

Preface

I wrote this this book to express my love for all things, even those things that may seem opposite. My life has been lived in many ways but I have always tried in life, to see the beauty in even the most horrible of those things that life seems to bring us.

I have found it impossible to not find this beauty; if you truly take the time to really look it is everywhere. My life is one of destiny and that of betrayal.

Life has taught me to think of others before myself and that betrayal of those that have pretended to love me, has taught me that life must be lived fully to achieve enlightenment. This story is a collection of those memories.

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“Cover art designed by Kevin Viratyosin”

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“At The Lake”

My birth was in the hospital at Hibbing, MN located on the Minnesotan Iron Range but I was re-born five years later at the lake. Our family had just moved to the lake for my Dads new job as a resort manager. He had been working at the mines as a core driller for iron ore mining exploration, again he had been laid off again and now it was time for a new start. Out of desperation to secure any employment, my father found the resort job and we all found the lake together.

The resort was situated on Moose Bay of Big Pelican Lake near Merrifield, Minnesota on rural route four. It is a strange thing how sometimes desperation can lead us to revelation. The short three years of our staying at the lake forever molded me; these are the first memories of my life living in the Minnesota dream.

We lived in what we called “the lodge;” it was the largest house I had ever seen. We had no electricity, and our water came directly from a hand pump situated by the kitchen sink. The resort was simplicity at its’ finest, a lodge and five one room cabins at the farthest western point of Moose Bay of Pelican Lake.

The lodge had originally been built as a log cabin and had been added onto as the years progressed.

There were still exposed logs that had darkened with age that were mixed with the added white finished walls of newer construction. At night time it was lit with hurricane kerosene lamps which gave off a warm glow only where they were present. Leaving dark corners in each room that remained unseen till the morning light.

My parents and I would huddle around the kitchen hurricane lamp where they would play cribbage till it was time to go to bed.

In the 1950's of Northern Minnesota, we did not have a television or any other electronic entertainment, only the conversations we shared each night as a family. It was a perfect existence, we talked about the weather, fishing, and everyday happenings that made up our family life on the lake.

We would sit there for hours; them playing their card game; me listening to the strange sounds outside. Each sound had a hidden mystery of its origins. I would sit there at the kitchen table and try to guess the sounds creator. There were owls hooting from high atop the pines, while the branches from the shrub just outside the window brushed up against the side of the exterior walls beckoning me into the mysterious darkness. But we were protected by our light from the lamp, protecting and separating us from our fears of the darkness unknown.

I believe I now understand the feelings of our ancestors huddled in their caves, protected by the fire that kept them warm. Each night just at sunset our beloved loons would call to each other, beckoning their lover to come to them. At night it was an eerie call, lonely yet with a tone of hopefulness. As their mate would answer their call, they would then sing together as if their first meeting. With an energy and flamboyance that only someone who has taken this precious sound into their very soul, could they possibly explain it's emotion.

Their song would at first seem to be far off, and then it would build to a crescendo. The sound of two life forms, telling each other of their days adventures in such excited tones that if one is not moved by this choir of nature, you need only listen. Then suddenly silence.

For in a bird's life if you are not a predator, you are the prey. I knew where they were, sleeping side by side on their nest that I had discovered on the edge of the frost heaves of the floating bog. Frost heaves are a creation of water freezing under the floating marsh of the bay that when the ice melts quickly, left behind are these telltale bumps protruding above the flat green colored mossy plain. They poke out their moss covered human like looking heads, they appear to be peering above their secret hiding place. The moss that covers their heads is like soft living hair with light red colored strands of moss flowers at their tops; soft to the touch and waving in the breeze coming from the lake.

In the early spring I would make a game of jumping as fast as I could from one to another, Mother said I looked like I was dancing because of my erratic movements caused by the unusual placement of the heads. Dad would watch me and laugh, always yelling his concern for the dangerous deep water channels caused by the beavers that lay hidden below the floating bog.

One day while dancing on the frost heaves I discovered the loon nest at the very edge of the water where the cat tails grew. At my first investigation it was vacant, but I could tell it was new because of the fading color of vegetation they used to make their nest.

Each day I would go to the nest looking for eggs, or a chance meeting with the loons themselves. The

Loons always watched me from afar nervously, I tried to tell them I would not harm them, they would swim further away. One day I went to examine the nest and there were two eggs, they were white with black spots. It was like magic; on the previous day the nest was vacant and the next day there were two eggs, they were a gift of nature from my friends the loons.

They laid together in their dry nest cradled perfectly in the center of cat tail base and golden tufts of softened grasses.

I gingerly picked up each one to examine their differences, then I carefully placed them back exactly as they were. I was amazed at their warmth, as I held them in my hands; they felt as though their mother had just left.

I looked around for the loons, they were crying mournfully at the center of the bay. I realized I had invaded their home and left the eggs just as I had found them, racing back home dancing over the frost heaves as fast as I could travel, to tell my Mother and Father of my fantastic discovery. I burst through the front door of the lodge and yelled "The loons have laid their eggs!"

Up till this point I had neglected to tell them that I had found the nest. They explained to me that it was important that I never touch the eggs or the nest because once a human has disturbed their nest they would abandon it and the eggs would perish. I knew what the next question would be, had I touched the nest? I stood there in a numbing horror; I lied and told them that I had only looked at the nest and the eggs.

IT WAS THE FIRST LIE THAT I EVER TOLD MY PARENTS AND TO ME IT WAS THE WORST LIE I TOLD THEM. I WALKED OUT THE DOOR NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO, I HAD KILLED MY FRIEND'S FAMILY, BUT MY GUILT WAS SO HEAVY THAT I STILL VISITED THE NEST EVERY DAY. HOPING THAT THE EGGS WOULD BE SAFE AND WARM, I WATCHED FROM A DISTANCE. I WANTED TO TOUCH THEM AND MAKE THEM WARM BUT I COULD NOT CHANCE.

My Dad had told me that once they abandon the nest the predators would smell the eggs decaying and eat them. It was the worst type of torture that I had ever felt; I would stand at the end of the dock and call to my friends in their own language they had taught me until my tears were uncontrollable. While I tried to assure them that I had meant them no harm, and that they were safe.

My father would sit with me holding me in his arms on the wooden dock that protruded into the bay; he knew what my sin was. The loons would sit far off in the middle of the bay, crying together, tearing my very soul apart.

Every night I would call to them at the end of the dock, praying they would forgive me. One day I visited the nest and the eggs were gone! I was horrified, had a predator taken them? I ran to my Father at work on the row boats and stopped short, wondering how I would tell him of my betrayal.

He looked up at me and asked what the hurry was? I told him the truth, all at once I burst into tears because of the relief, and the torture was over for now. He looked at me and saw my pain, he said we cannot control nor only guess nature's hidden secrets. I cried all that night knowing that I had destroyed the family of my only friends on the lake.

The next morning I stood on the dock searching and calling to my friends for hours. I could hear my Dad walking up the wooden planked boat dock behind me as he stopped beside me and took my hand

as we looked together. He said "Nature has a way of working these things out." We looked all over the bay, it was empty.

I LOOKED OVER THE BOG WHERE MY ORIGINAL CRIME HAD BEEN COMMITTED. THEN FAR OUT INTO THE CHOP OF THE WAVES I SAW A DARK SILHOUETTE; FOLLOWING IT WERE TWO LITTLE BLACK AND WHITE OBJECTS BOBBING IN RHYTHM WITH THE WAVES FOLLOWED BY THE MOTHER LOON. I YELLED IN RELIEF BEGAN CALLING TO THEM IN LANGUAGE, THEY BOTH ANSWERED BACK.

Their voices spoke to me as parent does to an errant child. My Dad picked me up as I spoke to them and smiled a smile of pure relief. Their voices spoke to me in celebration of their family, I had been taught a severe lesson. Do not disturb others in their life, for the lessons taught by nature can be very hard.

Life once again returned to normal on the lake, I watched as the loon babies learned their lessons from their parents. Our cabins were beginning to fill with our summer guests, and of course they would bring their children!!! I had not seen another child in months, ever since the beginning of last Fall, when our last visitors had left for home.

But when I was told by my parents that our visitors would be there the next day, it was time to make plans so I could keep their children entertained. I would have to make them my friends as quickly as I could, since most of them would be going home in just two weeks. My job was to take them under my wing and show them the things they would find interesting about the lake.

I would show them all of my secrets, the bog, the old loon nest; we would be required to become great friends as quickly as possible. It was a necessity of time for their visit to be satisfactory. At night we would all go to the end of the dock and I would teach them the loon's language, I would call out to my loon friends and they in turn would call back to us.

The children and I would work hard at perfecting this new language, creating a wonderful choir of children and loons. I relayed to them the lesson I had learned from the Loons and warned them to watch, but not touch this natural world they were visiting.

It was a fantastic life, at night when the parents were sitting in their nylon woven chairs drinking beer on the deck, their children and I would entertain them by calling to the loons. The loons would call back and everyone would applaud for their free entertainment.

One night while we were performing our show I noticed a log floating off shore in the reflection of the full moon over the bay. It was a true Minnesota scene. The adults came to their opinions of where the log had come from. It was a strange puzzle that the log seemed to float eerily on the glass like stilled water, not moving. Everyone's was now peaked as they asked my what he thought it was. He answered, "It is most likely a log that has come loose from the beaver dam", since this was a common occurrence.

All participants became accepting of this explanation; my Dad had espoused his expertise and knowledge of living on the lake.

Everyone relaxed back in there chairs taking in the beauty of the moonlit scene, all of a sudden - the log, six feet at least in length - came alive and shuddered as if shaking off the moon beams. And in one gigantic splash, it disappeared below the waters of the bay.

No one moved, they were in shock, the lake had produced a mystery that was frightening yet strangely exciting, beers fell to the cement pad deck, the children and their mothers were all frozen in fear. Everyone looked to my Dad who simply said nothing, he had no answers.

Here was a lake that produced a sunfish with each cast, where children swam on white sand colored beaches and chased the dollar sized baby turtles as souvenirs. We had an unknown monster living in our lake and Dad would have to sort it out quickly before all of our guests would leave for the safety of the city.

He had to have acceptable answers for the parents and children or it would soon become a disaster. He called the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources warden, who said that it was a Tiger Muskie. My Dad said, "A six foot long Muskie?" The warden said that the lake was known for them, a knowledge they evidently did not want to share with anyone without a question first.

My Dad became worried because he knew that if he did not sort this out immediately, our guests would leave. He came to a conclusion that if he included the men in this hunt, they would keep their family at the cabins till Dad and they could straighten it out. He asked the men if they had any experience in catching fish this size, they professed with excited tones that they had the experience but not the right equipment the task.

They had only come prepared for bass or maybe a northern pike, but not for a monster like this. My Dad's frustration was beginning to show, what was the beginning of a bad situation was quickly becoming a nightmare.

That night while Mom and I sat at the kitchen table with Dad, we both looked at him for some sort of guidance. For the first time in my short life I saw fear and confusion in my Dad's face, he had no answers.

The next morning Mom and I awoke to hear Dad loading the Winchester 30-30 carbine deer rifle, we both looked at each other wondering what was up. We went out to the kitchen and there he was doing his final checks on the rifle.

Mom went about making coffee without saying a word, while I sat by my Dad wondering to say. Mom brought a cup of coffee over to my Dad with a quizzical look on her face. You see she was trying to understand what was happening as she finally asked what he was doing. He said, "I am going after the fish with your Leon, he'll be driving the speed boat, while I do the hunting for the Musky." Mom gave a strange look his way that a person gives to someone they have just to be insane; a kind but look.

She pushed her finger around the top of her coffee cup, you could tell on her face that she too was thinking about these turn of events. She was probably thinking that the stresses of combat in Korea were finally surfacing. The reality that he had called her parents where her brother Leon still lived to ask for his help; was now creeping up into her facial expression. And of course he had explained his plan in depth to them all! Her father didn't like my Dad, especially since he was a war hero and twice the man that he was.

She sat there saying nothing but you could see the doubt growing in her face for my Dad's plan. To me I thought, could my hero get any cooler than this! He explained his plan to us in depth; he said that the plan of action had to be big, or else it would not be believable. I was mesmerized by his attention

to every small in his plan of against the monster of the lake.

Mom was now standing looking out the window, probably wondering how long it would take her to pack all of our things into the car; when we would be forced to leave the resort because of Dad's crazy plan.

Uncle Leon soon arrived, he had driven up all by himself in the panel truck my Grandfather used on his mail route, my Mom breathed a sigh of relief because she was hoping only he knew. This was not the case however, he told us with that satirical smile he had inherited from Grandmother how everyone, everyone! was still laughing when he left their house.

Mom stumbled into the lodge saying nothing to anyone, probably to have a good cry as she often did. Dad said to Leon with desperate authority, "Get the speed boat ready." Uncle Leon had really only shown up to have the chance to drive the speed boat in reality. And thought that my Dad was setting him up for some sort of practical joke. He didn't care however because Leon was always up for fun.

He was only eleven years older than me and was always playing practical jokes on everyone. My Dad and Uncle Leon went out the first day, searching the entire bay, criss crossing back and forth while our guests stood on the dock and waiting. returned with no luck to report, you see the in everyone's face.

Dad was looking worried and said he would get him tomorrow. He tried to make sense of their fear, as he knew that there had never been anyone attacked by a musky. He tried to relay this to our guests but he realized that their fear was contrived by the fear of the unknown and the only way to defeat it was the sure defeat of the monster itself. But this fear, real or not, must be answered with resolve. He told them he would go out again tomorrow and this time he would destroy the beast of the lake.

The next day all of our guests stood again on the dock, watching as my Dad and Uncle crisscrossed the bay. With Leon driving and Dad standing like a statue at the bow of the speed boat with rifle poised ready for anything. I stood there amazed at this scene of bravery, I had never witnessed before. began yelling and pointing into the water, Leon turned the boat around and stopped.

Dad stood there looking into the water, he pulled his rifle to his shoulder and in a quick motion fired repeatedly into the water. The splash from the bullets hitting the water arched over them both in a fine spray as he fired. Then they both then looked over the side of the boat into the water and shook hands and waved back at us and yelled a shout of victory in unison.

All of the guests including the children exploded in cheers that echoed around the bay, everyone was hugging each other. We waited excitedly for their return, they pulled into the dock area and everyone began cheering and applauding. He jumped onto the wooden dock and the men shook his hand, congratulating him on his success.

They asked together, "How big was it?" Dad looked at them and said excitedly, "It was big!" Finally someone asked, "Where is it."

My Dad looked at my Uncle then at me and them and said, "It sank to the bottom as soon as I hit it" and that they would try and retrieve it tomorrow. All the men looked at each other and smiled, the monster problem of the lake had been sorted out and their exodus from the resort not happen.

The children swam at the beach again, and the men took their boats out into the bay to catch fish as the wives went about their curiosities and gossip - the World was safe once again. No one ever asked Dad if he had ever found the monster. I am sure if they had he would have told them that it had sank to the bottom.

After that, things went back to normal, summer was passing and fall was setting in.

We had one couple of late season visitors from California, they were fishing for sunfish dawn till dusk every day. Mom and Uncle Leon were attempting to teach me how to swim from the stern of the speed boat; as my uncle who could swim like a fish was flailing his arms at his sides trying to show me his swimming technique.

We continued at this folly for quite some time, suddenly we heard loud yelling coming from the direction of our guests' fishing location. The man was rowing the wooden boat frantically as fast as a five horse power Johnson outboard yelling, "SHARK!!! SHARK!!!" I screamed, "Get me into the boat!!!"

Meanwhile my Mother and Uncle were laughing so hard at me trying to climb up into the back of the boat feet first as they pulled desperately on my hands trying to pull me up into the boat by my hands; that they kept dropping me back into the water. My Mom could not contain herself watching me try to save my feet from the shark (musky), I was crying and they were now laying on the bottom of the speed boat laughing uncontrollably, holding each other, as I was frantically trying to pull myself up into the boat.

It proved impossible for my uncle to pull me out because he was just a teenager himself and Mom was no help either because of her laughing and trying to keep her cigarette lit and catch her breath at the same time.

THE MAN WAS ROWING THE BOAT WITH ALL HIS STRENGTH FOR THE FAR SHORE, WITH EACH STROKE THE BOW WOULD RAISE OUT OF THE WATER AS HIS WIFE HUNG ON FOR DEAR LIFE AT THE STERN OF THE BOAT. THEY BEACHED THE BOAT AND BOTH RAN UP THE BEACH TOWARD US SCREAMING, "SHARK!! SHARK!!!"

I was still crying, standing waist deep in the water at the back of the boat as Mom and Uncle Leon were still laughing uncontrollably on the bottom of the boat. The Man yelled, "Get him out of the water you fools! it's a Shark!!".

Finally after coming to their senses they lifted me out of the water with renewed sober strength, me whimpering and them still snickering, yet! The guests explained that they were fishing for sunfish when all of a sudden their wooden boat lurched sideways. They then both looked cautiously over the side of the boat to look directly into the eyes of a monster shark (aka, Muskie) as it seemed to look at them casually as it snapped the nylon stringer completely off the boat gunnel like it was nothing.

They watched as the monster slowly descended deeper and deeper into the clear water with the stringer of sunfish trailing alongside his huge elongated body. The guest said he was sure it was a shark he had caught them in the Pacific ocean before and he knew what he was talking about.

By this time my Dad had shown up and told them that there were no sharks in fresh water, the man's face flushed red, for he had come to that conclusion himself at the same time. The man was still livid,

mostly because of his mistake and how he now realized how foolish he looked.

That night we all sat around on the cement pad deck with refreshments; all of them laughing at the whole thing, especially at my ordeal. It's funny now that I think of it, but swimming in Big Pelican Lake took on a whole new meaning to me, I decided to take up the safer pastime of wading.

(A side note: About a month later my Uncle Leon and I were using the speed boat to go out to the sugar sand beach on the finger of land that separated our bay from the main part of the lake to swim, when we noticed something white and shiny on the beach, it was a skeleton of a giant musky about five and a half feet long.

The bones on its back were as big around as my little finger. A coincidence? We both walked to the boat quiet and saying nothing.)

"Buckley"

Buckley was a golden-brown Guernsey calf that Dad had gotten in trade from a farmer that he had worked for at the previous year's harvest time.

His color was that of hot chocolate with golden buttery accents, that framed his huge brown eyes. His eyes were perfectly rounded, and at their fringes his hair was a soft-white and gold. He was in my dad's care, and every day they walked around his pasture that Dad had fenced in just for him. It was a simple relationship for the both of them, as a master to his servant. He was gotten by trade, and out of necessity, as our existence relied upon his inevitable end. Dad would sit with Buckley for hours talking to his friend about his horrors he witnessed in the Korean War.

It was Dad's soul cleansing when they talked together; the listener never questioning the story teller's words. All of my dad's friends except one had lost their lives in the war he had beckoned them to.

We would sit and talk to our friend together, picking the sweetest grass from around the outer reaches of Buckley's fence, feeding him as one feeds a dearly beloved: gently and steadily.

My mom would tell Dad, "Do not get too close to him. You will have to butcher him soon." Dad would answer with his head hung low, "Don't worry. I will do my duty. Talking to him does no harm."

She would look at Dad as if he were a fool, not understanding their relationship. Dad began to see that I too was becoming Buckley's friend, as I dearly wanted to know the secrets he was telling Buckley.

Dad would work at the resort every day till exhausted, and then trudge up the hill to make sure that his friend had his food and was secure for the night. I knew this was their time, so I would sneak up following Dad at an unseen distance. I would hide in the hazelwood brush alongside the trail till Dad would call out to me, "Son, are you hiding there again?"

I would run up the hill and take his hand as we would walk with Buckley to the watering tank. Dad seemed different—at peace. We would rub Buckley's head, and I swear he would smile and wink at us as he ate his hay. He was loved, as all creatures need. We were poor in money, but our lives were rich because of Pelican Lake.

Buckley grew quickly from a calf to a steer, as he seemed to be more beautiful every day. His pasture was small, but sufficient in the grass needed for his growth. He had to spend the entire day alone until the evening, when we would visit him. I would sit in school and wonder what sort of adventures he was developing in his small world of the pasture.

I would imagine his startled look when he scented his neighbors: the deer and bears of the surrounding forest. One a friend, the other a possible threat. I could see him eating grass around his fence line, stretching his neck as far as he could to reach the tender grass shoots he desired.

I knew what it was like to live alone at the lake. I too would invent daily adventures in the surrounding nature that would teach me something new, and which I had not known before. As the school bus would reach the last curve on county-road #4, I would peer out the window, looking at the lodge for Mom and Dad. As soon as the bus doors opened, I ran straight up to Buckley's pasture. There he was, smiling and winking, waiting for me with Dad. Sometimes I felt as though I was disturbing them, but Dad would take my hand and Buckley would lower his head for me to rub.

We three would stay together on the hill till the sun would begin to set, and then Dad and I would walk down the hill towards the lodge.

The closer we got to the lodge, Mom could be seen looking out into the dusk light, trying to make out our shapes from her lonely back-lit-kitchen window, with her customary cigarette propped in her right hand, betrayed by its wisp of white smoke.

Dinner would be waiting, along with the questions of why we wasted all our time with Buckley. My dad would say, "He gets lonely too," when in reality it was Dad who was lonely.

Dad would ask Mom with an air of hope, "You should come and see him, he is growing so fast." She would answer back, "I do not want to get attached to him the way you have, I couldn't do it." His resigned look told me of his pain, he understood what she was saying.

Dad took great pride in the accomplishment of raising this calf into a full grown, healthy and beautiful steer. Buckley was now a yearling, and his fate was edging ever closer. My dad had devised a secret plan to save us all from Buckley's impending demise.

He knew that if he were to be successful at deer hunting this fall, he and Buckley would be spared for another year, at least for one more year, because everyone knew that it was only common sense to wait until he was the proper age of two.

With the added year, Dad's plan was to convert Mom into a Buckley-lover like we had become. Dad was a master of the woods, and was determined to use these skills to save his friend.

In Minnesota, deer hunting is not a sport, it is a religion. Every Sunday men go to church, but in the fall they all go hunting to find their God. To walk through the deep forests of pine, and to hear its whispered ancient language that beckons each deer hunter to venture deeper and deeper to find the

answers they seek.

Amongst that forest of green pines and white birch trees that frame each vista as if on a lodge wall, lies a special experience for those that seek its secrets.

Dad would dig deep into the hall closet, searching for his hunting gear. I watched him search from one unseen corner to another in vain, until finally his face lit up with a smile of discovery.

He pulled and tugged at the box till it appeared at the door of the closet. Dad would take a quick inventory and then haul it over to the kitchen table. Mom would complain as before, but there would be no attention paid to her.

He opened the hard cardboard box and started to remove each article as if he were assisting in the birth of his one true love. It was filled to the top with colored clothes, from bright-orange, to drab-green woollens.

He laid each article on the chair backs surrounding the table, with his red-and-black thick wool shirt, along with everything else that a properly outfitted deer hunter must possess.

Each piece of clothing was examined closely for imperfections, with each imperfection drawing different facial expressions. Each hole and tear spoke to past memories of this woodland drama. The hunt was on.

Leading up to this event, Dad had begun the ritual of growing his beard. A beard and deer hunting are the same compliments as his rifle and cartridges – they are a necessity. His beard was a great joy for me as I would hang onto it as Dad would walk around the house, growling with animated movements like a bear, and chasing Mom around till she gave up.

I was in heaven and Mom was in hell. She complained how rough it was as he attempted to kiss her. He pursued Mother with great relish, laughing as the beard seemed to enliven his hidden passions. He was free.

DEER HUNTING IN MINNESOTA HAS BUT ONE RIVAL—OPENING FISHING SEASON, WHICH THANKFULLY ARE OPPOSITE CALENDAR EVENTS. AS FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME, MAN'S GENETIC NEED TO HUNT WAS A FORMED NECESSITY OF SURVIVAL.

This drama that hunters play to – which leads to the death of one creature – means the survival and renewed strength of another.

The drama that was playing out in our lives was not that humans might survive, but that Buckley would. Dad carried an extra burden in this hunt, with the knowledge that if he were not successful, his friend would die.

The following day was the opening of the season for deer hunting. It was mid-November, and as always the case, nature had brought her coldest weather.

I awoke early and found Dad sitting at the kitchen table in the flickering light of the hurricane lamp, drinking his coffee.

It was still dark outside and the wind was blowing hard from the North, brushing the leafless branches of the willow tree against the lodge, making a melodious sweeping sound.

He said, "It will be very difficult this year. The deer will be forced to deep cover because of the wind." "Finding bedded deer is a challenge." It was as though he were trying to ready me for his possible failure. I watched him as he placed more wood into our potbellied stove. Each of his movements had a purpose, and he was changing from my Father to a hunter.

The stove glowed red at its sides, radiating an intense heat from its metal enclosure. Atop the stove sat the coffee pot, gurgling, forcing hot water onto its transparent-glass top.

Each time it gurgled to the top, you could see the water getting darker and darker, turning into coffee. He then, at the prescribed time, poured the fresh-hot coffee into his Stanley Thermos bottle.

He then prepared his sandwiches, which would suffice until his return that night. They were comprised of fresh-from-the-oven, butter-crust, baked white bread. He then cut off thick slices of Thüringer sausage roll, complimented by half-inch-thick slices of white onion, topped off with deep-yellow mustard, added for the glue that held it all together.

Thüringer has its own description, which those with a more sensible palate choose not to discover. It is made mostly of cow's liver and everything else that few would purposely indulge in, but combined this creation is even worse. It has a smell that one would associate with shoes from someone with a fungus, but to Dad it was just one more delicious part of his ritual.

He used to tell me that women will like the hair it will put on your chest. I should think that if I had never eaten Thüringer, I would surely not have been blessed with my son Dax.

Dad grabbed his jacket and hugged me, and said he would be back before dark. I watched as he left out the door, making the last check of his gear. I watched as he crossed the road that separated the resort from the deep woods beyond, straining my eyes in the early dawn as he disappeared into the birch forest, catching intermittent glimpses of him as he passed between their trunks, until he was completely out of site.

