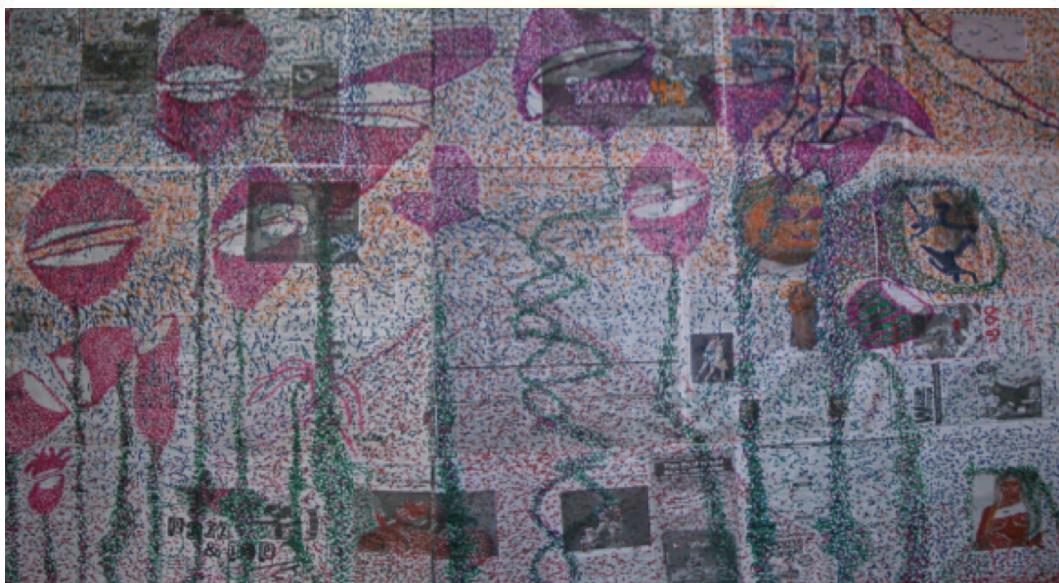

May 2004



Volume One / Issue Eleven

strawberry press magazine

**New Fiction by Kyle Flak, Cris Ritchie and
Whit Frazier**

STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE

MAY 2004

VOLUME ONE ISSUE ELEVEN

Check out the new look of www.strawberrypress.net online. We publish print and online fiction from all different types of authors and we are currently working on our second book publication – a collection of short fiction. We are also accepting submissions for upcoming issues of strawberry press magazine.

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A Kloomper Eats an Apple © 2004, Kyle Flak
Without Time © 2004, Cris Ritchie

Volume One Issue Eleven

Volume One Issue Eleven is maybe the shortest issue of Strawberry Press Magazine yet. And once again, it is an all fiction issue. We are trying to focus our vision here, and get more of a sense where we want to take this magazine in the next year. It's never easy getting this thing out, but it's a labor of love, so I can't really complain.

Our next issue will be the last issue of our first year. I'm very excited about this, and I definitely have some ideas in mind about how to send our first year out with a bang. Please write in with any feedback you have about Strawberry Press and the stories we publish. Writers thrive on feedback.

Cheers,

Whit Frazier
Strawberry Press
www.strawberrypress.net
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Kyle Flak: My name is Kyle P. Flak and I enjoy eating spaghetti

Cris Ritchie is an unemployed, college educated English major from Hazard, Kentucky.

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←

John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt

Whit Frazier



I

Alexander Hamilton walked out of his front door the morning of August 28th, 2004, prepared to die. His own death had been an issue with him for quite some time. His father, Timothy Hamilton, had insisted on naming their first (and as it turned out) only child Alexander, girl or boy, and though his mother, Mary Hamilton had argued against it, in the end his old-fashioned aristocratic despot of a father won the argument. Alexander Hamilton he was.

When he was real young he tried to hide the fact by calling himself Alex or Al, he even went sometimes by Albert, but in the end there was no running from his name. People would call him Alexander by default. It was as if his father had included some kind of aristocratic curse right along with him in the naming, and for years he had accepted it. Alexander Hamilton he was.

