

Objectifying Innocence

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This creative thesis is dedicated to:

Dr. Gaylord Brewer,

whose astounding patience and dedication to his craft inspires me to write well.

James and Penni Tilton,

whose fierce love and unwavering support got me here.

Abstract:

The focus of this creative thesis is to experiment with the nuances of literary innocence. More specifically, this thesis looks at instances of an actor projecting innocence on an object, and the inevitable confrontation that the relationship between them demands. Through the medium of four unique short stories and an accompanying epilogue, innocence objectified is examined in how it affects both the object and the individual who objectifies.

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The Arsonist in Lawrence County

Buddy pulls off the road on Pine Ridge and thinks of murder. The check engine light flares, flashing yellow, and he ignores it like he tends to. On the radio, a broadcast tells him the height, weight, and likely location of the on-the-run killer. Here, really. He is probably here.

Buddy steps out from the driver-side door, adjusts his felt cap, and crunches his boot into the fresh-fallen snow. The flakes bounce off the side of the once-red Chevy, tumble toward the ground as he makes his way round to the back. Through the soft, overcast light of late afternoon, the white-laden woods are still and quiet. He reaches under the latch of the tailgate, pulls it rough and sets it against the bed. His hand reaches out and settles on the walnut stock of his Over & Under, pulling the shotgun out and shuffling the box of shells towards the back of the truck.

Buddy grabs a handful, dropping them into the side pocket of his camouflage jacket. His gloved fingers fix around a shell, withdrawing and pressing it up and into the load. He grabs the fore-end and pumps it with a downward thrust. He likes the click of a good action, and he grins. He rests the gun on the bed, reaching back into the truck, pulling the blue tarp aside as the plastic ruffles. Underneath, a gallon jug of fuel sits harmless, just like he'd put it. He eyes it, considering the container with good weight because of what he is planning to do with it. Buddy locks the truck with the fob and grabs the blood-red jug, his free hand pulling up the shotgun by the forestock and kicking up the bed with his knee. His hand slips through the strap on the shotgun and he slides it up over his shoulder. He turns to the woods, the old trail barely visible and an old PRIVATE

sign hanging off the hinges of a post. As if it had ever deterred any of the young shits from heading up to the old shack and breaking any windows left intact.

It is the first time in a year he's made his way up here. His therapist told him to leave it behind, sell off the old thing. *You're lucky you got out when you did*, she told him once. Her voice rings in his ears and bounces around in his skull. She told him like she knows what happens in a shack in the woods with no mailbox. As if Momma didn't do her damndest with him. She wasn't wrong about the schools, anyhow. And Papa, he had a name to live up to. Can't blame him for that much, at least. Sadie got picked up by the state when Buddy did, and she turned out alright, so what the hell was the harm in keeping it?

He makes his way up the trail with even pace, weighed down by the tank in his left hand, and for a little while anything about killing is out of his mind. A quarter mile up the trail, the pines thin out where the bug patch has been tearing through. The little chiggers bred like rabbits, and then made little holes through the bark to get to the tree sugar on the inside. They'd take a whole grove out if left to their own, but the early frosts this year had kept 'em pretty holed up. On his left, one good-sized pine is chucked down already, and the thin, green streaks that tear through to the center look flat like a sickness.

The quiet of the wood is something strange, and only the gentle push and pull of the wind rustling through aching branches makes any noise. Buddy carries on, his rhythmic, crunching footfalls beating out a trail in the dimming twilight. His breath is white clouds in front of him, and when he notices them he has to think about every suck and sway of his lungs that pushes in the frigid air. He has to forget, he tells himself, so his

body can remember on its own. He's so focused that he almost misses it right in front of him.

He comes to a full stop, freezing mid step when he sees it, the foot print. It's wide, with good tread, and masculine. Boots is what it looks like. The snow was only just starting to cover it up. He sets the jug on the ground, kneeling into the snow, and pulls the gun from his shoulder, resting it in the crook of his arm. The print heads west. Sunward. Whoever he is, he probably won't find the house, and Buddy looks around, but the slew of needles in a rug under the bordering pines hasn't yet caught the fall of any new snow. The trail this far in was so overgrown that you'd miss it unless you were looking for it. Buddy is though and, convinced with the quiet, he keeps on, a little quicker now that he might be too late.

The trail starts to get overgrown about half a mile up the track, where the weeds get thick and the creek is just up ahead. The snow is clearing up now, only slow flecks tossed here and there, whipped haphazard by the wind. He passes that last bend before the water and stands idly gripping the red plastic of the gasoline, staring down at the clear trickle of the water through the bank. The white of the snow looks whiter with the wet black mud right next to it. This is where Buddy had come down to wash his hands after it happened. No running water at the shack – it'd been built that way. When it happened, the well was too much to think about with the shaking in his hands, and he wasn't about to make Sadie fetch him a bucket, not with what she'd seen. He thinks about stepping down to the water, letting it run over his hands again like it did back then, at least once before he leaves. Buddy thinks better of it and steps over the small gap of the water, the soft trickle fading behind him as he walks on.

There won't be much left of the house, seeing as how the last time he walked up here it was already full of holes anyhow. Even if the footprints have made their way up to it, they might've thought nothing of it. It's still standing, at least. It has to be. He picks up his pace, huffing now as the white clouds pump out of him in a sure pattern.

Up above him, the last, searching birdcalls ring out with a sturdy hopefulness. The birds left up this late in the evening weren't worth the bullet unless you're next to dead, as they'll be the ones left out of meals more often than not. The burrows under the pines are snow-covered, and the whole of the forest is turning in. He'd be turning back home about now if he was out, otherwise Momma would get too worried and she'd lash him again. He misses the discipline, he realizes, because then he had someone else to get angry with, and then forgive, like he always does. Almost always.

Everyone who's killed a man, they can't get rid of it. At least that's what the therapist had told him. *Everybody has to work through it in their own way. You just have to find yours.* For some people, you can't touch a gun again. Or an axe, a knife, maybe your own damn hands. Some people can't let go of the gun. Guns make it a lot easier nowadays, but a man can't make his own way without one, so Buddy just fell into that sorry mix of people who don't get to deal with it like everybody else. Some people, like Buddy, bury it deep and hope to never see it again.

The trail is impossible to see now. The low light doesn't help, but nobody exploring ever gets this deep and thinks that there's still something at the end. Buddy presses on for the last few hundred feet until he sees the angled logs of the roof jutting through the branches, and he pulls up against a tree, drawing in a deep breath. Of course it's still here.

As it comes into full view, he admires it for a moment. The ancient, interlocked patterns of the logs that make up the walls are like a puzzle, each piece laid in turn like a sewing pattern. On top, the bricks of the chimney are poking out like a stray tuft of hair. The roof is angled, almost like a child had drawn up the blueprints, with enough of a slant to keep the rain off. On the right side of the house, he and Papa had built on what was first laid down, adding an extra room the same size as the first house. He remembers well, finally getting the logs set, and then sawing his way through to the other side and seeing Sadie waiting for him. Apparently, she'd been talking over with Momma what to say when the final cut went through, so when he pulled the middle chunk out, she shouted "Peekaboo! I see you!" and stood, beaming proudly. She was nine then, so Buddy made a face while Papa started laughing.

The porch beams are still up. Hanging above the door is a wood-burned plank reading *HAMILTON*, his last name, but the windows on the front side had been pushed out a while ago. The front door still stands, locked with a heavy, black seal. It wasn't his handiwork, or to his liking, but he hadn't come around to changing it yet. They had given him the key though, after they'd shut the whole thing down and he'd come of age. The smokehouse on the north side is rigid in the cold and has yet to collapse, but the door hangs skewed on just the top hinge. Now, Buddy lives with a steel refrigerator, and the old smokehouse stands empty and wanting. Momma might lash him for it if she ever found out. That was the whole point of moving out here, or so she'd told him once. Get away from it all. He was two when they'd bought the cabin and scurried off from the world, so he didn't know much about what was he was missing. Now he has a cellphone, and the world forgets little places like an old house in the woods up a long dead trail.

The fresh dusting of snow makes the deep brown of the wood stain look almost night black, and the sun has almost passed below the horizon. Buddy pulls himself from the tree and marches up to the steps. He looks to either side of the trail, but the only tracks are the ones he's leaving in his wake. He steps up onto the raised porch and stands in front of the door, dropping the jug onto the flooring. Buddy reaches into his back pocket and pulls out the key, black to match the lock, and pushes it in before twisting it. The lock pops open and he lets it rest on the latch as he puts the key back. Now he lifts the lock and pulls the door toward him, the hinges creaking in the decaying silence of the woods.

