Naked Shall I Return

A Collection of Stories which Attempt to both Mock and Come to Terms with this First of Existential Statements

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INTRODUCTION

My final semester as an undergraduate has been a difficult one for me. A four year engagement was ended, and I renounced the religious beliefs I have been force-fed since childhood. As a result, I have led a solitary experience and been forced to reshape my identity from one emotionally and spiritually dependent to one divorced from such dependence. At times, these stories have been my only outlet and means of constructing meaning from my personal disorder.

In coming to terms with my new identity, I have accepted the following from Irving Howe’s *Classics of Modern Fiction*, 1986:

- The one freedom to man that matters most is the freedom of choice, and insofar as rationality and social organizations threaten this freedom, even in its destructive aspects, they can be enemies of life.

- What redeems life and gives it meaning is human suffering, an experience which, in its fullness of consciousness, is possible only to mankind.

- Man is hopelessly split between the side of himself that wishes to act and the side that wishes to observe.

- Intelligence is a disease from which man cannot escape: it dooms him to self-pride and narcissism.

- It is often impossible to make a clear distinction between man’s pride and humility: one masks the other.

- A feeling that in a universe deprived of God and the comforts of religion, man has been left “homeless,” a stranger in the universe, and must therefore consume himself with introspective anxiety and self-mortification.

Although my fiction is in its infancy stage and certainly not comparable with the selections to which Howe alludes, these ideas are expressed in my writing. In “The Perambulation of Morty Forster,” for example, the issues of both physical and spiritual homelessness are addressed by a man, like Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, who has reasoned himself into impotence. Amanda Conally’s excessive introspection likewise contributes to her inability to make rational decisions in facing life’s dilemmas. In each I attempt to address the issue of responsibility in coming to terms with the purpose of human existence.

The protagonists in this collection are estranged from conventional life. In order to compensate for certain inadequacies, they want to sample all of life’s cuisine, so to speak, without being reminded they may become satiated or gluttonous; yet, these characters cannot digest some of life’s bitter dishes, and this realization gnaws at them like the pangs of hunger. In short, the protagonists in my fiction, with possible exceptions, cannot reconcile their intellectual, reflective, and passive natures with their
passionate and capricious ones. They cannot accept neither the blind faith and of religion and consolation of physical relations nor the harsh reality to which they are doomed. (Not to mention that they do not want to become automatons by always following the middle course).

In this way, I have subverted plot and operated under the premise that in fiction the exception is the rule (while of course trying to make these exceptions somewhat plausible). I have even, as in the case of “The Anti-Christ,” created something with such a gnostic and impenetrable air that it cannot be easily understood. But what is the nature of scripture, but a deliberate means to baffle the less informed and justify this action by esoteric circular reasoning? In “The Anti-Christ,” therefore, I present a sympathetic view of “evil,” that the banality of such evil can be more damaging than explicit immorality.

Mine is a fiction that can't make up its mind. It attempts to be simple and minimalistic, to retain a tone of innocence and sympathetic understanding, but at the same time it wants to break out in extended, poetic prose. (The former tendency, I think, prevails). Nonetheless, this is a fiction in progress, open for modification and certainly welcome to ridicule.

The collection began and ended with Miles Dubliner. The short story was initially written last semester for a fiction writing class. I recently adopted it to a screenplay for a film class and was much more pleased with short film. In its short story form, I think the “Object Beneath,” like my fiction and life as a whole, is hampered by introspection. The screen play allowed me to think and write in a more fragmented style, to reflect less, and position and place more. In short, it offered much more authorial control. (I just wish I could work out the accompanying screen play to my life in the same manner).

I suppose it ironic I should base the title of this collection on a Bible verse, Job 1:21. Nonetheless, Job represents a voice in me that cannot reconcile the notion that a transcendent, benevolent God would distribute punishment and suffering to innocent, blameless people. After Job’s sons are killed and wealth taken, he says: 

_Naked came I out of the mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there._

Although I have cursed God and died, in so far as I have given up my religious convictions, I feel a strong connection with this solitary sufferer. Like Job, I too have had my family taken away and been stripped of identity. But I do not acknowledge that some Prime Mover allotted such a fate; like the characters in this collection, I accept the possibility (not the eternal truth, mind you) that pivotal events in life are not regulated or part of a supreme agenda, that they occur like catastrophes—indiscriminately, tragically, and capriciously.

It is not the purpose of this collection to preach an ideology, for I know existentialism is a hard doctrine for many to swallow. It is one that cannot be forced upon another person or be adopted for its own sake. One must, in a sense, resort to the nakedness of existentialism in times of despair and estrangement and implicitly hope that it is only a temporary condition.
The Object Beneath

Miles Dubliner woke up suddenly with an uneasy feeling. He felt the vein in his neck racing with blood. His head was numb and he had a bitter taste in his mouth. Turning his head slightly, he noticed a bottle of sleeping tablets lying on his nightstand. He tried to reach the bottle and count how many he had taken, but his lethargic body did not respond. He could not even focus his vision to see if the cap had been removed from the sleeping pills.

What happened last night? he wondered.

The phone began to ring. Each ring echoed in Miles’ head, serving as a shrill chime of recall which brought the night’s unfolding to the edge of his memory. The phone silenced, but the ringing within Miles’ head continued. As the pain subsided, a revelation churned and came forth: Oh my God, exclaimed Miles. I tried to kill myself last night. He thought for a moment. But I don’t remember how.

He closed his eyes and tried hard to think. Was it an overdose on the sleeping pills? he thought. I always take two or three before going to bed. Maybe I just drank too much and imagined I tried to kill myself.

Miles took a deep breath that came up short. He did not believe his last speculation, for he knew he had done something very wrong to his body. I was drinking...and Mickey...I got in a fight with Mickey. He looked to her picture on the nightstand beside his bed. It was a snapshot in a plastic trinket frame from an amusement park. The picture was worn and had begun to fade.

Miles looked away to test his memory against the picture. She was wearing a black-striped blouse, he began, and her hair was wet from the water ride. He didn’t bother looking back at the picture, for he had internalized it. Instead, Miles began to recollect the events of that day at the amusement park. Images soon drifted through his mind: holding hands along the parkway, feeding each other cotton candy, screaming as the roller coaster plummeted downward, and shooting toy frogs with the pellet gun to win the stuffed bear. I can remember all this like it was yesterday, but I can’t remember what happened last night!

He began again. After I got off the phone, I went to the liquor cabinet and... He tried to raise his head to see if any liquor bottles were on the floor. His body resisted; it was content to subsist there and take several short breaths.

Lying on his back, Miles peered down under his chin. No noose, he laughed. At least I know I didn’t try to hang myself. He tried to shift his weight. As he moved, he felt something cold and smooth against the back of his left shoulder. So there’s the whiskey bottle, he thought. As he shifted his weight again, the object sank from the edge of the mattress and wedged itself under his back. Miles wanted to leave his bed, for he felt there was a serious matter which had to be settled. But he was paralyzed, unable to send the proper messages to his body for action. Maybe if I go back to sleep, all this will go away.

He lay there quiet and immovable, yet failing to sleep. He felt his body sinking, turning slightly counter-clockwise and falling into a quagmire of sweat and pain. Miles at first concentrated on this sinking feeling. He realized he could not stop it, so he let it
control him. Soon, his mind regained its acuity and he decided to get out of bed.

He slowly arched his back to sit up, but the object beneath pierced his back. Damn, what the hell is that thing? Miles then realized, as if the object somehow revealed itself, that under his back lay his pistol. Oh my God, I did try to kill myself last night! He was more concerned with this realization than with the gun.

After this, Miles felt very nauseous. He could feel himself ready to vomit. At the brink of his stomach’s release, Miles realized that the pistol beneath him was loaded and on occasion had fired suddenly, without provocation. He then stiffened himself as his mouth filled with vomit, making sure not to press his back further against the pistol. He tilted his head back to spit out the excess contents and avoid suffocation.

Miles gagged in disgust. I don’t even have the guts to kill myself, goddammit. Hell, I’m such a failure that I can’t even kill myself right. I should just roll over on this gun and end this farce.

Miles lay there several minutes and pondered his death. He thought about Mickey. She was pregnant and was to leave the night before for a two hour drive to a Louisville abortion clinic. Overwhelmed by the thought of fatherhood, Miles refused to go with her. As a result, Mickey demanded an end to the relationship and went alone. Miles felt powerless: he thought of marrying her, but he had no job prospects and not enough money. His parents, who were paying his college tuition, would never understand his dropping out of school to get married.

Amidst the stench and peril of his bed, Miles thought of their unborn child. What they would have named the child? It would have to be a name beginning with “M.” After all, that is how they had been brought together: Mickey’s girlfriends convinced her that “Miles and Mickey” had a certain flare and would attract a lot of attention around campus. Mickey laughed at the idea and made the first call.

Michael. Yes, his name will be Michael, thought Miles. Or Melissa, if it’s a girl. I don’t even know if it is a boy or a girl. He began to cry.

The phone began to ring again. This time it rang enough for the answer machine to click on. Miles moved his lips to the prompt: “This is Miles’ room. I can’t come to the phone right now. Please leave a message and I will return your call.” Miles laughed. He did not want those dry, monotone words to be the last he heard.

The machine beeped and spoke, “Miles? Where are you? I tried to go last night, but I couldn’t do it without you there. I need to talk to you. Where the hell are you? Call me back.”

Miles knew Mickey was in the bathroom, sitting cross-legged on the floor. She usually could be found there when she was sick or worried, calling him for comfort. Mickey, come over here, prayed Miles. Come up to my room and find me. I can’t lie here much longer like this.

The sheets of Miles’ bed were soaked with sweat. The pain from the gun piercing his back had intensified. It now felt like a part of his body, a cancer-filled appendage ready to burst, to mix with the wetness on the sheets, a coming together of blood and water, to cleanse and condemn.

Struggling against his worry, Miles decided to play mind games. He was always good at reverie and daydreaming. He thought of a topic: All White Basketball Team. Bird, Maravich, West, Petit, and Walton. Would play at the Garden with Riley as coach. OK, next topic. What would I do if I had to spend an entire year in isolation?
Like Chekhov’s “The Bet.” I’d have to have plenty of books, and a computer, and music—a piano would take up too much room.

On second thought, Miles realized that he could not live in an isolated room. He had always been an outdoorsman, always hunting, fishing or playing baseball. He had become fascinated with the instruments of outdoor play at an early age. First the bicycle, then the skateboard, go-cart, three-wheeler, rifle, and boat. As his body and mind matured, grew more danger-seeking, his interest in outdoor weaponry so too developed. The gun became like a third arm in his late teens, for his father and he frequently went on extended hunting trips. Miles laughed to himself as he thought of how guns were introduced to him by his dad. The two were urinating in the woods with their guns held under their arms.

