Praise for Chad Faries

"Like some improbable love-child of Dorothy Allison and David Sedaris, *Drive Me Out of My Mind* is a gritty, unflinching memoir about growing up on a forgotten frontier of broken American dreams—Michigan's brutal Upper Peninsula—that is also an uproarious comedy about a childhood spent in houses pollinated by drunks and users and poets and lovers and madmen . . . and one unforgettable mother."

— Adam Davies, author of *The Frog King*

"I loved this grave, manic, kickass, drug-addled, sex-drenched, visionary memoir. It starts as a tale of rootlessness and slowly becomes the opposite of that: the story of a constant love between a troubled boy and his unhinged mother—the portrait of an iron chain. It's mesmerizing."

— George Dawes Green, author of *Ravens* and founder of "The Moth"

DRIVE ME OUT OF MY MIND

24 HOUSES IN 10 YEARS

by

CHAD FARIES

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DRiVE me
OUT OF MY MIND

Dedications

Above all, this book is dedicated to Mom. Unconventional parenting apparently works, and I love her for it. And of course there are the other fantastic, resourceful, and resilient women—Gramma and my three aunts. Basically, everyone alluded to in this book—this is for you. Regardless of story or actions, everyone deserves dignity and that is what I tried to give them here. Efforts were made to change the names, but obviously those who know my story intimately will also know the characters by association. And let's not forget the Man Worth Mentioning, Greg, who never left my side. Thanks for not killing him with Pandora's Box, Mom.

Sister Jazmine, though you were born after all the events that took place in this book, you will have a central role in part two and a much greater dedication!

Beyond those mentioned in the book, there were many that helped bring this story to fruition. Special thanks to the Hungarian Fulbright Commission and all my fellow "Fulbrighters" in Budapest where this book started taking shape: Alex, Haleh, Tyler, and the whole crew. Thanks to The Bard Room and Treehugger Dan's in Budapest where I first unleashed these stories.

Thanks to my buddies Jonathan Johnson, George Dawes Greene, Adam Davies, Robert Firth, Jayson Iwen, Aaron Hunter, and others who gave me direction and reminded me about the importance of STORY. Becoming a raconteur for the Unchained Tour also helped.

In Savannah, I have to give extended thanks to Matt Pricket and the Savannah Book Festival, Joni at the Book Lady, all my colleagues at Savannah State, and the creative team that brought the book and trailer (check it out online) to life: MaSovaida, Audrey, Mike, Matt, Josh, Andrew, Ashley, Beck, Noah, Jeff and his Impala, and the wonderful parents that trusted me with their children on a motorcycle. And LaShawn "Lone Star" should be thanked for her patience and sweetness.

And then there is the dark haired girl who is behind the shadows on every page. Sometime she is called Ruby, Star, Eurydice, Suzy, etc. I finally found

her walking across a street in high-heeled boots in a foreign land where people speak a language delivered from aliens. For better and for worse, the other central dedication must go to Gingike. *Things like this drive me out of my mind.*

What makes a house grand
ain't the roof or the doors.
If there's love in a house
It's a palace for sure.
Without love . . .
it ain't nothin but a house,
a house where nobody lives.

from "A House Where Nobody Lives"
– Tom Waits

DRIVE ME OUT OF MY MIND
24 HOUSES IN 10 YEARS

Foreword
Behind City Market.
Iron River, Michigan: Late Summer 1976.....**1**

1
Orchard Place.
Battle Creek, Michigan: Early May 1971.....**25**

2
711 Roosevelt Street.
Stambaugh, Michigan: Early Fall 1971.....**29**

3
Gennesee Street.
Iron River, Michigan: Spring 1972.....**33**

4
Third Street.
Stambaugh, Michigan: Late Spring 1972.....**37**

5
A Basement Under a Doctor's Office.
Battle Creek, Michigan: Spring 1973.....**43**

6
Lincoln Street Across from the Cemetery.
Stambaugh, Michigan: Late Fall 1973.....**49**

7
Lincoln Street on Top of the Hill.
Stambaugh, Michigan: Summer 1974.....**55**

?
Lost Chapter for the House Behind Heartbreak Hotel.
Iron River, Michigan: Sometime in Spring 1974.....**63**

8
Eddy's Sister's House.
Battle Creek, Michigan: 1974-75.....**67**

9
Merit Street.
Battle Creek, Michigan: Summer 1975.....**77**

10
711 Roosevelt Street.
Stambaugh, Michigan: Early Winter 1975.....**87**

11
The Sharecropper's House.
Wachula, Florida: Late 76-Winter 77.....**101**

?
Lost Chapter for Euridike. Stambaugh Hill House.
Stambaugh, Michigan: Sometime Before 1975 ..... **125**

12
Near City Market.
Iron River, Michigan: Spring 1977.....**129**

13
Further Down Lincoln Street.
Stambaugh, Michigan: Summer 1977.....**147**

14
Pittsville and Stevens Point.
Wisconsin: Fall 1977.....**157**

15
The Last Time at 711 Roosevelt Street.
Stambaugh, Michigan: 1978.....**169**

16
A Trailer Park.
Karnes City, Texas: Fall 1978-Spring 1979.....**181**

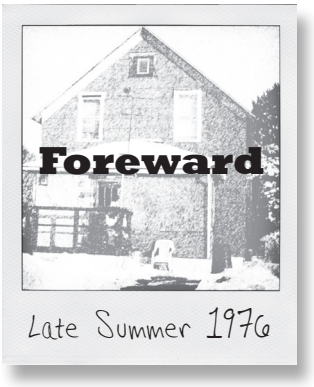
?
Lost Chapter for the Shamrock Bar.
Gaastra, Michigan: Mid 1970's.....**191**

17
A Trailer Park.
Glasgow, Montana: Summer 1980.....**195**

18
Planet's Resort.
Iron River, Michigan: Summer 1980.....**203**

19
Dober Location.
Caspian, Michigan: Winter 1980-81.....**217**

Afterword
1308 Ninth Street.
Iron River, Michigan: 1981-82.....**229**



Behind City Market. Iron River, Michigan

Has he lost his mind?
Can he see or is he blind?
Can he walk at all,
or if he moves will he fall?
Is he alive or dead?
Has he thoughts within his head?
We'll just pass him there
why should we even care?
from "Iron Man"
– Black Sabbath

At five years old it was hard to get me off the top of Barbie. When you're the first boy born to a family of three aunts, a single mother, and a middle-aged grandmother on husband number four, you don't have much say about what gets handed down, but you do have a say about use. Every afternoon I would take Barbie to my bedroom for her nap. I would undress her and place her plastic body softly on a pillow, take off my second-hand mismatched Garanimals, and mount her. Since my body hid her face from me, I stared at the poster of the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders over my bed and picked a different girl each session to focus on. My favorite was Suzie

Holub from the 1976 roster. Her hair was dark, and her smile even darker. In her brown eyes was a distance I wanted to travel, a distance that would fly me east over an ocean to a larger city on a larger river where Suzie would be at the bank, parting my hair and speaking the language of aliens. It was natural that her breasts were adorned with stars because she was of another universe. This supernova love was painful. My pee-pee was half the size of Barbie's body so I just rested it there like a rocket on a launch pad until the boosters kicked in. And then I launched a thousand expeditions in minutes, and my rocket often got damaged in the atmosphere, but I figured if I did it long enough I would reach love.

It wasn't supposed to be right for a little boy to play with Barbies, but it felt so . . . heavenly, in a Carl Sagan sort of way. I wasn't playing with Barbie; I was nurturing her. I stole Grampa Duke's moustache comb and ran it through Barbie's hair. I washed down her body with my tongue, a damp sock, and undiluted Mr. Clean. With baby oil libations, I squeezed her through the love-tunnel of my grasped hand. I carried her in my back pocket and untucked my shirt to hide her.

I treated her well, and everyone knew it and was getting a little worried.

Aunt Molly was the first one to walk in on us in my new bedroom in the alley house behind City Market. My Spider-Man underwear was at my knees, and my ass travelled to and fro in the dank air of dirty socks, broken Crayons, and asbestos. She was 15 then, seven years younger than Mother and ten years older than me: silk-black hair, gap-toothed, busty, tushy, and already letting boys mount her like I did Barbie. She never made eye contact and "really liked praying" is what Gramma would say sarcastically. Maybe she was always just looking for the Lord, and I didn't know much about that either so to me, he was just something like a superhero—Spider-Man, the Green Lantern, or even Ragsy, the mutt across the street.

"Jesus Christ! What the hell are you doing?" she screamed after she entered my room without observing the "Chad's Domain" sign. "Oh my fucking God!" she said drawing out the vowel in "God" in a sharp ascending pitch. I was bummed because I had to look away from Suzie and my rubbing rhythm was all off now. Molly started running in place as if she were trying to escape something she clearly could not. All I saw were her breasts shaking freely

under her Warhol Rolling Stones tongue shirt. In a half laugh/half scream she called for Aunt Ally to come and look. Molly and Ally were always visiting Mother in her new house because they were free to smoke cigarettes and meet boys there. I really dug them most of the time because when they babysat me we'd go to Ben Franklin's dime store and steal art supplies for them and action figures for me so I could have some toys for boys. But nothing beat a naked Barbie and her breasts cutting the waves of excited adolescent shrieks, and a poster full of flat bellies and blue stars.

I made eye contact with Suzie again and got my rhythm back.

"Chad's fucking a Barbie, for Christ's sake!" It sounded so crude and base. I was trying to fill her with love, albeit unsuccessfully. It was the process of removing her clothes, combing her hair, licking her clean, and rubbing her down that really counted.

I tore my eyes again from Suzie and looked back over my shoulder at Molly there with her hands on the doorway jambs. I didn't know what to do, so I didn't stop. I just kept pumping her and pumping her while Molly laughed and ran and ran without going anywhere, still yelling for Ally to come, "Oh Lord, Holy fuck! You gotta see this Al!" I looked Molly right in the eye and kept giving it to Barbie because I remembered that is what I saw Ragsy—my buddy LittleMan's mutt—do when he was giving it to Gramma's Fox Terrier, Lady. I had walked into the backyard on Roosevelt because Lady was whining. I let out a scream when I saw Ragsy mounted on her rear-end. He just glanced over his shoulder at me with a really dumb look. I guess he was confused that I was disturbing him and not leaving. And that is exactly what I felt; why would Molly stay, all exposed in the doorway like that? Maybe she could have hid in a closet and observed in order to learn something, but to just gawk on like that was really strange.