From the day of this acceptance – (and he remembered this day well: it was the spring of 1989, and he was thirteen years old; he was coming home from school one day, riding the schoolbus just like every other afternoon; the bus picked up students from three different schools, and one of them just so happened to be a high school; and right by this high school there was a small corner store that was bumrushed every afternoon by all the younger kids; naturally Albert Hamilton was one of them; well this particular afternoon a very pretty girl that he liked sometimes to glance at and smile at and was always too shy to say anything to asked him, will you buy me a bag of Skittles? – and how was he, Albert Hamilton, to say no to such a request? – only her request – it took her a moment to decide just what kind of candy she wanted – delayed him just enough to put him at the back of the line; the entire experience could only be called harrowing; the busses were already starting to lurch forward through the highschool parking lot, and here he comes, running and huffing and puffing, hands waving frantically and full of various bags of candy, praying Jesus don't let me get stuck here with all the highschool kids; (it had happened before: rumor had it that once little Simon Smith had been left behind at the highschool, and the next day he came in with a cast and crutches; said he had been chased through the parking lot, down the hill, up the hill, back through the parking lot, and finally in a desperate effort to save himself had launched himself over the hill, and gone crashing down through the trees and bushes and sticks and stones, and all those highschool kids did was stand there and laugh at him;) getting left

behind was not an option; so that Albert Hamilton ran waving and shouting in front of the schoolbus, until the driver saw him, stopped and let him back on the bus; and when he saw cute little whatshernname he handed her the candy, and she laughed so hard she fell back on her seat, while he stood there panting and sweating, and she shouted so the whole bus could hear: Alexander Hamilton, you are the absolute *cutest!* – and he thought to himself, beaming, naturally, why yes, yes I, Alexander Hamilton, am the absolute cutest – and from that day on he simply accepted the name, and even bore it with a certain amount of pride;) – though from the day of this acceptance, Alexander Hamilton had always been preoccupied with his own death.

It was not really a fair position to be put in. He had always been an admirer of the original Alexander Hamilton, and he could never decide if this was because Hamilton sounded like the kind of guy he would admire – or if it was just because they both had the same name. He remembered learning all about Alexander Hamilton when he was in sixth grade – the fiery federalist who always had something to say and even more to write – and most importantly, died in what he thought to be a very honorable manner at the hands of Aaron Burr. Yes, Aaron Burr he most certainly hated, but did he really like Alexander Hamilton or not? And if he did, how was he himself to die – the successor to a man with such a great legacy of death already behind him. Not a day went by after that fateful afternoon on the schoolbus that he didn't think and think hard about exactly how he wanted to die; and when.

When he finally got to high school himself it was the same old thing all over again. His history teacher in sixth grade had been a big fan of Alexander Hamilton. She pretty much revered him, and the fact that Alexander Hamilton had the same name as Alexander Hamilton made that a great class for him. He'd even written his end of the year essay on Alexander Hamilton because he knew it would be an automatic A. He'd come home, and his father would sit in his large leather easy chair, smoking an old oak pipe and say, "I envy you my boy. I have given you the life I always wanted myself. How many hours did I curse my own father for not giving me the name Alexander. What moron would pass up such a wonderful opportunity? Well, my boy, it is up to you to pass on the legacy. I want you to name your first child Alexander Hamilton II, and he shall in turn name his first child Alexander Hamilton III, and so on, so that our dynasty may grow." Alexander naturally had no intention of doing any

such thing; and while his history teacher in sixth grade had been a fan of Hamilton, his history teacher in ninth grade was an ex-hippie who came to work everyday in wrinkled old button downs two sizes too small, had big perspiration marks underneath his armpits every day (even in the dead of winter), began class discussion with things like: “if you don’t write poetry, are you truly alive?” and hated Alexander Hamilton with a passion. Alexander Hamilton represented everything coarse and boorish and mean-spirited about contemporary corporate America, and the first day of school when doing roll call, Mr. Slokorome actually stopped at Alexander’s name, went wild eyed and shouted: “which one of you is Alexander Hamilton!” To which Alexander sheepishly raised his hand. “Well, young man,” Mr. Slokorome went on, “this should be an interesting experience. I hope you harbor no love in your heart for your namesake.” To which Alexander said absolutely nothing. Naturally, things went downhill from there

Coming out of class that morning was a riot for the other kids. As soon as they walked out of the door they burst into song: *John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt! His name is my name too!* The whole experience was humiliating. When he got home he decided, just to piss the old man off a little bit, to tell him about what happened that day at school. They were at the dinner table when he did it. His father, always a composed man, set down his fork, and looked directly at his son for a minute or so surmising the situation. “Fools,” he said. And continued to eat. “And I want you to see if there’s any way you can get yourself out of this hippie teacher’s class. People like that shouldn’t be allowed to poison our children. Is this where my tax dollars go?”

