Paths

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Jack T. Mullen

Thesis Advisor
Professor Dimoplon

[Signature]

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

26 April 1994

Graduation: 7 May 1994
The urge to write comes upon one all at once, usually in the midst of doing something completely unrelated. It is often just the vaguest notion of what the story should be. Of course, this mere outline does not always just spring into print. Trying to force out a story is nothing other than an impossibility. A good analogy is that of wine making. Once the original idea comes into one's head, it must be allowed to ferment for awhile until it is ready to be tasted. If this is not done, then the wine will not be a very good one.

That was the way with these stories. Part of a story could be written quickly, but then a certain stopping point would be hit, and it would have to be put aside for some time. Then, what should happen next comes to mind, and the point of the story once again becomes clear.

Of course, it is the revision that makes a story much clearer and smoother to read. It is possibly more what is cut out of a story that raises it to the next level than what is written originally. By going back over the story and removing unnecessary sections, its focus becomes clearer, and the theme begins to assert itself.

The first story, "Angry Spirits," is about isolation. The protagonist and the victim in the story are both isolated in their own ways. Only as the events of the story unfolds does
Charlie realizes that he is just as much an outsider as Bill is. Bill cannot help the reason that he feels this, but Charlie is set apart by the way that he rejects the mindset of his community, and even his family.

"Separation," as the title implies is about loss. The main character must face that his ideal has been taken from him. As reality floods in, Will must accept that the expectations of his youth are nothing more than that. Once this occurs, life can continue and false hopes do not rule with such a heavy hand. It is a story about death, both literally and figuratively, and how one is to some to cope with it. This letting go process is carried out both through ritual and by releasing the pain with the mind.

Sean in "Across a Room" is controlled by his desire to find something, it is just that he does not know exactly what. Perhaps it is the search that he enjoys, and to focus upon someone would be to rob him of his direction. The world he creates for himself, at least in his mind, is superior to the world of actuality around him. He is tempted to allow himself to taste the real, but he holds back because within himself is the hope that one day his interior and exterior worlds will merge into one.

Overall, the unifying theme in these stories is a search for self. The characters are all in a state of limbo, and they are attempting to make their way through the maze that their lives are presenting them. Although they may not find their way out of
this maze, it is the attempt that they are making which gives them their humanity.
As the bus bounded along the bumpy road, the suburb drifted by, and the children yelled and screamed at each other amid a hail of paperwads and insults. Charlie saw the bus driver glare at them in the rear view mirror through eyes surrounded with heavy blue eyeshadow. The minute she turned her concentration to the road, she was hit in the back of the head with a wadded up piece of paper. The red of her face told him that the anger was bubbling up inside her. He saw her look up into her mirror again, and then she slammed on the breaks and pitched the kids who were standing over the seats in front of them. One skidded down part of the aisle on his back, while the contents of his bookbag spilled all over the floor. His pen rolled slowly towards the gearshift.

"Will you kids just sit down and shut up!"

This outburst merely quieted everybody down for a moment, but the noise level soon raised. Charlie and his friends sat near the back of the bus, just in front of the area considered the exclusive property of the freshmen who still had the misfortune of not knowing someone who could give them a ride to and from school. The remaining back seats were taken up by the bigger eighth graders.

Although Bill was in the eighth grade he sat in front of Charlie and the other seventh graders in his own seat. He did
not talk very much and seemed to want to keep to himself. His black face made him unique among the rest of the children.

"So what are you doing tonight, Bill? Did you get invited to Janet's big party?" said Charlie.

"Nah. I don't know her too well. She seems nice though. I went and promised my little sister that I would take her around the neighborhood trick-or-treating anyway. I kinda feel like I should, too, because my parents are going to some party that my dad's work is putting on. My sister's all fired up about being a witch this year. Mom made her this costume and everything. She wants to take our cat along with her, but I don't want to mess with it," said Bill.

"I'm not going either. She's made friends with all you eighth graders now. I don't know what I'll end up doing."

Seeing his stop approaching, Charlie got up and called over his shoulder, "Hope your cat doesn't get too heavy as you carry it all around the neighborhood."

As the bus came to a halt, Charlie, David, and Jarrod brushed past the paper skeletons hanging from the bus ceiling and stepped out the door that made such a squeak when the driver opened it with that long handle. Charlie saw her glaring at them all as she usually did. He figured that she must get a kick out of being in such a crappy mood all of the time.

The bus drove on, and exhaust mixed with the wind and the leaves kicked up into the air. The breeze had a bite to it, as the warmth of summer was fast becoming a memory. Charlie thought
about how nobody was going to be swimming in the pond again for quite awhile.

"What should we do tonight?" said Charlie.

"Why don’t you go and mess around with Bill?" said Jarrod sarcastically.

"What’s wrong with Bill?" answered Charlie sharply.

"If you can’t tell by looking at him, I guess you’re just pretty stupid," Jarrod said.

"I don’t care if he’s black. God, you’re such a jerk sometimes," said Charlie.

"Duke it out or knock it off. Aren’t we going to go out trick-or-treating like we always do? Maybe we can steal candy from some little kids who get too far away from their parents," said David.

Jarrod looked at him. "Don’t you get tired of doing that every year? Let’s do something more exciting. My mom bought a whole bunch of toilet paper from the wholesale club, and I don’t think she’d miss it if I stole a few packages."

"Yeah, and we could smash some pumpkins and stuff. We might get some soap to write on people’s windows too," added David.

"Don’t you think we might get caught?" asked Charlie.

"You’re such a chicken. What do you think they’re going to do to you when they catch you? It’s Halloween, for crying out loud. If we don’t do this stuff somebody else will. Me and David are going, so if you want to be a wuss, why don’t you stay home and hand out candy to all the little kids? That’ll be a fun
time," said Jarrod.

"All right, I'm coming. Are you guys dressing up?"

David chuckled. "Why don't we put big white sheets over our heads so everybody can see us? Just put on some dark clothing and say you're going as navy seal or something. Let's all meet at my house around nine."

Charlie left them with a wave and walked down towards the end of the street toward his house. Five jack-o-lanterns awaited him on his front porch and cobwebs blew in and out with the wind in the corners over the front double doors. The hanging man at the end of the porch was the topper of his mother's creations.

He heard his mother in the kitchen as he opened the front door and smelled the odor of pumpkin seeds roasting in the oven.

"Hi Charlie. How was your day at school?"

"It went pretty good, I guess. You kinda went overboard with the decorations on the front porch, didn't ya?"

