of silty sand and let it go slowly, as in an hourglass. When all the sand had fallen, she said, "There will always be pain. I am sorry about that. It is something about Love even I cannot

change. It is in her nature. But if you confront him, you will at least learn how to live with it."

As they sat in comfortable silence, the sun setting behind them, Misfortune considered her sister's advice.

When darkness was firmly settled, Satiety kissed her sister on the forehead, and wished her, if not better fortunes, then at least some semblance of contentment. She went her way, unsure if she had made a difference. Misfortune stayed long after, unsure of her direction. A day later, Misfortune, not yet wielding the courage to face him, was once again watching Regret from a distance, certain the right time was just around the corner.

"Tomorrow. I'll talk to him tomorrow."

A Woman with a Bicycle, and a Woman without a Bicycle

A series of *misfortunate* accidents conspired to draw Bliss from her bed in the middle of the night and keep her from returning. An exploding light bulb. The incessant beeping of a smoke alarm hungry for a new battery. An air conditioner suspiciously stuck on the coldest setting. A door with a tendency to lock behind her. Awake and chilled, Bliss stepped out of the lake house to warm herself in the summer night. Locked out, she began to wander around the lake, embracing the quiet peace of the witching hour.

Well, these things happen.

How the goddess came to leave her lover behind was this.

Bliss met a woman with a bicycle. Well, first she met a woman *without* a bicycle, *then* she met a woman with a bicycle. After coming to small stream blocking her path, she veered off to walk through the dark village, fudge shops all closed for the evening, one or two taverns still serving the night owls, finally finding herself in a neighborhood of homes where the locals had long been in bed. *How lovely.*

She had just crossed back into the heart of the village when she spotted the old woman without the bicycle. Her type was not uncommon. Even at such a late stage of life, the woman had failed to learn the lessons born of her experience. She was sour and angry. She allowed herself to feel the weight of the world on her shoulders, and stooped under the load. A lifetime of bitterness coursed through her, the dark cloud not only surrounding her, but seeping out of her from the inside.

Such ones were never easy for Bliss. She did better with those of thinner shells, people who had forgotten to enjoy the little things in life, but still desired them. The woman without the

bicycle belonged to the type who had built up thick shells over the course of a lifetime, who feared joy, who made it their mission to be strong, even at the cost of their own happiness. The woman had forgotten the lessons of her youth, when the world still held wonders, had failed to learn from her mistakes, and doubled down on stubbornness instead. Bliss should have known better, should have made better use of her experience. Goddess of the present that she was, however, her long experience was effectively moot.

Bliss approached the woman with little more than instinct.

"Nice night," Bliss said, coming up quietly behind her.

The woman hunched her shoulders, stooped her head, and walked faster.

Bliss flooded her mind with clarity. Visions of the starry night, breeze through the treetops, a spike of wakefulness coupled with the pleasant anticipation of sleep. She made the old woman aware of the dry sidewalk, the cold clarity of the evening, the warm snug of her jacket, the distant sound of an owl. She flitted by memories of mosquitoes, gone but not forgotten, focused her mind on the surprising comfort of her shoes, now at the rare state of *perfectly worn in* but still new enough to last a long time. In short, Bliss used all the usual tools at her disposal to cheer the poor woman up.

The old woman, however, did not take the bait. Life is hard, she knew. The world is against you, and happiness is just a ruse to distract you from the struggle that is your miserable journey through the world. It is a drug, meant to lure you into a state of complacency, to better destroy you by disappearing when you have most come to depend on it. Peace was not to be trusted. Better to walk about the world with eyes wide open, see the dangers about you for what they are. Never let yourself be seduced by happiness.

Bliss, bored and losing interest, gave up and looked for another.

A woman came up riding a bicycle, not young so much as *younger*, more easily distracted by Bliss. The bicyclist caught a glimpse of the stars, thought about how lovely the evening was, how large the universe, how blessed she was to be some small part of it. She focused on a constellation she remembered from her youth, but which she could not quite shape in her mind. No matter. It was lovely anyway.

Isn't this nice?

Misfortune, watching from the darkness, was disgusted. Her mother. Her lazy, careless, thoughtless mother. Once again, the poor excuse for a goddess hardly needed a hint of adversity before giving up and moving on. Never stayed to finish her work. Never cared for anything but the one moment she found herself in. Angry, bitter, Misfortune pounced. Using her mother's tactics against her, she drove the two women together.

Distracted, pleased with herself, enjoying the beauty of the stars rather than looking at the road in front of her, the woman with the bicycle collided into the woman without one, taking them both to the ground. Misfortune, her work done, walked off to see about Regret. Behind her, two women and a goddess were left to fend for themselves.

The bicyclist laughed. The other woman rose in anger. Apologize though she might, the woman with the bicycle could not calm the other. Anger, of course, breeds anger, and the two were soon in each other's faces, dark words flying hard and fast, physical violence soon following. Bliss was out of her element, not usually seeking to find pleasure in hate, but here she was, and here she determined to see what could be done. Two women letting their angers arise against each other, one hardly caring, the

other feeling relief at letting out a lifetime of bottled up angst, sparked a thought in Bliss.

By the time the women separated, the younger woman and her bicycle lay on the ground, and the old woman, walking away with a small limp, had bliss in her breast at her triumph over adversity. Looking behind herself twice, she smiled each time at the lump of human she had conquered in battle, the human who had, after all, *started it first*, and given the violence in her heart a just means of expressing itself. As she turned the corner, leaving the incident behind, the corner of a smile crept up at the whisper in her mind. *Isn't this nice?*

By the time Bliss came back to the other woman, not young but younger, she was sitting up, wondering what in the hell she had been thinking. Bliss sat beside her, her part in the massacre already forgotten.

"You alright, Sugar?"

"I don't...ugh...what even...ow...holy..."

"C'mon, Sugar. You can't lie here all night. Let's get you a drink."

"I don't drink...what even...who was that woman?"

Bliss did not have to play stupid. She had already forgotten the incident.

"What woman?"

"That woman who...oh my...I think I just..."

"Calm down, Sugar. Let's get you on your feet."

A few minutes later, they were walking together down the street, the damaged bicycle limping along beside them. An hour later they were still walking, the incident now forgotten by both. An hour after that they were sitting by the remains of a forgotten campfire, letting the fire and breeze dry them off after a much later than midnight swim. A day later they were on the road to the coast, laughing at everything the woman had left behind. A

week later, the woman was utterly destroyed. Bliss was off to her next adventure, and the woman's heart lay where it had fallen from the goddess's hands into the dirt, left behind, forgotten like everything else Bliss had ever known.

ACT 4 Confessions

Exercise 8: Regret's Return

Here.

You have overslept. Perhaps you had a little too much to drink the night before, stayed up a little too late, but you had no responsibilities in the morning, nobody dragging you out of bed. This is not the joy of sleeping through your alarm clock, feeling physically great but fearing the repercussions of walking into work two hours late. This is the lumbering, lethargic feeling that may keep you from ever rising. If you do, your lids will be heavy throughout the day, your body dragging, as if wading through several feet of water just to walk across the room.

Perhaps you are also a little under the weather. Your nose a little drippy. Your head a little achy. Your stomach a little unsettled. Your muscles have atrophied. Not hungover, exactly, but some combination of all the things in your life that conspire to put you, from time to time, in a bit of a *funk*. The day is beginning to feel like a layabout one. A day to stay in bed. To not bother with the world. Hide under the covers and wait for a better one.

As you open your eyes for the fourth time, your mind fighting for clarity, you discover that it *is* Monday, after all. You are tired and sick and not your best self, it is true, but you are not yet late for work. If you drag yourself out of bed, you might yet, with a hurried but not panicked morning, get yourself to work on time.

