

Emergency Room

One Sunday near the floral border between March and April, I thought I would head north to explore the coastline. I looked for my friend, but his Volvo was missing as he had probably gone to Morro Bay to drink some coffee and do some reading at his café. I considered waiting for him since I was in a particularly pleasant mood and the thought of another voice in the car seemed nice, but when I didn't see him after lunch, I struck out on my own.

It was a perfectly spotless afternoon; the kind of day that makes you depressed at night if you weren't outside to enjoy it. Stuart had mowed an acre of cover crop next to the barn that morning and as the sun grew stronger and began to bake the pithy stalks of vetch, I caught a whiff of that long lost odor of freshly cut grass. I breathed it deeply and marveled at its power to transport me two decades back in time, where the redolent aroma of cleanly shorn east-coast lawns always marked the beginning of the end of another tedious year in the classroom. I always had trouble harnessing my unbridled enthusiasm for the outdoors during the last two months preceding summer vacation. Seductive days, with their supple arms and slender fingers, gently pulled me through an open window at the back of the classroom and treated my fancy to a sumptuous feast. How lovely the view was from above! The sun caressed my back and the breeze delivered a cotton cloud that slid under my belly like a warm pillow. I was able to control everything. I rose above the school until it was a creamy geometric pattern. I saw suburban neighborhoods tucked neatly away under forests of blue conifers and light-green maples. A rusty river full of whiskered catfish flowed next to the highway. It seemed so fast and powerful when I was immersed in its murky waters or strolling along its banks. From above, it was just a lazy stream meandering quite languidly under concrete arteries and cars that were like a multitude of gleaming beetles, racing each other across the water. Life was so quiet from above and I had supreme command over the horns and squeals and shrieks of the world. I always followed the birds around as if I was an esteemed relative visiting from a remote corner of the world. I watched them glide beside me with delicate balance as they performed fantastic aerial maneuvers with such grace and ease that I felt sure I would never descend back to earth. Astonishingly, twenty years later, on my own time and my day off, I was again overcome by that same blissful dream, completely oblivious to traffic signs and other vehicles as I calmly guided my rotund silver cloud out of town and onto Highway 1.

I had no idea where I was going. Visions of stout redwoods danced across my brain. I pictured the milky-skinned silhouette of Julia Pfeiffer Burns

appearing out of a foggy grove of sempervirens wearing nothing but her pioneer hat. Her lips formed the silky smile of a temptress as she reached out to me. Further north, the hypnotic sapphire eyes of Carmel beckoned me with their lusty luster. Her mermaid scales shimmered like sequins in the rippling water. Her long garnet locks undulated in time with the waves and beads of the Pacific fell off her copper skin like diamonds when she emerged from its bosom and called to me with a sibilant moan. How many more of my imaginary maidens yearned for my presence as I drifted north without a molecule of distress in my heart?

Somewhere near San Simeon, my vaporous chariot eased off the road and banked against the curb. I relented to a muscular marine gale and felt myself reeled in toward an outcropping of sharp black cliffs rising out of a furious sea. I glided past a group of windsurfers and across a gurgling stream that fed the ocean. The soles of my feet never touched the sable sand and I rose above eroded plutons, porous and filled with pink and purple shells that sparkled like opals whenever a sleeper wave broke against the rock face. Atop the bluff, the wind was fierce and it pushed me along a thin trail of red earth that ran along the sleep lip of the cliff.

I crept along the trail noiselessly, passing short-needle pines with distorted limbs and resinous blue cones. Accidentally, I stumbled upon a solitary grave. Beloved Mocha, the wooden plaque read. A Faithful Friend. She Will Be Missed By All. There was a badly weathered photograph glued underneath the painstakingly hand-carved green lettering of the old girl in her healthier days, floppy ears hanging beside her head and a wet pink tongue panting happily while her loving eyes told of no greater joy than at that moment. I was apprehensive standing upon this sacred burial ground and I looked around cautiously, but the whipping wind was my only witness and she would never whisper a word. I disappeared like a ghost behind a Monterey Cypress curtain and down a steep incline to the sea. I sat in a smooth depression and watched a group of black cormorants sun themselves. Next to them, on another rock, a clan of white gulls caroused and barked across the water at their neighbors. I waited for the fight, but it never came. A big breaker hurtled into their perches and scattered them like grains of salt and pepper. I shielded my face as the water shattered into infinite granules of salty mist. Another, and another. There was nothing peaceful about the enraged ocean attacking the cliffs, yet I was totally at peace allowing my brain to trace the shapes of the rolling waves. The frigid Pacific gnashed her teeth so violently against the rocks that no other sound, however loud, could ever rise above that vicious cacophony. Below, I watched as dark crevasses, bitten out of the black sandstone welled up with spicy foam. The ocean is not a demure damsel and just as quickly as her billowy

white dress covered the rocks with lace, she yanked back her turquoise folds, revealing a sloped glistening thigh.

Poseidon didn't like me staring at his mistress in such a lewd manner and he blew me back to the top of the bluffs with a jealous lung. I lost the trail and forded some brambles that left rosy lashes across my bare calves. I was an explorer. Was I the first to traverse this unforgiving landscape of sagebrush and scrub oak? Would I stumble upon something far more glorious than a cocker spaniel's grave? What else lay in store for me, the great twenty-first century conquistador of the central coast. I pushed on and strange patterns appeared on my legs-crimson hieroglyphics-proving to any skeptic who would dare doubt this epic journey through uncharted territory that I had braved harsh terrain, indeed. And after nearly a mile of adrenaline-fueled bushwhacking, I found it.

Two large pines stood on either side of the opening. Their bristled arms intertwined to form an arch that commanded deference. The golden light which hung on my shoulders like a cape fell away when I reverently entered the hallowed chamber as a knight ascending to the throne to meet his lord. It was cool and quiet and even the wind hushed and paid its respects. My feet sank into the soft bed of pine straw and a fresh citrus aroma overtook the wanton brine. I was overcome with solemnity and I stood meekly with my arms at my sides and my head bowed. There was no sound for an eternity and my mind was as clear as the air I breathed. The trunks of the trees were old and sturdy. Wisps of brittle green moss like kings' beards hung from the canopy and shafts of light pierced through the ceiling. I saw the ancient elemental remnants in the lambent canes as they ignited shadows upon the castle floor.

I treaded softly and slowly, like a spelunker entering a cave, to the back of the room where the matrix of branches was thickest. The path ended abruptly, though I knew there was more to this magical place. Seeking a secret passage or trap door, I pushed against the woody barrier with my fingers, feeling for a weak spot. I peeled away layers of branches only to reveal more impenetrable webbing. I continued in this manner for some time, unable to advance, and with the imminent nebula of defeat lolling over me, I sat upon a rock and dozed off.

