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Toska: Stories

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Toska: Stories

by

Ryan Conaughty

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

May 09, 2012
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by

Ryan Conaughty

APPROVED BY:

[Signatures and dates]

Advisor

Reader

Reader

Chair, Graduate Committee

Chair, Department of English
This is for:

The Park Rats:
Deez, Megalo, Sin, and Hightower

crazyguysandgirlsonbikes

Mom and Dad
I’d like to thank:

The entire English Department at SUNY Brockport: for making my stint here a memorable ride, specifically, my invaluable professors who provided me with more of an education than I could ever ask for: Anne Panning, Greg Garvey, Jim Whorton, Miriam Burstein, and Ralph Black.

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I'd like to give a special thanks to my thesis readers, Anne Panning and Jim Whorton: I am honored to be able to say I have studied under and learned from writers of such caliber and talent. Thank you.

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This collection of short stories is dedicated

with the utmost respect for a life devoted to his passion,

with unconditional awe for the uncompromising commitment to his craft,

with a fanatical admiration of his brutal and heartbreaking honesty,


to a man who fell apart,

and the writer who put me back together:

Richard Yates

“It wasn’t what he said that mattered—for a minute it seemed that nothing Carson said would ever matter again—it was that his face was stricken with the uncannily familiar look of his own heart, the very face he himself, Lard-Ass Platt, had shown all his life to others: haunted and vulnerable and terribly dependent, trying to smile, a look that said Please don’t leave me alone.”

-“A Really Good Jazz Piano”, The Collected Stories of Richard Yates
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Abstract

This creative thesis of short stories focuses upon the theme of people searching for something they cannot find. Each story centers around characters who cannot obtain the thing they long for, be it a voice, an answer to a question, or some sort of redemptive relationship. As a collection, the intent of this thesis is to present particular stories of characters who are on the verge of coming to a realization about themselves but who are unable to become who they want to be. In the story “Rocks”, a child who isn’t speaking is sent to summer camp so that he may make friends but learns more than he is supposed to. “Waiting” is about a man who cannot find the words he must say to make his relationship with his girlfriend work, so escapes to a bar and meets a man with a story to tell. “I’m Not Hurting Anyone” is the story of a man who has made a terrible mistake he cannot move on from, even when the demon he keeps at bay tries to help him recover. Lastly, in “The Swimmer”, a young artist in search of an answer to where he is going in life finds his hero in the unlikeliest of places with unwanted results. The author seeks to present these stories to showcase various tales of loss, despair, anger, acceptance, and ultimately, the collapse of each character’s ability to acknowledge who they were and the failure to accept who they have become. The characters of Toska are unable to find themselves when they look for who they are. These individuals remain as silent and lost at the end of their stories as we often find ourselves.
Introduction:
A Way of Being Alone

Finishing up my Master's in Education in 2006, I found a website that changed my life forever. I was one semester of student teaching away to becoming, at the age of twenty-four, a certified English teacher, on the proverbial path to becoming a "grown up". Apparently, I was ready to reign in all the fine, little strings and the thick, heavy chains that come along with being an adult. There was one minute problem that had been eating away at everything I was, though, ever since I started the program: I was completely and utterly miserable. I felt lifeless, pretending I was supposed to be some sort of professional educator at twenty-four. What the hell did I know about anything? About the world? About myself? All I had done was read articles and research papers on how to present instructional materials to un-interested kids and how to manage a classroom. I didn't have any sort of life experience to relate to students. I didn't have a story to tell. I wasn't a teacher, I was a fraud.

I needed something to prove to myself that I wasn't as lost as I thought I was. A voice inside kept telling me that there was more to life than just going to school, getting a job, and rotting away in an existence of could-have's, should-have's, and ultimately, a terrible sense of regret and sadness about a life un-lived. I went through a type of existential meltdown. I wanted to feel alive, I wanted an adventure and I started grasping at anything and everything to fulfill the emptiness inside: hiking the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine, backpacking across Europe, a road trip to
the West Coast, hell, I even started researching how to canoe down the Mississippi River with nothing but a backpack, a sleeping bag and a paddle. *Nothing* was going to stop me from proving to myself that I could have a story to tell that was worth remembering. That's when I found crazyguyonabike.com.

I don’t remember how I found it. I was clicking through websites of adventures journals and travel blogs, and up popped this beautifully tame, simplistic website, soaked in a yellowish-beige. There were pictures of bicycles. Lots of bicycles. And stacked and piled on the back of the bicycles were dirty sleeping bags and tents and bright clothes and there were big, worn down and sun-faded bags filled with gear that hung off the side of the tires. It was a website dedicated to going places on bicycles. These people, whoever they were, were riding bicycles across continents. Around the planet. And they were sharing their stories with the world.

*That’s what I’m going to do*, I thought, *I’m going to ride my bicycle across America.*

And that’s what I did. It took me two years of planning and two and a half months of riding from Virginia to Oregon. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. I got chased by three-legged pit-bulls in Kentucky, jumped off cliffs in Missouri, rode all day and night for 128 miles through Kansas, witnessed the wonder Grand Tetons and felt the sand of the Pacific Ocean between my toes all on my own determination and drive. The best thing I did, though, was keep a journal on the crazyguyonabike website. After riding my bicycle anywhere from forty to ninety miles a day, I would find a place to sleep, be it a campsite or next to a river, put on a
sweatshirt as I lay in my tent, put the hood over my head, put the pen to the page or my fingers to the keys, and scribble and type away until I got my story out. *Hood up, ink down,* I would tell myself, write it out. This is why you’re out here.

People from all over the world followed me every day and read about my thoughts, my fears, my observations. They read my story. They sent me emails, telling me how I inspired them to live better lives, that I made them reflect upon the choices they had made and how my honesty deeply affected them to the point they started to question the path they had followed. I even had a young man, around my age, write to me and tell me that what I written made him wish he could leave his wife and kids for a few months just to have one last adventure, but he couldn’t because he was stuck. He found me and the story I wrote as an escape from the one thing he could never run away from: himself.

That journal is what brought me to SUNY Brockport. I did something only a handful of people have ever done. My story meant something to people. They identified with something about the way I wrote it and, in turn, I was inspired by not only how much people enjoyed my writing, but how hard I had worked to dedicating myself to write every day. The recognition from crazyguyonabike allowed me to believe in myself for the first time that I could do something great. That community of bicycle adventurers ignited a spark in me to return to school for writing. *That’s what I’m going to do,* I thought, *I’m going back to school to study the craft of writing.*

And that’s what I did. But things began to fall apart as my program progressed and I found my life turning into the type of short stories I write the further I got into
my program. I thought riding my bicycle across a continent alone was hard, but it was nothing compared to readjusting back to the life I had fled from. I couldn’t do it.

The trip changed me in ways I didn’t expect. Bitterness and regret about who I had become and the path I was now headed down replaced my initial feelings of accomplishment and optimism. I began to re-read my journal entries to re-live those experiences and get then angry that I had even returned back to New York to start my life. Drinking was a way to suppress my anger and depression but it also caused me to stop caring about the things that once mattered like drawing and writing. In fact, alcohol didn’t suppress anything, it merely emphasized all my negativity I felt about myself and all my inner turmoil of who I wasn’t and told myself I couldn’t become. I stopped writing. My girlfriend left me not too long after. Can’t blame her.

I was supposed to find myself out there, on that bike, but when I returned, I found that all the fine, little strings and the thick, heavy chains were in the exact place I had run away from. A constant state of doubt began to infect my mind about what exactly the purpose of me leaving in the first place was. Who had I become? Was the trip even worth it if I had reverted back to the person I ran away from? Did I find what I was looking for? A serious depression and self-hatred began to consume me: I wasn’t the free-spirited, relaxed, adventurous, happy young man that I was on the road or that I promised myself I’d turn into. I wasn’t an inspiration any more. I wasn’t the writer I thought I was, I was a fraud.

I had traveled 4,463 miles alone on a bicycle and didn’t get anywhere.

*
The first ten pages of my copy of Richard Hugo’s *The Triggering Town* are stained with light brown splotches where it had come in contact with a banana that was beginning to rot in my backpack. The stains remind me how long I ignored everything else but the book. I had forgotten about the banana, I was too focused on Hugo’s words. The rest of the pages are marked with lopsided stars, underlined sentences in wiry black and blue ink, and brackets in the margins with my slanted scribbles of my thoughts next to them, talking back to Hugo about his thoughts on writing. To me, books like my stained and scribbled-up copy of *Town* define the beauty of reading: being able to explore your own thoughts that are triggered by the words of others. There are no better conversations you can have than with yourself and sometimes the only way to talk to yourself is to write it out.

That’s what writing is to me: a conversation of solitude. Rilke advises a young, fearful Kappus in search of guidance on writing, in *Letters to a Young Poet*, that:

> no one can help you--no one. There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: *must* I write? (Rilke, 6)

I ask myself this every time I stare at a blank piece of paper or computer screen. What do I have to say? What makes my perception of the world different from
anyone else’s? Why am I wasting my time creating something when someone has probably said it better? It’s the writer’s curse: the internal doubt of not being able to write anything worth reading. It is hard to ignore myself and my fears. It is harder to believe in myself and my strengths. The nearly impossible thing to do when I am alone, though, in the vast solitude that Rilke speaks of, is to accept the fact that I wouldn’t be struggling if I didn’t have the flame burning inside that darkness to do anything else but write. Must I write? It is sometimes the only thing that allows me to keep going.

I’ve learned more about myself through reading and writing than I have with anything else in my life. I believe in the power of words so much that I have tattoos from two short stories that changed how I not only look at the world, but read. “You must shut your ears to the roaring of the voices” (Anderson, 438), from Sherwood Anderson’s “Hands” is my dedication to myself to stop listening to the negativity surrounding me, external and internal, about dedicating my time to creating short stories, as well as accepting myself. The other, “and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (Joyce, 24), from James Joyce’s “Araby”, are the last eight words of what I consider to be the best short story ever written, about the hurtful truths of the world. These stories don’t have happy endings. My stories, in turn, don’t either. John Gardner says to “write the kind of story you like and know best” (Gardner, 18), in The Art of Fiction, my favorite book on the craft writing. I’ve learned what I like and don’t through reading countless collections of short stories and in doing so, I feel like
I have begun to develop a voice and style that mimics what I enjoy the most from the stories that alter who I am.

I don’t care for flowery, experimental prose, with intricate word combinations or boundary-pushing risks. If the room is dark, say it in four words, not fifteen. It’s the immediate setting and instance of time, rather than various locations and extended meditations on character development that draw me into a story. I appreciate compact and focused stories, tales where the proverbial lens is not just tight on a character, it’s uncomfortable. I want to see their scars, not the make-up. Descriptions are at a minimum in my stories and dialogue implies more than it says, most of the time. Strunk and White’s invaluable *The Elements of Style* taught me to, with Rule 17: “omit needless words” (Strunk, 23) back in my undergraduate days, and I still try to adhere to it today in my fiction and what I read. Raymond Carver’s fiction, specifically his collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, was my first foray into brevity and cut-throat intensity of minimalistic human emotion and interaction. While Anderson and Joyce taught me the basic fundamentals about setting, characterization, and the importance and insignificance of epiphany in fiction, Carver was my initial influence on style and a gateway to the overall theme of the basis of all my fiction: the ways people hurt each other.

Like any good piece of fiction, Carver’s stories deal with relationships. Its the conflict of those relationships that make a good story. Without conflict, there’s no reason to read or discover anything about the characters. And if done correctly and truthfully, a world is created that the reader believes to be nothing more than a mirror
of reality. Its only when fiction accurately portrays fictional relationships as reality
that the story transcends itself from an artist’s creation and becomes something
organic and alive, like Gardner states:

He (the writer) must present, moment by moment, concrete images
drawn from a careful observation of how people behave, and he must
render the connections between moments, the exact gestures, facial
expressions, or turns of speech that, within any given scene, move
human beings from emotion to emotion, from one instant in time to the
next. (Gardner, 24)

In doing so, the story ceases becoming just text to be read, it becomes “a kind
of instrument for understanding” (Gardner, 38) the intricacies of life. Fictional
characters, if we believe in them through the writer’s craft, reveal more about the
world around us than those around us do. When done well, fiction not only “broadens
our knowledge of people and places”, but also “helps us to know what we believe,
reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our
faults and limitations” (Gardner, 31). My struggle is to not just create a good story but
a great one worth reading. I truly believe that in fiction, a good story is one that we
wish was real. A great story, though, is one that we wish wasn’t. Fiction tells us the
truth about the lies we tell ourselves.

I didn’t develop that mindset until I was introduced to a writer that I had no
idea existed. I had been reading fiction theory and books written to teach you how to
construct the “perfect” story. Books made to help develop characters and bring a
setting to life. The more I invested in these pseudo-self-help books, the more I started losing my faith that I could learn anything about the type of story I wanted to write. I wanted stories that left the reader breathless with emptiness; I had a vision of how to portray the way things fall apart and can’t be put back together. All I wanted was to write my own “Araby”. I looked to imitate Carver but not his early work, more “Cathedral” (his best story, in my opinion), rather than “Fat”. My thought process was one that if I had a basic understanding of the fundamentals, those would be the tools in the proverbial toolbox Stephen King talks about in his wonderful On Writing. After all, “if one is to write, it helps to know what writing is” (Gardner, 33). I was doing it all wrong, though. I was reading how to write instead of reading good stories and writing my own. Books such as Inspired Creative Writing and What If? began to line my bookshelf, replacing Bradbury, Cheever, Updike, and actual story collections. I lost my drive to write after inundating myself with other people’s ideas of what writing was. Then, halfway through my program at SUNY Brockport, when everything started to fall apart, a gift, possibly the best gift anyone has ever given me appeared like a beacon to save me: a hardcover copy of The Collected Stories of Richard Yates.