The wind was pushing the pine trees in the forest back and forth with a great energy. I watched this natural wonder taking place before me and thought of how brave my Dad was, going to a place that I was forbidden to go.

The woods of the 1950's Minnesota that I grew up in went on endlessly in any direction. If he were to get injured, he alone would have to make it back on his own.

Neighbors at that time were miles away, and if something were to happen to Dad, by the time they would put together a search party he would be froze to death. I sat on the porch, watching and waiting for Dad to mysteriously appear at the edge of the woods, just as he had disappeared earlier in the morning.

Tipi, my little black terrier, was sitting with me as he always did. He was a gift from my dad to help relieve my loneliness. We sat together all day in the freezing cold, while Mom begged us to come in and wait for Dad.

I refused, telling her that I was waiting for Dad's rifle report, signaling his success. We sat there until dark, but there were still no sounds of Dad's rifle. My fear began to rise for my dad's safety, but all I could do was wait. When you are six years old, your father is your hero, and your needed mentor to

manhood.

It was now pitch-black outside, and still no sounds signaling my dad's return. My mother began to worry as well. She suggested we should bake some more bread, and I sat there saying nothing as she began her busy work. It was now hours later and the wind began to blow more intensely. I could see intermittent, errant snow flakes pass the lit-kitchen window.

THE SOUNDS OF THE ENCROACHING DARKNESS BECAME MORE AND MORE INTENSE, AS I STRAINED TO HEAR THE SOUND OF MY DAD'S FOOTSTEPS ON OUR PORCH. WHEN I FINALLY THOUGHT I HEARD FOOTSTEPS ON THE PORCH, I LEAPED TO MY FEET AND RUSHED TO THE DOOR. MOM STOPPED ME WITH A PROTECTIVE ARM, AS SHE WAS UNSURE WHAT IT WAS. THE DOOR BURST OPEN, AND IN WALKED DAD, COVERED IN BLOOD. MOM SHRIEKED "ART!!", BUT HE WAS SMILING FROM EAR TO EAR. HE TOLD ME TO HURRY AND BRING A LAMP OUTSIDE. I HURRIED PAST MOM, WHO WAS STILL CHECKING DAD OUT IN A SEMI-STATE OF SHOCK.

I grabbed the lamp and followed Dad quickly outside, and he pointed in a direction for me to hold the light up to. There at the edge of the light was a large shadowed form on the ground. Dad had shot a huge ten-point whitetail buck.

Tipi and I began to dance around the buck, me laughing, and Tipi barking uncontrollably, while Mom smiled too. Dad was exhausted. He explained how he had dragged the deer through the dark woods for hours, as he was afraid that if he left it till the next morning the wolves might get it. We all looked at each other, knowing that Buckley would be safe for another year.

The next day Dad and I walked up the hill to care for Buckley. Buckley seemed to understand that he had received his reprieve. He ran around his pasture, kicking up his rear hooves like a child who had just received a wonderful present.

We laughed at his antics and then Dad became quiet. He looked stoically at Buckley, because he knew the dreaded day would still come.

Life on the lake returned to normal again. Winter was coming, and the resort would have to be prepared for the long Minnesota winter. Every day after school, Dad waited for my bus so we could walk up together to see Buckley. The snow was getting deep, but we didn't notice.

It was a daily ritual that pleased us all, as these visits seemed to relieve their loneliness. Spring came slowly, but eventually you could see the upside-down boats outlined in the deep, receding snow.

Every spring the wooden row boats would have to be sunk in the shallows of the lake to swell their planks from the dryness of the previous winter. Dad would then raise them one by one and seal the remaining cracks with tar, which in turn he would paint a brilliant white. Then they would be tied neatly in a row against the dock, awaiting our guests, bobbing in the waves of the bay.

All had been forgotten about last fall's deadly drama, and we all went about our exquisite life that we shared on Big Pelican Lake. When spring comes to Minnesota, it seems like years before that the lake had been covered with ice and deep snow. Now everything had once again turned to a vibrant collage of greens, mixed with dashes of yellow-swamp marigold and purple-Siberian iris at the fringes of the lake shore.

I could see the beavers swimming almost submerged to and fro across the bay, resuming their work

left from last year of cutting the green saplings to repair their dam, and feed their young. They set about their ritual methodically as if they had never stopped during the winter's freeze. Occasionally you could hear them splash their great oversized tail for danger—real or perceived.

It was glorious to see the new life emerge, from the grass, to the animals that browsed upon the new shoots. I would sit for hours at the end of the dock, watching nature unfold before me like a well-choreographed play with fine actors, precise in their every detail. The male sunfish below the dock was fanning his fins, preparing a nesting bed on the bottom of the bay for his female, heavily-laden with eggs. Occasionally a large-mouth bass would pass over, casually surveying the nest, as if to take stock in his dinner plate.

The male sunfish would follow closely, darting at the bass's tail to give a subtle warning that he could not hope to complete. The bass would simply float away towards the emerging lily pads to assume his vantage point. Lily pads grow quickly to emerge to the water's top, seeking the Sun's rays that will help produce the heavenly flowers of white and pink.

As summer approaches, the light-breezes off the bay carry the sweet fragrances that will envelop the resort, as if standing in a French-perfumer's shop.

It is a heady and delicious smell that you can almost taste on your lips as you breathe. The flowers seem to hold the last of the sunset's rays, as they are the last thing you see when darkness falls on the water as night approaches. In the morning you can see the trillium flowers carpeting the forest's edge, where they intermingle with the white birch tree stems. The wind blows their white-flowered heads in movements that resemble a giant's caressing hand moving over them. They seem to be directed by an orchestral conductor, directing each blossom, each leaf, in an energetic play composed just for us and the sun to admire.

Each flower is whiter than the next, trying to coax the bees to come and pollinate them, so that they may produce the seeds needed for next year's life to start over again, as they have done for ages, since the beginning of their existence.

After the bees have done their work, the petals begin to fall and blow in the wind, as if the earth was breathing in and out the last perfumes of spring.

It is a wonder to watch as nature shows her many secrets. To those that wish to see its daily changes, the admission is free.

I would walk through the grove of trees next to the lodge, seeking out the last of the blooming flowers. Then I would notice that where there was once a flower, there was now a string of reddish-colored seed orbs, that would in time turn to a dark blue, resembling the rattles of a snake.

They have the appearance of cranberries, but they are to never be eaten. I watched as spring would fold neatly into summer, then to fall, as all of the woodland creatures began their preparations for winter.

One morning the loons were gone, as were the Canaries, seeking areas to the south with longer seasons and a plentiful food supply. The beavers and muskrats went about their work even more hurriedly than before, zig-zagging across the bay, seeking out the last shoots of green that would

secure their survival till spring.

Each day at dusk, my dad and I would climb the hill to Buckley's pasture. I would pick the sweetest grasses along the trail for our dear friend. I noticed that the grass along the trail had produced seeds at its tips. I asked Dad if it was wheat. He smiled and said no, and that it was just a way for the grass to live on.

I THEN ASKED, "AM I *YOUR* SEED DAD?" HE STOPPED AND LOOKED AT ME LIKE HE HAD JUST MET ME AND SAID, "YOU ARE MY SEED THAT WILL FOLLOW ME." HE TOOK MY HAND AND SQUEEZED IT LIKE NEVER BEFORE; WE HAD MADE A CONNECTION THAT I DID NOT UNDERSTAND.

We reached the pasture and there Buckley stood, waiting as always. His big brown eyes looked at us, and then his brow furled slightly, perhaps trying to understand our difference. He was staring at Dad, and for the first time I saw tears running down Dad's cheeks.

I gave Buckley the fresh, slightly green grass I had just picked. He ate it cautiously, always watching Dad. Their relationship had changed too that day. I was in shock, for I had never seen my hero cry.

What had I said? What unknown secret had been exposed? Was it the secret of the seed? We walked back to the lodge as I could see that Dad was visibly shaken, because I did not understand the change we were all going through.

Mom never mentioned from that day forward my dad's friendship with Buckley. The relationship between Mom & Dad changed too, like spring to fall, and I had completely forgotten Dad's impending duty.

There was a coldness in the lodge that everyone felt. Dad would stand close to the pot-belly stove, trying in vain to revive the warmth of the past summer. Each day fall turned colder, and ever closer to winter. One day while Dad and I were visiting Buckley, he said, "It is time," struggling to say the words.

I looked at Dad in horror, and asked, "What about the Deer hunt? You will save Buckley again!" He looked at me with a deeply sorrowful look and said that he had made a mistake, and that he should have bought a cow for milk. I was in total disbelief, because my hero was going to murder our friend. I could not hold his hand any more as we walked back to the lodge.

Our relationship had changed as well. Our hearts were broken, and now our paradise was gone. We were being forced to play out what nature demands from all her creatures—survival.

The celebration of life, is inevitably followed by death, to complete the cycle. I could no longer follow the path to visit Buckley, as I could not bear this part of nature that was playing out. In the lodge the conversations were hollow, as we sat at dinner each night looking into the darkness outside.

In late fall the darkness comes early to the woods of Northern Minnesota. It seemed to have enveloped our very souls.

Finally the decision had been made as to which week the duty would be completed, to assure us of our preservation. I followed Dad from my hideout in the brush along the trail, out of the need for answers. I am sure he knew I was there, but he did not call out to me this time.

Dad rubbed his friend's forehead softly. Buckley seemed to know. The next morning we heard automobile horns honking on the road outside of the lodge. We jumped out of bed and ran outside to see Buckley proudly standing in the middle of the road.

Dad grabbed a rope hanging in the porch and went up to Buckley, asking him what he was doing on the road as he led him back to his pasture on the hill.

Dad came back down the hill to the lodge and entered. Mom had already poured him a cup of coffee. She looked at Dad and said, "You should have been more careful in closing the pasture gate." He said "I did," as he looked in his cup trying to understand what had happened.

The next morning we were again awakened by the sound of car horns blaring angrily. We all went outside, and there was Buckley again, as proud as ever. Dad walked Buckley back to his pasture, and this time Mom chided Dad by saying, "How can a cowboy not know how to tie a pasture securely?" Dad had been a real cowboy after the Korean war, and worked at two large ranches, breaking horses and everything else a cowboy must do.

The lodge was once again filled with conversations about these strange events, and everyone had their own idea. We all sat at the kitchen table, laughing at our foolish friend and his antics.

Mom had her own ideas too, and I believe she thought Dad was leaving the pasture gate open on purpose so Buckley could escape. But Dad swore that it was not the case, and that he would figure the mystery out.

The next morning, horns were again honking angrily as Dad ran to get Buckley. He grabbed Buckley's rope, but he would not budge. Dad got angry and pulled at the rope with all his might, but Buckley would still not budge from the road.

The milk-truck driver jumped out of his truck and tried to help, but they still could not budge Buckley. The driver looked over to Dad and said, "You know, it seems as though your steer is trying to get himself killed."

Dad dropped the rope and stood there in shocked disbelief. He knew at that moment that the driver was right.

We all stood in the middle of the road for what seemed like hours. Mom started to cry, as I was trying to grasp it all.

Finally Buckley started to walk back up to his pasture, as Dad took his rope in his hand and walked beside him, visibly shaken. His legs seemed out of time and rubbery as he walked back to the lodge.

Dad walked into the kitchen and sat down, as Mom tried to find something to keep her busy to escape from the moment. He now realized it was true. His friend was trying to save him from his duty.

Dad looked at me with an expression I had never seen before. He stood up abruptly, knocking over his chair and not noticing it, as mom said nothing.

He went to the hall closet and reached inside, and his face tightened as he grabbed something. It was his deer rifle! I was in shock, and tried to speak as Mom ran into their bedroom crying.

It was severely cold as he walked out the door without even a jacket, marching up the hill. I wanted to chase him down and beg him to stop, but I did nothing.

I sat there frozen in my chair, and then with the loud "Bang!" from the rifle report, I shuddered from deep inside, feeling like I was sinking into the floor.

Dad returned from the hill. He looked different. I could not look at him.

The next week, little was said in the lodge. Dad walked into the kitchen carrying a butcher's box full of packaged meat. He sat it down gently on the table, and no one spoke. Dad looked deeply at me, and said, "Buckley was our friend, and as any true friend, he gave his life so that we may live."

I LOOKED AT DAD, AND RAN AND HUGGED HIM AS HE DROPPED TO HIS KNEES AND HUGGED ME BACK. OUR FAMILY HAD MATURED BY ANOTHER YEAR ON THE LAKE. WE HAD LEARNED THAT NATURE CANNOT BE RUN FROM—IT MUST EMBRACED.

"HEN'S AND CHICK'S"

My first memories of Grandmother are of her smile, and that she was always busy in our lives. She taught us to love this life, no matter what our circumstances were. She always told me, "Never be boring." I believe I have done what she wanted of me.

She was a lovely woman of the country, and married to, to say the least, a difficult man.

If I were to describe her, I would have to call her a laughing sadist. Even when things were horrible, she always had this prankster-smile, as though she was observing this experiment of our life.

Her hair was a thick coiffure, deeply dark and rich, with strokes of gray that outlined her slightly contoured European facial features. Her movements were strong, yet gentle in her duties of a country girl: always cooking, canning, and baking one thing or another to assist in her family's needs.

Her existence was based on one thing—others' happiness. Every summer I would be dropped off with my grandparents, to give my parents their needed rest from me. It was an odd arrangement, as my grandmother would be greatly relieved by my arrival, but Grandfather would quickly disappear. I learned from her to love flowers and to understand the importance of gardening. She taught me that this work was a labor of love.

My grandparents lived deep in the north-woods of Minnesota, near a county road seldom visited by strangers. It was a secluded life with little secrets. They had the ability to know whose car was passing by its distinctive sound, and if it was unknown, they would get up and look out the window facing the road to watch the stranger's vehicle. Guessing who it might be, they would ponder their destination and who they might be visiting.

In her youth, Grandmother was the county switchboard operator for the telephone company. She took great pride in knowing everything that went on in her neighborhood, mostly by listening in on others' conversations.

Those of us who were lucky enough to grow up in this country life of little technology, learned to flourish in others' personal lives. The phone system was connected together by independent neighborhood lines to each farm, and then connected to the county's main line.

Each house had its own distinctive ring, signaling the occupants and the rest of their neighbors that someone was getting a call.

Each knew that if they got a call, everyone else would be listening in. It was comical to watch her pick up the receiver very slowly, as to not reveal her eavesdropping. She would hush me as I would sit waiting for the news, and her face would signal the impending news report.

She would always tell me that listening in on others' conversations was her duty, to make sure that all was well in their world. But I knew that she was just lonely, and this was her way of staying in the information-loop. There were no secrets between friends or enemies in this woodland neighborhood.

She would then take a walk in her garden, pondering all she had learned from the eavesdropping, and deciding what, and how, she would spread the news to friends and relatives—cordially of course.

The garden was her sanctuary, where she would inspect each plant while putting together the news of the day. I would cling to her, always fearful of the barn-yard rooster who patrolled this shared sanctuary, staying close behind us, watching our every movement.

Grandmother told me that my uncle Frank and aunt Lynn would soon be arriving with my cousins. She prepared the news in her head, and I waited excitedly for my cousins' arrival. Their car entered my grandparents' gravel driveway from the main road and came to a dusty stop. I could see the almost white-blond heads of my cousins bobbing around, preparing to escape the car.

As the car came to a stop in a cloud of dust, it was like an eruptive birth; there were eight of them running towards me all at once. At first it was sort of scary and I almost ran for the house, but then their smiles mirrored mine, as we looked similar, and everything calmed down quickly.

There's a funny thing about relatives. Even though you are strangers, you share a relative life together, and the first awkwardness of meeting is washed away, because you have the same reactions to one another.

I would immediately take them to the garden, which I took possession of. This was my home for the summer, and I knew all its secrets. Grandmother would whisk the adults away into the house for coffee and gossip.

I would lead my cousins immediately to the garden to show them the blooms, and what the blooms became. My cousins would graciously listen intently because their home had a garden too. Gardeners, even as children, share in this wonder of life, in this connection of our families.

We would walk closely together, always watchful of the rooster, for I had explained to them about this menace. Every once in a while one of us would stray from the group, and the assassin-rooster would chase the interloper back to our flock.

Eventually he became brazen enough to attack the entire group, and our screams would bring Grandmother running with a broom to our rescue. My cousins and I would flock around her like

chicks to a mother hen. The rooster would take up his guard far away enough to avoid her wrath, but close enough to keep us nervously watching.

He was very large for his type of bantam-bred chicken, and he managed his hens with a severe authority. He would guard their perimeter from dangers—real and imagined—strutting around the farm yard like it was his, and his alone.

His plumage was a fantastic shiny-red body, capped by a darkened-ebony hood, with a bright-orange comb on the crest of his head. As we ventured deeper into Grandma's garden, we clung instinctively to her safety, always aware of his presence. He was watching us, making sure that we would not disturb his flock of hens.

The garden was the dining area of the chickens, with each leaf holding the promise of a delicate meal of insects or slugs.

Grandmother would walk deeper and deeper into the garden, educating each of us on our questions about the plants before us, drawing us deeper into her sanctuary of safety. However, just as one of us would stray from that safety, the rooster would chase the offender back to Grandmother, flapping his wings and pecking at their heels, till driving them back to her flock.

He would take great pride in this work of his, and Grandmother would always reveal that sadistic smile that I grew to love.

For us, the garden held fresh-from-the-earth vegetables, and of course the bright-red and superbly-sweet strawberries. Grandmother knew that the strawberries were the only real reason we were there, so she would always start her lesson on the garden plants at the greatest distance from the strawberries.

Relishing in her control over her brood's desire of the sweet-red strawberries, it was another simple lesson of life: to get to the sweet things in life, you must pick the weeds first.

It was a sun filled morning in mid-summer, and the last of the dew was still clinging to the leaves. At that time of day, the garden was the most beautiful place to be, with the buzzing-bees pollinating the flowers, flying from one to another, as if dancing in the air to the music of the birds, singing in the trees that surrounded the garden.

It was the beginning of the early harvest, when all the plants are at their zenith. In the bright-greens, fading to shadowy-blue foliage, it seemed as each plant tried to outdo their neighbor for our attention. Opening wide to the Sun's rays of energy and growth, they would hide the fruits that cling to them as a protectant mother does, until they are perfectly ready to be seen and enjoyed.

We stayed close to Grandmother's safety, mimicking each step she took, ever mindful of the assassin watching us. He was perched on the electric-pig fence that surrounded the garden, watching us with his pure-black-darting eyes, waiting.

We huddled around her, clinging to her every movement, to every word she spoke. As we watched, the rooster watch us. I noticed he was eying a particularly large-green grasshopper on the other wire above his head. He moved as a predator does—taking careful notice, but not so much as to alarm the prey of his intentions.

He stretched out fully to snatch the grasshopper in one quick thrust. All of a sudden his entire body straightened and convulsed unnaturally, and then his wings shot out from his side and shook uncontrollably. We all watched in amazement as he dropped to the ground, lifeless. We advanced cautiously to the rooster, thinking it could be a trick. I poked him carefully with a stick that was lying next to him, as we were all ready to scramble to Grandmother, but there was no movement.

Upon realizing the rooster was dead, we all let out shouts of joy, dancing around his lifeless body. The assassin was dead and we began kicking him in turn, releasing our vengeance upon him as he had done so many times before to us. All the while Grandmother stood there with her arms crossed, laughing at our antics.

She said laughing, "Children, please stop, as he is quite tenderized!" She scooped him up in her arms, and proceeded to the chopping block, while we all followed howling at our new found freedom.

At dinner that night Grandfather made a comment suggesting cautiously to Grandmother, "This chicken is a bit tough, don't you think?" We all looked at each other and giggled. His confused questioning immediately received the expected smile from her.

You see, the rooster was Grandfather's trained assassin. He had gone to great lengths to find this giant rooster, which he got to protect the hens. That it harassed us was just icing on the cake for him. Grandmother responded in a half-serious laugh, "He was tenderized quite well, wasn't he children?" as she smiled at us with that sweet-sadistic smile of hers.

The pig fence that Grandfather had built to house the pigs in was powered directly from the county power line, which he was stealing electricity from because he was too cheap to buy electricity like everyone else.

At night I would lay in bed under Grandmother's quilts, and occasionally a violent squeal would erupt from one of his pigs after almost being electrocuted by accidentally bumping into the fence. I would giggle with laughter under the covers listening to this bizarre sound, which I suspected was my grandmother's reaction as well.

Grandfather was one of those people who took great pleasure in others' disappointments. He was a rather large man of Basque-ancestry, with a large, balding head, with white hairs at its fringe.

While working on the rail road as a young man, he lost the front of his right foot in an accident, which was his natural excuse to not seek steady work, and to receive pity from all of those who were told the story.

Another school year passed and I was again installed at my Grandparents' home for the summer. As usual, I felt the disdain of my grandfather, who felt saddled with my care and amusement. His care was only invited by my grandmother's intent on him spending time with me.

He complained regularly to Grandmother that I was totally useless. She then forced him to take me on his country-mail route, which he relished above all else. It was his moment of empowerment over all whom he delivered to. There was no time in which he did not have his desired power. He delivered bills, notices of death, and government notices.

He would drive down the dusty-back roads of the early 1960's Minnesota, delivering his power over

all of his customers. With an air of shared self-importance, we would rumble down the road in his Chevy panel-truck.

I was eight years old, and useless by a man's standards. He smoked cigarettes which he rolled from a tin of Prince Albert. He did this act with great care as he drove along, while holding onto the truck's steering wheel.

His task of making me useful was now his sole priority. We spent hours every day on the mail route, where through his training, I became a master at cigarette rolling.

My usefulness was now proven. When he took me to the post office where he picked up his mail to be delivered, he would gather all the mail carriers so he could show them my perfected skill. Each one that I would roll to perfection would guarantee me one of his large pink mints he kept on the truck's dashboard. I became a master of this profession, and although unbeknown to me at the time, it would prove very important to me in the late 60's of my adolescent life, growing up in Minnesota.

Dust would billow from the rear of the truck as we drove from one mailbox to another. We would drive all day in the heat of summer, him with his stories, and me with my new found profession.

Years later I understood why Grandmother forced us together—it was the only time she could be sure that he would not betray their estranged love. Because he had taught me this new trade, to Grandmother's chagrin, she declared that he would build me a dog house for my reward, and for his punishment.

My grandfather had many flaws, but he had one saving grace—he was a master builder of homes.

He set to the task of building the most beautiful dog house anyone had ever seen. It would be built for Rusty, their cocker spaniel, who was loved by all. He was of a blonde-rust color, reflective as the sunlight would dance on his chest in rhythmic waves, as he breathed methodically while snoozing in the sun-drenched porch.

Grandfather became obsessed in this endeavor, and he used the finest materials and the most decorative design. Each piece was planned to fit perfectly. He added lattices on the roof's eaves for decoration, and only the best shingles were used. As he would set to his punishment, grandmother and I would watch him from the porch doorway, amazed at his determination to build this mansion of a dog house.

This went on for days, as each day he would assemble all of his power tools, planning his grand design.

Grandmother would watch with her sadistic smile and I would watch with great pride in his labor at this quixotic endeavor. I would move over and sit by the red-rose bush next to Grandmother's laundry lines, and watch him while she hung the laundry.

We would make a game of which of the bright-red-rose blooms were the most fragrant. He would occasionally glance our way and grimace in disgust at my interest in beauty—something he could not understand. Grandmother would simply smile at his dismay.

One day as we watched him in his labors through the glass-porch door, going on now for two weeks,

he signaled to us that the masterpiece had been completed. He stood on top of the roof of this mini mansion, looking over his masterpiece.

He looked like a giant who was trying to stomp his way through the roof. Grandmother quipped, "He looks like a big bird perched up there." We both began to snicker just as he looked up to signal his triumph, and for us to come over and see his completed work.

His face became as red as a brightly-lit-Christmas-tree light, as he leaped off the roof with a roar, and landed perfectly atop a four-foot-long board, which had a six-inch-long-protruding spike, precisely where had landed.

He looked down at his foot in horror. Through the top of his work boot the spike emerged with traces of sock and a trickle of blood, through the same deformed half-foot that he treasured so desperately.

He let out a wild scream like a mad man. We looked at him trying to understand what had happened. There he was with his carpenter's hammer, trying to pull ever so gingerly from his foot, the board and spike.

He looked at us with an unknown hatred, as we looked at each other and burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter. We could not control it—this unknown delicious feeling.

We were standing by the laundry lines as he was screaming words at us I didn't understand. She grabbed me by the hand and we ran to the house trying to escape his wrath, but each time we tried to open the porch door latch, our hands would slip off the handle because we had to hold our sides from the intensely painful laughter.

Each time we would glance back in his direction as we tried to get up from the ground in front of the porch door, we would see him getting closer, dragging his piece of wood behind him like he had only one ski.

He was now waving his hands wildly, screaming all of those new words at us. As he got closer to the clothes-line, the board got caught up on the rose bush and he tripped into Grandmother's sheets hung on the line, and he was now fighting an epic battle to free himself.

He looked like King Kong trying to strike at the airplanes that buzzed around him, roaring his anger while his arms flailed about.

Meanwhile, Grandmother and I were still writhing around in the dirt, holding onto each other at the porch-door entrance, trying in desperation to open it, while laughing in fits of uncontrollable insanity.

He finally reached us, stumbling and dragging the board behind him. Standing before us was this enraged giant with a hammer in his hand, all wrapped up in Grandmother's sheets, to do what, who knew. We tried to stop laughing, but every time we looked up at him we burst into laughter again, and by this time he must have seen his reflection in the porch door.

He looked bewildered, and then he too began to laugh. Here was the great builder, wrapped in white sheets like a Roman warrior—hammer included—with a two-by-four stuck to his foot.