A powerful sneeze restored my consciousness. I looked at my watch and nearly an hour had passed. I felt an itch inside my nose, but scratching offered no relief. I sat still and focused until I realized there was something crawling inside my nose. I jumped to my feet and suppressed the initial surge of panic. I peeled back the nostril and inserted the tip of my thumb until the edge of the nail dug into the crusty wall. I felt a small bump that did not live there. It moved as I brushed against it.

There are few things more frightening than finding foreign matter on your

body. The imagination can be terrifying when unchained and allowed to run amok. Fortunately, this was not one of those moments when we are trapped in a helpless position, jailed in our own personal hell, desperately attempting to mollify our mind's ghastly creations. Indeed, this was a moment of action. There was no time to consider the myriad monsters with their slimy appendages that might have parasitized me. This was merely a basal sympathetic response from my nervous system. The moment I felt that slight squirm along my septum, I switched fingers and ripped out the rogue.

My breath was short as I studied the small vampire arachnid writhing between my nails. It's reddish-brown shell had a strange white devilish design and I tested its strength. How many ounces of blood had this tiny phlebotomist gorged upon, undetected? Surely now, in my vice grip, it knew the end was near. I didn't torture the wretched creature, after all, it was only doing what was in its nature. But I, too, followed my instinct and neatly folded it in half until it popped and broke in two, leaving a dab of fluid on my fingernail. When I was sure it was dead, I flicked it aside and checked myself for more of its relatives. It was then that I noticed something different about my castle.

An hour earlier, the sun had been directly overhead and obfuscated by the thick canopy. Now, it had dipped toward the ocean and I noticed for the first time, where there had been no light before, there was a visible gap in the impassable pine forest. I quickly forgot about ticks and inspected the source. I pushed against the web again and my hand plunged through. The wooden limbs spread before me, allowing the rest of me to enter and after some very minor abrading, I found what I had come for.

As I emerged, the sound of a crashing wave heralded my arrival. The space was only thirty feet across. Two hundred feet down, a virgin bronze beach accepted the advances of the surf's white lips, inching closer and closer. The space was shaped like a crescent and covered by a soft blanket of moss and grass. The curtains of a cypress draped over the rooftop pine like a beaded doorway and near the edge of the rim a wonderful little garden-a community of cinnamon-colored wildflowers-quivered in the breeze. There was exactly enough space for one man to sleep comfortably. Drawn back several feet from the ledge, one solitary soul could safely rest, knowing that he was lying upon the most pristine place in existence.

I was much too excited to sleep and I could only lay there, basking in my discovery and greedily trying to take it all in through eyes, ears, tongue and prospecting fingertips. Lying supine, I was absolutely certain I was the first and only member of my species to touch that plush carpet, to watch the tremulous flowers tremble like red glitter and to hear the crepitating surf. No one else had ever seen that part of the world from my vantage point and it was unlikely that

any would ever do so again. And it was with a feeling of tremendous achievement and satisfaction that some time later, grinning ear to ear, I pushed back on the secret panel leading out of paradise and was slightly confused upon finding underneath my calloused heel, an empty pack of cigarettes resting in the middle of a fire ring.

I believe I made a sound like a deflating balloon. It came out of my cheek and I drew it out until it degenerated into a squishy afterthought. My first reaction was to inspect the bitter litter underfoot. The slim cardboard box had some avant-garde teal smudges on the front as a design and the fire had left the name on the front: Capri. She was cruel, this predecessor of mine, but not without a sense of humor, however cold. How did I not see it before? I had gloated myself to the point of blindness. The circle of blackened rocks was obvious enough and there were other signs, too: one candy wrapper (Snickers), one empty tin of sardines in hot mustard sauce, of course there was the obligatory beer can (Coors Light, though I was shocked there was only one) and finally, *pour la bonne bouche*, the crowning insult, one shriveled, disgusting, spent prophylactic, bunched up like a lubricious *Lumbricus* next to a bulbous pine cone.

The vulgarity of these filthy relics sobered me at once and was too much to bear. All traces of bliss evaporated as my glare fell upon the sordid campsite. It was time to go. I struck a brisk pace and made a beeline down the cliff ignoring any bends in the trail and plunging directly into the coastal chaparral. Down the slope. Over some rocks. The smell of rotting marine life; shells crunching underfoot. Through the muddy creek, past the drunken windsurfers rolling on the beach like seals. Across the parking lot and into the driver's seat. I found a station playing some aggressive speed metal and I spun the knob until the volume was at a deafening level. The windows became blurred vibrations and I thought they might explode at any moment. I idled for a moment, giving few onlookers the vilest stink eye I could muster, then I was gone. There was no one on the road and I pushed my little cumulonimbus until the speedometer reached triple digits and I was home before the sun set.

I slept poorly that night not because of any disturbing dreams, rather, quite the contrary. Most people say that their best sleep comes in the form of blackened slumber, but without dreams, I wake up fiercely petulant and more exhausted than the night before. There are three activities that allow my mind to shut off: music, sex and basketball. During every other moment of my existence I am consumed by thoughts. This includes sleep, reveries and all things related, including dreams. I am a lucid dreamer and I quite often find myself quite conscious during sleep. This typically produces grotesquely galactic hallucinations that greatly overcompensate for my earthly failures. That night,

however, I could only lay inside my cocoon, writhing in pitch-slathered agony as I raked my claws across my skin, cursing the venomous oak that had coated me with its venomous lube.

I consider myself a man of reasonable willpower. One morning when I was twenty-seven, I woke up with a terrible throat ache and renounced cigarettes forever and have never smoked since. But that was an easy trick-merely teaching a dog to sit- compared to playing the part of a pacifist during an urushiol attack. Volition is always strong for the first few days, but pliant resolve eventually yields to deals between the cortex and claws that invariably leads to rationalization. Just a light graze with the petals from a rose, soft as a feather, I promise; a gentle dab with a napkin; one, and only one, isolated scrape with the pinky nail. Go ahead, I give you permission. This will all be over soon. How long can one glossy-lobed shrub torture us for? It looks pretty, like an aspen leaf, flitting there on the forest floor. But what a defense mechanism it has evolved! Never the aggressor, *Toxidendron* retaliates mercilessly. The following Friday, it had spread across my legs and had infiltrated the darkest, most tender region of my body.

By Herculean resolve, some self-brutality and some barbiturate concern, I was able to keep it below the belt. A minor outbreak had developed on a vein behind my ear and just below my left nipple, but I forced myself to adhere to strict celibacy around those regions. Below the waist, I decreed that I would allow regimented scratching-three times daily, a short session following each meal. After nearly a week, I amended this law by instituting a post-repast constitutional. I would suffer one minute of unmitigated flogging to aid with digestion. I timed my meals accordingly. Just before bed I wolfed down a sandwich and a cup of raw sugar and followed it with sixty seconds of pure rapture. Anyone curious enough to poke their head through the door would surely be scarred by the bizarre gargoyle, a masochistic fellow covered in beard, stripped down to his briefs, furiously whipping his lower extremities with a black leather belt and groaning scurrilously.