You sit on the edge of your bed, deciding whether to sleep-walk through the day or forget it all and go back to sleep. Should you drag yourself out of bed, you will not be your best. Your work will be middling, your failure rate high, and your reputation damaged. If you stay in, however, tomorrow will only be that much harder. Sometimes, the best thing to do is just to go

through the motions until you feel yourself again. Act without feeling. Fake it till you make it.

You determine to face the day. You get up and start moving, hardly focusing on the world about you. You burn the toast, scrape the garage while backing out, roll through stop signs. You call upon your first client, bad coffee still roiling your stomach. You give your spiel without feeling. You say the words, but without care. You are unprepared for the day, counting on your years of experience to help you improvise your way through. You are outside of yourself looking in, wondering where that voice that sounds so similar to yours is coming from, and why it sounds so unconvincing. The moment a word has passed your lips, you cannot remember what you have said.

Perhaps it would have been better to stay in bed after all.

Your client sees right through you, of course. She has heard your pitch before, has even fallen for it, but before she can do so again, she needs to feel your attention. On your best day, she is an easy mark. Today, however, you have shown your hand, and she dismisses you as easily as she might an email from a millionaire African prince just looking for someone to share his fortune with.

She bids you good day, and you wander off, head still throbbing, congestion waxing, and thinking that it might be best to cut your losses and try again tomorrow. Just as you are about to do so, however, as you are about to give up altogether, you spot an old colleague watching you from the shadows. Why she is watching you it is hard to say, but it is certain your failure is no longer a private affair.

Should you give up now, slink off to bed, you will never live it down, your credibility forever tarnished. Should you fail again, you may never find the desire to work again. Head pounding,

stomach wishing for a toilet with increasing urgency, you dismiss your better instincts, and head off to seek another client.

Good idea or not?

Vigilance

There is a moment *before* the impact of the tsunami, before it wreaks havoc upon the shore, that one can feel the peacefulness that comes with low tide. The water recedes, the shore is calm, the earthquake only a memory. The inevitable is coming, but not yet. Not just yet. To stand in that place, at that moment, certain of the inevitability of what must come next, one might still relish the quiet, the calm before the storm, so to speak.

And you?

Do you run for safety, use the precious respite to protect yourself? Allow yourself to think rationally in the face of an instinctual calm fighting for your attention? Or rather, do you give in, stay, pretend the impending wave has changed its mind, that it will continue its retreat, neglect its final destination in favor of a new course, one that will forever spare you. Of course, you will *say* you would choose the former. What fool would not? Yet, in the moment, the sun shining, the sky clear, everything about you seeming as glorious and optimistic as you have ever known, will you really be able to dismiss the voice in your ear that says, "*Relax, friend. Everything will be fine. Stop worrying so much and enjoy what you have,*" or some other such malarkey?

Nisha Eikenboom prepared.

Prior to the Days of No Regret, she had spent a lifetime worrying about her past, second guessing herself at every opportunity. For a lifetime, the voice of Regret had dominated her, made her who she was. It had not destroyed her as it had Donna Purcell, but it had done damage enough. When she began to experience life without him, when she *noticed* that he was gone, she merely assumed she was having a string of good days. She supposed it was something like the opposite of a funk, and that soon enough, like it or not, life would return to normal.

Except.

Except she no longer wanted life to return to normal. She liked the person she was becoming, this person with no regret. She supposed that if she wanted to maintain the good feelings she had, wanted to live the life she was only now getting her first taste of, she would have to fight for it. It was all well and good to be blessed with a good feeling, but if you wanted to keep it, you would have to earn it. For Nisha, this meant knowing it, understanding it, and dismissing it. Challenging the magic. Such tasks are not easy, and they are not without cost. Yet, she had glimpsed a paradise, had wandered its shores, and she would not readily be kicked out if she could help it.

She used her time wisely, fortified herself against a storm she knew would come for her in time. She was a recovering addict, never quite trusting the peace of the moment, sure that it was only with constant vigilance against the enemy that she might continue to live in peace. She was the ant, preparing for winter, as the grasshoppers all played music in the grass. Before the *Days*, she would never have believed she could simply dismiss regret. Once inside the *Days*, having done so, having lived some life without it, she knew it could be done. One only needed to choose. She steeled herself, forced herself to imagine Regret closing in, practiced her arguments against him. Every day, she would pretend to feel regret, that she might practice dismissing him.

And he did come back.

For Nisha, his paltry return only made her stronger.

In her ear, Regret whispered, *"If only you had walked away from him when you had the chance..."*

And Nisha thought, "Today is also a chance. Perhaps I shall walk away now."

In her ear, Regret whispered, *"If only you had not given so much of yourself to him..."*

And Nisha thought, "Sal has earned all I have given him, though admittedly, the time may have come to stop giving."

In her ear, Regret whispered, *"If only you had made your own life, rather than leaning on him..."*

And Nisha thought, "It's hardly been half a year. Even so, it has been fun. I have loved him. Probably I still do. Nothing wrong with sharing myself with him."

In her ear, Regret whispered, *"If only you had listened to your mother, gone home, you'd probably be well off by now..."*

And Nisha thought, "I can always go back there if I want, which I don't. I don't belong there. Beside, every day is a new day. Who cares about what happened back then? This is my life and I can do what I want."

With each whisper, the voice got weaker, until at last it disappeared. Perhaps if he had been less predictable, he might have caught her off guard. As it was, however, his taunts were expected, her preparation nearly perfect, and she needed little more than to speak the rebuttals she had practiced so long. Maybe she just wasn't worth it for him. Maybe he was biding his time. Regardless, she won the first round definitively.

Regret slinked off in confusion. He had left his friends behind after convincing himself they did not need him. That they found more regret without his help than with it. He had felt unworthy, not because he was not strong enough, but because the market was flooded with his goods. What was the point, he had asked, of preaching to the converted? Of selling regret when you need only sit back and watch them drown themselves in it? Nisha's resistance saddened him, even angered him, but it also gave him some semblance of hope. Here was an old friend who really did need his help. If it was true for her, it must be true for

others. He was needed. He need only up his game. Searching for an easy conquest, someone to practice on, to warm up with, to help build his confidence, he sought out Nisha's new lover.

Regret would come back. Of that Nisha was certain. And when he returned, it would be with a greater arsenal, deeper and more challenging than the superficial volley he had brought today. She was not some Israel Kasterfink, fortified simply by a carefree nature, unaware of the enemy. She knew her enemy, knew his strength, and would not let her guard down. She would not fail in her vigilance. Such an enemy does not give up easily, and one is wise to remember that. Such an enemy is always lying in wait. Such an enemy is patient. Though she had won the first battle, she was not so foolish as to believe she had won the war.

Whether Salton could win his own battles, however, was something in which she had less confidence.

A Cognac in the Study

It wasn't that Salton was particularly susceptible to Regret. He was not. Things had always worked out pretty well for him, even after he had made his greatest mistakes. As long as he could remember, he had been blessed by Dame Fortune, a blessing that kept darker forces at bay more often than not. If Misfortune was the perfect apéritif for the meal that was Regret, then Dame Fortune herself was closer akin to the brushing of one's teeth. Rather than preparing the palate, she created a barrier that not only destroyed the appetite for such a god as Regret, but repelled him as well. Where the grand dame chose to give her blessings, Regret could rarely take hold.

Salton, though not what one might call a *favorite* of Dame Fortune, surely had some of her favor, enough so that he rarely doubted the return of her blessings, even after the longest of absences. Presently, she had been absent for some time. Whether she had tired of him entirely or would soon return could not be said. The grand dame goes where she will, and woe be to thee who dares tell her otherwise. The absence of Regret, however, coupled with his new life with the beautiful and wise Nisha Eikenboom, gave him a sense of contentment so strong he felt almost as if the blessings of Dame Fortune were still upon him. Life was good and getting better. Surely it could naught but last. Salton, with little to ruin his life, felt confident in the future.