Grandmother and I had shared a special moment together—the delicious pain of uncontrollable

laughter. Grandfather too had experienced pain, but not as delicious as ours.

STAYING AT THE FARM WAS A SPECIAL TIME FOR ME.

"SANTA'S COMING, ISN'T HE?"

The year was 1968. It was a very cold and record-high-snowfall winter. One morning when we awoke, our mother yelled up to us in a frantic tone to get up. My sister Dana and I jumped out of bed, anticipating a snow-day from school, because it was in the weather forecast we heard the night before.

That night as we went to bed, the wind was picking up and the snow was beginning to come down in large flakes, adding to the already several inches of accumulated snow on the ground.

In the darkness, you could see the snow build to mounds and wisps like whipped cream, in its own world of artistic freedom, highlighted only by the occasional street light, which seemed far off because of the shadows-upon-shadows that they produced. It is a fantastic world they create, looking like blankets of white-meringue frosting.

We raced downstairs to get to the television. Casey Jones, Captain Kangaroo, and of course Axel and Carmen-the nurse would be waiting for us, to welcome us to another day in the state of mind of the 1960's Minnesota.

Mom called us into the kitchen nervously. She was sitting with a cup of steaming coffee and her signature cigarette at the kitchen table. She sat, looking into her cup of coffee like someone with terrible news to tell. I sat down at the table not knowing what to expect.

Dana was pouring cereal into a bowl, when Mom looked at me with fear in her eyes. She said, "Steve, I cannot see out the windows. The snow has covered them up."

I looked up from the table, and for the first time I noticed what she was talking about. The light that was coming through the window was filtered with an almost transparent veil of snow. I jumped up from my chair as she looked at me with a smile, betraying her need for someone else to be afraid as well. Instead I let loose a loud "YIPPEE!" Not only would school be closed, but the sledding would be fantastic.

Dana startled from my yelling and started to cry. I grabbed her and hoisted her up on my shoulders to show her what was going on, and she too began laughing.

Mom looked at us like we had just lost our minds, because we were now captive in our own home! It was probably an old fear from the past that freed itself from her genetic memory of ancient times, when her people were often captive in their homes until the spring-thaw.

To us, it was like another Christmas present. It was added time to our coming Christmas vacation. Mother was trying to bring calm to us from her fear, and we in turn were celebrating the new snowfall. It helped us forget that there were still no Christmas presents under the tree.

We had all decorated the tree together the night before with an uneasy happiness. Dad joked that there might not be any presents this year. Mom looked at him with a painful smile and said he was just kidding. However, I knew they weren't.

It had been a difficult year for us, as Dad once again had to start a new job that paid even less than the last one. Things were bad for us all. There was an uneasy happiness that Mom, Dad, and I shared, because for Dana it was the first Christmas she would remember for the rest of her life.

Christmas for us was the one time I could be sure that Mom and Dad would not be arguing again. There would be fantastic baked goods that Mom would make, and Dad would always sneak around, trying to hide each present that he had picked up after work, but this year that part of the mystery was not happening.

He seemed more and more nervous as Christmas was now only a few days away, and I could tell he was not happy. He was desperate. He would try to mask his fear by finding work for me to do, and then you could tell that this idea was worse because I was doing what I was told to do. His hidden idea was backfiring, because as everyone knows, and as he too realized, Santa loves all children, especially the good little boys and girls.

Decorating the tree the previous night together was a time when each of us added their own touches. After we had finished decorating the tree, we would look at our differences and similarities—the things that make a family a family.

In a family like ours, the parents never spoke of our financial troubles with us because of their embarrassment. There was always an uneasy sense of shared nervousness, as our smiles hid the truth of our fears. Was Christmas coming this year?

I was nine years older than my sister, and I had celebrated many Christmases with our parents through very difficult times. However, we were together, and for me that was all that mattered. We seemed to have grown through these difficulties together.

FOR MY SISTER THIS WAS ALL NEW, AND MAYBE I FELT A GUILT THAT I HAD NEVER KNOWN BEFORE, BECAUSE WE NEVER HAD TO WORRY ABOUT DOING WITHOUT, WHEN ALL YOU HAD WAS EACH OTHER. MAYBE THIS WAS THE NEW FEELING MOM, DAD, AND I SHARED, AND HONESTLY DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THESE NEW FEELINGS.

We had just moved to Sauk Rapids from the country, and there were reminders everywhere that we did not have the things we didn't know we needed. Dana was super excited, and asked me almost every hour, "Is Santa coming soon?" I would tell her, "Yes, he will come."

Usually we spent Christmas day at my mom's parents' home, but this year Dad could not bear it. We were broke, and with barely enough to eat, because we had moved to this house after gardening season was over, out of necessity for Dad to find work. Going to my grandparents' house definitely had a different meaning for my dad, as this was where he was put to the supreme test of courage.

The Korean War could only be described as a training period for this war between Dad and Grandpa. Grandfather had a great talent of making everyone's accomplishments seem insignificant to his. *It was a special time for my Dad.*

This year was different. Dad had lost his good paying job at the creamery at no fault of his own, and

the manager had embezzled the profits. There was no way Dad could face my mom's relatives this Christmas, and Mom was sad because of it, but understood.

This Christmas we would either make it together or fall apart. Dad had found another low-paying-night job so that we would survive at least financially, but now he was working sixteen hours a day.

To Mom, I'm sure she felt like he was trying to escape this picture of failure that she had to face each day with a smile, because in her family, work came second to family.

There was no speaking about going to Grandmother's house this year, at least not by all of us. Each night their arguments became louder. My sister would come to my room and talk to me, flinching every time their angry voices would echo up the stairs.

Her first words were always the same: "Is Santa coming?" I would tell her that he would, and to not worry. I was getting tired of her asking me this, and maybe it was because I was afraid that I was telling her a lie too. After her persistent questioning she would head off to her room.

I would lie awake in my bed, listening to my parents screaming at each other, trying to pick out clues of what Christmas was really going to be like. I could hear my mother begging my dad to take us to her parents' home, so at least the kids would have a Christmas.

My father's pain could only be detected by his anger in his response—"No!" He told her it would be our family, and our family alone that would celebrate Christmas together this year. Dad could simply not face another year of disappointing looks from her relatives, as he had enough of those Christmases.

It was now Christmas-Eve morning, and I could smell Mom making a special breakfast for Dana and I. I met her in the upstairs hall and we walked downstairs together. I grabbed her hand as we turned the corner to the living room, and noticed that there were no presents under the tree.

Mom quickly whisked us into the kitchen to save herself from the impending questions from us, which she had no answers for, and from the three-year-old looking down at her pancakes.

Dana and I were eating our breakfast with Mom, who was now talking about all the wonderful things we would bake together, like her melt-in-your-mouth popcorn balls, which I taught Dana how to mold with her hands for the first time.

The fragrance of spices from baking the pumpkin pies would permeate each corner of the house, taking us away from everything we were worried about.

Our mom had a talent of taking simple ingredients from the cupboard and devising wonderful treats that would carry us through the holidays together, no matter what. She made a deal with us: if we would help, she would make them extra sweet just for us. We volunteered for the assignment with excited vigor.

She would cut the crust-trimmings from around the pie, coat the strips with egg, and then sprinkle them with sugar and cinnamon for a first-taste of the treats to come.

As we sat at the kitchen table munching on our first Christmas treat, I could see Dana was mustering

up her courage. She took a deep breath, that seemed to be taken directly from Mom and I, and asked, "Is Santa really coming this year?"

Before this moment of happiness left our mother's smile, I said, "If you truly believe, he will come!" Mom gracefully smiled at me with an uncertain smile that I had never seen before.

It was truly Christmas again, just as I had remembered them from before, and we were laughing again. I stopped eating for a moment and watched Mom and Dana munching away, smiling at each other. I realized something strange at that moment—that I was the only one that truly believed.

I continued eating, watching my mom and sister talking and catching the crumbs from our treat in their cupped hands.

The rest of the morning, Dana and I talked about our plans for the day to come, and I told her I would have to shovel the new snowfall before we could go sledding.

I got dressed for the work ahead, as one does for hard work, and walked outside. I looked at the drift which neatly covered the kitchen window that had earlier caused Mom her distress, and chuckled. I located the shovel where I had left it against the garage door, covered completely in snow, and looked at the feet of new snow to be removed with a sigh.

My father had taught me to start at the deepest and hardest place, and work to the easiest, as he explained, "That is how a man does it". The snow was so deep that I had a difficult time heaving it over the existing banks on each side of the drive way. I worked on steadily till I reached the street.

I looked down the street both ways and saw that I was the first one done. It was strangely lonely; not a car was in sight, and there were no other kids shoveling. I came to the idea of building a snow fort at the end of the drive, in the steep banks I had created from my snow shoveling.

I built the fort with an elaborate tunnel system. It was perfect. I could spy on our neighbors in total concealment, and then retreat deep into the center of the fort. In the center the street noise became a whisper, and I could feel the cars' vibrations as they drove by.

Everything was a brilliant-white inside the fort, with only the rays of the sun poking through the air-hole at the fort's top. From the top to the driveway entrance, I built a slide as slick as ice. I would lie on my back with my nylon-shelled-overcoat and fly through the angles and loops of my slide. It was great!

I DID THIS FOR HOURS, FORGETTING ABOUT MY SISTER'S QUESTIONS, AND THAT MY DAD UNFORTUNATELY HAD TO WORK *ONLY* EIGHT HOURS THAT DAY BECAUSE IT WAS CHRISTMAS EVE. JUST AS HE WAS ENTERING THE DRIVE I SHOT OUT THROUGH MY TUNNEL. HE SLAMMED ON THE BREAKS AND ALMOST HIT ME.

The rest was a blur, but as I opened my eyes I was being held up in the air by my dad, and he was crying. I said I was sorry as he looked in my eyes, saying nothing.

I walked ahead shakingly on the driveway to the kitchen door, and there in the window were Mom and Dana, staring at me strangely.

The rest of the night we were all quiet. Dana sat next to me on our couch as we tried to pretend to

watch the Christmas program, "It's A Wonderful Life" on the television set. Mom said it was time for us to go to bed, and we both looked at each other as we ascended the stairs to our bedrooms.

My sister's eyes said it all as she looked at me, but I had no answer. As I lay in my bed, I heard Dana walking towards my room. She stood at my door and asked, "Are you sure Santa is coming?" I tried with all my heart to answer her, but I could not, and she turned and went back to bed.

I lay in my bed looking at the ceiling above me, asking myself the same question over and over, "Was Santa really coming?" With all my strength, I asked God to send Santa to save our family, and drifted off into a restless sleep.

A few hours later I heard a large thump on the roof above me. I leaped from my bed and ran downstairs. Immediately I looked under the tree and there were presents! I started yelling for Dana, Mom, and Dad came out of their bedrooms to see what was happening. Still half-asleep, they looked in disbelief. Dana came running down the stairs, screaming all the way.

I YELLED, "SANTA HAS COME, I TOLD YOU ALL!" MOM AND DAD WALKED OVER TO THE TREE, AND THEY LOOKED LIKE PEOPLE DO WHEN THEY SEE A MIRACLE. DANA RAN TO THE TREE AND STARTED TO CRY IN A HYSTERICAL LAUGHTER. MOM AND DAD LOOKED AT EACH OTHER IN SHOCKED DISBELIEF. I PICKED UP DANA IN HER BUNNY-SUIT SLEEPER AND CARRIED HER OUTSIDE TO SHOW HER THE MIRACLE.

It was very cold outside, but we felt nothing. I showed her where Santa's sleigh had landed, and where the reindeers' feet stood in the snow on the roof. Our mom came to the door and told us to come in so we wouldn't freeze, and I yelled, "look at this!"

Mom and Dad reluctantly came outside and looked to where I was pointing. Through the haze of everything that had just happened, they smiled too. It was the kind of smile that only parents see on their children's faces when a magical moment like this comes.

Dana and I rushed past our parents to the living room to open our presents. We opened each one carefully, afraid that this all might be just a dream.

Inside the wrapped packages were presents that were special to each one of us, even for Mom and Dad too. Mom and Dad quickly went to their bedroom. At first it was quiet, but then the shouting began, both claiming neither had spent money they did not have.

I tried to ignore them as Dana was able to. It was enough just to see her smile. I opened another present and noticed that the wrapping was very, very old in design. I had never seen anything like it, even at Grandmother's. I knew my mom had not purchased them because she never left the house without Dad, and Dad lived by one thing, and one thing only—discipline. There's no way he bought them. Even if he had, Mom would have thought him the hero of this family drama. My sister and mom never left the house until I got home, so it was definitely not our Grandparents.

I looked at my sister, who was looking at me. There were no words, but she knew that if you truly believe in Santa, he will come!

"Hell's Angel's Part One"

“TO THE CHILDREN OF ABUSE, DO NOT DESPAIR, THERE WILL BE FLOWERS TO SMELL.”

The wind moved the huge branches of the elm outside my bedroom window. I watched their hypnotic movements as if they were dancers portraying a violent scene in their choreography.

The leaves were all perfectly horizontal at once, as if in a Van Gogh painting, in a dark portrait outlined by the glowing-full moon—the type of full-moon that lights the outdoors eerily in black-and-white extremes, hiding its shadowy-secrets behind each obstruction.

It was like an alternate world, drawing me deeply into its safety, where I could hide my secrets of pain. It was the one place that I could escape to entirely, where the fear of some violent reprisal from my father for an unintended-childhood infraction, did not exist. I have always loved the darkness. It is comforting, like my grandmother's heavy quilts that I hid under, listening to the sounds of the night outside my bedroom window at their woodland farm.

I smiled in those remembrances that seemed so far away, as though they had never existed. It was a security that I find now only exists in the darkness.

THE MOON SHONE DIRECTLY THROUGH MY WINDOW, OUTLINING THE FRENCH-STYLED PANES LIKE A STRANGE KALEIDOSCOPE IN A BRIGHTLY-LIT-PLAID DIAGRAM THROUGHOUT MY BEDROOM. SUDDENLY, A FLASH OF LIGHT STARTLED ME. I LOOKED DOWN AT MY MOTHER'S ELEVEN-INCH BUTCHER KNIFE IN MY HAND. I HAD GOTTEN LOST IN THE DARKNESS AND FORGOT HOW I CAME TO BE LOOKING OUT MY WINDOW, SO LATE AT NIGHT.

Dad had beaten me severely after dinner, and I had decided that he would never hit me again. I sat there in shocked-disbelief, staring at the knife as I turned it, exposing it to the moon's glare, and then disappearing it again into the darkness.

How did my life come to this: betrayed by my father's love, replaced by the violence that I could not understand. How could he beat me just because mom found my childhood infractions unacceptable? He had always dismissed her concerns before by stating “He is just a boy, doing what boys do.” She would relent and go about her daily life, angry but secure in her power over us both.

Dad would smile and tell me not to worry. “Your mother means well. She just does not understand what boys do to become men,” he would say. I would look up at him, knowing he would always protect me from the dangers that life would reveal to me.

I believe that is why boys do wild things. They know their father will always be there to save them, because that is what a hero does.

I sat on the edge of my bed for hours lost in the darkness; time did not exist. A sound woke me, and my back was still throbbing from the welts administered by Dad's belt the night before. I moved and felt a coldness against my side—it was the knife! I sat up in bed, startled, and frozen in the reality that it was not a dream after all.

The morning sun was now blazing through my southern-exposed window with an intense-yellow. An uncontrollable fear crept over me as I tried to come up with a plan to replace Mom's knife without her

noticing. I could hear her clanking pans together in the beginning of our breakfast's preparation.

I crept down the stairs silently, trying desperately not to be noticed by her. I had the knife behind me, concealed under my pajama-top, as I edged ever-closer to the knife rack. She looked at me and smiled. Another beating, and everyone would pretend like it never happened.

I made small talk about nothing, edging closer and closer to the knife rack, intent on replacing the butcher knife undetected. She seemed to be blocking me, as she would move back-and-forth from the stove, to the area where the knife-rack stood on the kitchen counter. Each time I moved towards it, she would smile and move into the way. I was panicking—did she know what I had planned that night!?

Finally she relented and began to make the pancakes on the stove, but while always glancing back at me. I timed her movements, and just as she flipped a pancake, I thrust the knife back into its slot!

I quickly looked towards my mother, and she just smiled strangely at me. She had to have known all along! I clumsily sat down at the kitchen table as my knees buckled under the stress. What would I say to explain why I had the knife?

I looked down at the pancakes she had set in the middle of my plate, trying desperately to think of an excuse of why I had it. She sat across from me at the table with her coffee, smiling, but saying nothing. My mind was reeling for the fear that Mom would tell Dad what I had done, and I would receive another beating.

I sat there playing with my pancakes with my fork, and suddenly she spoke: "I heard you moving around last night in the kitchen. Were you thirsty?" I had forgotten how this drama had begun.

I had snuck downstairs to get the knife, and decided to run the faucet to mask what I was really there for—the knife. How could I explain that I had planned on stabbing my dad, so he would never be able to hit me again? I couldn't even explain it to myself. How could I ever have come to hating my dad so much, to have even considered killing him?

He was the man who would come upstairs to my bedroom to rub my hands softly, trying to relieve me from the same nightmarish-dream that repeated weekly in my sleep. The dream was always exactly the same: two forces fighting. One was colored grey, and the other sky-blue.

It was like a battle in a war movie about the Civil War, where troops dressed in their blue and grey uniforms clashed endlessly. Each time I awoke, I felt as though I would not survive another battle. My fingers felt like logs, and not my own.

MY DAD WOULD HEAR MY CRIES AND RUSH UPSTAIRS AND HOLD ME, RUBBING MY FINGERS SOFTLY, ASSURING ME THAT I WOULD BE ALRIGHT. I WOULD LOOK AROUND THE ROOM EACH TIME TO MAKE SURE I WAS REALLY HOME AGAIN FROM THIS NIGHTLY-BATTLE BETWEEN THE TWO COMBATANT FORCES. FINALLY THE FEELING WOULD COME BACK TO MY FINGERS, AND DAD WOULD GO BACK DOWNSTAIRS TO BED, TELLING ME AS HE LEFT THAT EVERYTHING WOULD BE ALRIGHT.

Several nights later the dream reappeared. This time it was extremely intense, and I knew that one of the forces would lose this surreal war tonight. It was as though I was watching a battle between good and evil, and that I was the prize. The forces were indistinguishable as to whether they were humans, or just energy itself. The battle raged back and forth for what seemed like hours.

The sky above the battle scene, which had previously been a smoky haze, was now turning into a clear, light-blue. I watched as the blue forces seemed to gain strength ever so slightly against the grey forces, pushing them back steadily, until finally there was no grey energy left in the field of battle—only the blue.

I awoke in my bed drenched in sweat. My dad was sitting next to me, rubbing my fingers. I looked up at him and told him that I had won. He smiled and hugged me and said, “I told you you would be alright.” From that night on, all my dreams were in vibrant colors, and I would escape to them like an actor in a play, that only I alone could direct.

After that, my life changed from one of only fear and hatred, to one of discovery and acceptance. The fear of the beatings from my dad became non-issues that I could simply eliminate by going to the nearby woods, where everything that I discovered daily helped me realize that nature would teach me all that I desired to know of life.

The nature of the woods had educated me that life was unchangeable, that it was simply a matter of acceptance, direction, and circumstance. I could not change my situation at home because it was not my fault, it was simply my existence in living with my parents in their life.

The woods, in all their vibrant colors, showed me that I was just another piece of the picture of this life, and that in accepting it, I could control my future. The animals taught me that the inherent-dangers of laziness and incompetence would be followed by certain-destruction.

They also taught me that fear was a natural source of strength to be utilized in self-preservation, and that if channeled correctly, it could be used to find a great-inner strength that I had never known existed within me. I would sit under the canopy of trees, quietly within the hazelnut shrubs, watching all of the creatures in their search for food, and of being food for their neighbors.

By watching them closely, I learned that I could use the art of camouflage to escape danger, and that by feigning superiority I could control my opponents. I had until now been living at Pelican Lake with my parents. We shared a commonality of love for the lake, which was wonderful. I had found nature because nature was all that I had for a friend, and it was all that I needed.

There were no children to play with at the lake, except during the summer, when their families would come to our cabins for summer holiday. I was never alone though, because I had discovered nature’s secret. I had learned that I was merely another part of nature, and that I could either be destructive, or exist within its perfection entirely.

Each time that my dad beat me with his belt, I would return to the nearby woods, and again find my place in nature, sitting quietly under the canopy with the hazelnut shrubs. I would watch the quick-moving skink delicately run over the fallen debris from the treed-canopy above, like a ballerina delicately dancing over each obstruction, in its search for grub-worms and other small insects. It is an amazing thing to sit in this world of nature. Quietly, and without movement, you soon become a part of this secretive place of seclusion.

The Skink and its neighbors would travel over and around me, as though I were just another piece of their natural habitat. This place of sanctuary allowed me to escape the fear and pain from the welts on my back, throbbing in constant waves of heat, until nature would again release me from this tortured-

existence. The skink walked over my tennis shoes, as I tried desperately to feel each of its feet's delicate touches, watching every cautious step in amazement.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a slight movement, and then it disappeared. Was it my imagination, or had another secret been revealed to me and I had missed it? I scanned the branches and twigs of the hazel wood, and nothing unexpected could be seen. Then an amazing thing happened—a twig moved ever so slightly, barely noticeable to the eye.

I reached out and touched this woodland mirage. It moved ever so slightly, but the branch that it was walking on did not. I pulled back my finger cautiously, not knowing if this unknown creature would have a defense that would teach me another painful lesson of life.

I watched this master of camouflage move in a rhythmic-motion forward, then backwards, making a slight-forward progress. Reaching out again, I touched its elongated body gently, and watched as it seemed to act like a cat being petted, arching its back in reaction to my touch.

I placed my opened hand in its path, and it proceeded to walk up my palm, and then up my arm. Carefully, I adjusted my arm so that it could once again climb onto the branch. It moved on unmolested. I had become a part of nature!

The excitement that I felt was surreal, as in my abused life I felt as though I was lost, with no place to belong to. In nature, I had found a safety which I had not felt in a long time. It brought back memories of life on the lake, where my parents were my only source of safety. Nature was my school, where everything I needed to understand was within my grasp, and always readily available to explore.

I leaned back against the oak tree and looked up at the forest canopy, noticing that the afternoon's sunlight had now disappeared into dusk.

Immediately, a sense of dread overcame me, and I hurried home to a dinner that had been over hours earlier. I ran home as the street lights started to flicker, signaling that darkness was closing in quickly.

Taking hold of the screen door handle, I pushed the door-release button as quietly as possible. Immediately, the back-door light came on, and I stood frozen.

My mom opened the rear-screen door, and stepped aside to let me enter into the kitchen. Dad was sitting at the table, looking down at his cup of coffee. These were the signals I recognized that I was about to be asked questions which I could not find any acceptable answers to.

He looked up at me with a face of dread and asked me where I had been, as my mom stood behind him, her arms crossed. I looked at him and told him that I was just sitting in the woods and watching nature, as he had taught me to do at the lake.

A strange smile came over his face, and I thought that another beating would soon begin. He asked me what I had learned. Fear crept over me again because Dad had taught me that when animals make mistakes, there are severe consequences.

My mind raced, trying to find an acceptable answer that would cure his curiosity, and save me from my impending punishment.

I proceeded to tell him about the entire adventure in detail. Mom's arms dropped to her side, as she quickly reminded Dad of my infraction. He kept looking at me with a smile, waiting to see if my story would save me. Not losing my stride, I told him about the skink and about the walking stick, but he feigned ignorance of their existence.

A smile came over my face, as I suddenly realized that he was hoping my story would somehow save him too.

Mom started pacing back and forth in our tiny kitchen, as Dad urged me on, trying to ignore her impending explosion. She stopped directly behind Dad and asked him, "Aren't you going to punish him for being late for dinner!?" His face changed slightly as he said, "I want to hear about his adventure." His smile grew broader, as mom just stood there shaking in disbelief, saying nothing.

She was losing her power over him quickly, as my story telling became more and more interesting, and Dad kept urging me on. Mom gave a heavy sigh of resignation as she walked into the living room. A mutual look of relief came over Dad's and my face, because the moment of anger had passed.

After a few moments, he told me loudly—for Mom's benefit—that I could not be late for dinner again, or there would be severe consequences. You could hear Mom sigh in the kitchen, as she gasped her failure aloud. Dad smiled and hugged me as he walked into the living room to face Mom's glare.

I sat there, trying to understand everything that had just taken place, and how I had escaped another beating. I sat at the dinner table staring into my dinner plate, playing with my cold food, moving my green-beans around like a fortress surrounding my mashed-potatoes—then it hit me—all I had to do was come up with a great story to tell my dad, and I would be spared a beating.

This strategy worked for almost the entire summer. I made sure that I obeyed my mother's wishes. And on occasion, when I got lost in the nature of the woods, I would develop a great story to tell them while walking on the road back home.

MOM WOULD BE WAITING FOR ME ALONE IN THE KITCHEN, TRYING TO DEVISE A WAY TO DISRUPT MY POWER OVER DAD, SO SHE COULD AGAIN REGAIN HER'S OVER US BOTH. DAD HAD BEEN WORKING LATER AND LATER BECAUSE HE WAS NOW THE MANAGER OF THE CREAMERY, REPLACING THE PREVIOUS MANAGER, WHO HAD BEEN CAUGHT EMBEZZLING MONEY FROM THE BUSINESS.

I would try to time my arrival with Dad's. These were delicate maneuvers, trying not to be late for our customary-five-o'clock-dinner time, and to not be too early to let Mom find a problem with my existence in her life.

Fall had come and released the leaves from the treed-canopy in the woods, allowing me a view of the distant, forbidden-swamp. I had spent the afternoon in my woods, looking down the hill at the swamp, which now stretched out before me like an unknown land, with its cold, dark-colored water, and large swaths of cattails, outlined by the taller-bulrushes.