I had made plans, several weeks earlier, to visit an old friend who lived in Yuba City. I was nearing my wit's end with the interminable rash and I decided a change of scenery might take my mind off the horrible itch. I called him Friday night to remind him of the visit.

"Porter, I'm coming to Yuba tomorrow, right? No that's fine. I don't have any money either. Yes that's good. The cheaper the better. Wait. Listen, I have a scorching case of poison oak. Yes, it does. You did what? When? And she used what? No, I've never thought of doing that. Yes, really. Well, I'm slowly losing it if you must know. Do you still have your forty-five? Nothing, just joking. Yes, alright. Anyway, we'll see when I get there. I'll be there a little

after noon.”

The next morning I dug the rim of the shampoo bottle into my calves while showering until they looked like they had been chewed by a deer. I forced myself to sing along with a classic rock station to pass the time. Ridiculous songs, really. I adopted a different accent for each tune: Sean Connery singing *Vogue*. “*Let your body go with the flow, you know you can do it.*” Ravi Shankar’s playful, *I Want You To Want Me*. Hitler’s military rendition of *Barracuda*. I changed the channel and overdubbed 50 Cent over Figaro. Rosanne Barr as Cio-Cio San. This amused me for several hours until I could no longer stand the sound of my own voice. In Sacramento, I started flicking my kneecap with my middle finger and that seemed to temporarily starve the fire and in Yuba I made a wrong turn and was distracted by a detour through town, though when I finally pulled into Porter’s long stretch of macadam, the itch was back.

In the yard I was greeted by Porter’s new puppy, a wonderful creature that immediately bounded up to me and began rubbing its velvet coat against my shins. He rose on his hind legs and his claws ground against the front of my legs. I gasped and my eyes rolled into the back of my head. Had I ever known such delicious relief? “That’s a good boy.” He responded with a warm tongue that lapped up a leaky corpuscle. In between a mild spasm, I wondered if dogs could get poison oak. “Okay, dog. That’s enough. You’re a good dog.” He followed me around to the back where I saw Porter leaning over a row of vegetables. When he saw me, he motioned for me to come over.

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I met Everett Porter in a small town in Pennsylvania. We were both at a party where I was inadvertently trying to pick up his girlfriend. On pure principle, I didn’t like him at first, but after talking to him later on, I realized that he was a difficult person to dislike. He had the kind of polarizing personality that made people either love him or hate him. We instantly became friends. He stood over six feet and possessed the hearty laugh of a man of large appetites. Perhaps one of the reasons we became good friends was our love of overindulgence. We enjoyed pushing things to the brink and if they happened to fall in, we leaned into the chasm, gleefully watching them burn.

The year after the great millennium shift, Porter and I, along with another fellow named Roper, were living in a ratty little apartment in Pittsburgh. We were both delivering pizzas and kept strange hours. There were issues with Porter’s credit so Roper and I decided that we would put the electric and cable

bills in our names. Around the middle of November, when the crisp autumn temperatures started dropping, we grumbled to Porter about the cold, but he would hear none of it.

"Nonsense," he would say. "It's perfectly comfortable in here. You guys need to grow a pair. Put on a coat, Beef."

It was a typically bitter winter in the Steel City and we slept in jackets and ski caps and doubled up on sweatpants and socks. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for Roper or me to put the heat in our names, but we were highly principled and somehow, the thought of giving in and signing a contract with the gas company while Porter did nothing was out of the question. In retrospect, our obstinate resolve was admirable. At first it was a small point of pride. We boasted of our penurious existence and told our friends of life in the ice house. Our next door neighbors came over one day and asked me, "Why don't you just put the heat in your name? How can you live like this?"

"Because the electric is already in my name," I said. And Roper said, "And I have the cable in mine."

"But aren't you cold? How do you sleep at night? It must be forty degrees in here."

"Oh, it gets cold," I bragged. "But the only way we're getting heat is if Porter takes it on."

A few days later we received a kerosene heater as a gift and it sat in the middle of the living room burning gas for a few weeks until Roper's dog almost knocked it over one night and we decided that the cold was preferable to a house fire. Another month passed and though I had grown accustomed to seeing my own breath pass in front of my eyes as I fought for sleep, I thought it odd that we had never heard single complaint about the cold from Porter. One night, when I was sure he was asleep, I crept out of my room and cracked his door and saw him sprawled on the floor, half-naked, with a white-noise machine simulating a stream next to his head and a small space heater, glowing orange, resting not more than two feet away from his perspiring amplitude. Through ripples of heat, I saw that he wore the expression of a man completely at peace on his face.

"Do you know he's sleeping naked in his room?" I said to Roper the next day.

"Yeah, he's got that little space heater now. He's like Fatman in the Fat Cave."

"A space heater. I never even thought about buying one of those. Do you have one?" I asked him.

"Yeah, but it's worthless. The only reason it works for him is that he has such a small room."

It was true. I bristled at the thought that not only was he roasting comfortably in the dead of winter, but he was also paying the smallest share of the rent.

"This is unacceptable," I said. He's never going to break down as long as he has that thing. We're both going to be icicles by the end of March. I can't feel my toes in the morning anymore."

Roper approached me later that day, grinning deviously. "I have an idea," he said. "The only way we'll ever get him to feel the pinch is to take away his heater, but he'll know it was us if we just go in and steal it. What we have to do is make it look like he *lost* it."

"What did you have in mind," I asked, warming up to the idea.

"It's easy," he beamed proudly. "We have to freeze him out of the Fat Cave. There's already snow on the ground so we'll just wait until the next time he gets sauced and tell him that he ran outside with the space heater trying to melt the snow."

"Are you serious?"

"Ab-so-lute-ly. It's Slim, he'll think it's the greatest thing he's ever done.

"He's working *tonight*, you know," I said and he nodded. Then he went to class and I left for work.

I got home after two in the morning and Roper met me by the door.

"He's been drinking Guinness for the last two hours," he said excitedly. "He's on the porch right now in rare form."

I stepped into the living room and noticed at least ten crumpled cans strewn across the floor. I glanced at Roper wryly. The sliding door to the balcony was open and Porter's dark outline flickered against a small fire that leapt out of a charcoal grill. I noticed several balusters missing from the railing.

"Nice fire you've got going, Slim"

"Shut up and grab a beer. It's a beautiful summer night, Beef.

I took one and leaned against the door. "What are you burning there?"