Then Ally finally responded, the only one in seven generations of family to be a member of what Gramma would call the Itty Bitty Titty Committee. At twelve, her body was nearly fully matured just like the other women in the family had been. Her bitty-titties had no hope of growth. Her hair was as long as Molly's with no bangs, but lighter, reds and blondes like the color of a sunrise, which fit her well because most of the time her thoughts were in the sky. "Spacey" is what Mother said, and I thought that's what I wanted to

be; to me, "spacey" and "heavenly" were the same. She was the most petite in character and stature, but when she had her mind made up about something, she painted it with loud, dark language and a glare from her icy eyes.

"What? I'm painting clouds," she said in her spacey-tone from somewhere in the distance. She was really eating her stash of Kellogg's Corn Flakes with Tang.

"Get your little tits in here and check this out!"

And so the loud painting came, "I said I am fucking painting clouds, slut-face! I'm coming now. Happy?" she said in a way that boomed from some deep, animal place. Seconds later the busty and the bitty were both there staring at me and laughing, like I was a scene in a cartoon that they had always wanted to see. "Wow," is all Aunt Ally could say with her orange lips, and that could have meant she was really proud of me, or that I had disgusted her beyond words. It was always like that with her. So I just thought of Ragsy and kept going until I was so excited that I peed all over Barbie. That yellow was always my weakness, and I would manage to piss in every place I lay my head for ten years. A puddle formed on the pillow and overflowed to the linoleum floor and streamed toward Molly and Ally's bare feet. They didn't notice until the liquid heat touched their toes. They looked down, then at each other briefly, screeched "gross!" drawing out the vowel in "gross"—this time in a sharp descending pitch, spun around in opposite directions, accidentally knocked their foreheads together—and left me alone.

I had never given it to Barbie like that before and I'm not sure if she liked it. The only thing I got was a heart beating really fast and the shakes. If anything, I lost something, and that would have been my breath, I guess.

Nevertheless, there were benefits to Barbie fucking. Somehow people knew I wasn't naïve about humping and petting. I got a little more respect and people laughed and joked about me admiringly. I sat up late at night thinking about what they would say:

"Dat Chad really knows how da give 'er tarpaper," Toivo Takala would say shaking his head, smiling, and staring at the ground with a beer in his hand, trying to picture it all and reframe his own childhood. It made people feel good about themselves and their youth to know I was screwing Barbie.

"Holy wah!" Vain might say, "What a character. Dat Chad is all right." He was saying this from the arms of my Aunt Molly who he practiced with in the

backseat of his car parked out at Cannon mine.

Barbie was my tool for practicing. I was just trying to figure things out, how a prairie dog knows his hole from all the others, what is flotsam and what is jetsam, am I a grown-up acting like a child, or a child playing "big." People never stop trying to figure these things out. Mother was still working on figuring things out, and that's why we had moved again.

* * *

Depending on the slant of the Earth's axis and Mother's inclination, we would roll up or down the hill that separated Iron River from Stambaugh in Michigan's Upper Peninsula—U.P. for short. Had it been 60 years earlier we would have been able to take a trolley with an interior decked out in Mahogany. And we would have seen miners, red with ore dust coming up right out of the Riverton, Beta, Caspian, Buck, Fogarty, Berkshire, Seldon, Paint River, Mastadon, Nanaimo, Isabella, Baltic, Homer, Crystal Falls, or Hemlock mines. There was just one mine of over a hundred still operating, but the open pits right in the center of every community were a constant reminder of a better time, even though the whole county was now a toxic waste site.

So, the emotional tilt of the axis rolled us down the hill again and we came to a halt behind City Market. City Market was still pure Main Street U.P. and had the soul of that better time. It was no bigger than a living room and had one of everything you ever needed stacked in a metrical pattern that composed a song of processed food, saggy asses, and large guts. There was a butcher too. His name was Butch, and like any good butcher had a white fresh bloodstained apron with tiny animal hairs crusted into the fabric like shaggy scabs. He smiled a lot and was considered quite handsome by the over-40 conservative helmet-hair housewives who had voted for Nixon. They wore polyester pastel colors and white pumps—smoked cigarettes with fake ivory holders. My Gramma kind of looked like this, but didn't care much for politics—liberal by nature, not by choice—and had an authentic ivory holder. Her preferred drink was a Bloody Mary and for a long time I believed that blood was the ingredient and never thought much of it. It matched her character, and anyway, all the women in my family were constantly bleeding and complaining about being "on the

rag." At five, you know that blood comes from somewhere, so you figure things out on your own—the women in my family drank too many Bloody Marys.

None of Butch the Butcher's admirers worked, just shopped and flirted with him. They kept houses in order and food on the table. The prescription seemed to work well since there was nothing else to do other than Friday Fish Fry and Polka. But Mother and my aunts never read the instructions, and Gramma wasn't a very good teacher, so they made up the expectations of women. Even after Eddy—Mother's experimental half-a-year husband that divorced her and the entire U.P. for a life below the bridge back in Battle Creek—she wanted someone to expect something from her, still. All the women did for that matter, but you'd never know it if you heard one of their conversations:

"I said fuck that, I'm not putting up with his shit about wanting a good woman at his side when he rolls over in the morning with nothing more than a spent roach and a pocket full of blank applications. Get a real job and buy a proper bed that's not stuffed with hay and maybe a good woman will appear. Wash your prick twice a day with laundry detergent too; it stinks from being stuck under your ass."

If you wanted a man for more than a couple of days, this talk didn't work. Nevertheless, it was fun to learn new vocabulary and I started to respect the boldness of speech, even though I would never want Barbie to treat me like that.

* * *

Mother was growing and growing like an umbrella plant in good light—not up or down, but out. She was trying to fill her stomach with meats and chocolates to satisfy her hunger for wanting to bust out of Iron River. Her lips and breast and hips had already been full since she was twelve and men had often remarked "she sure doesn't look twelve" while they secretively envisioned licking those lips while licking their own. And Mother—for reasons sometimes sexual, but most of the time not—would grab her FF breast—most of the time for real, but sometimes not—take aim, and squeeze it as if she were shooting a bullet out of her nipple.

She was doing a lot of "speed" is what everyone called it, and to me it was like the spirit of a U.P. Championship Rodeo Bronco condensed into a little

pill. Our love had a distance and I never got close enough to figure out the reason we would move 24 times in a decade, but I followed her and tried to collapse that distance and always stumbled. Sometimes, though, I took the lead. Maybe each house was an hour in a day that had a deadline for figuring something out. And maybe she was trying to figure out how a seemingly random and fleeting emotion on August 15, 1970, like wanting to feel a man "explode inside of you" is what I had heard the women say, could lead to your child writing it all down years later. But then, "years later," after all the stories of all the hours in that "day" had been written, I learned at "Randy's Hole in the Wall"—when she was too drunk to drive and I brought her home—of another one of her seemingly random and fleeting emotions: the desire on May 6, 1971 to be a mother at 17 and not give me to the family that had been making arrangements for months to take me into their story. "Can I keep him, Mom?" she asked Gramma.

And after her second daughter Hope's botched illegal abortion 15 months earlier in a NYC hotel room, after her implicit cover-up of Mother's being molested by her step-grandfather, Gramma took a nervous puff from her ivory cigarette holder, shed a tear, and exhaled, "Of course you can. That's my first grandson." And in that odd moment they lay down the pathetic legacy of rapes, and beatings and denials for something far more stellar, and perhaps not random at all. Gramma and Mother embraced chaos—a determined future, nevertheless, unpredictable.

"And that's my story and I'm sticking it to you," is what Gramma would say, draw a long puff, throw her arm down to her side, stare in three-quarter profile up at the sky, and then blow a smoke cloud as if she was creating a weather system. The saying was a concoction of clichés synthesized into something that made a perfectly fresh sense. There was no escaping the story. If you were in the presence of it, it adhered to you.

Though wild, and knowing she would ultimately throw anyone, at night Mother still wanted someone to ride her. She had all this energy with no direction, no plan, and if only someone could break her we might stick around for a while. She'd wake me up around midnight and we would walk a couple of blocks down Main Street past the old City Hall which was one of the few old brick buildings that was kept up. The others had either been torn down

or abandoned because since half the population had left over a 50 year period on account of almost all the mines shutting down, there were a lot of empty rooms. The City decided that an empty lot was better than an empty historical building so there were tons of places to park in West Iron County, but not enough cars to fill the spaces. The City planted trees and put picnic tables around the perimeter of the lots to attract people to come and park, but this didn't work either. Finally they just stopped tearing down the old buildings and left them as some representation of an ancient mining civilization "that on_e endured in t_ese gre_t lan_s of sweat and toil," is what the plastic sign with missing letters said in front of the Iron Country Museum.

Walking at night with Mother, sometimes I would stumble in my partial slumber over the uneven slabs of pavement that the winter frost had unsettled. I stumbled in front of the Jack-O-Lantern bar where black strippers from Detroit danced on the weekends, and scabbed my knee on memory—once LittleMan and I had sneaked out of our houses and met by the trash cans in Roosevelt alley and rambled all night down back street wonderlands, puffing on old cigars the whole way with stars stuck to our eyes. We were off to see the "chocolate" that his older brothers were always talking about. I had seen a lot of breasts, even LittleMan's sisters', but never anything the color of a Hershey's bar. I knew somehow that food used to describe people seemed a little funny, but Mother, after all, would be eating men.

I didn't have any brothers or sisters, but LittleMan did—a whole constellation of them: two younger sisters, Tracy and Elaine; and three older brothers, Pete, Jimmy, and Marky. In the sky of Stambaugh they formed something like a sickle that cut its way through the checkered flannel fabric of a traditional family. Naturally, I turned myself into a star and often resided, dwarfishly, in their cosmic field. LittleMan was a year older than me and a little more "badass" is what Aunt Molly would say. We shared yellow hair, lake blue eyes, bedwetting, and lack of breath. He would often take his left hand and squeeze his jugular vein and wind-pipe with his thumb while the fingers held on to the back of his neck for a good grip. Holding back that blood and air made him a little dizzy and spacey. He called it "nuthing" because it was the same feeling as huffing, but with no glue or spray paint. My lack of air came in the form of panic attacks.

We climbed on top of the trashcans in the back of the Jack-O-Lantern and peaked through a crack in the window that had been painted black. Indeed the women were dark. We first saw the whites of their eyes and then drew the rest of the wild curves with our gaze, which, at five, was respectful, though ignorant Their nipples were like the tips of markers with aureoles resembling a scribble of storm cloud banks. Their teeth were brilliant like bleached white construction paper on which I drew pictures that I worked hard on and wanted to last.