"I just get in the spirit of these holidays. Are you going to Janet's party tonight? I was talking to her mother today on the phone, and she was telling me all about it."

"Well, I wasn't really invited." Charlie's face winced slightly as he said this. Janet had been his friend since childhood, but she had started to drift away from him lately. Now, she was little more than someone that he said "hello" to in the halls.

"I'm sure that Janet just forgot. She has always been nice to you before. And she's real pretty too. I'll just call her
mother and ask her if it is okay for you to come over."

"Mom, please don't do that. I just don't run with her group of friends. I'm going out with the guys to get candy tonight anyway."

"Suit yourself. I thought you were getting a little old for that though."

Charlie went upstairs to his room and threw his bookbag down on his bed. Unzipping the worn duffle bag quickly, he grabbed the books that he needed for the next day. Halloween took place during the week this year, and Mr. Williams had scheduled a test about World War II and the pogroms in Germany for tomorrow. Although he liked Mr. Williams a great deal, this move did not particularly endear him to Charlie. He was horrified by the plight of the Jews, but still found it hard to concentrate with his plans for Halloween running through his head. Charlie did not see how that old stuff was going to affect him directly anyway. He went over his notes quickly and read what he was supposed to. It didn't seem to stick with him very well, though, but he thought that it would be good enough for the test, because the exam was supposed to be multiple choice and he figured he could fake what he did not know.

Dinner with his parents and older sister went on as it often did. His mother went on and on asking his sister about who was going to be at the dance which was being held at the high school that night. His parents reveled in the way that she was so popular.
His sister, Nancy, crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue at him when their parents were not looking. Charlie could not help allowing a smile to fall on his lips. "So what are you doing tonight, Charlie?"

"Oh, he's going out with those friends of his that are never going to amount to much. I don't know why he doesn't try to work a little harder and tap into the in-crowd like you have Nancy," said his mother.

"But Mom, I don't like the cool crowd that much. Those people are in several of my classes, and we just haven't hit it off that well," said Charlie.

"Don't worry about that Charlie, they'll come around," said his sister. "And if they don't, I wouldn't worry about it."

"Of all people, I didn't think that I would hear this from you," said his mother. "Do you want him to be a social outcast? You should help him out once in awhile and teach him how to fit in a little better. That would mean so much to me, and I'm sure Charlie would appreciate it."

"Will you just leave the poor boy alone?" said his father before he put a piece of pork chop in his mouth. "He's only in seventh grade. I'm sure the social ranking system has not been set in stone just yet."

Charlie's mother glared at his father for a moment. The rest of the meal was spent in near silence, with only an occasional comment to break it. These attempts were unsuccessful, as everyone seemed suddenly eager to finish eating quickly.
Before long the dishes were stacked in the sink, and the members of the family retreated to their own separate corners of the house.

The sky outside grew dark and the wind began to blow harder with chilling force and soon he was waiting under the tree in front of David's house. He had on his father's old navy blue coat, which nearly reached down to his knees. The hood on the coat covered his face to such an extent that he was nearly invisible in the darkness. The only giveaways were his hands and his white tennis shoes which clashed with his dark pants. He kept his hands in his pockets as protection against the cold. A dark pillowcase was hanging from his belt, so that his mom might better believe that he really was going trick-or-treating.

Jarrod and David came out the garage door together. They were dressed in dark clothing like Charlie. David and Jarrod each carried a back pack full of the implements of destruction that would make the evening exciting.

"First, let's go near the entrance of the neighborhood and have some fun with the cars coming by," said Jarrod.

Once there, they positioned themselves in the woods near the side of the bridge that crossed over the creek. Jarrod took a stuffed rabbit that looked lifelike enough for their purposes out of his bag and tied fishing line around its neck. Then, he threw it to the opposite side of the road.

Jarrod waited until a car came driving into the neighborhood at a good clip. Then he pulled the rabbit across the road. The
car came to a halt with a skid and then drove on. The driver laughed audibly and sped off into the night after obviously recognizing the prank. Charlie imagined that such things had been done a few times before. He noted the fakeness of the stuffed animal as it had crossed the road.

The next driver was not so understanding. It was David’s turn, and he was just a little slow in pulling the fishing line. The car nearly lost control in its effort to avoid the fluff filled mass, which became floating bits of stuffing as the front tire of the car skidded over it. The driver got out of his car and ran down the hill by the road towards the hiding kids.

Charlie did not wait for the man to catch him. When he heard that car door open, he was on his feet and running. He was not alone in this venture.

"Come back here you damn kids! I’ll beat the living shit out of you! Trying to make me wreck my new car."

Charlie heard the crashing footsteps grow louder behind him, so he ran all the faster. Then he heard a crunch as the man tripped over a dry exposed root and fell with a thud. The other two caught up with him and they ran on further until they were well out of harm’s way. The adrenaline raced through Charlie’s veins.

"Let’s go and tepee Janet’s house now. We should be able to have a little fun at her party. We’ll just show up," said David.

They approached her house stealthfully. This one would be difficult to do properly without detection. They went to the
backyard first and flung the toilet paper high into the trees. The long strands trailed eerily into the breeze.

Charlie could see into the family room as he rounded the side of the house. He searched for Janet, but he could not see her in the sea of masks present.

The toilet paper that was too high for anybody to reach would grace the tops of the trees around the house for a good long while, until wind and the rain brought it down. The job was almost done, when Jarrod happened to step in front of the garage door, which was equipped with a motion sensing lamp. Its light flooded the front yard and exposed the miscreants.

They ran away from the house quickly. Charlie did not think that they had not been recognized, but he did not want to make Janet mad at him.

Once they were safely out of range, they slowed down and began to laugh. The multitudinous ghostly strands were illuminated by the flood lights. The expedition had been a success. Charlie figured that everyone at the junior high would know who had perpetrated the act within a week because it would just be too hard to keep the other two from saying anything. To keep such an act of daring a secret would seem such a waste. He would try to avoid Janet’s eye for awhile, but he felt a certain amount of glee about what they had done in spite of himself.

Jarrod grinned at them and said, "We’ve still got the good stuff left. Dad said that we should be sure and hit the Smith’s house hard. Those niggers shouldn’t be moving into our town, let
alone our neighborhood. It’ll bring down the property value. They should go back and live with their own kind."

"But that’s Bill’s house. We shouldn’t mess it up too bad. He’s a pretty nice guy," said Charlie.