He stoked the fire with a charred wooden spoon from the kitchen and suddenly his leg shot out and struck another baluster. It splintered at the base and he reached out and yanked it free and tossed it into the fire. The rail looked like it was wearing a toothless grin. "Nothing that'll be missed," he said casually and the dry piece of wood, like a turkey leg, caught fire and hissed and spat.

"I don't think we were getting any security deposit back anyway," I said.

"That's right, Beef," he slurred. "The only way we're getting anything back is when Roper finally sucks it up and takes one for the team." Marilyn, the landlady, had a crush on Roper and the running joke was that he should be a good sport and work off some of the rent each month. Porter poked his head inside and roared with laughter. "You," he said pointing unsteadily at Roper

"need to stop being so selfish and do the right thing." He was leaning too far forward and as his body shook with laughter, he lost his balance in the chair and fell awkwardly. The grill flipped over and sent embers and ash flying into the house. I jumped back as an orange coal landed on my foot. Porter was rolling on the floor like a walrus among the flaming debris and Roper ran over with a glass of water and poured it on his head. Smoke rose from his pate. Porter managed to get up but he was disequibrated. He wobbled and then struck the coffee table with his knee before crashing into the couch. We were silent for a moment and then he began laughing again, as if he had just pulled off a death-defying trapeze act.

Wide-eyed, I turned to Roper and said, "This is good. He's not going to remember any of this." I stomped out the rest of the coals on the balcony while Roper walked around the couch inspecting the singed carpet for renegade embers. By the time the fire was out, Porter was sprawled on the couch, unconscious and snoring loudly. It had started snowing and I shut the sliding door and watched the fat flakes swirl around an orange spotlight and stick to the asphalt. I heard Roper's voice behind me.

"Hey, come here." He was standing in the hallway outside Porter's room. "What should we do with this?"

He had the little black box in his hand.

"Should we destroy it?" I asked.

"Maybe not."

"You're right, but we should put it somewhere he won't find it until spring." I looked around at the squalid kitchen. The floor was disgusting and hadn't been mopped in months. It would remain that way until we moved out. "How about in the cabinet with the cleaning supplies? He'll never think to look there."

Roper laughed. "Perfect. It might as well be in the Federal Reserve." He reached down and hid it behind a jug of bleach.

"Alright," I said. "Easy enough. Now what's our story?"

"Simple, we tell him that he got mad at the snow, stormed outside and tried to melt it with the space heater. I don't think he'll need a lot of convincing."

"Nice. He probably would have actually done it tonight if he could have stayed awake long enough." I slapped him on the back. "Good work, general. Won't be long now and we'll be able to feel our fingers again. It's late, though and I'm beat. I'll see you tomorrow."

The next day I returned in the afternoon to find an agitated Porter stamping around the apartment.

"Where's the heater, you little snake," he growled.

I've always been a good actor, though and I had been anticipating every one of his conceivable reactions during my deliveries all day so I was prepared for him. I corroborated Roper's story perfectly. Eventually, I saw the wry creases of pride from at the edge of Porter's developing smile and it wasn't a question of theft anymore; it became an inquisition of details.

"I fell into the fire? And I was using the deck as fire wood? What did I say when I was trying to melt the snow?"

We had him in stitches as we all pictured in our heads what it was like when the great Everett Porter leapt off the balcony and took on mountains of snow with his space heater. On Monday, after a dramatic change in his sleeping conditions, Porter finally placed a reluctant call to the gas company and later that day I heard the heavenly sound of warm air rushing into my room through a vent next to my bed.

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"Lord Beefington!" he bellowed with a grand arm gesture in that regal, stentorian voice we had developed years ago when greeting each other. He cocked an eyebrow and momentarily appeared to be of nobility.

"Fatteus von Greasebottom, I presume," I replied in my most histrionic air of lordship as I approached with the dog bouncing beside me.

"Look at this," he said, frowning. The goddamn deer took out all my tomatoes."

I noticed small hoof prints along the entire bed and all the plants had been whittled down to nubbins. He looked up and smiled broadly.

"Beef, what's up my brother?"

We exchanged a hug and then, as if he had just remembered our earlier conversation, his eyes turned downward.

"Oh, man. How'd you manage to get the Grandgore all over your legs?"

"It wasn't easy," I said. "You'd be surprised how hard it is to find a syphilitic harlot these days. It was worth it though."

"So it's like that? Itching pretty bad?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. I think it's spreading, too. I've had to readjust my stream."

"Dear Lord," he laughed. "Well you know how to get rid of it, right."

"It's too late for ointments or creams now. I didn't realize I had it until it was too late. The oil is already stuck to my skin."

"Nah, forget about that stuff." He pulled a circular can out of his back pocket. "All you need is bleach and sandpaper."

"What?"

"Sure, didn't your mom ever do that back east?" He flipped his wrist and his thumb snapped against the aluminum lid, producing several sharp cracks that reverberated through the forest. "It's that oil that's making you itch," he continued, unscrewing the top and taking out a pinch of the brown stuff. "What you have to do is open up all those little pods to get that oil out." He placed the tobacco between his lower lip and gum, next to a canine. "Then you bleach the hell out of it and that's that." He spit into the grass and looked up at me grinning. "You never did that before?"

"And you use sandpaper to bust open the rash?"

"Oh yeah," he said confidently. "You just scrape it really good and make sure you get all the pods. That's the key. Gotta get all those pods or else it won't stop itching." The dog came over and Porter knelt down and knocked it on its back. "Did you meet Stan?"

"Yeah," I said absentmindedly. The itch was worse than ever and visions of bloody sandpaper appeared in my head. "He came up as soon as I pulled in. Seems like a great dog. Why don't you show me around the property?"

Everett Porter was the kind of man that I thought would never marry until he did. Like my own fierce independence, which has never boded well with commitment, I figured that he would remain a lost soul forever. But he met a nice responsible Catholic girl who condoned his often outrageous behavior and though it would be difficult to find two more antithetical personalities, they were married in a small chapel in Yosemite and had made it over what seemed like the first hump of matrimony. I always admired them for succeeding in the one thing I could never seem to manage in any relationship-working things out. I suppose he realized he had a good woman and he was smart enough to know he wasn't getting any funnier or better looking, so he wisened-up and locked it down, as the saying goes. It was a good thing, too, because at the time of my arrival, Porter had been out of work for a few months, though he hadn't really been looking very hard. He was a talented chef, of the opinion that his time was worth far more than ten dollars an hour, but money had never been important to him. Life in the culturally mummified Yuba City didn't give him many avenues to pursue fine dining. He had been the head chef at an upscale restaurant in town, but the economic downturn had forced the establishment to transform into a Applebee's clone. This was unacceptable for Porter, and as a man of principle (enjoying one of the benefits of having a working spouse), he tendered his resignation after the metamorphosis.