Richard Yates. Here was my own personal revelation. Here was a voice that I thought was writing for me and to me, much like millions of poets and readers thought Rilke was writing to them. This guy, I thought, this guy gets it. Here were stories that didn’t just pull punches; they kicked you when you were down and then asked if you were ready for the real pain of reading them. I read “A Really Good Jazz
Piano” three times in a row, each time shaking my head in disbelief that a story could portray characters so unforgiving, yet so broken, and leave me feeling so sad at how real they were. “No Pain Whatsoever” left me feeling hollow and empty and I didn’t talk to anyone for hours later when I had put myself together again and I loved it. “Liars in Love” made me a believer that fictional characters could be vessels for real truths about what it means to be alone. Yates came into my life in a moment of “hopeless emptiness” (Yates, 200) and illuminated everything around me. I became obsessed with Yates, reading all seven of his novels, the article in the Boston Review, “The Lost World of Richard Yates” by Stewart O’Nan, and then read Yates’ excellent biography by Blake Bailey, A Tragic Honesty. It was Yates’ uncompromising view, his unflattering and honest portrayal of the simple sadness of being human that I connected with and that I will always admire. O’Nan’s article, with amazing clarity and intensity, focuses on the power of Yates’ simplistic and unnerving vision:

...the characters earn their downfall, seem fated to it. It’s the merciless limning of his people that make Yates unique and the process of reading his work so affecting (some would say terrifying). We recognize the disappointments and miscalculations his characters suffer from our own less-than-heroic lives. And Yates refuses to spoon-feed us the usual redeeming, life-affirming plot twist that makes everything better. No comedy dilutes the humiliation. When it’s time to face the worst, there’s no evasion whatsoever, no softening the blows. (O’Nan, 5)
I found a strange beauty in the failures of every character Yates wrote about. Yates “believed that humans might somehow handle their own lives, even if they never appeared to do so very satisfactorily” (Fraser, 2), which is something I focus on in this thesis. I don’t like stories of people making up after a conflict, of problems being solved, of things being put back together again. Fiction is supposed to tell us something about ourselves that we can’t see. If we “respond to fictional problems as though they were real” (Gardner, 31), then a story, however good it is, that ends in a positive ending, isn’t accurately depicting reality in a fictionalized form. It’s just a story. But when the reader is witness to and is connected to a well-constructed downfall, when they are left feeling as if they are a character within that story, as if they have experienced the failures and pains the author sought to represent as accurately as possible with his craft, then it’s fiction. To me, the sign of great fiction is that the tragedy it portrays isn’t an illusion, it resonates off the page and sticks to the reader. Fiction that leaves readers questioning themselves, their emotions, their choices in life, is fiction that says something about how we operate in this strange, unforgiving world. Short stories affect us. They say in a little space what most writers can’t say in thousands of pages. And what the best writers do, writers like Yates, is share something about how they see the world, however bleak it may be. Writer’s reveal to us how they have conversations on solitude:

We share the dreams and fears of his people--love and success balanced by loneliness and failure--and more often than not, life as defined by the shining paradigms of advertising and popular dreg, is
less than kind to us. Yates proves this with absolutely plausible drama, then demands that his characters--and we, as readers, perhaps the country as a whole--admit the simple, painful truth. (O’Nan, 6)

Richard Yates helped solidify that “painful truth” through his stories, novels, and his turbulent and sad life: things probably won’t work out in the end. In fact, more often than not, they definitely won’t. But there is an underlying theme throughout all his work that reveals a faint glimmer of hope. As his characters in *Revolutionary Road, The Easter Parade,* and his short stories show, there is only one thing we can do when we encounter uncertainty and failure. *We have to keep going.* Yates’ characters never give up on the world; the world just gives up on them. When faced with ending relationships, attempts at false happiness, and the mediocre dreams they strive for and ultimately fail at, Yates has them do the only thing they can: they keep going.

Rilke says that, “ultimately, and precisely in the deepest and most important matters, we are unspeakably alone” (Rilke, 14). Yates mimics this but sees solitude in a different light, saying, “‘if my work has a theme, I suspect it is a simple one: that most human beings are inescapably alone, and therein lies their tragedy’” (O’Nan, 7). Whereas Rilke emphasizes, embraces, and suggests solitude as a way of discovering a form of individuality and self-realization, Yates views solitude as a type of inherent burden of being human. It’s as if there is a type of “dread, a constricting heaviness of spirit, a foreshadowing of some imminent, unavoidable loss” (Yates, 204) that we all face when looking at the characters of his work, seeing ourselves in the process. My
characters relate more to Yates’ view of being alone, even though I admire and agree with Rilke’s use of inner meditation. My stories center on characters who cannot find what they are looking for; unable to acknowledge their fears and failures to others around them, as well as themselves. People fail in these stories. They then have the fleeting chance to redeem themselves and learn something about whatever it is they are looking for, but in the end, they are left with nothing that can provide them any sense of order in the world. They remain as sad and lost at the end of their story as when they started. Contrary to Joyce and Anderson, there is no epiphany, no happy ending (Yates would be proud). As Joyce Carol Oates says of Yates’ characters, and how I view my own, they are “invisible people, not quite there, unable to assert themselves or to guide their own destinies” (O’Nan, 8). The ambiguity of each character’s situation mimics the indifference they feel toward the notion that they have no say in what is happening to them, even though they are in complete and utter control over the decisions they make. My “characters struggle with problems that cannot be solved and either accept their fate or struggle on” (Gardner, 138). This is a collection of stories about weak characters with chances to be strong, which they cannot live up to. They are bleak and sad stories about people not wanting to accept who they are and who can’t come to terms with who they can never be. As James Wright, a poet who was introduced to me and then changed my outlook on poetry and writing, says in a letter to Donald Hall in 1958:

I looked at this truth, and I knew that I was too weak and cowardly to bear it; and, as a result, I completely lost control of myself, and gave a
great wail of terror. I was not, and am not, man enough to behold naked my own emptiness. (Wright, 135)

Michiko Kakutani, a writer for the New York Times, stated about Yates’ Collected Stories, that “the short story tends to ‘heighten the depressive, claustrophobic mood of these tales--tales that suffer from a certain sameness and limited emotional vocabulary when read, one after the other’” (Cohen, 8). The same can probably be said of this collection of stories, which I will accept. While I agree that the intensity of his unrelenting view of the human condition is intimidating, Yates’ work is harsh in a way that most readers don’t want to acknowledge. There are truths in the pain on the page. Yates acknowledges this, declaring, “the emotions of fiction are autobiographical...but the facts never are” (Fraser, 4). This is reflected in his work, as well as mine. Where Yates served in the war, spent time in the tuberculosis ward, and went through bouts of extreme depression and insanity, which he then used as material in his stories and novels, I have created this collection of short stories to reflect my views and emotions to the effects of divorce, alcoholism, and failed relationships.

“Rocks” sets the tone of Toska. The main character, Greg, is a young boy who isn’t speaking. There isn’t much detail to why he’s not saying anything to anyone but there are hints along the way that it has something to do with his parent’s unhappy marriage, alcohol, and the passing of a family member. The parents go to “meetings” and see a “counselor”. They send him to summer camp, possibly in hopes of restoring their relationship and maybe getting Greg to speak. It becomes clear that Greg is quite
removed from his surroundings: he is an observer; he does not contribute or interact in almost any way. His initial foray into summer camp mimics his home life in that he doesn’t know how it operates even though everyone else around him knows what is going on. He is as foreign at camp as he is with his parents, who have sent him to specialists and doctors to find out why he isn’t speaking. When Greg meets Dirt, the obese camper who knows the ropes, Greg is confronted with someone who has just as much experience as him of not fitting it. Dirt, though, reacts to being an outcast in a different way. When the two boys share a quiet moment by the lake, the reader shares the uneasy tension of the two outcasts with the horrific actions Dirt takes to finally release his pent up anger that Greg identifies with. “Rocks” is about children who don’t belong, who are unwanted, and the consequences of what happens when they are made to feel like they are the cause of something they can’t understand. It’s about the effects of divorce and what it means for children to lose their parents. It is based off the first piece of fiction I ever read by Richard Yates, “Dr. Jack-O-Lantern”.

There are traces of Vincent Sabella, the main character of that story, in both Greg and Dirt.

“Waiting” follows an unnamed narrator, escaping an eminent conversation with his girlfriend about how he’s cheated on her with one of his students. Finding solace in bar, he meets a man dressed in camouflage uniform and hears a story from the man about people unable to tell the truth. As the main character returns, drunk, to his girlfriend, he is forced to confront her. The structure of the story is the most complicated I’ve written. Characters are telling stories of other characters in three
different narrative layers (buddy to Gabe, Gabe to narrator, narrator to reader). There is a type of communication, a sort of “handing down” of the story that filters through each character until it reaches the narrator. When finally faced with the opportunity to relate something he has learned about himself or how to tell the truth, he is unable to find the words to express how he feels. The narrator is left in perpetual limbo, between the comforting sanctuary of the bar and the dark, intimidating monotony of a life he seems to not want to be a part of. The narrator has the opportunity to keep going but he just doesn’t know where to go. I wrote this story after I broke up with someone who was too afraid to tell me that she didn’t love me any longer, after I had given up on myself. The sad part about it, though, is that I was too afraid to tell her the same thing. In the end, we couldn’t tell each other the truth.

“I’m Not Hurting Anyone” demonstrates that “where plot is concerned, anything can happen that wants to, so long as it holds interest” (Gardner, 93). Ray Collins is a man with a past that haunts him. He drinks heavily and the pain of what he has done is beginning to catch up with him, so much so that it is starting to literally wear him down. Ray starts to fall apart before the reader’s eyes. Again, Ray is given a shot at redemption, but he is left alone, unable to understand what exactly he needs to change about himself to become a better person, even when the answer is right in front of him, pleading with him to see how he is hurting himself and those around him. This story was called one of the “strangest” I’ve written by my fellow graduate students but also their favorite because I tried something new and wrote something which they, as well as I, didn’t expect. Someone told me to read Haruki Murakami’s
collection of short stories, *The Elephant Vanishes*, around the time I wrote this story and Murakami’s strange, matter-of-fact tone of the bizarre and his deadpan presentation of the strangeness of the world worked in combination with the overlying seriousness of a man falling apart enough to warrant positive reactions in workshop.

Alcohol plays a fairly large part throughout most of my work, but in this story it is the defining factor Ray’s self-control. This story is a lament on a minor breakdown I experienced halfway through my program. Everything around me started to fall apart and I wasn’t strong enough to try to put them back together. I drowned myself in self-loathing and expensive beer, ignoring my inner voice that was begging and pleading with me to get over myself, to get over the pain, and to just write it out. I was drunk and didn’t care about anything until I took a harsh look at myself one day, much like Ray does, and saw that I didn’t like who I had become. Unlike Ray, though, I didn’t lock my consciousness back into the darkness. I wrote this story as a way to keep fighting, to keep going. Ray’s ending is ambiguous for a reason: he has apparently failed to realize what it takes to get over himself, but in losing who he was, he is given the opportunity to become someone else. It is up to Ray to decide if he can or not, no one else. I, on the other hand, have decided to replace alcohol with tea and become a regular at the local gym rather than a regular at the local bar.

Lastly, “The Swimmer” deals with two characters who cannot let go of something they cannot grasp. Jack Wright is in search of guidance on where to go in his life has found, in hopes of an answer, Winter Lochney, a man with a story to tell.
Winter, though, provides a different answer than what Wright is looking for, in more ways than one. Not only does he provide Wright with a story not worth hearing, he also gives Wright the truth of what it means to give up. If Thoreau was right in saying that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (Thoreau, 11), then Winter Lochney is the embodiment of our own fear of moving on and learning from our failures. Wright embodies a typical Yates character in that he’s “half-good, half-gifted, and it isn’t enough against the immense forces of luck and circumstance” (Fraser, 2), while Lochney has given up in the face of opportunity rather than moving forward. Toward the end of the story, Wright sees a tired waitress who embodies his resentment and fear of living his life without trying, without dedicating himself what he wants to be. He has an epiphany, the only one in the collection, to rebel against the typical Yates character, who:

all rush around trying to do their best, trying to live well within their known and unknown limitations...Doing what they can't help doing, ultimately and inevitably failing because they can't help being the people they are. (Fraser, 3)

Unfortunately, for Wright (and the reader), there is no lesson learned. Wright doesn’t learn anything from Lochney, because in the end, Lochney doesn’t have anything to teach Wright. He is left in silence, with no direction and without the guidance he thought the world could provide.

The title, “The Swimmer” is a direct reference to John Cheever’s story of the same name. In Cheever’s masterful story, Neddy Merrill is on a quest to swim home
across the county by way of various swimming pools. Throughout the story, Merrill constantly questions his ability to recognize the signs of a past he cannot remember and a future he won’t acknowledge. Jack Wright is based on Neddy Merrill in that they are both looking for something they can’t find in the end. Desmond Adagio is loosely based off Richard Yates.

In the end, *Toska* is a collection of stories about failure but there is more than darkness and solitude of the characters. These stories are aimed to resonate with the reader and provide a way to think about the ways in which people hurt each other and possibly themselves. If the end result for the reader is a type of exploration of solitude, a conversation with themselves, then it isn’t about failure at all.
“toska”
/tō-skə/, noun:

"No single word in English renders all the shades of toska. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom."