It was with such confidence that Salton dared to revisit his father.

Though there can be little doubt but that behind his winning smile he was, at heart, a coward, it was not cowardice that brought him to his father's doorstep. It was not fear of life without his father's money, not fear of his father's lost love, not even the fear of leaving his past behind that brought him there. Salton

never really believed these things could be lost. Dame Fortune had been there for him before, and would she would be there again. He need only wait. Salton's cowardice was of a different kind. Salton was not ruled by fear. He simply preferred the easy road, the low hanging fruit. He loathed conflict, and was quick to deflect it. He believed the world was carving a path for him and preferred the simplicity of following it. Perhaps that was why the grand dame kept him in her good graces: He never refused her gifts. Coward though he was, averse to conflict as he was, fear of Misfortune was not one of his sufferings. What brought Salton Christensen to his father's door was simply a confidence that his father would come around. That his father had always come around. That his father *not* coming around *just didn't make sense*.

On another day, he would have been right.

Pater Christensen, unlike his son, *was* ruled by fear. He had fought trouble his whole life, had earned the pedestal he now stood upon, had earned his status by standing his ground, never backing down. When I say he was ruled by fear, I mean that his battle *against* fear gave him strength, made him who he was. He always feared there was someone behind him trying to take him down and, unlike his son, reveled in the conflict such fear brought. It was precisely this belief that brought him the power and riches he now so enjoyed. Expect a fight and strike first. That was the way of success. That was the way of business.

For all that, however, fatherhood is not the same as running a business. One cannot build a business without risking its loss. One prepares to lose everything constantly. If one is not prepared to bet the farm, so to speak, one can never own the town. To risk the loss of your son, however, to feel the failure of a hated father, that was a different level of risk altogether.

He considered that the boy was old enough to make his own decisions. That if he left well enough alone, his son would surely drop the tart and move on to someone else, as usual. That if he didn't, maybe it wasn't for a father to choose his son's loves. There was no regret for what he had done, what he had said. Rather, he thought of the future, and that coming to terms with a grown up son might serve them both. He would not compromise on the money, of course, but perhaps some level of reconciliation might make them both stronger.

On another day, Pater Christensen would have come around.

On another day.

Today, however, as Pater Christensen sat in his study, comfortable in the absence of regret, complacent in his willingness to dismiss his fear of the future. Lazy, sloppy, perhaps even content, the voice of an old friend, a voice that had been long absent, once again harassed him. Pater was ill prepared.

"If only you had been harder on him."

"If only you had made him learn the hard way."

"If only you had cut him off sooner."

It was a good tactic. Had Regret suggested that Pater had been too hard on his son, Pater could have dismissed the idea on its face. He had been living comfortably with his decision for nearly six weeks. To back down now would be unconscionable. Even a god as out of practice as Regret knew well enough to embrace such stubbornness. To use it *against* his friend. He left Pater proud of his decision, but encouraged him to wish he hadn't felt forced to make it. He showed him the failure that led to the fight, to his son's banishment. Showed him all the ways it could have been avoided, if only he had dared to act earlier.

If only you had been a better father.

Regret for his failure as a parent, for spoiling his son, for avoiding conflict out of fear that he might otherwise lose his son's love, *that* was the prevailing fear of Pater's adult life. That was a regret he knew well. That was a whisper he had heard so often it could not be easily dismissed.

Regret may have been out of practice, but he was no fool.

On this day, there was no hope of Pater Christensen coming around. On this day, Pater was filled with regret, not for teaching his son a valuable lesson, but for not having done it sooner. On this day, only surrender could win his favor.

Twenty-six miles away, rolling down the country roads of nearly rural suburbia, confident and cocksure, Salton, too, lay victim to whispers he had not heard for one hundred fifty-one days.

"If only you had trusted your father."

"If only you had shown him more gratitude."

"If only you had given him the respect he deserved."

It was fairly sloppy on the part of Regret, but he was admittedly a little out of practice. Better, he thought, to keep it simple. For Salton, it was just enough to make him second guess himself. To make him the slightest bit humble. To turn his swaggering confidence to honest contrition. To bring with him an air of subordination when at last he arrived at his father's door. On another day, Salton would not have even considered humility. On another day, Salton would have shook hands with a smile and a wink, conned his father into another chance, found reconciliation without humiliation. It was his way.

Today, however, was not another day.

Salton had broken with his father in defense of his girlfriend, had stood up for principle in the face of financial ruin. With his life hanging in the balance, he had told his father to go to hell, so to speak, for the sake of integrity. He had gone back to

his father, some forty or so days later, one hundred fifty-one days from Regret's first absence, not broken, but stronger. He was well prepared to lose the grace of his father, to lose his father's money. He merely thought, now that some time had passed, his father might be more susceptible to his son's charms. Some forty days or so after his father had insulted his love and thrown him from family and fortune forever, Salton believed a glass of cognac with his father would have him apologizing to Salton, apologizing to Nisha, and reconciling the family.

The whispers of Regret showed his fantasy for nonsense.

Had Salton loved Nisha more, he might have stood his ground. Had Nisha loved Salton more, perhaps the same could have been said. Their love, however, was not for each other, but for themselves. They loved how they felt when they first met, how they felt during the *Days*. It was a love for their new life, not *with* each other so much as *without* Regret. Even before the god's return, they had begun to tire of each other, as one tires of sweets after a long indulgence. Forty or so days after the fight with his father, Salton was not quite as dedicated to his love as he had once been. Nisha even less so. With regret about to slip back into their lives, joy was already slipping back out. At the moment, with hardly a hint from Regret, Salton was ready to put his own holiday behind him, to take his father a little more seriously, to come home.

Salton did meet with his father. Pater, a little broken by Regret's return, stood his ground, but with love. He stood his ground to help his son become a man. He stood his ground to teach his son the value of hard work, the value of family. He was prepared to concede on the girl, prepared to give a little by way of negotiation. Lose a battle to win the war. Pater wanted his son to step up, to become a captain of industry like himself. If he was prepared to work, prepared to enter the world of responsibility,

Pater was prepared to let him love whomever he chose. Salton wanted his father's love, wanted to change his life, was ready to work. He, too, yearned for reconciliation, as long as he could keep the girl. He knew Nisha would never forgive his father, would never see him as anything more than a heartless racist. Salton, however, knew him better, and found a place in his own heart to forgive him.

Salton agreed to work for his father.

Salton agreed to put off marriage for a few years.

Salton agreed to let bygones be bygones.

Concession it certainly was. Surrender, perhaps. In any case, it was enough of an olive branch to give Pater comfort welcoming his son back into the family, and the fortune that came with it. By the time the father and son were sharing a cognac in the study, Nisha's life had once again changed forever.

The Curtain Warmer

It was at about this time that Regret met with Horatio Porter.

His success with Salton and his father had given him confidence. Of that there could be no doubt. Here were two friends who clearly needed his help, friends who, without his whispers, would have continued to go on as if the past were of no consequence. Perhaps he had been wrong to leave. Perhaps his friends did not do it to themselves. Perhaps he had been mistaken. Still, Salton and his father were the stronger ones. They were the least likely to fill in for Regret in his absence. When he *did* burden them with his whispers, they felt the stern hand, felt the wallop of self-doubt, but more as the residual pain from a spanking than the life sucking depression felt by the so-called *weaker* ones. Salton and Pater were the sort who heard Regret's whispers and said, *"Oh, yeah. That was foolish, wasn't it? Should probably clean that up. Well, no time like the present. Better to get it over with."* And so on.