“You know the difference between a rifle and a gun, son?” said his dad, relieving himself.

Miles nodded as he tried to match his father’s stream in length.

“This is my rifle, this is my gun, this is for killing, this is for fun,” sang his dad, shaking his hips and rifle on the proper cues.

Miles laughed so hard that he dropped his rifle from under his arm. It discharged and sent a bullet into the woods.

“Goddammit, boy. Haven’t you got any sense?” his father shouted.

Miles zipped his pants back up and secured his rifle. “It didn’t think a bullet was in the chamber.”

“This’ll sure as hell be the last time I take you hunting. You’re liable to get somebody killed, the way you act.”

Miles sustained the mind play for several minutes until a sense of uneasiness convinced him that thinking of such things was meaningless. A part of him wanted to pray, but the thought of prayer overwhelmed him. So he decided to write a mental letter to Mickey.

Dear Mickey,

I’m sorry for running from my problems. I’ve always pretended that my problems were not real, or at least not as bad as they seemed. It seems I can’t confide in anyone anymore or accept things as they are. I’m a hypocrite and an idealist with a false sense of hope. But what’s the use of living if we can’t wish for something better, or see the world as a proving-ground for reform? Anyway, I love you and want to marry you. I want to have children that we both want.

Miles finished the letter prematurely because his mind was preoccupied with the object beneath him. I’m lying in a pool of vomit and sweat because of this damn gun, he thought. You can’t bargain with a gun. It wouldn’t be so bad if someone had the thing stuck in my back. At least then I could try and bargain with the person.

Miles tried to imagine a sinister man behind him whose finger was at the trigger. He tried to frighten himself by the ominous shape and appearance of the man, but image after image left him unafraid. Maybe I should give him a deeper voice and the bloodshot eyes of someone deranged, he thought. I’m not thinking hard enough!
As he began again to dissolve into reverie, Miles heard a car pull into his driveway. It was Mickey’s. He could tell by the low hum of the engine. She rang the doorbell several times. “Mickey!” cried Miles. “I’m up in my room! Come up here now!”

There was no response.

She knows I’m here because my car is here, he thought. Why doesn’t she open the door with her key and come in?

Mickey rang the doorbell again.

“Mickey!” he yelled.

Again, there was no reply.

“Hell, if I die—I die. I’m not going to lie here any more,” said Miles as he began to concentrate on his body. He felt for his hands and legs. He contracted his muscles and eased onto the balls of his feet. “All right, explode off the bed, Miles—explode!” he breathed. The doorbell rang again, interrupting his train of thought. “Explode on three! One! Two! Three!”

Miles twisted from the bed and fell to the floor. He was out of breath and dazed. He sat for a moment to contemplate briefly all that had happened. He then hurried to the window and peered into the yard. Mickey had just closed her car door and was about to pull from the driveway. Miles pounded his fist on the window until the glass broke. “Mickey!” he yelled, with a flow of blood forming on his hand.

He ran downstairs, stumbling several times in a swoon. “Don’t go, Mickey! Don’t go!” Miles tried to pull the door open before the bolt was fully turned. He pulled in frustration. As it opened, he sprung through, running in his bare feet. She’s going to kill the baby, he thought.

The rhythmic clap of feet against concrete was soon heard as Miles found his stride. The run was exhilarating; his body unleashed itself in speed. Yet, Mickey’s car was becoming more faint in the morning fog. Ending the chase, Miles stopped to catch his breath. Mickey’s car sped up the hill toward the interstate. It was shifting gears haphazardly.

Miles yelled once more in desperation. He then turned and raced back for the house, trying to remember where he had placed his keys. He jolted up the stairs to his room and scanned his dresser. The keys were not there. He picked up clothing from the floor and felt in the pockets. No keys. He looked to the nightstand. “They’ve got to be here somewhere!”

As he peered across the room again his eyes detected a glint of metal on the bed. Miles pulled back the sheets in a rush and uncovered the pistol. He stared at it in awe. This worthless piece of metal held me captive in my own bed for two goddamn hours, he thought. He placed his fingers on the handle and ran his left hand over the smooth metal. He remembered doing this the night before. He inspected the pistol closely; he had never realized its polished appeal before. What power, he thought. To take men’s lives. Made by men who have guns. Who have children. Children who play with guns. He thought of his unborn child. “Michael, I love you,” he spoke. He raised the gun to his head. “I am the gunman.” His finger felt for its placement. It found the safety notch and depressed it. The trigger locked. “Now, where are my keys?”
I met the anti-christ by chance at Dienbienphu where the landscape is in the shape of a tortoise shell turned on its back. He lived there like a red termite burrowing his way through time. He comes up from his underground tunnels only three or four times a century, so I was fortunate to talk at length with him.

He was not like the anti-christ we typically think, or of which the Bible speaks. I imagine he was taller than Napoleon, and did not have a mustache like either Hitler or Stalin. He was not even riding a white horse. In fact, he seemed not militarily or politically-minded at all. He was rather soft spoken, talking not like a horned dragon in archaic rhymes of pestilence and bloodshed, but of things which we all understand, things common and close to us.

It seemed he was this night a bit melancholy, as if he did not really like who he was. He would gaze at a certain point in the night sky for several minutes or nights, I forget which, and then look to his body and, with a little shard of gold, silver, bronze, or iron, would make delicate incisions in his skin. As he did this I tried not to look because I am not comfortable with the sight of another's blood, but I could not help but watch, for he was naked and it was beautiful and he was not bleeding.

It was not a dirty thing for me to watch him, as he had no penis and I did not think of him as a man. Yet I was curious, so I asked him why he lacked it. This, of course, seemed absurd the moment I spoke it, for I knew full well that an anti-christ did not really need a penis.

He was very frank in his response, “I cut it off—no, it was, you might say, a circumcision gone awry, to prevent the loneliness and narcissism that masturbation brings.”

I agreed shamefacedly and let him get back to his cutting. All over his hairless body he had cut himself, in some sort of familiar pattern which I could not at first quite recognize. The incisions were not long ones, like we might make to remove a gall bladder or malignancy, but little points that, after hardening into scar tissue, had become an ornate matrix of light wanting to break through. On his crown, there appeared a circular scar pattern comprised of several minute cuts. It was apparent he had started there and moved to other parts of his body, for the scars in this circle were more faded than those surrounding.

I watched him silently for several nights as each night became a series of nights. Each of those nights, or at different times in the one night, he looked to a different point in the night sky, then began piercing his skin. Once he studied the point in the night sky, he did not look at it again. When he was finished cutting, he swallowed the little shards of gold, silver, bronze, or iron, nodded farewell, and crawled back into his tunnel.

“How long are you staying at this village?” I asked him before he left one night.

“Not long.”

“Have you much more cutting to do here?”

“No, not here.”

“Where will you go next?”

“I do not know.”

“Will you be at Armageddon soon?” I could not help but ask.

“I do not know.”
“How will you tell when that time has come?”
“I will not be able to tell. That will be for you to discover.”
“Is it written anywhere when that time is to come?”
“No, it is not written.”
“If you will not tell me of things to come, may I ask you why you cut the night sky into your skin?”
“It is a ritual that I am bound to do.”
“I recognize a few of the constellations you have cut into your skin...Orion, Andromeda, Canis Major and Minor...and in relation to these constellations, that scar on your crown must be the moon. But it does not look like the moon I know.”
“It was the moon found in the night sky at Golgotha. Is it fading?”
“It was, as of last night. I cannot tell now while you are standing. If you bow down a bit I can get a better look.”
“I cannot bow down before you. What you saw last night, I’m afraid, is the only glimpse allowed to you. You should have looked at it more closely.”
“Come with me to the water tomorrow so you can see if the moon is fading for yourself.”
“I cannot go to the water with you, lest I drink.”
“Not to drink, to look at your reflection in the water, to see if the moon is fading.”
“If you want to see if the moon is fading, why not look to the moon itself?”
I did not go to the water or look to the moon that night, or any of the nights that make up the night. Somehow I feel guilty looking to the sky, at the stars, moon, and sun. I am an incongruity compared to them and it as a whole. If all the generations of humankind have looked to the sky, at the stars, moon, and sun, and not noticed and recorded if the moon was fading or if the stars were a bit out of place, why should I?
The Perambulation of Morty Forster

A hungry, crying child scratches at the walls of its choking room, but the mother has left, refusing to embrace and care for the child. To evade the cold of night, a man crimps his body to fit a cardboard enclosure with the faint hope that some passerby will provide a warm night’s lodging or hot plate of food, but he is neglected by the people on the street who think he is beyond their help. “What else can the mother do?” the people ask, “she has to work during the day, or both will starve.” Or, “There is really nothing I can do, other than give the homeless a few dollars, and that only prolongs the problem. It should be up to the government.”

Such is the thinking of a big city culture that has conditioned its inhabitants to turn away from those in need. Such is the practice of a people who do not wish to help outwardly with money or work, or internally with prayers and support. I know this, for I am a victim of this city’s neglect.

The crime of neglect against me happened yesterday when I went to the grocery to buy cat food. I have tried to clean the thought of this crime from my mind, for I am not one to dwell on my own misfortune, but as a citizen who feels crime is already out of hand, I cannot leave this crime unreported.

Before I begin my recount, let me inform you a bit about myself. I am a scholar and philosopher. Not out of smugness do I say this, but necessity, for I author philosophical and religious publications. I work out of my apartment, sending my manuscripts to an editor by mail.

As a prominent thinking man unlike the great herd of humanity—who act rather impulsively for the most part—I like to carry on elaborate conversations within my head. I tend to think in long, explicit sentences, as if someone were listening to my thoughts. I think this way to lessen ambiguity for my hypothetical listener. Be them God or peer, I have come to envision a third party listening to, if not watching, me.

Solely writing my arguments on paper has come to bore me, so much so that I have developed a style in which I can compose backwards, from left to right, without altering my argument for spacing’s sake; and the product looks as if I composed in the conventional style. Such is not my rule of practice, but a hobby form to which I revert in times of ennui.

I feel I am becoming verbose, so I will return to the narrative, but please allow me to underscore my journey to the grocery with my internal musings, for reasons just stated.

It is Saturday, and after securing my apartment, I exit my building and sit on its outer steps to acclimate myself to the outside. After applying sunblock, I sit and clean my glasses, which are now darkening to help my eyes adjust to the brightness of day. I then proceed to the grocery, being particular to walk on the right side of the street and sidewalk, farthest from the curb, as every citizen should.