His unique decision to willfully gain unemployment was similar to my decision to come to the farm. Neither of us had ever had a desire to possess gross amounts of money, nor were we ever frightened by precarious living

conditions. We shared the ideal that you make due with what you have and that the reward lies far away from possessions and material wealth. He was more resourceful in poverty than me. Where I would eventually break down and find a temporary job, he could go on the road and survive as a hobo. His methods were simple and his means cheap. A field of sagebrush would bring in enough cash that could be multiplied many times over as grilled cheese sandwiches and beer in concert parking lots. But it never lasted with Porter. He was a man of powerful urges, grand ideas and even larger appetites. No matter how successful his schemes were, they could never keep up with his lifestyle.

In the two years he had been married to Emily, a noticeable change had come over him. He still loved the open road and the thrill of exploring lonesome mountaintops, but now he seemed to want to experience those things with his wife. Being fiercely independent, he would never concede that he was any different or driven by any other force, but I knew that if Emily ever presented him with an ultimatum, no matter how many times he had vowed against it, he would be cooking in that Applebee's the next day.

"So how many members do you have in your CSA down there?" he asked kneeling down to apply some cayenne powder to what was left of the tomatoes.

"Forty-five."

"See, I don't need that many. If I can get twenty people per season, that'll be plenty to live off of."

"It's not that easy," I said. "There are three of us and we pick all day before the CSA. It's a lot of labor. Especially if you don't want to use machinery."

"Yeah, I'd rather not use them," he said. "I might get a small rototiller, though."

"You'll need a mower too, if you plant a cover crop."

"I've been thinking of using a sickle."

I laughed. "I don't think I've actually ever seen a sickle." I took the blade of the trowel and ran it across my tibia and shivered. My grandfather told me he used to cut grain with one in the old country. I guess it could work. Would be good exercise for you, anyway. Emily would probably appreciate it. You're not getting any slimmer, that's for sure."

He ignored my jab. I was a cynic telling him things he didn't want to hear.

"If I could make fifteen grand a year, that would be enough for me."

"How does she tolerate your sloth?"

"Oh, she's got a sweet deal and she knows it," he said proudly. "She gets a fine meal every night and I provide the fun and excitement in the relationship."

He had a point. Good food and spontaneity are pillars of a healthy

relationship.

"I guess that's true. You are a riot. Or used to be. Seems like married life has slowed you down a bit."

"It's true," he said. "I'm not jumping off balconies trying to melt snow, but you know, that life has to end sometime."

"I suppose if you two are both happy there's no problem, right?"

"Damn straight," he went on. "She brings home the bacon and I cook it up. Yup, the old lady's living the good life. And she gets to go to bed with this every night."

He stood erect with his fist on his hip and his elbow jutting out like a potbellied Spaniard.

"Yes, a real Don Juan."

He leaned back and slapped his belly. "She knows how lucky she is."

We walked around his land and Porter pointed out different areas and his plans for them. "Up there, in that clearing just south of those oaks, we've been talking about putting in a guest house. Somehow, we seem to get a lot of company up here. I'd really like to build a yurt up there."

Stan jumped like a kangaroo into grass that was twice his height. When he would stray too far, Porter vehemently called him back and chastised him face to face. He was a strict disciplinarian, but it seemed to be working; the pup was remarkably well behaved and already grasped basic commands. The scenery was beautiful with the gentle sunlight flitting through the trees and leaves whispering all around us.

"This place is great," I said. "This would be perfect for a kid to grow up on. Has Emily broached that topic yet?"

"We've talked about it," he said kneeling to inspect some plant on the ground. "We're kind of just waiting to see what happens. We're not really trying, but if it happens it happens." He tore off a few leaves and offered me one. "You ever grow this?" I shook my head and asked him what it was. "Miner's lettuce," he said chewing on the edge. It was comical to watch his big bearded mandible nibble on the thin leaf. "This stuff is growing everywhere around here."

"It doesn't taste like anything," I said.

He stuffed the rest of the plants into his mouth and stood thinking for a moment. "It's not bad. If I can find a buyer at one of those health-food stores this'll be the easiest money I ever made. He offered the dog a bite, but the animal just licked the little green disc and left it slimy in the grass. "Sucker."

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I thought about Porter with a son and I knew that it was in his future. Whenever people say that are not trying or they just want to wait and see, it only means that they have stopped using contraceptives. Those euphemisms serve two purposes. First, they placate interrogators: acquaintances, friends, but mostly family member, especially mothers, who, once a woman is married, become afflicted with grandchild syndrome. Regardless of whether the couple wants kids or not, these harmless euphemisms serve to deflect or mollify the issue. "We're going to wait and see," bides a couple some time to decide if they are each capable of dealing with the concept of a child and ultimately, whether the marriage is strong enough to support the addition of another heartbeat and a pair of lungs.

Second, after all the inquisitors are appeased, "we're not really trying right now" serves another purpose. It is a pressure release valve for both spouses. Though reproduction seems like the most fundamental and natural of all deeds, as with so many things that are coveted in this life, those who want it most are often exactly the ones who are incapable of fulfilling the object of their desires. Newborn babies can save marriages, turn lives around and sometimes complete personality overhauls. They can also destroy marriages, drive people apart and cause resentment. Unborn children, however, are more of an idea than anything else. There are few things on this earth that cause as much discord and tumult as an unborn fetus.

Many couples marry without taking a definitive stance on children. Indeed, it is a touchy subject and I would gladly take a nickel for every relationship that has failed due to incongruous ideas on the tenets of family life. For couples that do take the big plunge and reach the precipice of parenthood, they must traverse a narrow road, full of potholes and quicksand that we bachelors and spinsters never have to cross. While we can simply, *go around* that precarious topography, they must tread prudently and slowly, with soft soles as the wrong decision can lead to disaster.

Perhaps, after a year of marriage, the wife wakes up one morning only to realize that, as she stares at her drunken sailor, brazenly reeking of another woman, she will never allow his seed to ever reach her precious egg. What of the man? Many a loyal dog has stayed with his bitch and given her a litter despite warnings from his brain to, "Get out now!" Long since emasculated, when that first glistening cantaloupe skull emerges from her gaping crease, his fate is sealed and after the initial excitement evaporates, he must take a breath of the acrid air that he will taste for the rest of his life, suck it up and accept his future and the decisions he has made.