For Regret, it was good work. Important work. Better still, the clear lack of regret that they exuded as he approached spoke well to his value. Still, there was something unsatisfying about it. Such people were his bread and butter, suggested that Regret ultimately made the world a better place, served a purpose. That such people heard his whispers and acted upon them, gave the world reason to value Regret, proved him to be a fire that allows new crops to grow.

To feel worthy, however, Regret needed a true sense of conquest. He needed someone who would listen to his whispers and say, *"I'm so stupid. Why can't I do anything right? I'm such a failure. I just want to pull the covers over my head and make it go away."* And so on. Someone like Donna Purcell. Donna was, Re-

gret had no doubt, the obvious choice for the headliner. By the time he was through with her, she would be so broken as to be unrepairable. A headliner, however, needs a curtain warmer, and his work so far could hardly suffice.

He needed a warm up act, someone he could crush. Maybe not utterly. Maybe not yet. But he needed *some* satisfaction. Someone like Horatio Porter.

When first Regret whispered into Horatio's ear, he met resistance, not entirely unlike his visit with Nisha. Regret was not the only one out of practice. Horatio had become, over one hundred fifty-one days, comfortable in a world without regret. He had told himself the world was friendlier than he thought. That he had, perhaps, taken life a little too seriously before, that it did him little service to dwell on the past. Easy enough when Regret is not whispering in your ear. Harder when he is. Inertia, however, must be overcome, and Horatio was a solid weight not easily moved.

Regret had found him on a good day, a day on which he was unlikely to do more than encourage the man to make better choices tomorrow. Like Nisha, Horatio had become comfortable with his new life, with Regret's absence. Unlike Nisha, however, Horatio had not prepared himself for Regret's inevitable return. Had not fortified himself. Regret, still smarting from Nisha's cold shoulder, encouraged by his success with Salton and his father, was increasingly prepared.

Horatio was not.

It was a great success.

Where, with Nisha, Regret had struck and waited...struck and waited...struck and waited, with Horatio he struck struck struck struck struck. It was a little boorish, admittedly, but Regret needed a win, and he was not about to let the idea of a fair fight get in the way. He kicked Horatio until he was down, and then

kept kicking. Horatio, unprepared for such an onslaught, broke under the pressure. What strength he had gained over one hundred fifty-one days waned, dissipated, leaked from his life, until he was a crushed ball of sadness, fear, and depression, just wishing for it all to go away. Repairable, perhaps, but unquestionably broken.

It was the victory Regret needed to find his own life again. The victory to find his confidence again. The warm-up band was a success, and the crowds were ready for the main event. Riding high, he glided to his next conquest.

Horatio Porter

"I think it was the string of bad luck as much as anything. Without that, maybe she would have been ok. I'm not saying that...what I mean is...ok...part of it was definitely her *reaction* to the bad luck, right? As if...how do I put this...as if somehow the bad luck plaguing her life was so random and without purpose it made her more powerless than ever. Like, before, there wasn't much you could say, y'know? Maybe something like, *when life gives you lemons, make lemonade*, or, *we learn our best lessons from our mistakes*, or, I don't know, some other cat poster crap like that. Except, without regret, it was like there were no lessons to be learned. It was all just random crap that had nothing to do with you.

"Except when it did.

"Ok, I'm not saying this right.

"My dad used to say, *adversity builds character*, ok? Well, actually, what he would really say, y'know, when he wanted me to do something I didn't want to do, he'd say, *it'll put hair on your chest*, which was his way of telling me to *man up*, I guess. Still, I knew what he meant. Adversity *does* build character. Y'know, like, if, I don't know, let's say your house burns down or something, and you rebuild it. It's a pain, and all that, it probably takes over your life and whatever, probably for a long time, but when you're done, there is this thing that you *did*. You won this battle and learned all these things, and you are a better person for all that work, even though there was all this suffering and whatever along the way. I mean, not that you don't wish it never happened, which of course, you *do*, but because it *did* happen you accomplished this thing and have all the experience and confidence that goes with it. Without adversity, you never *test your mettle*, or

whatever. What I'm saying is, I guess, in some ways, misfortune can be beneficial, right?

"But here's the thing. At some level, you need to see the results of your work. You need to *triumph* over adversity. You need to *rebuild the house*, right? If you don't, if no matter what you do, things just get worse. At that point, misfortune is just, y'know...*misfortune*, I guess. And if there are no lessons to be learned because...well, because you never regret your decisions, if it's all just, yknow, *random*, then the world is out to get you and there is no winning and all you can do is to lay down and let the world beat out of you what little life is left because...I mean...I don't know.

"A lot of it was her fault. Definitely. If only she hadn't missed so much work, maybe she wouldn't have been *downsized*. If she'd only cut back on the shopping, maybe the credit card debt wouldn't have been so scary. If only she'd taken the car in when the brakes started to squeal, maybe the accident wouldn't have happened. If only she'd kept up on her insurance payments, swept the back steps, checked for her keys before she locked the car. Even down to that stupid burn she got on her thumb, a lot of it could have been prevented, maybe. If only, if only, if only...but she couldn't...*we* couldn't learn anything.

"Before, we would have said something like, *stupid stupid stupid* and physically hit ourselves in the head. You know what I mean, right? And the other one of us would have said, *honey, it's not your fault*, but we would know that it was. Know it in our hearts. That always sucked, for sure, but it gave us something to fight against. To promise never to be so stupid again. To *do better*. I'm not saying that would have...I mean...she was...I don't know...I guess...I want to say *depressed*, but I'm kidding myself if I don't...I mean...she *was* suicidal before, right? I think I've come to terms with that, and I don't want to be dismissive of it, but I

also don't want to make it sound like...I mean...it wasn't just the lack of regret, y'know? I think I could have...y'know...if we'd been able to fight it, look it in the eye and say, *yes, this was my fault, but next time I'm not going to let it happen*, if we'd been able to do that together, I think maybe...I don't know. Maybe things would have been different.

"What happened, though, was that all this bad luck became, like, *evidence* or something that the world was against her. To have power over your life and constantly screw it up definitely steals your confidence. To have *no* power, though, to feel like, like you're fated to misery and misfortune is something else entirely. It just makes you want to give up.

"I mean, there I was, by her side, ready to help her fight back, and I felt exactly the same way she did. I was like, *what's the point*, y'know? I could hug her. Tell her everything was going to be alright. Help her out with the bills. Help her look for a job. Take care of her when she was laid up in bed. I *did* do all of those things. But I couldn't *inspire* her. I couldn't give her any *hope*. Because, and I think this is the thing I've been trying to say, without regret, without some sense of *responsibility*, without anything to inspire...y'know...what's the word...*agency* maybe, how can there be hope?"

Nisha Eikenboom

"Ok. I'm not doing a great job describing this. The way you sometimes hear about it is like, *dude I'm sorry about last night, I was soooo drunk*. As if the drinking led to bad decisions, but the bad decisions didn't really count because you weren't really *you*, right? Except, I think it was more like, *dude, I had an awesome time last night, but I didn't really deserve it because I was so wasted*. Does that make any sense? Like we talk about it as if we're ashamed for not having been more responsible, but really we're ashamed for having *enjoyed* it so much.

"I liked Sal. I really did. I actually thought maybe we could make a life together. Even when his inner coward started to show, I kind of thought he might be the one. Someone I could *invest* in. In the end, though, I think he was just too afraid of the person he became during the *Days*. Like he was ashamed of showing this other person he normally kept hidden inside. When I finally accepted that person was gone forever, that Sal didn't even *admire* that person, I kind of...I don't know...lost interest or something.

"When he told his dad to eff off or whatever, it was a pretty big deal for him. I mean, I get it. I'm not sure I could really cut ties with my family forever, even now. But for him, it was an even bigger deal because of the *money*, right? So when I call him a coward, I'm not really being fair. I mean, what he did, what he did for *me*, was about as courageous as anything I could think of. He gave up everything for me. Everything.