The darkest people in Iron River were the full-blooded Chippewas and some of the Italians, but the African-Americans never settled up here, and it's no wonder; the way the men inside the Jack-O-Lantern screamed at those girls would have sent me running home right away. But the women pretended to like it, probably because they had no say in the matter, and knew they didn't have to stay forever locked to the sick magnetism of West Iron County. I thought it would be easy to fall in love with one of those women, but to the screaming men they were no different than the "food" in the pictures LittleMan's oldest brother, Morrie, had stashed between his mattresses.

Mother caught me before I planted my face in the sidewalk and put me on track. I shook the memory off and we took a left and ended up at The Dinner Bell all-night café. It had the only neon sign in town, a blue coffee cup that looked more like an elephant scratching the back of an ear with its trunk. It was right next to a parking lot so it made the perfect truck stop. Those truckers were like weathered and worn superheroes to me and I really dug them. They had a way of hunching up their shoulders so their necks would disappear, as if they were always hiding from their past of fighting dangerous villains and saving maidens from the clutches of husbands that beat them. Under their eyes was black shadow that hadn't been wiped away by sleep's dirty kerchief for a long time. It didn't look bad, really—it was just part of being "on the road." I guess after staring at blacktop long enough, it soaks into your eyes and you just can't wash it away, no matter how many filthy gas station bathrooms you stop at. And belt buckles. Everybody likes a belt buckle as big as a TV screen. In that late night café I saw eagles, Peterbilt semi-trucks, Indian heads, turquoise stones, Harley Davidsons, and a lot of text, like "keep on truckin," and "gear jammer" all riding above a crotch, cinching diesel-stained jeans to a solid ballooned-gut of landscapes that they had been feeding on.

After midnight everyone at the Dinner Bell looked like a different strain of human and I guess we weren't excluded. The wait staff and truckers knew us pretty well there, and it never seemed weird that we showed up in the earliest of morning that was still night to me. There was no sense of time in a 24-hour café. The people who worked there never slept and worked continuous shifts so there were always the exact same faces greeting me. Don was the owner and had some kind of accent, maybe Italian. His eyes were like an Orangutan's—like big benevolent, sad pennies.

"Hey Kate! How-a the hell are you?" and then a kiss on each cheek. "Oh Chad, come-a here," then a kiss on each cheek and Don would give me some crayons that he stole from the new Big Boy across the street that would ultimately put him out of business.

And then there was Mary who was definitely on speed, like Mother and Aunt Hope, but her recipe must have been different. She clicked her teeth all the time as if she wanted to eat me, and I was frightened, and I thought about how bad it was to think of women as food. She talked really fast, even faster than Aunt Hope, and even faster than Alvin of the Chipmunks. I didn't understand a single thing about Mary. Her hair was a foot high and she wore gold fishing lures with baby-blue dyed feathers for earrings. From a distance, Mary could have been a looker, but up close her hips blurred into her breasts and her shoulders into her head—she had no knees or elbows, just tubes for legs and arms. Perhaps she was something Don made in the backroom one night with pasta dough and chicken parts when it wasn't too busy. Maybe he just ordered her and added water, a couple of breaths, and a lot of coffee. She seemed low maintenance because she never slept or changed. Maybe she wasn't even really there. Maybe she was some kind of trucker construct made to make sure they always had something to come back to. But they surely could have done better. I finally came to the conclusion that Don grew her between the three trees on the grass island in the middle of the parking lot. He put coffee grounds and egg shells over the soil until she sprouted. Then he salt and peppered her for three weeks. When her mouth formed, he fed her farina and goat milk.

I had a problem with Mary; she wasn't a mother. And I couldn't be sure about any of the above, because we never went to the café in the day when I was coherent. Even when I walked by The Dinner Bell in daylight, I couldn't

tell what was going on because the nicotine-stained curtains were drawn. Only at nightfall would Don pull the string in unison with the last hour clang of the church bell at 9 p.m. before it went silent for the night so workers could get a good rest without being reminded of the presence of God on every hour.

Gary Taggit often showed up around 4 a.m.—ready to ride—after his night shift at the Coleman Company where he twisted wires for AMC automotive on an assembly line. He was from the South and talked differently too, and when he and Don got to talking it was really something. Don was always adding extra syllables, while Gary Taggit was stretching them out.

"Howww Yaaaall Doooooooin,'" Gary would sing in his placid drawl that tweaked Mother's ears.

"Ah, Gary! It's-a good-a to see you," Don sang. Mary cracked a smile too, revealing a bobbie pin she plucked and stuck in her hair. There were hugs and handshakes and dead animals smiling on the wall, wondering at the hours and days on plastic beer clocks that needed their batteries changed, and dated yellowing calendars with a coat of fur where dust from the five years they had hung there stuck to multiple layers of grease. It was another festive night at The Dinner Bell.

Everybody was always just "doing" and "being" and most of it was good. People talked for hours about what seemed like absolutely nothing, but the whole gamut of emotions was still covered by simple inflections. We all drank coffee together and ate hash browns and eggs with frozen sausage links that Don brought out from the kitchen where something cooked the food. And Mother grew a little more with every bite.

* * *

Mother was so hungry she started eating men. If she didn't get enough food she would often bring Gary Taggit back to the house with us which was convenient because I was usually sleeping in a booth by the time we left and Gary was strong enough to carry me all the way back to my bedroom. Mother would pull back the sheets and Gary dropped me in as if he was putting dirty clothes in a hamper. If I was awake, I was too tired to move, but I could hear Mother feeding on him. The sound was like the tiny skull of a hamster being

chewed and sucked dry by a cat. In the morning I would run into him in the kitchen and we would eat cereal together while Mother rested up for another late night.

"Where are your wounds?" I asked him, man-to-man.

"You mean this purty ole thang?" and he pulled up his shirt and showed me a big scar shaped like a canoe. I couldn't believe how fast he had healed. I started to fear Mother.

Craig Kalavala, a volunteer fireman, was the first I actually saw her try to swallow. I saw her on her knees in the living room in front of an overstuffed chair one night when I was sneaking a glass of water from the bathroom because Mother was trying to prevent me from bedwetting so I hadn't drank any water since noon. Her feet were tiny and her toes were curled so that their knuckles rested on the carpet. Her back was to me so all I could see was Kalavala's huge hands on her head like an ugly hat. I thought he was trying to warm her up by placing her between his legs and putting a hat on her. I smiled. It was nice when people treated Mother well. Soon the wet skull crushing began again and Mother was swaying her head all over as if she was grooving to the Grateful Dead. She even put her shoulders into it, and wiggled her hips as much as she could while on her knees, feeding on Craig Kalavala's legs while he relished in the pain. When Craig finally contorted his face and pinched his eyelids shut as tight as he could, I saw Mother expand another inch. Then she lifted her head and I saw her profile. She wiped off her mouth with her forearm and left Craig Kalavala there all exposed, and I saw his profile—top and bottom. I wasn't naïve anymore about what she was feeding on. And now it made perfect sense to me given the relationship I had with Barbie. I figured it would do Barbie good if she could feed on me.

* * *

Since there was never balance in her nights and days, Mother wanted to celebrate stability when it occurred naturally so she planned an autumn equinox party and invited everybody we had brushed into in Iron River. The cast of characters included all of the above, and then some. They can't be excluded and it is impossible to give them the attention they deserve. This

is one of the effects of a nomadic life that equated "proximity" with "family" superimposed onto a decade of liberated love; this is one of the effects of living in 24 houses riddled among over a dozen cities. That said, the staples that fed my family story and cinched it together were Gramma, her daughters, and a slew of would-be dads sometimes masquerading as animals and superheroes, or an effeminate "Man-Worth-Mentioning." All the others simply aided the women in their processes of figuring out the chaos, equally impossible.

Gramma came with Grampa Duke, husband number four. He had moved all his kids from a previous marriage up with him: Brandon, Bud, Martin, Shel, and daughter Jennifer. Aunt Hope and her husband, Bruno, came up from the Lower Peninsula and Mother's best friend from Battle Creek, Melody, caught a ride from them. The Dinner Bell must have shut down for the night, because for the first time ever I saw Mary and Don outside of work. Some of Mother's snacks came: Craig Kalavala, Gary Taggit, and bad old Big Tom. The three of them wore the same type of ripped knee bell-bottom blue jeans with square-toed buckle boots and drank beer with cocked elbows. The frayed threads hung from their knees like trembling tendons as if they had just been scrapping in the alley and won. That was their way of showing what they were like on the inside. No emotion, just raw meat. But the three were just different flavors of the same ice cream to Mother. They never took their eyes off of Jensen, the Indian, who also had received an invite from Mother. He didn't have holes in his knees—because he had cut his pant legs right off and came over in a stained muscle shirt and cutoffs. He was being really quiet all night on purpose. But I knew he wanted to make small talk, maybe even play with me. And then again, maybe he was "anti-speeding" is what Aunt Hope called it. Downers is what everyone else said, but Aunt Hope hated being down. The one trait she and I shared was being down for no reason whatsoever. Maybe Jensen had this too.

Mother was trying to seek some purpose in Iron River, and she felt that inviting everyone she had at least a minimal connection to would possibly make her feel "at home." In a world of bartending, dealing pot, and exchanging plastic welfare coins for cigarette money there didn't seem to be a lot of room for purpose beyond satisfying men who didn't give a shit about you. And if they did give a shit about any of the women in the family, the girls would run

them out of town anyway. But there was a lot of possibility to dream. And that is what I did with Mother in that living room on that night. Dream.

The house was decorated with candles and dried grass. The few antiques that she had acquired from Jack Hartley, Gramma's third (and dead) husband prior to Grampa Duke, were polished with lemon oil. In each ashtray was a cone of patchouli incense. Silk scarves batiked with suns and moons hung from the mirrors. In the corner of the living room a card table was set up with a fishbowl turned upside down stuffed with dried trilliums that looked like white tongues, next to a pack of old Tarot cards she got in exchange for a couple of joints when the town went dry and Ella Vogel was parched. The house smelled like a rainbow farm and LittleMan was spending the night to keep me occupied so we could watch the harvest and wonder at all the colors of 1976.