I knew that it had been there all along because of the waterfowl that I saw flying overhead daily. When I told Dad about the swamp, he reacted sternly in telling me that I was to never go near the swamp, because it was dangerous.

It was a strange warning, as he seemed angry, but filled with fear at the same time. He grabbed me

brusquely by the shoulders and looked directly into my eyes to make sure I was listening. “Never, ever, go near the swamp!” he said. I knew enough not to ask why, because this was the same kind of intensity I had seen so many other times before, preceding the beating that would soon follow.

I did not understand how this swamp was not the same as the lake that had been so instrumental in my early childhood’s natural education, but Dad’s warning was clear.

I would sit in my woods and watch nature change daily. The first thing was that all of the lizards disappeared into the fallen leaves. An amazing thing happened while searching for my friend, the skink. As I was moving the oak leaves where he would search for grubs and other insects, the leaf-mat below the dry leaves started to move every time I lifted a deeper layer. I jumped up, not knowing what kind of animal lay below.

A nose poked out slowly, followed by a black shiny head. It was a new lizard! It seemed to be pulling itself from under the wet leaves, similar to how I would pull myself from under Grandmother’s heavy winter quilts.

It’s head was flat, moving side to side as it squirmed to pull it’s body from under the heavy layers of decaying leaves. I watched cautiously, not knowing what to expect. Behind its head was its neck, which seemed to have yellow markings that stretched and wriggled. It proceeded to pull its body completely out from under the wet-leaf mass. It was huge!

Its coal-black-shiny body seemed to reflect the trees above my head, and it was covered with brightly colored yellow stripes. I had never seen this animal before. I reached out to touch its wet-looking body, but then I quickly pulled back my fingers. Was this one of the reasons Dad had told me to stay away from the swamp?

I watched in amazement as it hugged the ground, as if to get the last remnants of warmth from its subterranean lair, before it ventured out into the world of light. Its eyes looked around, blinking, as it regained its daylight vision. Suddenly, it tried to escape after it noticed me sitting on the ground next to it.

I reached out and grabbed its shiny body, expecting a slimy feeling. Instead, it felt like my bicycle’s inner tube, only much smoother. The lizard squirmed in my hand, and I was amazed at its strength. I held it fast, but careful enough not to injure it. It fought my grasp courageously, until it began to rest, as if it had expended all of its new-found energy.

We looked at each other curiously, as I released my grasp slowly, to assure it that I meant no harm. It rubbed its head comically with its stubby-legged-front feet, like it was trying to remove the sleepiness from its tiny black eyes.

Its body felt cold, but I could feel its heart pounding energetically beneath its deep, black skin.

I looked at my new-found friend, and realized that he was another teacher in the nature that I loved so dearly, and that I would have to release it back into the wild. I laid it onto the forest’s leafy carpet under my feet. It looked back at me, and then took off quickly towards the swamp. I followed it through the underbrush, down the hill, and into the high brush that hid the entrance to the edge of the swamp. Pushing through the high-brush’s tightly-grouped, heavy-stalked stems, I followed the lizard

as closely as possible as it entered the bulrushes. I pushed them apart like a heavy curtain, to find myself standing at the edge of the swamp.

I watched as my new friend slipped into the water, using its tail and feet to propel it deeply under the muddy swamp. The sun was setting, and I found myself standing at the one place that Dad had forbidden me to ever go.

I looked across the expanse of the dark colored water. It was surrounded completely by cattails, and seemed strangely forbidding. The Fall season seems to take all that was alive and vibrant into a time of death and decay.

My father had taught me at the lake that this was just another part of nature, and that it was a necessity for the new life to reappear in the coming Spring. I stood at the water's edge, feeling the sponginess of the mud beneath my feet. Looking out over the water, I noticed the deepening shadows extending out from the western side of the swamp, suddenly realizing, "I'm late!"

I ran so fast that it felt as though my feet were not even touching the ground. Running down the street, a boy my age was standing by the road and waved as I passed by, and waved back.

I reached the back door, but before I could open it the porch light came on, and I watched as the door slammed open against the porch wall. I jumped back, and my mom was standing there, looking angry, but strangely satisfied.

She opened the screen door and seemed to guide me directly into the kitchen, where Dad sat, looking at the table with clenched-fists. I smiled at him, hoping he would smile back at me. He instead looked up, and his face was red and contorted in a scary-mask-like appearance.

He reached to grab me with shaking hands; I immediately started my story about the lizard. Before I could start, Mom shrieked, "No more stories!" We seemed to be frozen in time, as Dad and I both looked at each other, me smiling, and his tortured-looking red face trying desperately to change.

It was like Dad was fighting the same battle against evil, as I had done every night for years in the past. His face turned to a look of desperation.

He attempted to get up, but he seemed to have no strength left in his body. His trembling hand rested upon the back of my neck, as if using me to steady himself.

HIS HAND WAS GENTLE AS WE MOVED TOWARDS MY BEDROOM. IT DID NOT SEEM REAL. IT SEEMED LIKE I WAS IN ANOTHER WORLD, AS I LOOKED TOWARDS THE SUN-FILLED ROOM, WHERE I WOULD RECEIVE MY BEATING AGAIN.

I watched the leaves of the elm twitch nervously in the subtle wind through the window, as we entered my bedroom. He closed the door behind us, and I walked towards my bed, hearing him slip his belt from around his waist. I instinctively turned around to see tears running down his cheeks. He told me to look away, as I asked, "Dad, why are you going to beat me?" He said back, "Do you think I want to beat you!? You cannot be late for dinner!" I responded, "Don't worry Dad. I understand."

He walked towards me and told me to turn around, as he gently laid his hand on the back of my neck, and told me not to move so he would not accidentally hit my back.

I stared at my bedroom wall on the other side of my bed while steadying myself, holding on to the bed in anticipation of the first blow. I could see the shadow of his arm rising over me against the wall. It blurred in a quick movement downward, as the first blow struck me below the waist in a searing pain.

I tried to escape, pulling desperately away from his anger and the severe pain from each blow. He grabbed me tighter around the back of my neck, until I resigned myself to this fate.

Tears rolled from my eyes uncontrollably as I watched the shadows of his arms in blurred movements, striking me over and over again. Eventually the agonizing pain of an uncountable-number of blows, turned into one throbbing mass across my entire back.

I could hear a pounding in my head as I attempted to separate myself from this place of hatred, and the sound got louder as my dad's movements slowed—it was Mom pounding on the unlocked bedroom door, screaming for Dad to stop hitting me. She screamed, "Stop hitting him! You're going to kill him!"

Dad stopped mid swing and collapsed to his knees on the floor. I sat hesitantly down on the bed. The pain was now a throbbing mass covering the entirety of my back, and it slowly started to numb to just a pulsing warmth.

I looked over to where Dad was kneeling on the floor. Tears were streaming down his face as he stared at his hands, holding the belt in them as if they were not his own. Mom opened the door quietly and told me to go wait outside. I ran as fast as I could into the dusky-sunlight, towards my woods.

I felt the wind on my face. It felt wonderful, and the faster I ran, the more cool the wind felt as it passed over my back, with each quickening-stride I took. The street lights that I passed under became brighter-and-brighter as the darkness came, till I had come to the edge of town, where the woods would welcome me to their safety. The last of the street lights' glowing aura gave way to complete darkness, and I slowed to a hesitant walk.

The darkness came in sheets, covering me in its layers, until total blackness enveloped me. I stopped on the gravel road alongside the woods, looking down into the void as I rubbed my right foot on the road's pebbled surface, assuring myself that I had not disappeared into this total darkness.

A strange fear crept over me that I had not felt before, as I stood there alone in the dark. The street lights behind me were now just globes of yellow in geometric lines, resembling a squared-Christmas tree. Somewhere under those lights, my home existed. The darkness covered me entirely, to where it seemed as though I had become part of the darkness itself.

The darkness passes over me and then through my soul,

As I am grasped into the void where my life exists.

A warmth that feels like sheets of bedding,

Covering me completely in its blackening fold after fold.

Deeper and deeper I ascend into my world of darkness,

Where only I am safely alone.

Suddenly a brilliant swath of silver colored light stretched across the road, illuminating a path directly into the woods. The moon's light had penetrated through the heavy overcast of clouds, to reveal the hidden entrance to my lair beneath the woodland canopy.

What usually would have been a time of happiness had now turned into a time of solace, as I entered my woods. I did not know this nature that was previously unknown to me because of my parents' severe warnings about the possible dangers that inhabited this nocturnal world.

I stumbled over an exposed root while entering the forest. I looked at it curiously, and realized that it was the same root from the oak that I would step over without care during my daylight ventures into the woods.

Everything that I had become accustomed to had now changed in the twilight, where shadows now strangely displayed the nature I loved so dearly in this abstract world of darkness. I felt my way through the underbrush until I located my special place beneath the oak, amidst the hazelnut shrubs. Sitting carefully down, I leaned against the oak trunk.

Pain seared through me as the oak's bark scratched my welts from the earlier beating, reminding me of how I had come to this unfamiliar world of shadows. I leaned back solidly against the bark, until the beating was again fresh in my mind, reliving each blow, which before seemed singular. My heart raced as before, feeling each welt individually, as a blind person feels to understand the face of a stranger.

Excited, but strangely remorseful in each discovery, a sound penetrated my mind that shattered the moment. I searched through the darkness, using the intermittent silver light from the moon. The sound came closer and closer, as I tried to locate the direction it was coming from. I whipped around my head, looking frantically towards the sound, and froze, not making a movement, not even a breath.

It hurried ever closer until finally a shadowed glimpse of moonlit hair appeared. I braced myself for this encounter that I could not escape. It made a comical squeaking sound that alleviated some of my apprehension, and walked right up to me. It stopped at my feet and looked right at me, and we both stared in disbelief.

Shocked, it ran down the hill into the shadows towards the swamp. I thought of chasing it, but just then I heard a car horn.

I had forgotten my pain in the excitement of this moment in nature. It was Dad honking our car's horn outside the woods on the road. I stood up, scraping my back against the tree and realizing my searing pain again, as I considered staying in this natural world. Then the truth of the matter came over me.

I felt that I did not belong in that world, where my parents' abuse was changing me into someone unknown. However, I also knew that I did not yet belong in this world of nature, that I still had so much to learn from. Cautiously, I walked to the edge of the woods, where I could see my father sitting in the light of the car's interior. He waved to me, as if beckoning me to enter the car.

I stood there motionless. He looked small in the car, surrounded by the darkness. I had thoughts of running back into the woods, to escape what I assumed would be another beating for running away. Instead I looked at his face: he was smiling like a child who had just broken something precious, fearful of the consequences to follow.

I walked to the car and opened the passenger-side door, expecting a violent response to my entry. Instead he said, "Your mother is crying. She was very worried about you." I looked ahead out the windshield of our car, trying to understand what strange trap designed by my mother lay ahead of me.

Dad could not look at me. He slid the gear shift into first, and the car lurched forward uncharacteristically, as he always shifted it perfectly, in smooth, automatic-like movements. I sat frozen, looking out the windshield as we approached our house. The lights were all on. I looked at our neighbors' homes, but they were all dark and everything was quiet. No one could save me. It felt as though I was being delivered for execution. The closer I got to our home, the more a dreaded heavy feeling overcame me.

My whole body felt exactly like my fingers used to feel after my nightmares—that intense numbing feeling of no control. My dad hurriedly left the car and moved quickly into the house. I sat there in the darkness until Mom poked her head through the house's rear door curtain, and opened the door.

As I opened the car door, everything seemed surreal in the darkness, and somehow safely different from the world that I was forced to live in. Standing in the moonlight, I realized that living in the darkness I would be alone, or at the very least separate from the world I knew.

I resigned myself to this present existence, walking towards the door. Then something came over me that I had never felt before—acceptance. At that precise moment I came to the reasoning that he could beat me, but that I would never let them destroy me. I would accept the beating, but I alone would control the amount of pain that I would feel from the blows from Dad's belt. I would not be their victim.

I walked through the porch door into the kitchen, where sitting on the table was a plated portion of Mom's cinnamon-raisin rolls with a glass of milk. I stood there, waiting and wondering what their next move would be. I could hear voices coming from their bedroom. They were quiet whispers, and there were no discernible angry tones. I pulled the chair away from the table and sat down, cringing at the remembrance of the pain that emanated from the welts on my back, and leaned back into the cool-feeling chair.

The voices became less noticeable as I began taking apart the soft cinnamon roll. The sticky caramel coating caused me to lick my fingers, and the cinnamon and sugar coated my senses as I ate. A door slammed shut and I froze, waiting for an explosion of unknown anger.

But there was nothing. I went about pulling apart the folds of soft dough from the raisin-covered-mound of sweetness. I looked at the clock on the wall above the kitchen window; it was after 1 AM. Never had I stayed up this late, even when waiting for Santa Claus. I laughed to myself at this simple thought, and wondered if Santa would even come this year.

Finishing my treat, I pushed away from the kitchen table and placed the dishes into the sink quietly. I walked up the stairway to my bedroom, and there was my friend, the moon. It seemed to glow

especially bright as I sat down on my bed.

Sitting there, I wondered if any other children were looking up at the moon in the same dark circumstances as I, or was this existence mine alone?

I awoke fully dressed, as Mom was calling to me to, "Get up! You're going to be late for your first day of school!" I jumped up and began to panic. I had forgotten that today was my first day of ninth grade, in a newly constructed school.

I sat there for a while, trying to put everything into perspective. My clothes smelled of the woods, and my sweat-soaked shirt reminded me of the previous night's abuse. As I adjusted my position, trying to move slowly, my shirt felt as though adhesive tape was being pulled from the welts on my back.

A strange feeling of accomplishment came over me. I had survived another beating, and my parents had not destroyed me. The pain became a new source of perceived strength. If I could survive my dad's punishing blows, I could withstand anything. Mom called to me again, and this time a frantic tone came from her voice, and I sensed fear in her.

She had come to the stairway door and knocked hesitantly. I answered back, "I'm coming down." She said, "OK, please hurry. You do not want to be late to your first day of school." Her voice sounded relieved as I answered her. Had she feared that Dad's beating had taken the last of me?

I walked downstairs. Mom was nervously smiling at me, as I confidently sat down to my bowl of oatmeal. She began to say something about my wrinkled clothes, to which I responded, "It's alright." She stopped and looked at me quizzically, and then proceeded to talk erratically as though a fear of being discovered had now taken over her person.

Finishing my oatmeal, I looked at the kitchen clock, got up, and stepped towards the porch door. Mom handed me my bagged-lunch. Her face looked confused as she tried to smile, saying, "Have a good day." "I will," I said, smiling back at her.

We had just moved again into this small town, where Dad had found a job at the local creamery. But this home was ours, unlike all of the other homes we had rented since my birth. I walked towards school on the prescribed route that Mom and Dad had told me to take. They told me they just wanted to make sure that I would arrive safely to school.

I walked a few blocks when I came to a busy street. I stopped and looked both ways for cars, and saw that the kid that had waved to me the day before was on the road towards the woods. He waved at me again, and I returned the gesture. He then motioned for me to come up the hill.

I looked around to see if someone was watching me, as I walked toward the new kid. I reached the dirt road and introduced myself, and he reciprocated by telling me his name was Wayne. He then asked me if I wanted to walk with him to school. I said, "Sure."

We started walking towards my woods, and then as we neared the path that I took every day when I needed to escape, he started to walk directly up the path to my sanctuary. I froze, and he asked me what the matter was. I didn't know what to say. How could I tell him of my life of abuse?

How could I make sense of my fear from my dad's warnings of the swamp, and the fear of retribution

from my dad if he ever caught me there? I followed him as we passed my secret hiding place. I glanced at Wayne, and he smiled and said, "It's a great place to hide." Stunned, I asked him how he knew where I went to hide.

He pointed towards another patch of hazelnut brush and said, "That is where I hide from my parents." We both cautiously laughed as we shared this strange secret. Could he be suffering from the same abuse as me? As we came to the end of the woods my heart raced, and there before me lay the swamp.

It was huge; I had only seen a small portion of it when I followed the lizard to its cat-tailed edge. I stood there for a while and then Wayne, walking ahead of me, said, "Hurry up, were going to be late for school."

We began running down a dirt road. It lay directly down the center of this magnificent, new, and unexplored world. I looked as quickly as I could, left, and then right, trying to see all the things that flew and scampered away as we ran down the road towards the school building.

The new school was actually bordered by the eastern edge of the swamp, running up against the school's athletic fields. I looked out at the swamp one last time as we entered the school doors. Wayne said he was in eighth grade. It had not occurred to me that my new friend was younger than I. I said, "Hey, let's walk home together after school?" He smiled and yelled back as he ran down the hall, "See you after school."

I sat, watching the clock's second hand move methodically to each hash mark on its face, until finally the last bell sounded the end of classes. Everyone jumped up from their desks, and I ran through the doors that I had entered at the beginning of school, running towards the swamp.

Wayne was already waiting on the dirt road that led to the swamp. I caught up with him and asked, "Does your dad tell you not to go near the swamp?" He laughed and said in a matter-of-fact manner, "My dad could care less. He's a drunk." I did not know what to say; we just kept walking along until we came to the tee in the road.

We stood there silently, like two strangers who were hesitant to greet one another. Were we really ready to share each other's secrets? I told him with remorse, "My dad beats me." He looked at me and said, "Mine too."

We resumed on our walk towards our homes silently, as we had shared enough of our pain for one day. As we reached the woods we both stopped, looking into the underbrush over the path, to where on the other side our homes were. We walked onward, not even glancing at our hiding places of shared embarrassment. On reaching the entrance to our woods, we said in unison, "Let's build a club house!"

Laughing and running together, I left him at his home's driveway. I ran the rest of the way home feeling something that I had thought was lost forever—happiness!

Running down the tarred road to my home, I suddenly felt a strange feeling of dread come over me as I entered my driveway. Dad's car was already home. I entered the kitchen from the back door, and there was Mom and Dad sitting at the kitchen table. Mom looked at me and asked where I had been.

Confused, I just stood there staring at them until I said, "School," to which Dad looked up at me and responded, "I took off work early to pick you up from school." The room started to spin, as I tried to understand what was happening. I grabbed the table chair in front of me and steadied myself for what was to come. Mom asked me, "Which road did you take home?" I stood there frozen in place as I looked out the kitchen window. There was no correct answer that would save me from this inquisition.

The familiar numbing feeling began to overwhelm me again. I heard words being spoken, and as I listened to them I realized they were my own. Somehow I had been speaking to Mom and Dad all along. It was like someone else was standing next to me, telling my story. The ringing in my ears dissipated as I regained my composure, and my voice became my own again.

Dad looked calm as he asked me, "I thought I told you not to go near the swamp?" I must have told them I had taken the swamp road home. I said, "Dad, I made a new friend. His name is Wayne." They looked at each other, him trying to discern what Mom's next move would be, and me waiting for the judgment. Mom looked at me curiously and asked, "Who is this Wayne?" I told them how I had seen him the day before when I went to the woods. Dad looked away in embarrassment, remembering how I had ended up in the woods, from the beating.

I felt that I might have a chance to escape their punishment, if only my story was good enough. I continued on in my story until Mom finally said, "Art, go with him up to the swamp and check it out." Dad looked at me with a surprised look, and then he looked back at Mom. I could see his muscles flex as he pushed back on his chair to get up. He looked confused, as I am sure that my face looked the same.

I opened the screen door and Dad followed me as I went to get into the car. He said, "Let's walk." We started out of our driveway and headed up the road towards the woods. I looked up at Dad and he smiled.

The closer we got to the woods, the more relaxed I felt as we walked together, looking at small agates and other pebbles. It felt like it used to when we lived at the lake. We walked to the entrance of the woods and I stopped. He asked me, "What's the matter?" I stood there, not knowing what to say. What if he asks me where my hiding place was, I thought. I answered, "Nothing," to which he smiled and said, "I used to hide in the woods too."

I wondered what he meant by saying that? I wanted to ask him, but I was too afraid of entering into an unknown new relationship with my dad, especially since I didn't know how much trouble I was already in.

We walked through the woods to the road that ran through the swamp. Standing there with my dad, it felt like all of the other times we had shared at the lake together in the past. He walked to the edge of the water and seemed to be taking it all in, picking up a long stick from along the shore. He pushed it deeply into the mud at the very edge of the water, and it continued until it disappeared at its very end. I was shocked.

He motioned for me to come over and see what he had done, and I understood what he was showing me. He said, "Just as I thought, this is a peat-bottom swamp. It's very dangerous." I asked him what a peat swamp was. He looked at me in the same way as one of my school teachers would, when they

wanted to make sure that I was really listening.

Dad said, pointing at the stick, “This is why I didn’t want you to come here.” I told him that I would never venture from the road, and he looked at me as though he had expected my statement. He said with a tone of dread, “If you go into the water, you will drown. It is nothing like the lake was, it has no bottom.” He continued to explain, “It is like quick sand. It will suck you in, and the more you move, the deeper and faster you will go down.” I looked at him and swore that I would never go into the water, and that I would only go here to get to and from school.

I asked him why the water looked so black, and he said, “The mud is barely a few inches from the surface, that is why the water is black.” He looked down at me and placed his hand on my shoulder, saying, “I will trust you on this, but remember, if you go in the water, I will not be here to save you.”

He knew I would travel the road anyway, but now I knew the rules. It was another change in our relationship as father and son.

The next day I met Wayne by the entrance to the woods, and told him about what had happened between my dad and I. He seemed to not pay any attention as I explained his warnings. He smiled and picked up a rock, skipping it across the water from the road. It was as though he was showing his disregard for the warnings as he said, “I’m not afraid.” We walked in silence the rest of the way to school, saying nothing as we went our separate ways to our classes.

Fall turned into winter quickly, and our times at the swamp changed, as did the seasons. We adapted well however. The swamp’s forbidding waters turned to ice, and Wayne told me that soon the warming house would be opened for ice skating. Before, I had always skated at the ice rink at my grammar school. I was excited for the chance to skate on the swamp, and be able to reach all of its secrets across its vast expanse. Ice skating was another place of freedom, just like the woods were. I would start out by simply pushing off with my right foot and gliding along, listening to the blades floating over the ice, and listening to all of its imperfections.

I loved to feel the wind on my face, closing my eyes and using my memory to skate around and around unobstructed, as if I was floating in an alternate world.

Wayne told me that the warming house would open on Saturday, as we walked on the snow-packed-swamp road towards home. I looked across the ice, and there were some men working on the building. We walked out from the woods to the warming house to watch the men work. One climbed a ladder with a huge, gray-colored cone, which had two wires attached to it. We watched in silence until I finally asked a man what it was.

He laughed and said it was a speaker. He explained that the warming house attendant would be playing music from it as we skated. Wayne and I looked at each other in amazement—music as we skated! Suddenly behind us came a loud roaring engine sound and its siren blaring. It was a fire truck pulling up to the warming house.

We moved out of the way as the fire truck drove up to the swamp’s edge. The firemen proceeded to get out of the vehicle, and began unloading the hoses they used to fight fires with. Another fireman took a wrench over to the fire hydrant located by the building, and they brought over the hose and connected it to the hydrant. The fireman turned the wrench at the top of the hydrant, as the other

firemen walked with the hose to the center of the skating rink. Water burst from the hose in a loud swooshing sound. I noticed that there was a circular bank of snow encircling the skating rink to-be. They sprayed the water all around them until there was a thin coating of water everywhere.

There was an old man standing at the warming house door. He had a tobacco pipe protruding from his mouth, and smoke swirled from it as the breeze came across the swamp. He seemed to be in charge of the work being done. He looked over at us and asked, "Do you boys skate?"

We answered in a resounding, "Yes!" A smile came across his face, and he motioned for us to come inside the warming house. We walked in cautiously behind him. The interior had warm and cozy-knotty-pine-wood-planked walls, and there were benches around the walls of the building. At the far end was a potbellied stove, glowing brightly from the fire within. He sat down on a wooden-high-backed-rocking chair next to the stove.

Us three sat around the stove as he talked about his life, and we listened intently to his stories, like children do when their grandfather speaks of the past. I looked all around the building, taking in all the ambience of the place that I would spend every free moment I could squeeze from each day. It smelled heavenly of rich wood scents, cherry pipe tobacco, and the stove extracting the combusted heat from the oak logs.

I asked him what type of music he would be playing. He looked at me and said, "Mostly Classical." Wayne seemed agitated by this information, asking, "What about rock & roll?" The rink attendant looked at Wayne like he had just told him some sort of horrible news about his family.

Wayne smiled at the attendant like he had just gained some sort of delightful power over him by making him angry. The attendant pointed over to the record player and said, "As long as I am here, there will be no Rock & Roll," with a sly smile directed towards Wayne.

I could tell that Wayne was visibly angry because his face was beet red. He said angrily to me, "Let's go!"

As we walked home I asked him what the problem was, and he said, "Screw that old man." I felt embarrassed for some unknown reason. How could something as great as a skating rink turn into some sort of strange personal anger for Wayne?

We reached Wayne's driveway and he just walked up to his door and waved to me, and his facial expression looked like I would not be seeing him again. I walked the rest of the way home trying to understand what had happened.

I was so excited about the skating rink, and yet my friend was somehow angry. Wayne was my first friend, my very first friend. At the lake there were none within walking distance, and having one this close was great.

Up until now we had shared our secrets of our lives of abuse, and our daily discoveries at the woods and swamp, but now things had changed. I wondered if I knew my new friend. I was taught to respect elders no matter what, and Wayne acted like he respected no one at all.

I reached my driveway and noticed that Dad's car was already there, and I ran into the house to tell him about the skating rink. Dad and I would sit in the basement at night and listen to Classical music

on our phonograph. It was one of our special times together. His favorite was George Gershwin. We would sit there for hours in our solitude, listening to music that spoke to our souls.

I found Dad there in the basement waiting for me, and told him about the newly-discovered-warming house and skating rink on the ice of the swamp. He said he had seen the fire truck leave the fire station, and was wondering where it had gone.