"He was so proud of himself, and I was so proud of him, and I thought, *this is the guy*, right? Like how often in your life does somebody give up everything for you. How often does somebody show you, not just tell you, but *show* you that their love for you is the only thing in the world that matters to them? Once? Never?

"We didn't even make love that night. It was like that first night all over again. Just fell asleep on the couch, holding each other, like nothing else in the world could ever matter.

"Later, though, at the end, even before the *Days* were over, things started to feel sour and normal and dark and I don't know, just, whatever. Even then, I could tell he thought he'd given up too much. Like he was asking my permission or something to make peace with his father. His father who had called me *that gold digging whore*. His father the effing racist. I'm sorry, there's just no other word. He told Sal our children would be an insult to his mother. He should have been begging *my* forgiveness. *He* should have been making peace with *me*.

"I knew Sal had gone back. He told me he was going to. That he thought he could bring his father around. Said that if his father was ever going to grow as a human being, he needed to accept us together and see how wrong his first impressions were. I'm not even sure he cared about the money at that point. I think he really believed he could reconcile us or whatever. That his father would see the error of his ways and do the right thing.

"As if.

"I guess...I guess if I'm really being honest with myself, it was that I still believed, *believe* in regret. I knew that Sal hated himself for breaking ties with his father, and that, in the end, he would always hate me for it. I left because I knew I could never compete with that. Regret is a tenacious monster. It will never let go. Never. I don't know that I would have seen that if I hadn't lived without it, but once it came back, I recognized it for what it was. I will never take it for granted again.

"When Sal came back he was...like, both sheepish and proud at the same time, I guess. I could just tell. I knew he'd felt it again, just like me. And I knew, *knew* it was over. We hung on a bit after that, but that was the moment it was really over. I'd been wor-

ried about him choosing his family over me, but that was never the choice. He chose *regret* over me. What he did for me during the *Days*, that wasn't the real Sal. The real Sal showed up after regret came back. Once I saw that...

"We never really had a chance. Regret gave us a break for a little while, and we had a lovely affair. But the minute it came knocking, we knew it was over. It was never going to leave us alone again, and we both knew it. I'll never forget the moment I left. I didn't yell or scream. I was just kind of *resolved*. I just told him I wasn't worth it. That he'd always resent me for ruining his life.

"I was really begging him to hold on to me, of course. I think I wanted him to say he would never leave me. That he would never regret his love for me. That he would turn his back on his father's stupid business and be his own man. That he meant it when he told his father to go rot in hell. I'm sure he knew it too. I'm sure he could see it in my eyes. I'm not really that subtle.

"But I was prepared for him to give up on me. I knew it was coming. Inevitable, right? And when he let me walk out, I wasn't really surprised. In some ways, I was relieved. There was no way it would have worked out. No way.

"Nobody wins in a love triangle with Regret."

Horatio Porter

"I'm not sure I can do this.

"When I started, I thought...I thought it would be, y'know, *good* for me or something. Like it was one of these steps of grieving that I just had to *do*, and that it wouldn't be so bad if I just...maybe just treated it like reminiscing about my college days. It sounds so easy when you say it like that, right? Like if you just talk about it, you'll get there. Without knowing it, you'll have this, I don't know, *catharsis*, or whatever. You know you have to do it. It's the obvious thing that you have to do to move on to the next chapter, or the next book, or whatever, but to actually *do* it...I mean...it's not just about saying the words, is it? It's about *meaning* them.

"I just feel all this...

"...but you know that, don't you?

"What's there to say, anyway? She needed me more than she had ever needed anyone in her life, and I was crying into my fucking pillow, too afraid of the dark to even check on her. *Pussy Porter*. Just like ever. She was right there. What, twenty feet away? I just...

"Ok, ok. Just give me a sec..."

"This is, umm...harder than I...

"I'm sorry. I just need..."

"Fuck.

"Ok.

"Donna and I blew off dinner. Not really on purpose. It was just one of those nights. We weren't really hungry at the same time and didn't really care. She must have had an early lunch or something. When I had come home from work, she was already eating some chips and dip, and I knew it right away, knew we wouldn't be cooking, or going out. I was what we used to call...*on my own*.

"Funny phrase, that.

"Anyway, dinner for me was pretty lame. I had some leftovers that were on the verge of going bad, and that I hadn't liked much the first time around. I remember wondering if the meat was off, if I would get sick later. Not regret it. I knew that once I'd made the decision to eat it, I wouldn't regret it, even if I spent the whole next day vomiting. More just...y'know...well, who the hell wants to get sick, right? Just cause you won't blame yourself for it doesn't mean you want to *do* it, right? Anyway, I ate about half of it. We sat down together to watch...it was...isn't that something? I can't remember. Huh. I can remember that whole night like it was...like it *is*...and I can't remember that. Not that it...

"I remember not being able to concentrate. Like I was half asleep already, but not tired so much as, like, *overtired*. Like how you feel when you sleep too much, and you know you should be completely energized from all the rest, but even though you know you could not possibly sleep another second, all you want to do is lay there and pretend. Not that I *was* overtired. What I

mean is...that's just how I felt, right? Like I was tired enough for bed but not tired enough for sleep.

"Donna said she wasn't tired, but that she would be in a little later. I remember thinking we were becoming like an old married couple. Not that...I mean, I can hear how funny it sounds when I say it like that. Really, I had always thought old married couples laid up in bed reading, turning off their lights one at a time, like in the *Brady Bunch*. I still think that, I guess. When I say I thought we were becoming like an old married couple, I think I mean more like we had come to that place where we gave ourselves a break. Every night didn't have to be special. We could be boring and normal sometimes, let each other off the hook. That's what I mean. Like the *real* part of marriage.

"Maybe if I had just stayed up a little longer. Maybe then we would have been together when...I don't know. It's pointless, right? I mean, I *didn't* stay up longer, so there's no use in...

"Anyway, I went to bed. To bed but not to sleep, right? I tried to read, but couldn't concentrate. I turned off the light and tried to sleep, but I couldn't get comfortable. It was like I was getting sick or something, though I felt fine. *Physically*, anyway. I remember thinking that maybe the meat had been bad after all. That maybe, I don't know, an hour later or something, I would start feeling the effects, and my restlessness was somehow connected with it. Like, just the slightest hint of a wish that maybe I'd made a mistake.

"That's when the voices started.

"At first it was just a memory. I was fourteen, sitting at the piano, not playing. Just staring at the sheet music, thinking of how stupid it all was, of how I didn't care, of how much time practicing took out of my life, of how I was never going to be very good at it, of how I was old enough to make my own decisions. You know. All that teenage stuff. Just a memory of quitting

piano. Not of the day I actually quit. Not of the fight I had with my mom over it. This was a memory of the moment I *decided* to quit, right? On the *inside*.

"I was feeling kind of blue, I guess, and I kept thinking, *if only I hadn't quit the piano, I'd probably be sitting down at one right now, playing something comforting. Something soft and sad. She'd be sitting next to me, maybe singing something. I'd be able to make everything great. Or at least better. If only had hadn't given up so easily.*

"I immediately realized I was being ridiculous, right? I mean, who cares about something that happened so long ago it's a surprise to remember it? If I want to play the piano, I can do it any time. I mean, it's not about what I did or didn't do when I was a teenager. It's about what I do *now*, right? Even today, I'm not sad about quitting the piano. I'm sad about *not being able to play* the piano.

"So I, y'know, rolled over onto my side, closed my eyes again, and tried again to go to sleep. Somehow, though, this image of quitting turned into this *feeling* of quitting. Like I had quit everything I had ever tried, ever. It wasn't voices in my head, exactly, but also it kinda was. How can I...it was like I never heard the actual words, but I had a memory of them having been said. Does that make any sense?