In front of him, the old circular rug still boasts a dim shade of red. He pauses in the frame of the door, taking in the at once foreign and familiar hearth. A rocking chair takes up the whole left corner from the door, where Papa used to sit before the rolling fire and read from either the Family Bible, the Family Quran, or the Family Vedas. Buddy can't remember much from any of them, except that they were all good at putting him to sleep. Momma's paintings hang on the far sides of the wall, both landscape watercolors of the open sky, blue and wide. The bookshelf for the den rests against the wall that bordered the bedroom, and all the old histories and tomes and textbooks have gathered a full layering of dust. Momma used the old homeschool manuals from some scholastic organization, and the truth is that Buddy can still hum the tune from the old grammar jingles. The home looks almost quaint, if not for the lingering stench of death.

Buddy walks to the entrance to the bedroom and presses his hand up against the wood, feeling the grain as it tracks upward and swirls to a knot. Inside, three beds rest against the walls: two smaller ones for him and Sadie, one for Momma and Papa. The

sheets are gone from all three, and on Momma's side, he sees the deep impression her body left in the bed, after it had all happened.

And it did happen. The newspaper stories that get brought up in any sort of conversation won't let him forget. Memories pumped back into his mind, flashing rapidly. Memories he'd thought he'd abandoned long since. Memories tried, and failed, to be left to rot.

Momma asking Papa whether he liked it here or back up-state more.

Sadie crying over a cut knee and Papa disappearing for an hour.

Buddy trying hard to swing an axe while Papa sat on the porch, critiquing him.

Mama walking off into the woods when she found Buddy hunched over the answer sheet in secret.

An old bottle of scotch Buddy found behind the smokehouse.

Walking in early from chores and seeing Mama and Papa wrestling naked.

Papa missing with a buckshot the Whitetail that had snuck up in the morning.

Cursing.

Momma saying she's running out of savings for food.

More cursing.

And then that one. The flashes stop, and as he freezes he sees the whole thing in the room with him. He sees Momma storm into the house with two empty bottles in hand. She throws one of them on the floor, and one at him. She grabs Buddy and Sadie's hands, and Buddy walks with her out the door, crying as she passes through the house. They're at the porch, walking out when Papa grabs her by her shirt collar and stumbles, pulling her back inside. She screams at him, he yells at her. *I hate this life, You don't take my*

kids, Where are the keys to the Ford, No, you bitch. Screaming, fighting. Buddy hears a smack, then another. He rushes into the house and Momma's bleeding from her ears. Buddy grabs the gun leaning against the frame. Papa hits her again. He points it and closes his eyes. Papa asks what he thinks he's doing. He pulls the trigger.

Sadie is standing behind him and she is not crying.

The memory is gone. Buddy is still there. His face is hot and his breath is ragged. He clutches his jacket and wipes the sweat from his brow, his knuckles white. He breathes deep. Twice. Three times. Buddy walks to the door, opens it, and reaches for the crimson jug on the floorboards. It is twilight now, and Buddy, jug in hand, walks to the bookshelf, grips it firmly, pulls it from the wall and it topples, crashing on the floor, books flying.

Truth is, Buddy and Sadie tried to make it work for a while. They took Momma and put her up in bed, waiting for her to wake up. Sadie kept feeding the fire and Buddy dragged the body out into the woods. Buddy pulls the cap on the gasoline, walking into the bedroom, and starts to pour it on the beds. They waited two days for Momma to wake up, but when she did, she wasn't right in the head. She couldn't get out of bed, and she was tired all the time. Sometimes she was there and telling 'em what to do, other times she waiting for her brother to give her a lift home from school, she said. He pours the gasoline on the books, the rocking chair, the paintings on the wall. They started going deep into the stores in the smokehouse, and Buddy only knew how to fix anything over a fire. He tried hunting, but a twelve year old can only do so much with a gun. Sooner or later, they were both going to starve. He pours the gasoline on the porch, spreading out the last drops and chucking the canister back in through the window. Buddy came back

one day and Sadie was crying on Momma's lap. She'd just gone to sleep, and wouldn't wake up. So Buddy took off down the trail, and at the end of it, he'd started walking down Pine Ridge Road, until a local pest control agent and his wife picked him up on their way back home from church. Couple hours later, he and Sadie were wards of the state. No living relatives, except for one estranged aunt living in France that they couldn't get a hold of. He reaches into the pocket on his right side, lights a match and catches the whole matchbox on fire. He tosses it into a puddle of fuel and it goes up. Fast.

Buddy is standing outside the home of his youth, watching as it begins to glow red. The blaze makes its way up the walls, creeping toward the roof. He pulls out his phone, dials Sadie's number and holds it up to his ear. It rings as the fire rages. No answer, but the tone for a voicemail pops up. The house begins to crackle as searing ashes make their way up into the night. He waits for a moment before speaking.

"Hey, Sadie." The roiling of the flames is muffled. "It's been a while since we've talked. I just wanted to ask how you were doing. I'm doing a lot better. How's Samuel? The kid? All right, well. That's all I've really gotta say. Get back to me soon."

He pulls the phone away from his ear, stops, and brings it back up. "This is Buddy, by the way. Okay." He hangs up and turns on the flashlight to make his way back. As he leaves, he can feel the heat against the back of his neck as the crack of a support beam sends a rush of embers into the empty air.

On his return, he stops by the creek and rinses his hands through the running water. He cups them, pulls the clear liquid to his lips and takes a long, slow pull from the water. He stands and makes his way along the trail, avoiding the stray branches and keeping to the path. Buddy passes the bug patch, the old sign, and his truck sits,

untouched. He opens the passenger door and rests his shotgun on the seat, before making his way over to the driver-side of his Chevy. He gets in and closes the door, waiting until the interior light slowly fades and he is left alone in blackness. After a while, he slides the key into the ignition and turns the station to the public radio, pulling out onto the road as he makes the journey into town.

The radio finishes a segment on the mess going on in Eastern Europe, when the local news comes into brief. Buddy takes the knob and turns the volume up.

The search continues for the third day now for a man identified as Thomas Wright for a string of serial arson crimes. On Thursday, the man's home was set ablaze with his wife still inside, subsequently lighting her supposed lover's home on fire as well. He is suspected to be responsible for a third housefire that took place on Friday. He has since evaded all attempts of arrest by authorities.

Buddy tightens his grip on the steering wheel, his eyes on the road ahead. He rounds a blind turn and slows down to make it smooth. The radio begins to describe the man and issues a warning. Something appears out of the darkness on the road ahead. Buddy slams on the brakes, stopping feet from the figure frozen in place. The two stare at each other for a moment from sheer surprise. The noise of the station slowly fades back into his ears. The radio is describing the fugitive, his height and hair color – a perfect match with the man in front of him. His face is long and his eyes are blood red, exhausted. He wears black-charred jeans and a gray winter jacket, and his boots are the perfect size of the footprints on the trail. A smile starts to crack Buddy's lips, his eyes still wide. His gaze is fixed as his finger thumbs the window control, lowering it.

“Hey... Thomas.” The man grimaces, but doesn’t move. “I just want you to know, you’re too late.”

The man looks puzzled. His eyebrows crease together. “W... what?”

“I said,” Buddy smiles, “you’re too late. I did it. I did!” Buddy is almost giddy and the man stares in wild confusion.

“You can’t take it from me,” he continues, near shouting. Buddy grits his teeth. “You can’t take what I’ve already gotten! Ha, you sick bastard!” The man turns and takes off, limping into the woods. Buddy laughs and slaps the steering wheel, strangely giddy. He shakes his head, and presses down the gas pedal, tearing off into the darkness ahead of him, wholly unafraid.

Something Nothing Coffee

They looked sore against the landscape, at least in his eyes. Sheltered in the shade of the umbrella draped over the glass coffee table, the cup in front of him sat half-full with a hard, native brew. On her side, some delicate, expensive Mochachialatto or something. It was their last day in “paradise”– her words. He was proud of how he’d done so far, walking day in and day out – glancing at ancient ruins, speaking silent prayers in front of altars and old mosaics. Paying for them, too.

He glanced around, at the crumbling wall atop which the tourist-laden coffee shop had taken up residence. The wall had been turned into a walking tour through the remains of the old city, the vacant homes and boarded up windows overrun by T-shirt salesmen and artisan craft shops. A sand-swept dull brown that designated most of the land as history was now interspersed with vibrant signs and misspelled English phrases. The city was an awkward blend of ancient and modern, except now you didn’t think about how the Jews had built it, Arabs inhabited it, and crusading Christians had taken it for God; now it was split between the lot of them. No, now you walked through the roughshod, cobbled streets without picturing the blood pouring through its cracks and crevices. And you can get coffee with your pretty wife while the local boys sunbathe on the rock face cordoned off to visitors.