I explained how they sprayed the water on the old ice with the fire hose. He smiled and said, "That must have been exciting." I said yes, but that Wayne had gotten angry at the attendant. Dad looked at me severely and asked, "You showed the man respect, right?" I responded, "That's what you taught me to do, be wary of strangers, but respect my elders. Right, dad?"

HE JUST SMILED WIDELY AT ME, AND WENT TO THE PHONOGRAPH AND PUT ON *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS*. IT WAS ONE OF OUR FAVORITE GERSHWIN COMPOSITIONS.

The next day when I went to Wayne's house, he was standing there smiling, as if nothing had happened the day before. He yelled at me to hurry up. I ran up to him, and we both took off running as fast as we could towards the skating rink.

As soon as we got to the edge I stopped. The rink was perfect like a mirror, and I stood there looking from one side to the other. He yelled, "Let's slide across!" I told him the attendant might get mad if we damage the new ice.

Wayne seemed to take a strange energy from my warning. It was as though I had dared him to do it. He laughed wildly, urging me to follow him. I looked around for witnesses, and ran to the rink's center and slid all the way across to the other side. It felt as though I was floating on air. We both yelped in satisfaction as we ran over the snow drifts on the swamp towards school. It was Friday, and it was the first night that the rink would be open.

After school we ran directly to the rink, and coming out onto the ice we could see the smoke rolling out of the warming houses. I ran up to the door and walked inside warily, waiting until my eyes became adjusted to the low light from the sole light bulb, hanging from the exposed-wooden rafters.

There, next to the potbellied stove, sat the warming-house attendant. He looked startled, as if I had just awakened him. He looked hard at me, trying to discern who I was. Then he said with a chuckle, "Oh it's just you. It's getting harder and harder for a man to rest around here." He then asked in a sarcastic manner, "Where is your friend?" I had forgotten about Wayne in all the excitement, and looked behind me, expecting him to be right there with me, but he was not.

At first it kind of shocked me, but then I looked back at the old man and sat down on the bench next to him. He acted as though I had been alone all along. He asked me my name and who my dad was. I told him hesitantly, for fear that I might tell him the secret of my abuse if I allowed myself to relax in this safe place.

All I could think of telling him was that my dad had fought in the Korean War, and that all his friends that he had grown up with went with him, and that all of them died there.

The old man nervously lit his tobacco pipe with a shaking wooden match. I could tell he was trying to compose himself, as I had seen Dad do so many other times before, especially after asking him

incessantly about the war. The old man wiped a tear from his chin—it had rolled down his entire cheek without him even noticing it.

He stared at the glowing-red crack in the stove door, as did I. We just sat there saying nothing, but I felt as though something had happened between us. Finally he smiled and said in a cracked voice, “You had better get home to your mother's dinner before you are late.”

I grabbed my books and jumped up to leave, and yelled, “I’ll see you tonight!” He smiled and said, “You bet.” I ran home past Wayne’s house. He was outside shoveling his driveway, and just sort of nodded, as I waved in passing.

I made it home just in time to sit down for dinner. Mom asked where I had been, with an upset tone in her voice. I looked at Dad, who was looking at me, and told them that I had made a friend of the old man at the skating rink. Dad asked, “A Friend?” I said, “Yes. He seems like a great guy Dad. You should go talk to him some time at the warming house. He seems lonely.” Mom added, “I thought we told you not to talk to strangers?” but I continued, saying, “You know Dad, when he asked about you, I told him that you fought in the Korean War.”

Mom suddenly dropped her questioning, replaced by looks of bewilderment. Dad answered, “You did?” I said, “Yes, but it seemed to hurt him, because he started to cry.” Dad just sat there silently, looking out the kitchen window into the early dusk light, as a single tear painted a clear line down his cheek.

Soldiers march off to war to find glory at their own expense,
How could the world not see this abuse of human history?
As nothing more than the tears that wash their damaged souls,
From their imposed sins from survival's salvation.
Can anyone know the sin of survival as a soldier does?
Life’s struggle to find our destiny can lead us to our animal,
An animal not of our control, but one born out of our necessity to live.
This discovery leads us to the loss of our very soul.
Tears run down the cheeks of the dead young men,
Flowing like connecting streams through the soft-flowered-fields of war.
Contorted placements of these flowers from death,
They are enemies no more; our soul is the fear of death.

We all just sat there trying to ignore how uncomfortable I had just made Dad feel, when I realized that

I had not asked permission to go to the skating rink that night! Up until now I had never ventured out at night, if only on the occasion of running away to the woods after a beating.

How would I ever find a way to ask such a new question in our present relationship. We had just moved to this new area, and before I had never needed to go out after dark. I kept talking about the new ice on the skating rink, and how perfect it was. All the while I could detect a strange game emerging from my parents with me.

After dinner I jumped up to do the dishes without being asked. Mom said with a smile, "You are in quite a hurry tonight. Is there something on TV you wish to watch?" I just kept washing the dishes, trying not to pay attention, but my mom still required attention for a favor.

All I could think about was how fantastic it would be, to be the first one on the new ice, no cracks or imperfections, gliding over it with little or no effort. It would be about as close to heaven as I would ever find myself—simply sublime.

I started telling them again about the speaker, and that the attendant said he would be playing classical music. My dad perked up and asked, "Classical music?" I said, "Yes," and then came to a thought: "Dad, maybe I could bring one of our Gershwin albums to play for everyone there?" He acted nervous for some unknown reason and said, "No, I am sure the attendant has his own records to play."

Mom began asking more and more questions from the statements that I had given, and they were now fueling her interrogation. She said, "What other kids are going to be there?" My heart sank as I realized that I had just given her a reason to say no. She did not know these children, and Mom did not like strangers.

Dad, finally out of pity, and possibly boredom in waiting for my answer, said, "Are you going to the skating rink tonight?" Mom looked at Dad in confused wonderment as to where this question had come from, and I looked at him in shock. He asked me as if this unknown event that I had hoped for secretly were already a foregone conclusion, a regular occurrence in my daily life. I did not know what to say, out of fear that I would somehow ruin what was happening, and all the while watching Mom's face turn from red to calm.

She composed herself and said to Dad, "You take him up and back." And then she looked at me smiling and said, "Your father will return and pick you up at 8:00," "Do not make him wait for you," she warned. I could tell she was happy with her new-found control over us both, on the decision she had not made.

I ran to get my skates, but then remembered that I had forgotten to get them sharpened! Dad was standing behind me in anticipation of my statement, and said, "I got them sharpened this morning at the hardware store." I wanted to hug him, but I saw Mom watching this interaction between Dad and I intently, as though she was trying to figure out if this had been our plan all along. I jumped up and grabbed my coat from the hanger and ran to the car, waiting for Dad.

Dad got in to the car and started it up, smiling widely at me. I smiled back, just trying to understand what was taking place. When we got to the rink, there were children running around crazily. It reminded me of Christmas morning, when I would run downstairs in celebration of a happy occasion.

Dad said in a kind of remorseful way, looking at everyone, "Don't have too much fun." He seemed resigned as he left the rink and I behind, as I stood there watching him leave.

I looked around for Wayne, and then I suddenly realized something odd as a chill came over me. I knew no one else that would be here. Wayne was the first and only friend I had since moving to Sauk Rapids. I had always liked being alone, mostly because of my interests in exploring nature.

Everyone was running in and out of the warming house and yelling to each other excitedly. I walked up to the door and prepared myself for the unknown interior, which sounded like it was going to explode from all the kids inside. Suddenly the door burst open, and a boy nearly ran me over leaving the warming house. He stopped, looked at me sternly with a smile, and then laughed-out-loud, telling me, "Hurry up and put on your skates! We're playing Pom-Pom-Pull-Away!"

I was in a surreal world as I entered the warming house. I knew no one, yet everyone was so happy and excited that I felt strangely in the right place.

Someone called out my name, and there was Wayne messing with the attendant at the phonograph, until the old man smiled at me and brushed Wayne aside, to his consternation. The attendant grabbed me through the crowd of kids, sat me down next to the stove and asked, "Where's your dad?"

I must have looked puzzled as he continued talking to me as if we were old friends. Wayne stood there staring angrily at me for some unknown reason. The old man grabbed a record and placed it atop the turntable, and delicately placed the needled-phonograph arm on the record, and a loud booming, crackling sound blurted from the outdoor speaker.

It was indiscernible, but everyone burst out of the warming house screaming all the way to the door. They squeezed out, pushing and pulling as if the warming house were afire. I looked over to the old man, who was visibly excited as well. He then sat down and lit his pipe, exhaling a large plume of scented smoke, and laughed aloud, yelling, "I thought they would never leave!"

I laughed nervously too. He must have realized that this was entirely new to me, and put on the album to get the kids to go outside and skate. It was exciting to say the least. When I entered the warming house, there was a fantastic energy coming from all the kids within, and now it seemed exactly as it did when I had first entered it with Wayne, vacant, but glowing warmly.

I told him my dad had to go back home to my mom, at her request. He seemed to understand, as he threw some logs of wood into the stove and slammed the steel door shut with a clang. I was sitting on the bench lacing up my skates, when the door burst open, and in walked the kid that almost ran me over as I was entering the warming house.

He walked over to the stove and placed his mittens on the warming plate on top of the stove, and then began warming his hands by passing them over the intense heat. He smiled at me shrewdly as if he had a question, and said, "Wayne told me to tell you to come out and play Pom-Pom-Pull-Away." I sat there finishing my lacing, and then looked over to the attendant. The old man stood up and grabbed the push broom in the corner, and acted as though he were sweeping us out the door as we ran onto the ice. Faster and faster we flew over the ice towards the outer snow bank; we were racing.

We matched each other's strides, each more powerful than the last, until we ran into the snow-banked

edge of the rink and toppled over onto the other side, laughing.

He said, “My names Darrell,” as we jumped up to see two lines of kids. He then yelled, “Let’s go!” I was a bit confused. It seemed that my only friend, Wayne, had other friends and had never mentioned them to me. I looked at the rink and there were dozens of kids lined up on each side of the ice rink in opposing straight lines, and all of a sudden a lone skater in the center of the rink yelled out, “Pom-Pom-Pull-Away, send Wayne on over!”

The crowd erupted in cheers as I could make out Wayne skating furiously from the opposite line, trying to avoid getting tagged by the skater waiting in the center of the rink. Darrell and I cheered him on as he dodged and swerved, trying not to get tagged. He made it to the other side easily.

This went on for what seemed like hours, until there was just Darrell and I left to be caught by those that had been tagged already. Everyone else was now mulling around in the center of the rink, and in unison, they all called Darrell over. He skated like he was trying to escape death itself. He went at the slower kids who were exhausted, and easily got through to the other side.

I cheered him on as the rest booed, and then together they all cheered, as he bent over to take a bow. Now it was my turn. No one had called me yet, and I was the last one left to run the gauntlet of the mob at the center of the ice. They were all screaming as I prepared to take off, and then I realized something horrible—no one knew my name; no one would call me! I stood there looking at everyone, and then a single voice called out my name. It was Darrell, and I could see Wayne’s face turn red, as though he had been exposed, looking directly at me. The rest of the kids shouted my name as if a great discovery had been made, probably because of the quiet awkward moments leading up to everyone learning my name.

I took off as fast as I could, because it would be highly important to prove myself to everyone, and at the very least put on a good attempt to not get tagged, especially now that my anonymity had been found out. I could see Darrell jumping up and down on the far side of the ice, yelling and waving to me, and all I could hear were the others chasing me like howling dogs chasing a deer.

It was like a strange dance. There were those who were exhausted and made an effort in acting as though they were trying, but then giving up. The girls were all standing together, and as I rushed towards them they simply smiled with their rosy cheeks, and let me pass as they reached out to me ceremoniously. I could hear someone closing in behind me—it was Wayne.

His face was contorted into an angry-looking smile, as other kids were flying across the ice trying to tag me. Some, out of desperation, would dive at me, sliding across the ice on their stomachs in my path, forcing me to literally jump over them. I would land on the ice and turn to watch Wayne jump over the same human obstacle, barely staying upright. He became more and more animated in his skating as the closer we got to Darrell, until we reached the snow-banked edge and leaped over it, landing in the outer-snow base and coming to an abrupt stop.

I was laughing and trying to catch my breath. Darrell came running up to me, cheering, as he grabbed my hand and pulled it over our heads, shouting, “The Winner!”

I looked over to where Wayne was standing, and he seemed angry at both Darrell and I for some unknown reason. The crowd yelled out, “Pom-Pom-Pull-Away!” and Darrell waved at Wayne, which

seemed to infuriate him even more. Darrell looked at the mob and said, “The only way one of us is going to win, is to go separate ways.” He looked at me with that devilish smile of his, and I yelled, “Let’s go!”

We took off, heading for the outside edges of the mob, and we zigged and zagged courageously as if in some epic battle, avoiding the taggers' valiant attempts. I saw Darrell jump over two kids as if he were flying. He landed in mid stride and crashed head over heels into the snow bank, untouched. I, on the other hand, had seemingly attracted everyone to come after me. Evidently Darrell had a reputation of not losing, and I, the new kid, was the great-intended victim for this mob of screaming children.

I swerved, ducked, and finally, just as I was about to make it to the snow bank unscathed, I felt someone grab my arm—it was Wayne! He howled loudly as everyone kept coming straight for us, but no one stopped! They all reached out in unison as if to tag Wayne, Darrel, and I, and crashed into us all. Wayne had, as I am sure we all did, a shocked-facial expression.

Everyone went flying into and over the snow bank, laughing and yelling out, “You’re it!” It was fantastic. Up until just a few days earlier I had one friend, and now I had more than I thought was possible.

At first, Wayne and Darrell seemed angrily confused at this uncontrollable situation, and then we all started jumping on top of everyone, yelling out, “Monkey pile!”

The entire mob became exhausted from this exercise. We all got up, and the girls of course realized, too late, that it was an awkward situation to be laid upon by the boys of the mob.

They began barking out silly orders, trying to regain their composure, while all the boys laughed at their futile attempt to regain their loss of control. We all headed to the warming house. Inside, everyone was covered by melting snow, with the girls on one side, facing the laughing boys on the other.

It was evidently unsettling for them, as we laughed and pretended to lay on top of each other as we all did before.

Just then, I heard a familiar-car horn outside, and yelled, “I have to go! My dad is here!” All of the girls cried out in unison, “STEEVE! Your dad is Here!” I stood there staring at them. Some of them blushed out of embarrassment I suppose, while others taunted me until I left the warming house.

I waved to Dad, who was smiling inside the car. I opened the door and looked around to hear Wayne and Darrell yell, “See you tomorrow night!” yelling back, “Yeah!” I looked at Dad as I got into the car. He again smiled, but looked away into the windshield glass as we drove away. I saw his reflection, and it seemed in pain.

Excitedly, I told him how fantastic of a time I had experienced at the rink, but he said nothing. I told him how easy it was to make friends here in our new town. He looked at me and smiled weakly, and said, “Your school report card came after I dropped you off at the warming house.”

Still excited, I told him that I had made a new friend, “His name is Darrell.” Dad ignored me, and asked, “How come you didn’t tell us your report card was coming? Your mother is furious at both of us—me for letting you go skating, and you for having almost all D’s.”

All of a sudden I felt like I was disappearing again as I sat in the passenger seat, looking at Dad. He seemed so far away. I tried to touch his arm, but he pulled it away as if it were painful. I had forgotten about my report card, sitting there, looking at the floorboard of the car and my skates in disbelief.

I wanted to beg Dad to just keep driving and not go home, and that we could go live somewhere else.

We drove into the driveway, and I could see Mom standing in the living room window, arms crossed, smoking a cigarette. I felt sick to my stomach. Dad said, "Pull yourself together, we are both in trouble this time." I looked at him, and he seemed to hesitate, as I had done so many other times opening the back door to our house.

He opened the door and walked into the kitchen, where Mom was already waiting. I laid my skates down in the porch, and immediately she said, "Do you think we would have let you go skating if we knew how bad your report card was?" I felt microscopic as I looked at her, trying to come up with an appropriate answer. I couldn't tell her how I really felt. How could I tell her that school was boring and that all I wanted to do was walk in my woods?

She screamed this time, "Explain yourself, mister!" I looked at Dad, trying to get some inspiration from him, but he seemed worse off than I. Finally, I mustered enough courage to say, "I forgot about my report card." She screamed again, "Forgot! Forgot! How do you forget about your school report card? Did you forget to go to school today?" I looked at her and smiled faintly, saying, "No, I went to school." Her face looked as though it was going to explode. I looked at Dad, who had hid his head down, but I could see a small smile on his face, as he tried not to laugh, and ignore Mom at the same time. It was a weird scenario. I was about to take yet another beating, but I wanted to laugh out loud.

Dad grabbed me by the arm and took me into the guest bedroom. He slammed the door behind us with such force that I thought it would fall from its hinges. I looked at him, and he was smiling. I smiled back at him, as he pulled his belt from around his waist.

Something strange happened, as we both had to choke back the laughter. He looked sick, and I said, "Dad, it's alright, I understand." I smiled at him, and he was shaking all over. It was as though he were possessed, as he tried desperately to strike me. Finally, a strange look of desperation came over his face, as he said, "Please, I have to." He couldn't finish the last words in his statement, as his arm raised over me, and down came the first blow across my back and the foot board of my bed.

He hesitated as I looked up at him, and he was smiling. As I looked forward, waiting for another blow, I saw the shadow of his arm come down, and the sharp sound of the belt's report came, but there was no pain! I looked back at Dad, and he motioned for me to stay still. He beat the foot board relentlessly until mom banged on the door, as if on key, for him to stop.

We looked at each other like we had just discovered a great secret together. He slid his belt back through his pants' belt loops around his waist, and said sternly, "Go upstairs to your room now and think about what just happened, and why!" It was extremely hard for Dad and I not to laugh, even though we were both in tears.

We had found a way to deceive Mom, and save us both. There was an unspoken understanding between us. I knew from then on that I had to receive a blow or two for enough of a theatrical impact to fool her, but for the time being our torture was over.

The next day as I walked to school, I saw Darrell walking ahead, and called for him to wait up for me. We walked on to Wayne's house, saying nothing. Wayne ran out of his back door and looked at me, and his smile changed as he looked at us standing there.

It is a strange thing about children of abuse—they do not have to say anything; they know what it looks like, without saying anything at all. We walked along quietly until we got to the shortcut that took us through the woods. We started pushing each other down onto the snow bank along the road until we laughed together.

We looked at each other with an understanding. Our secret of abuse was ours alone, and we wouldn't let it destroy us. We got up and ran all the way to school. Maybe it was to show we were together in this thing we call life.

We stuck together throughout the winters skating, and our abuse strengthened one another. We were inseparable, like brothers.

Spring came, and the three of us spent every waking moment together, watching the swamp change from winter, to the start of green cattails at its edge. Darrell told us that his older brother had to make an insect collection to graduate from high school.

We walked along, watching the first of the butterflies and grasshoppers float and land on the sunny swamp road ahead of us. Suddenly, a thought came to me as I said, "We could make the collection for him." Wayne responded, "How much would he pay us to do it?" We stopped and watched all of the insects in front of us on the swamp road, as Darrell said, "All seniors have to have an insect collection to graduate." Standing there, surveying all of the different insects as if counting money, in unison we let out a yelp, "We will be rich!"

We ran with our arms outstretched as the grasshoppers and butterflies flew around us, trying to escape our invasion into their world—then it hit me. I asked Darrell, "What does an insect collection look like?" as we walked into our woods. It was a logical question, since all of my experience up until this moment had been sitting amongst the inhabitants of the forest. I was always amazed just by watching them.

Darrell seemed perplexed by the question, as his face turned from a look of happiness, to one of concern. Finally, Wayne said, "Let's ask Mr. Esterberg." Mr. Esterberg was the high school Biology teacher. It was him that made the required insect collection a prerequisite of graduation for the high school.

This questioning would have to be carried out in a very clandestine manner, as Mr. Esterberg was nobody's fool. If he were to figure out our plans to build the collections for the seniors, who would pay, and not complete his assignment themselves, it would, to say the least, upset him.

Mr. Esterberg was an interesting teacher. He truly enjoyed the challenge of trying to teach biology to students at the height of their hormonal change. Watching him watch his students at their confused attempts at the study of nature was very entertaining.

The girls would dress in white and other bright colors, knowing that they were going to the swamp for the field instruction, and the boys would stand around in various manly poses. Mr. Esterberg, out of

frustration, would throw up his arms and take off his shoes and socks, roll up his custom-tailored-suit pants, and jump into the muck up to his knees.

I watched in awe of his passion for nature, and his desperate attempt to get someone else to get it. He was a mentor to me. He brought me from a simple curiosity of nature, to the need to understand the secrets of life itself.

After school, the three of us asked him questions about properly collecting insects, and how to preserve them. At first he seemed very interested in our questions, but his interest soon gave way to more questions from him than from us. I could tell we were getting close to exposing our plans to him, as his questions became more and more like an interrogation. I finally grabbed Darrell and Wayne's attention and said we must get home.

They looked at me and agreed, moving towards the classroom door. He said, "You aren't going to be collecting the insects for the seniors, are you?" We looked at each other, and then at him, smiling as we shook our heads, "No."

To children who have mastered the ability to occasionally escape our abusive lives by deception, it was nothing to fabricate a story to our benefit. In reality, we were actually going to build the entire display case, which happened to contain a variety of insects.

We used Darrell's dad's wood shop to build the wooden cases for the collections, and the orders came in quickly. In this occupation, we became experts in the names of all the insects of the swamp. We learned when each one would appear for their sustenance, and the renewing of their species.

We charged each student thirty dollars, which was a great deal of money at that time, in the late 1960's in Minnesota. Our popularity increased a great deal with the seniors. We seemed to be drawing the ire of all the other students, because we were untouchable.

AT THAT TIME HAZING WAS A RESPECTED SOURCE OF PLEASURE FOR THE SENIORS, WHICH THEY RELISHED UPON ALL OF THE LOWER CLASSMEN, EXCEPT US OF COURSE. IT WAS ACTUALLY QUITE TAME COMPARED TO THE LUNACY OF TODAY. THEY WOULD FLUSH THE HEADS OF THE UNDER CLASSMEN AND MAKE THEM EAT HOT PEPPERS.

The game would go something like this: the seniors would be stationed by the lavatories, waiting for their prey like lions on a hunt. The under classmen of course would run past them in their attempt to reach their next class, like spooked deer, trying to get to class safely without the humiliation, and not be the unfortunate one caught.

Our ability to produce something of value for the seniors was of course, empowering. We would walk casually past the melee of the jungle scene of survival with little care, because the seniors needed us more than we feared them. It was a comically-bizarre scene to watch the juniors—the deer—line up, planning their run past the gauntlet of seniors—the lions—one at a time, as they would push one another ahead.

The seniors would wait patiently by the bathroom—watering hole—which was situated at the center of the school, as their victims advanced cautiously. The girls—lionesses—would be cheering the show on, as the hourly event would unfold.

I watched this performance with the curiosity of an anthropologist, as one junior after another fell

victim to the gauntlet. The victim would struggle at first, as they would be picked up by several seniors, lofting them high above their heads, as they walked in unison towards the bathroom.

The watching-crowd would cheer wildly as the seniors would make a dramatic portrayal of this crime. I watched the victims' face change from horror, to fear, and then to resignation.

The victim would emerge from the bathroom with a dripping wet head, to cheers from everyone, including the teachers. The victim would then smile, as one would smile in humiliation, and head on to his next class. I looked around at the mob scene, and there was Mr. Esterberg watching me, smiling. It was an odd smile, as if to say, "I got you."

He had figured out my crime, and by not showing the least bit of fear of being a victim, I had sealed my coming fate. I told Wayne and Darrell what I felt was coming to us from Mr. Esterberg. They laughed however, and said he had not figured out anything. They went off to their next class, as I walked into Mr. Esterberg's class, like heading to an execution.

I walked into the classroom, and everyone just stared at me in the kind of dreadful look one has for a victim that is thankfully not them. Mr. Esterberg sat at his customary lab chair with a peculiar smile, as if he knew a secret. I sat down, and then the performance began. He stood up, adjusting his custom tailored suit, as if preparing a great oratory speech. He proceeded by loudly saying, "Class, today we are going to examine these wonderful insect collections created by the SENIORS!"

I felt like I was disappearing on my lab chair, as everyone, including Mr. Esterberg, directly looked at me! I looked up at the wall where all of the wooden cases were displayed, and all of a sudden it hit me like a lightning bolt—THEY ALL LOOKED EXACTLY THE SAME! There were a couple cases that were of poor quality, but I then realized that they were from seniors who did not pay us to build them one.

Mr. Esterberg then said, "Mr. DeLong, are these not the most beautiful insect collections you have ever seen?" I felt an intense heat surging through my body as I sat there, dumbfounded.

Evidently he could not understand why I had no answer for his question, because he flew over to me and grabbed me, pulling me reluctantly over to the cases, and stating, "Mr. DeLong seems to be having a hearing problem, class." Everyone chuckled reluctantly, because no one but Mr. Esterberg and I understood what was going on.

He then explained my treachery to everyone in the class room in very dramatic tones, as I stood beside him, quietly waiting for the punishment to come. The students looked at me with pity. At the end of his speech, he said sarcastically, "Mr. DeLong, Mr. Ostlund is waiting for you in the principal's office. Please hurry, you don't want to be late."

Everyone, including myself, grimaced, because Mr. Ostlund was known to utilize the paddle for just such circumstances. Just then, the school loud speaker crackled, and out came a woman's voice, "Will Mr. DeLong please come to the principal's office." I walked over to the classroom door and opened it. Walking down the hallway, I looked into the glass windows alongside each classroom door as I passed them.

Everyone was looking out the window from their desks as I walked by. The seniors were visibly

concerned as I walked by, anticipating my assured betrayal of them to the principal. I got to the principal's office and walked in. The secretary looked at me like she would not be seeing me again.