-Vladimir Nobikov
Rocks

Greg was left alone with a full backpack of clothes hung over his right shoulder and a sleeping bag next to his left foot. His baseball cap shielded his eyes from the sun. He stood on the small porch of the cabin, in front of a wooden bench covered with scratches, and names and initials of previous campers carved into the faded wood. He watched his parents drive away, down the road, away from the camp parking lot, and watched the car disappear behind the trees. There were hands flapping up and down or side to side to say goodbye from open car windows and he heard horns honking and beeping as other cars drove away. All the sounds were echoing against the thick trees that touched the sky. He looked at other kids who stood next to him, who either waved back and smiled or stood quietly and watched no one wave back.

There was a wide dirt path that led through the camp. It began at the gravel parking lot and went through the corridor of cabins and over a hill, where it ended by the water. There were a few teenagers who stood in small groups with their arms crossed or sat on the porches of the cabins. These counselors all wore the same dark blue shirt with a white insignia of the camp on the left side of their chest: Camp Kory. The logo of the camp had a cabin on it and from the cabin led a small, white trail that changed from a thin line of dirt and bumpy rocks into a stream of water, leading and connecting into a lake. It was the same logo on the papers his parents had showed him when they sat him down at the kitchen table, after they had come home from their
meeting in the city.

The corridor of wooden cabins was four long on each side of the trail. A large section of grass was between and in front of each cabin allowing the campers to play games and socialize. A thick forest lined the backs of the cabins on the right side of the path and behind the cabins to the left were the baseball field and a small path leading toward the mess hall. Greg’s cabin that he had been assigned to, number eight, was the last in the row, next to the hill. As he looked around from his cabin porch and saw groups of kids run from cabin to cabin or stand in group, laughing and talking. He was the only one who stood alone. He saw an oak tree on the top of the hill as he scanned over the campground. There was a very large kid sitting under it, carving something into the bark with a knife. The kid wasn’t just large, he was huge. The fat kid glanced toward Greg, then looked back toward the tree.

Greg picked up his sleeping bag and brought it to his bunk. Greg was thin and weak. He was small for his age, born premature and weak; so frail that he broke his shoulder when the doctor pulled him away from his mother when he was born. He had a timid smile and large, dark brown eyes that looked deep and heavy with a sadness that made people, when they looked with pity at him, wonder what tiring burdens he held behind them.

He put his backpack, sleeping bag, and his baseball cap on the top bunk. The side of the bed had his name written in black marker on a yellow note card with an arrow pointing up. There were four bunk beds in the dim room; it smelled like old, musty wood. The other beds had bright, fluffy sleeping bags and big, soft pillows and
backpacks, except one. The bunk next to Greg’s, the bottom one, had a thin and faded purple bed sheet and a plastic bag filled with clothes stuffed into it. The bunk didn’t have a pillow.

Greg didn’t have a pillow, either. His father was so eager to get Greg to camp that his father almost forgot to close the door to the house behind him and one hour into the ride to the lake, his mother realized they had forgotten Greg’s pillow. She asked his father to turn around but he said they were going to be late and he kept driving. His parents didn’t talk to each other during the rest of the way.

Greg walked out of the cabin and started walking up the hill, toward the tree and the fat kid. The kid didn’t stop carving into the tree or look at Greg.

“Whaddya want?” The kid said.

Greg turned back toward the camp and looked from the hill. A few boys were running with each other across the path to different cabins. All the cars in the lot were gone. There was a older man in a white shirt and shorts with a clip board talking to a group of counselors, pointing in different directions.

“I said, whaddya want? You dumb or somethin’?” The fat kid said from behind Greg. His voice was thick, like his huge throat blocked the words.

Greg turned back around. The kid had stopped carving into the tree and held the knife in his fist tightly. It was a red pocket knife.

“Get away from me,” the kid said. He pointed the knife at Greg and said, “scrawny little shit. I’ll cut your insides out. Get outta here.”

Greg took a step back down the hill. The kid stopped pointing the knife and
Greg and began to carve into the tree again. When the kid moved his harm, it waved in jiggles. Greg had never seen a boy that fat before. There were long folds of his fat in his tight shirt and there was no definition between his knuckles. Greg couldn’t see any angles in the kid’s face, it was thick and round and his eyes were embedded in the fat of his face. His long, greasy hair was down to his cheeks and his shirt was faded and the blue color of it had smudges of dark spots. White threads hung from the cuts and rips around the knees and pockets. Words and little symbols sketched in black pen covered his thighs and his dirty, untied shoes. There was a thin film of oil or sweat on his skin. Dried mud was caked around his finger nails. He was the fattest kid Greg had ever seen.

The sound of a loudspeaker crackled. A voice came on and echoed through the camp. All campers were to return to their camp for introductions and assignments. Greg looked down the hill and saw boys going into cabins. Their laughter carried up the hill.

The fat kid put the knife in his pocket and wiped the bark shavings from his shirt and shorts. Greg could see little drops of sweat on the kid’s forehead and upper lip. The kid put his hands on the ground and spread his thick legs and pushed himself up with a grunt. The fat kid loomed past Greg, pulling his shirt back down over his stomach, where it had ridden up and gotten caught in the folds of his skin. It looked like he had been scraped by shaky hands where the red stretch marks ran down his skin. The fat kid lumbered down the hill toward the cabin in wide, heavy footsteps.

“Stay away from me,” the kid said to Greg as he walked by. Before Greg
started down the hill, behind the fat kid, he walked around the tree to see what he had been carving. In the bark, there was two small dots with slanted lines at the top of each and a curved line like a frown. It was a face, Greg recognized, a terribly carved angry face. Below it, the words, slanted and sharp and thin, read, “Dirt” and under it were numbers with little marks before them, in a column: ’12, ’11, ’10, and more. There were a lot of numbers. The kid’s name was Dirt.

* 

After the counselors had given their orientation of the activities the boys were given some time to walk around the camp, to explore, and to meet other campers. All the counselors were stationed at various cabins, the mess hall, the outdoor theatre, and the baseball field to answer any questions the boys had. There was a three-tiered wooden fence that lined the outer edge of the woods past the hill and it wrapped itself down the trees and around a bend and ended at the lake. The campers were not, under any circumstances, to go past the fence and to the lake without supervision from a counselor. Greg and Dirt were sitting on their beds, along with the rest of the boys in their cabin, listening to the counselor finish up the list of rules and assignments that had been regulated to each member of the cabin.

“Dirt,” the counselor said when he finished and hugged the clipboard against his flat chest, “it would be nice if you would show Greg around camp a little. Help him get his bearings.” The counselor was thin and had his blonde hair slicked back. Greg thought he smiled a lot. Too much, actually.

“That freak doesn’t talk,” Dirt said. He stood up from his bunk. The wood
creaked from the release of the weight and he looked out the window. There was
snickering and giggles from the other boys who were sitting on their beds. The
counselor was standing by the doorway.

“This is Greg’s first day, Dirt. You were probably nervous your first day.”

“The hell...” Dirt said.

One of the boy said, “Just shut up and help him, fat ass.” There was more
laughing.

“Alright,” the counselor said toward the boys in the corner. “I’m not having
this on our first day. Dirt, please do what I asked you. I don’t want to call your
parents.”

Dirt turned away from the window and toward the counselor. “You can’t call
my parents. I don’t have parents. They’re not my parents.”

“You know what I mean, Dirt.”

“No. I don’t. Tell me what you meant.”

A bed creaked. The counselor looked around the room, swallowed, and put
the clipboard under his arm.

“It would help Greg to feel more welcome if we-”

“Jesus, kid,” Dirt said, turning to to Greg. “Listen to this shit. Let’s get out of
here.”

Greg looked at the boys in the corner and then at the counselor. Their eyes
drifted to the floor when Greg looked at them. He climbed down his bunk. He
glanced again at the counselor before he walked out the door and he saw something in
the counselor’s eyes. It wasn’t anger or irritation. It was the look Greg had gotten from all the therapists and the teachers at school. He even got the look from his parents, mostly when they came home from those meetings, before they started fighting and before he went to his room so he didn’t have to listen to them. Pity was covering the counselor’s face. It was a sadness that, once the counselor saw that Greg was looking at him, dissolved into a timid face of sorrow, with his lips pressed in and against his teeth into a smile, a imploded and completely untrue smile that unconvincingly said everything was going to be fine.

* 

Dirt led Greg through each area of the camp. He didn’t say much, just what the location was and what they did there. He showed Greg the outdoor theatre where they were to perform skits and the mess hall where each week, each camper was assigned a different task, be it garbage pick up or food tray collector. Dirt also showed Greg where the best shower was in the shower cabin.

“The drains get plugged up early,” Dirt said to Greg as they walked back toward their cabin. “They say it’s from bugs and hair but it’s from those dumbfuck counselors plugging up the drains with their jack-off wads. Probably thinking ‘bout their own moms or something. I call it the Jack Shack.” Dirt laughed a little and looked at Greg with small, yellow teeth. When he didn’t smile back, Dirt kept walking. They walked along the dirt path, back toward the cabin.

“The hell is wrong with you? Why don’t you say anything?” Dirt asked. His parents had asked him that question before but stopped a long time ago. A lot of
people at different hospitals and offices asked him, too, but nicely. People with ugly sweaters who had tiny offices with couches and flowers on the tables asked him in ways that all sounded the same: too nice, too smiley. They wrote on papers when he didn’t respond. Then their smiles would go away. There wasn’t any specific instance that caused Greg to stop talking. He never mentioned, though he sometimes wanted to, the night his parents had come home from one of their meetings, talking about what their “counselor” said. He remembered his mom started drinking red wine in the kitchen and his dad got quiet and looked out the window for a long time. It was the one he remembered because it was one of the first times it happened. He heard the glass of wine shatter against the wall and the shards fall to the floor and that’s when he heard the screams from his mom and then the crying. Greg wondered if their counselor was like a camp counselor.

When Dirt and Greg got back to their cabin, the other boys were standing around a bunk in the corner. The boys stopped talking when they walked in. The counselor wasn’t in the cabin.

“Hey, Dirt,” one of the boys said, “good thing you’re not on a top bunk. If the bed broke, you’d kill somebody.” The boys laughed.

“Yeah, Lard-ass”, another said, “You’re at the wrong camp. Fat Camp is across the street!”

“Did your mom put some butter in your plastic bag for all those rolls under your shirt? Or did she spend her paycheck on that bed sheet?” The boys laughed again.
“Wait, wait! It’s not his mom, remember?” one of the boys said. “More like whoever bought you!

“Yeah, they must’ve picked you up in the bulk section, fatty!”

Dirt kept his round chin up and looked at the boys in silence. Greg couldn’t tell if Dirt was hurting silently or if he just didn’t care. There was something in the way Dirt stared at the boys, though, that gave Greg the notion that Dirt was used it, that he knew how to endure it and take whatever they put in him. It looked like Dirt was absorbing everything and internalizing it, but he wasn’t letting it show. Or maybe he did, maybe that’s why he was so fat, Greg thought. Maybe he was just holding it all inside and it wasn’t getting let out.

The boys in the corner of the cabin started talking to each other again and they turned their backs on the two.

Quietly, almost in a whisper, Dirt said, “let’s go to the lake.”

*

The water crept up to the smooth pebbles of the shore and retreated. The rocks crunched under their shoes as they walked along the curved edge of the lake. The sun was beginning to set behind the trees and shadows crept across the grass. Dirt bent down, occasionally, to pick up a rock and fling it across the lake’s surface, causing it to jump and coast across the water, skipping and bouncing and finally disappearing into a mound of silent ripples. Greg followed and watched Dirt.

Watching the rocks skim along the top of the water, Greg remembered his grandpa. His grandpa had a cabin, where Greg and his parents spent a few weeks
during the summer. This was before they started fighting and the meetings. There wasn’t much to the place; two bedrooms, a kitchen, a boat dock, but Greg remembered sleeping on the old Army cot that smelled like wool the most. Greg slept by the sliding glass door and looked at the stars over the lake. He loved sleeping over at his grandpa’s cabin on that cot. He felt like he was on an adventure, like he had escaped. He loved skipping rocks with his grandpa, too. He remembered the buzzing of mosquitoes and the smell of thick bug spray that his mom used to slathered onto his skin before he went out to skip rocks against the cold and calm mirror of the lake, before the sun went behind the hills. He and his grandpa would stand at the edge of the uneven and creaking dock, drinking ginger ale out of glass bottles and throwing rocks into the sunset. His grandpa used to laugh at how far his throws went. His grandpa used to call him “big guy.”

“Good one, big guy”, he used to say, and laugh long and deep. His grandpa’s voice sounded calm and soft. Greg had never heard a voice like that.

They spent as long as they could, before the sun disappeared, picking up the pebbles and flat, thick stones from the pile they had gathered off the shore. Greg would hold them in his hand, smooth and small, rubbing the stones between his fingers like a prize, before twisting his body and arm and throwing them into the glowing ripples of gold and fire, waiting and wanting to hear his grandpa’s voice tell him how good of a throw it was, how he had done a good job. Greg never had to explain himself to his grandpa or listen to his grandpa cry and beg him to talk and then scream at him asking him why he wouldn’t say anything. They would just throw
rocks until the pile was gone. They would pick up the empty ginger ale bottles and walk back to the cabin, not saying anything. Then his grandpa died. Greg’s mom found him slumped over and face down on the kitchen table. That’s when his mom started getting sad and crying. She spent a lot of time in the kitchen, drinking different things. That’s when his parents started fighting and going to those meetings he wasn’t allowed to go to.

“So whaddya think of camp?” Dirt asked. His voice was different, it didn’t sound angry. “I mean, ya know, what I showed ya’.”

Greg walked.

“Whatever,” Dirt said, “Ya know, I kinda like that you don’t talk. I wish no one talked. I wish that those jerks had their tongues cut out or something so they never said another damn word. I hate those kids. I hate everyone here.”

There was no wind. The only ripples on the water were from the rocks that Dirt was throwing.

