Five From Fall Creek

A Collection of Fiction

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Muncie, Indiana
May 1999
Abstract

The purpose and intent of this creative project is to display both my writing and my editing abilities. I will write and revise to the best of my ability four short stories. In addition, I will edit a fellow student’s story. Both of these will be done with the goal of homogenizing the stories to an extent so as to fit them together as well as possible.
Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Jim Pavlik for supplying the last story in this collection and adequate kicks in the butt to keep me working, and Dr. Margaret Dimoplon for guiding me for the past four (or is it five?) years and helping me to keep my work looking more and more like fiction and less like bathroom tissue.
Preface

This thesis is the culmination of several years in the creation of a town called Fall Creek, Indiana. It was conceived by Jim Pavlik and I one day while lost on the streets of Indianapolis. We wanted a town that had no connotations; one we could build from the ground up, and people with whomever we wanted. Thus far, Jim has written one story and I’ve written four concerning the town. The stories complement each other well and combine to paint a picture about an eerie little town that vaguely resembles a cross between Muncie and Kendallville, Indiana, my hometown.

The order in which the stories are taken makes no consequence, except for the fourth and last pieces, “The New Kid in Town” and “The Honorable Judge Bowman Carter,” respectively. Two characters in particular play heavily in the plots of both stories and the progression of their relationship should be experienced chronologically. Other than that, the stories are to be seen as connected, but (hopefully) stand on their own.

The first story, “Grinding Down,” was written before the idea for Fall Creek came about, and then was tailored slightly to fit into the town. The action does not take place in the town proper, but on the campus of the adjoining Bain University. The character David will return in a story that is barely hinted at in “The Tease.” I have no idea as to how the plot of this story will
go, save that it will occur during a time when David is still in college, and his father, Connie (from “The Tease”) is forced to move in with him due to marital troubles.

I can say little for “Grinding Down” that it doesn’t say for itself, except that it is my favorite, having been through the most revisions, and presenting most poignantly the troubles I went through at the time I wrote it.

“The Tease” was initially written as a freewriting exercise in ENG 405. It was then turned into a character sketch of an unlikable protagonist, and shortly after, became (for the most part) the story shown here. The only thing I could ask for is a better reaction from Mark to Brianna’s secret. Other than that, I am happy with the piece, especially the sharp-edged way that Mark asserts himself.

The voice is not so old or rural as is used in other stories here, because the action takes place on the “bad side” of town. This story was technically the first appearance of Bowman Carter, though Jim was hot on my heels to finish his story first. We had discussed the townspeople’s opinion of Bowman, and I decided to use his story to flavor my portrayal of Mark as maybe not just a misogynist, but also evil.

“On the Threshold” has many facets, and I must say that of all the works here, I am the least pleased with this one. It is a story of a boy who is under pressure to succeed at life, is given an advantage, and ultimately loses grasp of his life (literally and figuratively). Also, it was a hard story to produce until it crystallized in the form of a renewal of “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” This, I felt, was the perfect form in which to tell the story, not only to add to the ambiguity of whether or not in the end he kills himself, but also to show the struggle within himself and how that manifests in his fantasy before he dies.
For what it is, I am pleased to present it. For what it could be (and will be), I am anxious and discontent.

"The New Kid in Town" is the most recently written, and was borne of an anecdote that became the plot of the story, at least in action, if not in motivation. I am content for now about the events of the story, but I eventually want to add more "meat" to it, maybe another meeting of Jamie and Andy (?).

Mostly for me the story is a voice piece. I have trouble with first person points of view, and though the narrator has no place in the story, this was no exception. I call this point of view "Old Man First Person Omniscient," in recognition of the storytelling voice. This story is a darker tale, somewhat like "The Tease," showing what really goes on in Fall Creek yet no one talks about, and in this case, knows.

Finally, Jim’s "The Honorable Judge Bowman Carter" has always been the piece that ties the rest together. The Labrador who was the inspiration for the good Judge belongs to Jim’s girlfriend’s parents, and is a monster. We decided that if any dog would be able to drive people to do the things they do in this story, that dog would be it.

I had a lot of fun editing this piece and shaping it to allow all the other stories to fit into it. The two characters from "The New Kid in Town" were not in this story from the start; they were only recently added, or more to the point, characters were changed into them, to give another dimension to the tale the old man spins.
The excitement of the music had failed to ignite the spark of enjoyment in the loosened inhibitions of the thinning crowd. David took a seat at an untended table near the door, wiping crumbs from the chair. He smiled slightly, shook his head and resigned himself to finishing his beer, tunneling into bed, and falling asleep to infomercials. He took a sip and glanced around, the beer already having gone lukewarm in his bottle. He swallowed, grimacing, and sighed. He scanned the room and blew the remains of yet another saltine across the table.

Most tables were taken by couples, comfortably drinking themselves cuddly. Music played in futility, pumping bass out for invisible dancers.

A large group of girls appeared from the darkness outside, smothering the mat with their comfortable weekend shoes caked with the blizzard’s torment. He raised his bottle to one who smiled to him as he watched on.

Having been spotted watching them, he wrinkled his forehead and turned, taking another bitter sip. Some of them were young, nineteen. David slid his beer away and made a more obvious attempt at viewing them inconspicuously. They had assaulted the bartender and carried their mixed drinks with little age-bleached umbrellas to a set of booths opposite David.

The tallest had slid in last and gave him a giggling wink. A smile revisited his face, and she glanced at him once before turning back to her friends.

Her blond hair barely brushed her back past her shoulders. She flashed her blinding smile like a light that imprinted its image in the minds of the unsuspecting. She brushed her hair back and posed perfectly, a Greek art clothed in a loose T-shirt and tight bluejeans.
Twenty minutes passed as David saw the drink wear her down. Her face was a perpetual smile as she sipped, leaned on her friend, and snatched quick glances at David. He yawned and began to reach for his coat, when she rose and slowly danced to his table. She leaned across the table, her shirt hanging immodestly off her shoulders. After he averted his eyes from her, she looked down and she clapped a quick hand to her chest. She rolled her eyes at herself and whispered, “Wanna dance?” He stood as her friend joined her, pulling her away after he smiled prudently. He looked and softly said, “Sorry, not tonight.”

* * *

David jerked the ripped backpack strap on his shoulder and sped up his gait, glancing up at the hiding moon through the falling snow. The only sounds that met his bare ears were the occasional roar of a passing car, and the soft cadence of his soles on the thin powder of white snow.

Feeling the band on his finger through his glove, he wondered what Sara was doing, some two hundred miles and a week away. “Reading that poetry of hers? Leaving a message on my machine?” He glanced at his watch out of habit, took a few more steps, then pulled his glove down again and looked more closely.

“Eleven forty-two,” he whispered, and cleared his throat. “No, she’s asleep.” David smiled for a brief moment at the prophecy and felt the joy slide from his face. “She’s never awake after eleven,” he frowned and shook his head at her predictability.

“What?” He stopped in his tracks and crinkled his forehead with a laugh of disbelief at the absurdity of his complaint. “Jesus, can you believe that? Trying to get some sleep! The bitch!” he mocked himself aloud.
He exhaled and hopped onto the sidewalk. The strenuous air that choked the campus thinned as he entered the true life-center of the university: The Village, a line of convenience stores and bars. The wailing beat of the music from the latter was alluring. David looked in through the windows and watched as women laughed and smiled, pouted and fawned.

He lowered his head as his mind turned back to Sara alone in her bed, curled up into a ball as always: a breathing granite, to be left untouched until the morning light cracked her shell of sleep and released a woman back into the world.