Tony Tarnovsky and his brother Hairy Jerry showed up with a couple of the strippers from the Jack-O-Lantern and things really got going. The women were parting the smoke with moves and figures U.P. women could only dream of. The women of my family were among the most beautiful in town, and also had all the moves. That is why people flocked to the party. None of my family was actually from the U.P. We weren't provincial Yoopers. All of us, including me, were born below the bridge, just like the Jack-O-Lantern sisters, and we dreamed ourselves class acts. Mother and family danced freely with the strippers and, because of proximity, they were too now family. That was that.

Molly and Ally were the DJ's and had Mother's albums scattered all over like a tiled dance floor. They were both wearing orange and brown striped halter-tops and tie-dye bellbottoms that masked their feet. The comments were all the same:

"Those girls sure look like dey could jerk a bobber," Toivo mumbled with a plastic cup full of green liquid in his hand.

"B.J. said the one with the little titties ain't even a teen yet, but her ass looks like a Michigan apple. How the hell did she end up with little titties in a family like that anyway?" Craig Kalavala said with his head cocked back and to the left staring at Ally bending over a Led Zepplin album, and Mother's breasts in the distance that were pressed into the side of Indian Jensen as she whispered something into his ear. "Hey, B.J.," he yelled across the room to Gramma, "what do those letters stand for?"

"What do you think?" she yelled back, and continued bumping hips with the strippers.

"I get the shifty one with the big tits and big brown eyes to match," Big Tom said, his thumbs tucked behind his Peterbuilt belt buckle.

"I get the shy one," Gary drawled.

Under his breath, Craig Kalavala mumbled, "You wish, you fucking redneck."

"Yous' guys go ahead because I'm gonna pank me some jungle rump," said Hairy Jerry, "Let's go dance with all those apple-knockers, Tony," and they walked off toward the record-cover floor Ally and Molly had created.

LittleMan and I were being cute by sipping drinks and everybody got a kick out of that. I was talking shit too and it went over pretty well with the company as they descended deeper and deeper into the bowels of the rainbow.

"Hey Butch," I yelled over Janis Joplin, "check this out," and I made a face by stretching up my mouth with my thumbs and pulled down the tiny bags under my eyes with my pinkies.

"Hell! That looks like the skinned face of a rabbit!" he said genuinely impressed. Then I tried to show him something else but he started chatting-up Gramma. LittleMan called me into the kitchen where he was working the crowd.

"Look at this stuff! It's like a mad-scientist's lab!" and we gazed at the bottles of Schnapps, Kailua, Ouzo, JD, and countless cheap wines—T.J. Swan, Lambrusko, Mad Dog—spread out all over the kitchen. We mixed them into plastic cups. I pulled Barbie out of my back pocket and used her leg to stir. There were some old cookie tins in the corner that we grabbed for trays and placed the plastic cups hastily down, spilling a bit. We walked into the living room and served the guests, but not before we tasted what we had made.

Bruno was getting paranoid and telling stories about something called "Nam" to the macho guys while Melody provided the soundtrack by singing "Summertime" a cappella for the girls. Gramma was tying knots in cherry stems with her tongue.

"Girls, let me teach you something; this is how you make men happy. If you can do this with their pecker, they'll never leave you. I'm not sure if they'll like it, but they won't dare to leave you." Her hair was always done up like cotton candy, and her lips were full and bright red. Beauty-wise, she had all the best characteristics of her daughters.

Catfish are jumping, and the weather is hot

"Can I have a sip?"

"You wouldn't believe the grass in Nam, high enough to hide behind, but better to fire up. The buds were like roses, I am telling you. Not the kind you buy in the flower shop, but the small wild ones you find out by Camp Lake with the round heads and firm petals. The ones that won't even let you pick them they're so potent. Well that was Nam: A bouquet of buds to fan yourself with. And if you fondled them too much they would make you bleed."

Hush baby, baby, no, no, no, no, no, no, no don't you cryyyyy.

"Can I have a sip?"

"Ally, give me that fucking album; don't let anybody stand on that one! That's a classic. Look at the cover. That's The Moody Blues for fuck sake. *On the Threshold of a Dream*. I'm gonna paint that fucker ten times bigger and hang it over my bed."

"Huh? What did you say?" Aunt Ally replied, more interested in studying the pictures on all the albums.

Aunt Hope was talking really fast—like usual—to Grampa Duke's boys. Her preferred drug was usually speed and then she would adjust the velocity with weed and alcohol so she wouldn't get too anxious and panic. She sounded something like:

"Damn, Duke raised some reallygoodlookin' boys. ShitShel, take your eyes offof Melody and lookoverhere. How tall are you Martin? Is your dick reallybig? Bud, I love those curls, your whole body's like pubic hair," then she'd laugh like a mad lamb, "a big cock! Letmelickyou." And she ran her tongue across Bud's cheek and her husband Bruno couldn't really do anything but be confused because it was sort of her brother and Grampa Duke was sort of her father so it wouldn't be good to start anything with sort-of-family.

Don't you cry.

"Can I have a sip?"

Don and Mary were decked out in lime green polyester. Plastic gold and pink beads the size of walnuts dangled lazily from Mary's neck. Don was sucking on them in a corner and I was even surer that he had created her with kitchen scraps and his bare hands. I had never seen him be affectionate with her, but now he treated her like a gourmet meal. She wore butter lip

gloss and had an egg white manicure. Her hair smelled of mayonnaise and beer. Outside, in the fluorescent lights of The Dinner Bell with some sips of brightly colored tonics in my stomach, I realized it didn't make any difference whether Mary had a human mother or a vegetal mother, she was loved. In a time of little thinking or evaluating in a little town at an insignificant house on an insignificant alley, the only ideas we had were love, and in that vagueness slowly we would figure things out.

LittleMan and I met in the corner. "How many sips did you get?" he asked.

"I got about ten! Did you get anybody to try the drinks we made?"

Yeah, your Uncle Shel with the Harley and braid. He drank something that I put a little dish soap in."

"What did you do that for?"

"Well I needed more color! You used up all of the green melon stuff, so I just put in a little of that green liquid by the sink. It smelled exactly the same. Anyways, look at him, he loves it. He's all over Melody."

"I want to talk to those girls from Detroit. I think they dig me. They keep looking at me and pointing when I sip someone's drink. I think they like the way I bring the glass to my lips. I bet they think I'm hot."

"You're crazy man. We're kids."

"But don't you know? It doesn't matter what you look like. Look at Toivo over there. Go talk to him. He talks like a little baby with his 'Tank yoos' and 'How she go' stuff. Molly and Ally are fighting over what records to play and pulling each other's hair. Butch the Butcher is all stiff trying to dance sexy and smashing Molly's records under his feet. It's all messed up, LittleMan! It doesn't matter how old you are here. So these chicks can dig me, because in this room with a plastic cup in my hand, I am a man. Watch this," I said confidently.

The only thing I managed to say to one of the strippers was "I like tobacco." And she didn't know what the hell I was talking about, but she smiled and ran her long finger across my lips. I spun on my heels and came face-to-face with LittleMan who had a full tray of drinks.

"We're really talking now! What do you say about some more sipping? Let's see who can get ten more sips first," I said to LittleMan.

And with that we spun around the room. Each sip burned like hell at first until the heat was distributed evenly from head to pee-pee to fingertips to toes.

The three macho men in jeans had Mother's tarot cards in the corner and were trying to play poker by designating death as the king and so on. Craig Kalavala got a pair of cups and a pair of Grim Reapers. The candles dimmed from a brief gust of wind as Arnie the neighbor showed up at the front door with a big red nose and a monkey on his back that bit you if you tried to touch it.

"Arnie, how the hell are you?" Butch the Butcher said as he shook his booty and trampled over Mother's Rod Stewart album. Arnie looked about 80 and was really slow with his speech and movements. He moved his head up for ten seconds and then down for ten more before opening his mouth to respond,

"I'mmmmmm goooood." Any delay that he had, the monkey on his back made up for in a hurry. It was a little spider monkey that could fit into the palm of your hand. Arnie had the leash running from his neck to the monkey's so it wasn't apparent who was in control of who. As Arnie made the slow rounds, the monkey began masturbating out of nervousness and tossed his tiny wads of semen into the crowd. It was no different than the sweat flying off a forehead. LittleMan and I held our stomachs as we chuckled and couldn't talk the rest of the night. All we had was laugh left in us and we did it until it hurt. And the music played on.

Yeah, fairies wear boots and you gotta believe me;
Yeah I saw it, I saw it, I tell you no lies.

"BANG!" Grampa Duke yelled—just like that, for no apparent reason—to derail conversations and get people to lose track for a while. He had a big arm around one of the black strippers. Butch the Butcher was next to him shooting the shit with the other stripper at his arm. When he yelled "Bang," the strippers hit the floor and Bruno screamed, but only with his eyes. They swelled up as big as the vinyl 33's Ally and Molly were spinning. It was as if that expression summoned in a new mood, and all of the sipping started to manifest itself in a slow mirror where images were delayed to the brain, and by the time they got there, the light had already changed so there was no point in evaluating the present because it was already passed. A glass falling to the ground was already broken so no need for wasting the energy to move suddenly across the rooms to catch it. It was no different than looking through a telescope at the Orion Nebulae whose reality we see is actually already thousands of years old.

Mother appeared from the kitchen with a tray of brownies filled with

pot, "Who's hungry?" With the strippers on the floor and Grampa grinning, everyone was a little tense and ate them right up and asked no questions. LittleMan and I managed to get our paws on some too. We gave some to the strippers to help them get back on their feet, but not before tasting a little, which made staring into the slow mirror even more interesting. LittleMan leaned against the wall and started doing "nuthing" with his hand on his neck, rolling his eyes. We watched the reflections of the strippers as they rose, transformed, and taunted the monkey by lifting up their shirts and showing their nipples. The monkey screeched and swatted at them as if it had no interest in ever nurturing again. It preferred to suck on Arnie's hairy earlobe, which—if sucked hard enough—produced wax drawn out from the canal, which the monkey rubbed on its lips like a mother-balm.

Yeah fairies wear boots and you gotta believe me
I saw it, I saw it with my own two eyes,

At this time of night, most of the light was coming from candles, or tiny lamps situated in corners with blue or red flower patterned bandanas thrown over them. The light was even darker given my sipping. People were talking again, but not just about the monkey, they were talking about me and LittleMan too. I knew they must have thought we were cool again, at least the guys.

"They're tanked!"

"Holy Cow, Kate, look at dat kid! I tink he's fucked up!"