She *was* pretty though, and the way she carried a smile made him almost forget what she looked like when they were alone and forced to talk or not talk. They’d been

married nearly a decade now, and only in the last few years had he learned the difference between not saying anything and saying nothing.

He looked at her, at the way the sheer blue dress draped over her shoulders, the slim straps dangling the cloth across her delicate chest. Her legs, long and sun-touched, were crossed in a restless quiet. The dress was light, but still decent, and the deep blue stripes of fabric down her thighs dared you to trace them. He noticed where she was looking now, and he shifted in his seat. He thought at first she'd been looking out over the shimmering waters of the Med, with the gulls diligently circling for their next meal, but her eyes were lower. There, at the edge of the walls that had repelled every kind of person, the boys were basking shirtless in the golden sunlight. Age and heritage had bronzed their skin. They hadn't yet filled out their frames, but they were all touched with the comfortable air of belonging. He had probably seen and not noticed the homes they'd come from, improvised and squeezed between ancient buildings that defied renovation. It wasn't defiling the history as much as surviving alongside it, and for that, he couldn't help but admire them.

He'd seen the look in her eyes before, at some altar where she'd whispered a hopeful prayer and dropped a coin into a metal collection plate. It was a surprising turn for them – neither had been particularly religious once they left their homes. He couldn't even say if she was Catholic or not, just that she wished there was God somewhere, but couldn't make sense of him. This was supposed to be a reawakening trip or something, to give the big guy upstairs a chance. Joe had come along not for Him, but for her. Maybe God would hold them together, bridge the gap between them and make them whole again, but when he saw the way she looked at the fading visage of a deity on the wall, he

felt jealous. And he felt it come right back when he saw her eyes give that same look to the young men lying on the half-shattered, bleached rocks.

“Mary,” he said.

“Hm?” Her gaze lingered for a moment before turning back to look at him.

“How’s the coffee?” said Joe.

“Oh.” Her eyes fluttered for a moment. “Um, it’s good.”

“Good?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “Really good. And yours?”

“Fine.”

“Didn’t I tell you?” She forced a smile. “They make it better here.”

He looked down at the mug, the few small grounds that had seeped through the filter bobbing and swirling, little black specks enveloped by the thick warmth of the dark liquid, his mind drifting to a few days earlier and the few, vital words shared between them.

“What are you thinking about?” She’d broken the silence, which was otherwise uninterrupted save for the occasional siren or echoed laughter from the street five stories below. They were poised over the balcony, leaning on the metal railing that separated them from a quick final judgement. He was holding with cupped hands a mug of the instant coffee mix the hotel had left for them, and even though it was Israel, it tasted like any other hotel instant coffee mix.

He smiled wide. “Well I can’t just come right out and say it, now can I?”

“Oh,” she grinned, “but that would make it so much easier.”

“Not too easy?”

“Maybe...” They stood quiet, and quietly together. The fading horizon struck hues of orange and pale blue across the open sky. Long streaks of clouds stretched across the dying sky, as if someone had taken their fingers and run them through the unbroken face of a puddle and he was just catching the ripples before they faded back into the still water. The sun had receded over the horizon, and you could still see its effects without actually seeing where it came from. This struck him as insightful and representative, and he should have said something.

“Joe, I need to tell you.” She was looking out over the sea, the fading light playing with colors on her soft skin. He raised an eyebrow and watched her. “I need to tell you, because it’s important to me, and you’re important to me, and I’m trying to figure out how they play together.”

His gaze sharpened. “Am I competing with something now?”

Her voice broke. “Joe, I...” The eye he could see started to water and her lip quivered. “What... what would you think of me? I know we’ve shared this for a long time, but—”

“Shared what?” He sounded more hostile than he’d meant to.

“Our... I don’t know, our nothing,” she retreated.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She didn’t respond, but choked back a tear and kept looking forward, outward. The light was fading quickly and the wind had picked up so that stray hairs flipped back and forth on her cheek. For a while, neither spoke, until Joe finally broke the silence with some snide comment about the coffee. Really, she told him, it tasted much better when

you get it authentic, and she'd heard of this place that really puts in all the effort to make it real and tasteful and simply good, the way he liked it. They'd go there at the end of the trip, and he could taste the coffee the way it was supposed to be made, the kind you make when you really believe that the beans were there to be pressed into a drink and enjoyed, a real pleasure. They'd have some then if he came with her now. She promised.

One of the boys stood up, younger than the rest. He took off his shoes, and carefully made his way over to the edge of the rocks. They were both looking now, watching silently together as his compatriots clapped and whistled at him. He glanced back at them, nervously inching his toes closer to the sheer cliff. Mary leaned forward in her seat. Looking below, there were rocks sprinkled through the water, but in large clumps so you could avoid them if you knew how the water broke below the surface. The boy shook his head, changing his mind and backing away. The other boys cheered louder, jeering him now. He looked almost as if he were about to cry.

In that moment of vulnerability, the air changed – grew lighter. Suddenly the boys looked much younger. They looked like the children they were, not the soon-to-be men that shirked their responsibilities to lie out in the heat.

Mary burst up from the wicker chair and, breaking the stillness of the day, cheered at him. Cheered at the little boy. All of the ones on the rocks turned quickly to the lady in the blue dress that was urging him on. Joe shifted in his seat and looked around at the other tourists there who were watching the spectacle silently. She clapped alone, shouting encouragements and smiling that big contagious smile that sucked you in. He smiled back, and his eyes grew big, bigger than you'd think was even real anymore.

The young boy chuckled in curious bravery. With a renewed vigor, he sucked in his belly, puffed out his chest, and launched himself over the edge. Mary threw her hands up into the air and started laughing one of those grating, discourteous belly-laughs.

“Mary,” Joe said, “please.” Her eyes didn’t lose their excitement, but turned to look at him, locked on his gaze for a moment. There was a splash and the sound of water scattering and rushing back to fill the empty space.

“Give me this, Joe.” And with that she turned back, craning her neck to watch the white foam at the bottom circle for a fleeting moment. A few yards away, the boy’s head popped out of the water. She was cheering again, clapping, and the tourists were chuckling to themselves at her, the American. She laughed, clasped her hands in front of her chest, and grinned. The boy’s eyes went straight to where she was, and even from that distance you could see the flush in his cheeks. She laughed and turned back to the table, sitting down without looking at Joseph.

“What?” she said, eyes forward.

“Everyone’s looking,” said Joe, glaring at her.

“Why can’t you let me have this, Joe?”

“Have what?”

“Joe!”

Joe glanced at the tables around them. “Don’t make a scene. And I quickly think we’re reaching the point where you have to make a decision.”

“Me? Make a decision? Don’t put this on my plate, Joe.”

“Your boys are calling to you.”

“What?” She looked back over, and the ones who’d been lying on their backs, skinny and tan and young, were waving their arms toward her, beckoning her to them. The little one was jumping. She broke into another of her glaring smiles, and she blushed.

Joe soured. “I think they want you to join them.” She looked out at them, considering. “Well?”

A tear started to gather in the corner of her eye again, and she looked from them to him. Resigned, she chuckled, reached down to her wrist, unbuckled her watch, and placed it in her purse. Then, without so much as a glance, she rose and walked forward. As she ducked under the railing, they started to cheer, now the other tourists joining in on the laughter and applause. They were urging her onward, closer to the edge of the rock wall.

The coffee really tasted awful, but he couldn’t tell her that. Honestly, it tasted more like dirt than decent coffee. Everyone tells you that things will be better here, because it’s the Med and the Med is beautiful and life-giving, and the people who work, work hard. It was supposed to taste good just because they’d bought it by the sea and they’d travelled so long just to reach the Promised Land.

When she jumped, time didn’t stand still like he’d thought it would, like he’d hoped it would. Her sheer dress fluttered around her in a perfect, temporary beauty, and her arms hung high at her shoulders. And her smile, that big, beautiful smile – it was the closest thing to God.

When she broke the surface, he reached for his ring and a hundred dollar bill, placing both in her purse, uncaring about surely waiting thieves. She would be well taken care of by the boys cheering on the shore. He turned, walked away, and said nothing.

Revelations

Had anyone been looking intently, they would have noticed him blankly staring forward in the front seat of his car, engine running and smoke drifting from the open driver's side window, like a damn tourist. As it was, the familiar street and still more familiar neighbors dutifully kept to themselves, leaving Samuel to sulk in decrepit solitude in the dull red four-door parked on the public curb. He wasn't brave or bold enough to pull into his old spot in the driveway and the extended distance from the front door felt more appropriate to how things were now.