"Come on, let’s scare them a little or at least piss them off real good," said David. "My dad doesn’t like them either."

For the assault on the Smith house, Jarrod had a little different arsenal. A couple cartons of eggs and some spray paint were in his bag.

They stood back in bushes along the property line and hurled the eggs at the house. The eggs hit the paint on the side of the house with a dull smack and ran down in a widening stream of goo. The paint would bear the mark of that night until it was covered over with a new layer. The eggs would slowly eat their way into it and leave discolored marks.

For some reason, Charlie’s throwing arm didn’t seem to be working that well. His eggs would either fall short or he would miss completely.

"If you are going to be such a pansy, then we’ll finish off the rest of your eggs for you," whispered Jarrod.

Once that phase of the assault was finished, they watched the house. Nothing happened. There was one light on in the house, but it was as if no one was home.

Jarrod and David took out the spray paint.

"Come on guys. That’s going to be a pain to clean up," said Charlie.
"We didn’t think you’d be up to it," said Jarrod. "That’s why it’s your job to smash the pumpkins on the porch."

With devilish glee, the pair sprayed neon orange paint all over the front of the house, while Charlie watched with apprehension. He started to leave, but he was drawn back to the pumpkins on the front porch. He picked one up and half-heatedly dropped it to the ground. It hit with a thrump, and the bottom of it collapsed.

"Not like that," Jarrod said as he ran up. "Like this."

Jarrod took one of the three remaining gourds and threw it as hard as he could onto the front porch, and it exploded. He took the biggest of them and heaved it at the picture window off the front of the house. Charlie sickened as the glass collapsed with the weight. He could see the shattered glass and the pieces of fruit flesh lying all over the dining room floor in the house.

"Now it’s your turn." Jarrod handed him the last projectile.

"Fuck you." He threw the pumpkin at Jarrod’s chest as hard as he could. Jarrod partially caught it, but the side of it did collapse, leaving damp smears all over the front of his coat.

Jarrod dived at him, and the two fell into a writhing heap on the front lawn, more of a wrestling match than a fight. Neither one of them would give up nor gained any headway. Charlie began to feel the burning in his arms, and his breathing was labored.

"Let’s get out of here!" David called from the side of the house. With those words, he vanished, abandoning his painting.
The red and blue flashing lights filled Charlie's consciousness. Charlie was no longer so much concerned with Jarrod as with what the consequences of those lights would be. The car had pulled up on them quietly, and had only turned on the lights when they were in sight. He figured the sound of breaking glass had caused one of the neighbors to make a phone call.

The door of the car quickly opened, and the officer ran out towards them.

"You two stand up. Move over by the car."

The urge to run was strong in Charlie, but neither he nor Jarrod risked running. Charlie kept seeing images of getting clubbed from behind by a nightstick or having his legs shot out from under him like in all the cop movies.

"You boys are in big trouble. If the folks that live here don't press charges, you're still going to have a big bill to foot to pay for those damages."

The boys found themselves pushed up against the side of the squad car.

"Depending on your parents, you might even get to spend the evening in jail. Doesn't that sound nice? Plus you will get to experience the local court system. I've had a little fun in my time on Halloween, but I think that you went too far tonight. You got a beef against the people who live here?"

A voice rang out from behind them a few moments later.

"What happened to my house?"

Bill had returned from taking his little sister out trick-
or-treating. She hid behind her brother's legs.

"This is your house?"

"Yes, officer. Did these guys do this to my house?"

The officer eyed him closely. The hint of a smile came to his lips. "No, I don't think so. They were just passing by when I got here. The guys who did it got away. I had heard that you folks moved in over here, but I wasn't sure where. You shouldn't get too excited about this kind of stuff happening. Your kind is just going to have to accept that kind of thing in this town."

"What did you say?" said Bill.

Charlie saw the glint of anger in the boy's eyes. He also saw pain.

"Don't get smart with me boy. You don't want to have the law angry with you now, do you? Why don't you boys run along now so I can fill out a report on this. Thanks for your help. It's too bad that you couldn't identify whoever it was that made this mess."

Charlie and Jarrod looked at each other in surprise and then went their separate ways without a word. Charlie was glad that Jarrod had not tried to walk with him on the way towards his house, but had taken a shortcut. He did not think that he could stand being near him just now without trying to resume their fight. He could not get the hurt look in Bill's eyes out of his mind. He hoped that Bill had not recognized him, but did not know how the boy could have helped it. Shame burned his cheeks as he walked home.
He quietly entered his house and went to his room. He had said a quick hello to his parents when he came in, but they were preoccupied with the horror movie marathon on HBO. He was eager to get to bed and put the day behind him. The past few hours seemed unreal to him, and he thought that by getting some sleep that he could calm some of the demons that were running around in his head.

Sleep did not come, however, as his thoughts kept returning to Bill, and they tried to fight against the injustice of it all. He did not want to face him the next day. Even though he had done little more than stand by and watch what was happening, he felt as guilty as if he had thrown the pumpkin through the window. For a long while, his consciousness resided in that halfway phase between being asleep and awake. His bed did not comply either, as whatever position he managed to get into made him more uncomfortable. When he finally did manage to get a few hours of sleep in the small hours of the morning, his dreams were filled with flashing lights and the sound of breaking glass.

The next morning, he forced himself to get dressed, grab a piece of toast out of the toaster as he left the house, and walk down to the end of the street where the bus would pick him up. He had thought of asking his mother for a ride to school, but he could not think of an adequate excuse which would have convinced her to do such a thing. The bus stopped, just as it had done every other morning all year, and he took his accustomed seat. Jarrod and David sat by themselves in a seat across the aisle and
did not even acknowledge his presence.

Then came the part of the ride that Charlie had been dreading. The bus stopped in front of Bill’s house. Bill got onto the bus with quiet dignity and sat in the first seat. There were a few snickers from those who were a little bolder, but for the most part, the bus was unusually silent. The house, although it did not suffer any damage that could not be fixed with some paint and some new glass, looked as if it had been though a war the previous evening. The jagged hole in the front window had a board behind it. The "GO TO HELL NIGGERS" that had been spray-painted in big neon letters on the side of the house was partially covered over with black spray-paint. It was as good a job of cover up that could have been done in the dark with a flashlight. Most of the bits of pumpkin had been cleared away.

Charlie hung his head in shame at the sight of it. The bus ride went on without end for him that morning. Charlie felt the shun of his "friends," and yet he was too afraid to go and talk with Bill. He saw Bill sitting in the front seat staring out the window, as if in disbelief, until the bus made its stop at the junior high.