I knocked lightly on his door, and a voice called for me to enter. I grabbed the door handle, and it eerily felt like when I would enter the porch door to my home, expecting my abuse to be waiting behind it.

I entered the principal's office as a voice said, "Close the door." My eyes adjusted to the back-lighted shadows as I attempted to make out his presence. He then said, "Mr. DeLong, you are in a lot of trouble." I looked at him and realized how much larger he was close up, as compared to when he was speaking to the school at the auditorium. Finally, he came totally into focus. I noticed he was holding the spanking paddle in his right hand, and gently tapping his desk with it.

He stood up and came around his desk. I was still standing, looking out the window, and not knowing what to do next.

He said, "You have broken several school rules by building those insect collections for the seniors." He went on to say, "You could not have done this on your own. Who helped you?" I just stood there silently, and he walked over and put his hand on me. I pulled away instinctively, as no stranger was ever going to hit me, ever.

He made a lunge towards me and I dodged his attempts to hold me down. He hit me across the back and I said, "No one beats me but my dad." He stood up and stared at me, and I do not know what my face looked like, but he seemed somewhat shocked. I moved to the coffee table and picked up a heavy-glass ashtray, and held it over my head like I would strike him if he came closer. He gave me a queer look and set down the paddle, and I followed by setting down the ashtray.

HE KEPT LOOKING AT ME LIKE HE WAS STARING AT HIS OWN PAST, AND THAT IT HAD FINALLY CAUGHT UP WITH HIM. HE TRIED TO REGAIN CONTROL OF THE SITUATION BY ASKING ME AGAIN, "WHO HELPED YOU BUILD THOSE INSECT CASES?" I JUST LOOKED AT HIM AND SAID, "I DID THEM BY MYSELF." I FELT SICK, BECAUSE NOW I HAD JUST TOLD HIM THAT *I DID* BUILD THEM. THE FIRST RULE IN THE SURVIVAL OF ABUSE IS TO SAY NOTHING.

It just feeds the moment if you answer your abuser. He then said, "Who did you sell them to?" I looked out the window and said, "I only built a couple, and I don't remember who I sold them to." Dad had taught me from my childhood that you do not betray your accomplices just because you get caught. I kept staring out the window, saying nothing more, and he seemed confused as to what to do next.

He finally told me to go back to my class, and that he would be calling my dad. I stepped out of the office, and as I looked back, the secretary smiled at me strangely, as I went back to class.

I walked past the same classes again, and everyone looked straight ahead, as I looked inside for some sign of approval. Reaching Mr. Esterberg's classroom door, I stood there looking at the handle, and then to the exit doors of the school, trying to figure out what my next move would be.

Suddenly the door opened, and there was Mr. Esterberg, pointing me back to my chair. Everyone stared, trying to see what had happened to me, and if they could see any visible bruises. Just then the school bell rang, signaling the end of school for the day.

They all ran for the door except me. I knew that when I got home, Dad would be waiting for me. As I walked through the school exit doors, Wayne and Darrell came running up to me excitedly, asking, "What happened!?" I told them what had happened, and that I did not implicate them in the trouble. They both just stared at me, saying nothing.

Darrell then said with that quirky smile of his, "My brother is going to want to know if you told on them." I stopped and told them the whole story from beginning to end. They both smiled and began punching me in each shoulder excitedly, not trying to hurt me, but show their approval.

When I got home, Mom was beside herself with anger. Dad sat there resigned, and asked me what was going on with the principal.

I told them what had happened, and that I did not know it was against the rules to work and make extra money. Dad just stared at me, trying to understand all the implications of what I had done, while Mom continued in her tirade. Dad stood up, and I prepared for a severe beating. He said, "Did he hit you?" He looked possessed as he asked me again, "Did he touch you?" I looked at him and said, "Yes, he hit me with the paddle, but it didn't hurt." It felt good telling him that a stranger had hit me, but that it didn't hurt. He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to the car, shoving me in violently into the passenger side. Mom asked where he was taking me. There was no answer, as Dad burned rubber on the Plymouth sedan. I had never seen him act like this before. It was strangely exhilarating.

We arrived at the school and the strangest thing happened: Dad was there to protect me from a stranger's abuse. He walked like a cat over the hallway floors. It seemed as though he would attack anyone that had the misfortune of confronting him.

I walked beside him proudly as we entered the principal's office. The secretary used the phone and talked to Mr. Ostlund. I could tell Dad was just about to explode, as I had seen it before. I could hear Mr. Ostlund hang up his phone, and then total quiet.

His door opened, and he cordially invited my dad and I into his office. To say that there was tension in the air would be an understatement. What happened next was one of the strangest occurrences in my life. Dad and Mr. Ostlund just sat there staring at each other, for what seemed like hours. Then Mr. Ostlund said sympathetically, "I am sorry for hitting Steve." There was more silence, and then Dad said shakily, "Never do that again."

Mr. Ostlund sat back in his chair while rubbing his forehead with his hands, and said awkwardly to my dad, "My dad beat me too." They both just sat there. I was so confused that I thought I would pass out from not breathing. Dad put his head in his hands and said, "Me too." They both looked at each other with tears in their eyes. Dad stood up, shook his hand, and said to me, "Let's go home."

The next day as I got to school, there were several seniors waiting for me at the entry with Darrell's older brother. One of them asked me, "What happened yesterday in the principal's office?" I tried to get past them as I said, "Nothing." They blocked my entrance, and asked if I had ratted them out to Mr. Ostlund. I told them the whole story over again.

One of the seniors grabbed me and said that he didn't believe me. Darrell's big brother Pauli stopped him, and said if he says he didn't tell anyone, he didn't. I looked at Darrell's brother and nodded appreciation. Then the other senior said, "If he didn't say anything, then why is Esterberg trying to

flunk us all?" Darrell's brother Pauli said, "You idiot, it's because they all look exactly the same. That's how Esterberg figured it out"

The other seniors started to get angry because of the obvious mistake by everyone. As if it wasn't enough that they had to have them finished to graduate and pay for them, no one ever thought about making them all different to avoid the discovery of their deception.

They let me pass, but I knew from that moment on that my days of asylum from the hazing were over. I walked to my business class, which of course led me directly past the bathrooms. Thankfully, the seniors—the lions—who were on head-flushing duty, had not yet been informed of my demotion.

They all nodded and smiled as I walked past. I hung my head, feeling nauseous as I entered my first class. It seemed to be ruin-Steve's-day, as the entire class, girls included, started chiding me about the trouble I was in. The boys were especially excited, as they chanted, "Flush, Flush! Flush!" I stood there, watching them act out the upcoming punishment for thinking that I was better than they were.

Mr. Dunham entered the classroom, and looked over at me, smiling. I sat there and managed a sheepish smile. It was he who taught me that capitalism was freedom.

The class bell rang, and everyone sat still at their desks. I got up and took a deep breath, looking around at them, and then to Mr. Dunham, who tried to act busy going over papers, but was watching me from the corner of his eye.

I walked out into the hallway. It was lined by everyone from the entire school, waiting patiently for my fate. Looking ahead I could see the seniors—the lions—in waiting, watching my every move, as the predator watches their prey. I stopped and noticed Pauli was standing in the front of "the pride of lions," smiling, as if to signify that it would be over soon.

Suddenly someone shouted out, "POM-POM-PULL-AWAY, SEND STEVE ON OVER!" It was Wayne and Darrell, waving and jumping up and down from the other side of the seniors' mob.

The crowd burst into cheers and started screaming, "POM-POM-PULL-AWAY, SEND STEVE ON OVER!" All the teachers were now peeking out of their classroom doors, watching the show.

I stood there in the center of the hallway, frozen, trying to figure out what to do next. The seniors were now chanting for me to come on down. Finally, I looked at them and ran towards them, just like I would have done if I were skating at the rink. Some of the seniors locked arms to stop my charge. I ran to the left and then to the right, dodging those before the chain, with little taste for this abuse.

Just as I reached the chain, all of the seniors grabbed me at once. They lifted me up over their heads and started doing a version of a conga-line dance. They were repeating, "COME ON DOWN!" as the entire hallway erupted into chaos with screaming and yelling, as they carried me into the bathroom.

They stood me up and said, "Because you didn't rat on us, you can flush your head in the sink." I looked at them all as they milled around, waiting for me to wet my head in the sink. For some unknown reason I turned to Pauli and said, "No." He looked at me, as did the rest of the seniors, and smiled, with what I had always considered was only Darrell's smile, and then they all bellowed like lions, roaring their approval of my choice.

They grabbed me again and hoisted me up in the air. I watched them all laughing, looking up at me. I too started laughing, as they dunked my head into the toilet. Someone stepped onto the toilet's valve handle, and all I could hear was a loud "Swoosh," as I looked into the interior of the toilet's basin, for the first, and hopefully last time.

They sat me down and someone said, "You're alright," and then they pushed me out of the bathroom door into total silence. Everyone was standing in the hallway waiting for me to exit. I walked out in front of the seniors, who were clapping and pushing each other around.

The hallway erupted into clapping and cheering. Even Mr. Ostlund was standing there smiling, as I walked out with a dripping-wet head. Evidently when the seniors roared their approval of my choice, everyone must have thought they had killed me.

Mr. Ostlund and the now-exposed and embarrassed teachers who were standing in the mob, witnessing the spectacle, now hurried all of the students to their next class. I walked to Mr. Esterberg's class, walked in, and took a seat at my lab position. Everyone pretended that nothing had happened.

Mr. Esterberg walked into the classroom and glanced at me, smiled, and then grabbed his lab coat. He stood there at the front of the classroom, looking at the other students, and then at me. He must have been trying to figure out a way to distract them from my circumstance, but then he just smiled, looked directly at me, and said, "Well Mr. DeLong, what did you learn today?" I smiled back and said, "I learned that I should have run the other way."

He sort of snickered uncontrollably as did the rest of the class, nodding his head in agreement, and told us all to open our books to page 181.

The rest of the school year went well. I, through my silence, had attained a distant equality with the juniors and seniors for being a standup guy and not telling on them. I started to make more friends that were older and more troublesome than I would imagine. I would be walking down the hall with these new friends, and Mr. Ostlund would look at me like I was lost.

Darrell and Wayne tried desperately to hold on to our friendship, but I had started to change. The new friends smoked pot, and were always asking me to join them in their gang's activities. I was too naive to understand that I was heading the wrong way in my life, but these guys seemed like they would protect me from my dad's beatings.

We talked about our dads beating us like it was a badge of honor, because they could not destroy us. The more I hung out with them, the further I got away from the swamp, and the more I began experimenting with drugs. Wayne's brother Butch was the leader of the neighborhood gang, and he had the same wild look that we all shared—the look of an abused person.

Wayne asked me to come with him to the swamp to see if there were any baby turtles we might be able to catch. Butch smiled and excused me, which seemed to perturb Wayne. We walked together till we reached the woods, and then we both stopped and looked in, trying to remember where we used to hide after the abuse from our parents. Wayne took off running as fast as he could, calling back to me to try to catch him.

I forgot all of the changes in our friendship and raced after him, and the skinks and squirrels all ran away from me, just like they used to. I finally caught up to him by the North-facing part of the swamp, where together we used to catch dollar-size turtles, and then sell them to the neighborhood children for pets.

We stood there just like every other day, when we used to chase all the butterflies, and discover something new about nature almost every day. Wayne said, "There are a bunch of them on top of the lily pads, see?" I said back, "I can wade out there on the sand bar and get them," to which he responded, "You're crazy."

I proceeded to wade out on top of the sand bar, which looked safe, as I crept closer to the lounging-baby turtles. Wayne kept telling me to be careful, but for reasons I can only guess now, I kept going. Just as I grabbed a couple of turtles, I slipped off from the sand bar into the muck. Wayne yelled for me to come back.

I told him, looking straight into his eyes, "Wayne, I cannot move. I'm stuck!" He yelled to me, "Don't move!" and I yelled back, "I can't!" I started to become scared, because I was slowly sinking deeper into the muck, as it held me tightly in place like wet cement. I started to try to walk out towards Wayne on the road, but I only sank in deeper. Wayne screamed, "STOP!" I looked at him and said, "I am going to drown if you don't get me out of here now!"

Wayne looked at me strangely. If I were to guess now about what was going through his head, I would say he was trying to figure out which way it would be harder to lose me as a friend: to lose me to his brother and his friends, or lose me to the swamp where we had found nature, which he could control.

We looked at each other in this strange moment in time for what seemed like hours. The water was now about to reach my mouth. I could feel the water creeping slowly up my neck. I said nothing, as there was nothing more to say. I would be lost either way.

Wayne took off towards the woods, and I watched him enter into the high brush area and completely disappear. I sank deeper into the water, and I was now totally in the grip of the mud that lied just under the water of the swamp.

I looked at all of the beautiful plants surrounding me, which I had never seen before from this position. I was strangely calm, as I watched the baby turtles swimming around me, sinking even further. I watched them try to climb on top of my face clumsily, and I smiled, but as I opened my mouth water started to seep in.

The water was up to my nostrils now. As I concentrated on keeping my mouth closed, the water was starting to pour into my ears. I could hear the turtles' little feet pushing the water around their bodies as they swam by. It was interesting to watch them from this vantage point, which until now had only been from above. I held my breath and ducked my head further under the water, until my eyes were level with the water.

It was fantastic. The baby turtles would stop, and we would look directly into each other's eyes, and then they would swim away in fear. I lifted my head up out of the water and took another deep breath. I rested back into my original position, and found that I now had to tip my head back to keep the water from going into my nose.

I looked up into the sky and watched the puffy clouds float by. The sky looked so blue that I had not noticed that I was sinking further under the water.

I felt the cool water touch the back of my head, and it caused me to jerk my head forward quickly. My nose now filled with water, like it did when I ducked my head on purpose under the water before, to be eye-level with the baby turtles.

I looked around and tried to move, but it was hopeless. Then, just as my eyes were sinking under the water, I saw Wayne splashing a stick in the water in front of my face. It was weird, as I thought to myself, this must be the same view a fish has when they are looking at us standing on the road.

I reached up out of the water and grabbed the stick, as Wayne pulled on the other end with all of his strength to release me from the muck. I slid across the water and muck till I could climb out onto the road. I looked up at him, and he looked resigned in this dilemma's conclusion—our friendship was over.

We walked back to his house, and the thing I felt truly bad about was that I never even thanked him, and I don't know why. Maybe the survival lessons that I had learned at home taught me that he was too late to save me.

When we got back to his house, no one said anything, even the two guys who had just pulled up on their chopper motorcycles. Butch said, "You'd better clean up before you go home." I grabbed their hose and turned on the water to wash off the mud. Wayne stood there for a while, and then walked into the house.

I asked what time it was, and Butch told me it was five o'clock. I said that I was late for supper, and the strangers asked me what was wrong. Butch told them about how much I was getting beaten by my dad. They looked at me, and one of them said with authority, "We'll give you a ride home." I told them that I had never ridden on a motorcycle before, but that my dad used to ride with a gang in the late 40's. They jumped on the kick starters of their motorcycles, and they roared alive. They revved them up, shook hands, and sat down on their motorcycles seats, waving for me to climb on board.

I climbed on behind the guy who had a long pony tail. I looked up, and Butch was standing there like a General sending his men off to war. The bikers and Butch nodded at each other, and we roared off down the street towards my home. It was a fantastic feeling that no one would ever take away from me again.

I looked ahead down the street as the trees and on-looking neighbors flew by in a blur as we roared by. I noticed on the back of the bikers' jackets were the words, "HELLS ANGELS, NEVADA". What did the words mean?

We reached my house, and they unbelievably drove right onto Dad's yard, which he coveted above all other things inanimate in his life. The bikers revved up their Harley's till the windows shook on my house. I climbed off and they shook my hand.

Just then, the front door to our house flew open, and there was Dad standing with his Winchester rifle. The bikers laughed out loud and tore through Dad's grass, tearing a nice groove till their tires squealed, and then hit the road in front of our house, yelling and giving Dad the finger.

I looked up at Dad, who was still pointing his rifle at them. He was smiling at them with a forlorn look, as though he wished he could have left with them. He then looked at me with hatred. I wanted to run, but I just stood there looking at him, wishing it were already over.

He grabbed me and threw his rifle onto the couch, as he marched me into my bedroom. He removed his belt, and I positioned myself for the impending beating. I watched the shadows on the wall in my room like I had so many other times in the past. I could see his arm come down, and nothing!

HE KEPT HITTING ME, BUT I FELT NOTHING AT ALL. I KEPT WATCHING HIS ARM'S SHADOW COMING DOWN, OVER AND OVER, AND THERE WAS STILL NO PAIN. I LOOKED OUTSIDE MY WINDOW AT THE ELM TREE LEAVES. THEY LOOKED EXACTLY LIKE THEY DID THE NIGHT WHEN I HAD CONTEMPLATED KILLING MY DAD. HE FELL TO THE FLOOR EXHAUSTED, AND I TURNED TO HIM AND SAID EXCITEDLY, "DAD, IT DOESN'T HURT ANYMORE!" HE LOOKED UP AT ME IN TEARS AND SAID, "PLEASE FORGIVE ME!" I LOOKED AT HIM IN DISGUST. INSTEAD OF UNDERSTANDING MY VICTORY, HE COULD ONLY UNDERSTAND HIS LOSS.

I stood there looking down at him, as I put on the shirt that he had torn from my back before he started his exercise.

I walked out of the front door as my mom yelled for me to stop. I turned around and looked back. Dad walked out of the front door and just stood there, looking at me. I went back to Wayne's house and told Butch that I needed a place to live. He smiled and said, "Not a problem."

"Birth of My Son"

WILL DAX SEE THINGS AS I DO? WILL HE TAKE THE TIME TO PLANT A SEED, ONLY TO AWAIT ITS GERMINATION, TO WATCH THIS RISING LIFE FORM IN ITS MOST DELICATE MOMENTS, TURN TO STRENGTH IN STEM, LEAVES, FLOWERS, AND FINALLY WATCH THE LAST OF ITS STRENGTH DISAPPEAR BACK INTO THE EARTH, WHENCE IT CAME FROM IN THE PREVIOUS FALL. ONLY TO WAIT FOR SPRING TO COME AGAIN, TO PARTAKE IN THIS PLAY OF NATURE UNFOLDING AGAIN AND AGAIN. THIS IS THE SIMPLICITY OF LIFE IN ITS GRANDEST THEATRICAL PLAY, THAT ALL ARE WELCOME TO SHARE.

We are all merely bit players in this creation of life, this amazing gift that if shared, creates the breezes of sweet scents from the flowers, and the rich decaying fragrance of the Earth .

Will he notice these scents of life's anew and of the past? If one truly wishes to understand life, you must accept death, or as I like to refer to it, renewal. What does life give us? From our first breath the urgency begins, we instinctively know it is the beginning of the end. It is how we live this life that directs our existence.

In our beginning, we fear nothing. We can stand atop a mountain with no fear or understanding of this thing, which seems a subject we will never need to learn. And then it happens, for some unknown reason this thing which we cannot explain and should not feel has come. It must be spoken about to be overcome, to be understood.

When I look at my Son, it is not to revel in my life, but in his to come.

Will he let fear control his life, or will he learn to live with it and set it aside, as I have done? One can either use fear as a weakness or a strength. You cannot escape this life you have been given. Even

at the end of it, you must live it until the end.

I SHOULD THINK THAT I WILL LAUGH AT THE END; TEARS ARE A WASTE OF THE MOMENT AND CLOUD THE EYES' LAST REMEMBERED SIGHTS. EVEN IN THE MOST HORRIBLE MOMENTS IN THIS LIFE, THERE ARE MOMENTS TO SMILE ABOUT, AND LAUGH ALOUD, BECAUSE IT IS *OUR* LIFE.

I look into his newborn eyes, searching for that spark that will tell me we are the same. In touching his small hand, his fingers instinctively grasp my finger. I hold a marvel in my arms. I had sewn this seed months before, by my planned strategy of enforcing one of life's greatest moments—which I wished to share with this nature I love so dearly—creation.

We look deeply into each other's eyes, as he too is searching, as I am, for our connection in soul and of heart. It is an odd feeling looking into the eyes of your destiny, the map that you will follow now and for the rest of your life.

In some ways it is a relief to know your path, but at the same moment you realize that the path is unknown. I hold him close to my chest to hear his beating heart in his new life. His smile is calm, as our two hearts listen to each other to learn the rhythm of our shared existence.

At that moment I realized that my one true want in life, my son, signals the impending end of my own existence. You are blessed with this new life you hold in your hands, but you also realize at that very moment of his birth, that your end comes as well.

Maybe it is this selfish fear that holds others back from fatherhood, for they too know the secret. I pity them in their fear, in their selfish goal to hold on to their unshared-life, which has no meaning. It is this plan of nature that is the easiest to follow. I will tell him that this is why I am here, to save you with this shared love of fatherhood and of nature. This I swear to my last breath.

"MY SWEET ADDICTION"

Dax was born on May 17th, 1989. He, who I had waited for my whole life, had finally arrived. My wife wanted to travel as a way to take up our shared time in life. I, on the other hand, had one selfish goal: to have a son I could love till my end came.

My earlier romances had educated me to the wants of women. I had come to the conclusion that the only way to be successful in marriage was to have children. I stated to her one time, "Yes, travel is an education, but children are the real journey."

She responded by saying, "Children are impossible to travel with. They are so much work," to which I answered back, "Why would anyone marry not to have children? It is meaningless, for if you are truly in love, a license means nothing." To be honest, I should think that there are very few women that would choose child birth over a leisure activity.

I looked into her eyes for some sort of direction as they were smiling falsely in agreement. She then, with much thought said, "We will have to wait till we are financially successful to have children." It was a strange statement to me, since I felt that having children was the greatest success of all.

Our love was an estranged love: I the romantic, her's bent on our financial success, to make sense of our license.

The first two years were of building a business from nothing, to a widely known concern, which blossomed until competition of lesser quality made it impossible to continue with a profit. As I was pressing her for children, she was showing her obvious disappointment in my failing business.

At the time we were living in a 600-square-foot house that easily conveyed my business failure completely. It seemed as though time was running out for the success of my wanted-fatherhood.

MY WIFE REPEATED ON A REGULAR BASIS THAT HER ABILITY TO HAVE CHILDREN WOULD SOON PASS, WITH A SMILE. ON TOP OF EVERYTHING ELSE THAT WE WERE DEALING WITH, THERE WAS THE TRUTH THAT ONLY AGE CAN TELL. WE HAD MARRIED LATER THAN MOST DO, IN OUR 30'S.

I believed that we were both mature enough to be parents, and I would be a father at any cost. Two years passed as I worked feverishly to keep the failing business successful.

Cherry one day walked up to me in a form of shock and said, "I am pregnant." I took her in my arms and danced around the small living room, howling my approval.

I danced alone in this dance of love, while she was flung around like an opposing team member who must feign happiness for the victors. The next nine months were a joy; every day I would watch her change, and I would compliment her glow.

She would tell me her breasts were growing larger and this pleased her immensely in her desperation to find a victory in her malady. Her heart was growing in this new life we had created. She was a beauty that only a new life can bring to any woman.

We decided to surprise her parents with the news on our next visit. We traveled to their home with a

renewed love, and what had started as an act of contrition was now a thing of shared happiness. On arriving at their door, we were pleasantly accepted into their home. Cherry's smile betrayed her as her mother asked, "What's the problem?"

Cherry told them the wonderful news. Her father's face beamed redder than his sunbaked-face could possibly camouflage. He was ecstatic. Her mother, on the other hand, portrayed a queer look, as one who is watching a puppy for friends that she must return. In one look, her mother had renewed the fear of life in her.

It was as though her daughter had now started on the same trail of misery she had taken years earlier. Her disappointment was stated with no words at all. All of the female elements in their family had taken up the worst quality of humans—jealousy.

Cherry was lost in this unsupported-love from them, and so was I. We were now desperate to escape this family condition neither of us could understand. Our greatest achievement had in one afternoon become our worst fear—parenthood.

It has always been amazing to me how people can take a wonderful event and through one contrivance or another, make it horrible.

We slept in their guest room, feeling as we did when we had not yet married, as thieves. We returned home the next day, and all I could feel was that all the positives we felt before our visit were vanishing, as though they had never existed.

Cherry had lost the glow which had now been suppressed again by the unknown fear, as she no longer accepted the beauty of the impending birth. It was as though a part of her had been deformed by the ever-growing lump in her stomach.

I worked hard to disprove what she had grasped from her mother. We would have to work hard to erase her gloom, and it was up to us now.

The night of our son's birth came, and Cherry suffered terribly, as I coaxed and attempted to coach her, reminding her that this new life was ours, and ours alone to start together.

She labored for twenty-two hours, and after a pain-reliever was finally administered, she calmed from her deepening fear. She knew that I was there for her always, but as the twenty-first hour of labor passed, her fear of this impending birth was understandably weighing heavily on her, as she begged to go home.

I held her hand and looked deeply into her eyes, and said that we could not. I believe at this point she truly realized that I loved her, and that the only way out was the feared-birth itself.

She smiled as the doctor came in and said that the time had come. She pushed bravely on, as I, in amazement, coached her. The nurse said that the head was crowning; we were almost there. Dax came out with ease, and Cherry was aglow again with the forgotten-happiness that she deserved.

Our son was then handed to me, and at that very moment he opened his eyes, and I swear he smiled at me. I was now transformed from a mere husband, to a father. It is a weird transformation that comes to all fathers: elation, fear of the unknown, and then the questions-never-asked that pour through you

like ice water.

It is at that moment when you realize that all your trivial concerns are no longer important. This new life that I held in my hands would now require my heart and my obsession forever.

Cherry and Dax were able to come home two days later to our ever-waiting, overly-excited malamutes. They were two brothers, named Jax and Kodiak, and weighed roughly 125 pounds each.

Cherry said she was a little frightened at the idea of bringing Dax home to a place that barely fit us and the two dogs. I told her that they would sacrifice themselves for our son's safety, and she was uneasy, but agreed.