"If only you hadn't dropped out of calculus...

"If only you hadn't quit wrestling...

"If only you hadn't bailed on that trip to California...

"If only you hadn't broken it off with Tasha...

"If only you hadn't hit the brakes so hard in the rain...

"If only you had kept up at the gym...

"If only you hadn't quit Foley Engineering...

"If only, if only, if only..."

"Over and over I just saw myself as this loser who couldn't stay with anything. I mean...I know it's not true, right? I've stayed with a lot of things. I actually stick to things more than most people I know. It doesn't...it just doesn't...in that moment, all I could see were the things I *did* quit.

"At first, I took it just like the piano thing. I mean, I'm still young, right? I've made plenty of bad decisions, but there are a ton of decisions in front of me, so I'll just do better, right? That's how things had been throughout the *Days*. But that night, at that moment, it was like it was all bullshit. Like everything I had been telling myself, everything that had made me feel so relaxed during the *Days* was crumbling. Like...like maybe how you wake up after drinking away your troubles and they're still there. Not that I ever really drank like...but you know what I mean. Like for whatever reason, you've forgotten about how horrible everything is, just for a little while, and then suddenly, all the awfulness comes back and you realize it was *joy* that was the illusion, not pain. I mean...not to make life sound awful and all that. Of course it isn't. But it can *feel* that way, right?

"Well this was that, but ten thousand times worse. It was like the world's worst bait and switch, and I had totally fallen for it. Except, instead of losing my life savings, I felt like I had lost my life.

"Anyway, that was really...I mean...do I have to...

"I don't know. Maybe I...

"Ok.

"I was in bed, head crushed into my pillow, just, y'know, wishing for these thoughts to go away, these thoughts I wanted so badly to be rid of forever, and they were just crushing me, ok? If...if you haven't...I mean, you just can't imagine how much force comes with that kind of...*potential energy*, I guess. Except it wasn't *potential* anymore, was it?

"Like...ok. My mother always told me to clean up as I went along, y'know? That if I let the mess accumulate, soon it would be completely overwhelming to the point where it felt impossible. If I just cleaned up as I went along, y'know, like wash the pot as soon as I was done with it, instead of what everybody wants to do, which is to blow it off until after dinner is over, I would be a lot happier in the end. Duh, right? If you let them pile up, it gets overwhelming. Or in my childhood bedroom. Y'know, like if you let it go too long, you can't hardly think about even *starting* to clean it. That's what happened. I'd been blowing off cleaning up for one hundred fifty-one days, and now that I thought about getting started, it was just...y'know...impossible.

"My regrets never really disappeared is the thing. They just gathered somewhere unseen, unmanaged, untouched. They festered and grew stronger. Lying there, pushing my face into the pillow to block out the voices, I just couldn't do it. I just didn't have the strength.

"But what really...I mean...what finally...

"Ok...I mean...there I was, lying in bed, fighting my demons, or maybe *hiding* from them, and this other voice tried to sneak in, quiet, ok, but *sure*. The voice told me that if I could suffer as I did, if I could hardly hold myself together as these...waves of regret, I guess, came crashing back like a tsunami, what about Donna? The voice was like, *maybe you should man up*, or *grow some hair on your chest*, or whatever. Just...y'know...stop thinking about yourself and take care of *her*.

"And I...the truth is I ignored it. I told myself it wasn't real. That I was in pain and I wasn't up for it. That she could take care of herself. That I would get up in a minute. That I just needed a little time to myself. That...and this is really the thing, I guess...that if I had screwed up my life as much as I was feeling in that moment, what use could I be to her? I was ready to tell myself anything, *anything*, to make all the voices go away.

"If only I hadn't been such a coward."

A Horrible and Useless Person

Donna should have been stronger. One hundred fifty-one days without regret should have taught her something. Should have impressed upon her the limited value, if not utter uselessness, of such a feeling. Should have, by use of example, said to her, "*See, honey? You don't need that. That ain't helping you. What's done is done, right? See how easy it is when you just don't worry about it?*" Or perhaps, better said: *Isn't this nice?"*

Instead, she never quite accepted the gift. Never really believed that anyone, least of all she, could ever truly live without regret. True, she smiled more, relaxed more, allowed herself to live in the moment. She learned to be the kind of person she always wondered about. The person who didn't take life so seriously, who could see the good things without always focusing on the bad. Yet, it never felt quite right. Something was missing. Regret was an old friend who had always been by her side, a constant companion without whom she felt somewhat empty. He was trouble, always had been, but the loss, however beneficial, was still a loss. He was the boyfriend she knew she was better off without, but for whom she still quietly pined.

Perhaps she was more prone to the *Great Apathy* than most. Perhaps her furtive wish for the bitter taste of regret encouraged her to weary of the sugary dessert table her life had become. Everyone tired of the desserts, of course, but some tired sooner than others. Donna, who had never really developed a taste for them, for the sweet joys life could offer, never truly trusted them. She liked chocolate, but preferred it darker. Bittersweet. In her heart, she knew the milk chocolate coated caramel and toffee could never be more than a special treat. An accent to her life. Such treats could never truly satisfy her.

It wasn't that she desired to feel regret again. Nor was it that she disliked the feeling of relief that came with his absence. She *did* like her new life. She *did* like the new feeling. She *did* feel like she had made a new start. At the same time, however, she never came to trust that he was gone for good. She knew, as much as she had ever known anything, that he would come back, roaring with the inertia of a one hundred fifty-one car freight train, and that his return would destroy her.

In her heart, she knew she was a horrible and useless person. She never dared to consider that the great gift could last.

She was right, of course. Not that it served her. Whether because she had not the strength, or merely failed to use it, I will not judge. Suffice to say what strength she showed, what vigilance she practiced, what small amount of her shell she held close to her heart, was not enough. One hundred fifty-one days is enough time to make the strange feel normal. To get used to it. To feel entitled to it. Comfort is, one cannot deny, seductive. Donatella Purcell was seduced along with the rest of them, lured into a state of apathy strong enough to bring down the guard of all but the strongest. With less strength to begin with, she was easily crushed by the unstoppable mass that was Regret's inevitable return.

As her husband lay hiding under the covers, lacking his own strength to fight the old god once again, Donna sat on the couch, thumbing through the internet. Quietly, a voice invaded her mind. A whisper, really. It was familiar and yet strange. Like seeing an old friend after many years, the eyes the same, but the lines in his face disconcerting. He is the person you knew, but he has aged. You know not whether age has changed him for the better or for the worse, but the change cannot be denied.

If only you'd commented. That was exactly what you would have said. Now it'll just look like you're repeating, even though

you really did come up with it first. Why are you so afraid? You don't even deserve to be reading this. If only you'd just dared to put yourself out there a little. It's not like they even know who you really are.

Followed, strangely, by,

Oh, who cares, Donna? Don't be seduced by the dark side. It's not like worrying about it will change anything. Ooh, those puppies are adorable. I hope they got adopted.

And for a moment, all was well.

Then,

It's so late. Too bad you're not tired. If only you'd put down the laptop an hour ago when you started getting a little sleepy. Now you'll be wired for another hour and exhausted in the morning. If only you'd gone to sleep when you were tired. You're so stupid.

Followed by,

Like it matters. It's not like I can go back in time or anything. So what if I'm tired in the morning. I'll deal with that tomorrow. If I'm not tired, why should I worry about it?

A short while later, her stomach twisted, as if there was something she should worry about, something that was undone, something she didn't want to think about hiding just below her conscious self. The kind of something that keeps you up most of the night, then haunts your dreams.