Then there are the couples to whom Mother Nature is not so kind. This is

where “we’re just going to wait and see” exists at its most poignant peak. At first it is just bad luck; simply unaligned rhythms. Months pass and still nothing. She has started taking fertility pills and he has quit smoking, cut out red meat and processed foods and taken to a rigorous fitness regime at the gym. The nocturnal ritual has started to lack the zest and spontaneity it once had. Where once, their lust had the thrill and unpredictability of a cobra, it has now taken on the perfunctory and terribly mundane routine of two pigeons scrounging for bread crumbs under a park bench. Gone are the days when lovemaking was an electrifying ride in a Maserati at breakneck speed along the edge of a razor canyon above a thousand foot drop into blackness. The cursory journey is now taken in a boxy Volvo, along a residential street at five miles under the limit, and the once steamy, sultry air that fogged the glass is replaced by a bitter lung spray that coats their respective windows. Sadly, some unions accrue too much rancor and bitterness and simply dissolve. More tenacious couples desperately hope for the best, but it is useless to fight biology and the moment of truth has arrived. It is something they never wanted to do, but they are out of options. Though they are still a loving couple, committed for life, the time has come to discover who will shoulder the blame of infertility.

At the gynecologist’s office he is outwardly tender and supportive and he cradles her sobbing body, while inside he feels a strange combination of relief and shame. At a urologist’s office across the street, a young woman squeezes her man’s hand as he bites his lip and hangs his head. Briefly, the marriage is infused with a newfound solidarity. This passes and another year goes by and the nightly ritual becomes even more strained and drained of joy. Expensive pills and appointments with specialists put additional stress on the once granite relationship. The subconscious pressure to deliver builds and blame and resentment begin to erode the crumbling foundation. Finally, they are faced with the ultimate reality. There are few choices. “There is always adoption,” she says, but some men won’t hear it. For the couples that do, it is a difficult journey that is noble, yet hardly envious. Other couples accept a life without progeny. For some it turns out to be a blessing that injects freedom and vigor back into their lives; a fraction get a taste of the universe’s ironic sense of humor—the rare benevolence of chaos—when, after years of giving up hope, they gaze in wild wonder at the miraculous blue cross soaked in her urine.

And then there is the unspeakable road—the most difficult journey of all. *In vitro* fertilization is survived only by the strongest marriages. With adoption, there is the knowledge that neither member has any affiliation with the child, but the sense of coming together to raise it unifies them and can save them. With insemination, the man will have to inflict amnesia upon himself to come to terms with the fact that the swelling mass of life in his wife’s belly is, in fact, not his

child, but an anonymous donor's thawed preparation. I pity these men with all my heart. I would not wish it on my worst enemy, for it is a wound that will never heal, and though there may be times when the man thinks of the growing child that has absolutely no resemblance to him, and who viciously hurls adolescent insults at him as his "son" or "daughter," he will forever kiss it tenderly and lie awake at night like a ghost for the rest of his days, knowing that he is rearing a child, carried and birthed by his wife, who was spawned from the loins of another man.

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"Hey, you shouldn't itch that. It'll only make it worse," Porter said with a mouthful of miner's lettuce. "I'm telling you, if it's that bad, sandpaper and bleach."

I caught the tail end of what he said and noticed that I was bent over ripping my leg to shreds. My calf was streaked crimson and my hand looked like a bloody claw.

"Dammit," I said inspecting the carnage. "I didn't even realize what I was doing."

"Yeah, I lost you there for a minute. Still daydreaming, eh?"

"Yes. I was just considering paternity."

He knitted his eyebrows and twisted his mouth into a comical frown.

"Okay, terrific."

"Never mind." I wiped my red fingers on the grass. "Let's destroy this thing right now. I've reached my breaking point."

"Hey, alright," he said and his face lit up with the puerile excitement teenagers experience just before they witness their friends attempt something incredibly foolish like jumping a campfire or licking a frozen telephone pole.

"Now you're talking sense, brother. Follow me."

He led me into the house and I walked on my toes across the plush brown blond carpet in the living room and into the kitchen. "You know, when my dad was growing up in Lancaster, he once ate a bunch of poison ivy on a bet." He rifled through some drawers. "His throat sealed shut and they had to take him to the emergency room and put a breathing tube inside him. He could've died."

"That's a wonderful story, thanks."

He laughed. "Oh, he was fine. Sorry. It actually worked out for him though, since he was immune to it for the rest of his life. Here we go."

He pulled a sheet of sandpaper and cut off two squares. I was nervous

when I felt the coarseness of the grit.

"Christ, why don't you rip a shingle off the roof, Porter. You're telling me to use this on my leg?"

"Yup, just bust open all those little..."

"Yes, alright. Bust open the pods. I got it, I got it. I don't know, this seems pretty masochistic."

What? No. It's the only way I know of."

I considered another torturous night with the creeping chafe. Anything would be better than that. "Fine, I'll do it. Where's the bleach?"

He rummaged under the sink gleefully, then ran off. "Hold on a minute!" I heard him going through the cabinets in the bathroom and he returned a minute later with a plastic bottle.

"That's not bleach," I said taking it from him and inspecting the label.

"All we have is alcohol," he said glumly. "But it'll work just the same."

It was seventy percent isopropanol and I tried to draw upon some dusty chemistry knowledge.

I suppose, this will work, too," I thought out loud. "It's the same principle, right? Break open the pods," I nodded at him. "Wash off the oil and dehydrate with the alcohol. Isopropanol works well on oil. Hell, this stuff will actually disinfect my leg while it's drying out the rash."

"Exactly," he agreed with a downward gesture of his index finger. He wore an eager smile of anticipation.

"In fact," I went on, building my resolve. "Alcohol is probably better than bleach. Not as corrosive. Bleach is nasty. I'd have to dilute it."

He shook his head, agreeing with me. "Do it to it."

"Alright," I said and set off toward the bathroom. Just before I closed the door I heard him yell over the blaring television, "Make sure you get all those pods! That's where all the oil is."

I sealed myself off and studied my operating room. There was a long counter at waist level that ran along the entire wall. A mirror hung above the sink and I watched myself strip down to my underwear. I propped the heel of my right foot against the faucet and inspected the outbreak. The pestilence had spread across the entire surface of the leg. My leg begged for balm. I ripped the sandpaper in half and doused it in alcohol until it was soaked and black. Then, with a single stroke guided by desperate purpose, I drug it along my shin from ankle to knee.

Mere words simply cannot do justice to the rapture that possessed me. I was paralyzed with relief. Every ruptured pod released more of the poison that bubbled up from my raw flesh. I went over the front of the leg once, twice, three times, until I was certain of complete annihilation. I was not bothered my

the crimson streaks appearing like wild strokes from a painter's brush. I was a bloodthirsty Picasso. An enraged Goya. Skin was my canvas. I shuddered in near orgasmic agony as I moved to the meaty portion of the calf. Fueled by pure adrenaline, each stroke grated more pods and the poison and blood and lymph ran together and formed orange rivulets that stung as I dabbed them with cotton balls soaked in alcohol.