He began to readjust his scarf as the door to one of the bars burst open. A woman of Sara’s height emerged, her eyes dazzling like diamonds with alcoholic wonderment. Her skin glistened with dancing close and penny-draft Wednesday night. She wore no coat, and immediately shivered as the night airbrushed her face with chill. After the bouncer’s urging (“Shut the fuckin’ door”), she spun and lost her balance on the glassy ice. She fell wildly, barely catching herself with her hands. David ran to her, nearly falling himself.

“Ow! Damnit.”

“You okay?” He offered her his hand and she took it still watching the ground. He pulled her up, noticing the smearing redness. “Hey, you’re bleeding there,” he said, turning her hand gently in his.

“Don’t worry about--” She brushed the snow off her sweater. “Thanks, but you don’t have to,” she smiled and with her free hand brushed a blond lock from her face. She looked up at him through her bangs, head lowered and eyes raised to meet his.
“Well, don’t thank me yet, you’ve got a piece of bottle here.” He examined it to determine at what angle the glass had entered her palm. “Huh, beer bottle. I hate beer. How about you?” Having distracted her, he readied himself to remove the glass.

She hung her head and put her free hand to her forehead. “I dunno, I guess. Nasty, but it’s cheap,” she shrugged, and he quickly eased the shard from her hand. “Ow, goddam! That hurts!” She pulled her hand back quickly, sober now. “Bastard.”

He grimaced at the name, kneeling to gather up a small handful of clean snow to numb and wash her hand. She whined, nearly on the verge of tears. He offered the snow to her, and she slowly released her hand once again to him.

“Sorry about the ‘bastard’ thing, it just... really hurt,” she whispered, her eyes begging forgiveness. He smiled in response, shaking his head to dismiss the thought. “Are you all right now?” he asked, watching her face wring with the pain. David left a small lump of snow in her palm and wrapped his white scarf around it. He crushed a tiny frozen dirt clod with the toe of his boot.

“No, I’m not all right,” she answered, “I’m bleeding, I’m cold, and now I owe some guy I don’t even know a new scarf.” She smiled and laughed in frustration as tears ran down her face.

“No, don’t worry about it. I got another one at home.” He stood, hands in pockets, watching her last tears for the evening fall.

“Thanks,” she paused, taking in a deep breath. “You a pre-med?” He nodded, and she looked up at him and saluted with her newly-bandaged hand. “Really. Thank you.” She smiled, looked down, took a step to walk past him, then turned and raised herself up to meet his
lips with hers. "Bye," she whispered. Her voice blurred David's mind with warm strawberry daiquiris as he watched her small frame slink slowly away from him.

"Hold on! You're walking home? You don't live all the way up on campus, do you?"

He ran to catch up with her.

She turned to answer, yawning like an innocent child: "No, it's really close to here." She put her hands to her mouth to warm them.

He unzipped his brown leather jacket and began to remove it. "Well, then take this and let me walk you home. It's late," he lied.

"It's not even midnight yet, is it?" she asked curiously. "You call that late?"

"Well, no," he stammered, caught by the truth. He caught her gaze and smiled. "But let me walk you home anyways, Ok? I'd feel better about it, especially in your condition," he smiled. "You know, after your injury." He pleaded with his eyes and draped his beaten jacket around her shoulders.

"Ooh, a real gentleman, huh?" She smirked and looked at him from head to toe. "Where's your shining armor and white horse?"

"Yeah, well, armor's in the shop and it's the horse's night off." He laughed with her and bowed, extending one arm to the side, in an 'after you.' She took a step and his eyes followed. Her body was slender and relaxed after the alcohol had taken its toll. Her small hips swayed in the cold night wind like a beckoning leaf. He released himself to passionate images of them together. He shook his head, realizing the face and body were Sara's, overlaid with this girl's, and walked with her.
The walk to her house was a short one; hers was only half a block away from the Village. She led him up to her lit doorstep and leaned against the door lazily. She twisted the doorknob and found it locked, not surprised. She reached deep into the pockets of the jacket for her keys and drew out a set.

"Those are mine," he told her as she struggled to force the keys into the keyhole to no avail.

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry," she whispered and handed the keys to him, digging in her own pockets and withdrawing a single key. "Here we go." She stumbled with the key but was finally able to open the door. "Thanks for walking me. Told you it wasn't far."

"I know, and I was happy to do it." He smiled and coughed painedly.

"You gonna live?" she paused, stumbling for his name. "What's your name, anyways?"

"David Landt."

"David Landt, Geri Cochran." She held out her hand and he shook it. "You wanna come inside for a bit? Warm up?"

"No, I'm fine, I better get goin'." He took a step back from the door and she matched it, staying close.

"You sure?" She smiled and ran her tongue slowly over her lips to wet them. "You don't have to go home tonight." She reached up and wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, and gently pulling herself up, kissed him full on the lips. Another shot of strawberry rushed into his head and he closed his eyes, bringing his left hand up to cradle her cheek. He kissed back, drawing out the kiss, then stuttered and broke it after a moment. He brought his hand down slowly in a fist, his band digging into his finger.
“No, not tonight. Not tonight.” He turned around, lifting leaden feet and sighing down to the gravel path. As the door closed behind him, he inched the glove off, held his banded finger before him, and dropped the ring into his pocket.
The Tease

“Mark, just have a seat, there’ll be a table ready in a minute,” the waitress said hurriedly, rushing with a full tray of coffee cups and rhubarb-strawberry pie.

Crushed by the kitchen heat in the small restaurant, Mark looked up at a metal fan that hung from the wall like a paralyzed limb. “Hey Jen,” he said, “when the hell you gonna get that damn fan fixed?” He nodded up at it in contempt as he spoke.

Jennielee stopped in her path and turned to see out of habit, though she knew the clock and the question well enough. “Don’t you remember that lightning storm—oh, no, you wouldn’t. You didn’t even get to Fall Creek ‘til this past March. Well, this one afternoon, the sky goes all black all a’sudden, and before a drop falls, it gets all tense, like everything stopped. The air was just sparking all over town. I heard that poor Judge Carter’s hair was all standin’ up on end for two days after.”

Mark sat and lit up a cigarette. He raised an eyebrow in mock interest at Jennielee’s daily dose of exaggeration. “That so?”

“Anyways, just when we were all sure the clouds were gonna clear out or pour, this great crooked bolt a’lightning comes ripping down on the electric tower ‘cross the street. Shorted out the whole restaurant. That fan was the only thing broke, thank the Lord.” She paused and nodded for emphasis. “Connie keeps it broke as a reminder; he kind of thinks of it as a souvenir.” She stood proud, blocking the aisle with her hands on her hips.

“Hmph.” Mark glanced at his menu. “So how are Connie and David?”

“You—” The soft chime announced the newest customer, cutting off Jennielee’s rebuttal. A tall gaunt man entered, smiling at them both.
“Curt,” Mark nodded, peeling off his thick coat as he rose.

“Hello,” his friend replied dryly. He smiled and turned to the waitress. “How are you tonight?”

She returned the warm greeting. “Not bad. Cold enough for you, Curtis?” she asked, as he hung his coat on the doorside rack.

“Ah, he’ll live,” Mark answered, and tossed Curtis his own coat. “Hang that up for me, while you’re at it, would ya’?”

A tone sounded, summoning Jennielee to the kitchen and she skirted off, not breaking her walk. “So how’s Laurie there?”

He sat down and removed a toothpick from a dispenser. “Laura’s just fine, Mark.” He sighed and plunged the toothpick into his mouth, grinding down on it.

“Well that’s just wonderful,” Mark answered, his attention caught by a young couple leaving. The girl, blond and trim, hair in a long full tail, rubbed her chin, barely hiding the pinched redness on either side.

Her date led her by the hand to the door, answering her whispered request. “No, now just stop it,” the boy glared at her. He smiled, dismissing it, and whipped his hand, spanking her with a loud smack. Her eyes clamped shut for an instant, squeezing out tears, and she cupped her hand gently to her bottom. As they passed, Curtis looked down, rotating the toothpick with his tongue.

