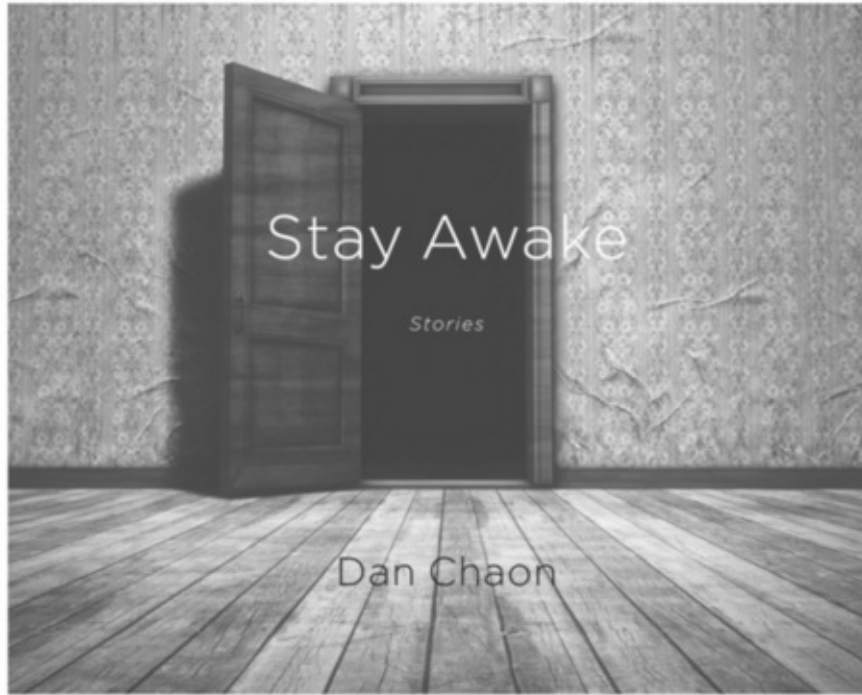


stay awake

Stories | National Book Award finalist | Author of *Await Your Reply*

dan chaon





BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

Stay Awake is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Published in the United States by Ballantine Books,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,
a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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The following stories have been previously published:

“The Bees” (*McSweeney’s* #10, 2002), “Thinking of You in Your Time of Sorrow”
(*Mid American Review*, 2004), “Shepherdess” (*Virginia Quarterly Review*,
Fall 2006), “The Farm. The Gold. The Lily-White Hands.” (*Avery Anthology*, 2007),
“Patrick Lane, Flabbergasted” (*Ninth Letter*, Fall/Winter 2007), “St. Dismas”
(*Santi: Lives of Modern Day Saints*, edited by Luca Dipierro and
N. Frank Daniels, Black Arrow Press, 2008), and
“To Psychic Underworld:” (*Tin House*, 2010)

eISBN: 978-0-345-53230-5

www.ballantinebooks.com

Title-page photograph: © iStockphoto

v3.1

I had a dream I was awake and

I woke up to find myself asleep.

—STAN LAUREL

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The Bees

Gene's son Frankie wakes up screaming. It has become frequent, two or three times a week at random times: midnight—three A.M.—five in the morning. Here is a high, empty wail that severs Gene from his unconsciousness like sharp teeth. It is the worst sound that Gene can imagine, the sound of a young child dying violently—falling from a building, or caught in some machinery that is tearing an arm off, or being mauled by a predatory animal. No matter how many times he hears it he jolts up with such images playing in his mind, and he always runs, thumping into the child's bedroom to find Frankie sitting up in bed, his eyes closed, his mouth open in an oval like a Christmas caroler. If someone took a picture of him, he would appear to be in a kind of peaceful trance, as if he were waiting to receive a spoonful of ice cream, rather than emitting that horrific sound.

“Frankie!” Gene will shout, and claps his hands hard in the child's face. The clapping works well. At this, the scream always stops abruptly, and Frankie opens his eyes, blinking at Gene with vague awareness before settling back down into his pillow, nuzzling a little before growing still. He is sound asleep, he is always sound asleep, though even after months Gene can't help leaning down and pressing his ear to the child's chest, to make sure he's still breathing, his heart is still going. It always is.

There is no explanation that they can find. In the morning, Frankie doesn't remember anything, and on the few occasions that they have managed to wake him in the midst of one of his screaming attacks, he is merely sleepy and irritable. Once, Gene's wife, Karen, shook him and shook him, until finally he opened his eyes groggily. “Honey?” she said. “Honey, did you have a bad dream?” But Frankie only moaned a little. “No,” he said, puzzled and unhappy at being awakened, but nothing more.

They can find no pattern to it. It can happen any day of the week, any time of the night. It doesn't seem to be associated with diet, or with his activities during the day, and it doesn't stem, as far as they can tell, from any sort of psychological unease. During the day, he seems perfectly normal and happy.

They have taken him several times to the pediatrician, but the doctor seems to have little of use to say. There is nothing wrong with the child physically, Dr. Banerjee says. She advises that such things were not uncommon for children of Frankie's age group—he is five—and that more often than not, the disturbance simply passes away.

“He hasn't experienced any kind of emotional trauma, has he?” the doctor says. “Nothing out of the ordinary at home?”

“No, no,” they both murmur, together. They shake their heads, and Dr. Banerjee shrugs. “Parents,” she says. “It's probably nothing to worry about.” She gives them a brief smile. “As difficult as it is, I'd say that you may just have to weather this out.”

But the doctor has never heard those screams. In the mornings after the “nightmares,” as Karen calls them, Gene feels unnerved, edgy. He works as a driver for the United Parcel Service, and as he moves through the day after a screaming attack, there is a bare

perceptible hum at the edge of his hearing, an intent, deliberate static sliding along behind him as he wanders through streets and streets in his van. He stops along the side of the road and listens. The shadows of summer leaves tremble murmuringly against the windshield, and cars are accelerating on a nearby road. In the treetops, a cicada makes its trembly, pressurized hiss.

Something bad has been looking for him for a long time, he thinks, and now, at last, it is growing near.

When he comes home at night everything is normal. They live in an old house in the suburb of Cleveland, and sometimes after dinner they work together in the small patch of garden out in back of the house—tomatoes, zucchini, string beans, cucumbers—while Frankie plays with Legos in the dirt. Or they take walks around the neighborhood, Frankie riding his bike in front of them, his training wheels squeaking. They gather on the couch and watch cartoons together, or play board games, or draw pictures with crayons. After Frankie is asleep, Karen will sit at the kitchen table and study—she is in nursing school—and Gene will sit outside on the porch, flipping through a newsmagazine or a novel, smoking the cigarettes that he has promised Karen he will give up when he turns thirty-five. He is thirty-four now, and Karen is twenty-seven, and he is aware, more and more frequently, that this is not the life that he deserves. He has been incredibly lucky, he thinks. Blessed, as Gene's favorite cashier at the supermarket always says. "Have a blessed day," she says, when Gene pays the money and she hands him his receipt, and he feels as if she has sprinkled him with her ordinary, gentle beatitude. It reminds him of long ago, when an old nurse had held his hand in the hospital and said that she was praying for him.