The children outside are like squirrels gathering nuts. They run and shout and gallop jerkedly across the streets, then stop suddenly to see what is happening around them. Their summer attire of tank-tops and short-pants hang loosely from their sweaty bodies. Such attire is acceptable for children, but questionable for adults. I mention this because a man covered in nothing more than an undergarment and headset runs into me hastily without apology. I even think his vulgar perspiration is on my suit coat! Plagues have broken out over less!
As angry as I am with the jogger’s lack of concern for public safety, I rather envy his headset. I suppose we all want to drown out external distractions and exist within our self-contained worlds. If I enjoyed music, I would like to pay attention to nothing but headset input. But I do not enjoy music as I should; it distracts my mind. As a young man, when listening to Barber’s Adagio with a female companion, I suffered an overflow of emotion and, wanting to express my affection for her with a kiss or slight embrace, I only cried and convulsed, causing her to leave embarrassingly and never speak to me again.

I pass more children playing games along a side street and they give a quick start at me. I should think it customary for inquisitive children to look at me oddly. They are obviously unaccustomed to wearing suits and unsquirrel-like behavior.

I suppose too that I walk peculiarly. My shoes are heavy and scrape the pavement. But if I were to concentrate on my perambulation, then I should not be able to give strict attention to my thoughts, and a man who does not inspect his mind, does not exist.

Thinking such, I approach the highway which divides the city. The intersection is abuzz with honking, shouting, and black boys selling newspapers on the median. “You like a paper, misser?” one boy says to me. I nod my head no. He is tall and lanky with ash spots covering his skin. His body must be no more than thirteen years of age, but his eyes and face show that he knows of suffering far beyond his years. When he sees me, he shows no outward startle. At this, I turn up the corners of my mouth at him, but he approaches someone else to sell another paper. I attempt to cross.

These confounded automobiles! Whizzing by with scornful drone and honking out of needless frustration! The green light precedes compassion here. Never a driver greets me with a wave to pass on by. Better to be self-sufficient with one’s legs than hide comfortably behind a wheel! A great many problems in this city might better be solved if its citizens would drive, shout, and honk less, walk more, and think in greater detail.

As I reach the other side of the highway, the sidewalk becomes more cracked and uneven. Dirt and sand show through the concrete. I must now concentrate on my perambulation, so as not to stumble on the seams. The people’s pace on this side of the highway is a bit lethargic, and I suppose it is good to slow my walk so as not to stand out any more than I do.

Within minutes, I approach the market square. It is an intersection formed by dilapidated shops: a cafe, movie theater, gas station, and grocery on each corner. (I once volunteered at the cafe as a benefit for the homeless on Thanksgiving). There is also a bookstore beside the grocery where a gambling operation is known to exist. This was revealed to me by the checkout lady with the bright lipstick at the grocery. She likes to gossip with the customers in line about the affairs of the neighborhood.

The bookstore is a tawdry place with barred windows and dingy posters on its storefront that advertise live dance shows. As I pass it to get to the grocery, I notice a man in a dirty denim jacket lying on the pavement against the store’s facade. When I try to circumvent his outstretched legs, he places a cup in front of me.

“Spare change for homeless?” he asks.

“No sir. I do my part for the homeless,” I reply. He looks a bit rough to be homeless, not like those I helped at the cafe last Thanksgiving. He must be a grifter exploiting the name of those who are genuinely homeless.

“That sure is a nice suit,” he says as he pushes his hat up from his eyes. “You ain’t goin’ to this strip shop are you,” he says declaratively.
“No, of course not. Please excuse me.”

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with a man enjoyin’ hisself. Some my biggest donations come from customers here. That’s why I sit here. And ‘cause the owner lets me sleep in the back room sometimes.”

I do not reply, but walk past him to the grocery entrance. Seeing this, the beggar sluggishly gets to his feet.

“If you goin’ shoppin’, you gotta have some change t’spare,” he pleads. “I ain’t eat a good meal in three days.”

His character is very convincing—I think—and rush into the store. The beggar has so harassed me that I can think of only a few items I intended to buy: cat food, bathroom tissue, castor oil, and saltless crackers.

As I proceed down the first aisle, nothing is in its place. Where the bread is usually kept are condiments, party favors, and fireworks. The owner must have rearranged this opening section. But when I come around the corner, I find the same disorder. Dry goods have been replaced by breakfast cereals; garbanzo and navy beans are likewise in place of the castor oil; and what is a blackhead extractor?

I must have a certain kind of bathroom tissue, you know; most brands make me break out. Not to mention that I will not eat certain types of cat food. I must have the moist morsels; the firmer brands give me severe indigestion. Oh, what is to be done? I can locate none of these items. Browsing is out of the question. What seems to have been a quaint and stable grocery has now become a nuisance to me.

There, I see dog food; cat food must be around the corner. The selection has dwindled! Only two cans of Tender Vittles and one dented can of Moist and Meaty. I do not see any of the gourmet blends. How can a grocery change so dramatically for the worse?

Two cans go in my suit coat and another in my pants pocket. I also manage to find the brand of bathroom tissue that doesn’t irritate me and proceed to the checkout line.

My usual checkout lady is absent from the front. I was so looking forward to seeing her painted lips move incessantly. She may gossip a bit, but she never asks any questions like the others: Do you have any coupons or food stamps? Are you going to pay with cash or check? Do you want paper or plastic? My checkout lady knows my routine and preferences, and as a result my checkout is pleasant and expedient. Perhaps I’ll wait here by the periodicals until she returns.

“My Boss Want to Know my Intimate Desires” boasts the feature of the latest Real Confessions. By the appearance of the woman on the cover, I should think all humanity knows her intimate desires. Your secret is no riddle to the gods, poor soul!

“Lane two is open,” says the store manager, startling me.

“I prefer to remain here for the time being,” I reply to her.

“Well, I think it’d be best for you to check out now. Otherwise, I’ll have to hold you for theft. We’ve been having problems with shoplifters lately. What’s that in your pockets there?”

“This is cat food. For convenience’s sake, I place a few items in my pockets so my hands are free. Clutching things makes them prone to arthritis. I have no intention of stealing, I assure you.” I ease away from the manager, who begins taking inventory of the magazines and does not continue with her accusations.

My checkout lady has returned to her lane, so I take my place in line behind another shopper. She is conversing with the shopper about the hot weather—a dull topic by her standards. As I place my purchases on the counter, the lady shopper turns
and asks, "What kind of cat do you have?"

"Just a cat I found rummaging through the back alley," I respond. "An alley cat, not a specific breed as far as I know."

"Well, I fed my little Burmese the cat food you have there, and she wouldn’t touch it. I hated to throw it out, but what can you do?"

"That’s the nature of cat’s. They’re very particular. It seems they have strict standards about their diet."

"I know what you mean. They act like they’re too good for the food. It makes me boil sometimes," she says as she hands over her food stamps to the checkout lady.

The lady shopper seems intent on sharing more cat stories as we exit the grocery. Seeking to rid myself of her, I stop outside the store in hope that she will walk her way, but she continues with her anecdotes.

After several minutes of fabricating cat stories with her, I inch toward home. The lady follows. It seem she wants to continue the conversation over dinner in my apartment!

Repulsed by such a dreadful notion, and upon seeing an open door swing open nearby, I escape from the lady. She bids farewell and makes for the corner. My intention now is to wait here behind the door until the lady leaves on the bus.

"Fifty-cent cover, buddy," says a man with greasy hair at the counter.

"May I wait here for a moment? The sun is unbearable," I say.

"You still gotta pay the cover."

I put down my bag and search through my purse for the change. After paying, I gather my sack and turn around without at first realizing what materials exist nearby. I recoil to find a most revolting display. Massive phallic icons cover the wall next to the door. Opposite the wall are magazines which make the issue of Real Confessions look tame by comparison. Flesh piercing flesh! Rape! Sodomy! My disgust is overwhelming. As a result, I begin to feel faint and stagger against a receptacle holding some kind of plastic instruments. The receptacle holds, but I lose consciousness and fall to the floor. (This is all speculation, of course, for I do not rule out that I was mugged by some villain).

Next I recall waking cloistered in a dimly lit room. The beggar is peering down at me.

"You ok, buddy?" he asks.

I am unable for the moment to regain my faculties and do not speak.

"You passed out in the front room. They came out and asked me if I knew you."

"What have you done with my pants?" I ask.

"You had a little accident, mister. Old guy who cleans this place took ‘em to the laundry ‘round the corner. I gave him fifty cents for you, since I know you ain’t had no spare change."

"Where am I? Can you take me home? Perhaps you should call the paramedics. My head is aching badly."

"Simmer down, mister. You’re gettin’ excited again. You have family to call?"

"No. I walked here. Where is my purse and sack? And glasses, what have you done with my glasses?"

"Your bag broke. Your stuff is a little wet for worse, but it’s here. Your glasses are behind the cot. They got twisted. This is where I sleep sometimes, when there ain’t a crowd. Comfortable in it’s own way, ain’t it?"

"What are these noises I am hearing?" I ask.

He chuckles. "We’re in the back of the store, next to the videos. I’ve learned to
drown ‘em out, but they can sure get to you. You have medication to take?"

“No. Just return my slacks so I can leave.”

“I’ll check on your pants, mister. Just keep calm. The owner don’t want no more trouble.”

As he opens the door, the noises become louder. Several women groan in pain, from all directions. It is unbearable. I put my hands over my ears, but the groans persist.

“Here you go, mister,” says the beggar. His hand appears from around the door with my slacks. I put them on, fumble for my glasses, and open the door. The light is insufficient for safe passage.

“Can you help? I can’t see,” I say.

There is no answer.

Suddenly a door opens into me from my left. A flickering light is shed from behind the door into a passage of carrels. “Excuse me,” says a voice. I move aside as a man exits from behind the door. Unable to focus in the darkness, I follow the man’s footsteps to an exit.

We enter a passageway laden with heavy, tribal percussion. As we leave the carrels, I notice an exit sign at the end of the passageway. I move toward it.

The passageway provides little more light than the carrels. A curtain hanging from the ceiling sections off the passageway from the larger part of the room to the right. I follow the curtain, walking parallel to it until I come to an opening, where the light grows stronger and the music louder. I back up against the wall and peer into the room.

Beyond a cloud of smoke, several men are seated before a platform. Two women are in front of them, moving rudely to the music and touching each other. The women are nude, save their high-heeled shoes. One woman clings to an upright pole while the other grabs at her from behind. Their bodies are accented by a column of lights of assorted colors, while their faces remain hidden by matted hair and shadows.