As the boy retrieved his letterman’s jacket from the rack, Mark cleared his throat loudly, demanding the boy’s attention, who turned to meet his gaze.
“What are you lookin’ at?” He noted Mark’s leaning frame and build, sizing him up. He took a step forward, tossing the girl’s hand behind him.

Mark sat up, draining all emotion from his face and kept his eyes locked. “Your girlfriend.” He watched as the boy visibly stuttered in form, winded by the truth.

“Oh.” The sound fell from his mouth with no support. The girl’s watery eyes bounced from her date to Mark with incredulous passivity. She finally turned, tears uninhibited, opened the door, and ran out into the twisting winds. The boy whipped his head to the door and back to his opponent, unsure. “You-“

“Yeah?” Mark asked, taking a step toward the boy. Curtis hid the beginnings of a smile and turned back to the counter. The boy dropped his eyes to the floor, stepping backward. He opened his mouth slightly as if to speak, then ran out the door to the girl, shivering by a locked car.

“Well, was that dangerous enough for you? Staring down that kid like that?” Curtis asked, revealing the smile now.

“Oh, shut the hell up.”

“I don’t know, Mark.” His face boiled down to sincerity. “He had that letterman’s jacket; he could take you apart,” he paused, “if it hadn’t been his old man’s.” He laughed earnestly and wrapped the toothpick in a napkin and set it in a sand-filled ashtray. Mark chortled and, noticing Jennielee beckoning, walked to their table. Curtis followed.

“I had to do that, though, man. I just can’t stand for crap like that. Pretty girl being with a jerk like that kid.”

“Well Mark, I’m impressed. I didn’t think you gave a shit about anybody’s feelings.”
"Oh, sure I do. It's just like this girl I met about two years ago, before I came here. I was in O'Hare, picking up some Jap for my boss. Big client, big account. I think we ended up with it," he paused for a moment of thought.

"So anyways, this hot girl's just sitting there, bawling her eyes out. Point for her—she got my attention. I look up at the schedule board; goddam plane's late, so I go over and sit down next to her. She sniffles up and smiles at me, wanting to show how good she was handling herself. . . whatever.

"She ruffles around for a tissue and this picture drops on the floor. I pick it up before she notices and take a look at it. Big guy, goofy-ass pretty-boy smile. Football under his arm. Probably a quarterback, with those teeth. Faggot.

"It's then she sees me with it, so I give her a real Hallmark-y, is-there-anything-I-can-do look, and her face softens a bit. Point for me. I gently touch her shoulder, shake my head slowly back and forth, say 'shh' real soft. Then I tear the picture up and offer her a cup of coffee," Mark turned up a corner of his mouth in triumph. "Now she was a good fuck." He gave a leering half-smile, blew the rest of his cigarette out in a snaking stream, and snubbed the butt in the ashtray.

"What?" Curtis nearly exclaimed, crinkling his brow. "You just left the airport without picking up the client?"

"I'm sure he got picked up by somebody," Mark answered, "no biggie."

"But—"

Jennielee sauntered over, cutting off Curtis's remark.

"So you guys know what you want yet?" she asked.
"Yeah, I want the turkey salad platter and coffee." Mark looked up at Jennielee's sharpening glare and smiled.

She scribbled the order angrily, not taking her eyes from his.

"What about you, Curtis?"

"You still got some of your delicious rhubarb pie left?" he asked, releasing the tension of Mark's order. Jennielee's face quickened as Curtis's smile leapt to her lips.

"Mm-hmm," she nodded. "I knew you'd want some, so I had Connie save you the first slice cut." She brushed an auburn lock of hair away from her eyes. "Anything else?"

"Coffee."

"Ok, I'll be right back." She flashed a few teeth through her smile and turned to go, squinting foully at Mark again.

"You're unbelievable, Mark. Do you go through life just trying to get under people's skin?"

Mark exhaled, tapped out another cigarette and lit it as he began to speak. "Look, yeah, I know I'm a prick, or more importantly, that's what other people think of me. Know what, though?" he took a long drag on his cigarette, "I act the way every guy wants to act. The only difference between you and me is that while you bitch to yourself about "woulda's" and "shoulda's," I'm doing 'em." He flicked off his ashes for emphasis.

"It's just like this girl I picked up last night. You wouldn't believe her if you saw her, Curt, but that's just you. Long smooth legs, big round breasts, the works. And here's the kicker," he paused, smiling, to take another drag on the cigarette, "she didn't even ask for foreplay or nothin'. Not that we didn't do any, just she didn't ask for more. And after that," he
smiled, his eyes widened, “well, let’s just say I’ve had a lot of women, and I’ve never had one ask for that kind of sex. She called me today and asked me to come over. Said she wanted to show me something.”

Curtis’s jaw dropped and Mark laughed.

“Okay, guys, here’s your coffee,” Jennielee said, setting down the cups. “Your rhubarb-strawberry, with extra whipped cream, and for you,” she turned to Mark, “a plate of dried corn. This is the same food we give to turkeys to fatten them up, before we tear them away from their families, hack off their heads, rip the feathers out of their skin, gut them and roast or boil them. Then we flayed the flesh from their bones and mixed it with mayo to make your turkey salad sandwich.” She placed the plate before him, letting it clatter loudly. “Eat up.”

Mark smiled, shaking his head at the routine.

The two ate in silence until he finished his sandwich. He glanced at his watch. “Shit,” he complained. “I’m late.” He stood, dug a ten dollar bill from his pocket and dropped it on the table. “That should handle my order, but I want the change the tomorrow.” He left, waving a quick hand to Jennielee.

The route to the girl’s apartment was a short one; she lived only a mile past the Pudding Window, the club at which Mark had met her. He sped past it, glancing at the women in line to get inside the club. His car skidded into a parking spot, and he quickly jogged up the steps to the door.

He pressed the button for her intercom system, and the door buzzed, unlocking. He sauntered through it and down the hall to her apartment. He found the door left slightly open and entered.
Her apartment was decorated more than last night. Silk sheets draped over the furniture and lamps. "Hello? Brianna?" he called, taking off his coat and dropping it in a nearby chair.

"Have a seat on the couch, Mark, I'll be right out," she answered from the bathroom.

He sat, and noticing the VCR was on pause, turned on the television. He recognized the frozen image on the screen. It was that of he and Brianna, from last night. He unpaused the tape and the scene played before him, the two kissing, Brianna whispering in his ear, her smile and his look of shock.

"Yeah, we can definitely do that," the videotape Mark replied, unbuttoning his pants and lowering them, as she pulled a chair close to her and bent over it. Mark watched himself lift up the back of her skirt to find a thong bikini underneath. He caught his breath from excitement at the discovery and watched as the figures began. The moans and screams of pleasure, echoes of the night before, filled the apartment.

The pair acted out the night as Mark had remembered it, with his walk into the bathroom afterward to clean himself. He then leaned closer as the tape continued and he saw Brianna dart her hand under her skirt, touching herself with great, jerky movements. "Damn. Got her rocks off again," he murmured. The TV turned off before the videotape Brianna climaxed.

"Oh, we were supposed to watch that together!" Brianna whined. Mark turned and saw a medium-sized man of small build standing behind him.

"Whoa!" He jumped to his feet, eyes wide with disbelief. "Where's Brianna?"

The man took a step forward, which Mark matched with a retreat. "Actually, Mark, it's Bill," the man said softly, smiling. "But I like 'Brianna' more, don't you?"

"What?" Mark shouted, his face contorted in confusion.
“Oh boy,” Brian sighed, “You didn’t know, did you?” He sat on the couch heavily. “I thought you did.”