Aunt Molly glanced over where she sat next to a pile of records, "Goddamn! His eyes look like two festered assholes!"

"Hey sugar," said one of the black girls tickling me under the chin. I put her fingers in my mouth and sucked them. She pulled them out fast and acted like she was disgusted, but immediately laughed and slapped her full hip. The monkey mimicked her, slapping his own hip as he sat on Arnie's head now, like a really fucked up hat. Molly was playing the drum sequence from Black Sabbath's "Iron Man." I moved right in to doing my psychedelic rendition of the robot. It was customary that I did a spastic interpretation of the robot to this section as I often did at the parties she and Molly threw when they babysat me. It was an incredibly fast section, but tonight it was syrupped, sweet and slow, like my breath.

People had brownies smeared all over their faces which distorted in the

body heat of a naughty monkey and strippers, and two little kids grasping each other's hands and spinning slower than expected. The slow mirror was not only slow now, it was warped so that you could see what people truly looked like before they had time to fix up themselves for the present. Heads were misshapen and stretched wider than the shoulders. People had no necks and no hips in a warped mirror. All my life I longed for people to look like this, like cartoons; but when it really happened all around me, an actual carnival sounded a little better because the people were supposed to look freaky there. But here, with weed in my stomach, trying to spin as fast as possible and managing to go slower than the second hand on a clock, I wanted a little distance; a carnival with cages would have helped the anxiety. The faces were getting a little frightening. Somebody was shouting "monkey" and laughing deep and slow, and they weren't talking about the monkey. It was Big Tom doing his bad math, figuring the strippers looked no different than the monkey.

"Fucking monkey bitches" he started saying, and the slow laugh blanketed the crowd. Gary Taggit chimed in and those men had that strange bond I would often witness in the future that drew me away from my U.P.

Thankfully there were gentleman I learned about, gentleman who didn't just wipe the tip of their dick with a square of toilet paper after they pissed. These gentlemen were in direct opposition to the men that treated women like bad objects who deserved to be punished, or even worse—rotten food. U.P. gentleman treated women as good objects that should be placed on a shelf next to stuffed fish and guns, which I suppose was a little better. Butch the Butcher was a gentleman. And he was big. Grampa Duke was a Lower Peninsula gentleman—and not so old for a Grampa—not even fifty. He was big, 6'4" with a lean, movie star face whose only imperfection was an under-bite, but only when angry. Now he had an under-bite. He yelled "BANG" again, but in this time progression it sounded like something thick poured out of a bottle, "Baaaaaannnnnggggggg" and his arm came around from behind his back like the slow arm of a record player until it settled into the groove of Big Tom's mouth. The momentum was transferred to Big Tom as his torso twisted backwards while his feet stayed planted as long as they could until they gave into the momentum too and spun into the air, launching off a little like a failed rocket. His arms opened up from the centripetal force so that at a point

in his spinning, about 90 degrees, he struck a perfect Crucifixion pose. The liquid from his burnt orange drink LittleMan had mixed up cascaded into the air like the flame from his rocket fuel and splashed stigmata on his hands. Big Tom had been transformed into Rocket Jesus. And all of the slowed voices were like deep groans and I incorporated the rhythm into my Black Sabbath robot dance routine, panting, and dodging the body as it fell.

Butch the Butcher was in the corner in love with my adolescent aunts feeling "chivalrous,"—a word I learned earlier in the week after reading about King Arthur—and responded similarly to the way he responded to dead meats. He made a fist, and rather than swinging it around from the side, he raised it above his head and came down on Gary Taggit's head like a hammer on a carnival anvil. All of the slowed motion was the closest thing I had ever seen to a ballet. It was beautiful the way everyone had memorized their moves and executed them with perfect precision. Just like in the *Wild Bunch* when all those cowboy guys and Mexicans were blowing the hell out of each other, and it looked like they were smiling, almost enjoying it as they pranced through the air on a descent down to death. Gary fell to his knees with his back perfectly erect, and then forward onto his face, keeping the perfect posture.

Since she had ran out of brownies, Mother was in the bathroom eating Jensen when she saw the thick sound seep under the door. She patted the sides of her mouth with her wrist and excused herself from Jensen's table. When she got to the living room, she took her left breast into her right hand, cocked it, and surveyed the room. The breezes of bodies had blown out most of the candles. There was the antique lamp in the corner and a yellow streetlight outside that lit up the room like a lighter lights up the palm of a hand in a dark night when the wind is blowing. Here we all were in a cupped hand like failed action figures and Barbies that nobody wanted to buy. Nobody every wanted "Suzie Stripper" or "Indian Jensen;" "Butch the Butcher" or "Toivo the Yooper." So whoever's hand held us must have either really cared, or was just plain bored. Perhaps there was a closeout sale on Seventies sub-culture heroes.

And with that, the subculture's all-time headliner, Jesus—not Rocket Jesus—JESUS, appeared at the door with wire rimmed glasses. "Peace!" he said calmly, "What's happening? Am I late? How is my Goddess?" he said to Mother. He had a big brown beard and wild long hair in ringlets. Behind him

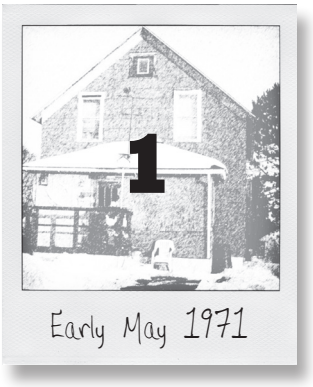
from the street the angelic headlight rays of a red 1964 Plymouth Fury cast a golden aura on his skinny frame. I was sure Aunt Molly summoned him with all her "praying." Had I been coherent I would have known it was the Man-Worth-Mentioning mother had met at the Shamrock Bar. Had I been more coherent I would have known that this could possibly be one of the few men that cared about me.

Tonight no one was boring. We had celebrated and liberated. No one cared much that Big Tom and Gary Taggit were laid out on the floor or that LittleMan was puking at age six off the front porch. With brightly colored alcohol and chocolate Marijuana in our stomachs, ages were collapsed. Grampa Duke and I were peers. No one cared that the monkey started throwing shit rather than semen. We were all "throwing shit." The drum solo from "Iron Man" was playing over and over. Full of nervous laugh, I still couldn't manage to speak. I kept dancing and dancing, doing the robot with slow, jerky, movements trying to mimic something of artificial intelligence. If I did talk at that moment, I would have only been simulating some emotion. So I straightened my hands and tweaked my head and hips. I malfunctioned and started spinning on my heels, stuck in a rotating pattern. I spun until the few light bulbs burnt out and everything went black except for the headlights of Jesus' Fury outside.

I fell into his arms.

I woke up in the back of a 1960 Ford Falcon station wagon sleeping on top of twelve cases of beer with Barbie at my side. Mother turned the ignition.

And then we moved.



Orchard Place.
Battle Creek, Michigan

There's a chance peace will come in your life, please buy one.
For sometimes when I am feeling as big as the land
with the velvet hill in the small of my back,
and my hands are playing the sand.
And my feet are swimming in all of the waters,
all of the rivers are givers to the ocean
according to plan, according to man.
from "Peace Will Come"
– Melanie

The first house was yellow, and the wood smelled of it. That's all I really remember, if that. In 1971, a house full of women—one widowed and already a grandmother at 37, one with an illegitimate child—on a middle-class street couldn't be trusted. Gramma B.J., Aunt Molly, Aunt Ally, and Aunt Hope welcomed me home from the hospital, a nine pound and some ounces red-haired, blue-eyed boy. The 7:32 p.m. sun had painted me ugly, especially in the eyes of the neighbors. My head was already a sunset on the first day. As Mother stood at the door of the yellow house with my red head at her chest, together we stepped over the threshold into an open field of brilliant descending color and in her arms I inhaled the stories:

Clayton Johnson, Mother's stalker of five years had been here. I could still smell his cheap cologne and nervous sweat. He had sneaked into Mother's bed two years earlier and raped a friend of the family at knife point, mistaking her for Mother—who was sleeping at a friend's house—and threatened her to not say a word because he knew Orchard Place was the house of women on a block where it didn't belong:

Earl Grove had been here. I could still smell the Triumph exhaust in his motorcycle jacket. He had shown up looking for Mother's friend, and Mother offered her sweet 16 year-old self to a 28 year-old drifter instead under a tree in the backyard, just once, after taking portraits of her in hats, posing against the backdrop of the garage door:

Jack Hartley had been there, right behind that garage door, and never, ever left.

How can 24 houses in 10 years be anything other than a jumble of coming and going? Sometimes all there can be is a name, like Clayton Johnson, and then he's gone. But the stories of all these men, and some women too, affix themselves to these five women living under the roof of what would be the most beautiful house ever lived in from the outside. But from the inside, in the guts, it wasn't that different from the belly of a beautiful beast—full of blood and excretions, yet driven by a heart and wonder of the complete mammalian organism. This is where my story, maybe the first significant story ever told by a male in this family, began to shape itself. And since I was only five days out of the belly of a beautiful beast, the house was familiar to me. It had been grazing on wonderful grasses.

Guests were coming and going all day. At five days old, with no reason, everything is a simple emotional blur of color, a steady movement of subtle light on grasses of the field swaying in a Lower Michigan spring breeze. Like a white puff of pollen tinged with red sun-blood, I drifted from grass to grass in this Orchard Place.

Aunt Ally was Wall Barley, found in country lanes huddling up at the foot of walls, but not very often growing out boldly in the fields. When I was in her eight year-old arms her bristly spikes were quite sharp.

Aunt Molly—her older full sister—was Barren Brome, growing in bleak places where few things survive. It's rarely found in the States. In her arms I

felt a certain kinship and somehow I knew my light did her good. In a wind her sway was always a bit rough. She couldn't look me in the eyes, so I just mimicked her gaze and learned about the stains on the floor, the loose threads on the curtain, or the muscles on a man.

Molly and Ally's father, different from Mother's, had shut himself up five years earlier in the garage and turned the ignition switch on the Pontiac. He was dead and all over this house as I gazed with Molly: The old roll-top desk; the oak table with five leaves; the bone-china; the mahogany scars on Mother's shins from his beatings, and all the other antiques he had kept in immaculate condition, just like his body. His memory was the reason we would soon leave this house. Gramma was finished with her shock treatments that were administered after Jack's death. Her field was in order and she had husband number four lined up.