“It gets boring after a while,” he said, as he picked up another rock. “They think I don’t know, but I do. I mean, I know why they send me here,” and he flung the stone harder than the previous ones and it slipped into the water with a quick sound. “It’s the same thing every year. They want me to meet friends and lose weight and whatever else they say and try to get me to do for however long I’ve been comin’ here, but I’m not here for me. They think I don’t know, but I do. I’m not stupid.”

Greg looked back toward the hill. He heard the boys laughing from the path leading up to the camp. It was the three boys from the cabin. The were walking down
the path, toward the lake. One of the boys in the group pointed to Greg and Dirt.

“What did your parents tell you?” he picked up another stone and asked Greg. “They could have let you stay home,” he threw another rock. This one skipped. They kept walking. Dirt was scanning the shoreline for flat, smooth rocks as he talked. Greg watched the water that disappeared between the small stones on the shore leaving them dark and heavy looking. The rocks looked different here than at the lake where he and his grandpa threw them.

“They say that it was going to be fun? That it would be good for you? What’d they tell you this was gonna be? Campfires and ghost stories? You gotta learn somethin’ bout this place, kid. Nothing’s gonna change when you get back there. They’re still gonna yell at night and apologize and tell you they’re sorry and that they love you and all that shit. But they won’t change. That’s why they send us here. They don’t know what else to do.”

Greg picked up a smooth, heavy stone and held it in front of Dirt.

“That’s a nice one,” Dirt said and smiled a little. Greg put the stone in his pocket. He felt it slide down and bump against his thigh.

“I guess you’re not totally dumb,” Dirt said and turned around, walking away from Greg. “I could get used to ya’. Look, kid, you’ll find out. This whole thing isn’t about you at all. I mean, why you’re here at camp and all. Listen, they just—”

Dirt quickly threw up his hand and held it in the air behind him, stopping Greg from walking. Dirt started walking slowly toward the edge of the water, toward a depression in the rocks where a thin layer of water had collected. Greg saw that there
were ripples from something in the small, shallow pool and before he could see what was causing the ripples, he watched Dirt lunge forward and land on his thick knees with the small rocks scattering around him and Dirt threw his hand into the water and the water splashed and Greg saw the tiny water drops flash in the sunlight. Dirt’s round hand was cupped over the other. He was holding something. He stood up, smiling and showing his small, yellow teeth and walked back toward Greg with the rocks grinding against each other under his dirty and wet shoes. His hands were dripping with water.

The three other boys walking down the hill ran to Dirt and Greg and they shouted at Dirt, “What is it, Dirt? What did you get?”

“Yeah, Dirt, what’d ya get?”

“This,” Dirt said, and he slowly removed his upper hand from his lower and he revealed a fat frog with a pale-white belly and splotches of black and green on its wide and textured back. The frog’s sides were moving in and out quickly and its eyes were shiny and wet in the sunlight. Greg reached to touch the frog, but Dirt pulled it away. The frog kicked and extended its arms to try to escape but one of its legs was stuck between Dirt’s fat fingers. The frog’s breathing slowed. Liquid started to trickle from Dirt’s closed fist.

“Look,” Dirt said, smiling, almost laughing, “it’s scared. He’s peeing ‘cause he’s scared.”

“Hey, put it back, Dirt,” one of the kids said.

“No,” Dirt said differently, “it’s mine.”
“Put it back, Dirt, or I’m gonna tell,” another kid said.

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Just let it go, fat ass,” the third kid said.

Greg watched Dirt and he saw Dirt’s face change. The stoic indifference Greg saw in the cabin was gone. Dirt looked down at the frog.

Dirt put the frog in his open hand and held it below the body by its long, skinny legs. The frog hung over his fist like a heavy lump and its eyes were wet and unblinking. He placed his other hand where the frog’s legs connected to its stomach and he began to squeeze. It made a long, high sound. Dirt squeezed harder, sliding his tight, thick fist up the frog’s wet body. Dirt’s hands were tense and shaking and his lip was twitching as he stared at the frog. The frog made another sound and Greg heard small crunching from inside the frog and something shiny and purple came out of its mouth as Dirt’s hand slid up its body and then a wet grey thing after that and then the frog stopped making sounds when the blood came out from behind its eyes, when Dirt’s fingers reached the frog’s throat. All the dark blood started running down its body and all the wet things hung out of its mouth and against Dirt’s fat fingers.

Dirt turned toward the lake and threw the frog across the water. It fell beneath the surface with a sound that wasn’t a rock and the insides fell into the water around it.

Greg watched the ripples fade away into the cold water.

A boy in the group started crying and then the three boys ran back to the camp. Greg stood, breathing heavy, looking at Dirt’s fists shaking by his sides with
the thin and shiny blood that was smeared across his plump fingers and all over his thick knuckles. Dirt stared into the lake, unblinking. He was crying and his lips were wet with tears. Greg looked back at the calm and dead lake.

"Do that again," Greg said.

*

When Greg came out of his bedroom, his mother was standing in the kitchen, in front of the sink. An empty bottle of wine was on the table and one that was half empty. There was also a full glass and small puddles and streaks where it had spilled. The cupboard to her right, where they kept plates and dishes, was open. He had come out of his room because he heard a plate break and there were shattered pieces on the floor.

Greg walked up to his mother, the broken shards crunched under his shoes. She was a small woman. She had thin black hair and wide, dark eyes. He stood next to her at the counter. She was looking out the window. She had been crying and she looked tired. There was a bruise on her arm.

He wanted to tell her he was sorry. How all this had turned out. That he was kicked out of camp after Dirt blamed the frog on him. That Dad wasn’t home and that his clothes and his things in the bathroom were gone and that he’d left after they got the phone call about the frog and that they had to come back and pick him up from camp. That grandpa had died alone and that it made her sad all the time. He was sorry for all of it and he wanted to tell her that he was.

He reached into his pocket and was about to take out the rock he took from the
lake and give it to her but he realized, as he stared at the dark skin of the bruise on her arm, that Dirt was right. None of this was about him.

So he turned around and opened the closet and got a broom and swept the broken pieces of the plate into a small pile. He swept the pile into a dust pan and put the broken dish into the garbage can. He put the broom back into the closet and closed the door and when he was done, he turned around to say something. He wanted to say something but he couldn’t find the words to tell her that he was sorry that he didn’t want to talk but instead he watched her stare out the window.

She took a drink and then turned around and faced him.

“Honey,” she said, walking toward him, pieces of plate cracking and scratching against the tile, “honey, I’m not mad at you. You know that right? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

She knelt down in front of Greg and reached for his hands and held them in her own.

“Jesus, Greg,” she said and a sound came out of her mouth like a whimper, “your hands are so cold. Honey, I’m not mad at you. Ok? I just want you do something for me. I need you to do something for me. Can you do that? Can you do that for me?”

Her eyes were wet and they were red and they were sad.

“Why did you do it? Why did you do it, honey? You can tell me.”
Greg opened his mouth, but he could only blink in silence. *I didn’t*, he thought, *I didn’t do it. I didn’t do this.*

“Please, Greg. Just tell me why,” she started to cry again, “why did you make him leave? Why did you make Daddy leave me?”
Waiting

I slept with one of my students. It wasn’t an accident, it just happened, like things like that do. I’m not gonna try to explain it to you. I guess I didn’t know what I wanted when I did it. Well, I mean, guess I did. I don’t know. I don’t really know what to say. I don’t like talking about it.

I told my girlfriend about a month after it happened. Well, I told her after she kept hounding me to tell her why I was “acting strangely”, or whatever she had said. I didn’t think I was. Hell, I knew I wasn’t. I mean, it was just something that happened, ya know? I felt bad about it, sure. We got into it one night, my girlfriend and me, after trying to make things better. That’s when she told me I couldn’t fix it. She was leaning on the frame of the doorway with her arms crossed as I graded papers in the bedroom. I had to teach in the morning. She said I couldn’t fix it and expected me to fight with her.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” she then said.

I twirled the pen between my fingers and listened to the silence. It was one of those silences that you know you should listen to and remember because you’re waiting for the other person to say what it is you can’t say but they don’t say anything. Sometimes, I think you say more by not saying anything. I mean, I had things to say, but I didn’t say them. I was just so tired of it. I’m always the one fixing it, reminding her how much I care about her, writing little sentences on colored paper and leaving them on the counter top, surprising her with white or red flowers, sitting
with her on the bathroom floor and leaning against the cold wall, talking quietly about how I want us to work as she cries and asks me what the hell it is we’re doing to each other. We’re supposed to get married. We’re supposed to do a lot of things. I don’t know anymore. Like I said, though, I’ve said it all before so I kept my eyes on the papers and kept quiet. That’s when she walked into the other room of the apartment. It’s not a big place, we’ve only got one bedroom. There’s the room where the t.v. is leads to the bedroom and bathroom. The kitchen’s the only place separated by a wall. I don’t mind it. She wants something bigger.

I heard her sit on the couch. The old springs moaned and creaked. I had that couch since college and she hated it. We’re supposed to get a new one but I don’t see why we can’t keep my couch. I think that she just wants a new one to have it, so that it looks good, not that she needs it. She turned the television on and I heard people laughing, then someone said something and there was more laughing. It was that show, the one about the gay man living with his best friend who’s a straight woman. She told me once that she wishes life was like that show: where everyone is funny and happy and problems are solved in fifteen minutes. She watches it when she’s upset. She watches it a lot, lately, when she comes home from her job. She’s a teacher, too. I can’t stand the damn show. None of those people on that show are good people. All they do is hurt each other. Then they laugh about it. They’re not good people. Anyway, the laughter was the only sound I heard when I walked out of the bedroom. I walked through the kitchen, not saying anything and not walking through the living room. There’s that wall separating the kitchen from the living
room, like I said, so I just walked from the bedroom into the kitchen without seeing her. After I put my boots on, I shut the door to the apartment and walked to my car through the thin snow falling against the night like silent rain.

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After I entered the bar, I kicked the side of one of my boots against the other to get the snow off and watched the jagged pieces of snow fall onto the gray mat. I hung my jacket upon the hook on the pillar. It felt good to put my jacket there, like it was supposed to be there, like I was welcome. I felt safe. The bartender said my name and put a beer on the bar in front of an empty stool.

I sat down and wrapped my hands around it, warming it. There were a few people sitting at the bar and a few people ate food at tables. It’s not a big place, it’s cozy and it feels like people know when you walk into it. It’s small and dark and you can always hear people talking, usually about good things but I’ve heard bad things, too. It’s comforting, ya’ know, the voices in the dark and the clink of glasses being cleaned behind the bar in the sink and silverware against plates. It’s just relaxing, I guess, the sounds of a bar. All bars probably sound the same but they’re all different. That’s what I think. Anyway, it all sounded good to me and I drank in silence. I thought about my father and what he said about bars, that they’re for lonely people to come and be sad together in the dark. I told him that you don’t need a bar to be sad with somebody, but you do need somewhere dark. He said I made it sound like a confessional, ya know, like one of those dark little rooms in the back of a church where you sit down or you kneel down in the dark or whatever you do and you tell
the priest all your secrets and then he tells you to recite Hail Mary’s or prayers or whatever they do. Thing is, I don’t know what he meant by that, the thing about confessional. He didn’t go to church. I don’t either. My father died two years ago. His heart gave up on him.

I propped my elbows on the bar top and put my feet on the brass rail and stared at the old patterns in the wood of the bar. I like looking at the scars in the bar top. I mean, they’re smudges and they’re places worn out from too many elbows and too many drinks but I call ‘em scars. They’re like stories that won’t fade away. That’s when I started thinking about it all. I end up on a barstool when I can’t think anymore about the things I should be thinking about, like lesson plans, her, anything like that. I thought about what she said and how she said it, how she asked me if I had anything to say. She looked so uninterested, like she had asked it too many times for it to mean anything. She just stood there, unblinking, with her big, grey college sweatshirt on, the one she cut at the collar so the neck would be bigger. Sure, I had something to say. Sometimes I think there’s nothing left to say.

There was a man in a camouflage uniform next to me. I guess I didn’t notice him when I walked in. He had a shot glass turned upside down next to his half-empty beer. His uniform was splotchy with grey and green and white blocks and there was a name tag on his chest I couldn’t read. I think its strange how those colors are supposed to keep you hidden and safe from the things or people that try to hurt you. I nodded my head to him when he looked at me.

“This place always so quiet?” he asked me.
“Yeah,” I said. *And I’d like to keep it that way,* I thought.

He looked ahead, past the tap handles, down the bar. I could feel him looking around the bar, wanting to talk, to strike up a conversation. *Please,* I said to myself, *all I want to do is sit here and ignore the world and let my brain work itself out with the work I wasn’t doing, with what I hadn’t done and if I was going to-

“What do you got there?” he asked me. He looked nice enough, I guess, for a guy at a bar, sitting alone.

“Oh. Uh, I’m drinking an IPA,” I said and took a sip.

“This is a nice place. I don’t come out this way often,” he said. “Had a funeral today.”

“Sorry to hear that,” I said. *Here we go,* I said to myself. *Great.*

“Friend of mine’s mother. Knew her since grade school. Wine got her. Cirrhosis.”

Why do people do this? To me, of all people. Couldn’t this guy tell I didn’t want to talk? That all I wanted to do was sit here, alone? I didn’t say anything. Just shook my head slowly, showing him I cared, which I didn’t. You have to do that, sometimes, ya know?

“She died in a lot of pain. Didn’t even look like her, last time I saw her. She was all wadded up, like her body was closing in on her. Anyway, that’s what this is for,” and he pointed to the upside down shot glass, next to his pint, “that one’s for her. Thought it’d be, ya’ know, appropriate.”