“You thought I,” he caught himself in realization, “No! And what the hell’s the deal with the video?”

“Oh, sorry.” The man before him smiled shyly and shrugged. “I like to watch.”

Mark’s breath rushed from his chest as pains slowly emptied into his stomach. He turned to the door, swept his coat from the chair and looked back to Brian. He reached for the doorknob and shook his head in disbelief.

“I thought you knew,” Brian repeated. At this, Mark swung open the door and darted down the hall and out to his car. His stomach retched as he started the engine, furiously weighing the results of his obliviousness.

Once home, he piled clothes and his scant savings into a suitcase which he threw into the backseat of his car. He spun the keys to the door from his keyring and ran out the door, tripping over the threshold. He caught himself with his hands, the keys digging into his palm, drawing blood.

He wiped the blood on his jeans, and ran to his car.

He searched the radio dial for a classic rock station, speeding down through Main Street. He turned onto Jefferson Drive and swerved too late as an old black labrador bounced off his fender.

He angled the rear view mirror to see the dog behind him hobble a few more steps to the side of the road, stopping oncoming cars, and howl thunderingly in pain. Mark only drove on.
On the Threshold

I.

Perched atop Paulson Bluff, a boy felt the only sense of freedom he could ever remember in his sixteen years. He looked down the ice-tipped pines behind City Hall, and beyond, to the cozy suburban additions that stretched almost to the industrial parks his great-grandfather had used to build Fall Creek. The chill raised gooseflesh on his bare arms, and he shuddered, huddled in a teetering ball. He rested his chin on his knees and rocked.

Far below he saw a black dog digging in the frozen earth. “Hey Judge,” he whispered, as the wind lashed tears from his eyes. It blew up at him, ricocheting off the ground below the precipice. He felt gravity pulling him down, into the wind, and leaned forward even more. The air whipped his face, unsettling his stance with pain and force. The cold cut bluntly on his cheeks and reddened them.

II.

Geoffrey Paulson was not a tall boy, nor was he strong. He was lean and thin, but his occasional asthma attacks had bolstered his choice and kept him out of sports. He was a sophomore at East Central High School with a high average grade and a promising college career ahead of him. His parents had already taken him to four out-of-state universities and he would always have a full tuition, room, and board scholarship at Bain University in town, on account of his family. Not that money was ever an issue.

His friends were a world apart from him, but he loved them and spent as much time with them as he could. He knew nearly everyone in school and everyone knew him because of the lavish parties he often arranged. Still, he only spent time with his four friends; two couples. Carl and Nicky had been sweethearts longer than anyone could remember, and Seth was
planning to propose to Ellie next summer, once he earned the money for a nice enough ring. Carl had been the first to meet Geoffrey, in an Advanced Biology class that he had been accidentally placed into.

The five of them began spending time together soon after. After Geoffrey was introduced to Nicky, Seth, and Ellie, he invited them to his house for dinner. Seth and Ellie, who were vegetarians, ate only rolls and salad, despite Geoffrey’s offer to have a meatless entrée prepared.

Geoffrey became close friends with them all, best with Seth. By the time of his sophomore year Halloween party, they had already traded intimate secrets, such as they had. Carl brought with him a cousin from a neighboring high school to introduce to Geoffrey.

* * *

“Hey Geoff, this is Heather.” They had exchanged hi’s and hands and Carl had continued. “Heather, this is Geoffrey. We call him ‘Continental.’” He had winked at Geoffrey.

“‘Continental?’” his cousin asked.

“Yeah, you know: fifth wheel?” He punched Geoffrey’s arm playfully and laughed, walking off to leave the two to talk.

Geoffrey smiled, embarrassed, and offered her a soda. She accepted, and they walked to the refreshments table and away from the prying ears of the Paulson’s servants overseeing the party.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Carl can be kind of an asshole.”

“Oh, me? No, he’s right. I’m just the extra guy, trying to buy my way into everybody.”

“What?” She sat down on a nearby chair and he joined her.
"Well, like, this party. Do you think all these people would hang out with me just any time?"

She smiled. "I don’t know. I just met you, remember?"

"Yeah." He took a drink from his cola. "Don’t be freaked out, okay, but would you mind taking a walk with me?"

"Like outside?"

"Yeah, not far. I just don’t want to be here right now."

"Sure," she rose and slapped at her skirt to smooth it. "Let’s go. It’s too stuffy in here anyway."

"Cool." They slipped out unnoticed, even by Carl, who had been eyeing them for progress, and walked to the Bluff.

They stood on the edge of the cliff and looked down on the town. She looked beautiful to him in the thinning light of the stars and moon. He agonized over whether or not to try to kiss her, and how he should ask her.

III.

He rocked forward onto the balls of his feet, still wrapping his arms around his knees. As he closed his eyes and let his mind wander into what might have been, his shoes lost their foundation and slid along the dead grass toward the ledge. His eyes flashed open in fear and surprise and he fell backwards.

He could barely breathe a sigh of relief as he felt the wind blew over his face and the solid earth cradle his back. He lay there for a moment, listening as muffled gravel crunched under tires that slowly approached him. When the sound stopped, and the engine he had discerned was cut, he rolled onto his belly and looked. It was a car he did not recognize. He got
on all fours and slowly rose, his heart pumping wildly from his earlier scare. He barely found his balance, almost falling again.

The car door opened: the driver exited, wearing a green coat trimmed with white fur. He smiled, confused, when he saw the driver clearly. “Hey, what are you doing here?” His chest was constricted and his fingers were frozen. He tried to stuff them into his pockets to warm them.

“Well, I just came by to say hi. School’s out for us; what about you guys?” She looked more beautiful than she did those months ago.

“Yeah, we’ve been out since yesterday.” He stumbled toward her, his mind racing. What was she doing here? Will she spend some of her break in Fall Creek? Is she still...

“Oh. Well, I don’t really have any homework for the break, so I worked it out with Carl’s parents that I can stay with them for a week, maybe after Christmas, if you’d like me to.”

His eyes grew wide and dried in the cold. “That’d be great,” his lungs barely let him squeeze out. His feet fell again and again toward her, uncontrollably.

She smiled and his heart burned. “Great.” She took a step and met him, his cheeks ablaze. She put her mittened hands on his cheeks and rubbed them, laughing. “How long have you been out there?”

“I don’t know. I was just thinking about things, and,” he broke off. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and gently pulled a strand of hair off her face to behind her ear. Her coat pressed against his T-shirt as she leaned in closer. Her breath stole his, and contact was made. His eyes shut tightly, and his head filled instantly with stars—then all was darkness and silence!

Judge Carter had ceased his pawing and watched as the boy fell, landing only feet from him. He raised his head and proclaimed Geoffrey Paulson dead at the feet of Paulson Bluff.
The New Kid in Town

Most times it just don't pay to be the new guy. When Andy Richards drove into Fall Creek on September twenty-third last year, I could see he understood that. He was the fire department's new golden boy, and Dave Shambaugh wasn't about to let anyone in the town proper forget that. He hunted that boy like a bloodhound pup and cornered him at The Last Supper; made Andy spill coffee on himself he slapped him on the back so hard. Then Dave went on with his mayoral duties of kissing ass, following him everywhere so everyone would know that the new fireman was to be shown a good welcome, which usually meant a free dinner, or oil change, or some other something. I hear tell that Dave even offered Andy an evening with his daughter. He declined, of course, saying that he was tired out from the drive.

But that's how it is here most times. Something new shows up and people just scramble over themselves to get a look. Like Andy. Now that's not to say that everybody liked what they saw. Most of the ladies did, though, seeing him smooth-faced and trim. Put a real burr up Dave's ass when he saw his daughter hanging on Andy without his say-so. And I'll tell you one man who let Andy get under his skin, and that was Joel Macino, another guy in the fire brigade. But now I'm getting ahead of myself.