Mother and Aunt Hope shared the same father. His name was Boyd and he was around before Jack. The seed of the man never really mattered in our family, though. It could be said that the men were Meadow Soft Grasses. They had smaller seeds than the majority of grasses. So small were they that, by weighing and then counting a small number, it is calculated that it would take nearly two million of them to weigh a pound.

Aunt Hope's arms felt the most like Mother's, but she was closer in character to Wall Barley. She was both Meadow Barley and Floating Meadow Grass, growing in open fields instead of hiding away at the foot of walls. And loving the river banks, often growing right up out of the water itself, sometimes bending over and floating on its surface. Commonly found in ditches too.

And then there was that extended family, stretching over the hill and past the horizon. These were the blurs. They were all my mothers: Laura Jane, Sweet Scented Vernal Grass with yellow flowers; Chris Kip, Reed Canary Grass smelling like a river; Melody Nelson, Purple Molina on a wet moor. I drifted all evening from female to female wet with thick paint of sunset and the gentle strokes of exquisite grasses until I found Gramma:

Orchard Grass. The tallest of all. This is the grass that hares and rabbits are so fond of, for not only are they nourished by it, it's high enough for them to hide in, especially when dusk descends and zero hour approaches incessantly.

And then we moved.

A Trailer Park. Glasgow, Montana

Tell me, tell me where I'm going
I don't know where I've been.
Tell me, tell me, won't you tell me
and then tell me again.
from "Crystal Ball"
– Styx

So we were leaving Texas because we weren't going anywhere and nobody had a job and your Gramma and Grampa left us because they were sick of being parents and wanted to find an escape. I was dating a half-retarded redneck named Junior and we decided to pack everything up in Texas in a big U-Haul and caravan with Hector and Ally who drove the old Chevy Impala up to Glasgow, Montana where your Gramma and Grampa had another trailer bigger than this one. Since Junior hated Mexicans, it was perfect that Hector and Ally were in another car. I don't know why I was moving. I think that it wasn't good for us there in Karnes City. That is all I can say about it. I'm not too good about using images and stuff like you. I can tell you it was raining and the drops were 'fat like me' is what Junior told me, and that was supposed to turn me on I guess. I just felt afraid maybe, and I wanted something different and thought that Montana might help.

"You weren't very happy in Karnes City, no matter what you think. It was obvious by your whining and acting up all the time. I remember there was a slow kid a couple of trailers down and you guys used to make ramps and jump bicycles all the time. One day you had a big board and a stack of cinder blocks in the middle of the road. You put the board on the very edge of the cinder blocks so that when Cain's bike, that was his name, do you remember?—anyways, when his bike hit the board it collapsed and his front tire smashed into the cinder blocks and he fell off his bike and got hurt pretty bad. Then I had to stick up for you because his mother was really pissed and crying. I should have whipped your ass but I didn't have the energy. I wanted to do that kind of stuff to people too, you know, hurt people you care about, but I didn't really have the energy for that either. I could gossip about Patti Anne and how she sucked off Victor Attanasof behind the bar in thirty seconds while her boyfriend was in the bathroom, but I would never smack her upside the head for it. Is this the stuff you want? Do you want me to really tell you everything? I don't know if I can do that. You want a specific story? Details? O.K. Why Junior?

"About the only thing he could do good was make love. Well, fuck. He was an idiot, but I didn't have anybody. Sometimes I'd close my eyes and imagine I was with somebody who really mattered. You know, somebody who could put up with the family and scrub the floor once in a while. Somebody who could figure out bills and save some money. Junior was fun, but he couldn't really help out with anything. He dug ditches for a living. What the hell can you do with those skills but dig your own grave? And that's what he was doing. He was in to amphetamines you know, speed, and that helped his fucking, but it didn't help him concentrate on making a relationship work.

"Oh, a story? Well you hijacked a horned toad from Texas because you wanted to start a revolution in the North by introducing a new species. You had some wild ideas back then. I told you that he'd freeze, but I didn't really know that. Hell, maybe it would have worked, but you would have needed two. You only brought one. You said that it could mate with a toad from the North and then the chances of a species that could survive would be greater. You were always thinking like that. It was something you know. You wanted to be a scientist. I was so proud of you too—I forgot the story again. Oh, well, you had

this horned toad hidden under some chairs in the back of the U-Haul. And let me tell you something for once—that thing was really a lizard and everybody just got the name wrong because Aunt Ally told me that one time. She's one of the smartest you know, and I have no clue why I remember that; I guess it's just because I was think that was some useless knowledge to have, but she had it.

"So, we made it to Denver after driving twelve hours to stay with Dan Wall and his Hispanic girlfriend and she caught you sneaking into the U-Haul. You turned around with the toad and she started crying. You thought she was afraid and then she hugged you because she was crying about missing Mexico because she hadn't seen a horned toad in a long time, at least not in the city. And you hugged her and she cried some more. I was watching it all from a window and I bet you don't even know it happened. Did it? I don't even know sometimes. You know, we are not that different even though you'd like to think it. I don't know what really happened most of the time. My memory is so full of fear and things that I hoped had happened that I mix it all up. The names get screwed up. What I saw in a magazine might make its way into a memory and end up with me thinking that it was a moment in my life.

"So the story—well that was it. I forgot to talk about colors and stuff. Give me a chance, will yah! O.K. So we get to Montana where we would be for less than two weeks. It looked like the moon there you know. The whole city was like a pit. Our trailer park was all dirt and in the distance was a big dirt mountain full of gouges where the rain would run down. When we pulled into Glasgow I remember there was a double rainbow and we had some hope about things—like finding jobs. Gramma and Grampa where already somewhere else because your Grampa was a right-of way agent for a pipeline company, meaning he had to convince people all over the country to let his company dig up their land and put a pipeline there. He'd work a day a week and spend the rest of it having picnics and stuff. It drove Gramma crazy because he just didn't want to work. He was always talking about quitting "the system" is what he called it. Nobody in the family was very good at keeping jobs. Who wanted to work when there was so much living to do! Chad, it was the late 70s and all we had was memories of what could have been! I was still trying to make something happen but I didn't know what. It was about being a peace activist or something. I guess the way I lived was my activism. But I didn't think much

of that stuff. I mean I had burned my bra and read *Our Bodies Ourselves* and shit like that. I didn't want any wars, but at that time I was too into making sure I wasn't alone. I was making sure we had some food and I had a little pot and booze money to make things happen. I don't know what I'm saying really. Is this what you had in mind? You just want me to keep talking? O.K.

"Well I think I said something about the double rainbow. It might as well have been a double noose to hang ourselves with because those two weeks about killed us. Ally and I had it in us to get Hector and Junior to find jobs while we tried to make that shitty trailer livable. Junior and Hector were no more mature than you were. You all would fight over toys for Christ's sake. Hector sat in the back with you a whole day making a city out of sand for your matchbox cars, only you came in crying because he wouldn't let you contribute to the city. What a fucker he was. We didn't get along with the neighbors either. You were trying to make friends with the kids, but their parents wouldn't let you play with *them* because they figured we were all too wild. Junior had that southern accent and Hector was Mexican. You'd go knock on doors and they'd shut up their homes and peek out the window to make sure you had left. Christ, I shouldn't have let you play with them, the little bastards. You see, even if the events don't really show it, I cared for you as much as I possibly could. I just didn't know how to show you. Sometimes it came out all sideways and stuff. But I loved to part your blond hair and press the little mole above your mouth like it was a button.

"So every day was something like what I just explained until the last day. You took off with Hector to make sure he was looking for a job, and Junior went off on his own. From what I found out later, correct me if I'm wrong, is that Hector got an application at a gas station and then spent the rest of the day in a bar bribing you with quarters so you could play pool if you promised to tell me and Ally that he applied at ten places. Well, he came home pretty shit-faced and you weren't a good liar. You just said he applied for some jobs over and over. 'Well, where?' I said?

"'He just applied for some jobs,' you said.

"'Gas stations? Grocery store? You must know.' And you kept saying the same thing and wouldn't look me in the eye. That was about 6 p.m. Then Junior comes home and he's shit-faced too. Ally and I were yelling at them

both. I remember it was about to rain and the dirt cliffs in the distance would start flowing and mud would rush through the trailer park and take us with it. I don't know where you were, maybe out playing by yourself in the back. Do you remember that? Damn it was ugly there. It seemed like a city with no history. Just rock and, well, like I said—the moon. Maybe you were playing spaceman or Green Lantern, or something—you know, trying to save the universe and stuff. But the one thing that was interesting is that a rain changed the whole landscape and the city was different. The peaks in the distance weren't the same anymore. What was once the tallest was now the third or fourth tallest. It was really trippy how the earth could just change like that.

"So Ally and I were listening to music really loud because we were pissed and all the windows were open and the whole trailer park could hear everything. Rain was coming in the windows and we didn't give a shit because the furniture all sucked anyway. I didn't even decorate that place. It wasn't worth it. I guess I was waiting for a rain like this. I'm doing good now with this story I think; it's what you wanted, right?

"So we're listening to Styx really loud, 'Crystal Ball' was on. We were pretty stoned too because we had a little pot left, but it didn't mellow us out. You were out back, you know, playing spaceman again and I guess with some magic wristbands I had pinned around your tiny wrists. They were pretty small, smaller than other boys and I knew you had my bones, even if you didn't have my looks. *Styx* was singing, 'Tell me, Tell me,' and I said 'Yeah, tell me, I want to know fucker—What's your future? Where's your job?' I was talking to Junior and then Hector said to me, 'Fuck you fat bitch.' Then Junior tried to make up for the day by acting all chivalrous and called him a *wetback*. 'Swim back across the Rio Grande you fucking wetback,' he said. And that is when the macho pushing started and Ally and I became invisible, drowned out by the music and the alcohol.

"Those fuckers started pushing us and we were screaming and they couldn't hear a thing. They could hardly stand up. It wasn't like Ally and I were afraid, we could have easily pushed them over, but it was as if they would never stop running on low batteries. And we couldn't read them you know; we didn't know what they would do because when you get that drunk and are still able to stand, those batteries will run forever, just like that drizzle of rain that had been

falling for hours. So we unplugged the stereo and walked outside.

"By that time you must have heard them two going at it because you were on your way in and I picked you up and ran straight across the street to the neighbors we never met. So we're in front of the neighbors with the rain coming down all over us with screaming in the background and I just said to them, 'It's time to let us in.' So they did.