Sitting out in his lawn chair, drawing smoke out of his cigarette, he thinks about that nurse even though he doesn't want to. He thinks of the way she'd leaned over him and brushed his hair as he stared at her, imprisoned in a full body cast, sweating his way through withdrawal and DTs.

He had been a different person, back then. A drunk, a monster. At eighteen, he married the girl he'd gotten pregnant, and then had set about slowly, steadily, ruining all their lives. When he'd abandoned them, his wife and son, back in Nebraska, he had been twenty-four, a danger to himself and others. He'd done them a favor by leaving, he thought, though he still feels guilty when he looks back on it. Years later, when he was sober, he even tried to contact them. He wanted to own up to his behavior, to pay the back child support, to apologize. But they were nowhere to be found. Mandy was no longer living in the small Nebraska town where they'd met and married, and there was no forwarding address. His parents were dead. No one seemed to know where she'd gone.

Karen didn't know the full story. She had been, to his relief, uncurious about his previous life, though she knew he had some drinking days, some bad times. She knew that he'd been married before, too, though she didn't know the extent of it, didn't know that he had another son, for example, didn't know that he had left them one night, without even packing a bag, just driving off in the car, a flask tucked between his legs, driving east as far as he could go. She didn't know about the car crash, the wreck he should have died in. She didn't know who a bad person he'd been.

She was a nice lady, Karen. Maybe a little sheltered. And truth to tell, he was ashamed—and even scared—to imagine how she would react to the truth about his past. He didn't know

if she would have ever really trusted him if she'd known the full story, and the longer the have known each other the less inclined he has been to reveal it. He'd escaped his old self, his thought, and when Karen got pregnant, shortly before they were married, he told himself that now he had a chance to do things over, to do it better. They had bought the house together with him and Karen, and now Frankie will be in kindergarten in the fall. He has come full circle, he has come exactly to the point when his former life with Mandy and his son, DJ, completely fell apart. He looks up as Karen comes to the back door and speaks to him through the screen. "I think it's time for bed, sweetheart," she says, and he shudders off these thoughts, these memories. He smiles.

He's been in a strange frame of mind lately. The months of regular awakenings have been getting to him, and he has a hard time going back to sleep after an episode with Frankie. When Karen wakes him in the morning, he often feels muffled, sluggish—as if he's hungover. He doesn't hear the alarm clock. When he stumbles out of bed, he finds he has a hard time keeping his moodiness in check. He can feel his temper coiling up inside him.

He isn't that type of person anymore, and hasn't been for a long while. Still, he can't help but worry. They say that there is a second stretch of craving, which sets in after several years of smooth sailing; five or seven years will pass, and then it will come back without warning. He has been thinking of going to AA meetings again, though he hasn't in some time—no time since he met Karen.

It's not as if he gets trembly every time he passes a liquor store, or even as if he has a problem when he goes out with buddies and spends the evening drinking soda and nonalcoholic beer. No. The trouble comes at night, when he's asleep.

He has begun to dream of his first son. DJ. Perhaps it is related to his worries about Frankie, but for several nights in a row the image of DJ—age about five—has appeared to him. In the dream, Gene is drunk, and playing hide-and-seek with DJ in the yard behind the Cleveland house where he is now living. There is the thick weeping willow out there, and Gene watches the child appear from behind it and run across the grass, happy, unafraid, the way Frankie would. DJ turns to look over his shoulder and laughs, and Gene stumbles after him, at least a six-pack's worth of good mood, a goofy, drunken dad. It's so real that when he wakes, he still feels intoxicated. It takes him a few minutes to shake it.

One morning after a particularly vivid version of this dream, Frankie wakes and complains of a funny feeling—"right here"—he says, and points to his forehead. It isn't a headache, he says. "It's like bees!" he says. "Buzzing bees!" He rubs his hand against his brow. "Inside my head." He considers for a moment. "You know how the bees bump against the window when they get in the house and want to get out?" This description pleases him, and he taps his forehead lightly with his fingers, humming, "Zzzzzzzz," to demonstrate.

"Does it hurt?" Karen says.

"No," Frankie says. "It tickles."

Karen gives Gene a concerned look. She makes Frankie lie down on the couch, and tells him to close his eyes for a while. After a few minutes, he raises up, smiling, and says that the feeling has gone.

"Honey, are you sure?" Karen says. She pushes his hair back and slides her palm across his forehead. "He's not hot," she says, and Frankie sits up impatiently, suddenly more interested

in something that is happening on the *Fuzzy Fieldmouse* show, which is playing on the TV in the living room.

Karen gets out one of her nursing books, and Gene watches her face tighten with concern as she flips slowly through the pages. She is looking at Chapter 3: Neurological System, and Gene observes as she pauses here and there, skimming down a list of symptoms. “We should probably take him back to Dr. Banerjee again,” she says. Gene nods, recalling what the doctor said about “emotional trauma.”

“Are you scared of bees?” he asks Frankie. “Is that something that’s bothering you?”

“No,” Frankie says. “Not really.”

When Frankie was three, a bee stung him above his left eyebrow. They had been out hiking together, and they hadn’t yet learned that Frankie was “moderately allergic” to bee stings. Within minutes of the sting, Frankie’s face had begun to distort, to puff up, his eye welling shut. He looked deformed. Gene didn’t know if he’d ever been more frightened in his entire life, running down the trail with Frankie’s head pressed against his heart, trying to get to the car and drive him to the doctor, terrified that the child was dying. Frankie himself was calm.

Gene clears his throat. He knows the feeling that Frankie is talking about—he has felt it himself, that odd, feathery vibration inside his head. And in fact he feels it again, now. He presses the pads of his fingertips against his brow. *Emotional trauma*, his mind murmurs, but he is thinking of DJ, not Frankie.

“What are you scared of?” Gene asks Frankie, after a moment. “Anything?”

“You know what the scariest thing is?” Frankie says, and widens his eyes, miming a frightened look. “There’s a lady with no head, and she went walking through the woods looking for it. ‘Give ... me ... back ... my ... head....’ ”

“Where on earth did you hear a story like that!” Karen says.

“Daddy told me,” Frankie says. “When we were camping.”

Gene blushes, even before Karen gives him a sharp look. “Oh, great,” she says. “Wonderful.”

He doesn’t meet her eyes. “We were just telling ghost stories,” he says, softly. “I thought he would think the story was funny.”

“My God, Gene,” she says. “With him having nightmares like this? What were you thinking?”