As we walked through the door with Dax in my arms, they were strangely attentive. They acted like we had just brought them home a new brother. They howled in approval as did I, as I can now imagine what this insane scene was like for Cherry.

I grabbed her and held her to Dax, as we all laughed at this new excitement in our home. A family had been born. One afternoon as Dax was taking a nap on our bed, Cherry and I were talking when I realized the dogs were not with us. I frantically ran to the bedroom to find Jax and Kodiak sleeping soundly, encircling Dax on the bed to protect him.

Cherry and I looked at them, and Kodiak looked up like he was saying, this is where we belong. Cherry was right; we had grown out of size for this small home. I had recently joined the ranks of a real estate concern that allowed me the opportunity to locate our first home, which would support our growing numbers.

It was a four-plex-type apartment building that we would remodel to rent out, increasing our income, and adding the possibility of affording a proper home for our new family.

I told Cherry that this was merely a stopover to our needed success. The happiness she held in her arms gave us the strength needed to believe in that statement.

Within a month of looking at possibilities, I finally found our new home: a coming-addiction in a promising neighborhood. Cherry's excitement was only eclipsed by my relief. It wasn't much, but it was safe, and it held our hopes of a dream home, which needed to be a reality.

We had started from nothing, and we were now finding success through our shared desire to be a family.

The house was like many in the neighborhood—untouched since its construction. It was located in the promising neighborhood of Linden Hills, near Lake Harriet, in the city of Minneapolis.

I remember when Cherry first walked into the family room, carrying Dax in his car carrier, *she* looking at all the possibilities, and *I* seeing only the work to be done.

We moved in to our future dream house, and began the needed plans for renovation—our addiction had begun. I took control of the planning for the initial plumbing and electrical improvements that had to be completed to make life bearable, and Cherry took control of the interior-decorating improvements that would be the finish to my intended work.

I had little experience in interior design, and Cherry was thrilled to take her part. We had set our separate courses in this rebuilding partnership, as married people should.

She went about collecting decorating ideas from interior designers and from the industry's numerous self-help magazines.

It is a disease, this work of remodeling. I believe that the odor of age and of the past inhabitants that permeate from each corner of the home become so overwhelmingly offensive to the new inhabitants, that not by desire, but by necessity, they are forced to this never-ending endeavor. I think that to live in a dated house is the same thing as breathing alive in someone else's casket.

The offensive odors and the dated appearance were more than I could bear; I was firmly heading into my unrealized addiction head-first. It is a disease, this remodeling, not unlike any other addiction, for the more that you complete, the more that you see must be done.

If one were to describe the perfect addiction, it would be the remodeling of your own home. The money is easy to find. Your home has its present equity to draw from, in which money from a lender is easy to obtain. And in your addicted mind, you rationalize that this money is creating more value, and of course more wealth for you.

How perfectly the addictive pieces fit together: first the dream itself, then the necessitating home purchase, and finally the realization that you must make it your own dream home. What is more, is that the addiction is easily passed from one family to another. Never has an addiction been so perfectly conceived. Its ingredients are of the makings of mankind itself: jealousy, and of course greed, for you can never have enough.

This, ladies and gentlemen, may have been the original sin, the one that Moses, out of fear of his wife, could not add to the tablets. No matter the effects of triumph or of complete failure, the addicted seek another dilapidated project to satisfy their desperation for change, to visualize a perceived dream that others cannot. The truly addicted drive through neighborhoods searching as any drug addict does, seeking their fix, as if mesmerized.

This is the addiction of an imagined, needed-change to your life. I, like the others of this perfect addiction, will never be satisfied in this life, for it is the addiction itself that gives us our purpose. It completes us until the next project is found.

There was Cherry, creating the vision through her decorating magazines, and I, realizing the potential wealth from our home investment. Our neighbors, through jealousy, joined in this heartily. Flower beds and landscaping grew from the once dismal and plain soils that surrounded their homes, which were now transformed into lush invitations to the errant passerby.

I worked endlessly at this endeavor, as our enjoyment was the visible changes that we created daily. It was like our son Dax—the total enjoyment we could share together without question, for we had done it as a family.

The flowers that sprung up in the neighbors' yards confirmed that the addiction was spreading successfully, and with a needed urgency, like rains that quench a severe drought. It was insatiable as it flowed from one yard to the next, like poured paint. It was beauty that we were seeking—the beauty

that was absent from our shared communal relationships.

Each bloom in the boulevard garden I had planted held possibilities of the next conversation between neighbors. I would watch the daily progress of each bloom, as it developed from a bud, to its crowning glory of a full bloom.

The neighborhood children would walk by each day, watching for the flower beds' development, wondering if the buds had bloomed, and if they would be fragrant inside of their hidden colors. Not acting unlike a drug dealer, I would watch the children cautiously approaching the fragrant lilies first.

I would casually walk up to them, talking to them and acting as if unconcerned, while offering them a whiff of the Star Gazer lilies' deeply fragrant smell of rich vanilla. They would approach cautiously, as all good children should when approaching this hidden, and unknown desire.

Ever cautious, drawn ever closer to their new addiction, they smelled each bloom as a fawn does to a new growth of clover. Then, once entranced by this fragrance, they would reach out with their hands to touch them as if under a spell, pretending to grasp this delicate fragrance of life.

At the same moment they would abruptly pull back in hesitation, their noses probing deeper and deeper, as they breathed in softly to experience this purity without disturbance. Drawn by instinct to the flowers' beauty, and then to the perfume of nature that is its essence, its very motivation of existence.

The children would inhale the essence of each flower slowly, and then move on to the next one, their faces alight with the glow that everyone who covets this beginning of the addiction of beauty shares. Their noses would show the faint whisper of pollen received by this gift of love—this addiction is life.

We were entranced in this work of love, every day experiencing change from the slightest new transformation from our labor. In what others took simply, we experienced wholly. In what was once a bath that only served cool water for bathing, new plumbing now brought the rejoices of a shower that revived the senses of accomplishment. Unnoticed, we were being pushed ever further into the depths of our addiction.

Dax was now three, and we had put every penny and free hour into our obsession. He would watch me tear out a wall in amazement, not understanding the purpose. But he knew that the man, his father, who now hugged and kissed him endlessly, was doing something for him. And he was never out of reach of this father, who cherished him into an addicted obsession.

Because he lacked a proper education, my father was forced to work twelve-to-sixteen-hours a day for our family to survive. I did not know his gentle side in my adolescence, but I knew about his anger for our loss, as we *shared* only in the *loss* of our intended relationship.

Not knowing him the way that any son wants to know their father, I swore that my son would know me in entirety.

My son would watch me in my work intently, trying to understand my actions and their meanings. If I were busy, he would stay content watching me, but on slow days he would become anxious and cry from boredom.

The more that I would do, the happier he would be, laughing at my follies, and always smiling. I, in my work, had hoped that I would instill what every father wants their son to understand: that hard work is a pleasure which few understand, but for those few that do, they will earn success in life.

There was one instance I will always cherish. I was working on the bathroom plumbing, in which the exterior walls had been previously removed. The dilemma was that to do this work and keep Dax safe and happy, I had to devise a remedy for his boredom. For if he was not by my side in every endeavor, he would cry until I presented myself.

No matter how many of his dinosaur collection were about him, he would always need his father to play with him as well.

My work that day was high up on a ladder, propped up against an existing wall in the opened-wall bathroom. I had come to an idea for his safety that worked for us both.

I tied him to one of the bottom legs of the ladder with a soft rope, as this offered him the opportunity to travel safely about the bathroom floor, without falling from the exterior wall to the ground below.

This worked well, and he played with his dinosaurs and watched me till he realized that his freedom was limited by this rope tied around him. He stretched the tether until he ran out of free space, and with the rope taut to its maximum, he looked up at me and began to cry until I descended the ladder.

It was funny at first. I would coax him to play with his dinosaurs, and try to work, but within a short time I would feel the tugs on the ladder. There he was, looking up at me perturbed, with the rope tied loosely about his waist, crying for my attention.

I would again descend the ladder and hold him in my lap, as we would play in the sun filled room, having dinosaur wars. This would make Dax laugh to distraction, because of course the Dinos would occasionally attack him too, with my animated actions, exacting their revenge for his abuse on them.

He would laugh till exhaustion and fall off to sleep in his blankie, and then I would sneak back up the ladder while he slumbered on a sleeping bag I placed on the bathroom floor. I would again hear a familiar snuffle, and there he would be, smiling in tears, waiting for me to again descend the ladder to resume our play time.

This would not do if I were going to be able finish the work that had to be accomplished. I would have to wait for his mother to get home.

CHERRY WOULD ARRIVE FROM WORK AND WATCH US, TRYING TO DISCOVER WHAT OUR SEPARATION ANXIETY WAS ALL ABOUT. I WOULD LOOK INTO MY SON'S EYES, AND I KNEW THE SECRET. WE WERE FATHER AND SON, AND WE SHARED THE SAME HEART. A CONNECTION BETWEEN FATHER AND SON IS SOMETHING WONDERFUL WHEN PERFECT.

Especially if this relationship is kindled from infancy, the son looks upon his father as his hero, as someone he must emulate, and someone he will hope to become. To me, Dax had finally made everything in my life make sense. Through all the glorious and horrible things I had witnessed and partaken in, he was my hope. God had given me this miracle for me to raise and form into what I should have been—a second chance.

My life has had many pitfalls, some of which I fell into by accident, and more others, that I had

through weakness, succumbed to.

He had come to save me from my sins of the past, to atone for my miseries I had suffered and suffered upon others. It became my obsession to assure him a better life than mine, and I would be honest and forthcoming to him in all of my past-life's journeys.

Since I had broken my ties from past friends, famous and infamous, I believed I could at the very least guide him through the ideals of morality and honor. To me, a father who simply exists in his son's life, without attempting these things, is a failure. They are not what I would consider men.

I have known many fathers, whom for one reason or another, find great pleasure in seeing their sons become lesser than themselves. They are simply children themselves, living with childish jealousy.

People have asked me what I mean by this. I say it is a simple thing really, because you are no more successful than your children. If you believe you are wealthy financially and your child is not, how is it that you, as their guide, have not failed entirely?

It is a father's obligation to see that his son is more successful than himself, and it is a privilege to do so.

MY SON IS MY LIFE, ALTHOUGH THIS CAME AT A GREAT COST TO MY MARRIAGE, AS ONE MIGHT EXPECT. A WOMAN, ESPECIALLY YOUR WIFE, DEMANDS YOUR FULL ATTENTION, WHETHER HER CONCERNS ARE TRIVIAL OR NOT. I AM NOT A MAN WHO DOES NOT UNDERSTAND THIS, AND NOW THAT I THINK OF IT, MAYBE THAT IS WHY CHERRY WANTED NO CHILDREN.

She loved Dax as any mother could, but I always felt as though she resented how our love had been interceded. In her idea of love's expectations, she should have been the focus of my love, unconditionally. In my haste to produce a better me in my son, I alienated my wife.

I had never considered myself important in this life, until the birth of my son Dax. I took it upon myself to guide Dax on his journey of this life we share, at any cost to me, or to others. In this endeavor, I may have become those that I loathe—those, who through thought and action, think only of themselves.

I have always been of the mind that one should consider their actions upon others before their own considerations, living so that their lives and interests come first and foremost before their own.

In Dax's life, I have become obsessive. This obsession, and this love for my son, is not bad, I feel. Maybe if every parent were to be obsessive for their child's success, the world would be a better place. If being obsessive and loving your child is a sin, then might not this one sin be forgiven?

As Dax grew, and so did the addiction, what was once an idea of mere habit had taken on a life of its own. My remodeling of our home had become a great advertisement to neighbors and passersby, seeking their dealer for our shared-addiction of love, which needed change. I took on their addictions heartily, as their supplier in designing their dreams as well.

My Son asked me once, "Dad, why don't men cry?" I looked at him and said, "The reason men do not cry is because they fear they will never stop."

"A Dream of Love"

When I hold you in my eyes, I explore the wants of every man who can envision art in a woman and understand its subtleties—its brush strokes of curves that lead to the focal points of my hidden desires.

This love is deep and longing, like a kiss that betrays an unknown passion that cannot be explained by reason. As I kiss you, my wants become yours, as two breaths that become one in the wind. This thing we call love draws us deeper, ever deeper inside you. You attempt to push away, but must never let go. We cannot escape this thing we call life.

Again I slip into a deep slumber until my anxiety builds to awaken me, and the last of my slumber washes away. I find myself staring at my bedroom ceiling again, which I carefully examine, searching for an answer to this infidelity.

I want to tell my wife that it doesn't matter that she doesn't love me any more—that my dream has come to save me from this unforgiving loss. I hear her breathing in the next room, asleep in her own bed, far removed from my passions of before. My guilt overwhelms me that this failed love that was shared by us both, has simply vanished as if it had never existed at all.

Her breathing begins to become an obstacle to my own desired sleep. I lay in my bed patiently, awaiting the moment that I will hear the breathing of my new-found love.

I arrive in the same grove of trees, where the wind seems to kiss the leaves so perfectly, and where the fragrance of aromatic flowers encompass my very presence. My eyes search the grove for your presence, for your eyes that I still have never seen.

She is here, perfect in all, with lush lips and a smile that say she is happy that I have arrived. Who is she, this woman I love, with eyes that I have never seen? I would know her, if only this veil were lifted. That is the insanity of this love affair of my dream.

I can see her entirely. Is this woman a vision of what love truly is, or is she my destiny? Is this why she is not revealed to me? This agony of an unknown love is unbearable!

Can she be the one true love that we all seek, the love that is all consuming?

This dream is insidious. I can feel her warmth as she holds my hand and we walk together, to where, it doesn't matter.

We walk together through this grove, where my dreams began in desperation from the falling out of love with my wife, to be reborn again in this ecstasy of my dream.

After twenty two years of marriage, I was confronted with the reality that my wife had never loved me. She, out of her own need, required my proposed success, a success I could not guarantee. This deception caused part of my heart to be diminished, like the waning color of a flower which is not properly nourished.

When you are truly in love, the destination doesn't matter. It is all of those combined moments that are shared together that do.

My new love's hair is the color of summer: a soft red, to blonde, that blows softly in this breeze of the tree grove, like the waves of sun-infused heat.

I stare desperately at her aura, outlined by the sun's mid-day rays, searching for her eyes, which will betray her identity—but no. My fear builds that if I detect her identity, she will not come to me again. God! Is this the punishment for this sin of errant love? Her lips smile, framed by her golden-red hair. Her rose-colored cheeks speak to me, in the freshness that only new love can.

She speaks to me in the language of new-found love, but they are words I cannot hear. My desperation to know her identity has caused my heart to race uncontrollably. She pulls her hand from mine, as I try to hold her's tightly, in an attempt to speak of my passions, and of my unyielding love for her.

She smiles lightly. Has she realized in my pain that she, my new love, has become my true tormentor? She turns to walk away, and I attempt to reach out and grab her, but my aggressive motives will not allow it. I seem to have no strength at all, as I again try to speak to her, but there are no words. My heart is now pounding in my head. I cannot take this anymore. I am lost in this love that I cannot control! My arms reach out again, and out of my own volition, they seem to float to hers, which are outstretched to mine. Is there anything left in my heart for this debilitating pain?

I awaken, reaching out to you, but you are gone. I must now go through another day, waiting impatiently for the night to bring the possibility of our renewed love. Looking at my hands raised above me, I am amazed at their color in the sun.

I hesitantly look about my bedroom for her, but she is gone again. My eyes open widely, as the sun's rays illuminate my hands. I lie in bed, trying to regain what is left of my sanity.

Another dream has passed in the night, just as the others have done before, and my want is to never awaken at all. If it were not for this warmth in my soul that she has given me, surely depression would find a way into this daylight life of mine. Losing this love every dawn is maddening. My attempt to find the usual warmth in the sun, which I have always loved so dearly, has gone. It has been replaced by her.

The flowers that are in full bloom in my garden calm these feelings of abandonment, though it persists to my distraction. Flowers that once held my attention seem to have lost their meaning. Their fragrances, though beautiful, are not the same as the grove where my love awaits my return. I find myself going from one flower bed to another, realizing that I am trying to find the unknown flowers' scent that inhabits our grove.

Resolved in my failure, I enter our home, where only strangers live, attempting to understand my existence here. Our glances at each other are that of confused thought, as to why we even know each other. Would we even have been friends without our sexual desires?

It seems like this fantasy that we had succumbed to, was simply an uncontrollable-genetic fulfillment of our paternal requirements. Might it not have been caused by our shared experience, from our own parents' deceptive attempts at their love? Is it enough to simply love one another because they share the same moralities, or should love be horrible enough to be satisfying?

Has this new-found love of mine replaced that which I am forced to go through every day, because of

my desperate need to believe in truly unforgiving love?

My perceived duties of our lost love are systematically betrayed by our uncomfortable touches of this shared familiarity. In my desperation to rekindle what were once the forced moments of passion between us, it seems to have confused our separation ever deeper.

My fear of losing this *attempt* at love, has now been replaced by the fear of losing my *dream* of true love. We both go through the motions of daily life, waiting for the night's escape from our awkward relationship. She escapes my advances, as I await my dream.

Has God, in his plans, made man and woman so different, that their true love be unattainable, unless the contestants play the game with a careless passion?

We ascend the stairs to our assigned sleeping arrangements, following the path taken from past passions, before the discovery of our loss. My dream appears almost immediately this time. My need for it has overwhelmed my guilt.

I wish this vision to end, yet I see her again, but it is not the same. Something has changed. She is not a vision, but real this time. Her warmth, which usually is felt only by touch, has now invaded my soul. I, if by instinct, look to her eyes. Is this a trick—is she revealed? But dear God, I do not recognize her at all!

She takes my hand as before. Is this my true love revealed, or another apparition, as before? She looks deeply into my eyes, and waves her hand like any great illusionist before their exhibition. Why can I not stop looking at her, and make this illusion end? I desperately try to look away. Dear God, not again, not another illusion. I lift my eyes up slowly, knowing that my greatest fear may be realized, that I will not see her again.

This true love, which is my dreamed reality, is like looking up to see my own executioner. My fear is overwhelmed by this needed-end to fulfill love's aspiration, and that it may this-one-time be true, and not another betrayal.

Her eyes speak to me. Are they the words of our love that we share being spoken? How is it that I can hear her words of love now? Has this dream turned into another dream?

I feel as though I have been found by love itself, as she has revealed herself to me entirely. I awaken, and feel reborn in my thoughts and feelings. The sun's rays flood my room as never before. Love gives us hope. Hope gives me what I seek. I will wait for her love, which is true. Her touch will reveal her to me. I must wait alone.

"The Sparrow"

A sparrow's life is simple, and yet complex, as it is with all living creatures. It is simply how their life is examined that allows us to come to our proper conclusions.

As a sparrow, your fears are easy to see. It is the neighborhood cat, in which their predatory existence in the natural world is a bane to the song-birds that sing to us all. The sparrow knows of no fears that afflict mankind, such as heart disease and other contributing ailments that precede our end. They simply shrug off these feelings that make us run to the doctor for the slightest abnormality, flying from one tree to another with only one care: to exist perfectly, as nature intended.

You fly as fast as you did on the first day you discovered the ability of flight, never predisposed in thoughts of death, or the question that humans ask themselves each day—can I fly today?

The food I consume is a necessity to my power of flight. Water is a drink I take to quench this thirst, and that afterwards leads me to a bath to remove the pollen from my feathers from the trees that I alight on.

My thoughts are easy, with desires of nourishment and of love yet undiscovered. These things that I seek are not in my own control, and they are of the necessity of life itself. Is it love that drives me to the needs of mating, or is it my desire to share my life with another love?

Love's desire is a natural thing that I cannot control. I polish my beak and remove my unsightly-older feathers from last summer, primping my look for her imagined-arrival. I take flight, indiscriminate in my journey, always looking for my necessities in this life.

It is the beginning of fall, and my wants become more deliberate: to preserve my ability of flight. The fall's intermittent winds out of the Northwest remind me of the hardships that lie ahead, and these hardships draw me to her.

Is it a need for companionship, or is it the harsh realities of survival that draw us together again, for it is easier to share our flights together over the blanket of snow that will surely come. I ruffle my feathers in the sun's dawning light to insulate me from these cold-fall mornings.

Blankets of fog have rolled in with the dew from the farmers' wheat fields, which I frequent for the fallen grain from their last harvest. They seem to insulate the earth from the coming-frosts that will turn this moisture into icy crystals, clinging to the remaining stalks from the farmers' earlier harvest, eventually turning to snowflakes.

I land on a protruding branch high upon a leafless tree, surveying my surroundings, looking for the estranged love that I have not felt since last Fall. I feel a presence on my branch, look to the right, and she is there. She is more beautiful than I remembered, looking unconcerned for my attention, preening her feathers, and looking over the fields that lie before us.

I come to a fear I have never felt before. Am I too old to hold her love's attention again? Has another younger than I, found her beauty as irresistible as I have pretended not to notice, out of my fear of her abandonment? Moving cautiously towards her, she walks lightly away from me down the branch we

share.

I nervously look for other suitors. There are none. She pretends not to notice my advances, as my confusion is mirrored in her piercing black eyes.

Out of desperation, I fly and land on our shared branch ahead of her to stop her retreat. She looks at me deeply in a feigned moment of anger. I puff up my chest to show my intentions to her, which she seems to ignore, but she still has not flown from our perch.

My confusion is only compounded with her occasional song, which seems to call to another far away, possibly to a lost-love of summer that I could not understand.

I begin to sing our song that we shared last year, hoping to remind her of our past love. She begins to join in our song, as beautiful as ever, but with more intensity than before. I join in this harmony, portraying my loneliness, which she accepts as her own.

We take turns flying over one another on this branch, causing it to shake with our movements of rekindled love. Our song echoes over the field together as before. In a frenzied voice, we tell each other our stories of the past summer, and of our intended future together, that had never ended.

Our frantic voices have once again become one. We fly to our favorite pine tree where we nest each year, to find our love, which still churns in our hearts, existing as one.

We wake to a familiar chill, and an ever-increasing-northern wind that has brought snow upon its whispered-gusts.

We walk out tentatively on our snow-frosted branch, and watch as the snow falls lightly to the ground below us from our disturbance. The sun seems to know exactly where its rays should fall: perfectly on each branch, as if to accentuate the contours of the landscape that lies before us, as if it were painting its colors of the day just for us.

I look to her as she ruffles her feathers to insulate herself from the morning's cold start. Her youth is more evident now, as my movements signal the age of my portrayed-energy, camouflaging our unknown-future together. I too ruffle my feathers, and break out into a song that I hope she too will remember, a song that I first sang at our introduction.

She in turn joins in this past memory of our new found love. It is delightful to hear this vision of love echo over the fields before us, as it did before.

This is my eighth year in the meadow that I have inhabited through all the seasons, and all of the changes that nature gives us, in all its qualities. We again ruffle our feathers in unison, and take flight into the wind's currents in search of our next roost, and the possibility of a food source.

I feel no stiffness or insecurity in this flight into the sun's rays. The need for sustenance spurs us on from one patch of seeded-shrubbery, to another at the edge of the field. The drifts of pure white snow easily accent these food sources. Between our moments of necessary gorging on the seed, we sing our appreciations for the plentiful grain, and that of our shared companionship.

We take flight with this new-found energy, drifting effortlessly through the gusts of wind, like gliders

gently maneuvering through the winds that make flight possible for all that partake in this art.

I feel as young as I did upon my first flight, as I did when leaving the nest of my mother for the first time. Effortlessly, I race ever closer to the white drifts of snow. Faster, ever faster, I fly over this field of white. It is a brilliant white that I had never noticed before, as if looking directly into the sun itself.

To simply exist is not enough. We must create and experience to be complete; this is what separates us from the wild animals. It is a good thing to evolve and discover your capabilities.

"ITASCA"

I would be remiss in not mentioning this natural setting of Minnesota. The park is located on Highway 71, twenty-one miles north of Park Rapids.

For Minnesota campers, it is a mecca of sorts. It is the rustic, refined camping experience. It is the Glacier National Park of Minnesota. Its land history is of a glacial transformation caused from the last great North-American ice age, evidenced by its glacier-carved lake to its rounded boulders, stranded intermittently throughout its landscape, and found alone, as if left behind by giants playing a game of marbles.

To its old growth forests of White and Norway Pine, to the refined Douglas Lodge, if one wanted to call oneself a camper, you must visit. Its situation in nature is secured by its designation—in equal parts by the nature of humans and of the wild. The old growth forests are home to the Pileated woodpecker. The amazing bird of our pre-history flies from one tree to another, with just a few synchronized wing movements. Its call is the cry of an ancient-primal-laughing voice, echoing through the necessary-old-growth forest.

The forest is an important environment for several reasons, but the main one is that if it were not here, the Pileated woodpecker would soon disappear as well. The old-growth forest, like all of those forests scattered intermittently across this great country, are the homes to many species, which live only by the grace of these necessary-ancient remnants of our past.

This was secured by the forethought of early Minnesotans in the time of the last Great Depression. In listening to these prehistoric voices calling to one another, you realize that they are calling you into their world, away from the safety of yours, deeper into this wild life.

Suddenly, the beaver slaps his tail on the water's surface at the center of the lake, waking you from your trance, and warning you that to live in nature, there are rules that you must follow, or pay the dire consequences of failure.

Nature does not forgive our mistakes. It merely accepts them, as it does for all of the free animals that have chosen to live in its forests.

Lake Itasca has a stillness unlike most lakes found in Minnesota, because it lies deep in the gorge-like depression created by the last glaciers' violent land transformations, thousands of years before. The nature of Itasca is balanced by one family of loons, and one family of timber wolves, with deer, bear, and all the other expected-wild inhabitants of a balanced ecology. Lake Itasca runs east to West,

towards the Mississippi Headwaters, where lily pads in the western bay guide the canoeist in a gentle directional curve—highlighted by their brilliant white flowers—to its beginning.