“Yeah,” I said. I wasn’t trying to be rude, I just didn’t want to talk in the first
place. I mean, what could I say? I thought about just getting up and leaving, but I
didn’t know where else to go. I had nowhere to go, anyway. I didn’t want to go back
and fight with her or explain myself or my actions or who I was or what we were
doing to each other or anything like that. I just wanted to be here, alone. Couldn’t this
guy see this? That I didn’t want anything to do with him or his sad story and his sad
face. He looked like someone who was alone a lot. I don’t know how to explain it, he
just looked alone, ya know? You know what I’m trying to say?

“What’s IPA? That a brand or something?” he asked me.

I sipped my beer. I tried to sip so that he saw I was annoyed, “No. It’s a style.”

“So, you know your drinks,” he said. I felt him smile at me.

“I have a lot of practice.”

“I work in the city. No bars like this out there. Shitholes. All of ’em,” the guy
said, “I work on the Blackhawks they have stationed at the airport. I’m in charge of
the team that does the maintenance on them.”

After I took a drink, the man said, “I’ve done three tours in Afghanistan.
Brought everyone back home, thank god. Did you know that Afghanistan used to be
the world’s leader in exporting produce? You watch the History Channel, you’ll learn
that. I’m Gabe, by the way.” He put out his hand.

“Hi, Gabe,” I said. We shook hands, I told him my name. “I didn’t know that,
about Afghanistan. That’s...That’s really somethin’.” It really was. Gabe had a thick
face, round and red cheeks. He had an orange and red mustache. Buzz cut. He was big
too. Had broad and thick shoulders but the guy looked normal, not like a soldier. If
anything, he looked like there was some, I don’t know, darkness to him, like he was
eager and uncomfortable at the same time but relaxed, too. I mean, he looked like a
good guy. Not like he’d done bad things to people. You know how those guys look,
they don’t look too confident or like they have anything else to prove to anyone.
Some of ‘em got that look like they’re hiding something. I think most people are like
that. I’ve met plenty of people like that. My father was one of them: he looked like a
big, soft man afraid of the world and the terrible things it would do to him, but there
was something inside him that, if I said the wrong thing, man, he became one mean
son of a bitch. I think that’s who he really was inside. I bet Gabe was like that: a good
guy but afraid or regretful of what he’d done in some war or wherever he’d fought
and that’s why he looked that way and if someone said the wrong thing, he’d crack. I
bet that’s who he really was. Just some sad guy who’s alone and ready to crack.

We sat quietly and looked down the bar. The glasses were now rinsed and
lined up. A waitress was clearing off a table. There were other people, a man and a
woman, sitting around the curve of the bar, their beers almost empty. They sat and
looked ahead or somewhere else, not talking to each other.

Gabe finished his beer and ordered another.

“Actually, make that two,” Gabe said to the bartender, and nodded his head in
my direction. The bartender put a shot glass upside down next to my pint and then
filled his beer up.

“Practicing tonight?” he asked, pointing at the beer.

I laughed a little and said, “No. I, uh, just needed to get out. My girlfriend was
being, well, a girlfriend.”

“I hope you guys work it out,” he said, then took a drink. The weird thing, though, is that it sounded like he meant it. I didn’t even know this guy.

“Buddy of mine that I did a tour with,” Gabe said and then took a drink, “he told me ‘bout this bar he used to go to when his girlfriend used to start naggin’ on ‘im. Right next to some railroad tracks. Missouri or somewhere, doesn’t matter. Bar was so damn close to the tracks the owner had to nail down the pictures and mirrors to the walls, because whenever the train went by the whole place shook and you couldn’t even talk. You couldn’t hear a damn thing except for the whistle of the train and the sound of it screaming down the tracks. He said when the whistle blew and you heard it, the walls started to shake and people would look down to the ground and just wait. Everyone would just stop talking. You just wait for the train to blow by. He said it was like thunder that wouldn’t end. And it was, ya know, accepted that this had to happen, that you had to just stop and sit in silence and wait for this damn train.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m sure you’d get used to it.”

“Yeah,” Gabe said looked at the bar and rubbed a small spot with his finger. “Well, then he told me the weird thing. If you looked around at everyone waiting for the train to go by, if you’d look close enough, you’d see people moving their lips. Most of the time they’d be staring at the floor or looking across the bar at someone else or just gazing off into nothing, but you’d see people talking. Whispering in the dark, saying things to no one.”

I kept my eyes on the spot that Gabe rubbed with his finger and kept quiet. It
was a scratch in the gloss of the bar but it had been darkened, filled with dirt and worn down.

“My buddy said for those few moments that the train was going by, he’d get to see these people just, I don’t know, talking. Saying what they needed to say. No small talk or bullshit. He’d see people angry or sad or saying they’re sorry or that they wanted someone across the room. It was like church or something,” he said and laughed, “except you actually meant what you said to a room full of strangers that can’t even hear you.”

Gabe looked at me. He was smiling and looking for me to laugh with him. His face looked different, though. His eyes were weighted with sadness. I drank a sip of my beer and placed the glass on the bar, looking at it and thinking about this story he was telling me. Why was he telling it to me? What was the point of it? I mean, if you say something, if you say what you want to say and mean it and no one hears you, then does it matter? Is it real? What’s the point of talking or telling the truth if no one can hear you? Sometimes I feel like no one hears me, like I can’t even hear myself. That’s what went through my head as we sat there and when I looked up, he wasn’t smiling.

“So this guy, my buddy, he thought that this was the greatest thing. He started goin’ to this bar every couple nights and sit in the corner of the room, by a window, and drink and watch all these people tell their secrets in the dark of that bar. He didn’t say it but I think he became a little addicted to it. I mean, he said he went there pretty much every night for a few months. His girlfriend had left him by then, saying he was
a drunk. He even told her about it, about why he kept going back. About all those people.”

“Why would he tell her that?” I asked.

“Hell, I don’t know,” Gabe said. “Who knows why we tell each other things like that. Anyway, she thought he was sick. I think she called him twisted or weird or something. That’s when she left him. That’s when he started going every night. So, anyway, he starts telling some of his friends about it, how there’s this bar you can go to and see people talk to themselves, in all their misery and whatever. Then, once his friends started going, word got around town about the bar and the train and it started getting busier. He said he went in there one night and it was so crowded that he couldn’t find a place to sit or stand.”

I was watching Gabe talk. He paused a little after every sentence and pursed his lips. He was drunk. He was looking at the bar and he shook his head, like he didn’t believe or agree what he was about to say. “So, he went in there early one night. Orders a drink and sits in the corner and waits for the crowd and the train to come down the tracks. Place fills up and people wait and drink until the train comes. It shook the walls and the whistle blew and everyone watched. They all just waited. Waiting for someone else to, ya know, ta’ say something. So the train’s blowin’ by, the whistle’s going, walls are shakin’, pictures rattlin’ and everyone’s just. Everyone’s just lookin’ at everyone else.”

We were both quiet and he emptied his beer. He pointed to it. The bartender put another shot glass in front of me.
“Every single person in that place was there to watch,” Gabe said, “all the people, those sad or angry people who went there for comfort and solace, they weren’t there anymore. He said it was pretty strange: a dark little room full of people just waiting to tell each other the truth.”

He drank his beer, looked at me and said, “Anyway, that’s just a story I heard.”

Gabe looked back down to his drink. He was waiting for me to say something to him. I don’t know what I was supposed to say. I felt strange. I mean, I was drunk, but I felt something else. Like I didn’t know who I was or why I was there anymore. I don’t think I liked his story, but I wasn’t too sure because I didn’t know if I was sorry or not about it. About any of it. Not the story he told me, but ya know, everything else.

“You ever seen that show,” I asked him after a while, “that one about the gay guy living with his best friend who’s a straight woman?”

“No.”

“Can’t stand that goddamn show. My girlfriend watches it. She says she wishes life was like it, where everyone is beautiful and they’re all are really funny.” I didn’t know why I was saying this to Gabe. I felt like I had to or was allowed to. He didn’t seem so bad after all.

“She hates my couch, too,” I said for some reason. “She hates that it sags and creaks and that we can’t have an expensive one. I love my damn couch,” I said. I guess I felt like Gabe was alright with me talking because I didn’t feel him get weird
or uneasy. I kinda liked telling him. He just listened and I said, “she doesn’t like much of anything about me anymore, actually. But I think. I think that we’re. Ah, hell, I don’t know what we are.” I drank my beer.

“She wants to get married,” I said and wiped my face with my hand. I probably sounded drunk, “but I screwed up. Big time. Things are different now.”

Gabe didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to.

“It was just one time,” I said. “It was stupid. I didn’t even, ya’ know, I didn’t even finish in her, for Christ’s sake.”

“Who is she? This girl you screwed around with, a co-worker?”

“No,” I said and turned one of the shot glasses right side up, “not exactly.” I pushed the shot glass and it slid away from me, over the scars and scratches of the wood. The bartender filled it with whiskey and gave it back to me. I picked it up.

Maybe Gabe wasn’t such a bad guy. Maybe I was wrong about him, about there being someone else inside him and that he would crack. I felt bad about how I didn’t give him a chance and how I didn’t want to talk to him but I felt good, too, that I was sitting here, talking to him and not thinking about the things I should have been. I felt good and bad at the same time. You know what I’m saying?

“This is for, uh, what’s her name?” I said, holding up the shot.

“Hell if I know, you’re the one who slept with her.” He laughed a little.

“No,” I said, “your buddy’s mom. The one who died.”

Gabe’s smile faded. He nodded slowly and turned a shot glass over. The bartender filled it with whiskey.
“Amy,” he said, looking at his shot. His voice was different. It was deeper, pensive, almost. “Her name was Amy.”

“To Amy,” I said. I tapped it on the table and we drank together. It didn’t burn or hurt like it should have. I was drunk. I felt safe.

Gabe turned another one of his shot glasses over. It got filled.

“For, uh,” he mimicked me and smiled a little, holding up the shot, “what’s her name?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Your girl.”

I turned my shot glass over and the bartender filled it.

I said, quieter than I meant to, “Amber.”

“To Amber,” Gabe said. We drank.

It felt strange to say her name. I didn’t mean to say it out loud.

“Well, I hope you guys work it out, you and Amber,” Gabe said.

“Amber’s not my girlfr-” but I didn’t finish the sentence because I could feel the whiskey start to warm its way all over my stomach, inside my back. My eyes felt fuzzy. I felt hazy all over and I knew I had to get out of there before I got too drunk and said more to him. I’d said too much already.

“Gabe, I gotta get outta here. Nice meeting you,” I said and shook his big, warm hand. “Good luck to you. Thanks for the story.”

“Yeah, you too,” he said. He looked disappointed. I mean, I don’t think he was disappointed in me but what did I know?
I slid my chair back and got up from my seat. My legs felt sloppy. I took my change off the bar and stuffed it into my pocket. My eyes were heavy. I got my coat off the hook, said thank you to the bar tender and walked out the door. Outside, when I glanced through the window of the bar, drunk and smiling at how nothing mattered and yet it all seemed like it was going to be alright, I looked at Gabe. He was sitting there, looking down at an empty shot glass which he slowly twirled and twisted on its edge, not talking to anyone.

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“Where were you?” she asked. She was lying on the couch, wrapped up in a blanket. She sat up when she asked me. Her eyes looked puffy, like she had been crying. She sounded soft, that’s the only way I can describe it. Her voice was soft but it hurt to hear. It was hurt and it sounded like it hurt.

“I went,” I started saying, taking off my boots and placing them next to the door, “I had to go out.” I walked into the kitchen, pulled out my money from my pocket, all crunched and clumped together and put it on the table along with my keys. The keys were loud hitting the table. The television was still on. People laughed at something someone said.

I stood there, in the kitchen, waiting. For what, I don’t know, but I was looking at my keys and my crunched up money and I listened to the silence and I knew that I was supposed to walk into the room and sit next to her or kneel down in front of her in the dark. I knew that I had to kneel down and put my hands together on her legs or wrap my arms around her and lower my head into her lap or something.
That’s what I should have done. I should have said I’m sorry or that I wanted us to work it out and all those things that you do to make it better but I didn’t. All I could hear were those people laughing on the television. I didn’t kneel down.

I walked into the bedroom and put my coat on the bed. I looked at all the papers and the open books on my desk and I thought about working and grading those damn papers and cleaning off the desk but I didn’t. Then I thought, ya know, I thought about swiping my arm across the whole damn thing and watching it all fall on the ground in a mess, but I didn’t do that either. I just looked at all of it. Her paper was in there somewhere. She was probably asleep by now and then I turned off the light and walked out, back into the kitchen. All I could hear was that stupid laughing. I opened the fridge and looked for a beer. I heard her crying over the people talking on the television.

So I closed the fridge and walked into the room where she was lying on the couch, wiping her eyes. The light from the television flickered against the dark. I don’t know how long I stood there. It doesn’t really matter. It was long enough to feel like something needed to be said.

“What do you want me to say?” I asked. Everything was still between us.

She shook her head. Her lips crumpled like paper.

“Tell me what I have to say to make this better,” I said.

She brought her knees up under the blanket and against her chest. Her eyes winced. I could barely see, in the flashing colors and light from the television, her lips slowly moving in the darkness.
I wondered what Gabe was doing as I watched her. If he was telling stories to someone else or turning over the rest of his shot glasses alone. He seemed like a good enough guy, someone to drink with, tell stories to, learn something, I don’t know. But what the hell did I know about any of it. I mean, there I was, standing in the dark. Hell, I didn’t even know what I wanted to say. She just looked at me. She had to have known I was drunk, with her face all wet and broken in a frown. I mean, you know the face I’m talking about, right?