It’s a bad flashback, the kind of thing he’s usually able to avoid. He thinks abruptly of Mandy, his former wife. He sees in Karen’s face that look Mandy would give him when he screwed up. “What are you, some kind of idiot?” Mandy used to say. “Are you crazy?” Back then, Gene couldn’t do anything right, it seemed, and when Mandy yelled at him it made his stomach clench with shame and inarticulate rage. *I was trying*, he would think, *I was trying*, damn it, and it was as if no matter what he did, it wouldn’t turn out right. That feeling would sit heavily in his chest, and eventually, when things got worse, he hit her once. “Why do you want me to feel like shit,” he said through clenched teeth. “I’m not an asshole,” he said, and when she rolled her eyes at him he slapped her hard enough to knock her out of her chair.

That was the time he’d taken DJ to the carnival. It was a Saturday, and he’d been drinking a little, so Mandy didn’t like it, but after all—he thought—DJ was his son, too, he had a right to spend some time with his own son, Mandy wasn’t his boss even if she might think she was.

She liked to make him hate himself.

What she was mad about was that he'd taken DJ on the Velocerator. It was a mistake, he realized afterward. But DJ himself had begged to go on. He was just recently four years old and Gene had just turned twenty-three, which made him feel inexplicably old. He wanted to have a little fun.

Besides, nobody told him he *couldn't* take DJ on the thing. When he led DJ through the gate, the ticket taker even smiled, as if to say, "Here is a young guy showing his kid a good time." Gene winked at DJ and grinned, taking a nip from a flask of peppermint schnapps. He felt like a good dad. He wished his own father had taken him on rides at the carnival!

The door to the Velocerator opened like a hatch in a big silver flying saucer. Disco music was blaring from the entrance and became louder as they went inside. It was a circular room with soft, padded walls, and one of the workers had Gene and DJ stand with their backs to the wall, strapping them in side by side. Gene felt warm and expansive from the schnapps. He took DJ's hand, and he almost felt as if he were glowing with love. "Get ready, kiddo," Gene whispered. "This is going to be wild."

The hatch door of the Velocerator sealed closed with a pressurized sigh. And then, slowly, the walls they were strapped to began to turn. Gene tightened his grip on DJ's hand as they began to rotate, gathering speed. After a moment the wall pads they were strapped to slid up and the force of velocity pushed them back, held to the surface of the spinning wall like iron to a magnet. Gene's cheeks and lips seemed to pull back, and the sensation of helplessness made him laugh.

At that moment, DJ began to scream. "No! No! Stop! Make it stop!" They were terrible shrieks, and Gene held the child's hand more tightly. "It's all right," he yelled jovially over the thump of the music. "It's okay! I'm right here!" But the child's wailing only got louder in response. The scream seemed to whip past Gene in a circle, tumbling around and around the circumference of the ride like a spirit, trailing echoes as it flew. When the machine finally stopped, DJ was heaving with sobs, and the man at the control panel glared. Gene could feel the other passengers staring grimly and judgmentally at him.

Gene felt horrible. He had been so happy—thinking that they were finally having themselves a memorable father-and-son moment—and he could feel his heart plunging into darkness. DJ kept on weeping, even as they left the ride and walked along the midway, even as Gene tried to distract him with promises of cotton candy and stuffed animals. "I want to go home," DJ cried, and, "I want my mom! I want my mom!" And it had wounded Gene to hear that. He gritted his teeth.

"Fine!" he hissed. "Let's go home to your mommy, you little crybaby. I swear to God, I'm never taking you with me anywhere again." And he gave DJ a little shake. "Jesus, what's *wrong* with you? Lookit, people are laughing at you. See? They're saying, 'Look at that boy, bawling like a girl.' "

This memory comes to him out of the blue. He had forgotten all about it, but now it comes to him over and over. Those screams were not unlike the sounds Frankie makes in the middle of the night, and they pass repeatedly through the membrane of his thoughts, without warning. The next day, he finds himself recalling it again, the memory of the scream impressing on his mind with such force that he actually has to pull his UPS truck off to the side of the road and put his face in his hands: Awful! Awful! He must have seemed like a monster to the child.

Sitting there in his van, he wishes he could find a way to contact them—Mandy and DJ. He wishes that he could tell them how sorry he is, and send them money. He puts his fingertip against his forehead, as cars drive past on the street, as an old man parts the curtains and peers out of the house Gene is parked in front of, hopeful that Gene might have a package for him.

Where are they? Gene wonders. He tries to picture a town, a house, but there is only blank. Surely, Mandy being Mandy, she would have hunted him down by now to demand child support. She would have relished treating him like a deadbeat dad, she would have hired some company who would garnish his wages.

Now, sitting at the roadside, it occurs to him suddenly that they are dead. He recalls the car wreck that he was in, just outside Des Moines, and if he had been killed they would have never known. He recalls waking up in the hospital, and the elderly nurse who had said, “You’re very lucky, young man. You should be dead.”

Maybe they are dead, he thinks. Mandy and DJ. The idea strikes him a glancing blow because of course it would make sense. The reason they’ve never contacted him. Of course.

He doesn’t know what to do with such anxieties. They are ridiculous, they are self-pitying, they are paranoid, but especially now, with the concerns about Frankie, he is at the mercy of his fears. He comes home from work and Karen stares at him heavily.

“What’s the matter?” she says, and he shrugs. “You look terrible,” she says.

“It’s nothing,” he says, but she continues to look at him skeptically. She shakes her head.

“I took Frankie to the doctor again today,” she says after a moment, and Gene sits down at the table with her, where she is spread out with her textbooks and notepaper.

“I suppose you’ll think I’m being a neurotic mom,” she says. “I think I’m too immersed in disease—that’s the problem.”

Gene shakes his head. “No, no,” he says. His throat feels dry. “You’re right. Better safe than sorry.”

“Mmm,” she says thoughtfully. “I think Dr. Banerjee is starting to hate me.”

“Naw,” Gene says. “No one could hate you.” With effort, he smiles gently. A good husband, he kisses her palm, her wrist. “Try not to worry,” he says, though his own nerves are fluttering. He can hear Frankie in the backyard, shouting orders to someone.

“Who’s he talking to?” Gene says, and Karen doesn’t look up.

“Oh,” she says. “It’s probably just Bubba.” Bubba is Frankie’s imaginary playmate.

Gene nods. He goes to the window and looks out. Frankie is pretending to shoot at something, his thumb and forefinger cocked into a gun. “Get him! Get him!” Frankie shouts and Gene stares out as Frankie dodges behind a tree. Frankie looks nothing like DJ, but when he pokes his head from behind the hanging foliage of the willow, Gene feels a little shudder—a flicker, something. He clenches his jaw.

“This class is really driving me crazy,” Karen says. “Every time I read about a worst-case scenario, I start to worry. It’s strange. The more you know, the less sure you are of anything.”

“What did the doctor say this time?” Gene says. He shifts uncomfortably, still staring out at Frankie, and it seems as if dark specks circle and bob at the corner of the yard. “He seemed okay?”

Karen shrugs. “As far as they can tell.” She looks down at her textbook, shaking her head.