Visitors come from around the world to stand in the headwaters' shallow beginnings of the mighty Mississippi, amazed that a stream so diminutive could become one of the world's longest rivers.

I have stood there in the water, imagining what it must have been like for Robert de LaSalle to have finally reached this discovery, standing amidst the same old-growth forests where children now play games in the surrounding nature.

He may have been watched curiously from afar by the already-existing human natives, whose grave sites are now well marked for today's adventurers to photograph, with little concern for their safety from today's woodland natives, which watch their visitors from afar.

The fragrance of the water lily is a heavenly scent, which draws you like bees to a newly-opened flower. I sometimes muse that somewhere in the perfume regions of France, a perfumer is trying desperately to duplicate this pure essence of nature, failing again and again in frustration. The fragrance is like that of the air itself, light, gusty, and all enveloping. It can be heady on a calm hot evening, as it surrounds you completely with its hints of green and white fragrances of nature.

I believe each lake has its own description, or an aura, if you will. Itasca's sunset is a show of shadows because of its gorge-like characteristics, and from the large trees that create the shadows, from the lightest to the darkest of shades. At twilight, the loon calls to its errant lover, as all of us do, in a haunting call that echoes from the lowest point near the Mississippi's Headwaters, to the surrounding glacier-carved hills. Beckoning the darkness to its place, you can, if you truly listen, hear nature change from the day-life, to the nocturnal.

Sounds of the daylife begin to wane to a slumber, allowing dusk and the creatures of the dark to their awaited place.

Far off in the Southwest-corner of the park, you can hear the wolves' rhythmic calling to each other, waking each other from their daylight slumber.

Suddenly, their voices become one thrilling howl. In a crescendo of their combined voices, they signal that the hunt is on. You listen as your heart begins to beat faster and faster. You have heard this ancient beckoning language before.

What was once long repressed, now flourishes once again deeply in your human soul.

CHILDREN OF THE LAKE, HOWL, HOWL AT THE MOON!

Dance 'round the camp fire, holding each other's hands.

Howl at the moon children, for it is this freedom which no one can take away from you."

AT DUSK, THE CAMPGROUNDS BECOME ABLAZE WITH SCATTERED-CAMPSITE FIRES UNDER THE TALL, DARK-PINE TREES. THE WIND WHISPERS TO EACH CAMPER, IN THE VOICE THAT IS NATURE—WELCOMING ALL TO ITS GLORY, WHISPERING SECRETS TO ALL WHO WILL LISTEN, AND TELLING THEM OF STORIES FROM THE PAST, AND OF THOSE TO COME.

The camp fires mesmerize each visitor, as their children run from one fire to another, seeking the

campground inhabitants' secrets, making quick friends with unknown faces, and calling out to all to join in their adventures into the darkness.

Darkness brings out the primal hunter—that hidden genetic trait triggered by this world of shadows and fire. You can hear the children's laughter and screams of discovery as they bump into, and trip over unseen obstacles, running together, looking for more children to join them in this magical night.

The children's laughter mimicks the loon's, saying goodnight to all the campers, with all the voices ending as did the wolves', in an excited crescendo.

Then, all of the campers quietly gather around the fires, watching as the fire's fuel slowly wanes to coal, and then they are off to slumber. The campers lie in their tents, listening intently to the ever-advancing calls of the night creatures, causing them to hug each other in that primal need for warmth and safety in their sleeping bags, inside their tents, knowing that mere fabric is all that separates them from the night.

Each nocturnal call plays out a hidden drama of life and death. You can hear the barred-owl's-melancholy call, interjected like a bassoon into an orchestra of the wild life of the night, as you try to understand each sound's meaning.

Breathing slow and quietly, you try to interpret the sounds of the night creatures in their lives. The excitement is contagious, as you imagine yourself sharing in the hunt that rushes by your tent.

As the campers drift off to sleep, they dream of the dawn and their discoveries-yet-to-come in the park.

Dawn in the deep woods comes late because of the old-growth pines, which cast their shadows late into the morning.

You are first awakened by the scents of the early riser's camp fire, as the sun's rays remove each layer of the previous night's shadows, like sheets from a woodland bed. You can hear the last of the muted calls from the wolves as you wonder, was their nocturnal hunt a success, or will their morning's slumber be a restless sleep of hunger?

The aroma of eggs and bacon bring you out of your morning dream, as the first child races by you on their bicycle, determined to make every moment at Itasca count.

The loon's calls echo over the entire lake, summoning all campers to awaken and greet the new day. The beginnings of camp fires spring forth from each fire ring, as their tents rustle with their awakening inhabitants. Each camper stretches with the smile of a restful sleep, as a sudden morning chill urgently whisks them quickly to the outdoor toilet.

The sound of the screen door slamming at the toilet causes some to smile, in remembrance of past-mornings at Itasca.

The lake is mirrored by the reflected trees and cattails that surround it, interrupted by a canoeist slipping through the water's surface without a sound, gliding east to the lodge for breakfast. If Itasca is the natural setting of the park, then Douglas Lodge is its jewel. It connects that of humans' work from the past, the buildings blending perfectly with nature, in a classic combination of beautiful-raw

materials, to a fine-finished work of woodsmanship.

The lodge sports quaint, but small rooms, and the adjacent cabins coax the guests staying there to gather at the lodge's great room, where conversations break out between curious guests, asking subtle, probing questions, seeking their counterparts' secrets of origin, and sharing their personal feelings of this ancient place of nature, where man and nature coexist perfectly.

The fireplace extols the nature beyond the white, French-style-window panes. The grove of large red-pine trunks to the north sway ever-so-slightly from the wind, aloft in their needled tops.

After dining in the restaurant, people filter out to the eastern-facing log-style deck, to watch the ruby-throated hummingbirds feeding at the nectar-filled feeders at each corner. They are wonderful to watch, framed by the blue sky above and green flora below. They fly from one feeder to another, feigning an imaginary territory to their competitors, which they all must share. Their wings pass in a blur, closely to each guest, in a special-energetic greeting. The sound is fantastic; it's similar to the soothing sound of a ceiling fan.

Visitors to the lodge come from all over the park. All are welcome to this special Minnesota experience, shared by campers, and cabin guests alike.

Nature has a welcoming and equalizing effect on all groups that visit, from the family, to the executive seeking a restful time of seclusion. They speak the same language—it is of nature.

At first, the guests are preoccupied with their coffee and muffins. Then, one by one, they turn their private attention to the birds' movements, and then to the lake they hadn't noticed, hidden behind the curtain of bordering red-pine tree trunks.

A calmness expressed on each enlightened face shows their longing to be part of this grand place of nature, which in reality, they have always belonged.

Us, as humans, must only take from nature what she has offered us as a gift. Our position in nature is that of a steward.

"Lost in The Woods"

I found myself once again living out of my old Mercedes at the city park in Pine River, Minnesota. It is an acceptable practice in this town of dreamers. There I was in this town, surrounded by estranged relatives that I had not seen in many years, which was caused out of my obsession for my needed financial success, driving us apart over the years.

Two of them had called on me at the park out of curiosity, and I, for fear of rejection, would not, or could not, chance the calls that I should have made in my earlier success. Maybe it was because I did not want to find a jealousy of my success, which they perceived was not their own, fearing that it would somehow change our comfortable estrangement even more.

Their lives were of simplicity and a wholesomeness that I could not allow myself to share, which can be explained easily—I have never been satisfied with life enough to accept it.

We spoke in short sentences, trying desperately to put our separate, but remembered pieces of life

together, which would help us once again make that important family connection that I didn't know.

Our conversations drifted to memories of past, shared-childhood experiences, that became awkward because of our confused recollections that we each shared differently in our own minds.

Both seemed perplexed at my-being-at-the-park unannounced, possibly questioning my pretenses, for they did not ask why, or for what reason I was there. I soon became aware that my presence would make them realize their own estrangement from their once-closely-knit family, by recollecting those happy-past memories that were now lost to time.

For me, I was just happy for their visits, no matter what the reason. It was just nice to reminisce about these happy and uncomfortable lives. We soon discovered that too much time had passed for my inconvenient appearance to change our possible futures together, and they departed, wishing me well.

THAT NIGHT, AS I DRIFTED OFF TO SLEEP IN MY CAR, *IT BEING THE LAST THING THAT I POSSESSED*, I THOUGHT ABOUT LOSING EVERYTHING THAT I HAD WORKED SO HARD FOR OVER THE LAST TWELVE YEARS. THEIR VISITS HAD GIVEN ME A GLIMMER OF HOPE, BECAUSE FOR THE LAST TWO YEARS IT SEEMED AS THOUGH I HAD BEEN ABANDONED BY ALL BECAUSE OF MY FAILURES.

The house that I had labored on was now lost, along with my wife and business. I slipped into a deep slumber, a slumber that one can only achieve when you return to the safety of your own home. Still knowing that I must leave again, the slumber of the warm security, which I had not felt for the past two years, brought a smile as I closed my eyes. For two years I had been basically homeless, doing jobs from truck driver to day laborer, while living out of my car. I was not going to resign myself to this failure for long, in this park where I had come to each time when I had lost all that I had treasured before.

Somehow, this park in the northwoods awakened the strength in me that I had lost. The northwoods of Minnesota does the same thing for thousands every weekend.

The woods have always been an unknown security to my soul. Each time I come home to the forest I feel reborn. It was not the estranged family that had drawn me to this renewal. It was the wind that blows through the red pines in a melodious sound, created from its slender needles, that called to me again. It is a softly-intense sound that envelops your entire being, lifting your problems and insecurities away with the winds that whisper in this grand concert of nature.

A smile reached my lips, which I thought had been lost, upon looking up to their swaying branches, realizing my part in this nature. I again drifted deeply off to sleep, when suddenly I was awakened by lights brightly illuminating the interior of my car from a vehicle coming towards me. It was the town constable. He tapped on my side window with his flashlight, beckoning me to come outside.

He had stopped in his nightly patrol because he was worried for my situation. I stepped out of the car and looked above me to the pines that were still whispering in the wind above my head — it wasn't a dream after all. I spoke to him, still half asleep, and said, "I am fine officer, just in need of some sleep".

He asked my intentions of being at the park. I told him that I had just been laid off from my truck driving job. He looked at me as if he were trying to place my face from his own memories. I told him that I was seeking work in the area, and that things looked good.

His anxieties about me seemed to subside, since he realized I was not just passing through. I tried to settle his concerns further by explaining that I did not drink alcohol unless it were a celebration, and that it had been quite some time since that had happened.

He chuckled in agreement. I told him that it was very late, but asked if he would like to hear a story of a father's love for his son? I needed to tell someone this story to make sense of all that I had lost, and that all I had left from my past was my Son, and our shared love for each other. We sat at the picnic table as we became accustomed to each others' face and demeanor.

We relaxed into our conversation as two fathers do, when they know they can finally speak freely without ridicule. I asked him how many children he had, and he said he that he had two, that were the meaning of his life. I told him that I knew this feeling as well. I told him my story of when Dax was first born, and that I would wake up in the middle of the night and peer into his crib to make sure it was not all a dream. He laughed in respectful acknowledgment.

The story drifted to the time that my Son and I had both shared together, and of the events from the past two tears. The officer looked puzzled as he asked, "You cannot find a job?" I answered that I seem to be either too old, or have too much experience, and that employers will not hire someone they think will leave as soon as a better opportunity comes along.

His puzzled look remained, as he tried to figure out if I was lying, or if it was the sad truth. The conversation drifted to my past business successes and failures. I considered telling him more of my personal history, but I found myself unsure in this honesty. I felt as though I had to explain what I thought was my real problem, that in my youth I was wild and had broken the law. My fear began to swell inside me, as I attempted to tell my real story to a policeman that I had made a tenuous friendship with.

It's amazing how a stupid mistake that I made over twenty years before was still able to spring forth my endless feelings of guilt. I decided to see if this policeman could separate his assumed duty to his community, from his duty as a human, whom like all I have known before, have made mistakes themselves.

He seemed to be at ease as I began to tell him about my sin. I looked deeply, trying to discern the right moment to begin the story. It is difficult enough to tell a dear friend your sins, but telling a person whose life is based entirely on judgment, is another thing all together. I started out with a question: "Who is guiltier, the man who commits a crime and is punished, or the man who commits the same crime and is never punished?"

His uneasiness began to show, as he looked confused by my question, not knowing where the conversation was going. He sat upright and said, "I guess it depends on the crime". I said, "To me a crime is a crime. Someone must pay for it, and the crime should determine the level of punishment". His confused smile told me that he had discovered my secret, that he alone would know.

Humans take a great pleasure in others' weaknesses, possibly in their attempt to feign superiority over another. I believe it is jealousy, because it is a life experience that either by luck, or fear, they will never understand. Maybe it is this needed-human distraction to do something bad, that draws those without the courage to their conviction of fear.

Humans are driven by two things, but neither greed, nor jealousy are the paths which all should seek: enlightenment. Crime is neither enlightenment nor discovery; it is simply a cause and effect issue of one's supposed-superiority over another's presumed-inferiority.

Enlightenment on the other hand, is the exact opposite, as it is the acceptance of another's differences and their perceived reality, as you accept your own, without an abuse of others'.

I explained to the officer that in my youth I had helped a friend buy drugs for a supposed party he was throwing. Instead, his plans were to sell them for a profit. I charged him a fee of one hundred dollars for this connection. He in turn sold it to an undercover policeman.

My listener became entranced by my story, as I proceeded to tell how my friend was arrested, and of course to save himself, he turned me in as well. I told him how I was compelled to turn in the suppliers of the drug, but I explained that I could not save myself at the cost of others. He started to smile, as he began to take possession of this crime fighting event. His satisfied acknowledgment was expected.

He tried in vain not to show his approval of this action, but policemen share a jealousy of others in the lives that they cannot escape—fear. Fear is actually a system of confusion in our minds that is void, and must be filled by the illusion of control.

For a policeman, control is the authority given to them by others, which they cannot give to themselves. This authority licenses their ability to carry weapons in public, to exhibit their "superiority" over all, a superiority only shared by their weakest numbers, whereas true policemen that serve the common good of others are the true heroes, which the former covets.

Humans have a desire to be heroes, and this is attained only by those whom accept that their existence is for their service to others. Police, who only try to further their perception of their own power, are the dangerous ones, whom I tend to call the marginals.

Sadly, they neither fit in our world nor in theirs, as they try desperately to mask their fears by the exhibition of the false authority of their position in the community that they pretend to serve.

I proceeded to tell him how lucky he was to have a stable job that allowed him to take care of his family. I felt it was necessary to portray my life as a child so that he could fully understand the history of my guilt, and the mistakes of an adolescent's life.

He seemed readily interested in this history, as if he were trying to understand how a man he cautiously trusted now, could not have been trusted in the past. My story twisted and turned in many directions, but it always came back to one thing: the beatings that my father put upon me with regularity from the age of eight, till I moved out at the age of fifteen.

I told him how my father, who I love dearly now, had been my hated-hero as an adolescent, and how these beatings destroyed what as-a-child-on-the-lake had been a true relationship of a father's love for his son. Sadly, it took many years for me to realize that this abuse was actually instigated by my mother entirely. She, in her resentment of my father's working-sixteen-hours-a-day to keep a roof over our heads, had found a way to exact her revenge on us both.

He would come home exhausted and collapse in his chair, and mother, in her desperation for

attention, began complaining about my misdeeds, trying to portray her day she wanted to share with him. He would look at me and say with a forced smile that boys will be boys, knowing that this would only enrage her further.

She would berate him on every level of his failures until he would explode into a maddened rage, tear out his work belt, and beat me severely, as I begged him, "No daddy, no!" His violent arm movements whirled over me as he whipped me over and over with his belt till I could not stand anymore. I would collapse to the floor writhing in pain and uncontrollable tears. He would stand over me, holding his belt as tears ran down his face, trying to control his rage.

Mother would stand in the doorway to my bedroom with the same smile as her mother, as she had realized her power over us both once more.

This tragedy went on for seven years, as every human part of my father slowly departed from his soul. I grew in size, but my love for my dad let him continue until there was nothing left of our relationship.

I became a player in this drama as well, not realizing that I too, out of desperation for Dad's attention, would on a regular basis become more mischievous than the last time, to assure myself of his lost love.

I remembered the last beating as if it were yesterday. I was now fifteen, and an abuser of various drugs to escape the pain of this love I desired even more. My dad was a man of five-feet-five-inches, whereas I had now grown to over six feet, and still I went to my bedroom and waited patiently for his entrance, and my awaited beating.

I looked for my listener's reaction, seeing a tear roll down his contorted cheeks in the shadowed-light.

I continued in my story; my dad opened my bedroom door cautiously this time, as he tried not to look at me as I waited. Our eyes met as I said, "It's alright dad, I understand."

He slid his belt from around his waist nervously, as I stooped over to allow him an easier advantage to my back for the coming-blows. He proceeded to strike me repeatedly about my back, until he seemed exhausted from this exercise. I turned to him with a smile and said, "Dad, it doesn't hurt anymore." He dropped to his knees sobbing and begging for my forgiveness, as I walked past him unconcerned for his distress. I moved out the next day, and he looked at me as a stranger does at their victim.

Violence with children in the fifties and sixties was an accepted practice. My friends and I used to compare whose welts from their fathers' beatings were bigger. It's a curious observation—people have accepted that girls should receive hugs and boys should not. In reality, it is the opposite that needs to occur to end this history of abuse. Abuse is not invented, it is learned.

I wasted the next ten years in a fog of drugged-relationships, trying to discover what I had lost—it was love. The officer looked at me with sorrow, as he tried to understand my earlier life by comparing it to his, but he could not. My story had exhausted us both, as he tried to grasp the facts, and I tried to regain my strength to finish it. The story began again, as I tried to understand this need to finally tell my story to this stranger I just met. It was as though I was living through my entire abused

life again.

A huge weight was being lifted off me, as I tried in vain to hold back my tears that I should have cried at my last beating, so many years before. I told him that I had never beaten my son, and how I had almost become my dad—the fear and want of every man.

I told him that one day my son was being extra disrespectful, trying to push all my buttons, seeking my attention. The week had been bad, and I tried to reconcile in my mind what things had led up to my uncommitted sin.

The job I was working on kept me away from home almost every waking moment, and the pressure to finish the project to support my family was overwhelming. Christmas was just days away, and there were no presents under the tree.

My fear was that I could not buy my son presents in time, because the project needed to be completed for me to get paid, and it was weighing on me heavily. The day in question happened when I had come home, late as usual, to my Son's excitement and unending questions about Christmas. All I could do was look at the vacant space below the tree, as I tried to ignore his constant inquiries as to where I had hidden the presents.

My wife tried to dismiss his inquiries by talking of the weather, and questioned me about my job's completion. This only energized Dax's questions, which I feared would destroy his happiness. He jumped on my lap laughing, trying to get me to answer him.

Out of his desperation for me to listen, he accidentally hit me hard across the face. Startled, I became enraged by this disrespect of his lack of fear of me. I jumped up and chased him about the dining room, threatening him with a spanking.

He ran past me and raced up to our bedroom and onto the bed, as he goaded me on with his laughter, because I was now paying the needed-attention to him. I ran up to the bed and slid my belt from around my waist, with a strange weakness I had never felt before. I threatened my resolve as he looked at me smiling and terrified at the same time.

He pleaded at me, "No daddy, no!" I looked at him in disbelief—I had become my father. I grabbed him as he tried to free himself from my trembling hands, and hugged him tightly as I wept. He put his arms around my neck and hugged me as he said, "Don't worry daddy, I understand."

He had saved me. This child of eight years old, had saved his father from becoming the one thing he feared the most, an abuser of his one true love—his son. The officer looked at me with the pity of understanding. I felt near collapse as this remembrance swirled in my mind.

He looked uncomfortable as to where this story would go next, as I regained my composure and told him that from that moment forward, I swore that I would never hurt anyone ever again.

With great resolve in his voice, the officer said he would never touch his children in anger, only with love. I told him that my son and I were bonded by this event, because from that day forward we have always spoken at least one hour a day, to share our life, as it is meant to be.

I had come to the realization that all these things that money could buy, meant nothing compared to the

love my son and I would share for the rest of our lives. Our conversation again began to drift from one story to another about a father's love for his children, to times of great pain, that only a father can feel for his children.

The stars were out in their fullness now, as the moonlight began to wain. The leaves in the starlit darkness seemed to shine in this secretive world, not usually seen by others. We relaxed in this nocturnal change as two old friends who had found each other, after years of absence.

It is very nice when two good men meet and share the same beliefs and actions. It is like a huge burden is being lifted from your shoulders when a meeting like this happens. Most try to find this connection in a bar, but it gets distorted to where this needed relief never occurs at all.

To say men have a lonely life is an understatement. Our attempts to cure this become clumsy and awkward, leading to feelings worse than before. Women, on the other hand, find friends easily, because for them to share their hearts' inner-most feelings is a natural strength. Men are afraid to share what is considered a weakness, for fear of betrayal.

When women betray each other, they remain cautious friends, yet a man must know the rules to this thing called manhood. Betrayal must be answered, no matter the cost. Because men have a hidden heart, they must protect it at all times, for fear that they will lose what they care most dearly about—trust. Men will literally advertise this feeling of loneliness in their work and deeds, as a business man would advertise trying to reach their customers. Most will do this unconsciously by working on their machines and landscapes in their front yards, hoping silently that a likeminded soul will come along and share this interest, saving them from their shared-loneliness.

A woman, on the other hand, has to merely sit at a coffee-house table. Other women will ask to sit in an empty chair, and within minutes, total strangers talk as though they have known each other for years. They will speak of their needs and wants in romance, and of their sexual desires, as though they were speaking to a life-long confidant.

This is the phenomenon called sisterhood. Men in a successful relationship, or with the hopes of one with a woman, should take an interest in understanding this connection.

True men speak of work, hobbies, and their children. We spoke about our dreams and of our loss as one speaks to a man of God, honestly. He told me that his children were still in grade school. I said, "I miss that time especially."

I told him how I had created a job of building custom log furniture out of my garage, directly across the street from my son's school. I was able to watch him at recess every day, running across the church's front lawn like a deer, yelling to me and waving with his friends.

The constable spoke of his dream of being his children's coach in all their sporting endeavors. He looked to be dreaming of the future in his facial expression. I told him how I had worked at this myself since grade-school.

His attention grew as he asked, "How did you do it?" I said, "I was so desperate not to lose the first years of his schooling, that I invented a game where all the children could play broom ball on teams during their recess time." He smiled in approval and asked, "How did it go?"

I explained how I asked the school principal what she thought of this team sport, where girls and boys could play together, and learn to work together as a team. And I reminded her that we had spoken earlier of her concerns to alleviate the students' vast energy, so they could focus more readily on their school work.

I could see the interest in his face grow as he listened, making plans in his own mind. I told him that preparations had to be taken, and that salesmanship to the other parents had to be well planned to be successful. Selling the parents on the idea that their children would become team players was the most important part to close the deal. Also, you must entirely fund and volunteer to coach the games yourself, because the silent majority who do not want anything to undermine their authority will put a stop to your plans with ease. You must convince them that if they love their children and wish them to be successful in life, that this exercise is important. Tell them that you will simply be a bit-player in this, and that you will take all the responsibility for its success or failure.

Most importantly, you must include them by asking them to participate as monitors. This will give them the authority they desire, while doing very little. The persuasions must be subtle, letting the other parents feel as though it was their own idea, and that they have their power intact. I said to him, "You see, all parents do not want to give up their power over their children, even though your idea may have good merit."

I simply told them that they would be needed as referees. I knew that most of them were too busy and conflicted to help, but I empowered them to make the right decision, and be able to look like heroes to their children. He laughed and said, "This is some good stuff. I should write this down!" I laughed too, saying, "I am a salesman of life and of goods."

We both laughed as he asked me, "Why aren't you a salesman?" I told him that I had been a salesman my entire life. It was easy, because the only things I sold were either my services or products that I had made myself, and that it is easy selling what you believe in. But now, however, it seems it is all about making the sale, and no longer the quality of the products they sell. I said, "Look at what has happened to our car manufacturers. They simply create a buzz by creative marketing, but their products are crap." He said that his Ford was great. My answer to that was they cost too much for the regular working man.

He nodded in agreement, as we both looked up to the stars that were fading to the light of dawn. We didn't want to complicate our new friendship with an argument that we both silently agreed upon. I told him that to be a great salesman, you must simply guide the customer to what they already want. That works to your advantage.

He looked at me and said, "That seems pretty cold hearted," to which I responded, "Not really. You see, we all want to be guided in this life, but instinctively feel that we must be in control at the same time. I did not make this stuff up. It is the politics of life, and if you understand this fact, you can be wealthy." He asked, "What do you mean by that?" I could see that my sales presentation was faltering, and said, "Try this out the next time you are at the local bar: when you sit down and someone offers to buy you a drink, say, 'Let me buy you the first one, my friend.' I guarantee you that it will be the last beer you buy that night, or at the very least he will buy more rounds, because you have offered to sell your friendship to him. He, on the other hand, feels compelled to be the better man, and will keep buying all night." He laughed and said, "I will have to try this out on my brother-in-law. He is always

mooching drinks off me and he makes a lot more money than I do." I responded by telling him, "That's because you are a policeman, and he feels to be the lesser in your relationship. See what I am saying?" After a pause, I continued, "Or he could be a salesman and knows the secret as well." He looked at me with a sly-smile and said, "That son-of-a-bitch."

We both laughed, as he looked at the Sun rising, and said, "I guess I had better get home. My children will awaken soon, and I always try to be there at that time." He looked at me in a gesture of embarrassment, realizing this thing that he had taken for granted in his daily life, was another thing in my life of loss.

I waved as he drove out of the park, and thought to myself how jealous I was of his life of simplicity, as I walked back to watch another sunrise from the windshield of my car.

If you find a woman that this sales technique works upon, drop to your knees and beg for her marriage, for you are in the presence of a miracle.