When I finished, I stood on both legs and bent over to inspect my work. Below my waist, nerves tingled and synapses fired like soldiers retaliating after an ambush. I tried to stretch, but I found my extremities to be quite tight. The lymph was oozing out of me, like sap from a wounded tree. I peeled away my briefs and stepped into the shower. The hot spray instantly smarted as it filled the open gashes and I felt as though I was being seared on a grill. I applied a thick lather and washed away the bilious grime and crept out to air dry. The itch had subsided, but it was replaced by a puissant throb. I could already feel the edema swell as the sensation of being encrusted by a giant scab came over me.

I dressed and dropped the sanguinary evidence into the trash. I treaded delicately, aware of limited range to my gait and sat down next to Porter who was watching a hockey game and drinking a beer.

"So, how'd it-Jesus!" he exclaimed, snorting and spilling the liquid on himself. A mixture of chokes and laughs frothed out from behind his beard. "Good God, Freed. What did you do?" His mouth was slightly open and his eyes bulged as he cautiously drew close to the leg. "What do you mean? I destroyed the pods with sandpaper and doused myself in alcohol."

He laughed, inches away from my legs which were speckled with glassy yellow beads and it made me nervous because it was the type of laugh that betrayed utter amazement. It was the kind of ejaculation that frightens the other party because it is filled with fear and awe.

He stroked his beard and wrinkles appeared on his forehead. "Yeah, but I didn't tell you to turn yourself into hamburger. I mean, damn, Bobby. That looks bad."

I extended my legs into the light and he was right. My legs were puffy and swollen like two sausage links.

"I suppose I got a little carried away, huh?"

He laughed through his nose and this time it was the type of laugh that a man forces when he is trying to inject relief into a trauma. He went into the kitchen and brought back a roll of paper towels. I wrapped a couple around the fresh wound.

"Tape?"

He found a roll of masking tape and I gave him a look and he shrugged. He watched me tentatively as I fastened the towels to my legs until I wore two floral print casts. I felt like I should assure him I would be fine.

"That seems like it will hold up," I said standing and taking a lap around the couch. He cocked an eyebrow as I limped like an invalid. "At least it's not itching any more," I said. "That was the goal, right?"

"Right," he said drawing out the vowel. "And maybe in a week you'll be able to walk again."

"Small price to pay," I said scratching my heel. "I think it's time I started drinking. Where is the missus this evening?"

"Back east visiting her mother. She'll be back on Tuesday."

"Good," I replied. I wouldn't want her to see me like this, although I blame you entirely."

"Fair enough." He was easily convinced. He opened the refrigerator and tossed me a silver can. "But you don't actually think I'm going to keep this from her? This is pure gold. We'll be laughing at you for years to come."

The can made a crisp popping sound as I pulled back the tab. "Alright," I said rolling the frosty cylinder between my fingers. "But she'll just fall in love with my reckless abandon for prudence. Women love that sort of thing."

"No, she'll think you're a fool for butchering yourself. Honestly, this would probably scare her."

"Well, I'm a little worried myself."

"You should be. That leg looks like a filleted barracuda. I'd say there's a good chance you'll lose at least one."

"I'd get a wooden peg. You don't see many of those around anymore. I could be the captain of a boat."

"Then here's to ya, Stumpy," he said raising his can.

"No." I raised my arm and pushed my beer toward him. "Here's to eighteenth-century home remedies and fools who listen to their friends. Thank you for ruining my life, you bastard."

The cans collided. "Hear hear."

The next morning I rose with a headache that was quickly overtaken by mild panic. The right leg had plumped up to elephant size and burst through the bandages. Ribbons of dried pus clung to matted hair and when I rolled out of bed and put weight on the leg, the skin was so taut I was certain it would split open. Porter was asleep on the couch in a position only bachelors are typically afforded and he stirred petulantly, grunting and cursing the sunlight as it pierced through the blinds like dusty bayonets. I decided to let him emerge from hibernation naturally so I went outside and sat on the deck and listened to a conference of birds. He came out a few minutes later rubbing his eyes.

"Yup, pretty sweet not to wake up to garbage trucks and sirens every morning. Just the beautiful sounds of nature." He punctuated this last statement with a tremendous tuba blast that echoed through the woods. "Living the good life, Beef."

I propped myself up to face him.

"You hungry? I'm starving. Ready for some-Dear God!" he exclaimed, almost jumping backward. "What the hell is that?"

"That, my friend," I said hobbling toward him like a crippled veteran, "is what happens when I listen to you."

We both stood silently, staring at the engorged mass that used to be my right leg. I was nervous, but I saw that he was actually worried. I have had plenty of traumatic injuries in my audacious childhood and I realized that, in time, this too would become just another humorous anecdote. Though none of it was his fault, I saw guilt in his countenance so I mitigated the situation.

"And yes, you rotten witch doctor. I would like a last meal before I'm reduced to a sideshow freak in some lame carnival act."

He made a fantastic omelet and after I assured him I would be fine, he was back to his normal self.

"Throw some shoes there, Gimpy?" he said after he had cleared the table.

"I should probably get going, but okay. I suppose you're due for a quick lesson."

I've never thrown against a cripple before. Do you want a handicap or something?"

"No, just let me sit in my wheelchair on your porch after they amputate me below the waist."

"Okay," he belched loudly. "But I don't want you harassing the neighbors for change." He tossed the horseshoe and it floated through the air, oscillating sideways like a propeller. It descended at the top of its arc and struck the rebar with loud clang. It spun around the stake a few time and came to rest straddling the beam. "This isn't the mission, you know."

After the thrashing I collected my things and prepared to go. Convinced that I would survive, Porter watched me with amusement. As I got in the car he came over and we shook hands through the window. "Is the itching gone, at least?"

"Last night was better," I said starting the car. "But I don't think I got all of it. It feels like it might be flaring up again."

"Oh, man," he shook his head gravely. I told you to get all of those-

"Yeah, Yeah," I said motioning for him to stop. "I've heard just about all of the advice from you that I need, thanks. I'll be sure to have the hospital send you the bill along with the severed remains. I expect to see the leg mounted

above the fireplace when I return.”

“Sure,” he said with a wry smile. “I know a great taxidermist in Marysville.”

“Tremendous. Then it’s settled. I’m off. Good seeing you again, Slim.”

“Always a pleasure, my brother. You alright to drive?”

I pulled out of the driveway and flashed a thumbs-up. In the rearview I saw Porter pound his fist against the air and seeing Stan emerge from the woods, he started chasing him back into the forest.

In Manteca, I stopped to refuel and some gas dripped out of the nozzle and trickled down my leg. As I cleaned it off with gauze and more alcohol, it occurred to me that although I had the utmost confidence in my body’s healing capacity, another dusty week on the farm might not bode well for my afflicted appendage. The infection seemed to have gotten worse. Indeed, the leg was growing larger by the hour. I grimaced at the thought of the blithe disregard I had adopted for my own well-being. What seems hilarious in the presence of others, quickly loses its charm when there is no one left to pay you any attention. I felt ashamed as I dialed my father’s number.