“He seems healthy.” He puts his hand gently on the back of her neck and she lolls her head back and forth against his fingers. “I’ve never believed that anything really terrible could happen to me,” she once told him, early in their marriage, and it had scared him. “Don’t say that,” he’d whispered, and she laughed.

“You’re superstitious,” she said. “That’s cute.”

He can’t sleep. The strange presentiment that Mandy and DJ are dead has lodged heavily in his mind, and he rubs his feet together underneath the covers, trying to find a comfortable posture. He can hear the soft ticks of the old electric typewriter as Karen finishes her paper for school, words rattling out in bursts that remind him of some sort of insect language. He closes his eyes, pretending to be asleep when Karen finally comes to bed, but his mind is ticking with small, scuttling images: his former wife and son, flashes of the photographs he doesn’t own, hasn’t kept. *They’re dead*, a firm voice in his mind says, very distinctly. *They were in a fire. And they burned up.* It is not quite his own voice that speaks to him, and abruptly he can picture the burning house. It’s a trailer, somewhere on the outskirts of a small town, and the black smoke is pouring out the open door. The plastic window frames have warped and begun to melt, and the smoke billows from the trailer into the sky in a way that reminds him of an old locomotive. He can’t see inside, except for crackling bursts of deep-orange flames, but he’s aware that they’re in there. For a second he can see DJ’s face flickering, peering steadily from the window of the burning trailer, his mouth open in an unnatural circle, as if he’s singing.

He opens his eyes. Karen’s breathing has steadied, she’s sound asleep, and he carefully gets out of bed, padding restlessly through the house in his pajamas. They’re not dead, he tries to tell himself, and stands in front of the refrigerator, pouring milk from the carton into his mouth. It’s an old comfort, from back in the days when he was drying out, when the thick taste of milk would slightly calm his craving for a drink. But it doesn’t help him now. The dream, the vision, has frightened him badly, and he sits on the couch with an afghan over his shoulders, staring at some science program on television. On the program, a lady scientist is examining a mummy. A child. The thing is bald—almost a skull but not quite. A membrane of ancient skin is pulled taut over the eye sockets. The lips are stretched back, and there are small, chipped, rodentlike teeth. Looking at the thing, he can’t help but think of DJ again, and he looks over his shoulder, quickly, the way he used to.

The last year that he was together with Mandy, there used to be times when DJ would actually give him the creeps—spook him. DJ had been an unusually skinny child, with a head like a baby bird and long, bony feet, with toes that seemed strangely extended, as if they were meant for gripping. He can remember the way the child would slip barefoot through the rooms, slinking, sneaking, watching, Gene had thought, always watching him.

It is a memory that he has almost succeeded in forgetting, a memory he hates and mistrusts. He was drinking heavily at the time, and he knows that alcohol grotesquely distorted his perceptions. But now that it has been dislodged, that old feeling moves through him like a breath of smoke. Back then, it had seemed to him that Mandy had turned DJ against him, that DJ had in some strange way almost physically transformed into something that wasn’t Gene’s *real* son. Gene can remember how, sometimes, he would be sitting on the couch, watching TV, and he’d get a funny feeling. He’d turn his head and DJ would be at the

edge of the room, with his bony spine hunched and his long neck craned, staring with those strangely oversized eyes. Other times, Gene and Mandy would be arguing and DJ would suddenly slide into the room, creeping up to Mandy and resting his head on her chest, right in the middle of some important talk. "I'm thirsty," he would say, in imitation baby-talk. Though he was five years old, he would playact this little toddler voice. "Mama," he would say. "I is firsty." And DJ's eyes would rest on Gene for a moment, cold and full of calculating hatred.

Of course, Gene knows now that this was not the reality of it. He knows: He was a drunk and DJ was just a sad, scared little kid, trying to deal with a rotten situation. Later, when he was in detox, these memories of his son made him actually shudder with shame, and it was not something he could bring himself to talk about even when he was deep into his twelve-step program. How could he say how repulsed he'd been by the child, how actually frightened he had been. Jesus Christ—DJ was a poor wretched five-year-old kid! But in Gene's memory there was something malevolent about him, resting his head pettishly on his mother's chest, talking in that singsong, lisping voice, staring hard and unblinking at Gene with a little smile. Gene remembers catching DJ by the back of the neck. "If you're going to talk, talk normal," Gene had whispered through his teeth, and tightened his fingers. "You're not a baby. You're not fooling anybody." And DJ had actually bared his teeth, making a thin, hissing whine.

He wakes and he can't breathe. There is a swimming, suffocating sensation of being stared at, of being watched by something that hates him, and he gasps, choking for air. A lady is bending over him, and for a moment he expects her to say: "You're very lucky, young man. You should be dead."

But it's Karen. "What are you doing?" she says. It's morning, and he struggles to orient himself—he's on the living room floor, and the television is still going.

"Jesus," he says, and coughs. "Oh, Jesus." He is sweating, his face feels hot, but he tries to calm himself in the face of Karen's horrified stare. "A bad dream," he says, trying to control his panting breaths. "Jesus," he says, and shakes his head, trying to smile reassuringly for her. "I got up last night and I couldn't sleep. I must have passed out while I was watching TV."

But Karen just gazes at him, her expression frightened and uncertain, as if something about him is transforming. "Gene," she says. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," he says hoarsely, and a shudder passes over him involuntarily. "Of course." And then he realizes that he is naked. He sits up, covering his crotch self-consciously with his hands, and glances around. He doesn't see his underwear or his pajama bottoms anywhere nearby. He doesn't even see the afghan, which he'd had draped over him on the couch while he was watching the mummies on TV. He starts to stand up, awkwardly, and he notices that Frankie is standing there in the archway between the kitchen and the living room, watching him, his arms at his sides like a cowboy who is ready to draw his holstered guns.

"Mom?" Frankie says. "I'm thirsty."

He drives through his deliveries in a daze. The bees, he thinks. He remembers what Frankie said a few mornings before, about bees inside his head, buzzing and bumping against the inside of his forehead like a windowpane they were tapping against. That's the feeling he has now. All the things that he doesn't quite remember are circling and alighting, vibrating the cellophane wings insistently. He sees himself striking Mandy across the face with the flat of

his hand, knocking her off her chair; he sees his grip tightening around the back of DJ's thin five-year-old neck, shaking him as he grimaced and wept; and he is aware that there are other things, perhaps even worse, if he thought about it hard enough. All the things he's prayed that Karen would never know about him.

He was very drunk on the day that he left them, so drunk that he can barely remember. It is hard to believe that he made it all the way to Des Moines on the interstate before he went off the road, tumbling end over end, into darkness. He was laughing, he thinks, as the car crumpled around him, and he has to pull his van over to the side of the road, out of fear, as the tickling in his head intensifies. There is an image of Mandy, sitting on the couch as he stormed out, with DJ cradled in her arms, one of DJ's eyes swollen shut and puffy. There is an image of him in the kitchen, throwing glasses and beer bottles onto the floor, listening to them shatter.