Samuel flicked fresh ashes from his slow-burning American Spirit into the reservoir beneath the illuminated console, blinking rapidly as the thin trails of smoke ascended through the fading sunlight of the late afternoon. He noticed the movement on the opposing side of the street – Ms. Jo, the portly elderly lady who worked the register at the gas station down the road was bent over, plucking at stray leaves on the tomato vines straddling her front porch. She lifted her head and noticed him, smiling, the red sunhat tucking away the short graying curls on her head. She lifted her arm and waved at him, and Samuel nodded to her. Her smile faded at the faint gesture and she turned back to her work.

He pressed the final embers of the butt into the ashtray, a hiss breaking the firm silence in the car. He reached down and pulled out the buck thirty can of air freshener he'd bought a week ago and pulled the trigger as the aerosol sprayed toward him. The floral scent descended over his ash-laden clothing, settling on the outer edges of his

flannel jacket. He looked in the rearview mirror and ran his fingers through the brown mop on his head. A haircut was far past due.

Steeling himself, he opened the door, bracing with his foot to halt the return swing. He stepped out onto the once-welcoming pavement and swung the door back with small thud. Samuel started around the car, taking into view the single-story home he'd lived in for a decade before the split. The tin gutters on the sides of the roof had started to clog with leaves fallen from the bordering hardwoods, the old ones that had been tall before he'd even moved in. The decorative shutters still held firm on the sides of the outward facing windows, but the ones lining the frame into their old bedroom were discolored at the edges. The grass, still green and vibrant from years of careful maintenance, grew long and uneven now. He'd offered to keep mowing, but Katy didn't want him around too much.

Samuel made his way up to the scuffed white door, glancing at the empty coffee mugs that left stains on the wicker table sitting under the large bay windows of the living room. He drew up to the door, took a breath before knocking, and backed away slightly. He heard the dim shuffling of footsteps as he held for a beat, then placed his hand on the brass knob and walked into the house. He glanced around the living room, taking in the subtle changes since his last visit. The TV had been moved to the far center of the room, and a bright crimson couch now sat in its place. She'd replaced his movie posters with a picture of the Eiffel Tower, all romanticized and artsy. Framed baby pictures of Evan in swaddling clothes hung in ascending order on the wall leading to the kitchen.

He heard Capo pawing at the edge of her plastic cage, a slight whimpering chasing from her mouth. She recognized him, whining for his attention. Katy had been

trying to get him to take the dog. She'd been adamant. *I thought maybe your family in Mississippi might take him, it's real perfect dog land down there.* As if she knew. As if she saw him taking Capo in the car, eight hours on the interstate, her head out the window and tongue rolling in the rush of wind. As if she'd already seen his hand gripped tightly around the leash because he couldn't trust her, and the barren oak trees or walnuts were slowly giving way to pine – longleaf or loblolly pines, he'd learned once. As if she'd seen him signing Capo's name away to that uncle with the ranch and forever green pastures, with the cattle and open space, wide and limitless. What did she know?

He slipped off his shoes and made his way over the grate that took up a large section beside the couch. Samuel kneeled down, sticking his fingers between the metal rungs, which she licked while her back legs tapped against the hard bottom of the cage.

Katy emerged from the bedroom, both hands pressed up against the side of her face as she wrestled with a silver earring. Her hands shielded her face from him, but she spoke to the room.

“Hey.”

“Hi Katy.” Some dead air. “How are you?” He smiled at her, but she peered forward, walking toward the kitchen.

“Fine. Thanks again for watching over Evan tonight. Amanda had a test to make-up or something, and you were on call, so.” He watched as she marched by, her voice echoing through the living room as she sunk back through the doorway.

“No worries. I'm always free to look after him.”

She coughed and appeared in the doorway again.

“Don’t worry about feeding Capo, I’ve already fed her. You know where the fruit and veggies are, so go ahead and feed Evan in an hour or so.”

He nodded, looking up at her as she braced herself against the doorway.

“Well,” she said. She held her arms out in front of her, meekly. “How do I look?”

She looked better now than he’d ever seen her, even despite the pregnancy. A slimming rose slip was stretched over one shoulder, tight around the gentle curves of her breasts and hips, as if by brushstroke. Her dark hair was curled at the fringes and her sharp cheekbones complemented her oddly proportioned nose. Her eyes were still touched with something wild, but the light was lesser now.

He fumbled for a moment and tried to smile. “You look... good. Really good.”

“Alright.” She smirked and mumbled quietly as she walked to the door.

“Hopefully he thinks so, too.”

Samuel stared forward, eyes not moving from where she had been. He felt the heat rise on his neck. Capo yipped as she grabbed her purse from the TV stand and hefted it onto her shoulder.

“Oh, Samuel? Are you still smoking?”

He slowly turned towards her, eyes held just to her right.

“Not around him. Good? I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Thanks again, Sam.”

With that, she hurried through the door. No one called him Sam. He glanced out the window of the living room, watching her rifling through her purse as she walked to the car. He stared, unsure of what he was supposed to feel and how that reconciled with how he really felt.

Samuel stood, wiping his hand on his pants as he made his way to the kitchen. He opened up the fridge and pulled out the baby carrots and mandarins, peeling both and placing them into a bowl.

He crossed the house again, walking into the hallway. The mold-proof turquoise paint he'd laboriously applied a year earlier hadn't kept the black specks out of the corners. At her bedroom, their bedroom, the hint of tack once used to hold up a cursive "LOVE" sign was fading quickly. He placed his hand on the doorknob, began to twist his palm slowly, stopped, then pressed his ear up against the door. Hearing nothing, he gingerly creaked the door ajar, stepping inside.

There was the familiar smell of lavender and baby powder. The queen-sized bed, well-made, had been moved to the far corner of the room, pressed neatly up against the angled walls. The tails of the red curtains still bore the marks of Capo's curious teeth.

The crib was placed squarely beneath the softly humming ceiling fan, the blades shaking mildly in their suspension. On the floor, multicolored bras and logoed shirts were strewn haphazardly. He stepped between the small piles, noticing the worn lingerie, wishing he could peel them off her with his teeth; the bed, he'd remembered, was the perfect height to bend her over at the waist.

Samuel made his way to the wooden crib, meticulously crafted by Katy's father. He rested his arms on the frame of the chestnut rungs, peering down at the boy whose arms and legs were splayed. Evan, the child, rested his head in portrait, the round cheeks of his father diminished and the unfortunate nose of his mother prominently displayed. His dark tufts of hair, already long, shot out in wayward strands.

He smiled. Samuel retreated over to the closet and opened the door, pulling down on the hanging light switch extended by a repurposed shoestring. With twice as much room, she hadn't filled the extra space with new purchases, but widened the gaps between her shirts and dresses so you couldn't tell as much that there was something missing.

He crouched, moving aside black heels, sneakers, slippers – all the stuff that littered the bottom of the closet. Clearing a path, he reached towards the back wall, moving aside fabrics as his hand searched. He grasped its nylon hem, the edge of the diamond-shaped kite, and withdrew it, admiring it in both hands. She'd never learned how to string it properly, and Evan loved the way it swam back and forth through the air currents. This was his and the boy's. And she'd kept it.

“Momma?” He heard the dazed, faint voice behind him, turning to see Evan reaching up the rails of his crib.

“No buddy. It's Daddy.” Samuel stood and walked back to the crib, placing the maroon accented kite on the bed as he passed by it. The boy blinked a few times, before calling out again, “Momma?”

Samuel smiled, this time pulling him up and out, bracing him against his shoulder. He used his free hand to pull the kite from the bed and walked out of the room. Capo, from her cage, yipped at them.

“Momma?” the boy questioned.

Samuel's face fell into a flat grimace. “No buddy.” As he was walking to the kitchen, he said through a smile, “Hey big man, do you wanna go fly our... kite?”

He smiled.

Samuel shushed him, grabbing the blanket and the bowl of food from the counter and swiveled to the back door. “Kite, buddy. Kite.” Samuel pressed down on the latch of the screen door with the back of his hand, swinging it open and emerging into the backyard. He set Evan down on the grass while the child was babbling incoherent syllables. He stretched out the blanket, moving the boy onto the plastic and taking the bowl of food into his hand.

He and Evan struggled for the next few minutes, Samuel trying to hand the boy both carrots and orange, and Evan smiling wildly as he pulled solely the sweet fruit from Samuel’s palm. The child’s laughter and the flecks of orange fruit dotting his face were too cute for him, and Samuel set the now exclusive bowl of carrots aside and withdrew the kite.