If only you hadn't lost your job. That was your fault. Your fault. Your fault. Your fault. You should have taken it more seriously. You should have been early every day instead of always trying to be exactly on time and always ending up a little late. If only you hadn't taken all those sick days. You totally had it in you. It's like you sabotaged yourself. Like you were trying to get fired. Of course you were the first one to go when they started

cutting. If only you'd stayed late instead of putting off that job till after the weekend. You're so stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

That one hurt a little more. She was still able to kick it, but in a more traditional way, a way her old friend, waxing in strength, found pleasing.

Yeah, I did screw that up. But I'll get another job, and when I do, I'll work harder than ever. Teachable moment, right? When you fall off the horse, you've got to get right back on. When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

She closed the site where she had been mindlessly surfing memes, stories, and life lessons. Boldly, she went to her usual job searching sites, determined to make some progress. Hope crept upon her as she dreamed of her next job. Her next promotion. The beginning of her new life with Horatio. Soon, however, she was reminded of why her new life would have to wait.

If only you'd taken better care of the car.

If only you'd put some money aside for emergencies.

If only you had some friends who could take you to a job interview.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

You can hardly put the past away forever. You can throw it in the corner and cover it with a blanket. Hide it under the bed. You can even toss it in the bushes and leave it outside to rot. It is strong, however, and can never be disposed of entirely. It lies in wait, ready to put itself back in your path the moment you are too weak to hide it again. You think that part of your life is over. That it is something that came and went, something you are embarrassed about, ashamed of, but that is now irrevocably over. Not so. Your worser self is ready to drag you down again, down where everything somehow seems easier, simpler, regardless of the pain that accompanies it.

So it was with Donatella Purcell.

Life without regret had been great for her. Life before was the ghetto she had crawled out of, could look back upon from the uptown penthouse she had risen to. It was the forty dollar high that had held her at the bottom, stolen her life, the high she had finally learned to live without, positive she was better off. Something about it, however, still attracted her, and she found herself sleepwalking toward it, pretty sure the high was never worth it, but curious just to have a taste again, to convince herself of the truth. Maybe just one. For old times sake.

She allowed herself to taste regret, to remember the flavor, feel it course through her veins. He took to his opportunity with abandon. He filled her up, crawled into every crevice, filled every vacuum. To say he made her feel good, however, is to misunderstand his elegant seduction. She did not feel good. She felt *right*. The moment she allowed herself to taste his delicate flavors, she knew she had been kidding herself for nearly the last five months. She had been pretending to be someone she was not. She had been faking it. This night, with the old drug once again coursing through her veins, she was herself again at last. This was the real Donna, like her or not. This was who she was. A stupid, horrible, useless person who would always fail to make the right choices, would always ruin the lives of people around her, could never be deserving of the gifts she had been hoarding of late.

As her husband fought with sleep, mired in his own fears, unable to help her even had she dared to ask, she sunk deeper and deeper. She spiraled down into depths she had not believed existed.

If only you had worked harder in school.

If only you had listened to your mother.

If only you mattered.

If only you had the least amount of worth.

If only you didn't ruin everything and everyone you touch.

If only you had never been born.

By the time Horatio found her, he was too late.

Learning to Remember

Across the street from the apartment Donatella Purcell shared with Horatio Porter was a small open air shelter meant to protect commuters from the meaner weather as they waited for their bus. Given the hour, it should have been deserted. Instead, one end of the bench was occupied by a young and dour looking goddess in emotional crisis. She stared ahead, seemingly harmless, as she fought internally with her fear of rejection. If you are tempted to feel sympathy for her, know that, as passers by crossed her area of influence, she showed no sympathy for *them*.

An old man tripped on a heaved section of sidewalk.

A middle aged woman, taking her three dogs for a late night walk, lost hold of one leash and watched her young charge run across the street, his former tether trailing behind him.

A vagrant lost his torn but still useful sleeping bag to three hoodlums for no more than the sake of mischief.

Misfortune may have been wallowing in her own sorrow, may have been struggling with herself, with her fears, may even have been in crisis, but she was not harmless. It was not in her nature. Where she went, trouble followed. Where you crossed her path, you wished you had not. It matters not that her wrath led to greater things, that as Horatio Porter so aptly stated, *adversity builds character*. No one wants to visit with this goddess if they can avoid it. Forget the lessons you might learn, the teachable moments, the growth that comes after – it's just *too damn hard*. No sane person wants anything to do with her.

That she was born to be despised, feared, only exacerbated her feelings. Only a god could love such a creature, and her god of choice, she knew at last, loved her not. She wished it were different, dreamed her sister was right. That if she only dared to declare her love, there was some small chance that she might find

he loved her in return. Yet, sitting in the dark, Regret working in triumph across the street, whatever hope still remained in her vanished. She knew now that he never loved her. That he *would* never love her.

It was time to move on.

Yet, face him first, she must. On that point, her sister's wisdom could not be questioned.

It was time for Misfortune to take her beating and be stronger for it. Confess her love, feel her shame, and at long last move on. For so long she had lacked the courage. She had been afraid of losing. Afraid of giving up what little hope she still held close. Now, sure in her heart that there was no love to be won, that hope was already lost, the need for courage seemed unimportant. She had lost all.

For surely courage is meaningless without hope.

When Regret appeared, his havoc upon Donatella Purcell behind him, Misfortune was no longer afraid. *Resigned* might be the better word. She sensed his presence and made herself known. With not even a motion of her hand, she looked him in the eye, called him over with barely a nod of her head. On another day, a normal day, a day where Misfortune was her former self, it would have been the sort of nod Regret could easily have ignored, a nod Misfortune could have pretended was not intended for him, was just a random movement of her head easily dismissed. This nod was no more, but the *intention* could not be mistaken. Slight though it was, insignificant it was not. From across the street, Regret, exhausted and not quite himself, obeyed.

He sat next to her, said nothing, his head full of self doubt. He stared back toward the apartment he had just left, comforted by the presence of an old friend, wondering if he was the same as he had been when they had first met. He gave little thought as to

whether she, too, might have changed. Like all of us, he thought first of himself, his mind hardly considering the suffering goddess seated next to him. He believed she was there to comfort *him*. When he spoke, it was quietly, as if to himself.

"I can't figure it out, old friend."

Misfortune did not answer, but smiled quietly at the use of the word *friend*.

"Maybe I never had any balance, but I remember it differently. I think of myself as a dancer on one of their tightropes. I flick my arm here and knock one down on my right. Over there and one falls on my left. Soon they rise, ready for another hit. With each flick one falls. With each flick another one rises. The *dance*, yes? Delicate havoc. It has always been rewarding to taunt my friends because they always come back. That's how it *felt* anyway. Maybe I was just deluding myself."

Misfortune, not expecting him to begin, to share himself with her, forgot herself for a moment. Not, *forgot herself* in the way of saying something stupid. *Forgot herself* in that she forgot about her *self* for a moment, cared only for him.

"You broke one?"

Regret sighed. "Yes. I broke one. Over there. Another one. One of many. It has been a while, but she was far from my first. We all break one from time to time. It never feels good, but we get over it. I'm sure I'll get over this one."

"But?"

Regret looked at Misfortune.

"But this time feels different. Personal. As if I broke her to prove something to myself. I...stopped believing in my work, I suppose. Stopped caring, perhaps. I had done my work too well, and they started doing it to themselves. I think now it was just inertia. Soon enough, they forgot all about me, but for a moment, I thought they would never need me again. I told myself I was

just burning out, needed a vacation, but I think I was just losing my care. When I walked away, it wasn't just for a vacation. I told myself it was, but, I don't think I really intended to come back.

"And I met *her*."

Misfortune stiffened.