I gape astoundingly, feeling fever burn my upper lip. My eyes move back and forth from the women on the platform to the men in front, indecisive as to which group is more appalling. My body trembles as I press hard against the back wall for support.

Did not Tolstoy in his Kreutzer Sonata teach of the dangers of carnal love? Have the brothels been so easily replaced by pornography emporiums? Certainly, if there is an underworld, this must be its lewd procession!

At the end of the dance, the lights dim and a trickle of applause is heard. This gives me enough time to reach the exit without drawing much attention to myself. The men in front, looking mesmerized, shuffle for the exit as well.

Once outside, the men disperse for their cars in the lot across the alley. Others walk. Once my sense of direction is regained, I find my way back to the sidewalk that leads to the highway.

The walk home is a long one. My legs are weak and my head continues to ache. My glasses have been badly damaged in the fall and are causing problems for my eyes. I will be hungry when I return home, yet I have no cat food or saltless crackers. My health will begin to deteriorate, thus leading to an agonizing death, like Ivan Ilych’s. I can feel it! (His death too began with a fall, you know).

But cat food on saltless crackers is certainly not for nourishment. Rather, I eat them as a means of protest and penance, a representative strike against the hunger in this city from a man who could too easily become indulgent and greedy in his diet. (And, what is good for the homeless is certainly good for me). You see, our city is in need of men who are willing to eat locusts and wild honey as if in the wilderness.

And yet, I have failed in my strike. I have rejected the very people I have
professed to support. I have judged them and now fallen under the same judgement I so arrogantly rendered. I know I am a hypocrite! We are all hypocrites in our own pleasures! Life is such a baffling paradox that it makes hypocrites of us all...that laughs at us in enigmatic silence!

It is time I laugh back. Sitting here on the pavement, despite these failures, I feel now relieved of an immense burden, although this relief is itself an airy, despairing burden. I feel a grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear. A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief which finds no natural outlet, no relief in word, or sigh, or tear. And this grief causes me only to laugh. How does one write a laugh? More, how does one compose it backwards? Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!Hah!

There, the world's largest palindrome! My editor would be appalled at my overuse of the exclamation point! No matter, I've figured out one of life's mysteries: Life is absurd and one must laugh mockingly in spite of despair. What a simple truth! I've a mind to become intox--drunk right now. It's an absurd notion really, but I think I will get absurdly drunk to underscore the absurdity of getting drunk. (I just hope three absurds in a sentence don't cancel each other out!) Now, here's the plan: Not only will I eat cat food, but I will join the cats in the alley. In fact, I'll become the fictitious cat I spoke of in the grocery! Meow. Meow. Ah! There's the rub! Begone insipid self-examination! And the pointless circular reasoning of intellectual relativism is no more! What use is a life-plan to the navigator of one's own ship? I should now like to drift haphazardly on these streets, taking orders from no one, including myself! I'll trade in my suit for a sailor's cap and dirty denim jacket. Ahoy, homeless mates! Salute with cups extended!
Mom’s new puppy has got my gym shoe and is chewing the laces again. He’s an American Eskimo pup with white kinky hair, bushy, and as soft as cotton. His nose is splotched pink and he has thick brown crescent marks under his bug-eyes, which makes him look a little sad, and with his whiskers and beard, serious and old.

As puppies should be, he is impetuous and stupid, and sprawled on the floor chewing my shoelaces.

I’m home temporarily on break from college, lying on my bed trying to read a Civil War book, but the text is filled with too many names and facts, so I have to read every sentence twice for it to make sense. Books always lose their meaning when I try to read them at home.

As I’m about to snap my fingers to make Frosty stop chewing my laces, General McClellan finds Lee’s orders near Frederick and is thinking of pursuing the old General. He’ll stop. McClellan, that is, not Frosty. Even though he has the Confederates outnumbered, he doesn’t have the guts to chase Lee.

The gym shoes are old, and the laces easy to come by. I’ll finish this chapter then play with Frosty. He’ll forget about the shoe once we start wrestling.

Seeing the puppy there, impetuous and stupid, chewing my laces right after Lee refuses to retreat and signals his armies to meet at Sharpsburg, makes for a sharp contrast in personality to my defeated old Mom. She’s really my paternal grandmother who raised me as her son. When she bought Frosty, I thought it might bring some life to the house, because she had been falling asleep on the living room couch before, while the other American Eskimo dog died in her bedroom.

She still doesn’t sleep in her bedroom. In fact she doesn’t sleep much at all, at least while I’m home. She cusses around the house like when I was in grade school, constantly watching Frosty to make sure he doesn’t pee on the couch or choke on his bone or harbor a flea. She’s a caregiver gone out of control, at the same time selfless and completely self-absorbed in her duty as mother.

At sixty-four, she has the body of an eighty year-old. Her hand trembles and perpetually squeezes at things that aren’t there. She said her husband beat her, and maybe that hard life made her nerves this way. But she married the guy that beat her, my grandfather, twice.

She never hit me much, but I wish she had occasionally, instead of the verbal abuse. Just the other day, after a brief shouting match, she approached me with her usual hug of reconciliation, like she might have done with her husband after the first divorce:

“You love Mom?”

“Not when you’re mean.”

“I’m old.”

“You can change,” I said, but knew it wasn’t true. I know she likes to make up before I leave for the evening. Hell, I don’t beat her. I don’t even argue with her. So there’s nothing really to reconcile.

Since she bought Frosty, I’ve debated whether the puppy was a good idea or not.
I can’t decide if it has awakened her will to live by giving her the chance to become a caregiver again, or just aroused her hypersensitivity to things and increased her high blood pressure. When little things are out of place, her blood can really boil.

She’s often said of Frosty, “You’ll be the death of me yet, dog,” and I’ve always secretly applauded the statement from the other room. Until then, I harbor Frosty in my room to keep Mom from yelling at him, because I know how it feels, and although he can’t comprehend her words, the harsh tone must make him a little sadder.

As McClellan retakes Harper’s Ferry but never advances further, I wonder if she’ll outlive this dog who’s still chewing my laces. If not, maybe I should correct him now so that he’ll be trained when I have to raise him. Then again, I don’t mind him keeping his bad habits. Maybe he’ll grow out of chewing shoelaces.

Just as I’m deciding what I should do, and just as McClellan is deciding whether to chase Lee or not before Antietam, the bloodiest one day of war in North America, Frosty’s ears perk up and he’s off to the other room, drawn by some new sound.

“Get off me,” I hear Mom exclaim. “I can’t sleep for you jumping around and licking me. Go lay down, you little shit.”

Frosty returns to my room with an inquisitive look in his eyes. One eye seems to be looking at me while the other one is finding some new object to chew. He grabs one of my socks with his paw and moves his front teeth mechanically against the fabric.

“How about some peaches?” says Mom, coming from the other room. She sees him with my sock. “Stop that.” She kicks him to make him stop. “Don’t let him chew on your socks. I can’t be buying you a new pair every day for him to ruin. I thought you were going to help me while you were home. No one knows the trouble I’ve had trying to train that damn dog. Close the blinds.”


“I don’t want the neighbors seeing in. This house is bad enough without everybody looking in. Do you want some fruit salad?”

“No.”

“An apple?”

“N--.”

“An apple a day keeps cancer away.”

“No.”

“Banana?”

“No.”

“How about some peaches?”

“No, Mom. I don’t want anything. Just shut the door and leave Frosty.”

At the mention of his name, Frosty comes to the side of my bed. I try to rub his head. He chews on my fingers instead. Mom watches, then approaches to see if I’m bleeding.

“Males are so stubborn,” she says.

She is waiting for something. I can feel her coming closer and looking at me while I feign reading. Lee, McClellan, the aggressor, the timid...blood, guts, war, it’s all the same. I know how it ends anyway. I’m finished reading, but leave the book open to keep up the appearance.

“I wish I’d gotten a female,” she says and smacks the dog with my old shoe.
Amanda Conally

Amanda Conally felt something swell inside her. It was perhaps the incarnation of some feeling that wanted to be expressed, or a light-hearted response to something fresh growing inside with the anticipation of pain not far off. It began in her lungs, like a laugh, and moved down to her bowels, floating near her diaphragm, surrounding her stomach, and squeezing at her pelvis. Her stomach twitched and tightened apprehensively as if teased by the cool winds of an approaching storm.

Amanda closed her eyes, crossed her legs and hoped the feeling would pass, but it continued to grow, tickling her face and causing her eyes to water. In any other situation she would have relished the feeling, letting it carry her on its swirling groundswell. However bothersome, it reminded Amanda of her first swim, of feeling herself pulled to the bottom of the pool, submerged in blue, chlorine stinking her eyes, and shortness of breath; then, feeling her body rising, breaking the surface, and hearing herself gasp for air. But this buoyant feeling soon subsided and Amanda’s chest exploded upwardly with spasmodic force, expelling trapped air.

“Bless you,” said a voice from behind.

Amanda, with hand over face and eyes closed, nodded to acknowledge the well-wisher. Internally, she felt relieved; her lungs were warm and hollow and there was a languid, easy feeling throughout her body. But the storm had left damage. Amanda opened her eyes to find thick mucous covering her hand and test booklet. As she removed her hand from her mouth and nose, a long thread of the mucous extended from her upper lip, snapped, and flung back onto her chin and throat. She wiped it off quickly and peered around to see if anyone had seen the display. Nobody seemed to be looking.

My exam is ruined, she thought. I can’t turn this in now, it’s covered with snot. She rubbed the back of her hand across her face and throat to remove the rest of the mucous. God, this is sick. I feel dirty and have to go the bathroom to clean myself off.

Amanda turned her exam booklet face down and rose to leave her desk, but sat back down after second thought. She couldn’t leave now. This was a timed test and she had to finish. If she didn’t, it would hurt her chances of ever getting into medical school.

She turned her booklet back over, only to find the mucous had smeared her ink, making her essay illegible. The people at Duke would never accept her now. Her parents would be so disappointed. What would she tell Roger?

She once again placed her test face down on her desk. Her nose was running heavily and she wanted a tissue. She looked at the clock on the wall and checked it against her watch. Only fifteen minutes to write a new essay. She would never be able to duplicate what she had written. Maybe I can explain my situation to the proctor, she thought. He’s young and looks like he might have an interest in me.

Amanda made her way between the desks and descended the platform steps to the front of the room. “May I be excused for a moment?” she asked.