“Kite?” said Samuel, offering it to the boy. Evan’s eyes widened as he reached for the frail fabric. Sam chuckled, and once the boy had gotten a grasp of it, kissed him on the forehead and pulled the kite away. Evan slowly beat the ground with his small hands. Samuel unhooked the tightly bound spool, holding up a finger to Evan as he walked outward. Close to a hundred feet from the blanket, he turned and started back to the house, holding the kite outward facing behind him. The wind caught it, and Samuel quickly began to unravel the spool in his palm as he ran a few paces. He kept the tension line taught, running now back to the blanket as he glanced behind him and saw the kite swaying back and forth, dipping and lunging and rising back again. Slowly, the kite eased into the air while he walked forward. He grinned at the boy as the kite began to climb above him. His hand spun in frantic whirls while he unwound the string, and, with his free hand, pulled a stake from his pocket. The child’s eyes were fixed on the kite, and

Sam set to work. He wrapped the spool twice around the angled head of the peg, placed the wound string beside him and pressed the tent stake into the ground. He was huffing now and took his chance to sit down, watching the gentle sway of the blue diamond in the air.

It was hard to look away: something so slim, flying, pulling at the weight of wind currents months in the making. It had taken him years to fully understand the lure of it, but he'd come to get the feeling, the reason they flew it. He turned his head to see the boy, Evan, enchanted. His eyes were transfixed on the flight of something he'd held moments before. He followed the swing, return, and swing, return of the tail of the kite, black bows tied every six inches from the base of the sail. A smile broke onto his face, and Evan giggled softly before letting out a muted *daddy*.

"That's right buddy. That's right," said Samuel. The look on the young boy's face of unabashed wonder – this was a drug. This was magic. Pure, thumb-sucking magic.

The smile on Evan's face disappeared. He turned and faced the kite, which in his admiration of the boy had been wrangled in the branches of the nearby hardwood, wrapping its string in tangles and looping the kite in close.

"Daddy?" cried Evan as his face began to crumple into a tantrum. Samuel burst up from the blanket and pulled on the string. It was snagged impossibly, already bound between the spread of thick and strangled branches.

There was no ladder – he'd brought it back to his place in a teary-eyed exit. The tree was one of those backyard staples with no low-hanging branches. Without an alternative, he furiously looked around the scattered rocks and stray wood in the fenced-

in area. Nothing catching his eye, he reached down and pulled a rock from the dirt, looked back to make sure Evan was still on the blanket, and hurled it at the tree.

It had to come down. It had to be done. If he didn't get it now, Katy would never take the effort to pull it down. The fire department briefly flashed in his mind. No, no one else would.

It would be him.

Evan cried out for him. He threw another rock. It reached the excess of the kite, but it didn't move. Hitting it repeatedly with the stone wouldn't work. He would have to hit the branches that were holding it up. Gritting his teeth, he looked around him, fervently searching for something heavier. His hand found the ridged outline of a heavy, fallen branch. His breathing quickened as he wrapped his hand around the neck of the wood. He stared up at the kite, viewed the specific branch that the whole thing was set on, and threw it.

The boy cried out again.

It fell short, but the thud resonated in the otherwise quiet and windswept yard. He cursed, grasped the weighted wood with both hands and anchored his weight, swinging back once before launching the projectile at the branches. It missed, and fell, landing hard. Back and again he threw the log into the air, inching closer to the branch before straying off course with another bad toss. He was breathing hard, sweat stains appearing down his sides and back. He bounced back between chucking the branch, retrieving it, and launching it back into the air.

The boy was quiet, crawling to his father.

Short of breath, sweat beading down his face, he heaved the log once again with whatever force was left. It arched and he knew before it landed that this was the one. His face was shining as the log knocked loose the tied on strings, and for a brief moment felt the harmonic attunement to the expectations surrounding him. He reached for the descending kite grasping the tail in his palm and drawing it close. He felt capable, unstoppable, immovable... that was at least until the expected thud was replaced with a hollow sounding crack.

He turned slowly, holding the kite in front of him. And then everything stopped being so important.

There, lying on the ground, his arms splayed in fragile expression, was Evan - one eye opened faintly, his skull indented, bloody log resting beside him. Samuel sucked in a short breath, dropping to his knees and crawling to the boy's side.

“No, buddy. Shhh.” He pulled the fractured head into his chest, resting him in the crook of his shoulder. He softly brushed aside the bloody hair, already matting together. “Shhh buddy. Everything's gonna be alright. Every...” His voice broke, hot tears and sweat mixing in the rivets of his face, his whimpers broken only by the wind.

The Dual Latch

I was the one who found him, hanging there with his favorite black belt notched around his neck, his feet dangling half a foot off the ground, one hand on his free hanging junk. What they don't show you in the movies is that if the drop down is hard enough, the eyes of the judged pop straight outta their sockets, like a jack-in-the-box. The fall was short, but apparently enough for his left eye to shoot out a few inches from his face and dangle on some thin, sinewy flesh that ran back into the socket. At least the professionals had the common courtesy to put a black bag over their heads. My father did not.

Mom was off in Seattle at the time - another business trip with Mary Kay. I was the only one left in Nashville, so I headed down to Brentwood to pay him a visit when I got off on Friday. Figured he could use a little personal time, seeing as how he and Mom had been going through a rough patch. Turns out I was right. I'd walked into the house they'd lived in since I was in the fourth grade, only to find the TV on and the garage door still open. Nothing seemed too out of place, but when I couldn't find him, I thought he might be asleep, so I went upstairs to check. They never really show you how blue the body turns after the oxygen gets sucked out, nor do they talk about the smell of emptied guts that just... drifts in the air. I ran out pretty quick and puked in the hallway bathroom, and I puked again because I didn't know what else to do. What else is there to do? So I kept on until I couldn't tell if it was the shock, or because I was making myself do it, so I wouldn't feel so guilty looking back.

The cops made their way down to the house, told me to vacate the premises while they did their sweep for foul play. Most everything was left like they'd found it. I gave

Mom the call first, then Sarah, my sister. Sarah was out in Memphis with her new husband, but she drove down that night to come be with me. When the scene was finally cleared and the body had been taken to the morgue, Sarah and I started to make our way through the house, cleaning things up and making sure the room looked nicer than how he'd left it. The two of us were up in his room when I found it, hidden under some stack of folded jackets and polished dress shoes, a silver combination lock left unhinged around the handle. Sarah and I hadn't said a word to each other for ten minutes or so, but as I pulled the suitcase out from under the pile, she peeled over to look at what I'd picked up.

“That's Pop's old suitcase, yeah?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Dad took it with him everywhere. The thing's gotta be at least fifty years old.”

“I'm honestly pretty surprised the old thing is holding up.” She let out a grim chuckle. “Dad sure took good care of it.”

I smiled at her, then moved back to the suitcase as she returned to the opposite side of the room. She was cleaning up the chest-of-drawers when I decided to open the thing. I clicked up the metal latches, moving the rungs from under the holds and lifted the top by its handle. I couldn't help but stare. At first, it was anger. Hatred, even. I abhorred him for it. That bastard. After how long they'd been together.

And then I found the photos, and my anger subsided. My breath was coming uneven to me now, and I heard the shuffling behind me stop. I turned back, and she hadn't looked over yet, but I shoved everything back into the suitcase and slammed the lid closed. Sarah jumped at the sound.

“What the hell, Mike?” She held her hands out, then clutched them to her chest and started crying again.

“Sorry. The suitcase... it slipped.”

It was more in shock than anything else, so when she sat down on the bed and started to catch her breath, she asked me what was inside it. “Nothing,” I said. “It was empty.” My eyes shifted to the latch as I locked up the suitcase. “Mind if I... take it? For now?”

She shrugged and kept on. I slipped my fingers through the handle and lifted it up as I stood. I told her I was gonna run out to the car real quick, and when I got there, I stuffed the leather briefcase into the back seat. After another hour or so of halfhearted cleaning, she took off back to the hotel she’d holed up in for the night. She wouldn’t dare sleep in the house, and I didn’t think she’d want to squeeze into my studio apartment. I waited at the house, and got a call that Mom was on the way. I steeled myself for the conversations to come, but over the next few hours, through the tears and the blame, the confusion and confession, I held her like I was supposed to. Like a good son does for his grieving mother. My mind, though, never left the shoddy, old leather suitcase burning a hole in my backseat.

I couldn’t sleep that night. Like most people with some awful revelation, I waited, staring at the fan swirling over my head, the long, angled blades buzzing in repetitious torture as the hanging switch knocked against the bulb in unrelenting rhythm. I’d set the suitcase up on the desk chair in my room – my first mistake, as every fifteen minutes I’d sit up against the pillows and stare at it, imagining my father hurriedly stuffing the thing

full as he hears Mom pulling into the garage. It was hell, if I'm being honest, but we've all had those nights we've had to suffer through, just to make it to the morning. I was bleary-eyed, but not exhausted. I called Sarah right after the sun rose, waking her up as she groggily asked me what was wrong. She agreed to meet up for breakfast in an hour, and as I showered and started to shave, I looked intently in the mirror at face staring back at me, imagining one eye drooping lazily from my head, blinking in tandem with the one still inside me.