I turned to walk into the kitchen to find a beer, even though I knew damn well there wasn’t one and then I told myself to go into the bedroom to look through the papers to find her name, but I didn’t move. I didn’t even take a step anywhere, so then I turned back around and faced her and I started to say something about Gabe and his sad story about the train and his camouflage uniform, about how I thought people tried to hurt him and how I thought he was a good man, an honest man, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t make any connection between Gabe and the way she was crying on that old damn couch or any of it so I tried to turn away again, back to the bedroom, but I didn’t and I just stood there looking at her and I realized that we had nowhere to go.
When the bartender turns back around and opens the new bottle of beer, placing it on the bar next to an empty one, his smile fades as he looks Ray Collins. His eyes wince in confusion.

“Ray. Your face,” the bartender says, “Your face is-”

“I know, I’m just tired.”

“No. It’s your face.”

Ray looks past the bartender and into the mirror above the sparse rows of cheap liquor. There are gold-red dragons with large snouts and their scaly bodies bend like hills around the rim of the mirror. In his reflection, Ray sees that his face is uneven. His left cheek is sagging. His eyes are not level. There is a crack, an unbinding of his flesh around his eye, like his skin is soggy. Ray’s face is sliding off.

“You can’t do this again,” the bartender says. “You said it wouldn’t happen again.”

“I can stop this. Look, just let me finish my drink. Then I’ll go.” Ray takes his hand off the beer and puts his hand against the side of his face that is sagging. It feels warm against his palm. He tries to shift it back into place. It is secure for a moment, but as Ray smiles to the bartender in reassurance, the strip of flesh creeps back down, dragging the side of his mouth down with it.

“No,” the bartender says and takes the beer from the bar. “I can’t watch you do this again.”

The slab of Ray’s face falls upon the bar with a light slap.
“Ray, I’m asking you nicely, go please.”

The bartender is a young man, much younger than Ray. The bartender is Asian and has shiny black hair that is too long and falls past his ears. His skin the color of wet sand. His family owns the restaurant. He knows little to nothing about Ray. He doesn’t know what Ray does for a job or how old he is. Other than his name, the bartender knows that Ray comes into the restaurant everyday at six with his sleeve rolled up and puts his hairy forearms on the small bar. He then buys too many bottles of beers until he slowly gets up from his seat and slides out the door unbalanced. Lastly, he knows something happened to Ray Collins. The bartender never asks about it, nor does he want to know. He can see it in Ray. The bartender watches Ray, sometimes, from the back of the restaurant, as he puts silverware in thick, white napkins. He’s seen Ray stare into the mirror behind the bar for hours while emptying the small cooler of beer behind the bar. He thinks that Ray’s eyes say more than they need to at anytime: there is unease in the way his eyes blink slowly, despair embedded in each iris. There is a subdued sense of dread when looking at Ray Collins, as if he is fully and completely aware, regardless of what is said or done, that it, whatever it may be, is not going to be alright.

An oval shaped chunk of Ray’s face slides off his forehead and falls onto the bar with a small sound. There is no blood. Just pieces of flesh hitting the bar and landing like raw meat.
Ray says nothing. He places his other hand on his limp face and rests his elbows on the bar, covering his face. Flaps of his skin hang over the tops of his fingers as he presses his hand on his skull.

Muffled, into his palms, he says, “Should I pay you for the-”

“Please, Ray. Just. Go.”

Ray compresses his face with one hand, against his skull, afraid more will fall off. He reaches with his other hand for the pieces that lay upon the bar and pockets them. He walks toward the door, past the golden Buddha statue and its big, stained belly but as he does, Ray looks between his fingers at the restaurant, through the dim light. He glances at a couple sitting at the booth by the window, glowing in the light of the purple and red neon “OPEN” sign. They are finishing their meals. Rice noodles and bright vegetables on her plate, a large bowl of pho on his. The girl, Ray sees through his fingers, is smiling at the boy across from her. They are eating quietly. She is smiling and she looks happy. This is what Ray Collins sees.

Ray pushes the door open with shoulder, the small bells hanging from the door explode into a rattle, swinging and clashing off one another until the bright roar subsides into a clean and slow tinkling, like small, golden birds whispering as the sun falls into the cold darkness.

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Ray’s apartment is sparse. There is a gray couch with a cushion missing and a small table in front of it. The walls are white with no pictures. In the bedroom is a pile
of clothes and a blue mattress with no sheets. The kitchen has a table and a row of cabinets. In the bathroom: a towel. There is nothing more.

Ray has come home from the restaurant. He sinks angrily into the couch, fuming and embarrassed. He had told the bartender it wouldn’t happen again. The first time was just an accident, a random event that didn’t make any sense. It happened two months ago, but Ray left the restaurant and it was taken care of. But this time is different. His face will not stop falling. Now, he sits in the dark on the couch as the small chunks and pieces land on his chest and fall onto his stomach or roll off to the sides of the couch and collect in little mounds. He is not in pain and doesn’t cry. The strands of facial muscle or skull is not exposed, rather, there is a new and fresh thing, soft with no true curves or edges or characteristics where his face should be. It’s a thin and smooth mask, a slab of pink clay before the sculptor creates the art. Ray does not see this, though, he does not see beneath. He only knows the pieces are falling. The only thing he thinks of, sitting in the dark with face falling off, is his insatiable need of a drink.

He stands up. More pieces of his face break off. A shred of his right cheek, his left eyelid. The mounds from his lap land on the floor. He walks into the kitchen and turns on the light, illuminating the cramped, white room. His chin slides off. Ray opens the refrigerator door and looks for bottles of beer. There are none. Half of his nose falls to the ground. There isn’t much left. He steps away from the refrigerator. He looks at the white cabinet door to the right of the sink. The one with the lock on it. The only one with a lock on it.
Ray walks into the dark bedroom and opens the closet. In the corner is a small brown box. He picks it up and sits on the bed with the light from the kitchen falling through the hallway and into the room. He opens the lid. Inside is a key. Ray only gets the key when he knows he needs it, when he goes despondent, when it all feels like it can’t be put back together. He’ll go into the kitchen to open the cabinet at night, in the dark, because doing it in the dark somehow makes it okay to acknowledge that he does it. Why he keeps the cabinet in the kitchen locked is not important. It’s the fact that he does, that he tries to hide it from himself when he knows he can’t that makes it okay for him. Ray Collins has known for a long time, with each day since the accident, that he is not strong enough to let it stay locked inside.

He stands up, letting the box fall to the ground. He walks back to the kitchen where he slowly kneels down in front of the cabinet and puts the key in the lock. It feels cold and when he pulls it part, the click of the metal inside the lock is the only sound in the room. The cabinet creaks slowly open in the bright light of the kitchen.

Inside the cabinet, a little man is leaning against the thin wooden wall. His arms are hanging over his bent knees. The man is very small, only about two feet tall. The sleeves of his light blue shirt are rolled up around his thick, hairy forearms and his tan slacks are wrinkled. He slouches over his fat body. There are dark sweat stains under his arms. The man is pale and the top of his head is smooth and bald. He looks tired. He does not look at Ray.

“Give it to me,” Ray says. “Give me the bottle.”
“No.” The man’s voice is small and distant. He stares ahead into the darkness of the cabinet. “That’s not how this works.”

“Give me the god. Damn. Bottle.”

The man slowly turns his head away from Ray, facing into the dark.

Ray slams the cabinet door shut and locks it. He stands up and walks into the living room. When he returns, he has the sections of his face in each of his hands. Some hang from between his fingers, bouncing and jiggling. Each piece is a different shape and size, some edges jagged, some smooth, some strips. He places the hunks of flesh on the counter top, unlocks and opens the cabinet door, collects the scraps again and holds them in front of the man in the cabinet.

“Here,” Ray says, and thrusts the bits of flesh toward the little man, “here.”

The man looks back at Ray. He reaches slowly in apprehension. The man’s face is sad. He opens his plump, little hands and receives the pieces. He puts them into a pile and then, reaching into the dark, he pulls out the bottle of whiskey and gives it to Ray. The man looks ashamed as Ray rips it out of his tiny hands.

“See?” Ray says, opening the bottle, “we have an understanding.”

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Ray is sitting at the table watching. The man is quietly putting the pieces of Ray’s face in order on the bottom of the cupboard. Next to the pile of Ray’s face, the man has spread out bigger sections and smaller ones. He’s placed half of Ray’s nose in the middle and a part of his chin below it. The man picks up each piece from the mound and examines it, turning and twisting it, eventually putting it down where it
might go. The light from the single bulb hanging from the ceiling illuminates where
the pieces go. Some whiskey is gone from the bottle.

"You ever see *Jaws*?" Ray asks.

"No."

"It's about a shark. Do you know what a shark is?"

"No."

"It's about this shark that swims around and eats people. The only thing it
does is eat. It swims and eats, this shark. That's it."

The man says nothing.

"Listen," Ray says and takes a drink, "listen. The shark is a metaphor. It's not
man versus nature or man versus himself or that freshman composition 101 crap. The
shark, listen. The shark is god. Do you know what god is?"

"I don't think so," the man says.

"Good. The movie is about how god destroys the things we love," he says,
and he takes a drink. "All it does is drift around in the dark, in silence, and eat people
up. People who we care about. And love. It takes everything we love away from us
and it doesn't give them back." Ray takes another drink. The whiskey splashes
around in the bottle and he watches it. "He doesn't give them back."

Ray watches the man. The man takes a piece from the mound and holds it,
rubbing his thumbs softly over the flesh and puts it next to the nose. He watches the
man take another piece. It is a part of his upper lip. The man puts it below where the
nose will be. Ray takes a drink then he says, "But the shark doesn't care about love or
feelings. The only thing it knows is survival. It doesn’t care about anything else. All
the shark wants to do is feel warm inside that big, cold ocean. ‘Cause it’s alone, ya
see.” He drinks. “That’s what your god does. It’s alone and it takes things from us to
feel like it’s not alone.”

“I didn’t say anything about god.”

“You wouldn’t.” Ray drinks again. He’s drunk and his words are slow and
said with solemn intensity. “You never do. You never listen to what I’m talking
about. You just sit there and you think all those little thoughts in your little head.”

“I have to be in here.”

“This isn’t my choice,” Ray says, “I don’t have any control over what this is
with you and me. Don’t give me that.”

“You can stop whenever you want, you know that,” the man says, and lifts his
hand away from his work, pointing at the edge of the cabinet, at the lock. “You’re
stronger than this.” And then the man repeats it. “You’re stronger than this.”

“Shut up and finish,” Ray says and drinks.

They sit in silence.

“What happens to the shark?” the man asks. He places Ray’s forehead down.

“Chief Brody blows it up with a tank of compressed air.”

“And?”

“And then him and Hooper build a raft and swim back to land.”

“And?” The man stops arranging the pieces and looks at Ray. “Then what?”

“Then that’s it. Credits roll. The problem is solved.”
“I don’t understand,” the man says. “You said the shark was-”

“There’s nothing to understand. That’s all that happens.”

The man looks from Ray back to the flesh. He moves a piece of Ray’s lips toward the nose as the bubbles flutter upward when Ray takes too long of a drink.

* 

The bottle is almost empty when Ray asks, “Is it done yet?” His eyes are small and heavy.

“No, I’m missing some of it. I don’t have all of you yet.”

Ray runs his hand up and down his skull, sliding his palm forcefully across the new, unformed substance, trying to find an old chunk that hasn’t fallen off. He can’t find the missing piece.

“It must be back at the bar,” he says and stands up. He is slow and drunk and uses the table for support.

“Will you. Will you bring me back one of those cookies? The kind you brought to me last time?”

“A fortune cookie?”

“Yes. That’s it.”

“The hell for?”

The small man looks away from Ray. The man says something quietly.

“What?” Ray says.

“They just. They make me happy.”
Ray locks the cabinet door and walks back to the restaurant. It is only a block, but everything seems more important than it is now that he has whiskey-soaked blood and whiskey-soaked thoughts: the cool smell of the night air against his forearms from his rolled-up sleeves, the shapes of darkness between the pools of light from the lamp posts, the scrape of his uneven footstep. These are things he notices. He tells himself he should remember things like this, the small, simple things even when he knows he won’t.

As he approaches the glass door, Ray walks up to his own reflection. His light blue shirt is tight against his fat body. His balding head gleams under the lamp light. He looks smaller than he is as he looks in the reflection.

The bar is closing as he enters the restaurant. The bells dance and sing as the door opens. The lights are off in the dining area. Only the bar is lit.

“Did I leave something here?” he asks the bartender and leans against the bar.

“Yes,” the bartender says, and bends down and picks up a folded napkin. He opens it and reveals the oval shape of Ray’s eye socket. Ray picks it up.

“Thanks,” he says.

“You can’t keep doing this. You have to get control of yourself, Ray.”

“I am in control,” he says and looks at the empty hole of his eye. He puts it in his pocket.

“You’re drunk,” the bartender says.

“I’m not hurting anyone.”
Ray turns toward the door. The music has stopped and the candles on the table, the ones made of red glass that glowed and pulsed like eggs filled with blood have been put out. The empty restaurant is calm, almost serene in the faint light coming from above the bar and the street lamps filtering through from outside. As he reaches the door, he sees on the counter, next to the cash register and some small mints, a bowl of fortune cookies, each wrapped in clear plastic.

He places one hand on the door and pushes it open. With his other hand, he reaches for one of the cookies, but his hand hovers over the glass bowl. The bells stop Ray from picking one of the cookies. He hears the bells, the small chimes clicking with bright metallic pings, the random pattern of little noises in the dark, like keys, like distant birds, like glass shattering, like small keys, like ice in a glass, like keys, like keys, like keys, dangling from his hand before he gets into the car when she asks if he can drive, before the headlights flash like exploding white suns, before the tires scream against the night, before he hears the last sound of her breath ripped from her body, before the shards of glass twisting like stars fall against the squeal of crushing metal and burned rubber, before he sees her broken and wet with dark blood. He reaches for the cookie.