"It was a middle-aged couple with a teenage daughter and a little boy about your age that you tried to play with once until his mother called him away. The man of the house was bald by choice and said, 'come in' and when we got into their trailer they had already set up extra chairs for us. The chairs were set up near the front picture window. All the trailers had those big windows spread across the front like a movie screen. Wouldn't you know the window was positioned right toward our picture window. We didn't have curtains in our house, but the neighbors did. They were lace so you could see through them from the inside but couldn't from the outside. It was perfect for us because we didn't want them bringing the trouble over where we were. So we just watched. All of us.

"There were seven of us in front of that window watching the rain come down. The cliffs started to crumble, and Hector takes off his belt and wraps it around his fist. Junior was motioning him to come on. The little kid who was your age started screaming, 'Make them stop!' And so did the teenage girl. The adults didn't listen and just kept watching. Hector and Junior would duck out of view a little and then come back. You know, I think we all sort of liked it. It was like watching animals fight on 'Wild Kingdom.' We all acted like it frightened us, but we knew that these things had to happen and we were learning. The rain and mud were gathering in the dirt streets—see, now I am sounding like you a little bit more. I can see the details and stuff—so while the water was rising we were staring at that because Hector drifted away back into the trailer to get a better belt.

"He for sure got something better, an old rusty gun, and you started smiling and laughing and everybody was worried for sure in the trailer because they thought that you had gotten some kind of shock or something and that you would never be the same again because you were so freaked out. The other kids really started screaming because this was the climax, what they all had

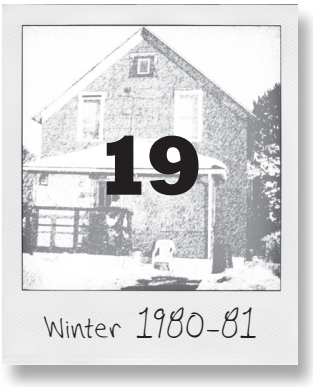
been waiting for. This made the movie worth it.

"Hector didn't aim the gun; he just held it up in the air with one hand. Junior was motioning with his hand and fingers for him to 'bring it on.' I don't even know how he could see with that fat rain dripping down his Coke-bottle glasses. It was getting hard for us to see the details too because the rain was thick on the picture window. In the distance the streetlights lit up the cliffs that were changing. You know, those peaks sort of looked like a heart monitor. It was all about Hector taking aim now. We were actually hoping you would start crying so that things would seem more normal if you can imagine that.

"So we thought you had totally lost it until you started shouting between your comic gasps that it was a pellet gun and there were no pellets because you and Hector were looking for some all day. Well, it wasn't quite funny, but there was a sense of relief and the bald man of the house had enough and put on his shoes, grabbed an umbrella and stepped out into the night right into a mud slick and fell on his ass which pissed him off. He got up, swam across the alley, grabbed the pellet gun from Hector, hit him over the head with it, and dragged Junior back across the street. Hector fell to his knees, exhausted, with the rain flattening his hair and exposing his humongous Mestizo head. The rain eventually washed him away. Junior was taken into the house and thrown into the shower by the bald man.

"We all returned the chairs to their proper places and the rain let up a little since there was nothing more to wash away. It continued to sprinkle a little until the bald man put the three of us in his car at 2 a.m. and drove us to the edge of town and dropped us off. Something was finally right because when we stepped onto the highway and stuck our thumbs in the air the rain stopped."

And then we moved.



Dober Location. Caspian, Michigan

Goodbye everybody – I've got to go,
gotta leave you all behind and face the truth.
Mama, ooo – (anyway the wind blows)
I don't want to die,
I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all.
from "Bohemian Rhapsody"
as sung by The Chipmunks

I was on my back legs with my front paws in the plastic hands of G.I. Joe, staring at him with my beautiful black and bulging Syrian Hamster eyes. The boy held each of us firmly in either hand and made us "play human," forcing us to jig on an old record that he used as a dance floor. His innocence led him to be somewhat torturous. He seemed convinced at times that I liked water. After singeing my yellow hair with a match in a failed attempt at darkening it, he would place me in a large pot full of tap water to see if I could swim. I tried to run in it as if it were a fluid wheel, only to get a lung full of water. But when it was all over, he would pat me dry with a soft cloth and fluff my hair in front of the forced air heating and I felt royal again.

For two weeks I ran around the perimeter of the living room counter-clockwise trying to reverse our predicament and make it grand like the first

day when the mother returned home from treatment with chocolate gifts and a golden glow on the fat of her cheeks like I had only seen on well-rested animals when I daydreamed about living outside of captivity while running on my wheel. Once I had escaped The Cage and was making my counter-clockwise rounds, I found the boy curled up next to the heater with a blanket covering his entire body and the vent in order to trap the heat in. I could curl into the arch of his naked foot without him knowing.

It was winter and the forced air heater kicked on every five minutes and I ran to it dreaming of again being nestled in fresh pine shavings with a family that was in order. Mother and child were trying to catch me and I let them believe they were close. Sometimes I would gnaw on the TV stand to make noise, or dodge out from the shadows to catch their eye and initiate a chase. I might nudge the collection of empty liquor bottles in the corner for a familiar chime. Then the two would bond and come together with the common goal of capturing me so they could put me back on the wheel to run for hours as they wondered at the rhythm of the wheel. I'm not pissed about it. My imagination is active and on that wheel I was crossing continents, running through sweet vernal grass and meadow barley, wooing females with golden complexions all the way.

I am an animal in the most animal sense. I live to eat and shit and piss. That is what I want you to believe, but since I'm discussing this, it's hard to deny that I reason and have motives. Mother and child needed me. While in The Cage I had tried to take care of myself the best I could because I knew they couldn't. I had stashed a supply of food in a corner. I licked the hair around my ass and genitals for hours until it was pristine. I shoveled my waste—which was minimal since feedings had ceased—into the corner opposite the food. I gathered the few clean pine shavings I could for a fresh bed to prevent sickness and control stench because a cleaning was long overdue.

Occasionally there had been the visitors that noticed the stench and freed me from The Cage briefly. They lofted me into the invisible paws of air that patted me all over and my thick angel hair stood erect and I wiggled my whiskers a million times faster than usual. But then they would toss me around like a used rag, and I tried to revel in it. I had to be happy for that boy. And when all the tossing and bashing was done, I crawled to him because that is what he

had hoped for. He had resorted to animals because he saw human language failing all around him and knew—on a good day—that what really counted was something as simple as a scratch behind my ear or a fingertip on the belly.

He loved animals so much that even his favorite eight-track had become a choir of Chipmunks singing Christmas standards. In a high-pitched, high-speed strained voice, Alvin, the lead Chipmunk, sang "Christmas, Christmas time is here, time for joy and time for cheer."

Once there was a guest who was to play the mother for a night and she laughed and laughed with the boy as they listened to the other Chipmunks—Simon and Theodore—explaining that they had wanted hula-hoops and planes for Christmas. Her eyes were like mine, black and bulging, after she had taken a paper square of blotter acid with a picture of my cousin, Mickey Mouse, on it. I knew it all after living in that house—how people rolled joints and snorted amyl nitrate and cocaine; I was observer-in-residence, and somehow I cared about everything.

The mother for the night was more a child than the child she watched though she was at least ten years older. She looked in The Cage and tilted her head in amazement. She felt like she was communicating with me and she simply wasn't. She was only affirming to me that I had to make a big change. She took off my lid and picked me up. This night, when I was free in the paws of air and cradled in the hallucinating woman's hand who was watching the boy's legs grow and root into the second story floor as he stood in front of the eight-track and pressed rewind again and again trying to make Christmas come, I had it in me to stay out of The Cage because I figured I could take care of mother and child better than they took care of me. This was the day I planned to save my life in order to save another. I had a good two months left before The Cage would become uninhabitable and my hair would become wire with dried urine, the same amount of time mother and child had to make another change before their complexions turned piss yellow, the color of the stench and ambiance of Dober Location—the "good" location—which was anything but good, regardless of what the Slavic immigrants had said a hundred years earlier while standing on this same floor.

I had heard these stories and more while I ran and ran on that blasted wheel. I was full of empty history and curses, soap opera dialogues and rock and roll;

the sounds of human sexuality, and long drawn out telephone calls while the boy was away at school about things he wasn't supposed to know but knew better than anyone. The mother was rapidly disintegrating, faster than me. The yellow of the beer and liquor had filled all the way up past her forehead now and was dulling her hair. Every conversation was now about "this," and every thought the child had at school was about "this" too, though it manifested itself in inappropriate playground love and violence behind the hedges when no one was looking. "This" was treatment. I heard the story first hand again and again on the telephone until finally the phone simply stopped working and the mother left for three weeks. "This" had happened. By that time I had only a little more than a month before The Cage would be uninhabitable.

This was the story: Mother came to in an emergency room and started screaming, "Let me go you fuckers! I'm not staying here!" The fluorescent rails on the ceiling probably ached in her eyes as they often did in mine when, because my stench was so rank, The Cage was moved from the living room to the kitchen sink and the bright rails of light hung from the bottom of the cabinet and prevented me from sleeping. For three days they piled dishes around me.

"Who the hell brought me here?" she continued.

"You brought yourself here," an orderly said, irritated. "You signed the papers. You said you needed help and wanted to go to treatment; now we are getting ready to transport you to treatment." And so it was that the mother was so ill she had to go to treatment yet again. She convinced the hospital to let her go home on the condition that she would check herself into treatment within a week. So she had a week to stare at the admittance papers and feel the numb between her interactions with the family and stew in the uneasiness of her decision. My tamed animal discourse keeps me from being overwhelmed with animal emotion that might keep me from reasoning for a family who needed me. If I had to tell the story boldly I would say she got shit-faced again, screwed the wrong people, pissed off half the town, left her son with no one, and had lost the capacity to take care of even the smallest animal.

The night before she left for treatment A-Man-Worth-Mentioning came over drunk and made love to her all night.

In the morning the child and I were loaded into a loud beast and moved to

the aunt's house. The breeze between the beast and the house provided respite from the stench. The smells outside were incredible. There was frozen water everywhere and it was fat and white. My eyes were wide and let in all the sun they could to feign warmth. The child was in a one-piece winter suit with a scarf wrapped around his neck twice and then over his face, around his ears, and one final wrap over the top of his head and then back in on itself like a long strip of gauze. The mother dragged her legs, fighting the magnetic pull of the house. Once she got into the beast and slammed the door, the force was broken and she collapsed onto the dashboard. Tiny drops of mud formed from dashboard dust and tears. They slid down the dashboard and pooled onto the floor, mixing with the melting snow from her boots that she wore with no socks.