I didn't trust myself to drive that morning, so I donned a jacket, gripped the coarse handle of the suitcase and started the walk down to the Waffle House. Sarah and I spent too many nights back in high school shuffling through the doors after midnight, so it seemed fitting we'd meet back up here, even under the circumstances. I ordered a coffee and waited for her, listening to the din of inconspicuous regulars waiting on their All Star breakfasts and undersized orange juices. I felt the eyes of everyone in the diner on me, my disheveled hair still drying, black bags under my reddened eyes. The waitress was an old black lady who offered me some coffee, pitied my sleepless state, and ended every response with a "honey."

When Sarah finally walked through the doors, I was on my third cup of the black coffee, like Dad took it. She was wearing a jet-black pea coat, its buttons clasped all the way to her neck. She wore these big, black sunglasses that covered half her face, and the combo made it look like she was some movie star trying to hide an unforgiving hangover. Her black hair, thick and bunchy like mine, like our whole family's, still held the sheen of a rushed shower. She sat down and stared at me, keeping her glasses on.

"Mike. You look like shit."

I didn't smile, but nodded at her. She huffed, then pulled out a stack of papers from a shoulder bag she'd been carrying. She couldn't sleep either, and had done a little research about next steps with the body, the funeral home, things that Mom wouldn't be able to do on her own with the state she was in. She ran me through what she was thinking, and I sat, idly nodding. I was despondent, and when she finally asked what the hell was wrong with me, I asked her if she wanted to know the truth.

She glared at me, indignant. "What are you talking about, Mike?"

"I didn't sleep, Sarah. I have to show you something."

"I can tell that much. What is it?"

"It's about Dad."

That beat hung in the air. Everything that had needed to be said about Dad had already been spoken between us. It was still too fresh. But as I pulled the suitcase up and onto the table, undid the latches, and held his hand on the lid, she pulled off her glasses and fixed her gaze on it. I told her I was sorry for lying before, but maybe what's inside would make her understand. I made sure the angle was right so that no other table would see it, then flipped the heavy top of the suitcase open.

Her eyes were locked on the contents, but she lifted her gaze to meet mine. Her look was questioning, and as she looked back it flared into the same anger I had felt. She started rifling through it, glancing around to make sure no one was looking.

"What... what is this?" Her words hid a thinly veiled rage.

"Keep your voice down. And it's not what you think."

"What then? What, Mike? What else could it possibly be?"

“The photos, Sarah.” She glanced up at me with a look that could kill. Her hand reached into the overturned gallery of photos and lifted one to her face. Her hand shot to cover her mouth. She didn’t breathe, and her eyes started to water. She didn’t blink, but kept complete focus on the photo at hand.

“This... this is why I need your help.” She didn’t acknowledge I’d said anything. “I’m asking you to help me, because I can’t tell what to do with it.” I waited, knowing she was processing everything like I had. Finally, she turned her eyes up to me and shook her head.

“So,” I started. “Should I tell her?”

She paused for a moment and let her hand fall back down to the table. She gripped the photograph and replaced it with another from the case.

“This would wreck her.”

“I know,” I replied.

“She doesn’t know about this.” Sarah shook her head. “She can’t know about this.”

We carried on in silence for a bit, and when our food arrived, I pulled the photo from her hand, laid it inside the aging, leather-bound suitcase, closed the latches and pulled it to my side. We didn’t look at each other for the rest of breakfast, but ate quietly, the boisterous sounds of the restaurant carrying the awkward exchange between us. After it was over, she asked if I needed a ride. I declined. I told her I needed the air. She left and I called a rideshare to come pick me up.

I was a sight to behold, standing alone outside the finest dining establishment in Nashville with a briefcase full of brutal secrets. When the driver showed up, my phone buzzed and I had to check and make sure this was the right driver. Geraldine, elderly, crooked teeth, unabashed smile. Yep. I piled into the front seat and was greeted with the confirmation that seeing really is believing. What few remained of her teeth were skewed to impossible proportions, and her thick southern drawl only accented the stereotypes she was playing into. She opened up and asked how my day was, remarked on the short length of the ride, and I sat through it with gritted teeth, white-knuckling the luggage in my lap. She asked me what church I went to, I said it had been a while, she told me about her chili cook-off this Sunday, and how Marge was going to get a taste of real chili when she finally gave up that coveted trophy ladle. I smiled with decent courtesy and chuckled.

About halfway through the ride and after I avoided a plethora of far-too-personal questions, she answered a phone call on the car's connected Bluetooth receiver. This was a first for me, my driver taking a call with a passenger on board, but she thought little of it.

“Hello?” she began.

On the other end of the line, an Indian-accented voice asked her how she was doing this fine morning.

“It's a beautiful day, sweetie. Who is this?”

The man continued, stating that her name had been drawn from a pool of potential customers, and that she was eligible to receive half off her current life insurance rates with the same guarantee. I struggled in my seat as the telemarketer laid it on thick. Once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, low-risk high-reward, limited number of available slots.

Geraldine was eating it up. I thought about telling her that the man was just looking for a quick buck, but she pressed on, sure of herself. I folded further into my seat.

“And all you need is my card number? Well, I’m driving right now, but if you give me just a moment.” She kept her eyes to the road and asked me something I’d never expected from a driver: “Reach into my purse, would you honey? My billfold should be in the front left pocket.” I reached down and withdrew her billfold. She told me which slot held it and I pulled out the credit card.

“Now, read off the numbers for John, would you?” We were less than two minutes from my stop, but who was I to stop a lady from what she thought was a good deal. I’d tried, I had. I read off the sixteen digits and the expiration on the flipside of the card, enunciating clearly so the voice on the other end of the line could write them down, audibly scratching with a pen on a piece of paper. He thanked her for her time and told her the transaction would be completed soon, and a receipt would be in the mail with two weeks. I dropped the card back into her purse as if it had stung me, and stared out the window, feeling complicit.

“You might be the finest young man I’ve met on the road. I’m very glad I got to meet you, Michael.”

“It’s Mike, but thank you.”

“Anyway, would did you say you did for a living?”

“I didn’t,” I replied. I quickly added, “but, I work as a managing consultant.”

“Oh, my cousin works at that as well. Small world, isn’t it?”

We pulled up to the street corner, and I hurried out, waving goodbye at Geraldine and vowing to never take that service again. I had enough blood on my hands.

There was a while where I wasn't sure if I could go through with it. I spent the Saturday locked in my room, waiting, staring at the bold brown edging of the leather suitcase. I knew what I had to do, and as the sun dropped below the horizon, I finally put in the call to Mom. She was dreary, but of course she wanted to see me. I don't think I felt much of anything besides trepidation on the ride over there.

She met me at the door and pulled me into a hug, puffy eyes evidence that she'd been trying to clean up from a day spent by the tissue box. She asked me what was in the suitcase, I told her that it was some of Dad's old stuff. She nodded and gave me a sad smile. Mom brought me in for another hug and sobbed quietly into my shoulder. I made my way into the living room, the place where every Christmas we'd wait anxiously for Dad to bring out the stockings full of candy and small toys. And where, through high school, I'd sat glued for hours with my friends playing different shoot-'em-ups or watching endless hours of TV. Now, I was sitting here against the corner, the luggage resting next to me, waiting on Mom to bring out a glass of water.

"So," she said as she sets the two glasses down on the table in front of us. "How are you holding up?"

I grabbed the drink and took a quick sip. "It's hard. I didn't really sleep last night."

She nodded. "I had to come down here and sleep on the couch." All day long, there have been people coming by and visiting. The kitchen is full of Tupperware right now."

I nodded. “That’s sweet of them.” We let the silence hang between us for a moment or two before I reached out and held her wrist, placing my free hand on top of hers. “Mom, can I ask you a weird question?”

She looked puzzled. “Well, of course, sweets.”

I chewed my lower lip for a second before starting. “If, if I had a secret that would change how you thought of me, would you rather know or not know about it?”

“Change how I thought of you how?”

“That I was a lot different than you might think. Almost changes everything about me?”

Her face changed to a more serious expression. “What are you talking about, hun?”

“Just say yes or no.”

She waited for a beat. “Well, yes I would. You don’t have to keep anything from me, you know that.”

I breathed out, nodding. “Okay. Well. What if it wasn’t about me?” Mom cast me a confused glance. “What if... what if it was about Dad?”