When he graduated high school, Alexander’s father decided he was old enough to learn to shoot pistols, and took him out to the shooting range. While they were out there, Alexander first began to formulate the plan for his own death. Simple enough, he would have to manage to set up a duel between his father and himself. When his father went to shoot, he would, like the original Alexander Hamilton, raise his pistol in the air, and let his own father be his executioner. It was a plan that would take years for him to execute, but it had a poetic justice to it. Besides, he figured, he wasn’t necessarily in any hurry.

Alexander took to the pistols well. So well in fact that when he went to college, his father insisted he join the fencing club. “There is nothing more noble than a man of learning who can also sport,” his father said. And since it was all the

same to Alexander, he took the fencing classes as well. And with fencing he also demonstrated a unique ability. It became commonplace for him to demand satisfaction from his peers. People thought he was a little off. Girls stayed away from him. But everyone respected him – he would walk by with a confident stride; brave, intelligent, refined, Alexander Hamilton, afraid of no man, except maybe the old man.

The whole time of course he was plotting. Working on a plan where he could trick his father into killing him. Breaks home from school he would go through his father’s boxes, books, chests, drawers, cabinets, nothing. There had to be a reason someone would demand satisfaction of the old man. All there needed to be was a reason. Everything else would make sense in the warped old bastard’s mind. Nothing. He would pace the room, thinking, never father? Not even one mistress I can call you out on? Nothing. Year after year it was the same thing. The year he graduated from college he was ready to give up. The graduation speaker, some boring old historian, gave a speech about how they had the rest of their lives ahead of them, and where there was a will there was a way, and even a man with the most wild and implausible dream could make it a reality with ingenuity, planning and hardwork. Alexander wept through the whole thing.

The following summer Alexander fell into a heavy depression. His attachment to the idea of having his father kill him had been so strong, he could no longer give it up without feeling a certain heartache and loss. No new ideas came to him that he liked. There was no better way to die than the one he had decided on, and everytime he thought – but what if I were to die in this way? – no sooner had the thought entered his head, a moment later it lay a dead sterile thing in his heart. There was no way for him to beat his father’s curse. The old man had won.

II

Alexander went to work in the fall. He worked as an assistant to a high powered somebody or other at a high powered bank that his father had a lot of sway with. A job was a job was a job after all, and he would need money if he wanted to get away from his mother and the old man; and that he certainly wanted to do. Things were going well for him, but he couldn’t say he was happy, because his one dream in life had been shut down, and he saw no way to reverse the situation. Of course no one would have reason to demand satisfaction from his boring old buffoon of a

father. What woman would be his mistress? It was a miracle he found a woman to begin with. Alexander would go to bars, get drunk and go on and on about it until someone would tell him to shut the fuck up about his father and who did he think he was? Alexander loved this: I am Alexander Hamilton, he'd say. And I demand satisfaction. I challenge you to a duel. Things usually ended up being settled outside in a fistfight. Alexander never once lost.

Things went on this way for a few years. Alexander's parents were proud of him, the people he worked for were proud of him, his bartender was probably even proud of him, but he wasn't proud of himself, no matter how impressive a picture he presented. Women were always hitting on him. They loved him, they loved his haughtiness, his aristocratic mannerisms, his style, his name, but he didn't respect them. In the end he started dating a woman named Tina because she was a model, and he figured Alexander Hamilton should really only be dating in the upper echelon of women. Tina was a sexy young lady, tall, thin, raven black hair cut feathered just above her shoulders. She couldn't walk down the block without men turning around. She was crazy about Alexander. They would sit in his penthouse apartment, and he would read the paper and smoke cigars while she brought him martini after martini. She liked to curl up next to him on the couch and talk, while he read the paper, smoked cigars and drank martinis. If he needed anything he wouldn't even bother to look up. "Tina, get me a bottle of amontillado." "Yes, darling. Which car would you like me to take?" Everyone said Tina was good for him. It kept him out of the bars, kept him out of fights, and it gave him an air or aristocracy that almost matched his father's. The old man couldn't have been happier. This sickened Alexander.