Dave was showing Andy around, like I said, when Jamie saw him (that's Jamie Shambaugh), and she walks up to them both and says hi to Andy and asking him all about himself and all the while fanning herself with the collar of her blouse. I about bust a gut when I saw Dave turn three shades of red and try not to holler at that girl in front of the new boy. I have to give him credit, though; he stayed calm long enough to rustle up a twenty dollar bill out of his wallet, hand Jamie some bull about her mother needing some milk, and send her on her way with a "have fun with the change, cupcake."

Well, the two of them finally reached the firehouse. Dave introduced him to the men that were on duty and made the radio operator announce Andy’s arrival in town so the rest of them would know. And that’s about when the trouble started. Now Andy’s a fun enough guy to be around, and he was making everybody laugh about this and that, slipping in real sly jokes about Dave, when Joel comes tear-assing into the fire house, yelling his head off. “What the hell are we running here, Dave? A goddamned radio show? Why don’t we just all start chatting up the line? I’m sure an emergency can wait, so let’s just have a grand old time!” He tromped through the station, focusing his attention on Dave, occasionally glancing at Andy to size him up. Andy was in his mid-twenties, and compact: what must have been about 200 pounds of muscle on a five foot and a half frame. Joel had seven inches and 40 pounds (not in muscle) on him.

Dave tried to cover his ass as best he could, for once not standing behind City Hall: “Now Joel, I was just making a quick little announcement. It took less than a minute, and there wasn’t an emergency!”

“That’s not the point, dammit! The radio ain’t a damned toy!” He jerked his thumb at Andy. “We’re all gonna meet your new boy there. There’s no need to use the radio for that!” He turned to Andy, his breath heaving. “I realize you probably didn’t have any part in this, and I don’t know how things were in Indianapolis, but this ain’t how we run things here.”

You know what that boy did then? He looked Joel right in the eye like some Bible hero with a sling, nodded, and said, “Good. There’s no room for that kind of horseplay in a firehouse.” He continued to stare at Joel until the fire went out of his eyes, and then turned back to Dave. “Mayor Shambaugh, you have a beautiful little town here. I’ll do my best to help keep it standing.” He smiled, walked out to his trailer-hitched car, and drove off to wherever he spent that first night.
Now there’s one thing I know, and that’s people. And, well, let’s not beat around the bush. Joel’s had his eye on the younger Shambaugh sister ever since he came here. He was younger than Andy was when he came, and not even marrying her older sister could get Jamie out of his mind. I suspect that about the time Andy showed up, he’d been trying to arrange a little family reunion in his boudoir. Anyway, no amount of suckin’ up or starin’ down would placate Joel once he heard about the way Jamie had started eyecin’ the new kid.

Time went on and there weren’t any more blow-ups at the firehouse, at least not between Joel and Andy. I think Andy put some kind of hoodoo in that stare of his, and Joel didn’t dare take him on outright. Besides, there was never any reason to. That Andy was some kind of fireman. He always kept all his gear in good working order and never clowned too much. It’s a sad thing what they did to him.

One day in July the boys got together and decided to haze Andy a little bit with a practical joke. They all hid their gear and told him that Joel was implementing some new timesaving plan. Everyone was supposed to stow their boots and whatnot at home when they weren’t on duty, and when a call came, they’d announce it over the radio and they were all supposed to gear up and go out to the curb and wait for the truck to pick them up. Well, these boys laid it on just right, and Andy fell for it. That night, he piled his gear into his little car and went home to find a place to keep it. Sure it didn’t take him too long to find a good spot for it; that boy knew how to pack and organize; he just had an eye for that kind of thing.

Now this wouldn’t have been too bad for Andy. He might gotten yelled at by Joel, and Lord knows that would have blown off enough steam to open all the envelopes at the IRS, except that the next day, when Andy had the day off, the church on Dawn Drive (on the way out to the college) went up, and with the Youth Group in there cleaning the pews, trying to help fix up the
church. Well, Andy heard the call, and got dressed in record time to run out to the curb. He could already see the smoke, 'cause the place he was staying at was only a few blocks away from the church. Well, he took off, running like all get out, then remembered that the truck was supposed to pick him up, and then ran back to his mailbox and waited.

Not a few minutes later, just by chance, the truck showed up around the corner. Joel yelled when he saw Andy just standing there "with a thumb up his ass," asking why Andy hadn't come to the station and how he was already dressed. Well, the truck pulled up to Andy, just like the guys told him it would, but as he took a step to climb on, Joel made Nathan pulled forward about ten feet. All the guys on the truck cracked up when they saw the look on Andy's face. Truth is, the kid slipped off the running board and almost cracked his skull when he hit it. The truck stopped and Andy shook off the pain and walked to it.

Again the truck took off another ten feet, but this time Andy jumped off before he fell. The guys just laughed, and Joel was watching in the sideview mirror, clutching his splitting sides. That was all Andy took. He started running off to the church, and before the truck got going again, he was halfway there. I hear tell from some of the boys on the truck that day that say he kicked in those church doors and rushed into the flames, grabbing kids and hauling them out four at a time. Joel flew out of the truck and ran in to do the same after Andy came out with his second armload. Lord knows how they got all them kids out alive, after all that business with the truck, but they managed it.

After that little show, no one ever pulled anything with Andy. Joel got his picture in the paper, carrying four kids like Andy, and a medal and all. No one mentioned anything about the way that day really went. My guess is Andy was too afraid of looking like a fool, and as for the other guys, Joel threatened their jobs. Since then, though, Andy wasn't quite as funny or
sociable, and the girls didn't talk about him so much. I guess he finally found out where he was in Fall Creek.
The Honorable Judge Bowman Carter

I was re-assigned to a small branch office in the suburbs of Chicago, and though I hated to lose my office in downtown Indianapolis, I was relishing in my new-found power and income. I told a friend of my new joy and my upcoming trip. Over our sixth farewell bourbon he told me that should I desire an interesting topic about which to write I should stop by a small town just off of Interstate 65, Fall Creek. He informed me that this tiny burg laid claim to the youngest judge on terra firma. His name was Bowman Carter and he absolutely loved visitors to the town. He was five years old. "Impossible," I remember exclaiming.

"No sir! What I say is true, old pal. Stop by The Last Supper, a posh restaurant on the main green of town and ask where he can be located. Really, stop by and see him."

I was lying when I smiled and said I would. Nevertheless, because of dilemmas with the movers and later with my dry cleaning, I got off to a late start. After two hours on the road dusk was already beginning to blur my vision. It was that certain kind of dusk, where the sun was highlighting the bottoms of the clouds in scarlet slashes. My vision had been dulled and set on fire. I had a hard time driving in those conditions; my eyes grew tired and I began to have a hard time focusing. Rather than force my way through two more hours of that just to arrive in an impersonal Chicago-land hotel suite, I decided to take the next exit and dine. If I was still tired after dinner, I thought, I would just stop and stay for the evening. The next exit was Fall Creek. I vaguely remembered my friend's story about the five year old judge; more important to me at the moment was his suggestion of the "posh restaurant" downtown. I drove toward what I guessed was the center of town and asked the first person I saw where such a place could be found. The young boy, maybe twenty, twenty-one, snickered. He started giving the directions and I realized, as I watched his face, if it weren't for the embers of sun he would have no color.
It was beaten and old and I fancied I had made a mistake about his age. He carried a beat up briefcase at the end of a leather jacket-clad arm that would have been as thick as my gearshift had it not been for the coat. He seemed pleasant enough but scared.