“You’ve got less than fifteen minutes to finish your essay,” whispered the
Amanda revealed a forced smile. "It's an emergency."
"I guess I can't stop you then."
Amanda hurried out the door. Once she was in the empty hallway, she placed her hand over her nose to prevent it from running further. The hallway was poorly lit, and Amanda could not remember from which direction she had come. She had seen a bathroom when she entered the building, but where was it? She needed some toilet paper and felt like she might even throw up. Her empty stomach churned as if it were looking for something to discharge.

She came to a water fountain near a crossway. She washed the mucous from her hand and splashed water on her flushed face. I've got to get myself under control, she thought. I've got to come up with a better story and more convincing evidence. I can't tell the proctor that I sneezed on my test, he'll think it's ludicrous. I'm certainly not going to show him the damn thing covered with snot. Where is the bathroom? I'm so sick.

As she stood in the crossway, a feeling of directionlessness overwhelmed Amanda. She was lost inwardly, her body confused and disoriented, purging itself it seemed out of spite; and she was displaced within a maze of corridors that took on the appearance of all the grade school halls she once traversed. She wanted to cry, but thought better of it. She wondered why she was acting so childish. Roger would never approve of her actions.

Amanda unsnapped the barrette from her hair. She bent over the water fountain as if getting a drink and gently placed the barrette's metal clip into her nostril. This caused her to sneeze again. She quickly removed the barrette and wiped her nose clean with her hand. I feel so dirty, she said to herself. I can't believe I'm doing this. God, I'm sick.

Determined, she placed the clip of the barrette into her nostril again, this time twisting it to pierce the lining. A flow of blood dripped from her nose, and she allowed it to splatter on her face and dress before stopping it. Now she had to get some on her test. They would have to let her take another one.

With her fingers pinching her nose and tears forming in her eyes from having her sinuses agitated, she made her way back to the testing room.
"My God, what happened?" asked the proctor.
"It's all right. It's just a nose bleed. I have to finish my test," said Amanda, making for her seat.
"Here, take my handkerchief. That looks severe."
"I think now I can finish," she said and quickly ascended the platform steps to the row in which she sat. The other students were staring at her. Some were whispering.
"I'm sorry, miss," said the proctor, following up the steps. "I collected the test booklets already. The time was up." He could see that she was deeply upset and he wanted somehow to feel more embarrassed than her. "We're about to begin a new section of the test. If you'll be seated?"
"Can't I add one last paragraph? The paper doesn't make sense as it is. I have a right at least to finish where I left off. I wasn't expecting this nose bleed, you know. You have to make exceptions for medical emergencies."
"I'm sorry, miss. As I stated before the test began, I have to collect all the test
booklets when time has expired. You can appeal to the testing board at a later time, but I still have to account for all booklets that were issued. My advice is to explain your accident to the testing board. If need be, you can retake the test during the next test date.”

“No. I don’t believe I can,” said Amanda, seizing the remaining articles from her desk. Blood was now coming out profusely, and a pool of it dripped on the desk. “Please, the test is not over. There are two more sections,” urged the proctor. Amanda hurriedly left the room, leaving a trail of crimson droplets on the tile steps and floor.

“We can make other arrangements. I can give you a few minutes to stop the bleeding,” he shouted down the hall.

Amanda did not look back. She was so red-faced with anger and embarrassment that she began to feel light-headed. Nevertheless, she kept an aggressive stride down the hall toward the exit. She could not believe she was leaving. But what else could she do? She couldn’t finish now in this condition. I’ve ruined myself with this stunt, she thought. Flunking this test will put off medical school for an entire year, and it’ll be five months before I can take the test again. I’ll have to sit out an entire semester. What am I going to do? What will my parents think? And Roger? God, I’m so sick.

In the parking lot, Amanda began to cry and tremble, genuinely this time. Tears mixed with the mucous and blood around her mouth and chin. She removed the soaked handkerchief from her nose. It reminded her of her first period and the humiliation of bleeding and losing part of one’s body to a rag. Amanda sped home in her car, not heading the stop signs along the side streets. She had to continue to pinch her nose along the way to prevent blood from dripping on the car seat. My nose is so ugly, she repeated as she inspected it in the rear-view mirror. Roger will laugh at me.

Once home, Amanda tried her best to forget about the exam. She turned on the television and flipped through the channels. Nothing interested her. Only soap operas and talk shows. I can’t watch this. It’ll turn me into some unimaginative housewife who can’t think for herself, like Mom. She went upstairs, blared the stereo, and began to draw her bath water.

With her finger, Amanda found where she had tore the lining in her nose; she pressed hard on the inflamed spot in an effort to make the swelling go down, but it caused her only to sneeze again and spray blood on the flowery bathroom decor. Dejected, she sat on the toilet and began to focus on the date with Roger that night. They had recently began dating and the nuance of the relationship still made her giddy. But since her nose was red and swollen, making her face disfigured and unkissable, Amanda was not quite as giddy as she would have liked. Unable to remedy her depression with reverie, she went to get an ice pack to reduce the swelling.

She let the ice numb her face. As she came to the full length mirror in the foyer, Amanda practiced a smile, but her face refused. She felt like she had been to the dentist or had another mole removed from her face. She stared for several minutes at her nose, looking at it from all angles. She took several paces back from the mirror and tried to decide from what distance the swollen nose was noticeable. No matter what the distance, she came to the same conclusion, you’re ugly. Up close she noticed her swelled bridge caused her eyes to look uneven. Ugly duckling, she said and spat at the
face in the mirror.

As she watched the spittle run its course down the full-length mirror, Amanda undressed. Buttons and fabric tore as she hurriedly took her clothes off. Watching herself disrobe was not routine for her, for she was shy and pristine about her body and took only quick showers. But standing there nude, house empty, she liked how her breasts cast a long shadow across her belly. It made her look thinner than she really was. But when she turned to show her profile, her abdomen was not so small. Still, even if her clothes had been on, her breasts diverted attention from her hips and rear, and hopefully, now her nose.

Amanda soaked in the tub for a long time. The hot water opened her lungs and she began to breathe freely once more. Yet, she could not help but worry about what Roger would think of her nose. There was no way to cover it up. She thought of postponing the date, but decided it was too late. Perhaps they should skip dinner and just go to a late movie. She hoped he wouldn’t be disappointed.

After bathing and fixing her hair, Amanda began her make-up routine. She had to be more meticulous now than ever, viewing the nose as a cosmetic challenge. After weighing her choices, Amanda decided to apply a thick base, shade her eyes and cheeks heavily, then use a light powder on her nose. She even decided to powder her cleavage and place a cute little mole on her cheek with her pencil.

Her choice of dress was likewise capricious. She put on a tight low-cut blouse that she had worn only a few times in high school. It had still retained its color and looked new. It had been a gift from a fashionable aunt who thought she should dress more risque so more boys would take notice. “Being well-endowed runs in the family. It’s tradition,” she remembered her aunt saying.

Struggling to fit into the blouse, Amanda questioned the psychology behind wearing it. Maybe she shouldn’t wear something so revealing. Maybe Roger would be too embarrassed to look at her breasts. Maybe he would think he has to concentrate on her face instead. It was a no win situation.

Not wanting Roger to see her in the brightly lit house, Amanda went out to meet him as his car pulled into the driveway. She waited for him to turn off his headlights before approaching. Customarily, she would have let him get out and open the door for her, but she put away her formalities and opened it herself. Once inside she looked down to adjust her blouse, smoothing the material over her contours so that the fit was without wrinkle. This was perhaps an indirect way of giving Roger permission to look also.

“Are you ready?” he asked, once she was fixed.

Amanda nodded with a smile, making sure to give him quick, flirty glances lest he see her nose either directly or in profile. As he drove, Amanda bent over toward Roger often to adjust the radio. She found a new song every five minutes and sang the words. With each station changed, Roger had to make a concerted effort to stay in the proper lane.

“So what movie do you want to see?” she asked.

“I thought a foreign film might make for a sophisticated change. Or aren’t you in the mood for subtitles?”

“A foreign film sounds good,” said Amanda, knowing full well that theaters showing foreign films were darkly lit.
“There’s the re-release of *The Seventh Seal* and *Cyreno de Bergerac* playing at the Imperial. Do you have a preference?”

“What’s *The Seventh Seal* about?”

“It’s an Ingmar Bergman film about a knight’s search for the existence of God during the Black Death of Europe.”

Great, just the thing for a formal date, thought Amanda. I feel like I’m in some twisted fairy tale.

“*Cyreno de Bergerac* might better fit the occasion. It’s more a couple’s movie,” said Roger.

“I’ve never seen an Ingmar Bergman film. Let’s try that.”

The movie house was cloistered and stuffy, causing Amanda to perspire and make her nose and make-up run. In addition, she could not follow the plot of the movie, for it was too abstract for her liking. The subtitles were as elusive as the content, they seemed to hurry by like fleeting thoughts.

*I want to confess as openly as I can, but my heart is empty.* God, my nose is full. I’ll be lucky to make it through the night without sneezing again. Roger’s cologne is nauseating.

*The emptiness is a mirror turned toward my own face.* If I turn my head slightly away from him, maybe it won’t stick out as much.

*I see myself in it and am filled with fear and disgust. Now I live in a world of phantoms. I am imprisoned in my dreams and fantasies.* Dear God, I forgot my Kleenex. I can feel my face ready to explode any second.

*It’s hard to conceive God with one’s own senses. Why should He hide in a mist of half spoken promises? Why can’t I kill God within me? Why can’t I have normal allergies like everyone else? I bet Roger can’t remember the last time he sneezed.*

*Why does He live on in this painful and humiliating way, even though I curse Him and want to tear Him out of my heart? Why in spite of all is He a baffling reality that I can’t shake off? Oh God, I feel it coming. Go way, please, just wait until I get to the bathroom.*

*I want God to stretch out His hand to me, reveal Himself to me, and speak to me, but He remains silent. I want knowledge, not faith, not supposition, but knowledge.* “I need a Kleenex. Do you have one? I need to go to the ladies room then.”

*I call out to Him in the dark, but no one seems to be there.* It’s so dark in here.

I hope I can make it. “Excuse me.”

*In our fear of death we make an image and call that image God.* God, I know I won’t be able to find the bathroom. I didn’t see one when I came in. Oh please let me find it.

When the movie was over, Roger escorted Amanda out of the theater and noticed several men look approvingly at them. He felt smug walking arm and arm with Amanda in the crowd of people and brushed up against her breasts in appreciation. Amanda did not mind.

“Did you like the movie?” he asked during the drive home.

“Yes, it was very profound. I like movies that make you think. I hope I did not spoil it for you by my trips to the bathroom. I’ve never had a worse cold.”