Ray puts the cookie in his pocket. He turns around to the bartender, not to say thank you, not to apologize, not for anything. For whatever reason, he doesn’t know, but he looks anyway because it gives him an excuse to pretend that he isn’t looking one last time at the booth to see the young couple, even though he knows they aren’t there, in the dark. It looks, in the dim light, that they were never there at all.
“I’m not hurting anyone,” he tries to say to the bartender. But he can’t say it. He can’t speak, his words are too mumbled and slurred and he can’t focus and what he says gets lost behind the bells that collide above his head as he walks out the door into the dark.

*

When he returns to the apartment, he kneels down on the kitchen floor, unlocks the cabinet, and takes the last piece of his face from his pocket and gives it to the man.

The man puts the eye on the face. Ray’s face is complete.

“Did you. Did you bring it?” the man asks. Ray sees the man has simple, clean eyes of sadness and defeat, but there is something like hope that glows strangely in the dark of the cabinet.

Ray takes the cookie out of his pocket. The small plastic crackles in his hand.

The man smiles. His voice almost a whisper. “You did get it. I knew you would.”

“Here,” Ray says and opens the plastic wrapper. He holds the cookie out delicately in his palm.

“My favorite part is breaking it open”, the man says quietly, looking at the cookie with a smile.

“Tell me why.”
“I like the feeling I get right before it breaks, of not knowing what it’s inside. It makes me feel warm. It makes me feel—” but the man bows his head down, embarrassed. He stops smiling.

“Go ahead,” Ray says softly, “tell me.”

“It makes me feel alive.”

“Does it?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Ray closes his fist around the small cookie. He grips the shards as he pulses and clenches his fingers, muffling the crunch of the frail shell being smashed together between his palm and fingertips. His fist is shaking from squeezing so hard. Ray’s eyes stay on the small man. Ray opens his hand and slowly flutters his fingers to let the pieces and the dust fall onto the floor. The fortune falls. Ray picks up the wrinkled piece of white paper from the crumbs.

The man sits, unmoving.

Ray places the fortune in his mouth and swallows it.

He reaches into the cabinet. He picks up his face, sticking his finger tips in the open mouth and nose. The mask is cold and thin. As he pulls his face out of the cabinet, he looks at the man one last time and sees the man’s lips tremble, holding back tears.

“Ray,” the man says.

Ray closes the cabinet door and locks it. He turns and sits with his back against the cabinet door and places the flimsy mask, flat and distorted, on the floor
next to him. It doesn’t look like him anymore. He can hear sounds of hard, quiet crying from inside the cabinet.

“See?” Ray repeats, looking down at the mask. “We have an understanding.”

There is a faint buzzing from the light in the kitchen. He listens to the man cry and closes his eyes. He leans his head against the cabinet door. That’s the crying, Ray thinks, you do when you are trying to hide it from yourself: the pulses of short breath, no air in the lungs, the warm tears in your mouth, the kind you hear in the dark when no one can save you. He listens to the man crying. *I’m not hurting anyone*, Ray thinks. *I’m not. I’m not. I’m not hurting you. I’m not hurting.*

Ray opens his eyes when the crying stops. His eyes try to align themselves but he is seeing double and unfocused. He looks at the mask on the floor and picks it up. It doesn’t feel like anything. It feels cold, like dead flesh. When Ray lifts his hand from the face, he looks at the empty bottle of whiskey on the table but he can’t focus on it. He turns his head and looks at the lock. It is small. It’s too small. He knows it is too small and he knows keeping it locked doesn’t work but he locks it anyway. Ray thought that if he kept it locked, he wouldn’t hurt anyone anymore.

“But then there’s Quint,” Ray says after a while, looking back at the empty bottle. “Quint’s the one who hunts the shark. He’s the shark hunter. He’s not afraid of the shark.” Ray’s words are slow and forced out of his mouth.

“Quint’s the hero,” Ray says. “Quint, not Brody. Quint tries to save the world from the shark. Chief Brody, he’s-Brody’s just trying to save himself. You get that? You understand that? Quint’s the one who tries to take it all back. Take back what
that goddamn shark took from him. It took everything from him. Quint’s the only one who fights back. You know what happens to him? Know what happens to Quint? ‘Cause he fights back?”

There is silence from the cabinet.

Ray throws his elbow against cabinet door. The lock rattles. He throws his arm into the door again, harder. The thin cabinet door splinters and cracks and the lock rattles louder.

“Do you know what happens?” Ray asks.

“No,” the small voice says from inside.

“He dies. Quint dies in the end. The shark eats him. That’s what happens.”

Ray picks up the mask off the floor and holds it up to the light and tries to focus on it. He can’t. He looks through the eye sockets, up into the light bulb. He can’t see the wrinkles by the eyes or the creases by his mouth. It is just a mask. Who the hell was this, Ray thinks. He drops the mask over the unformed flesh on his skull like a wet towel. It doesn’t stick. It rolls down onto his chest and tumbles onto the floor. The face won’t fit. It’s no good. Ray places his hands over his skull, over the pink mass where his face should be. He covers his eyes and mouth with his hands, pushing and rubbing his fingers under his eyes, his cheeks, around his nose. He begins to mold what he is now left with. He doesn’t know if he’s making a new face or if he’ll just end up making the same one, but he pushes and pulls and starts it all over again.

“The shark eats him. That’s what happens,” he repeats into his hands. “That’s all that hap
The Swimmer

It was inside a diner that was jammed between a pawn shop and an antique store, at the edge of a broken gravel parking lot, in a ragged little town, where Jack Wright found Winter Lochney. The waitress greeted Jack and poured a cup of coffee into a small, white mug. He watched the steam rise, thanked her and pretended to look at the menu after she walked away.

The diner was filled with the sound of silverware on plates and coffee being poured into cups and the dim murmur of talk. Jack let his eyes glaze over the menu and then up to see the people of the diner and then back down to the menu. His gaze alternated between the menu and the patrons. A tired looking woman, wearing a dark blue dress with her elbows on the table, sipped at her cup, ignoring her child, in a pink dress, who picked up pieces of pancake with her small fingers, pushing them into her small mouth, chewing. Toast and eggs. An older couple sitting by the window, saying nothing, both looking out toward the parking lot, watching the cars drift by on the road. Chicken fried steak. Two men with faded blue jeans and dirty baseball caps cut at their dishes and forked their food into their mouths and talked in short, uninterested mumbles. Corned beef and hash. An older man, maybe fifty, wearing a black sweater and black pants, sitting in the opposite corner of the room, reading a small black book. A grey and ash-colored beard trickled down his chest and messy black hair fell past his ears in waves. The man kept one hand on his cup and turned each page of the book with his other hand in controlled, exact movements. His shoulders were broad and his arms hung smoothly off them. He didn’t smile. He
looked distinguished and calm, though frayed and distant, purposefully oblivious to the world around him. He didn’t look like the others in the room.

“Decide whach’ ya’ doin’?” the waitress asked, appearing at the edge of Jack’s vision. He ordered eggs and double wheat toast.

When the waitress took Jack’s menu, he put his hands around his coffee cup and held its warmth. He looked into the black mirror in the cup. The light from the ceiling looked like a miniature spotlight and it vibrated and rattled inside as someone walked by his table. He began to settle himself in the moment. He had done it, he thought, he had actually done it. He took a deep breath of relaxation and sipped his coffee. It was over. The man in the corner, the one reading the book, was Winter Lochney. It had to be. A strange and bitter sense of security began to fester inside Jack, like a flame in the dark that slashes and shudders against the cold. It was a feeling that he didn’t want to make himself believe because it seemed too foreign and frail to have faith in: that somehow, all of it was finally, finally going to be alright.

Jack glanced around the diner. Along the wood-paneled walls, old and dead Christmas lights sagged between paintings of deer and elk that nibbled dark, thick grass at the bases of small waterfalls. Empty shotgun shells were attached to the dark, unplugged lights. There were Polaroid pictures tacked up by the entrance of men wearing flannel jackets or bulky orange suits with women in small, thin shirts and children smiling brightly at the camera, holding up large bass, catfish, and trout with both hands, struggling to hold the various fish. There were bearded hunters, staring into the camera coldly, kneeling over dead deer. The men held the crooked, lifeless
head of deer by the thick antlers. Blackish blood was caked into the deer’s fur around their snouts or open mouths and their glassy, dead eyes gazed a look of defeat.

The waitress brought Jack his food as he looked at the pictures. He ate his runny eggs and warm toast and drank another cup of coffee. She gave him the check when he was finished and he paid at the cashier. He returned to the table, left his tip, and looked out the window. Cars eased slowly by, between buildings. People walked in suits and dresses from church. There was a slowness to how everything moved and felt, a way only Sundays feel. He took a deep breath, turned around, and walked across the small diner to the man in black sitting at the table in the corner.

“Excuse me, sir. I’m sorry for bothering you, but-” Jack started and waited for the man to look up. He didn’t.

Jack said, “Are you Winter Lachney?”

The man didn’t look up.

“The thing is, I just. I’m asking because, well, I just wanted to, well, to just say hello, I guess, and...”

Jack stood there, his eyes darting from the man whom he now thought wasn’t Winter Lachney at all, to the cup of tea that he held in one hand, and back to the man, who looked into the black book.

The man exhaled and slowly let go of his tea. He picked up the utensils, the fork, the spoon, and the knife, from his napkin and placed them on the table in a neat row. He took the napkin and placed it into his book and closed it gently. He then looked up to Jack. His eyes were tight on Jack’s face and he tilted his head.
Jack’s mouth opened and his lips moved but no words came out. He thought about saying how he was a sports writer on assignment from a major publication, that he was just traveling through or that he was a biographer or anything else other than what he was and why he was standing there holding his breath. But as the lies mashed together in his mind, as his voice faltered in fear that it wasn’t Lochney that was sitting down in front of him, Jack felt his heart crack at the possibility that this had all been a mistake, that everything he made himself believe what he wanted and needed out of this meeting would fade away into the stale air in this little diner on the edge of nowhere.

The man said, “And who are you? Don’t lie to me.”

“My name is Jack.”

“Jack what?” the man asked.

“Jack Wright.”

“And who are you, Jack Wright?” the man asked with a cold indifference.

He knew the man sitting down was asking about his job, but there was something in the man’s voice that tore into him, as if he knew why Jack was there. Jack had left everything behind three weeks ago in Missoula, Montana: his job as a copywriter, his fiancée who was losing her faith in him, his mundane routine of a lifeless existence of working and sleeping and fighting and laying awake at night in a cold desperation for something more that what he had turned into. He was in search of something he couldn’t define: a spark, a light, a path, something to validate and make sense of how he let his life fall apart into pieces. He had developed a strange,
unnerving notion that the pieces, broken and laid out before him, had never fit together in the first place. So, at twenty-five, on the edge of a self-conscious breakdown if he didn’t do it, Jack emptied his meager savings account, quit his job, promised his fiancée this little journey would be worth it, that he’d return a better man to marry her, got into his car, and drove away.

Jack’s reason for trying to find Winter Lochney was one of guidance and hope. His desire to find Lochney had evolved from mere brooding and despondency and then into a sickening anguish of actually believing that he was meant for more than a mediocre life. Jack had promised himself years ago, after watching his father work thirty years for a steel mill only to die in his sleep never having seen ten miles outside of his home town, to never to be the thing he was now: he had become nothing but an ordinary man.

“Who are you, Mr. Wright?” the man at the table asked again.

Jack responded, blankly, “Are you Winter Lochney?”

The man exhaled slowly and tapped his finger on the black book on the table.

“Sit down, Mr. Wright,” Winter Lochney said, then, “how did you find me?”

* 

The waitress poured coffee into Jack’s cup. He thanked the waitress and she walked away. The other patrons in the diner had finished their food and had left. The tables still had dishes with scraps of food and wrinkled napkins. Jack had explained to Winter how he had followed his trail, starting where Winter grew up, to high school in Des Moines, then to college at Iowa State. Jack had developed into a self-made
detective, asking questions and stumbling on dead ends until, two months after leaving Missoula, he pulled into the diner’s broken parking lot.

“Thank you for letting me sit with you,” Jack said.

“Think nothing of it, Mr. Wright. I’m honored to have you in my company,” Winter put his hand on his cup of tea. His voice was clear and it sounded as clean as water flowing.

“That’s. Well, that’s nice of you, but I’m not anything, really,” Jack said.

“No?”

“No.”

“If you’re not anything, then what are you?” Winter asked.

“I’m supposed to be-”

“Oh, I didn’t ask that, Mr. Wright. I don’t care what you think you should be.”

Jack began to speak, but his throat closed with insecurity.

“If anything,” Jack began again and smiled a little but it died, “I don’t know what I am, anymore. I guess. I guess I’m a failure.”

“Failure? I doubt you’re a failure, Mr. Wright. What makes you think that?”

“I was supposed to be something. I was just. Supposed to be something by now.”

Winter then asked, “How old are you? Twenty-something?”

“Twenty-five.”

“And what do you mean, that you’re supposed to be something? Famous?”

Winter took a sip of his tea. “Important? What do you mean by that? Something?”
“My life, I guess, my life so far has been one giant build-up into nothing,” Jack said and drank his coffee, “with people telling me I’ll do great things. They say I’m talented and that, you know, I have something to give to the world. I’m a cartoonist, you see. Well, I mean, that’s what I want to do. I want to draw comic strips. I drew them in high school and college. I haven’t drawn since, though. I just don’t have time, ya know, with work and everything.”

Jack paused. “Thing is,” he then said, “I don’t know what that something is that I have to give. I don’t know what everyone sees in me. I mean, they’ve seen my drawings and my strips, but I don’t think they’re that good, honestly. Sometimes, I try to forget drawing. It seems like that’s all I ever do, is dwell on it and how I don’t do it. And then I don’t draw. I guess that’s why I’m here, talking to you. I thought you could give me some insight. Maybe a push.”