I don't want to give the impression that this town was filled with any sort of *Children of the Corn* archetypes, full of deadly religious fanaticism or small-town paranoia. I don't even want to give the impression that I was sensing any sort of foreboding energies. I was simply tired and hungry. I took the poor kid's directions and immediately found the restaurant. Its solid oak Cracker Barrel type of construction allowed it to blend into the rest of the colonial style architecture.

The place was thick with deep golden light reflecting off its wooden walls, sanded and stained to a bright mirror finish. The lighting was such that only what was directly illuminated, tables, food, and the tops of heads, was lit at all. Everything else gave itself weakly to the brown and black shadows. I was seated in the back, near the kitchen. I ordered a Moretti Dark and vegetarian lasagna. When the waitress came back to give me my check I remembered my old pal's suggestion and asked, "Where could I find Bowman Carter?"

"*His Honor,*" she stressed bitterly, "lived at the junkyard on the West end of town, but you can usually find him in the graveyard now."

"How will I recognize him?" I asked.

"He'll be the one in the center of all the people."

I went ahead and ordered a dessert to give my beer time to settle and then took off toward the graveyard. As I pulled into the cemetery, the last light was departing below the ridges of trees to the west, to Chicago. I drove around, lazily leaning on the wheel and pretending to drive with my chin. "Boring!" I yelled and instantly felt guilty for breaking such leaden silence, even
in the confines of my car. "Boring! Boring! Boring!" I howled again getting used to my echoless voice. The road was narrow and as it climbed the incline that made up the bulk of the cemetery it slowly angled towards the left. Upon nearing the top it took a sharp curve left, as I turned the corner I saw what had previously been obscured by a mausoleum. A huge crowd of people was milling around, staring toward the center of their group. I stopped my car and when I slammed the door only one or two people in the back turned to look at the stranger approaching.

"Good evening," I began, "I'm visiting and-"

"Shh, come with me," said a proud looking man as he grabbed my hand and led me to the center of the crowd. "Visitor!" he announced. He piloted me to an old Labrador lying on top of a fresh grave. "Stick your hand out." he ordered. I looked at him questioningly "Your hand, stick it out," he repeated more forcefully. I did, and as I expected, the dog raised his sad black head and sniffed my hand; he licked at a small dab of sauce I had missed with my napkin, then lowered his head to rest on his paws. "Great," said the man, "now come back with me, back here to that big cottonwood."

As we cleared the crowd, and for the first time felt the soft caressing breeze of an early August night, I asked the inevitable, "What's going on here?"

"You want the story of the dog or the man buried underneath 'im?"

"The man, I think."

The man's shoulders lurched up by his ears as he gave a soft chuckle. I half expected him to shake his head and say "city-folk" or something to that effect. Instead he just muttered "Think...(hehe)...that's pretty funny. You got time for a story, fella?"

"Sure," I nodded and sat at the base of the tree where the old man was motioning. Thinking back to the waitress's comment about Bowman Carter and his new "hang-out," I had to
wonder what kind of moribundity would allow a waitress to crack a joke like that to a customer. Of course what was I going to do, go back and steal my tip out of her apron pocket? Touche, the judge "hangs out" at the cemetery.

"Well I guess you picked the right one if you want a good story, 'cause if you want to hear the story of the man you have to hear the story about that dog there. Is that OK with ya'?"

"I guess." I had already made the decision to stay here tonight and what else was there to do; if I wasn't here I would just be cramming myself into some oily motor lodge and waiting for the truck driver in the next room to stop playing with himself to the rhythm of some pre-paid porno on the motel TV.

"Well," began the old man, "about two years ago, I think it was now, about two years ago, Bowman Carter was given over to the custody of one Jake Straw, he lives out in the junkyard. Anyway, other people had had their problems with Bowman but none they couldn't fix with a good slap on the nose. Things went a little strange when Jake took over. It's not that he got more violent, exactly, just that his violence seemed to get more picky. Let me tell ya', we was all a little dumbfounded at the crazy display he put on in front of the courthouse. Y'see Tom Brightman, he had just been convicted of petty larceny, stealing somethin' or other from someone or 'nother. From Jake or one of his friends I think. Well anyway, Tom had been real nice to Bowman whenever they met, had given him a steak or two if I 'member right. So it was no wonder that when Bowman saw Tom being led to the city jail that he just walked up to him and looked up with those great begging Labrador eyes and simply stood in his path."

"Wait," I interrupted, "You mean that Bowman Carter is that dog?"

"Yes."

"Judge Bowman Carter?"
"Yes. D'ya still want to hear the story?" His brow furrowed and I noticed for the first time the moonlight highlighting the ridges in his forehead.

"Uh, sure."

"So Bowman, he was just sittin' there, right smack in the center of the walkway, preventin' Tom to get to servin' his proper time. When the police guards tried to walk Tom 'round the dog, that dog, he set to growling so fierce that one of the guards reached for his pistol and the other for those sticks they carry. Now, see, I was there, and I'd known Bowman since he was a pup. I breed labs y'know. So I can't help but think that this is just plain strange and I'm beginning to think that maybe Ole Bowman has gone plum over the edge crazy. He had to know that Tom couldn't pet 'em and he didn't smell like steak none since he hadn't eaten since breakfast. Slowly the guards maneuvered Tom sideways and after a struggling crab walk up the stairs they pushed him into the jail. For hours afterward, Bowman just sat there howlin' and howlin' like a red hound that treed himself something tasty. Everyday for a week Bowman would come back to that jail and howl. Everyday at the same time that dog would walk right up to the jailhouse doors and set to screamin' fierce-like. Then one day Benny Tannas walked up those stairs and Bowman stopped howlin' and he started growlin', but real low. Those growls must have come straight from his gut. Some lawyers that were walking out while Benny was walkin' in said that they thought the marble stairs were rumbling. Bowman slowly backed away from the door and let Benny in and ya' know what Benny did when he walked in there? Confessed to the crime that good Tom and been convicted of. There was a small quick trial later in the week. Benny took over Tom's sentence and Tom walked free. We didn't even see a whole lot of Bowman after that; don't even know if he followed Tom home after the trial. He just disappeared."
The old man stood up, his knees creaking in the silence of the night, and dusted off his thighs. He offered his crusty hand to me and assisted my own rising. He casually glanced over toward where the circle of people still clustered silently around Judge Carter. "We're not gonna get any answers here tonight; why don't we go and get some coffee?"

"Should I drive?" I offered, motioning to my car.

"Don't bother, we're just a ways from a coffee place."

"So why is that dog there now?" I ventured hoping to hear the rest of the story.

"I'll tell you the rest of the story when we get our coffee."

The rest of the walk was spent in silence, long and uncomfortable. I was left to marvel at the creeping-violet landscape. Pine trees, like blurry coat racks swayed menacingly above our heads and our shoes squeaked with every step on the dewy grass, the smell of its cut hung about our faces like a rich perfume. As we exited the gate that marks the boundaries of the cemetery I noticed that the air outside was much drier than the air inside. I also noted for the first time, the cold dampness of my backside, where I had been sitting, and silently wished that the old man had wanted his coffee a little earlier.

We walked for about a quarter of an hour before we neared the first factory that would undoubtedly signal the beginning of civilization. I began coughing. The old man offered a bottle, "For your cough," he said, "the air can get pretty foul this time of year." As we passed the factory I could see the diner, The Slipped Disc; its cold fluorescent lights uglied the path that led to it. Bits of trash, small animals, and a variety of bent street signs were set off in a deep chiaroscuro lighting disaster. The stark silhouettes stood sharply against the luminescent street and air. I heard from behind the factory a chain being drug quickly along the cement followed immediately by the staccato blasts of a large dog's bark. The sound unearthed two memories
simultaneously. The first of being 7 or 8 and reading pulp comics, like *E.C.* and *Weird War Tales*. I remembered how all the ghosts wore chains and rattled them about just prior to their arrival.