“I didn’t mind.”
Amanda felt very awkward as Roger pulled in her drive. She felt that she should compensate him in some way for such an uneventful date. Maybe he wanted a kiss, but her nose hurt to even touch it. "Would you like to come in?" she asked.

Amanda left Roger in the dark living room as she went to the bathroom. She was hoping that her nose was back to its normal size.

By the bathroom light, Amanda excitedly took out the mirror in her compact to check her nose. God, it's huge, she thought. It's getting worse instead of better. I thought I might let Roger kiss me, but he'll have to come at me sideways to get around my nose. Why did I invite him in? I should have known better. She hurriedly powdered her nose and used a Q-tip to remove the dried blood from the inside of her nostrils.

Amanda brought Roger a drink from the kitchen and sat down beside him on the sofa. "I hope it's not too dark in here," she said. "My eyes are sensitive to bright light because of my allergies. I like your cologne, what's it called?"

"I'm surprised you can smell it with your cold."

"I didn't so much as smell it as feel its presence. It's my intuition, I guess," she laughed.

After a bit of conversation, Roger put down his drink and took Amanda's hand. "While we were watching the movie, it occurred to me, not in a religious way, but in a real and dramatic way that our time together is limited. We are so hampered by wristwatches and sidewalks and formalities of etiquette and dating that we don't act passionately and impulsively and open up to what we really feel. Extemporaneous speech is becoming a lost art. Everything is so planned and prognosticated. We've got psychics and stock brokers telling us what we think we need to hear instead of listening to ourselves. So," he paused, "I'm going to be very expressive with my feelings right now...

Roger took a deep breath, held it, and smiled; then, he exhaled in relief. Amanda could sense that his mind was brainstorming. "I like the way you answer questions in drama class. You're very thoughtful in your answers, and I can tell you're a very reflective, caring person. The other day, for instance, I like how your ears perked up when Dr. Kellogg began imitating the dog. You were silent, but I could tell that you wanted to bark along with him." As he spoke, Roger maintained a constant gaze toward Amanda, hoping their glances would meet, but Amanda met with his eyes haphazardly. She could feel her pulse squeezing her watchband tight.

"Amanda, I can tell that you like to hold back your feelings and think things through. But, I want you to forget about your past views on pacing a relationship right now. I want to know the real Amanda Conally. I don't want the prim and proper first-few-dates version who laughs at all my jokes and pretends to be interested in whatever I say. I want to know what you think is beautiful in this world, what you love and don't love, and what kind of dog bark makes you the happiest. I want you to close your eyes and imagine there is nothing holding back what you really want to say. Think of what we might do together if we fully expressed ourselves."

Amanda laughed heartily and blushed a deep red. She closed her eyes and let Roger take her other hand tight. However confused, Amanda loved the way she was feeling. It was as if she was a schoolgirl again and a boy with peanut-butter breath had asked her to kiss behind the garage. Surely, her nose couldn't look that bad.
“What do you see, Amanda? What do you feel?” said Roger, tagging a laugh to the last question.

Amanda was about to answer, but his laugh made her feel self-conscious. She thought he might be laughing at the disfigurement of her face, so she opened her eyes and looked at Roger directly, as a test, trying to look neither interested nor indifferent. After a moment of contact, his eyes, once fixed and serious, showed nervousness; they darted back and forth. Amanda quickly looked away.

Oh my God, I'm hideous, she thought. He can't stand to look at me. I should never have invited him in. I'm such a fool.

As Amanda fretted, her head lowering, Roger reached his hand under her chin, raised her head slightly and kissed her. It was a delicate kiss, passionately placed, and lasting long enough for Amanda to think it genuine.

Amanda watched Roger as he kissed her, and she thought it ironic that he was the one to close his eyes. Surely, he cares deeply, she thought. He closed his eyes for me.

Once her lips grew accustomed to Roger's, Amanda let the kiss take a new course. Her chest was pounding with anticipation and she felt a series of little twinges fire like circuits throughout her body. She imagined they were the pricks of acupuncture pins, heightening her sensation while at the same time narrowing the gap between sensitivity and numbness. Her mouth was aroused and flooded with saliva. Lulled by a surge of blood to her head, she closed her eyes and let a familiar dream take shape in her mind.

"Don't you want to look pretty like the little girls in the movies? Tatum O'Neill let her mommy pierce her ears."

"But it'll hurt. And it leaves holes," said Mandi.

"You're not backing out now, missy. You're the one who wanted this."

"I changed my mind. I don't want holes."

"Now listen, it's not painful. The man in the jewelry store takes a little instrument and quicker that you can say your name he puts an itsy-bitsy hole in each of your lobes. Your ear is made of cartilage, anyway, Mandi. Cartilage is rubber, like your pencil eraser. You can stick things through it without tearing it."

Mandi held her mother's hand tightly as they entered the jewelry store. "Are you coming with me?" she pleaded.

"Sure, honey," said her mother, approaching the saleswoman behind the counter. "I'd like to have my daughter's ears pierced, please, by the most gentle pair of hands you've got," she said, smiling down at Mandi.

Mandi's mother noticed a row of sale items in the main case, so she let the saleswoman take Mandi into the back room. "You're a big girl now. You don't need to hold your hand anymore," said her mother as she checked the prices closely.

The saleswoman's hands were cold and her face expressionless. She reminded Mandi of the stoic nurse that escorted her into her grandmother's room in the nursing home. "It'll just take a second, dear. We'll give you a cherry lolly pop when you're finished," she coaxed. "Jim," she called into the adjoining room, then smiled back at Mandi.

A squat man with black horn-rimmed glasses emerged, wiping his hands on a piece of immaculate cloth. "Got a couple of fishes that want to be hooked, eh?" he asked playfully. Without hesitation, he took a small instrument from his trouser
pocket, adjusted it, and sat in a chair opposite Mandi. His breath was so heavy that his
nose hairs moved in and out. Mandi knew that boys who came breathing hard had just
hurt someone at recess. She wanted to rush into the next room and tell her Mom.

"This will just take a second, dear," he said. Mandi wanted to tell him her
name, but he did not seem interested. He took a piece of gauze and wiped her ears
with alcohol. The smell burned her nose and she sneezed. "I'm going to tell on you,
mister," said Mandi. "You're a dirty old man."

"That's no way to treat a person, young lady. Didn't your mother teach you
some manners?" he asked.

Mandi did not answer. She pulled her skirt down and hugged her knees.

"Now, raise up, dear. Lean your head back and close your eyes," urged the
man. "Now, turn your head. OK, you're going to feel a little sting, but it'll go away."

He placed the instrument to Mandi's ear quickly and squeezed.

Amanda felt the pierce and recoiled before it went completely through. "Now
hold on," said the man angrily. "Your not supposed to move. Do you see what you
made me do?" He took the saturated rag again to her ear. With her chest convulsing,
Amanda gave a stifled scream at the sight of the cloth. It was stained with blood.

"You're bleeding."

Amanda lay there with her eyes closed. Her hands were reached over her head
and fastened to the arm of the sofa. She was not sleeping, only resting temporarily as if
outside letting the sun was lull her with its warmth. She was flushed and light-headed
because her blouse was pulled up to her neck, cutting off blood to her face.

"There's blood on your sofa. Do you want to stop?"

She awoke suddenly as if some spoken word had triggered it. "What?" She
lifted up on her elbows and peered with difficulty over her breasts. Her vision was
obscured, but she could see traces of blood on the sofa. She imagined it was a blood
darker than any she had seen before. Once focused, she noticed the crimson tint on the
matted hair at the base of the V formed by her legs. "Oh my God," she exclaimed.
"What have you...what did we..." She looked at him with horrific repugnance. "I
thought you were a gentle person. Why did you have to cut me open like a cadaver you
might be working on in the fall?" She doubled over and grabbed at her pelvis with
both hands. The pain she felt was more than a cramp. It seemed to hollow out her
body, leaving a gnawing emptiness.

She rocked back and forth in agony, crying from sickness and embarrassment.
Roger tried to comfort her by placing his hand on her shoulder but she pushed away.
He went to the bathroom and brought back a towel to soak up the blood on the sofa.
"No, don't," shrieked Amanda. "Get dressed and go. We've turned this place into a hut
for bleeding. I want to be left alone to bleed."

Amanda looked to her admission ticket to make sure she had found the right
room. The number matched her ticket, so she went in and found her seat. She was
early. The proctor was at the front mouthing the instructions she had to read. The
desk was too small for Amanda so she walked about the room to pass time. It was the
same room she had failed the test six months earlier.

She looked for traces of blood on the desks and steps. They were spotless. She
turned up the corners of her mouth and rested her hands on her stomach.

The test proceeded like it had before. She failed to finish all the questions in each section, but felt confident in the ones she answered. The essay portion of the test allowed her to reflect and counterpoise her analytical mind set. The first essay question prompted her to elaborate on the nature of citizenship and the role of the government in health care. She had expected it, and without complication, she provided a focused response.

The second essay, however, called for a response based on personal experience. What the question amounted to, Amanda reasoned, was Why should I be a physician? Or, more specifically: What responsibility do I have to myself to be a physician and caregiver? Amanda at first planned to write about the philosophical and ethical justifications for such a commitment, but felt a story would better suffice.

She began with a sneeze and ended with a child wrapped inside her belly.
THE OBJECT BENEATH, original screenplay

by Michael Stultz

1. Exterior. Establishing shot of old, knotted tree without leaves, split above trunk. There is a knot on the tree just below left of where it is split. The bark appears otherwise very smooth. As last notes of title music fade out, the sound of breathing fades in. The breathing is deep and relaxed, with unusually long intervals between each breath.

2. Tracking shot through "V" of the tree, to an upper-level window of a modest suburban house in background. Camera focuses on window, moves through it, then fades to black. Two long breaths are taken on blank screen.

3. Cut quickly to tile ceiling from bed level. Gasp of waking up suddenly. Breathing increases, with intensity.

4. Cut quickly to Miles in bed, viewed from ceiling. His room is well-lit in parts by sunlight filtering through his windows. Other parts are ominously dark. The bed is cramped in a corner. The mattress is twin-sized and pales in comparison to large wooden frame and posts. Miles' mouth is agape as he lies motionless on his back. He is dressed in the previous night's clothes, with shirt unbuttoned, and is sweating profusely.

5. MCU from overhead of Miles as he has difficulty swallowing. He tastes his mouth and looks perplexed. He begins to turn his head slightly toward rest of room.

6. Flash pan across Miles' room from his perspective. The images of a cluttered room are barely distinguishable. He makes a muffled groan.

7. (Tilted-angle) MCU from side of Miles blinking his eyes and shrugging somewhat to get a crick out of his neck.