“Hello. Where are you? What are you doing there? Yes, of course. Infections are not a joke. You did what? Come on, you’re too old to be playing these jokes anymore.” He was silent for a moment, the way most intelligent men reason to themselves before making a diagnosis. “You need to come down to Fresno and I’ll take you to the ER. You’re lucky I have the day off.”

My instinctive urge was to immediately contradict him, but I held my tongue. “Okay, I’ll be there in a few hours.” He was reading in the kitchen when I limped in.

“Ahh,” he grimaced as he approached me. He put on his glasses and knelt down and felt the leg. Then he stood and looked me straight in the eyes. “I really thought this was one of your little jokes.”

“I haven’t found that sort of thing funny for some time now.”

“And you did this to yourself?”

“Yes.”

“What were you-”

“Look, it seemed perfectly reasonable at the time. The itching was unbearable. It helped at first, but now it’s back.”

“Well, of course,” he gestured with palms upward. “The oil is inside your skin. There is no magic cure. You just have to be patient and wait for your body to fight it naturally. This was your idea?”

“Naturally.”

“Unbelievable,” he said shaking his head and staring at me perplexedly.

“Well, get in the car and I’ll drive you to the hospital. Do you still have

insurance?"

"Possibly. Look, is this really necessary? Can't you just prescribe me some topical cream or give me a cortisone shot?"

He cocked his head. "First of all, I'm not a dermatologist. I can't just prescribe any drug you may have heard of. And furthermore, there is serious swelling in that leg. Just get in the car. I'm taking you to the hospital." he said and I heard him mumble something about unbelievable and edema and negligence.

The emergency room was occupied by the typical Sunday denizens. I gave my name and information to Crushana, the triage nurse and we found two empty seats. To my right, a wizened wheelchair-bound woman with reptilian skin had a hole in her throat and cradled a small oxygen tank in her lap. On the other side, A young couple in matching gray sweat suits took turns wiping the febrile brow of their ghastly, pale-faced toddler below a poster advocating the nutritional benefits of green beans and carrots. Next to the soda machine, a pasty woman with burlap skin and enormous big toes dozed quietly while her husband stroked the back of her neck. An albino girl wearing a dog collar sniffled in a corner and applied cream to a nasty burn on her forearm.

"I hate this place," I said to my father.

He shrugged. "You made your own bed. I placed a call to a doctor I know so maybe it won't be such a long wait."

It wasn't. Fifteen minutes later I was admitted and taken straight back into a room. A mustached nurse in teal scrubs took my vitals and escorted me into another room with several beds separated by flowery curtains.

"Go ahead and take you shorts off," he said casually. Doctor Flume will be in shortly."

He walked out and I left my clothes on and scanned the room. The place gleamed of cold steel and had the blunt stench of sterility. Inside dark drawers lived bottles of bacitracin tincture, kerlix chux and surgilube. I heard the albino's voice in the bed beside me and she sheepishly confessed the cause of her burn to the doctor. She would always buy microwaveable popcorn from now on. A moment later, Doctor Flume came in. He introduced himself without a handshake and sat down across from me on a stool. I gave him a brief synopsis and he nodded and agreed with everything while tapping a pen against his front teeth.

"Very good, young Mr. Freed. You are certainly lucky that your father brought you in. This leg is quite infected." He paused and made a clicking noise with his tongue. "Oh, yes. Very nasty sore. You must know that sandpaper is not a proper treatment for poison oak." He wagged his finger at me and pursed his lips. "But it is not too late for you, Mr. Freed. I will bring you back to

health." He laughed at his joke and the tip of his tongue showed through his teeth. "Yes, I will treat you, Mr. Freed. I'm going to give you a cortisone shot for the itch. It itches terribly, no? And for the infection...prednisone and...keflex? Yes, keflex, I think. Make sure you finish all the medicine." He wagged his finger again as he scrawled down the prescription. He bit his pen when he was done and stared at me. "You are a lucky boy, Mr. Freed. Very lucky, indeed."

He stood abruptly and flicked the tip of the pen playfully against my knee. He had forgotten to retract the tip and it left a black mark upon my skin, but he didn't notice as he turned to leave. "Doctor?" I said and he turned around on his heels.

"Oh yes, of course, Robert. Now make sure to keep this clean and stay away from the forest for a while." He handed me the prescription and flashed me a wide pink grin and bolted through the doorway. "Give Dr. Freed my compliments," he exclaimed from the hallway. The nurse appeared momentarily with the steroid syringe. He saw that I was still clothed and he seemed irritated. "I need you to pull your shorts down, sir."

"Why don't you just stick me in the leg," I said exposing my thigh.

"Fine," he sighed, prodding my leg and jabbing the needle into the muscle. The plunger went down slowly as the chilly medicine entered the bloodstream. "I'm sure Doctor Flume explained to you that this is an anti-inflammatory shot," he said looking up at the ceiling.

"Sure."

He yanked the needle out and tossed it into the biohazard sharps bin.

"Do you have any questions about the medication?"

"No."

"Do you know where the pharmacy is?"

"I'll find it."

"Great. Make sure you check out before you go."

I wandered down the hallway until I found the pharmacy at the other end of the hospital. The pharmacist filled the prescription and my insurance was somehow still valid. My father was asleep when I returned to the waiting room and filled out the remaining paperwork. His hand were clasped together on top of his belly and the frantic movement of his eyeballs under his lids told me that he was dreaming. I sat down next to him and a few minutes later he sensed me there and started to get up.

"No," I said. Just take your time. There's no rush."

He leaned back and let his eyes grow accustomed to the light.

"Did he write you a prescription?"

"Some antibiotics and the nurse shot me up with steroids."

"That sounds right," he said yawning and swallowing a large mouthful of air.

"Flume sends his compliments."

"Yes?"

"He seems a bit nervous. Do you work with him much?"

"Rarely. Jurgen is a narcoleptic so he doesn't work in the OR very often."

"Really?"

"Yes. He is quite a talented diagnostician, though. Okay, let's go."

We walked to the car and it beeped as we got close. "I think you should stay home for a few days," my father said. It would be smart to keep that leg clean."

"That's what Jurgen said."

My father nodded.

"Well, I'll call Stuart tonight and tell him I'm convalescing for a the week. See, sometimes it pays to be a day laborer with no contract or responsibilities."

We stopped at a light and he turned to me. "Yes, you are certainly headed in the right direction. Maybe in several weeks you can save up for a pair of long pants to hike in."

"Thanks for calling Jurgen Flume for me," I said.

He paused a few seconds after the light turned green and a pickup flew across the intersection.

"You're welcome."