And whether they are dead or not, he knows that they don't wish him well. They would not want him to be happy—in love with his wife and child. His normal, undeserved life.

When he gets home that night, he feels exhausted. He doesn't want to think anymore, and for a moment, it seems that he will be allowed a small reprieve. Frankie is in the yard, playing contentedly. Karen is in the kitchen, making hamburgers and corn on the cob, and everything seems okay. But when he sits down to take off his boots, she gives him an angry look.

"Don't do that in the kitchen," she says icily. "Please. I've asked you before."

He looks down at his feet: one shoe unlaced, half off. "Oh," he says. "Sorry."

But when he retreats to the living room, to his recliner, she follows him. She leans against the door frame, her arms folded, watching as he releases his tired feet from the boots and rubs his hand over the bottoms of his socks. She frowns heavily.

"What?" he says, and tries on an uncertain smile.

She sighs. "We need to talk about last night," she says. "I need to know what's going on."

"Nothing," he says, but the stern way she examines him activates his anxieties all over again. "I couldn't sleep, so I went out to the living room to watch TV. That's all."

She stares at him. "Gene," she says after a moment. "People don't usually wake up naked on their living room floor, and not know how they got there. That's just weird, don't you think?" *Oh, please*, he thinks. He lifts his hands, shrugging—a posture of innocence and exasperation, though his insides are trembling. "I know," he says. "It was weird to me, too. I was having nightmares. I really don't know what happened."

She gazes at him for a long time, her eyes heavy. "I see," she says, and he can feel the emanation of her disappointment like waves of heat. "Gene," she says. "All I'm asking is for you to be honest with me. If you're having problems, if you're drinking again, or thinking about it. I want to help. We can work it out. But you have to be honest with me."

"I'm not drinking," Gene says firmly. He holds her eyes. "I'm not thinking about it. I told you when we met, I'm through with it. Really." But he is aware again of an observant, unfriendly presence, hidden, moving along the edge of the room. "I don't understand," he says. "What is it? Why would you think I'd lie to you?"

She shifts, still trying to read something in his face, still, he can tell, doubting him. "Listen," she says, at last, and he can tell she is trying not to cry. "Some guy called you today. A drunk guy. And he said to tell you that he had a good time hanging out with you last night and that he was looking forward to seeing you again soon." She frowns hard, staring at him.

as if this last bit of damning information will show him for the liar he is. A tear slips out of the corner of her eye and along the bridge of her nose. Gene feels his chest tighten.

“That’s crazy,” he says. He tries to sound outraged, but he is in fact suddenly very frightened. “Who was it?”

She shakes her head sorrowfully. “I don’t know,” she says. “Something with a ‘B.’ He was slurring so bad I could hardly understand him. BB or BJ or ...”

Gene can feel the small hairs on his back prickling. “Was it DJ?” he says.

And Karen shrugs, lifting a now-teary face to him. “I don’t know!” she says hoarsely. “I don’t know. Maybe.” And Gene puts his palms across his face. He is aware of that strange buzzing, tickling feeling behind his forehead.

“Who is DJ?” Karen says. “Gene, you have to tell me what’s going on.”

But he can’t. He can’t tell her, even now. Especially now, he thinks, when to admit that he has been lying to her ever since they met would confirm all the fears and suspicions she’d been nursing for—what?—days? weeks?

“He’s someone I used to know a long time ago,” Gene tells her. “Not a good person. He’s the kind of guy who might ... call up, and get a kick out of upsetting you.”

They sit at the kitchen table, silently watching as Frankie eats his hamburger and corn on the cob. Gene can’t quite get his mind around it. DJ, he thinks, as he presses his finger against his hamburger bun, but doesn’t pick it up. DJ. He would be fifteen by now. Could he perhaps, have found them? Maybe stalking them? Watching the house? Gene tries to fathom how DJ might have been causing Frankie’s screaming episodes. How he might have caused what happened last night—snuck up on Gene while he was sitting there watching TV and drugged him or something. It seems farfetched.

“Maybe it was just some random drunk,” he says at last to Karen. “Accidentally calling the house. He didn’t ask for me by name, did he?”

“I don’t remember,” Karen says. “Gene ...”

And he can’t stand the doubtfulness, the lack of trust in her expression. He strikes his fist hard against the table, and his plate clatters in a circling echo. “I *did not* go out with anybody last night!” he says. “I *did not* get drunk! You can either believe me, or you can ...”

They are both staring at him. Frankie’s eyes are wide, and he puts down the corncob he was about to bite into, as if he doesn’t like it anymore. Karen’s mouth is pinched.

“Or I can what?” she says.

“Nothing,” Gene breathes.

There isn’t a fight, but a chill spreads through the house, a silence. She knows that he isn’t telling her the truth. She knows that there’s more to it. But what can he say? He stands at the sink, gently washing the dishes as Karen bathes Frankie and puts him to bed. He waits, listening to the small sounds of the house at night. Outside, in the yard, there is the swing set and the willow tree—silver-gray and stark in the security light that hangs above the garage. He waits for a while longer, watching, half expecting to see DJ emerge from behind the tree as he’d done in Gene’s dream, creeping along, his bony, hunched back, the skin pulled tight against the skull of his oversize head. There is that smothering, airless feeling of being watched, and Gene’s hands are trembling as he rinses a plate under the tap.

When he goes upstairs at last, Karen is already in her nightgown, in bed, reading a book.

“Karen,” he says, and she flips a page, deliberately.

“I don’t want to talk to you until you’re ready to tell me the truth,” she says. She doesn’t look at him. “You can sleep on the couch, if you don’t mind.”

“Just tell me,” Gene says. “Did he leave a number? To call him back?”

“No,” Karen says. She doesn’t look at him. “He just said he’d see you soon.”

He thinks that he will stay up all night. He doesn’t even wash up, or brush his teeth, or get into his bedtime clothes. He just sits there on the couch, in his uniform and stocking feet, watching television with the sound turned low, listening. Midnight. One A.M.

He goes upstairs to check on Frankie, but everything is okay. Frankie is asleep with his mouth open, the covers thrown off. Gene stands in the doorway, alert for movement, but everything seems to be in place. Frankie’s turtle sits motionless on its rock, the books are lined up in neat rows, the toys put away. Frankie’s face tightens and untightens as he dreams.

TWO A.M. Back on the couch, Gene startles, half-asleep as an ambulance passes in the distance, and then there is only the sound of crickets and cicadas. Awake for a moment, he blinks heavily at a rerun of *Bewitched*, and flips through channels. Here is some jewelry for sale. Here is someone performing an autopsy.

In the dream, DJ is older. He looks to be nineteen or twenty, and he walks into a bar where Gene is hunched on a stool, sipping a glass of beer. Gene recognizes him right away—his posture, those thin shoulders, those large eyes. But now, DJ’s arms are long and muscular, tattooed. There is a hooded, unpleasant look on his face as he ambles up to the bar, pressing in next to Gene. DJ orders a shot of Jim Beam—Gene’s old favorite.