Her face dropped and her eyes squinted. “What are you talking about, son?”

I pulled my hand away and rested it on the suitcase. “I found this. In the closet. In your room, right after it happened.” Her eyes grew wide as she slowly dropped her eyes from mine and stared at the luggage, stared at her husband’s private suitcase. Her hands drifted to the latches, tears starting to well up, and she choked back her breath. Two soft clicks as she undid the buckles, grabbed onto the suitcase, and lifted it. Her mouth fell open and her eyes went wide as she reached in, pulled at the soft fabric, and lifted the

loose pair of pantyhose up to her face. Her grip curled into a fist as she turned from it to look at him.

“What... is this?” I kept my mouth closed, sympathetic. “He was... he was cheating on me?” Hot tears started streaking down her face.

I lifted my palm to her. “No, Mom. Look inside. The photos.”

Her eyes darted to the loose collection photographs. She dropped the stocking back into the suitcase, gathered one that was facedown, and turned it to face her. The anger flushed from her face as confusion took over, her brows forcing together. She pulled it in closer, mere inches from her face. She held the thing up, then turned it to me, not breathing. In the photo, Dad was standing in a suggestive pose, having set the camera up on the bed, wearing the long pair of pantyhose and one of my mother’s brassieres. Her hand shook as she dropped the photo and picked up another. More of the same, in different dresses – clothes, heels, stockings. I knew. I’d been through them all. The oldest one dated back fifteen years or so, back when Dad still had his moustache. Back when I was in middle school.

She scoured through the photos, rifling through them with a shocked expression. After she’d seen the last one, she dropped her hands to her side and closed her eyes. She stayed perfectly still for a while, no tears down her face. I wondered if I’d done the right thing. It was too late now, anyway. Mom slowly stood up next to the couch. I waited for her as she took a breath.

“No.”

I was taken aback. I didn’t know what that meant, so I just stayed perfectly still.

“No,” she repeated. “I don’t know where you got this, but you’re wrong.”

I started to protest, “But—”

“No, I said.” She was almost shouting now. “Why are you lying to me? You’re lying. And I want you to get the hell out of my house.

“Mom, I’m not—”

“Get out,” she screamed. “Now!” She started ramming the photos back into the suitcase, and slammed down the latches. “Take your... your filth and go!” I turned to the door, moving quickly and trying to calm her down, but she would have none of it. I opened the door and turned to leave, and as I moved through the doorframe, she hurled the suitcase at me. I tried to catch it, but the thing slipped and crashed to the ground, stockings and undergarments sprawled out and exposed. I kneeled down and looked to the house as the door slammed.

I picked up the photos and clothing, now marked with dirt. Honestly, I’d almost run out of tears at this point. Almost. Sighing, I walked over to the car and dropped it into the back seat, taking off to the apartment.

Sometimes you get this ache in your gut that tells you to do something, and it just won’t quit until you do it. Maybe it’s ‘cause it’s the right thing to do. Or maybe you just feel like you need an excuse to do something that’s hard.

I didn’t talk to or see Mom until the funeral, the full two days. I’d driven out, full dress, somber and ready to get the whole thing over with. It’s not that I didn’t care anymore, it’s just that I wasn’t ready for the pleasantries and the celebration of life and everything. Especially when the whole thing’s a sham anyways. Who knows how a preacher will handle a suicide.

And that gut feeling, the one I was talking about – it wouldn't let me leave that suitcase. I tried three times, each time going straight back up to the apartment. It was a headache, but for some cosmic reason, it had fallen into my lap. We got out at the funeral and followed the procession as they made their way through. Sarah had done all the planning. She'd made the call for the headstone, and had booked the preacher at their home church to give the funeral service. She'd set everything up: a closed casket visitation, for obvious reasons, and a small gathering at the graveside to celebrate his many accomplishments in life. Even a virtual photo gallery for Mom.

They'd gotten some of the church members to act as pall bearers, so watching them carry the body of my father, none of them knowing about the eyeball that tried to escape or the way he'd shit himself right after, it made me a little sick. People talk about suicide like it's cowardice. And regardless of the auto-eroticism of it all, people still believed it was all intentional. Maybe I did too. Like it's running away from the problems. Like it's giving up. Dad? I think he was just tired of it all. The lies and the running and the procedure. I think he had to choose between coming out of the shadows and ending things with Mom, or ending things himself.

I was walking next to Sarah as we arrived at the grave. She'd found out about the whole incident at the visitation. She'd told me her husband hadn't been able to make it to Nashville, but I think she asked him to stay home. I saw Mom with her flock of fellow widows and caretakers from the church with her, up near the casket. She hadn't looked at me yet. When we got there, we were all seated under the temporary awning they'd set up for us. It was overcast, and Mom was wearing a thin, black veil, like in the movies.

The preacher got up there and gave his spiel. Phrases stuck out to me, but the message of it all was lost, as I was thinking about my grip on the handle of the suitcase. *The justice of God, no man can know, he was a father and a lover, at his core a good man, bless his journey in the life after this one.* Mom looked over to me about midway through, and she wasn't crying like I'd thought she'd be. Actually, she looked down, and showed a sad smile when she saw me looking. Then she turned back to the preacher as he was concluding his prayer.

“*A-men.* The Lord bless you and keep you all. Before the burial, I believe Annie has gathered some of his favorite belongings, to be let down into the grave with him. Annie?” Mom nodded and smiled, thanking him. When she stood up, she wasn't carrying anything, but instead, she turned and walked over to me. I looked up into her eyes and saw the fragile smile of a woman worn unfairly by the world around her. I saw a glimmering of hope, and a gentle, quiet calm there. I think I saw my mother for the first time right then. Mom as she was, not as she was to me.

I lifted the suitcase and handed it to her, and she carried it over to the grave. She laid the suitcase on top of the casket, which I don't think you're supposed to do, but no one objected, and as we all stood and the casket was lowered into the grave, I walked up to her and offered her my hand. As the choir began to sing an old hymn, she took it and leaned into my shoulder, crying.

Epilogue

Rare is the instance when an author gets to comment on and examine his own work in the same place where it is published. Oftentimes, the clarification provided by the work's creator detracts from the reader's experience – at least in theory. Personally, the thought of my favorite authors telling me I was sympathizing with the wrong character or had critically misunderstood his original intent does not sit very well with me. To avoid any of these conflicting responses, let me preface the following with some brief clarification as to what this glimpse into the author's mind truthfully entails.

I do not subscribe to the idea that only the author's original understanding of his writing is the final, authoritative conclusion to a work's meaning. In fact, I believe that when an artist sends a piece out into the world, he loses all control of it, and the only governing body on the proper interpretation should be the reader. When a work of literature, art, or any other creative endeavor is given to public scrutiny, the layman's interpretation can be as valid as the creator's, if not more so, since the "little darlings" truly are so hard to kill. That said, my only hope in writing this is to convince you of the same convictions about my work that I intended upon their penning.

This creative project began with the hopes of exploring innocence through a different lens, in relative opposition to the literary constant that symbolic innocence tends to be. To amplify this distinction, I focused the writing on the idea of "objectified innocence," which is the break from literary tradition that I was hoping to look at. Since, in this tradition, a symbol takes on the embodiment of purity and innocence and the

reactions that entail are where the revelations are found, I hoped to explore this innocence with a touch more malice. Symbols of innocence often contain qualities typical of what they represent, such as the color white, infancy or youth, inexperience, or anything purity related. When the idea of objectification is introduced to this equation, the connotation is much darker and the focus shifts from what the symbol innately represents to what conditions the actor is specifically attributing the otherwise inconspicuous object. I preferred the term “object” rather than “symbol,” because an object generally serves a specific utility, something of employ for the initiating actor. The focus of the actor is what generates the meaning for the object’s existence or purpose in the stories I’ve written, and this focus on the actor hopefully reveals a more interesting relationship between the object and its responsible party.

To further the goal of this creative project and perhaps to make the relationship between the two more accessible, more often than not the objectifying party is the protagonist of the story. The reader gets to view the object from a similar vantage point to the protagonist’s. In each of the four stories in this collection, there is a specific object/instance that can be singled out as the one vessel that the protagonist attributes his concept of innocence. Hopefully, each object is more a reflection of the needs of the character than the innately innocent qualities of the object itself, be it a house, lounging local boys, a kite, or a suitcase full of pantyhose. My attempt at further exploring these themes had to culminate in a specific change evoked through the character objectifying this significant object, and through each story, a moment of growth or progress is necessary to the full development of the character and the function of the object.