During his test that day in History class, Charlie kept seeing visions of the previous nights escapades while he was answering the questions. His few hours of sleep kept him from concentrating fully on his test, and the pumpkin shattering the window weighed down upon his mind. A dropped book startled him enough to remove the visions from his head, and this allowed to
make his way through the numbing series of answers. He filled in the bubble with his pencil for each of the questions.
William Reed walked down the aisle of the K-mart and looked for the automotive section. The store had been enlarged and everything inside rearranged since he had left town for fall semester at the university. Finding it finally in the very back corner of the store after having to go through a maze of toys and discount intimate apparel for the "woman with a sturdier figure," he snagged the several quarts of motor oil and the oil filter that he had been looking for.

On his way out of the store, he managed to see one of guys with whom he had gone to high school. Michael Goran had never been especially close to William, but they had managed to spend a good deal of time together through high school, with their mutual friends, as well the time they spent together on the soccer team.

"Hi Michael. I see that they have you working hard in this dump."

"Will? I haven't seen you for quite awhile. You kinda dropped out of sight from everybody didn't you? And what's with the beard? Nobody's going to recognize you."

"It's hard to have time to keep in contact with all of you. I've been real busy up at the university. The beard is my disguise against running into all of you old folks again."

"Well this K-mart uniform is my disguise so that nobody thinks I am rich. This blasted place has been my home all
semester when I am not in the classroom over at the community college."

"How is it over there?"

"It's not too bad. The only thing that I hate is that it is like going to high school here in Greensville again, because so many from our class are going there. I'll bet you're glad you got away, aren't you?"

"It is kind of nice, just from the standpoint that I get to meet a lot of new people. Do you ever see Cassie around?" he said as he shifted his weight over to his left side.

"Well I've just seen her around a couple of times. She was with her boyfriend of course, so don't get any of those crazy ideas that you have always had about her, but she still doesn't look too bad."

Will winced slightly at the mention of her boyfriend, but he tried to keep from making this too noticeable. "There is nobody to match her on campus. Of course, her taste in boyfriends is questionable in my opinion."

"Let's see, who do you think would be a better choice for her? She never even gave you a second glance all through high school. God, I remember when you called her and asked her out and she said 'maybe' or something like that. Bet you felt a little silly when she never followed through," he said with a smile on his face.

"Ah well, for a couple of days, although admittedly deluded, I thought I was going to have the opportunity to be with my
ideal, if only for one evening. Of course, I probably would have
been so nervous that she wouldn't have been overly impressed with
me anyway. It does grate on me sometimes that she never gave me
a chance, though."

"I am sure that you are having a better go of it than I am
here. Usually the only girls I run across are still in high
school. Are you playing any soccer now on campus, Will?"

"Nope. I hung up my cleats in high school. Didn't you ever
get tired of playing that game? We were nearly playing year
round for a few years there. I don't want to have somebody
playing the role of coach over me anymore."

"There's my boss coming this way. Not that this is the best
job in the world, but it's better than nothing. Give me a call
sometime if you want. It was good seeing you."

"You too."

Michael waved over his shoulder, cut down a side aisle and
went off to start restocking the shelves. It felt odd for Will
to run into people that he hadn't seen for so long. His absence
had made him a stranger to those who had once been his intimates.

He lugged the carton with the oil and the filter in it up to
the check out counter. Somehow, the cashier managed to make the
his bill come out so that he ended up with the maximum amount of
loose change in his pocket. On his way out to the parking lot,
he saw the parents of one of his old friends, but he managed to
avoid recognition, as the evening sky was starting to darken
slightly and he did not give them any direct eye contact. Going
down memory lane once was more than enough for one evening. The chill air froze his breath, and a cloud of vapor appeared in front of him.

Getting into his car and exiting the parking lot, he noticed the new drug store which had taken over the card shop since he had last driven through here. The Popeye’s Fried Chicken restaurant—just a shell with grand-opening signs proclaiming that in one week, the best chicken in all the land would be served—had sprung to life since Thanksgiving break. He did not notice any other grand changes in the scenery on the rest of his drive home.

The place still felt strange to him though. He never had exactly been at ease in the town. There was just that undercurrent around that let him know he was not quite the typical town resident. He could not exactly pin it down. The place just never allowed him to feel at ease. He did not believe himself to be the only one, however. Those of his friends that were able, managed to get as far away as they could, either by going away to school or by getting a job in a different area.

Will hated to get his hair cut in the town, because that would mean having to spend twenty minutes in what was more or less a glass bubble. Being whirled around in those spinning chairs in front of all those strange or sometimes not so strange faces filled him with unease. And then there was trying to converse with the barber. What exactly it was he was supposed to say to her would always be a mystery to him. It did not matter
who the hair cutter was, as he never went to the same one twice. The person operating the scissors always seemed to expect some kind of conversation.

The other patrons never made much of a big deal about it and gabbed away, but this always presented a problem for him. After a cursory hello, he would often just sit in the chair and let his mind wander. He thought that perhaps he was one of those introverts that he had heard about in psychology class, but he was not really sure. In his mind, he found it to be silly to wrack his brain trying to think up something to say to the person cutting his hair. Usually the only topic which held any interest was the weather. If he came in with his heavy coat on and hung it up on one of those old metal coat trees, the barber would usually make some comment about how cold it was outside, and when it was raining, about how wet it was. After this, there was often a lull that became slightly uncomfortable until Will decided that too much time had passed, and then he did not trouble himself with it anymore.

One thing that he particularly hated was the potential to be given a severely messed up haircut. He always managed to point out to the barber how he should not cut his hair too close near the crown because if this was done, then it would stick up annoyingly for a couple of weeks. The worst, however, is when the barber takes it into his mind to take off the sideburns completely. Nowhere else but in the suburb of Greensville can a person find a hair cutting technician who decides to cut side-
burns to the level of the top of one's ear without even asking. To Will, it was absurd to do this, because obviously if a person has sideburns, and not even the obnoxiously long ones either which sometimes beg to be trimmed up, perhaps he would like to keep them. Will figured such an attack was in retaliation for his lack of conversation. In any case, he tried to always remember to run through what should and should not be done to his hair very carefully with the hair personnel before allowing them to continue. He never enjoyed that period of stupid looking hair following a barber's ravages before the damaged areas would grow back in and look somewhat normal.