"Your mother was...she was different. I know you don't want to hear this, but she *changed* me. I know how you feel about her. I may be ignorant and dismissive, but it would take a deaf man to mistake your feelings about her. But I am not you, and I was able to see things in her that you cannot. I won't say I was in love with her. I was not. I was not in love with your mother. But she changed me nonetheless.

"I had always feared myself a little. Always felt that, if I wanted, I could break pretty much anyone. Even one of us. Even you. Not only that I could, but that I *would*. That I couldn't help but do it. That, if I were to make a friendship, I would have to do everything I could to hold back, show a restraint I never quite had. Maybe I just never had it in me. In the end, I always failed. I always dropped some hint, somewhere. Sabotaged myself. Don't ask me why. I don't want to know.

"With Bliss, though, there was none of that. I don't mean none in that I didn't try. I did try. A lot. I mean none in that my trying didn't matter. Not because of the happiness she exudes. That's for the customers. For me, it was no more than her inability to remember a moment after it had passed. It did not matter how much I wanted to sabotage myself, how much I was willing to hurt her. She was immune. She has nothing to regret because she has no past.

"I was not in love with Bliss. I was in love with forgetting.

"I spent months forgetting myself. I sat in that house, worlds away from my work, and thought I could stay forever. Just stay and forget. Forever.

"But it wasn't me. It was her. Now she's gone, and what the hell *am* I, anyway, without my work? I couldn't just sit there hiding from the world. It was a nice break, but I had to come back. I had to see if I *could* come back. See if maybe I could dance again.

"And...well...I'm not sure I can. I've gone from complete failure, from everything's too easy, from knock them down with hardly a flick, to I don't know how to do this anymore. I can hardly walk down a highway, let alone a tightrope. Instead of gentle flicks, I'm flailing about, missing this one and killing that one. I spent so much time forgetting, I'm not sure I can remember anymore. I don't even know why I came back. Maybe they *are* better off without me."

Misfortune stretched her hand over the gap between them, and took his in it. This was her moment, though it hardly felt like it. Rather, perhaps channeling her mother, she just stayed in the moment.

She said, "Maybe they are."

Regret did not respond.

Misfortune did not care.

"Maybe they don't need you. Maybe they just think they do. Maybe they spent so much time thinking about you, they forgot to think about themselves. Maybe they became so used to you, used to...well...I guess being *afraid* of you...maybe...they forgot how to fight back without you. Maybe they don't actually *need* you to make them stronger. Maybe they're strong enough as it is. Maybe you don't...love them enough. Maybe you just don't, I don't know, care, I guess. Maybe if you thought a little harder about what I...they...felt, maybe you would have been a little more...delicate, I guess. Maybe you stopped caring just enough that they stopped caring about you. At least the smart ones. The ones you break..."

Misfortune trailed off. Had she said enough?

Regret wondered out loud, "The ones I break..."

Misfortune dived. "The ones you break are just too stupid to ignore you. They aren't your problem, Regret. They are their own problem." Could she dare?

Squeezing his hand, then letting go, she said, "*We. We* are our own problem."

Regret looked into her eyes, such as the streetlight shadows would allow, and wondered if he could care. If what he needed was not someone whom he meant nothing to, but whom he meant everything to. If he could take the pressure of caring. If he could risk the pain that would inevitably follow. If such risk was the only thing that had ever made him whole. If he could dare to do so again. If he even knew how.

He slid along the bench until he was up against Misfortune, and put his arm around her. "Maybe you're right, old friend. Maybe it's better not to care."

As the day grew light, they sat together at the bus stop, plying their wares on unsuspecting passersby, she causing the physical damage, he the emotional. Together, as old friends, they toyed with strangers, a scrimmage game without stakes, relaxed in each other's company.

By night, they had gone their separate ways, not sure when they might meet again.

Exercise 9: A Visit with Regret

You are a traveller from afar. Along your travels you have turned many strangers to acquaintances, and some acquaintances to friends. On the advice of an acquaintance on her journey toward friend, you have left the city in which you most recently found yourself, and travelled out to the country where a celebration of sorts is in progress. A farmhouse forms the center of a large party, spreading to the outbuildings, to the edge of the fields, and even to the woods and river beyond.

It is an annual affair, one which is attended each year by many of the same people, old friends glad to be in each other's presence, new friends made by mutual introduction. Food and drink are abundant. Conversation is lively. Music fills the air. You mix with the revelers, hoping to catch sight of your sometime acquaintance, as you join the festivities, making new ones. As is typical in your life, you are a stranger among friends, welcomed to be sure, but still on the outside, lacking the history that brings the rest of those around you together. As you mingle, you begin to piece together a story shared by all but you.

A strange story.

At first, the revelers speak of former celebrations, here in this place, in years past. Such conversation is not surprising, talk of former musicians that performed on the makeshift stage, memorable fireworks displays, that one time someone fell into the river and spent the rest of the day covered in mud, scaring the children as he chased them around the yard. Soon, however, it becomes clear that most of the talk is of a similar party four years before, and the months that followed. Of freedom. Of peace. Of joy.

It is as if they are all speaking of childhood, waxing nostalgic of a time when they had no burdens, no cares. As if they wished

they could return to the time when regret had no hold upon them, when life was only before them, never challenging them from behind. They speak with smiles, camaraderie, and more than a little melancholy. You find that you are among philosophers gently debating the merits of dwelling on the past, of learning from their mistakes, and the question of whether one might not live without regret forever.

A man tells you of what he believes to have been one hundred fifty-one days without regret. Of a carefree life with a beautiful woman, a time when life seemed wonderfully unmindful of burdens. He talks of a pleasant time that could not last. Of the boredom that comes from an unexamined life. Of learning to face reality, of accepting regret as a necessary part of life, a tool to drive us forward, to help us change. The pain that reminds us repair is necessary, and without which we might fail to repair ourselves at all. And his words come back to the beautiful woman, a woman he fell in love with when he saw her dancing naked around a fire. A woman who was better off without him. A woman about whom he still has lingering regrets.

A woman tells you of dancing naked around a fire. Of her subsequent love affair and broken romance. Of her determination to learn lessons from what she calls *The Days of No Regret*. Of her fight to live without regret in the months that followed, to keep up the fight as long as she has the strength. She talks disdainfully of what she calls the sheep who lack the courage, the revelers about you who tire of her lectures, but who suffer for their impatience. She tells you her mission has cost her friends, but that she does not, *cannot* regret her path. She admonishes you to do the same. And her words come back to the love affair, to the man whom she most certainly loved, but who was better off without her. A man about whom she refuses to have lingering regrets.

A man tells you of his lost love. Of a life filled with regret. Of a short respite that could never last. He bemoans coming back to this place, of his hope it might purge him of regret once again. He regrets coming here, and regrets regretting. He tells you of true love, of the pain that must always accompany life. He talks of the impossibility of fighting back against an enemy that showers you with gifts. Of how easy it is to be destroyed by pain when it has been gone so long that you forgot it was there. When it comes crashing back with a strength you are unprepared for after your complacency in its absence. Of how regret can and must destroy you. How it is a an inextricable part of life, painful but permanent. Of how life is suffering. And his words come back to his true love, whom he failed when she needed him most. A woman about whom he will have regrets as long as he is cursed with life.

Upon a hill overlooking the revelers, you see a god in quiet contemplation. Perhaps there is a goddess further in the distance, watching him. It is hard to say. The god beckons you. Dares you to approach.

You look about yourself for the woman you came for, your acquaintance on her way to friend, wondering if she, too, lived one hundred fifty-one days without regret. Wonder if you could make a life with such a woman, if such a woman could make a life with you. Wonder if a life without regret would only keep you alone forever. Wonder what it would matter, if you could never regret the decision.

You turn toward the god, ready to make a new friend.
Good idea or not?