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot, ever since I died,” DJ murmurs. He doesn’t look at Gene as he says this, but Gene knows who he is talking to, and his hands are shaky as he takes a sip of beer.

“I’ve been looking for you for a long time,” DJ murmurs, and the air is hot and thick. Gene puts a trembly cigarette to his mouth and breathes on it, choking on the taste. He wants to say, *I’m sorry. Forgive me*. But he can’t breathe. DJ shows his small, crooked teeth, staring at Gene as he gulps for air.

“I know how to hurt you,” DJ whispers.

Gene opens his eyes, and the room is full of smoke. He sits up, disoriented: For a second he’s still in the bar with DJ before he realizes that he’s in his own house.

There is a fire somewhere: He can hear it. People say that fire “crackles,” but in fact it seems like the amplified sound of tiny creatures eating, little wet mandibles, thousands and thousands of them, and then a heavy, whispered *whoof* as the fire finds another pocket of oxygen. He can hear this, even as he chokes blindly in the smoky air. The living room has a filmy haze over it, as if it is atomizing, fading away, and when he tries to stand up it disappears completely. There is a thick membrane of smoke above him, and he drops again onto his hands and knees, gagging and coughing, a thin line of vomit trickling onto the rug in front of the still-chattering television.

He has the presence of mind to keep low, crawling on his knees and elbows underneath the thick, billowing fumes. “Karen!” he calls. “Frankie!” but his voice is swallowed into the white noise of diligently licking flame. “Ach,” he chokes, meaning to utter their names.

When he reaches the edge of the stairs he sees only flames and darkness above him. He puts his hands and knees on the bottom steps, but the heat pushes him back. He feels one of Frankie's action figures underneath his palm, the melting plastic adhering to his skin, and he shakes it away as another bright burst of flame reaches out of Frankie's bedroom for a moment. At the top of the stairs, through the curling fog he can see the figure of a child watching him grimly, hunched there, its face lit and flickering. Gene cries out, lunging into the heat, crawling his way up the stairs, to where the bedrooms are. He tries to call to the child again, but instead, he vomits.

There is another burst that covers the image that he thinks is a child. He can feel his hair and eyebrows shrinking and sizzling against his skin as the upstairs breathes out a concussion of sparks. He is aware that there are hot, floating bits of substance in the air, glowing orange and then winking out, turning to ash. For some reason he thinks of bees. The air thick with angry buzzing, and that is all he can hear as he slips, turning end over end down the stairs. The humming and his own voice, a long vowel wheeling and echoing as the house spins into a blur.

And then he is lying on the grass. Red lights tick across his opened eyes in a steady, circling rhythm, and a woman, a paramedic, lifts her lips up from his. He draws in a long, desperate breath.

"Shhh," she says softly, and passes her hand along his eyes. "Don't look," she says.

But he does. He sees, off to the side, the long black plastic sleeping bag, with a strand of Karen's blond hair hanging out from the top. He sees the blackened, shriveled body of a child curled into a fetal position. They place the corpse into the spread, zippered plastic opening of the body bag, and he can see the mouth, frozen, calcified, into an oval. A scream.

Patrick Lane, Flabbergasted

There had been several funerals of his old high school friends and Brandon hadn't gone to any of them. He was aware that this was a problem, a problematic decision, and sure enough afterward one of the girlfriends of the dead called him up and told him how rude she thought he was. "It really shocked me," Rachel said. "Zachary was always a good friend to you and this just says something about you as a person that I wouldn't have expected. I lost a lot of respect for you today," she said.

He didn't know what to say. The truth was, he didn't have any excuse. He hadn't wanted to get dressed up, and he didn't like going into churches and being preached at. He had never really liked rituals, period. But he couldn't say this, and so instead he tried to tell her that he couldn't get out of work.

"Oh, come off it, Brandon," Rachel said. They had dated briefly in ninth grade and even after she had had little use for him. "Everybody can get out of work for a funeral," she said. "Why don't you just admit that you have turned into a complete shitheel? That would be the decent thing to do right now."

"Okay," Brandon said. "I turned into a shitheel."

"Yes you did," Rachel said. "What happened?" And then she hung up.

Brandon probably could have argued with her, but he realized that it was not the kind of argument that you could win.

What could he say? He had known a lot of dead people recently. But was that a legitimate complaint? Was it enough of an excuse to say that he simply felt worn out?

To be honest, there were simply fewer and fewer things he felt like doing. That he couldn't even *bring himself* to do. He'd stay up late playing video games on an aging PlayStation system he had hooked up to the television in the living room. He'd go to work at the grocery store. Sometimes he'd look at porn or read various message boards on the Internet. That was about the extent of it.

It seemed like he hardly ever talked to anyone anymore. At the grocery store he was working in the produce department stacking pumpkins when a beaming older woman came up to him holding some Seckel pears in her cupped palms as if they were delicate eggs.

"These are so adorable!" she exclaimed at him. "They are tiny little pears!"

"Yes," he said. "They are Seckel pears."

"Oh," she said enthusiastically. "And are they ripe? Could I eat one right now if I wanted to?"

"Well," Brandon said. He was a bit taken aback by her excitement. "Actually, these could probably stand to get a little riper. If you put them in a sealed plastic bag with a couple of bananas, and keep them at room temperature, they should ripen up pretty quickly. They will have a yellowish hue when they're ready to eat."

"Wonderful," the woman exclaimed. "You are really very knowledgeable and helpful."

"Thank you," Brandon said, and the woman clutched her tiny pears.

“No,” she said. “Thank *you!*”

The depressing thing was, he realized later that this was one of the nicest conversations he'd had in quite a while.

He had been working at the grocery store for a number of years by that point. “What are you now?” his first grade teacher, Mrs. Love-Denman, had asked him. “Twenty-five? Twenty-six?” They had abruptly come face-to-face in an aisle where he was stocking cans of soup and he couldn't believe she recognized him. “You're Brandon Fowler, aren't you?” she said in the gentle, unnervingly sensual Southern accent. “Oh, my land! I can hardly believe it! Brandon Fowler—all grown up!” He guessed that he had known that she still existed, that she was still wandering around town, but nevertheless seeing her freaked him out a little. She must have been at least seventy years old but she was dressed like a much younger woman, wearing an ill-fitting, stiff blond wig—and he had no idea what to say to her. He supposed that he'd been rude for not talking to her. He did say “Hello,” actually. And then he'd just smiled tightly at her and nodded in a kind of dazed way.

It was the sort of encounter that was really problematic and it took a long time to get over. At night, as they were closing, he paced slowly down the spice-and-cereal aisle pushing a wide dust mop, listening to music on his iPod, and trying not to think. In the parking lot he collected empty shopping carts, stacking them, inserting one into the next until he was propelling a kind of millipede of metal and wheels across the asphalt. Still not thinking. In the basement he lifted boxes of cabbages, crates of tangelos, rubber-banded bunches of beets and mustard greens and parsnips.