It was for this reason that he tried to get his hair cut in the city near his campus. There, he was just another student among a faceless horde, and he did not feel all the eyes bearing down on him. To save money, he also learned how to trim up his own hair, not that this looked superior to anything that a bad barber could do. With this, he could manage to stretch a haircut out over maybe ten weeks or so. Although it looked progressively worse, it would usually not ever get to the point to where it just looked excessively bad.

Sometimes he thought that the reason he felt uneasy about being out in his hometown was that there was always the threat he would run into Cassie. He also wanted to run into her, but when this happened, he also had the distinct feeling that she had him in her power once again. Seeing her brought his desire for her back into the front of his mind.
He clearly remembered the first time that he truly noticed her. She caught his eye in his freshman year of high school in his English course. She was new to the school, so he did not really pay much attention to her right off. She wore glasses that were too big for her face, and she sat in the back of the classroom. Later, he could not figure out how he managed to miss her for so long, but he must have made it through at least a six week grading period before she became the focal point of his life at school.

He distinctly remembered that it was *Great Expectations* the class was reading when his fixation with her first began. The reason that he remembered this was because he immediately equated her with Estella in the novel. He did not exactly know why he did this at the time, but perhaps it was just a slight precognition on his part. All of a sudden, that girl in the back of the classroom leaped out at him and overwhelmed him with her beauty. She had a little longer than shoulder length hair, big blue eyes, and a lovely face. He came to the conclusion that it was her eyes which drew him to her. That, and the way her thin nose would wrinkle up when she laughed. He so longed to reach out and touch her when he was near her, but he always managed to hold back. Cassie also impressed him by the way she had some awareness of what was going on in the classroom and did not have that dumb stare many of his other classmates managed all the time. She was beautiful and free from any blemish, and he was still going through the ravages and rites of passage of puberty.
Although he had long since began to sprout hair on his face, the acne still managed to spring forth on his face. It was not a terrible case, just bad enough to make him feel ill at ease and uncomfortable. In all the years that he shared the halls of the high school with her, he never once remembered her as having one blemish. If she did, he managed to effectively block it from his mind, for to hold her accountable for this would something akin to blasphemy for him.

In any event, he watched her from afar for nearly four years, and only got up the courage to make any approach to her once. It happened right after his sophomore year had been completed. Filled with the optimism which follows the holding of the set of keys to one’s own car, even if it is a beat-up old Chevy with an inherent desire to burn oil quickly, he found himself given just enough encouragement to dream. Just by luck, he had gone into Wendy’s to pick up something to eat. Usually he would have gone through the pick-up window, but he was in a hurry and the line of cars was just too long outside. Upon entering, he saw her on her way out. She was with a couple of her friends, but he was so caught up in her that he could never really remem­ber who they were. In any event, she managed to smile at him so prettily, and ask how he was with such interest that he felt con­vinced she had actually noticed him.

When the Wendy’s sandwich genius managed to douse his sandwich in the mayonnaise which he specifically requested not to be on his hamburger, he did not really care. How was that boy
supposed to know that cheese, lots of ketchup, and no mayo means not to put any mayonnaise on there?

After a few days of tortured thought, he finally got it into his mind that he would give her a call and see if she would like to go out to dinner. The blood coursed through his body at twice its normal speed at the bidding of his adrenaline as he picked up the phone. He rehearsed his statements and tried to calm himself down before he called. He must have dialed her number and then hung-up a half dozen times before he finally allowed the call to go through. After clumsily asking if Cassie was there, he got the reply that she was gone for the evening and then he was asked if he would like to leave a message. He declined this and hung up the phone in something like relief. At least he could keep his hopes alive for a few more days.

When he did finally reach her she avoided the question and asked him to call her back later in the week. Most people would get the message that she was politely telling him to get lost, but our Will was not in the mood to pay attention to any such request. With the finesse of a sumo wrestler in a waltzing contest, he was finally able to figure out in subsequent phone calls that she had just started dating a new boyfriend and that she was off-limits to anyone else. Or at least to him. At this, he felt the futility of his conquest, but he was still her faithful admirer. And this was how things stood throughout the rest of his high school career. All the other girls, in his opinion, were inferior to her, so he would rarely ask them out.
He used her as a kind of measuring stick to make comparisons with other women.

He was sure she was aware of his fascination for her, but he was not alone in his aim. Of course no one else had quite as much dedication to this task. He did not quite realize how obvious he was in his devotion until he happened to remove a small piece of paper that had managed to get into her hair while he was sitting behind her in second year Algebra. He did it so carefully that Cassie was not even aware that it had happened. The girl sitting beside him watched it all and then said, "Do you have to make it so clear to everyone that you are in love with her?"

He gave her a stupid smile and went back to trying to take notes again from the dreadfully dull teacher. Will always managed to try to hear all he could about her in the hopes that she would one day break up with her boyfriend, and then perhaps he could then have her to himself, but this never happened.

After he graduated from high school, Will did not hear anymore about her, and he figured that this was probably the best thing, because nothing caused him to become more frustrated than hearing about the prize he could not have.

He parked his car in the driveway in front of his house and walked in the side door with the sack full of car maintenance products under his arm. He left the sack in the garage and walked into the house. His brother had made it back from high school for the day and he was goofing around in the kitchen
making himself a sandwich.

"Are you enjoying your vacation?" asked Eric as he spread an unbelievably large glob of peanut butter onto a slice of bread, and then dumped a more than ample supply of strawberry jam on top of it.

"Of course I am. Too bad little brother has to stay in school an extra week before he's let out now isn't it?"

"Just rub in the salt. Hey, did you hear the news about the car accident?" With this, he took a large bite from his sandwich and chewed it with relish.

"No, what happened? I'll bet that one of your friends managed to get himself rear-ended on the way into school or something, didn't he?"

"Not today. Actually, I think that it was someone that went to school with you. Her next door neighbor is in my third hour geometry class, and he said that she slammed her car into a telephone pole late last night. Her last name was Reynolds or something like that."

"The girl's name wasn't Cassie was it? I graduated with two girls who were named Reynolds," he said with decided apprehension.

"Yeah, that's the one. Cassie. Did you know very well?"

"Well enough, I suppose. How bad is she hurt?" He leaned back against the kitchen table.

"She's dead. She wasn't wearing a seatbelt or anything. John said the police figured she just hit a patch of ice or
something which sent her flying off the road. I guess she was quite a mess."

"No shit," he said, as he walked out of the kitchen.