The other was being in high school and reading *A Christmas Carol*. Marley, like the *E.C.* ghosts of my youth, wore chains. The class talked about what those chains signified and I remember thinking how stupid Charles Perkins was when he said that the chains would be released if Scrooge changed his ways. I didn't say it then because Mr. Gilman agreed, but chains are something that someone else puts on you and you almost never have right to take them off yourself. Even if you put them on yourself you probably can't get out of them by yourself. Chains are made of metal for the purpose of defeating impermanence. Rope is something you can get out of.

The old man seated us on opposite sides of one of the red vinyl booths in the back. He rested his elbows on the speckled and stained formica table and looked at me. "Aren't you going to order any coffee?" I asked. As soon as I asked a waitress handed each of us a cup of steaming black. It smelled burnt so my first inclination was to leave it on the table, but the old man made it clear that I was to drink with him. He looked first at my cup and then to my eyes. He slowly raised his glass to his lips and raised his eyebrows at me, paused, then drank. I raised my cup, in fashion, and took my own sip. Even through the searing trickle of pain I could taste the subtle blend that made the coffee so good. The waitress had not brought us an ordinary house blend, it was more exotic, Indian maybe, which would account for the strange scent.

My storyteller wiped his lips and bristly face with the edge of his coat and continued his tale. "Well, it must have been back in January or February of this year, maybe March. Doug Matthews had been arrested and tried for child molestation. Now, as we all know, this is no
get a picture of the first "Doggie Judge." Of course, the governor had something to say about that, and apparently he heard that some bigwigs in Washington didn't like it none either, the president and some fancy Supreme Court judge. But the mayor, he's a real wordy guy, educated in Paris, the one in France, and real versed in public speaking and debate. So he had the governor tell those two fancies to call him up and he explained his case straight to the top, sayin' all sorts of real million dollar phrases 'Why does Washington care about some dog in a small Midwest town?' 'How does a dog being municipal judge insult the dignity of the entire judicial system?' 'At least this is one judge that's never gonna take a bribe to let some filthy drug dealer walk.' 'That this is merely a token gesture of respect for a dog who seems to protect the innocent and punish the guilty and that it will be the highlight of a small town parade and its surrounding areas and what's the point in letting a silly little honorary medal come between the president and three otherwise conservative state votes in the electoral college and what with elections just four months away?' Well the President agreed and at 3:00 on July Fourth and the old lab was asked to place his paw on the Bible, which he gladly did; someone quoted the judge's oath; Bowman barked and the mayor signed a paper, and the deputy mayor placed a medal around the dog's neck. If it had been a real person it would have been one of the most beautiful inaugurations in probably a hundred years."

He set his mug onto the table, empty despite his narrative. He glanced up, his green eyes studying my face for an expression. "You got arrangements for the night?" he asked.

"No," I lied, "I hadn't decided until just a few minutes ago to stay in town."

"Well, why don't you come and stay in our guest room. Alice won't mind and I can finish telling you the story of that guy you saw buried out there." He dropped a few bills on the table
and stood up. He shrugged his shoulders and stomped his feet to straighten his pants. I put both palms flat on the table and pushed myself out of the booth.

"Gettin' old," I joked. My partner wasn't amused. I shifted my clothes around, and once settled dropped a few of my own dollars down. Once out of the cafe, I was stunned to find how clean the air outside was. The night had come down crisp and black, the amber streetlights twinkled down the street. We walked further into the city, the stars overhead vanishing as we traveled. I marveled at my new friend's nature. He was tall with a full head of hair the color of faded ocean foam. His hands were like concrete, and though I had not seen him smoke, stained yellow from years of nicotine abuse. His eyes lacked all of the paternal kindness that I found in other old men like my grandfather. His walk was proud and his head was high. Each breath looked calming, as if he breathed in the world with each step. He never once looked over at me and never once did his face crack into a half-grin or a snarl. I wondered what those hands used to do, and not to sound too American prose, I wondered if he might have been a farmer. The great American sage, I thought.

"Hey, we're here. This is my house here," said my storyteller. I had kept walking while he stopped and I could tell by the looks of hurt and anger on his face that I had offended him.

"I'm sorry, I was just so lost in my own thoughts," I offered.

"Nevermind." He went on inside. "Alice, can you pour two whiskeys; I brought a guest over. We'll be in the den." He turned around and, seeing that I was still waiting outside, motioned for me to enter. His house was dark, golden, like the restaurant. His floors were very thick hardwood, and I could tell by their dimensions, hand constructed. I wanted to walk on the air so I wouldn't break the floor. I knew that it was solid, but it appeared so delicate, each board mating to the boards on either side. Each screw was laid and inlet, the brass had not worn off
despite years of heavy work boots. The varnish had probably never been redone. The walls were square and freshly painted. "I'm a carpenter," he said. "I built this house myself. Not a whole lot of work for a 63 year old carpenter so I been spendin' lot a time here at home, fixin' up the place for Alice."

"My dad was a carpenter. This is really good work, real solid."

"I don't like to get to windy about it, but thank you." He led me to the den, a small room off the main hallway. It was deeply carpeted with tongue and groove oak paneling that matched the floor exactly. The ceiling was a deep rosy oak with a sunburst pattern carved into the wood, exploding from the center ceiling light-piece. Each wall was covered with a large framed map. Most were yellowed and ripped; some were so old the edges looked like peeling linoleum. The world map bore the fading ink stamp of Fall Creek Elementary. The frames, like the floor and walls were delicately crafted pieces of very sturdy construction. They conveyed the same delicate strength. He motioned for me to sit down in a high-backed, green armchair. He was still standing when Alice came in with two small glasses resting on a silver serving tray. He walked over to her and took each of them deeply into the palm of either hand. As I looked at her from around the corner of the chair I stood up. I turned just in time to see Alice mouth something, to which he answered, "No, no answers." She glanced over toward me and smiled.

"Has Grant been showing you a good time?" she asked, like a mother on Christmas morning.

"Who? Oh yes, your husband, most certainly. He was just telling me the story of Bowman Carter." She gave Grant an uneasy look; he nodded. "Yes, he's quite a storyteller." Grant was already escorting her out of the den. He followed his wife until her departure was complete then he closed the door behind her.
"Please, sit down. Where were we? Oh, yes. Well, things went pretty uneventful after that for awhile. Maybe just a few days actually. As it happened, some real bad apple, don't remember his name, well, he hit poor Bowman with his car. Rather than face the wrath of the town he hightailed it right on out. Haven't heard 'bout him since; no one has. After Bowman was all patched up with that cast you saw on him tonight we all thought everything would be OK. But, y'see, Fall Creek is too far away from the lake and too close to those little mountains there." He pointed out of a large bay window behind him, to a pair of moonstreaked hills. "Air gets real dry and July was none too gracious with the rain this year and we all figured it was only a matter of time before the whole place would up and explode into some God-awful blaze. Sure enough, the old church caught fire like a stack of oil rags. Would have been fine 'cept the town Youth Group had just raised enough money after four years of collectin' to renovate it and they were busy cleanin' pews and sweepin' when the flames shut'em in. If you wanna hear my word on it, I would say it was either them darn chemical cleaners or some punk with a match that set that old kindlin' ablaze. Well, our volunteer fire department ain't no match for those city teams in Indianapolis or Chicago, like you're used to, but we got us some real crackerjack heroes, real tough fellas with a real love for savin' people. When the siren went off, they were out there lickety-split. Joel Macino, he was the first out of the truck and the first into the church. He pulled out four kids every time he went in, two under each arm, and though I know it sounds a bit like a tall tale, I swear that it is true. Not that I saw it, mind you, but there was pictures in the paper. So there was this grand old parade in honor of Joel on account of his bravery. As part of his memorial, the town decided to bestow a medal of honor on him and the person with the privilege of bestowing that medal was none other that our own Judge Carter.
"The air was unseasonably warm that day and the world swam in the humidity. I swear people's faces were wrigglin' like they was made of snakes and it all on account of the ungodly heat. Hundreds of people had come out to cheer Joel and his family. Reporters wanted pictures and the parents of the children he saved wanted to shake his hand (and probably have their picture taken doin' it, too). In the middle of all these people was that poor black coated labbie with his tongue turning to concrete outside his mouth. The parade started way out past the cemetery, continued into town, around the main square and back out toward the rear of the courthouse beneath the statue of Blind Justice. As the parade neared its end, the orange light of late afternoon melting down the waxen faces of the audience, the mayor placed the medal of honor into Bowman's mouth. Joel hopped down off his float as it stopped outside the winner's circle. He sauntered up to the chair that Ole Bowman was squattin' in and kneeled down so he could receive his medal, but Bowman, he just leaped onto the shoulders of the man, pushing him to the ground, and made a break for the park. He leaped into the pond, medal and all, but when he came back the medal was nowhere to be seen.