The aunt was Molly, and her boyfriend, Shane, looked worse than the whole lot of us. His yellow was mixed with hues of black and green.

We walked into Molly's living room which was messy with charcoal sketches of nature and skies and other landscapes with absolutely no people.

"What is that? Jesus Christ it stinks," she exclaimed while looking at The Cage held in the boy's dainty grip. It never occurred to her to wash me up a little. I hadn't really planned on ever being able to live in a cage free of stench and disease again anyway. And so the plans I had created while being tossed in the air by the hallucinating mother for a night became definite. If the mother ever made it back, I would leave The Cage and live among mother and child freely in the Dober Location house and we would all nest together. I would keep everything clean, from the floor to desire.

Regardless of what Molly thought of me, she was young and beautiful and smelled wonderfully most of the time—cream rinse and sweet tobacco, at least when those smells sneaked through my stench. It never occurred to her to clean The Cage or provide me with some food or water, but I hadn't counted on that in my cage-arithmetic anyway. She never looked at me long enough to read my lips, which mouthed "thank you for taking the child away from that," but she must have felt it because she provided him with pastels and watercolors so he could create great works of art that I would have pasted to the plastic walls of The Cage if I could to aid me in my fantasies. I would run into blue clouds and twirl off the blue walls. Or he would paint a Ferris wheel and I would ride it for hours, effortlessly without having to run. Once he painted the

mother, himself, and the Man-Worth-Mentioning, and scribbled a black spot on the floor and labeled it me. In his picture I was already free.

After three weeks, with only one week of cage life left, the Man-Worth-Mentioning picked the child and me up and brought us to the mother who was waiting with chocolates and gold for us at Dober Location. That man loved the boy and was still figuring out how to do it properly. He had come to visit each weekend at Molly's in that really loud beast that sputtered and died in front of the house, and then entered with wonderful grains, fresh vegetables, and words for the boy.

For the first couple of days the mother was different, or maybe it was my delirium from the lack of fresh air and water. The condensation that I licked from the sides of the plastic would simply not do anymore. It tasted of salt, perhaps because of the little urine I had. My food supply was long gone. But what worried me most was the familiar shake that the mother began to acquire after her third day home.

The phone was fixed and it began to ring again. The voices dragged her down as if she was a drop of dirty liquid traveling down a dashboard or the sides of a plastic cage, a liquid unfit for even the soil. Her complexion risked green or black as she wondered at the empty liquor bottles and remembered the stories associated with each. They dazzled and sickened her simultaneously and the only way to break her was to draw her attention to something completely different.

And for the boy, the changes were manifesting themselves is subtle ways. He had pulled out the magnetic tape inside his eight-track and put it back into the cartridge backwards so that The Chipmunks sounded more like the screech I made in my younger years, months ago when I was stirred by the partying and blasts of cigarette smoke from spectators that hovered over me wondering at my exceptional strength on the wheel. The art he had created at the aunt's was hung on the wall upside down and he started to read his books from back to front. He would kiss my genitals rather than my nose. The mother was sure to fill the bottles in the corner and the people were sure to come again with their nicotine breath and fumbling hands. And the child would again take to having a perpetual chill that I couldn't mend from The Cage. My lungs were heavy and I wheezed. My only hope was to get the child to play human with me.

With all the strength I had left I stretched on my hind legs as he moped past The Cage. I wiggled my whiskers and flashed my yellowing teeth. I massaged the plastic with my tiny feet no bigger than pollen bursts trying to get his attention. I spun around twice and the child bent down to me.

"You stink! Want to dance with G.I. Joe?" The lid of The Cage lifted off like darkness does when it succumbs to the splayed hand of morning. The child's hand, the same size as a fairy's, wrapped around my belly and I collapsed into the curve of his lifeline. I surrendered to comfort briefly before the tension of change set in. And before he could stand me on my hind legs to tango with G.I. Joe, I played animal for once and sunk my teeth into the fat of his index fingertip enough to startle him. I was dropped to the ground on my side and bruised my ribs. I had to do it. I was anything but angry. I was in love. In love with what could be the progress and possibilities of a family. My motivation was purely gallant though I had drawn blood with my incisors. I could feel the stench lifting off from me on descent. I could feel the energy of the child's pain and hear his screams for his mother. The sound waves of the mother's footsteps drifted over me like thick rings of smoke. We were all alive and feeling. The blood was pumping in our veins and we all had a goal. Mine was to defy time and science, mother and child's was to capture me. This was the unity I sought.

* * *

For the first couple days they were really diligent about it. They were moving furniture, leaving food out, saucers of water, clean pine chips in a corner. It was good for me, but what mattered most is that they were working together toward a common goal. But I wasn't sure how long they could maintain an interest. For a couple of days it worked perfectly. The phone was ringing and the conversation was always the same, "I have to stay home tonight because Chad and I are trying to catch that crazy hamster."

Often I would jump up into the springs of the couch and be completely out of sight. This downtime was important because mother and child would sit together on the couch and play tacticians. "The next time you see him try to scare him into the bathroom. This morning I sealed the holes in the floor with duct tape and plugged all the drains. There is nothing for him to hide behind."

I'm not sure why they even cared if I was back in The Cage. They just felt it wasn't right to have me running around.

I knew the desire wouldn't last forever, so that is why my motion was consistently counter-clockwise. In my mad animal science I thought perhaps if I ran perpetually I could freeze time or even turn it back a couple of days; the moment would stay and there would be no more alcohol and neglect and the pictures on the wall would turn right side up again. The Chipmunks would sing and mother would stay golden like the healthy animal she was. I was confident that I could defy time and science because they were the constructs of reasoning mammals, and I wasn't one in their eyes.

After a week I was well fed and for the most part my stench was gone. My legs started to cramp from the constant running. The shag carpeting was like thick, tall grass. My heart was aching from the pounding, yet it was full with unconditional love and a hope that only animals have. Call it ignorant, but I knew it would work. If the pain got too great I would stand on my hind legs and massage my chest with my front feet. On straight stretches I would close my eyes for micro-sleeps. I was losing weight so I could run even faster, though my joints were weaker.

But after ten or eleven days, mother and child showed disinterest in me. The phone conversations didn't mention me and she began planning for the weekend. I heard her talking to the mother-for-a-night again.

I stepped up the progress on week two and started my nervous gnawing at the tables on my counter-clockwise rounds, trying to get their attention. I chimed the empty bottles together and they half-heartedly tried to catch me. I let them closer and even contemplated letting them catch me.

It occurred to me that maybe I was running too fast and that I had turned time back too far. Perhaps now mother and child were at a pre-treatment moment.

At that juncture I had the option of turning around or continuing the counter-clockwise laps. Turning around may have progressed time with different results. It was possible that the mother might not make it to treatment, or even worse, not even make it out of the bar to the emergency room. The other option was to continue rolling back time. I was weak and frail, but I thought that if I were to increase my radius the time would go back even faster.

There was a small hole where the television cable came into the house. I gnawed at the edges of the hole so I could fit through and make it outside to run around the house. The first couple of laps I had to tunnel through the snow, but after that it was easy. The extreme cold wasn't a problem because I was generating a lot of heat. My joints felt like they needed butter. I wasn't able to check on the progress back in the house, but by my hamster math, I figured I had turned back a year.

I widened my radius to all of Iron River. I ran through Cannon Mine past pine trees and across the frozen water pits. I swam across the Iron River and dodged deer and traffic on highway US2. Main Street was dark except for the neon in the window at TJT's Nirvana Bar. Aunt Hope was inside, trying to convince Bruno he wasn't the Messiah. I had faith mother and the boy were leaving Montana and driving backwards to Texas and then backwards toward Michigan to another treatment center.

After two laps around Iron River, I went for the whole county. I ran through all the Quad cities: Stambaugh, Gaastra, Caspian, Iron River; through Amasa, Crystal Falls, and Beechwood. Sunset Lake was frozen over and the A-frames at Planet's Resort were in order except for a bucket of frozen Bluegills. I was really picking up speed now and blisters were forming at the back of my knees because of the chaffing from overextending each stride. It didn't matter though, because mother and the boy were in Stevens Point with the Man-Worth-Mentioning. He was reading to the boy, who lay in bed with heavy eyelids lucidly dreaming about Orpheus and Euridice, Star Sapphire, and the Green Lantern.

I was really moving now and went for the whole peninsula. I swam almost three quarters of the way in Lake Superior, Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, and the Sault Locks, and ran down the ice on Brule River the rest of the way. The pads on my feet were totally raw and I started to dream too and placed myself in a scene for warmth: I was at the feet of mother and child, who were in an orange grove sitting in the shade with hollowed weeds stuck into oranges. I could see a car traveling backwards all the way from Florida to Iron River. The cans of beer were being filled and sealed and returned to the stores and factories. All the marijuana was being shoved into plastic baggies and returned to the Latin American countries it came from.

I spiraled out and lapped the whole state of Michigan in an hour. Eddy Plunket was sucking gas out of a car and a night bear was crawling out of a window on Third Street, scaling down the asbestos siding. Smoke was being sucked into a grandmother's ivory cigarette holder and Aunt Ally was pouring cereal back into a box and Tang powder was pouring out of a glass of water. Aunt Molly was putting her breast back in her shirt.

If I lapped the entire continental United States I was sure that everything could begin again and progress differently. I dipped my paws that were worn to the bone in two oceans. Crossing the Florida Peninsula, I stumbled on a brilliant ring of aluminum foil with a green pebble. I slipped it onto my neck and drew from its power. Maybe in eleven years if events would progress differently I would have a clean cage decorated with brilliant watercolor scenes, full of wheels and fresh shavings, brightly colored tubes that I could nestle in contently with no worry in my heart. I would be free to be unreasonable.

* * *

I think I have managed it. I am at the beginning. I see the grasses disappearing into the soil of fertile fields. There is a sunset at the door of a house so yellow I can smell it. I am massaging my chest now. It hurts but I beat it like the proud animal I am with my slender blistered and bleeding claws. My wheeze is a growl, but with this ring around my neck I strike one last superhero pose. I am a portrait of accomplishment. I am drifting off. I have made it back to the foot of the stairs and I step over the threshold of the good location and lay me down to sleep. The ring slips off my neck and tumbles into the snow. My heart is slowing and has an ache I mistake for love. My eyes are closed. I smell good. I am crawling back into the womb with child. Mother pulls us in. The black is like black. The hour is zero.

* * *

And then they moved.