All he could think about was how much time he had spent pondering her over the years. Now all that was left of her was a mutilated corpse. His ridiculous hopes of reuniting with her someday were now utterly out of reach.

He wondered if she had really slipped upon the ice or if she had slammed into that tree on purpose. Of course, there was no real way to tell, but it still nagged at him. Her boyfriend was never rumored to have been that nice of a guy, but Will had no first hand experience with him. Maybe her boyfriend had just stopped putting her on a pedestal, like he imagined she had been at one time. Although Will could not comprehend how, her beau might even have tired of her.

In any event, he did not see why she would have killed herself. To him, she was perfection, and to see perfection destroyed hurt him more than anything. Enough reality had managed to seep into his skull to let him know that he was probably not going to sweep her off her feet, but not having that option at all hit him hard.

At this, he glanced up into the mirror on the dresser in room and got a look at the beard that covered his face. Keeping the thing suddenly seemed a silly thing to do. It was kind of a pain for him to keep it trimmed up. Plus, he still had to shave his neck most every day anyway in order to keep from looking like
a behemoth.

He went into the bathroom and took out his scissors and began to go to work reducing his beard to stubble. The clumps of hair fell into the sink, onto the counter, and onto the floor. The hair descended with deliberate slowness, gradually spreading out on its downward journey making an annoying mess. The massacred beard which remained on his face made him look very much like one of those beggars in the city who do not have access to a razor very often.

After cleaning up what he could of the scattered hairs and placing them in the wastebasket or washing them down the sink, he began on the next phase of the removal. He made the sure that the water was nice and hot and then dipped a washcloth into the water. The water was almost too hot to touch. As he wrung the water out of the cloth, he felt that pain in his hands one feels after coming into contact with water that is very hot, but not quite hot enough to actually burn one.

He then put the steaming cloth on his face and allowed the moisture to soak into his face. He did this a couple more times and then squirted a large white dome of shaving cream into his palm from the nozzle of the red and white can. He applied this mound of foam all over his face. He could still see some of the hairs on his face trying to clear the surface of the creamy mask. With his razor, he started off by clearing away the light stubble on his neck, where the beard had not been allowed to establish itself. Then he ran the head of the razor under the water faucet
and watched the little bits of dark stubble swirl towards the drain.

Once he had done this, he started to stroke the coarser beard stubble with the blade. This was not a seamless act, as the blade would catch upon the longer hairs and pull the skin up. When he was not careful, this would result in a nice little cut. By the time that he had completed his task, Will looked as if he were an actor in one of those hack and slash horror films. Although he had only managed to nick himself a couple of times, these had put forth a good deal of blood. At least it looked like a good deal of blood. Because his face was wet, the blood would fan out and make the cuts look much worse than they really were. Those few drops of blood that did make it down his face fell into the sink where they contrasted with its whiteness and were carried around in the slow moving current from the faucet into the drain. Once he gave his face a good washing and smoothed some after shave lotion over the ravaged area, he appeared more or less human once again.

The face in the mirror looked foreign to him. He had not seen exposed, as it was, for about ten weeks. When he ran his hand over his chin, the smoothness did not register to his touch as a familiar sensation. The mass of hair in the wastebasket appeared to be lost and out of place. A part of him had been removed.

The first thing his brother did when he saw him was to comment on this change.
"Why very observant of you, Eric. I’m glad to see that they are teaching you something at that marvelous teaching institution here in Greensville."

"What did you go and shave it off for? You went and left us at the university for such long stretches, and then I somewhat got used to the darn thing and then you cut it off."

"I did it just to annoy you. That and to stop having everybody comment on it all the time. If I had known that was going to happen, I would not have grown it out in the first place."

Will debated about whether or not he should go to the funeral home to see the body. He kind of wanted to go, but he talked himself out of it. How was he supposed to introduce himself to the mourning family. "Oh, hi. I’m that one kid who tried to ask out your daughter a few years ago. I can’t say I knew her very well, but I just wanted to stop by and see her one last time."

He knew that he could come up with something better than that, but he did not think he should go and see her. Besides, if what his brother told him was true about her being a mess, either the casket would be closed or she would be so heavily made over he would hardly recognize her. He decided it would be best for him to keep the picture he had of her in his mind as his last view of her.

Just in driving through town on his way to work over his Christmas break, he noticed where it was that she was buried.
There was only one funeral in town during the window when she would be buried, and he marked the spot in his mind.

Towards the end of his break, he went to the flower shop and purchased her a single red rose. The lady who sold it to him asked him if he had a date and was going to give it to some lovely creature. "Something like that," he told her. She gave him an odd stare after he said this.

Will drove his car off the street and onto those small one lane roads that ran throughout the cemetery. He stopped behind her barren grave. The new-fallen snow barely covered the newly disturbed earth, which had dried out brown sod over where the neatly spaded hole had been. Her headstone was yet to be erected.

He placed the flower on the ground in the middle of the spaded off area. The rose was out of place in the desolate surroundings. Before he went back to his car, he took one last look at the lonely sight.

The petals of the flower waivered in the chilly breeze. The flower itself began to close up in the cold air and the fleeting nature of the light as evening drew near. It was that grey light which accompanies most cold winter days. Sometimes such lighting makes one yearn for the sun.
Across a Room

The pub was reasonably busy for a Saturday night. Some of the customers amused themselves by playing pool, the avid fans were cluster around the baseball game on the large television, and the small wooden dancefloor in the back by the jukebox had a few couples dancing on it. The bar itself had the traditional barstools in front of the long wooden counter, which gave a good view of the many libations the pub had to offer. The draft dispenser was even the old fashioned kind with the long white handles. The Corner Pub had not changed much since it had opened about twenty years before.

The door opened and two young men came in. They went up to the bar and ordered a couple of drafts.

"Can I see your IDs, guys?" said the bartender.

"We've been in here a few times before. Why do you always have to check our licenses?" said Alan.

"Just the rules. You all here to watch the baseball game tonight? The league championships are getting close now," she said.

"You got it. That and maybe I can win some money off of ole Sean here if he'll play me a little pool later," said Alan.

"Fat chance of that. Wasn't it you who paid off my tab a couple of weekends ago? I seem to remember sneaking that cue ball through a couple of stripers and kissing the eight so it
fell into the hole."

"Ah, you were just lucky. I'd like to see you make that shot again," claimed Alan as he slapped Sean on the back.

"Well, here you go guys. I'll leave you two to reminisce. I gotta go take care of Mr. Franklin over there. A girl has to earn her tips and all," she said with a practiced smile as she shuffled down to the other end of the bar.