"Now that's when the trouble started. The town didn't look at Joel Macino the same after that. It was rumored that even he and his missus started hollerin'. People started looking at him funny, wondering what he could have done to make Bowman push him down like that. Everybody had their noses to the fences, askin' their neighbors on one side what they knew so that they could trade it with the neighbor on the other side for more information.

"I don't know who first did it, but soon everybody was writing him real nasty letters. (I got this tasty morsel from the mailman.) He said that everybody was doing those cut and paste jobs and since they was stamped, he was under legal obligation to deliver 'em. I didn't send any letters and Alice says she didn't neither, but it got real hard to trust anybody after awhile. Some
people were sayin' that he was part of some child pornography ring, or that he was a hitman for
the Mafia. People were using the silliest excuses to back up their theories. 'He is from Chicago
and he is Italian,' somebody who thought he was in the Mafia would say. Someone else would
say that their daughter would come home scared whenever he would visit her class on Career
Day. One person went even so far as to say that he was involved in selling drugs just because he
had seen Joel on the seedy part of town on occasion. I'm not sayin' that anybody was lying or
wrong or any of that nonsense; I'm just saying that it don't make no sense that this would all
come up now if everybody had been thinkin' it for so long. I'm also sayin' that no matter what
Joel had done we were his drinkin' buddies and we had got him drunk one night and he certainly
didn't deserve what happened to him then.

"We had all gone to grab a few early drinks from The Pudding Window, a bar downtown.
We went early to avoid the young'uns that start to fill the place up on Saturdays. We had all
bought Joel a drink, and there was probably nine of us or so, maybe more...well, wait; there was
also Andy, Nathan, and Jarod. So all of us had bought him a drink and he was certainly feeling it.
I don't remember precisely what was said but whatever it was didn't sit to well with him and he
decided he should probably head on to his wife and kids. He was gonna drive but we were all
real afraid that he would get in an accident on the way, so I offered to walk him home. I like to
walk places and I said I didn't mind. Soon everybody had agreed and we set off towards the
Macino's. We walked down the streets like an angry mob, shouting and laughing; people
sidestepped to get out of our way.

We got as far as the Macino's front lawn before it all came crashin' down. Tom moved
first. He punched Joel in the back. Joel arched and threw his arms out like a hawk nailed to a
door to die. Before he could scream one of the others, I suspect it was Andy, punched him in the

throat. I don't know if he did that on purpose or not, but Joel crumpled up and I tossed the rope around his throat. We all wanted this to be quick, but because he had been chopped across his neck he had clamped his hands around it real tight. We needed them out of the way. It's hard to get a big crowd like that to cooperate on something that physical. Just ask six novice carpenters to carry a palette of wood. We were all out grunting and struggling in Joel's front lawn when his wife opened the door. She just stood there and when she saw we were ready to toss the rope around a branch she closed the door to block the innocent stares of her children. She stayed real quiet and sat on the stoop. I stopped what I was doing and the ruckus of the crowd was just like a TV in a bar. I looked at Mrs. Macino and thought of when I used to give her a ride to the PTA meetings when it snowed real bad. She was still young and very pretty, but her face looked dusty, sad. Her eyes didn't betray any sentimentality as she peered through the darkness at her helpless husband. What could he have done? I don't remember who tossed the rope over, but I'd wager she does. I grabbed onto the thick rope, twine splinters breaking beneath my palms. We all heaved and ho'd that rope up all the while poor drunk Macino kicked his legs about. We had to use his belt to tie his hands back and eventually his pants wrapped around his ankles, but by then his kicking was all but done. We all walked quietly away and Mrs. Macino walked silently back inside and closed her door.

"Soon after Joel was buried Judge Carter started going out to the grave. We've all been following him out there at night to see if we can get any answers. We want to see if the Judge will tell us why we done what we done. Every night we go out there, waiting blind on that darned grave and wishing he would learn to talk."

My storyteller showed me to my room shortly after that. I shot my whiskey in a gulp in the hopes it would settle me. I woke up early the next morning and made out before anybody
thought I was gone. I left a small thank-you note and a twenty on the table and walked the 30 minutes back to my car.

The lynch mob still waited quietly around the large black dog, who sat up abruptly as I arrived. I put the key into the door as he limped over to me. I tried to ignore him as I unlocked my car and then I heard the soft rumble of thunder in his stomach and I knew that the mob was staring at me. The first one, Thomas?, was beginning to walk towards me when I yanked open the door and darted into my car locking the doors. I started the car and took off at breakneck speed, putting quick distance between the fireman's grave and me. I looked back only when I was certain I was safe. Through the aid of my rearview mirror I could see the group of them standing in the middle of the road staring at me, with Bowman sitting in the front and center of them. My narrator from the night before approached slowly from behind waving as he took his place along the right hand of the dozen. He glanced down at Bowman and glanced back up at me.
pretty crime; anyone involved in this case is gonna look ugly. Doug blamed the father of the
girl; the girl blamed Doug; the respected wives of both had set to feudin' so bad in the defense of
their husbands that they both went hysterical and left town. The judge was getting tired and
before we knew it Doug had been acquitted. Doug, I remember, stood up and arched his back
and put his County Animal Control jacket on, ready to go back to work for the city. He strutted
out of the courtroom and down the marble corridors of the courthouse. I don't rightly know from
any first hand seein' what happened right then, but from gossip I know that Doug walked out of
the courthouse and was rushed by Bowman. That Labrador was growling and snarling, frothin'
at the mouth like a caged wild pig in heat. Doug was hit solid in the chest after the first leap and
received most of the bites and scratches on his way down the stairs leading to Walnut
Street. By the time his tumble had stopped, so had all his screamin' and Bowman took off before anybody
could get a hold of 'em. When some people, including the girl's lawyer, came up to see if
anything was wrong with Doug, d'ya have any idea what they found? A whole slew of Polaroids
had bust from the seam of his jacket and they was layin' in a fan about his head, soppin' up the
blood that was gushin' from a gash he got on the stairs. I don't need to tell you what the pictures
were of, only that he was hauled right back up into that courtroom and placed back under arrest
to await a civil case of the same crime. Well, by the time that Fourth of July rolled around the
two stories of Bowman Carter had circulated all around town so that those who hadn't heard'em
when they happened knew all about then now, or at least some version of 'em. As part of the
July Fourth celebration, which is always real big and festive, y'understand, the mayor had
decided to place a honorary judgeship on Bowman's pedigree. The story made top news here
and in several other cities in the area. The parade this year was bigger than all of the other years,
'cept maybe after World War II and the Gulf War. News crews from all over showed up just to