There was a long silence between them, with Winter looking at Jack, saying nothing and then Jack asked, breaking the silence, “What, um, are you reading?”

“This? Oh, this is a book on,” Winter said and looked at the book and smiled. “Well, it’s complicated.”

“I’d like to know.”

Winter’s smile faded like ripples in water. He scratched his thick black beard slowly and then placed his hand upon the black book. His long fingers traced across the leather cover delicately. His movements were fluid, easy.

“This. Is a book about a lot of things. Mostly, it’s about a young man who, as most young people do, Mr. Wright, loses his way. He, well, he sells his car and then
buys a bicycle. He travels into Canada, through most of the United States and then decides to go down to Chile. He eventually realizes - well, I don’t want to give away the ending.”

“Please.”

Winter paused. “He realizes, Mr. Wright, that there was nothing in the world to find. That’s it. He begins lost and stays lost. There’s no “X” on the treasure map that can save him,” Winter said. His eyes drifted away from the book, past Jack’s shoulder, staring at the wall behind Jack.

“But the worst part,” Winter continued, his eyes sharpening with each sentence with an intense sorrow, “the saddest part, is that he doesn’t find anything worth saving. The journey doesn’t change him at all and he thinks his quest is a failure. He’s stays lost in the world.”

Winter looked toward Jack, “Like I said, Mr. Wright. Like most people do. You’ve read the article, I’m assuming?”

Jack nodded, somewhat embarrassed, but also thankful that Winter knew something about the reason Jack was there and cut to the chase. It was an article in the _New York Times_ that started all this, that brought Jack to Winter. Desmond Adagio, a writer with a rough past of alcoholism and mental instability, wrote about an athlete that disappeared from the spotlight, “Swimming’s Salinger”. Adagio told the story of a mediocre Iowa high school swimmer who, after swimming for his Division II team as a walk on, broke six school records and garnered Swimmer of the Year in the division and gained minor national attention. After graduating, the
swimmer trained for Nationals, qualifying for the squad as a relay-only member. It was the possibility, the potential of what the young man represented, Adagio wrote, that made it, in the end, such a strange tragedy. With the proper training and guidance, the swimmer could have been ranked as one of the greatest in the history of swimming, greater than Phelps, Weissmuller, Thorpe, or Spitz. The extraordinary thing, the unheard of thing, was that the swimmer trained himself: he made his own workouts and was his own coach and, therefore, didn’t learn basic fundamentals of dedication and integrity. The swimmer was doing something no one had ever done before and the world was watching him. It all happened at the Olympic Trials. With sponsorships and contracts in negotiations with major sport companies like Speedo and TYR, and with the bottom line awaiting his signature for the contract of a book and a movie, the swimmer waited for the signal to stand upon the starting block.

“You know, I contacted Adagio,” Winter said, “about a year after that piece went to press. I wanted some time to pass before I talked to him.”

Jack listened.

“Adagio was an elderly man, Mr. Wright, hunched over, like his shoulders had been broken from the weight of everything he carried. He had thick circles under his eyes and when he smiled, his face broke with all these deep cracks and wrinkles on the sides of his eyes and above his white beard. Smelled like stale bourbon. Seemed like he smoked a pack of cigarettes between sips of his coffee. He had seen a life, that man. Lived through things. We talked over chicken sandwiches somewhere in the city. He didn’t have much to say about himself. After strained cordials, I flat
out asked him. I wanted to know why he wrote it and why he wouldn’t let it go. I mean, it had been ten years. He told me, in the raspiest, grainiest voice I’ve ever heard, that he always found my story so sad, and that’s why it interested him. It was sad, he said, but more that I represented something of the ‘human condition’, as he put it. He said he wrote it because what I did had to do with something we don’t want to acknowledge about ourselves. Well, I said ‘People give up all the time, Mr. Adagio. I’m no different.’ He just glared into me. Shook his head and winced his eyes. He was seething. I mean, contempt just poured out and he asked me who the hell I was to just take the easy way out, to just let everyone down that believed in me. To squander such a gift. He was so angry at me. But then he said the damnedest thing, Mr. Wright, that I’ll never forget. He said, ‘We look for inspiration in the great things others do so easily because most of us aren’t strong enough to keep failing at the little things so terribly.’ Then he got up, threw a five on the table and left. Drank himself to death five months later.”

Winter looked out the window of the diner. He shook his head as if he still couldn’t believe Adagio’s anger, like the old writer who smelled like stale bourbon was sitting at the table with them in the diner.

“When I met him, he just looked like life had gotten to him, like he’d given up. You know how people look like that? You can see it in their eyes, they’ve got that look that says, ‘I’m just so god damn tired.’”

Jack let Winter’s words hang in the air. Jack had read and re-read the article. He memorized sections of it: The swimmer stretches his arms across his chest, one
after the other. He stands on the block. The crowd is electric, screaming. He reaches up and adjusts his cap. He places his fingers on his small, plastic Sweede goggles and shifts them up and down into his eyes sockets. That's when it happens. With the world watching, the band securing his goggles to his head snaps.

"It wasn't your fault," Jack said.

"No, no it wasn't. But it was my fault for believing I could actually do it."

"It was an accident," Jack said, "It was a fluke. Goggles break all the time."

"I had been swimming since I was five years old, Mr. Wright, and I'd never had a pair break. Why then? Why then of all the times in my life?" Winter spoke calmly and quietly, "I've had thirty years to live with what I lost, no need to try to change how I feel."

The signal is set by the referee. Lochney keeps his hands pressed upon his goggles as the straps of the broken band hang against his cheeks. The referee tells the swimmers to take their marks. Lochney bends, touches the edge of the block and his goggles fall into the water. The crowd falls silent in confusion and fear. The referee pulls the trigger to the black cap gun. The water explodes in white and froth as the swimmers enter the water.

"I'm not trying to change you. It's just. You just gave up," Jack said, "I mean, you worked so hard to get there, to qualify for that spot on the team. You didn't even. You didn't even..."
“Didn’t what, Mr. Wright? Try? I didn’t try?” Winter leaned forward, over the black book. His face changed into something hard and his voice became quiet, slow as water creeping over rocks, “all I did was try. Look where trying got me.”

_In the fury of white water and waves, the swimmers in the pool were unable to see the position of their opponent in lane four. They couldn’t see him because lane four was empty. Lochney stood on the block, not watching the swimmers, not looking at the referee or the crowd that was stunned into silence, but down, down into the bottom of pool, at the end of the black T, where his goggles had fluttered through the cold water and rested quietly, a silent weight._

Jack sat unblinking for a long time, then, “There’s got to be more.”

“There’s not. Why would you think there’d be more to the story?”

“Because bad things just happen. Things don’t work out sometimes. It’s not fair sometimes. You can’t just give up because something doesn’t work out,” Jack said.

“You’re wrong, Mr. Wright. You can,” Winter said, rubbing the small black book with his fingers, “you absolutely can.”

_The swimmer steps down from the block. He picks up his towel from the chair behind the lane four block. He walks along the side of the pool, into the locker room._

_It is the last the sport of swimming ever saw of Winter Lochney._

“So that’s it?” Jack asked, “the goggles broke and you gave up? On everything? That’s the big secret? That’s all there is?”
“There’s no secret to me or my story, Mr. Wright. Everything I was supposed to be depended on something that I couldn’t control. A thin strip of rubber failed. For the first time in my life, it failed. It was a sign that I wasn’t meant to go down that path.”

“How can you look at it that way?” Jack asked. There was a sense of pleading in his voice, like he was begging Winter to change who he had turned into so that Jack could see the truth of why he was sitting there over coffee with him. Winter Lochney had represented something to Jack. He was supposed to learn about what it means to dedicate yourself to something you love, to work hard at what you believe in, to do something more than just give up. Now it all meant nothing, all of it: his drive from Montana, the hope that he was taking control of his life by losing control, his dreams of returning a better man who knew something about the world. There has to be more than this, Jack thought, I didn’t come here to find this broken man with nothing to teach me.

“How can I look at it that way? Because, Mr. Wright,” Winter said, “some people are just meant to fail.”

“No. No, you’re wrong,” Jack said, then he said, “You had it. You were going to be something great,” Jack said, then, with the sound of defeat in his voice, he said, “you were supposed to be more than this.”

Jack realized what had come out of his mouth and froze. He watched Winter’s face slowly melt away into pain, not with anger or annoyance or a vengeful bitterness, but with a terrible, aching sadness that said Now do you understand?
“I’m sorry,” Jack said. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

Winter did not move from his seat. He merely looked down at his book.

Jack realized it was over. He stood up. He quietly placed a dollar on the table for the coffee and said, “I didn’t mean to waste your time. I came here looking for some sort of lesson or guidance or something. I don’t really know why I had to find you. I’m sorry.”

He turned toward the door, not waiting for a response. As he walked, he looked again at the pictures on the wall, of the deer and fish. He as about to turn the corner, out of the dining room toward the door when he saw the waitress. She was standing at a pay phone by an empty coat rack by the door. The receiver was up to her ear and she was leaning against the wall on her shoulder. She didn’t notice Jack and spoke quietly into the phone, she twirled the black, coiled phone line around her finger. He didn’t notice it before and he didn’t know why he did now, but she looked exhausted.

The flame, the frail little fire he felt when he first saw Winter had now gone out in the darkness and there was nothing but cold where it should have been more. _I’m going back without anything_, he thought, _all this was for a few cups of coffee_. He had placed whatever remaining hope and faith he had for himself in Winter and now he was left with the exact thing he came here with. That’s when it snapped.

Jack turned back around and walked back to the table to Winter, who was looking down at his closed black book.
“I can’t draw too well,” Jack said, “my lines aren’t fluid and all my characters look the same. I don’t know how to shade for depth or lighting and my circles are uneven. I can’t even draw backgrounds, everyone is standing in a big white empty space. I’m not a good cartoonist. I’m terrible, actually. But it’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted in my entire life. I want to say something in small, square panels with people inside them saying little words than hang in little bubbles above their heads. That’s what I want. And you know what? I’m going to fail at it. And that’s ok. I’m going to fail and I’m going to keep failing until I get it right. Then I’m gonna fail again so that I can do it better the next time. That’s what I’m gonna do. I’m going to keep failing. That kid in your little book was looking in the wrong place the whole damn time. So was I.”

When Winter didn’t look up, Jack turned around and walked out the door. He walked across the parking lot, opened the door to his car, sat down, and slammed the car door shut with the silence screaming inside his head.

He placed his hands on the wheel, gripped it, and closed his eyes. Now what? Now he had to go back to Missoula and stay the person he’d tried to run from. Or did he? What was back there? What was his life back there? Who the hell was he now? He could start over, drive somewhere and get a job, leave his fiancee. He could drive out of the parking lot and turn left or turn right, which way, he didn’t care. It didn’t really matter. There was no sense of urgency or ambition that burned within him to return to Missoula or go forward somewhere else. There was nothing. He held onto the cold steering wheel like it was an anchor keeping him steady, sitting in silence.
He opened his eyes and looked out the windshield and across the torn parking lot, into the trees that stood motionless, and he listened to his breathing.

There was a knock at his window.

When Jack looked, he saw that Winter was hunched over, peering through the window, into the car. Jack opened the window.

Jack waited for something to come out of Winter’s mouth with a feeling in his lungs like they were flooding.

“Don’t,” Winter began and then paused, “Jack, just don’t...” but Winter Lochney didn’t say anything more. He smiled a little, but then his smile faded. Winter reached behind him and pulled out the black book from the back pocket of his jeans. He held it out to Jack with his long fingers.

He took the book from Winter and watched him turn and walk away. His stride was long and calm and his wide shoulders looked like they could hold up the open sky or block out the sun. He walked like he was coasting effortlessly, floating down a stream.

Jack placed his hand on the book. It was warm. He took a deep breath and said many things to himself: this was what he had come here for, a message, a gift, a reason to keep fighting against the darkness of his doubt. Remember this, Jack thought, remember this because everything is going to change. Here’s your spark. Here’s your light. Here’s the “X” on the damn map.

When he opened the black book, his eyes glazed across the words and columns of numbers on the first page. He flipped the page to the second and third.
There were more words and columns of numbers. He started reading the list of words on the left side of each page. They were names. Last names. And in the next column were numbers. With decimal points. Some were circled and some were underlined, others crossed out. Jack flipped through more pages and saw more names and numbers. The numbers were times. He closed the book and looked out his widow to see if Winter was still there, but he had disappeared into nothing. There were only chunks of broken asphalt and gray rocks in the potholes dotting the ground. Jack opened to a page in the middle and found more names and times and found the same on every page he flipped through. It was a book, Jack began to realize, of qualifying times. Winter had recorded and tracked the past thirty years of National time cuts, of seconds or half-seconds missed or gained, of swimmers who didn’t give up, who beat his records, who didn’t sink to the bottom of the pool.

Jack looked up from the book, but he didn’t know what to look at. He glanced at his shaking hands, he looked at the trees behind the parking lot and then over to the passenger seat where a sketchbook and some pens lay, but none of it had any meaning like he made himself believe.

He closed his eyes and stared into the darkness and tried to think of a way to calm down, but all he could see staring back at him were the black eyes of the dead deer from the pictures in the diner. Then he saw the pictures of the smiling children, holding those heavy, thick fish. Those poor fish, Jack thought, those poor fish. Unable to escape, to do the one thing they were made to. He wondered if the fish ever realized it was over, if the struggle against some invisible line dragging them up
toward the pulsing light above the surface of the water meant it was over, that the fight was useless. He wondered if fish even knew what it meant to give up.
Works Cited