Eventually Tina left him. There was, of course, a certain inevitability to that. Or rather, Tina didn't leave him, but he found out that Tina had taken to seeing other men on the side. His first reaction was mild joy: "I demand satisfaction!" But it turned out that there were so many of them, he would've had to demand satisfaction from pretty much half the city. This sent him back into a depression almost as heavy as the one he experienced right after his college graduation. He'd sit alone in his penthouse apartment watching the sun go down through the walls and on the windows and drink himself to sleep, murmuring over and over to himself the drunker and sleepier he got: "I demand satisfaction... I demand satisfaction..."

It took him a year to get through the depression, and he came out of it a little more bitter. "There is not a woman in the world," he would say, "that would not sell you up the river for the right price. Women are soulless snakes and they love nothing save material." It was something of a mantra of his. People would say to him, "Alexander, think of your mother. She, after all, is a woman." And Alexander would reply, "yes, yes, it is unfortunate it must always be that way, isn't it? That a man must come from a woman." So that Alexander got to thinking. Why not just trick his father into thinking he'd been cuckolded. His father had never been in that position before. Certainly he would want satisfaction of some sort. Alexander himself, as the faux other-man could propose the duel. The idea was ingenious! It was better than the first: revenge on both parents in one fell swoop, and on women in general by sullying the name of his own mother! From that moment on Alexander Hamilton was once again a happy and focused man.

The first thing he did was rent out a post office box. Then he typed a series of letters with the post office box as the return address. Through the first letter to the last, he wrote the story of his mother's relationship with this other man. He made the other man wealthy, aristocratic, intelligent, well spoken – in short an adversary worthy of his father. The other man liked to sport: he could shoot, he could fence, he knew French, Alexander left nothing to chance. This was to be a man his father could respect, admire, and kill with pride. Once he had finished writing his letters he folded them up, and went straightaway to his parent's place. He slipped in with the key, and was lucky to find that no one was home. He went up to the master bedroom and let himself in. His mother kept a chest of various valuables in the closet. He opened the chest, and buried the letters underneath a few other loose items. The first phase of his plan was complete.

A few weeks passed, and Alexander let things be. All was well with the world. Finally, one evening when he knew his mother would be out, he gave his father a call. "Father I have some very grave news." "What is it, Alexander?" "It has come to my attention that mother may be seeing another man." "Alexander, that's absurd." "I would it were not so, but my sources are reliable. I'm sorry father, but I can speak on this no longer." And he hung up the phone.

That night Alexander's father tore through the house looking for signs of infidelity. It was not long before he came across the letters. He read

through them, one by one, thoroughly, going back over passages, admiring the language and style, at the same time burning with anger. After he finished the entire set he sat down at his desk, and wrote only: "Dear sir. I have discovered the letters you have written to my wife. I demand satisfaction. Name the date, time and location. We will settle this like gentlemen. Yours, Timothy Hamilton." Then he folded up the letter, addressed it to the post office box referenced on the love letters, and placed it in the mail. He did not bring the issue up with his wife when he saw her later that evening. He returned the letters to their original location.

Alexander was delighted when he got his father's challenge a few days later. He wrote back, "Let the date be Saturday, August 28th. Let the time be nine in the morning. We will meet in Orchard Field. I love Mary with all my heart. I will die to defend that love. Yours, Aaron." Then he broke out a bottle of wine, and toasted his victory. He paced the floor, repeating over and over: "August 28th is the day I shall die. August 28th is the day I shall die." He was overjoyed; but also he was terrified.

His father's acceptance letter came a few days later. Once he received it, Alexander spent the next few weeks making all the necessary preparations a man needs make for his own death. He got his will in order. He tied up any loose

business. He made rounds to all his friends, and though, not in so many words, said his goodbyes to them. He made his peace with God.

On August 28th, 2004 Alexander Hamilton left his penthouse apartment for the last time. He gave it one last loving look, packed up his pistols, and set off towards Orchard Field. He had disguised himself with a Harlequin Mask, grown a mustache, let his hair grow out to his shoulders, and wore a large hat that covered the top portion of his face.

His father was waiting for him when he arrived at the field. "So you are Aaron," his father said. "The man who has stolen the affections of my wife?" Alexander nodded. His father smiled. "They say a father can always recognize his only son," said Alexander's father. "This is no exception; because I would swear on your grandmother's grave that you are the spitting image of my only child, Alexander Hamilton." Alexander froze. "What are you doing, my boy? Did you concoct this whole scheme simply to call out your own father? My boy, I must say, I am extremely proud of you! This plan of yours, why it is worthy of your name. You have turned out more like the original Alexander Hamilton than I ever could have hoped!"