8. XCU of digital clock on a nightstand coming into focus. It is 10:30 in the morning. In the foreground, a bottle of sleeping pills comes into focus. The cap is off and the bottle is nearly empty.

9. MCU from foot-corner of bed of Miles watching his fingers extend and move toward edge the bed. In the foreground is a particular pattern in the wood frame of the bed. It appears to be a pair of ominous eyes. Miles' fingers respond lethargically and he gives up trying to move them. He looks again to the nightstand.

10. Shot (using telephoto lens?) from behind nightstand. Miles is looking at the bottle, blurred in foreground. The nightstand is near the bed, but seems to him out of reach.
11. Shot of Miles in bed from ceiling, a bit higher than before. His body seems to be in perpetual strain. Voice-over, Miles: "I can't move. What happened to me last night?"

12. Cut to XCU of phone, ringing loudly.

13. Cut quickly to XCU of Miles, startled, turning his head slightly. He grimaces from the noise.

14. Cut to XCU of phone, ringing loudly for last time.

15. Cut to XCU of Miles, eyes widening in realization as echoes of phone ringing continue.

16. Quick, dream-like sequence. Shots of Miles looking angry, yelling, jerking about his room from night before. Muted color shots, with bleak out-of-focus surroundings [pattern of all dream-like shots]. Miles' face is distorted; the colors in it bleed together like an overwashed piece of clothing. Loud music of underground genre accompanies shots.

17. Shot of Miles in bed from ceiling, a bit higher than before. Echoes of ringing still continue, but are fading.

18. Quick, dream-like shot of Miles, kneeling before his bed, pleading over the phone, and crying from night before. Muted color shots.

19. XCU of Miles, eyes widened, as echoes of ringing fades out. Voice-over, Miles: "Oh my God! I tried to kill myself last night!" There is a short pause. Then, as an afterthought: "But I don't remember how."

20. Slow tracking shot from bed-level top of Miles lying in bed. Shot begins at his head and moves toward his feet. His body seems overly-large, like a landscape viewed from high above. Voice-over, Miles: "Was it an overdose on the sleeping pills? No, I usually take two or three before going to bed. Maybe I just drank too much and imagined I tried to kill myself."

21. XCU of Miles closing his eyes, in deep thought. After a moment, he opens his eyes and looks to the nightstand.

22. Cut to XCU of framed snapshot on the nightstand of Miles and Mickey holding giant stuffed frog.

23. Exterior shot. Medium shot of Mickey and Miles walking hand in hand at amusement park, sharing cotton candy. They are laughing and licking each others fingers. The pink sticky candy looks like blood on their hands and face. Carnival music plays in background. Screams from crowd are heard.

24. Exterior shot of Miles in foreground throwing ball at stack of bottles; he knocks them down and is awarded a giant frog from the attendant, which he gives to Mickey. They laugh and hug.
25. Exterior shot. MCU of Miles and Mickey ascending roller coaster. They are looking serious at each other. No sound.

26. Cut to exterior shot of Miles and Mickey descending roller coaster. They are screaming and raising their hands. At the base of the drop Mickey takes hold of Miles' arm tightly. Sound bridge of thundering roller coaster carries to next shot.

27. Cut to overhead MCU of Miles in bed. He struggles to raise his head.

28. Flash pan from Miles' perspective of bedroom floor. Pan stops on glass bottle partially covered by a sock. Voice over, Miles: "So there's my liquor bottle. There's got to be another one around here somewhere."

29. Cut to overhead MCU of Miles resting head on pillow, exhaling heavily. He makes an effort to look under his chin. Voice over, Miles: "No noose." (He laughs). "At least I didn't try to hang myself." He closes his eyes. The camera gradually focuses in on Miles' face.

30. Extreme overhead shot of Miles in bed. The bed turns slightly counter-clockwise and begins to sink. The bed falls into a mire of muddy water, submerges, and begins to float downstream, feet first. Muted color shot, a bit more grainy than previous dream shots. Music fades in. The score has heavy strings and is eerie and psychedelic.

31. Medium, moving shot from one river bank of Miles looking horrified, coughing up water, still unable to move his torso. The surroundings are as murky as the river. The outline of a bleak forest can be seen in the background. Low hum of strings, almost like distant groans, is heard.

32. MCU from above left of Miles looking around. "Where the hell am I?" he asks. As he says this, animalistic laughter is heard. Miles spots something overhead and focuses on it.

33. Long shot from ground level of shadowed Harpies flying against the red sky. They are grotesque creatures, half bird, half disfigured man. Their laughter is heard from overhead.

34. MCU shot of Miles struggling to move from bed. He strains in frustration.

35. Medium shot from river bank of Miles' bed traveling down river. It is picking up speed. Laughter fades.

35. MCU of Miles. He notices something up ahead. Sound of water is heard.
36. Shot from Miles' perspective of swirling water funnel. Music intensifies. Fretting sounds from Miles are heard.

37. CU from foot of Miles' bed, looking toward him. His bed jars from entering funnel and begins to spin and descend. [Allegro] Miles becomes more audible; despairs.

38. Full shot from overhead of funnel. Miles' bed is waning, as are his cries.

39. CU from foot of Miles' bed, looking toward him. Water is surrounding his bed, carrying it toward the hollowed, dry eye of the storm beneath.

40. Full shot from overhead of funnel. Miles' bed becomes completely out of view. His cries are silenced. Music fades. Camera focuses on empty point of funnel.

41. Cut to XCU of swirling water in toilet. Flushing sound and female groaning is heard.

42. XCU of Mickey's face from perspective of inside toilet. She coughs and groans, spits.

43. Medium shot of Mickey turning from toilet slowly and dialing number on cordless phone. She wipes her mouth with a towel as she waits for an answer. "Miles? Miles, it's me. I'm vomiting. I may... may be...pregnant. What am I going to do?"

44. Medium shot of Miles looking stunned, sitting slowly at kitchen table. "Are you sure? How do you know? Have you taken a test? Did it turn out blue?" His voice is noticeably shaken.

45. Medium shot of Mickey crossing legs on bathroom floor. She slumps over and holds her stomach. "I don't have to take a test. I know. I'm sick. I never get sick in the mornings."

46. Shot of Miles nervously taking off aspirin bottle cap with one hand. "Well, just calm down. I'll go to the store and get a home pregnancy test just to be sure. I'll be there as soon as I can, OK?" Miles hangs up the phone quickly and exits.

47. Cut to shot of darkened room with lighted doorway down the hall. Miles' and Mickey's voices are overheard: "Here, let me do it. It's my stuff." "Mickey, why don't you wait in the living room. I'll mix these last two by myself." After a moment, Mickey emerges from doorway and sits on sofa in foreground left. She is visibly nervous. She covers her mouth with her hands and pulls her face down; her eyes drape, transforming her attractive features into an abstract mask. In the background, Miles' shadow is seen. He is about to enter the hallway, but hesitates and drops to one knee; his head sinks. His outreached arm is visible; it is holding the vile. Mickey hears him murmur; she turns her head and throws herself into the hallway, grabbing the vile on her knees. Camera moves in. "It's blue. It's blue. I told you, Miles. Why didn't you believe..."
me? It's blue. I knew it would be blue. Why did we have to waste fifteen dollars to make sure it would be blue." Her speech is rapid and mechanical. Miles emerges from the bathroom doorway and embraces her from behind. He looks at her to see if she acknowledges his gesture, but she continues to stare at the blue vial. "That fifteen dollars we could have used toward the 400 it's going to take to..." Her voice falls. "No. No. No, we're going to have the baby, Mickey." He turns her around and puts her face in his hands. "We're going to have the baby," he says, looking her sternly in the eye. Mickey does not return his glance, but looks sunkenly at the now empty vial.

48. Cut back to CU from side of Miles in bed, eyes closed in sleep, shaking his head as if to stop his dream. Music fades in.

49. Shot from ceiling, a bit higher than before, of Miles in bed shaking.

50. Cut to slow moving shot. Camera travels down an unmarked path in shaded forest. There is no green foliage, only knotted and twisted, poisonous thorns. Moans are heard, almost indiscernible voices: "We were men, and now are turned to wood; your hand should have been more merciful if we had the souls of serpents."
The camera approaches a solitary tree at the end of the path and focuses on it. The tree is split above its trunk and has a knot near its heart. Breathing sounds are heard.

51. CU of Miles in bed from side; tilted angle. He arches his back in his sleep. A glint of metal flashes just above his lower back. He wakes up suddenly in pain, grimaces. He is perturbed and looks down over shoulder. Voice over, Miles: "What the hell is that thing?"
He looks around the room.

52. Slow pan from Miles' perspective across bedroom floor, left to right. Voice over, Miles: "Must be a liquor bottle." At end of pan, camera moves up to wall opposite left of bed. A gunrack is mounted on the e wall. Two rifles hang vertically; several handguns are shown in profile. One is missing. Camera is focuses on empty spot in gunrack.

53. XCU of Miles in bed from side. He looks paralyzed.

54. Quick dream-like shot of Miles handling gun recklessly from night before. He is standing, taking gun from his hip and trying to spin it on his finger.

55. Cut to quick dream-like shot of Miles seated, writing a letter at his desk. He holds his gun flat to his head, with the barrel pointing upward. He seems to be using it as a thinking device while he writes.
56. CU of Miles in bed from side. He swallows hard and closes his eyes.

57. Medium shot of Mickey standing alone, staring at Miles' gun case. She looks around, then opens it and handles a pistol. She looks at it curiously, puts it back, and takes out another. Off screen, Miles: "Mickey?"
She hurries to put the pistol back.

58. MS of Miles coming into the room through doorway. He sees Mickey closing the case quickly.

59. MCU from Miles' perspective of light reflecting off moving glass door of the gun case.

60. MS from right corner of room of Miles approaching Mickey.
Miles: "What are you doing?"
Mickey: "I'm sorry, Miles, I was just curious. I just wanted to know what was so special about...(she nods at the guns)...that you spend every weekend at the levee."
Miles: "Don't worry. I'm not reprimanding you, but I wish you would have told me, that's all. Here, let's go out back and I'll show you how to use them." (He takes a rifle and a pistol from the case).

61. MCU of Mickey bringer her hands nervously to her chest.
Mickey: "No. I really don't believe in..."

62. MCU from over Miles' right shoulder. Mickey is frozen.
Miles (defensive): "You don't believe? How can you not believe? Look." (He brings a pistol [the first one she handled] to her face). "This is real, Mickey. This has real power. You cannot ignore this power." (She takes a step back).
(He puts gun to his side). "What I mean to say is...the more you know about guns, the more you will believe." (Mickey looks away, to the open gun case. Miles turns to leave.) "You coming?"