One more point of clarification before I get into the individual stories and how I believe they accomplish what I originally sought out to do: all the protagonists are male. This is not from a gender bias, nor is it a commentary on the fragile foundations of toxic masculinity; rather, I believe that the world in which the stories take place puts the same gendered pressures on men and women as our world does, and as my experience is limited to that of a guy, I believe I'm neither good enough thus far nor fully equipped to portray a female perspective with the full nuanced attention required to capture the truth of it, at least not yet. Hemingway said something along the lines of "write what you know," and though I might take that in a more literal sense than he intended, I'm still sticking to it, for now.

The inception of "The Arsonist in Lawrence County" came from a similarly horrific story that happened in a real place, in real life, at least the part of the story that Thomas Wright represents. What struck me when I first heard about this happening was the fact that the wound was still fresh and he was still on the loose, so the looming threat of a fugitive arsonist was an idea I set out to explore. While I may have avoided explicitly stating this fact in the piece, Buddy's original fear was not that he'd come across the arsonist, but that the arsonist would take from him something so pivotal to his development and his identity that he would have to move quickly before the arsonist destroyed that portion of his life. "Arsonist" strays from the other stories in the collection because his objectification of the house comes less from a need to materialize his struggle with fading innocence and more from a tangible event in his life that changed him at his core. Buddy's perspective on the house, from my point of view, is a dynamic one. On the one hand, the entirety of his early adolescence was spent in utter seclusion from society

and was centralized on the house, so he feels an unavoidable connection to the only early relationships he held. On the other hand, the killing of his father in an attempt to protect his mother forever mars his relationship with the house. To him, I believe it so significantly affects his later life (hence the therapist) that everything he's done which hasn't directly dealt with the house was an avoidance of what he knew had to be dealt with eventually. When the arsonist becomes a player on the scene, he's forced to confront his past under the threat that someone else will make his ultimate decision for him.

The reader will have to forgive me, but the opening line where Buddy "thinks of murder" is a bit of a red herring. It plays into the link between the title and the opening of the story. The "arsonist" is as of yet unidentified, so when a character's first introduction is of malicious inner thoughts, the reader quickly associates him with the criminal alluded to in the title. Then, at the grabbing of the gun and the jug of gasoline, the reader probably assumes his intent is anything but good-natured. As the story is revealed along the trail and the narration takes hints from Buddy, the reader is hopefully disarmed and starting to sympathize with Buddy. The early mentions of the therapist only keeps the reader on their toes, but when the reasoning behind his actions finally comes through, the intent is to get early assumptions of guilt converted into an understanding of when Buddy burns down the house. In a sense, Buddy reclaims his innocence from the harsh reality of his parents' deaths by eradicating the house altogether, but the whole plot point of the serial arsonist isn't revealed until the end, so the question of every party's innocence is constantly in the air.

"Something Nothing Coffee" is a multi-faceted story that uses a couple different media to express the dynamic of Mary and Joe's relationship. The focus of "nothing" in

the piece serves the underlying religious connotations throughout the story. Frankly, Mary and Joe visiting the Holy Land speaks for itself, but the relationship is revealed to be founded upon their mutual lack of belief in anything. A shift begins to take place when Mary begins to take the “pilgrimage” as an endeavor to reconnect with her religious roots. She promises Joe (a convenient name for a story with coffee in the title) that the coffee in its authenticity is worth it, a thinly veiled attempt on her part to inculcate him in the culture and religious opportunity the region offers. As she jumps later on in the story, Joe’s focus shifts immediately to his resentful disdain for the supposed “real stuff” that the locals had to offer. Regardless of what Mary had been attempting to do, his cynical lens through which the world is viewed colors every aspect of the trip.

Here’s a surprise – “Something Nothing Coffee” originated from a study abroad trip to Israel. I’ve led a pretty lucky life to be exposed to a number of different cultures from an early age, but this also lent itself to my growing an acute awareness of acting “like a tourist.” For Joe and Mary, this trip is an attempt to salvage a fast-collapsing relationship. Joe, throughout the entire interaction, seems to despise Mary for her enjoying the local life, largely because she’s being so unabashedly a foreigner while she does it. The objectified innocence in this piece is twofold: Mary sees the local kids lounging on the rocks and identifies with their freedom to explore and enjoy the world they live in, while Joe sees in Mary an innocent freedom from the constant pressure to avoid seeming “American” in a foreign land. As it stood, Joe was paralyzed by his apparent need to remain inconspicuous, and when he is confronted with the reality that Mary is carefree enough to break the bonds of social order, he has to come to a decision. As she jumps through the air and floats in a “perfect, temporary beauty,” Joe realizes that

either he could join her and accept her willingness to remain innocent of contrived societal conventions, or he could refuse this display of reckless abandon, which would mean their relationship would be fundamentally shattered beyond repair. Mary having chosen her path ahead, he chooses to leave immediately, a practical refusal to accept the childlike innocence Mary had come to represent in his mind.

“Revelations” is most likely the easiest story to interpret in a practical sense. The scene is immediately set that Samuel is a distanced significant other who is attempting to balance the delicate fragments of a relationship he has already lost. I view the relationship between him and Katy as one in which neither wants to appear as the guilty party for the fracturing of it. While the direct reasoning for their split is never revealed, what information is known paints an unfortunate picture: they were close enough to have a child, and Samuel bears enough personal responsibility that he still wants to have a relationship with his son. While Katy prepares to go out, presumably for a date with another man, it’s revealed that Samuel still feels a deep attraction for her as he looks at her longingly, reminiscing over their intimate relationship. What remains of their relationship is undercut by the desire from both parties to come out on the other side looking innocent. For Samuel, this means still taking an active interest in his son’s life and being willing to take care of their child.

The object of innocence in this story becomes relatively telling throughout. Samuel’s desire for a literal innocence in his son’s eyes, to appear as the “good guy,” manifests itself in the emotional weight he attributes the kite in the story. “This was his and the boy’s.” His relationship to his son hinges upon this toy as a special connection between father and son. When the kite gets stuck in a tree, the true objectification of the

object, the kite, reveals itself, as he desperately wants to reclaim the connecting object to his son. He throws increasingly heavy objects at the branches, assured that when he brought the kite down his son would laugh again. Eventually, the object becomes an obsession to him: “It had to come down. It had to be done.” His obsession with the object ends up costing him, though, as the object supersedes the awareness he needs to care for the thing was retaining the kite for – his son. The ending is the tragic consequence of his overenthusiasm to appear blameless in his son’s eyes and capable as the better side of his dilapidated relationship.

When I first heard secondhand the story of a son who discovers a stash of his father’s secret lingerie after his untimely demise, I knew there would be a story that arose out of it. The objectification in this one is a little self-explanatory: the suitcase comes to be emblematic of the true nature of Mike’s father, and the reactions to that object from multiple perspective in the story is revealing as to the characters’ priorities. The distance from the get-go of the family from one to the other is intentional, as their fractured relationships serve to give them a fairer understanding of the man they each thought they knew rather well. For Mike, his struggle is primarily in choosing to reveal the truth to someone who could rest easily in the memory of the man she loved, if not for the inconvenient truth of his hiding a vital aspect of his life. He gets a lucky break when Geraldine shows up, giving him a glance into the potential in letting an ignorant person believe what she wishes, despite the detriment of the truth. For Geraldine, the consequence was that some telemarketer would eventually take advantage of her, presumably. Mike was fated to have a firsthand experience of what his options were, which informs his decision to tell his mother the truth later on.

As his mother comes into the direct path of the truth hidden in the dual-latch suitcase, her reaction is paralleled with Mike and Sarah's. Hers is not a gentle understanding of these circumstances, but abject horror and outright denial of her son's plausibility. Unlike most stories I've written, the ending is mired in reconciliation, because despite the lying and the suicide and the betrayal of what Mike's mother knew his father to believe, she decides at the end to reconcile with the innocent truth that lies in store in the suitcase. She decides to put his soul to rest with the full acceptance and knowledge that she was burying him with a side of his life that he could not reconcile with his wife in the end.

Looking through the varied reactions to the objectified innocence in the stories I've written, though some might take issue with my characterizations, each person who acts with the agency to ascribe innocence to a specific object confronts that object and is developed through his reaction to it. Mike and his mother choose to confront the object by accepting the innocent truth that it entailed. Samuel, in seeking to preserve his objectified innocence, loses the person in whose eyes he was attempting to remain innocent. Mary fully accepts the childlike innocence of the boys on the cliff face, while Joe chooses unabashedly to abandon both Mary and the boys as opposed to reconciling with them. Buddy confronts his object by burning it to the ground, in effect reclaiming the innocence entrapped within. Each story tackles the experience from a different angle, providing meaningful insight into how I, as the author, see this device as impacting a character when he or she is forced to face up to it.