In the employee-only bathroom, he stood at the urinal stall and aimed toward the zinc cabinet that rested near the drain. Above the porcelain-and-silver piping of the toilet, people had written on the wall in pencil and ink and Magic Marker: various things.

His favorite piece of graffiti said: PATRICK LANE, FLABBERGASTED.

This had been scrawled above the urinal for as long as Brandon could remember, and he occasionally wondered about Patrick Lane as he peed.

Patrick Lane had apparently once been a grocery store employee, and Brandon liked to imagine that they might have become friends. He imagined that Patrick Lane was the sort of person who wrote odd, quirky, self-deprecating graffiti about himself, just for his own amusement. Perhaps Patrick Lane dreamed of becoming a cartoonist, or a singer-songwriter, or simply a perceptive and thoughtful wanderer in the mode of Sal Paradise in the Kerouac novel *On the Road*.

Did people ever hitch rides in the boxcars of trains anymore? Brandon wondered.

He liked to picture Patrick Lane, rambling across the country, leaving a record of his emotions—FLABBERGASTED—EXULTANT—INSULTED—DEVASTATED—and so forth, from bathroom to bathroom as he went.

This idea really appealed to him, but then someone said: *Oh, he's that poor kid that killed himself. I just couldn't bring myself to scrub his writing off the wall.*

Brandon was still living in the old house where he grew up, which he realized was probably a big part of the problem. His parents had been dead for two years, and his older sister, Jodee, was now living in Chicago with her boyfriend, Jake the Medical Resident.

After their parents' funeral, Brandon and Jodee had both agreed that the best thing to do

was to sell the house and split the profits equally. The original plan was that Brandon would live in the house for a few months and fix things up a little to make it more presentable so they could sell it.

But the house didn't seem to want to be sold. Things that had never been wrong in the twenty years that the family had lived there together suddenly turned sour when the housing inspector came to check on the building.

One problem was called "deterioration of the structural roof deck" and cost an enormous amount of money to get fixed.

Other issues were smaller, and presumably should have been repairable by Brandon himself, with the help of a home fix-it book. These included improper wiring connections, bulges and crumbling spots in the drywall, some plumbing stuff, and so on—but much of the work was more complicated than a person would think.

"But you're a smart guy," Jodee had told him. "You can figure it out. I think it's good for you to have a project to work on."

Brandon had spent some time at a couple of different colleges and then finally he had decided to take a while off and earn some money. He imagined that he would enjoy hanging around with some old high school friends, like Zachary Leven and Matty, and he was also a little kind of looking forward to having his mom do his laundry and so on.

And actually, Brandon's mom had thought it was a good idea. She thought that he still needed time to "find himself." This was right before she and his dad died.

Jodee was four years older, and she believed that their parents had been stricter when she was growing up.

"But honestly, I'm glad that Mom and Dad were harder on me," Jodee said once. "Because now I have a work ethic."

Then she hesitated. Brandon knew that she hadn't meant to be insulting, exactly. Nevertheless, he realized that she couldn't quite understand how it was possible that he was still living there, still fixing up the house, after almost five years.

Of course, Brandon was aware that things had probably deteriorated even more than Jodee had realized.

Steadily, he had been relinquishing, withdrawing from portions of the house, and the actual living quarters had shrunk considerably.

There was, for example, his parents' bedroom upstairs, which he was naturally hesitant to enter, and Jodee's old bedroom, where he had decided to store all of the stuff that he would eventually sell at an estate or garage sale, such as small pieces of furniture, vintage-esque clothing, his father's phonograph records and coin collection, his mother's jewelry and shelves of mystery novels, the boxes of photographs of the trips that they had taken as a family to Disney World, the Grand Canyon, New York City, and so forth.

There was the second-floor bathroom, which was now off-limits, following a weirdly disastrous attempt to replace the toilet's ballcock assembly and flush valve.

And then there were areas that he had started to clean or pack up but then had broken off for one reason or another.

For example, in the basement "rec room" area, on the upper shelf of a closet, he'd come across a bunch of games that the family used to play when Brandon and Jodee were kids: Monopoly. Yahtzee. Battleship. Which he'd planned to get rid of.

But then he opened the mildewy cardboard box of an ancient Scrabble game and an enormous number of cockroaches came scuttling out of it. Oh, my God! He chucked the game across the room and it broke open and all the little wooden tiles with letters printed on them scattered across the shag carpet.

His mom used to love to play Scrabble. He had this image of the four of them sitting at the kitchen table with the game board in the middle. He could picture his mother counting off her score and teasing their father, laughing and flourishing her little dictionary. She had seemed really happy at the time. It was weird to think that none of them had guessed how things would eventually turn out.

He knew it was childish, but after the incident with the cockroaches he had been unable to bring himself to pick up the scattered pieces of the game.

He had somehow gotten the idea that he would bend over and discover that the Scrabble tiles had spelled out some kind of eerie message.

When Brandon came home from work on the day that his parents died, he found a note that his mother had taped to the front door. It was a letter addressed to him, and he stood there on the stoop with his hand still on the side of the house, reading it.

Dear Brandon,

Your father and I have made a very difficult decision and I am writing to apologize for any pain that may be caused. Please, honey, don't feel guilty or as if this is all your fault because there is really nothing you could have done. Just always remember the happy times we shared as a family. You were a wonderful son!

All our love,

Mom & Dad

P.S. Please do not go up to our bedroom. Just call the police and tell them that you have found this note and they will come out to the house and help you take care of things.

P.P.S. I already sent a letter to Jodee so she should get it today.

This letter was one of the things that he tried not to think about too much, though sometimes little phrases from it would rise up for no reason to float on the surface of his consciousness.

You were a wonderful son! He thought. *You were a wonderful son!* There were a lot of ways to take that.

He often wondered about Jodee's letter, and whether they had told her something that they hadn't told him. Because she was older, or more responsible, or whatever. For example, had they explained to her in more detail about why they had killed themselves?

But he and Jodee had never actually talked about the letters.

Every once in a while, Jodee would call to check up on him and she would talk about how much she wanted to come back "home" for a visit, just to hang out and maybe even help with whatever finishing touches he was putting on the house. Give him that added "push" he seemed to need.

"I miss you, Li'l Bro," she said. "I can't believe how long it's been since we've seen each other."

"I know," he said.

"I hope you don't think I've abandoned you," she said.

"No, no," he said. He gave a kind of chuckle, and for a moment he thought again about the letter she had received from their parents. Did it say something like: *Jodee, please don't abandon Brandon!*

"Abandon," he said. "Whatever."

"Well, you know what I mean," Jodee said. "We had a toxic childhood—I realize that—but there comes a time when we all have to move on."

"True," Brandon said. He hesitated. There often came a point in the conversation where Jodee would offer to put him in touch with a grief therapist who had been very helpful to her.