"I'm sure we'll be back to see you later," said Alan with a wink.

They watched most of the game, but in the eighth inning, the pitching of the visiting team sharply declined, and before the side was retired, five runs were scored.

"Why does your team always end up winning? I'm not going to sit around and wait for any miracles tonight. Their batting just isn't good enough tonight to come up with six runs," said Sean.

"I guess you're telling me that it is time to mosey over to the tables. Why don't you grab another beer on the way over? I don't want you to give you the advantage of being able to shoot that straight."

"I don't mind if I do. You'll be taking care of my tab for me later anyway."

"Aren't you the cocky one tonight. If you are feeling so confident, why don't you go over and have a chat with that lady you've been eyeing all evening. I don't think you've seen that much of the game," he said as he tilted his head in the direction of the girl in the white blouse sitting at the far table sur-
rounded by a five other people.

Knowing exactly where Alan was directing his gaze, he deliberately looked elsewhere. "I think I’ll just leave the poor girl alone and admire her from afar. Don’t want to scare her off or anything."

As he walked past her on the way to the pool tables, Sean glanced her way, and when he caught her eye, he quickly looked away. Grinning at having been discovered, he made an effort to keep from looking at her. He did not want her to come to the conclusion that he was some kind of leering weirdo. Once he and Alan started to play, he began to sense that a pair of eyes was bearing down on him. Not wanting to acknowledge this, he played with increased concentration. At least he tried to play with increased concentration. In reality, the added attention he was being given while he played only aided him in placing the cue ball in the side pocket.

The pool games wore on and the bar tab added up. Sean liked the way that the pool was free here. This meant, of course, the tables would usually have a queue of people eager to take over. The more games they played, the longer the games took.

"My shots just don’t seem to go in anymore, do they?"

"Alan, your shots never do go in, and mine have been banking early all evening. Since we’re pretty much even, why don’t we turn our sticks over to somebody else."

It did not take long for another game to start up after they had left their equipment on the surface of the green felt.
Alan went up to the bar to make a last round of orders for the pair. When the drinks came out, Judy gave him a hopeful look after he had paid.

Leaning towards him with her elbows on the bar, she said, "Listen darlin, I know that you love me so much that you are gonna let me keep all the change from that ten, aren’t you? Looks like that would pretty well clean out your wallet, but haven’t I been at your beck and call all evening long?"

Taking most of his change from her hand, he said, "I’m not all that rich. What would your boss say if he knew that you were taking advantage of your poor half-drunk student customers? Take a buck or two out if you want, but just remember that I won’t be eating anything for a few days if you do."

"Whatever you say. I wouldn’t want you boys to stop coming round. Of course, it’s even better when you bring more of your friends along with you, like you have when you’ve been in here before. You know how much I hate having extra people in here to buy drinks from me. Have a good night now."

"You too," he said as he left her with a silly drunken smile and went over to Sean. He handed Sean his drink and they downed about half of them after clinking their glasses together. The pale beer rippled around in the glasses as they brought them down.

"I think that I must go take a piss, old pal. Beer runs through me pretty quick you know. I don’t want to see the level of that glass diminished when I return," said Sean.
"Do you honestly think I would do such a thing?"

"Yes, but I'm not going to take a beer glass into the men's room and try to balance it upon the top of a urinal."

Sean went off to enjoy the ritual of waiting in an over‐crowded restroom in order to use the one available toilet that was not out of order. He figured the guy who owned the pub must be the same man who owned his and Alan's apartment. Both were so quick to make repairs. He remembered this restroom had the same problem the first time he had come into the bar. The sole usable receptacle just managed to rotate on each new visit.

While he waited, he was able to enjoy the spectacle the nearly incoherent man on the floor was making. The man had apparently taken advantage of the evening's special on tequila shots. Sean just wanted to get out of there before the ill look on the man's face translated into a rather nasty mess. Washing his hands in the grungy sink and realizing too late the paper towel dispenser had been out of reinforcements for hours, he wiped his hands on his faded blue jeans. With this, he escaped, but he was still able to hear faint retching noises, as the charming man cleaned out his system.

Upon his return, Sean was greeted by Alan, who just happened to be in a conversation with the young lady whom Sean had been eyeing.

"Hi Sean. Look who just happened to walk over here. Her name is Audrey."

Sean glanced at her now somewhat familiar green eyes and
gave her a smile. Then he allowed himself to view her lovely face and shoulder length auburn hair.

"How are you Audrey? Was old Alan here in one of your classes or did he just come up and introduce himself?"

"Oh he just came up and introduced himself. Actually, we kind of met halfway. He said he had this friend who was just dying to meet me. The group I came with over there is just about to leave, but I was able to convince them that could wait around for just a few moments until you got back. Alan was very insistent that I should meet you."

"Well it was nice to meet you, and oh so nice of Alan to make a point of introducing us."

"I just thought that I would help you out a little bit. You didn't seem too motivated to make your way over to her," said Alan with a grin.

"Alan enjoys setting me up in stressful situations. I think that it is his hobby. Sorry if ogled you too much this evening. Sometimes I do that," said Sean.

"Oh that's all right. I didn't mind that much. You could have just come over if you wanted. Or you could have done the old standby of sending me over a drink."

While they were talking, Alan managed to slip away to the television by the bar. When Alan saw Sean glaring over at him, he started to laugh.

Sean's weariness began to press down on him, so he said goodbye to Audrey and tucked her phone number into the pocket of
his jeans.

When Sean and Alan made their way out of the bar and into the crisp air of the aging autumn, they walked in silence for a time. Their footsteps echoed off the sidewalk onto the various buildings in the vicinity: the gift shop, the drug store, and the deserted ice cream shop.

Alan finally broke the silence. "Well, did I do a good job for you in there or what?"

"Sure, she was real nice."

"You did get her phone number, didn’t you? I do hope you had enough sense to get it."

"I don’t know how much credit I can take for it, but she did write it down quickly on one of bar napkins and hand it to me before we left. The thing was a little damp with water or beer, but I think it’ll at least be decipherable when I get home."

He took the crumpled napkin from his pocket just to prove he had it in his possession.

"Why don’t you give her a ring tomorrow?"

"Oh, I don’t know about that. There’s that other girl in my English class I’ve been thinking about asking out."

"You’ve been telling me about her all semester. I can’t imagine that she could be any nicer or prettier than that girl tonight. At least give her a call."