63. MCU from over Mickey's shoulder of her looking at the second pistol she handled. "Let's take this one." (She lifts it from the case). "It's more my size, anyway."

64. XCU of Mickey holding gun. She turns it so that it glimmers in the filtered sunlight of the room. She begins to place her finger near the trigger. Miles places his hand on Mickey's and takes it away from the trigger. From behind, he takes hold of the gun handle with his other hand.

65. MCU of Miles putting gun carefully back in the case, still holding Mickey's hand. He then brings her hands to his lips and kisses them. They embrace.
Miles (softly): "I never told you this before, but I almost killed my dad with that gun..."
Mickey: "Wh--"
Miles: "...by accident. We were playing around out back, acting like a couple of gunslingers. He never told me it had a hairpin, and I never thought to ask. Luckily it hit him in the foot. He was lying there bleeding, so calm. He told me about the gun, how it must have a mind of its own. I wanted to call an ambulance. He told me to go put the gun in my case and never shoot it again. It's still loaded, Mickey. This is the first time I've touched it in six years."

Camera moves through the two embracing and focuses on the pistol. It is silver and the light highlights its polish.

66. Cut to XCU of metallic piece wedged under Miles' upper back.

67. Cut to MCU of Miles tightening in his bed. He extends his arm from his side and attempts to coil it to reach the pistol, but the mattress, sunken in the middle, prohibits his arm's full range of motion.

68. Extended overhead shot of Miles from ceiling. He extends both arms outwards, perpendicular to his body, straightens his legs together, and sinks his head slowly forward.

Voice over, Miles: "Why hast thou forsaken me?"

Variation of title score fades in. It is a solitary guitar.

69. XCU of Miles closing his eyes. Long take.

70. Cut to Long shot of two hunters walking down a marked path. It is early morning. The grass is wet with dew and the sun is missing. Music stops with cut. Sounds of insects, birds chirping are heard.

71. MS of hunters working their way through dense thicket, treading softly. Camera only shows their legs and boots.

Sound of a squirrel is heard and the hunters stop.

Asynchronous sound of hunter (whispering): "I see him."

Sound of rifle cocking. After a pause, a shot is fired. The hunter rushes to his kill. The camera lingers on the matted grass.

Off-screen, other hunter: "D'you get him?" Sounds of hunters fade.

72. Cut to MS from behind two hunters, Miles and his father. They are standing side by side with their backs are to the camera. The father has a burlap bag slung over his shoulder, containing the killed squirrel. Their rifles are tucked under their arms, pointing downward. They are urinating in the woods.

Dad begins song, then Miles joins in: "This is my rifle, this is my gun. This is for fighting, this is for fun."

Father shakes his hips while singing.

Miles: "Hey, don't cross the streams."

73. Cut to MCU of Miles in bed from extremely sharp side angle. He eyes are closed.

74. MS from Miles' perspective of Mickey entering room, wearing a wedding dress. She comes to Miles' bed.
75. MS showing Miles' bed from side. Mickey takes his hand, laces her fingers with his and pulls at his arm. His arm does not give Miles: "We can't get married, Mickey. My parents want me to finish college first."
She lets go of his hand and takes off her heels and garter. She lifts up her dress to reveal her white stocking and garter. She sits on the side of the bed and puts her thigh next to Miles' hand. He takes hold of the stocking. She drops to the floor, supporting her body with her arms, and extends her leg upward; thus pulling the stocking off.
Variation of title music fades in. Piano with light strings accompanying.

76. MCU from behind Miles with floor in view. Mickey sits on bed from other angle and has Miles take stocking off in same manner. She then takes off her panties, unbuttons the back of her strapless dress, and pulls it down to expose her breasts. She gets on the bed near the foot.

77. MCU shot from other side of bed, as viewed from nightstand. Mickey straddles Miles and moves toward him, dragging her breasts across his stomach and chest. Miles: "No...don't." She bends down and kisses him on the lips. Sound of pants unzipping are heard.

78. XCU from side of Mickey kissing Miles. Fairly long take. She leans back.

79. MS shot of Mickey sitting on Miles' hips. She reaches her hand down and adjusts herself. Miles: "Mickey, no. Not now, Mickey. Don't move me. I can't move. Under my back."

80. MCU shot from head of bed with Miles' head in foreground. Mickey begins to undulate her hips. Miles mingles moans with various pleadings for her to stop. As she moves, her abdomen slowly begins to swell. Miles: "I don't feel so good." He stiffens himself as his mouth fills with vomit. He tilts his head back to spit out the excess contents off screen. Mickey continues to move across his hips and swell.

81. MCU from side of Mickey coming to rest. She looks down to her abdomen and realizes that she is well into her pregnancy.

82. XCU of Miles' face; it is pale, and he wears a listless expression. He turns his head away from Mickey and the vomit in disgust.

83. Extreme shot from ceiling of Mickey moving from bed to floor. Miles turns his head from her as she sits in the floor and puts her stockings and heels back on.
84. MCU from head corner of Miles' bed of Mickey standing by bed. She looks at him solemnly for a moment, then moves to closet and removes a hanger. Camera follows her as she leaves the room. Camera blurs Mickey and focuses on Miles in foreground. 
Miles: "Mickey? Where are you going with that hanger? Come back here. We talk this through. It's my decision too, you know...Mickey!"
Sound bridge, phone ringing.

85. XCU of Miles in bed waking up. Phone rings several times.

86. XCU of answering machine clicking on.
Miles' voice on machine: "This is Miles' room. I can't come to the phone right now. Please leave your name, message, and the time you called."
Mickey leaves message: "Miles? Where are you? I tried to go to Louisville last night, but I didn't think I could make it without you. I really needed to talk to you, but like always, you're never around when I need you. Call me back. Otherwise, I'm going to have the operation today, despite how much you pretend to dislike it."

87. XCU of Miles' face. Camera focuses on his eye and moves in. Once it completely fills screen, camera moves out, fading into the black sun of lower hell.
Strings fade in.

88. Camera pans down to forests of the suicides. Miles' treetop is shown, barren and shaking in the wind. Camera pans down to the base. An empty children's swing hangs from a branch. Camera moves in to XCU of tree base, revealing a trickle of sap meandering through the bark. A minute green sprout is beginning to open up.
Strings fade out. Sound bridge: car honks.

89. Cut quickly to CU of Miles moving his eyes toward window.

90. Exterior. Mickey's car pull into his driveway. The day is blinding compared to the darkly lit shots from Miles' room.

91. MS with Mickey's car in foreground, looking up at Miles' bedroom window. She honks her horn twice, then gets out of car and knocks on front door with her car still running.

93. Cut quickly to Miles in his bed. Medium shot that becomes haphazardly close-up shot.
Miles: "Mickey! I'm up in my room! Come up here now!"

94. Cut to MCU of Mickey standing on front porch, arms folded, looking at the tree in complete silence. She turns and rings door bell repeatedly.

95. Cut to MCU of Miles. "Mickey!"
96. Medium tracking shot of Mickey moving from porch to tree, looking up at Miles' window.

97. MS of Miles, foot of bed with window in view. Theme fades in, in full orchestration. Tempo increased. Miles: "Hell, if I die--I die. I'm not going to lie here any more." Camera moves, encircling his bed slowly to the head, near the nightstand. As it moves, Miles contracts his muscles and moves onto the balls of his feet. His hand finds support on the firm mattress edge. "explode on three. One...[doorbell rings]...Two...[doorbell rings]" Camera moves in. "Three!" [doorbell rings on three]. Miles twists from the bed and falls to the floor. The camera moves into position behind the glass window, following Mile's tumble without showing the pistol. Miles is limp for a moment on the floor, then he gets to his feet and, lunging at the camera, breaks the pane of the window. "Mickey!" Blood forms on his wrists. Music intensifies.

98. Cut quickly to MCU of Mickey closing door from inside car. The door catching on the metal is piercing, creating a vacuum of silence until she turns on the ignition. She pulls from the driveway. Camera focuses on her face looking at house for last time. She turns the wheel once out of the driveway, shifts the gears, and leaves slowly.

99. Cut to Miles racing out of his room, still shot from broken window.

100. Cut to Miles bounding down stairs. Only his legs and feet are shown. He stumbles a bit, gains his balance, then hurdles the camera.

101. CU from behind Miles as he struggles to open the door. Once open, the door reveals a light that blinds Miles.

102. CU of Miles' face from just outside doorway looking in. He shades his eyes with his hand, looking outside. Sound car leaving is immediately heard. Miles: "Mickey!"

103. Tracking shot from behind Miles running through yard.

104. Close-up tracking shot of Miles from ground front. Sounds of his accelerated breathing are punctuated. The slap of his feet against the concrete is heard as background sound.

105. Tracking shot from behind Miles. He is now on the street and Mickey's car is seen in distance. Camera stops, Miles runs for a few more feet and stops.

106. LS from Miles' perspective of Mickey's car ascending a hill and turning onto the highway.

107. CU looking up at Miles. His mouth is agape, and he is panting, doubled over in exhaustion. He runs back toward his house.
108. MS from yard of Miles throwing open front door.

109. MS from doorway of empty room. Miles comes into picture, breathing heavily. He looks around the room in a frenzy, overturning laundry and books on the floor. Under his breath, "Where are my keys?" (Several times).

110. MCU from floor level side of Miles as he looks across his room.

111. Quick pan from lower part of gun shelf to bed and nightstand. Camera focuses on glint of metal on bed as filtered sunlight hits it.

112. MS of Miles moving to bed and taking pistol from sunken mattress. He turns the gun over, examining it as if he had never seen it before. Fairly long take of Miles inspecting gun. Music fades in.

113. CU of gun from Miles' perspective. It is raised off screen.

114. CU of Miles with pistol at his temple.

115. Quick flash of Miles with pistol at his temple from night before. Muted color shot.

116. Quick flash of solitary tree in forest. Music tempos begins to increase.

117. Sudden flash of black cloaked figure striking V of tree with a scythe-like instrument.

118. Quick flash of Mickey taking a bloody hanger from between her legs on clinic's table. She is in a black wedding dress.

119. Quick cut to XCU of Miles closing his eyes. The gun is shaking in his hand. He breathes hard twice. Musical score culminates, stops, then begins again with solitary guitar.

120. MS from ceiling above bed. Camera moves in slowly.

121. XCU of his finger extending toward trigger. It pauses and finds safety notch. Music stops. Sound of trigger locking is heard. "No where are my keys?" Fade to black.