"When you grow up with people like Mom and Dad, they catch you up in a cycle," Jodee said. "You can't escape—that's the problem."

"Absolutely," he said. He considered. What did she mean by that?

There were times when he would have liked to tell her that something really weird had been happening to him—something to do with his sense of time ... or?

But what could he say?

He was sitting on the fold-out couch in the living room, on the edge of the bare wafer sofa mattress with the sheets and blankets crumpled at his feet, and the TV stand right at the foot of the bed with the PlayStation wires and the console and cartridges—Tekken 3, Q*bert, Crypt Killer, that kind of stuff—and the dresser from his bedroom and the computer and basically everything from his room upstairs that he wanted cluttered in a kind of fort around the sofa bed. He hadn't been upstairs to his bedroom in probably a long time.

"Well, anyway," Jodee said. "I know you're busy."

He took off his socks and rubbed the itchy soles of his feet, which were being very slowly consumed by a fungus. He had tried all sorts of ointments but the fungus appeared to be indestructible.

"Did I tell you about Zachary?" he said.

In the background, through the telephone line, he could hear the deep, jocky voice of Jake the Medical Resident asking Jodee a question, and she hesitated—maybe gesturing or miming or mouthing, "IT'S BRAN! DON!" exaggeratedly so that Jake the Medical Resident could read her lips.

"Zachary who?" she said. "Zachary Leven from high school?"

"Yeah," Brandon said. "Zachary Leven. He died, actually."

"Geez," Jodee said. "You sure have lost a lot of people from your class. What was it? A car accident? I hope it wasn't drugs."

"Um," Brandon said. He thought about it. "You know—I'm not completely sure what it was. It definitely wasn't a car wreck but ...? Some kind of, like, illness? I hadn't talked to him in a long time and I missed his funeral, so ..."

He found himself sitting there in a state of pause. It was totally unnerving, because sure he had heard how Zachary Leven had died. Or read it somewhere ...? It reminded him of the day that his parents died, sitting there in the living room with the cop, a weight-lifter-looking guy named Mark Mitchell, who had a notepad he was writing in. *Had he noticed anything out of the ordinary about them recently?* Officer Mitchell asked. *Were they having marital problems?*

Had they made any statements concerning feelings of despair, had they verbally expressed any concepts of life not being worth living, that sort of thing? Were they having financial difficulties? And Brandon had been unable to think of a single explanation. There was nothing unusual that he noticed, he said, and he sat there in the wingback chair, the cop on the sofa, the new living room and the candy dish on the coffee table full of red and brown M&M's that he had never seen anyone eat.

He sat there remembering this, holding the phone against his face, and his eyes ran over the topography of the floor. It looked sort of like there was a kind of drain, a vortex around where the sofa bed was. A spiral of materials had begun to form an orbit: a spoon and empty yogurt container on the carpet, wasabi pea, Post-it note, throat lozenge, a sock in fetal position.

"Well—*anyways*," Jodee said at last, after the ellipses had trickled past for a while. She sighed in a gently emphatic way. "I don't want to keep you," she said. "I suppose I better let you get off the phone."

It had occurred to him that maybe something was going wrong with the world. Like global warming or an economic collapse or a coming plague. He could imagine that his parents had somehow intuited or found out about such an event, something so terrible that they couldn't bear to live through it. But what? He couldn't quite conceptualize such a catastrophe, though often he was aware of its presence, its *force*, something large and omnipotent hovering over not just himself and his house but also the neighborhood, the state, the country. Possibly the planet?

He noticed, for example, that many of the stores were closing and remaining empty—the old Beatrice Academy of Beauty across from the high school had shut down, and through the cracked windows you could see the hair dryers all piled together in a jumble, like dead spacemen. Parking meters along the block had been beheaded and were now just bare pipes sticking up out of the sidewalk. There were also more vacant lots than there used to be when he was growing up. These were lots where there once were houses, houses that he used to pass by on his way to school as a kid, and it seemed that they just came and took the houses away when he hadn't been paying attention. All that remained were patches of high grass and weeds, not even a foundation.

He had mentioned this to Patty and Marci, the two head cashiers at work, but this didn't seem to make an impression on them. "Brandon," Patty said. "This city has been sliding downhill for so many years I barely notice it anymore."

"Hon, you have some writing on your arm," Marci observed.

In the bathroom in the basement of the grocery store, Brandon washed the pale underside of his forearm with a paper towel and some industrial liquid soap. But it seemed that he had written on himself with a permanent marker, so it wouldn't come off very well. *WTF ...?* he thought. He pulled his sleeve up and saw that the writing ran up the length of his arm from his wrist to his biceps; it was definitely his own handwriting.

On the lower part of his palm:

Intercerebral myiasis—

maggot infestation of the brain—

extremely rare but not unheard of.

And then crawling up his wrist, very shaky handwriting:

slab rat beg fed garble fast bed bad bag serflet

Then, more neatly, on his forearm:

Conclusion simply the place where you tired of thinking.

And finally, on his biceps, little teeny letters:

Flabbergasted. Flutterghosted. Flatterguessed. Flabergist. Fl

Back when he was in high school, he had the habit of writing notes to himself on his own skin when he didn't have a piece of paper handy. But he had no memory of writing any of this.

Maybe he'd done it in his sleep?

He tried not to let this concept freak him out. He rubbed at it until it had begun to fade a little and his skin felt kind of sore.

He was aware that he might be having sleep issues. He might be addicted to the Internet and video games and maybe that was part of it. That was why he couldn't seem to get the house cleaned up and that was why he kept missing important social-obligation-type things like funerals and that was why he was waking up in the middle of the night writing stuff on his hands and his arms and even his legs and so on which he couldn't remember writing in the morning though there would sometimes be a Sharpie pen clutched in his fist.

When he first started sleeping in the house alone he had found it comforting to have a little music playing when he tried to go to bed, or maybe the sound of the television, The Weather Channel, just the chatter of voices—but soon it was the video games and the computer and well, multiple programs stacked on top of one another, and before long there was a semicircle of electronic devices around the sofa bed where he slept. It was as if they were projecting a small force field around him. It wasn't a powerful force field, but it was at least enough to allow him to rest for a little while.

There were electrical outages in the city and then he couldn't sleep at all. He would sit there alone in the dark, clutching his flashlight. He was certain he could hear sounds in the house. In the ruined bathroom, his parents' bedroom, in the basement, where he imagined the scuttle of cockroaches or Scrabble tiles—

And he'd once actually fled out the back door in his underwear with his flashlight and a sleeping bag in his arms and tried to sleep on the lawn under the old apple tree. But even there—the beloved apple tree of their childhood, “Jonathan the Apple Tree,” their mother had called it—even that behaved strangely. Its leaves would get a white powdery substance on them and then they curled up and fell off, and the apples themselves were tiny and wrinkled and deformed in a way that made them look like little ugly heads, and as he sat in the backyard on the sleeping bag he heard one drop.

... tunk?

A sinister little questioning sound.

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