Scuffing his tennis shoe on the sidewalk, he said, "I don’t know. We didn’t really talk all that much. We probably don’t have all that much in common. This way she’ll stay beautiful in
my mind, and I won’t have to discover that she has an annoying laugh or the intelligence of a fire hydrant."

"Well, if that’s the way you’re going to be, maybe you should let me have that phone number."

"Oh, if I see her around, I’ll buy her a cup of coffee or something, since we have been so eloquently and formally introduced."

Alan allowed an exasperated look to cover his face. "Sure you will. You’ll make yourself scarce if you see her around. What would you do if I told you she liked jazz and Charles Dickens’ novels too?"

"I’d say you must have played twenty questions with her the moment you met her, or you are just saying that to torture me."

"Well that’s just what I did, so why don’t you call her up and quiz her on all those paperbacks you have mounded up in your room?"

Sean stopped and looked back down the street towards the pub. He looked closely, but did not manage to see any people except for one couple getting into the Dodge parked a couple blocks away.

Letting out a sigh, Sean said, "You should’ve told me sooner. I could have spent a little longer talking to her if that was the case. That is a somewhat rare combination to find nowadays."

"If you only would have volunteered to clean up that mess we have piling up in our kitchen sink this week, I just might have,
but I think the thought of scraping all that nasty old food off those plates just made me forget."

"I guess I'll just have to let those dishes pile up for you a little longer. It is your turn to mess with them. After you left those bean curds in the bottom of the sink for me last week, if you think that I am going to let you off, you have gone mad." He pushed Alan off the sidewalk and they both laughed as he stumbled up into somebody's front yard.

Once back in their apartment, they went off to their bedrooms and collapsed after the long evening. Sean threw his clothes over a chair and put on his old tee-shirt and shorts. Climbing into bed, he was thrilled to hear the upstairs neighbors had just started up their radio at high volume. After a little while, the light hanging from his ceiling began to swing slowly back and forth to the pounding of feet dancing. He looked over at his clock and saw it was 3:08 in the morning. Putting his pillow over his head, he allowed exhaustion to sweep over him.

Awaking to the light sneaking around the corner of his blinds, he felt a slight headache. Walking into the kitchen and finding to his satisfaction that no cockroaches were crawling about, he opened the refrigerator and got himself a glass of milk. He downed some of it and then had a bowl of cereal to go with it. Raisin Bran makes a great brunch item. His head began to clear a little bit, so he took a quick shower and then hefted the clothes basket, which was threatening to create an avalanche in his closet, down to the laundry room.
It was not quite a laundry room, but more of a good-sized hall closet with a washer and dryer in it. He and Alan had been thrilled to find an apartment with these machines in it, because they would not have to cart their dirty clothes down to the local laundry mat, that house of torture for shirts with buttons. Sean always dreaded hearing the plastic clink, a button hitting the metal bottom of the washing machine, as he was pulling his clothes out.

Of course, the joy of having in-house laundry service was tempered somewhat by the fact the landlord was so cheap he had put in coin operated machines. If it were not so convenient just to stay at home, he would have chanced his buttons just to keep those few extra quarters out of his landlord's pocket.

Making some effort to separate his darks and whites, he threw in a load and went off to start on the excitement of Saturday afternoon homework. Hearing the machine stop in about a half hour, he went back to put in another load. On opening up the lid, he saw the disintegrated white particles of his napkin gracing all of his dark clothes. Cursing under his breath, he picked off all the pieces that he could and tossed his clothes into the dryer. Hoping the lint catcher would take care of the rest of the mess, he put in two more quarters. He also knew this was a pipedream and he would be picking minute napkin pieces off of himself all week long.

He did not expect to see her again, and he was correct in his expectations, at least for a few days, but on the Thursday of
the next week, he found himself gazing upon her again as he ate his lunch in the local Italian restaurant. He thought this was his penance for not eating the frugal fare waiting for him and probably moldering away in the refrigerator in his apartment.

By paying his utmost attention the book in front of him, he made a vain attempt to cram for the exam he had in a couple of hours. The plate in front of him contained a half eaten piece of pizza covered with parmesan cheese and pepper out of those shakers, which are a staple in such restaurants. His Coke bubbled as if it were angered at being ignored.

Before long, he could not help himself from sneaking a glance in her direction. She had situated herself across the room in a booth with one of her friends. Once again, he was struck by her beauty. With renewed diligence, he once again tried to make some sense of the subjunctive case in Latin. His professor delighted in giving out examinations with difficult passages to translate. It was often Sean's luck to interpret the manner in which a sentence should be converted into Latin incorrectly. This gave his professor great pleasure, as he found joy in making his students writhe in their seats. Just thinking about the test taking tension he was about to face in that classroom filled with those few students who had decided to stick out the course filled him with slight unease. No matter how long he studied the stuff, he could never achieve complete mastery of the material. Only after he was deep into new lessons would the old problems begin to vanish. His professor would always say,
"Learning Latin cannot be properly done unless it's painful."

In the midst of his thoughts, he felt a tap on his shoulder. She had escaped from her friend and asked him if she could sit down. He gave her a nod, and she scooted onto the bench opposite him which had a red rubbery cushion. Her skirt stuck to it, and she had to lift herself up to straighten it out. She looked at him and smiled.

"Remember me? Audrey?"

"Yeah, and I'm Sean."

"I thought you were going to give me a call."

"Well, I just didn't get around to it. Besides, I didn't know if you really wanted me to give you a call or if you handed those things out to a lot of people. You were a little tipsy, and I didn't want you to feel obligated to go out with some guy that you didn't know." He let his eyes wander nervously around the room.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'll just go out with those ten other guys that I handed my number out to then. I had a slot open for you on Saturday afternoon, but I think I can fill it with somebody else."

She shoved her way out of the booth and walked back over to her booth with anger in her steps. He noticed that he got a few strange looks from the girl with long dark brown hair sitting next to her.

Ending all pretense of studying, he closed his notebook and finished up the rest of his pizza. He decided he had probably
put too much of that pepper stuff on there for the amount of Coke that he had left, but he ate it just the same. He made doubly sure that he did not catch Audrey’s eye as he finished up. When he walked out of the restaurant, he could still feel the burn of the peppers in his mouth. He did not stop at the water fountain he passed on the way through campus, however, and he was savoring the sensation of it. Glancing down at his shirt, he noticed a piece of white papery fuzz. He brushed it off, and the wind carried it off down the street.