And with that Alexander Hamilton shot his father dead on the spot.

A Kloomper Eats an Apple

Kyle Flak



“Looly-Dooly!” is what my feet are singing today. Or perhaps it is the shoes who do the singing. The feet are inside. Maybe they are even the vocal cords or throat or some such thing. But the shoe would be the singer, or at least the face that most people would attribute the words to.

So, then I shall say that my shoes are singing “Looly-Dooly!” as they Kloomp along the red brick road downtown. I may be the only one who uses the Kloomping technique of walking. My shoes slide slyly and slowly. It tickles the sweet red bricks all playful like until they laugh their little fucking heads off. I giggle back at them sometimes when the mood strikes me.

I look around for other Kloompers, but only see people with mean old elephant feet. These feet are made of tumors that get bigger and heavier everyday and make the road say, “My cousin Sam is a dirt driveway in the country. Nice white chickens cluck cluck and eat his gravel. Barefoot children pitter patter with their tiny toes and draw smiles in his sand. SIGH.”

Today, the road looks like Sally to me. She is not red. She is not a brick. And I don’t think she has ever been a brick. As long as I have known her, she has been a woman. A woman who works at the library.

Secretly, I think she is a Kloomper. I have not seen her walking style; she is always sitting behind a desk. But I have seen her staple papers together. She squeezes the stapler like it is her husband’s hand. If her husband exists. I do not know if she has a husband or if that husband that she has exists. But you must imagine. The stapler is like her husband’s hand—in the future—when they are both at the point in life when the skeleton frequently tries to jump out of the skin and tunnel under a pile of dirt. She wants him to know that her hand is there and full of love energy, but she doesn’t want to turn his hand into a pile of pretzel crumbs.

One of the bricks in the road reminds me of her eyebrow. It is red like the others and there are cigarettes and dog poo all over it. Sally doesn’t usually have cigarettes and dog poo all over her, but if she did I would still like her. Her spirit is a bright red like the brick and it would glow and shout until the poo and cigarettes decided to let her have all the attention.

I decide to pet the brick that looks like her eyebrow.

When my thumb goes in one direction, it says, “Wake up you little bastards!” Then all the hairs on Sally’s eyebrow stand up and pretend they didn’t fall asleep.

When my thumb goes in the other direction, the hairs on Sally’s eyebrow lie down and say, “MEOW MEOW I am a tired lazy fat cat.” Then they sleep all day.

Today will be the day when I ask Sally to go to the new giraffe exhibit at the zoo with me. I am afraid that she will say, “I like girls.” or “I will be eating string beans on that particular day.” or “you look like a rusty tambourine waiting in front of a deaf man’s shack for the garbage man to come.”

There have been many signs, though that Sally is in love with me. One time, I said, “I’d like to check out this book about owl habitats.”

Then she said, “Okay,” and stamped the due date on a little paper card so I wouldn’t forget when to bring the book back.

But even with this evidence, I figure it couldn’t hurt to bring a gift along when I ask her out. Maybe it will make her feel obligated to stare at some giraffes in my company.

All this Kloomping brings me to the bookstore somehow. A lady is there on the couch and she is a wave in the ocean and she is coming towards me and her mist says, “Shush”.

“What?” I say. She had said something. Or I thought she had said something.

“What?” She says. We what? each other for some time. Eventually I say WHAT with an exclamation point after it. She hears my exclamation point and takes it and puts it in that pouch on the front of her overalls. OVERALLS. Once is not enough with that word.

OVER
ALLS

“Fish books.” I say.

“No. Or Yes.” she says.

“Oh?”

“No, if you like the blue gill. I mean if you are looking for the blue gill. A book about the blue gill that is.” Her words begin to find it difficult to climb in my ears. There are already so many words swimming around deeper inside. And they have covered the entrance with more fur and bigger greasy yellow walls. Inside is where I begin to decide what her lips want me to know. “It was sold not more than an hour ago to a woman with teeth. Teeth that I noticed. Most women have teeth, I think.”

“Maybe.”

“Does your grandpa still shoot little kids’ dogs?”

“I don’t have a grandpa anymore.”

“He must be somewhere.”

I decide to leave the bookstore for some reason. Maybe I'm tired or maybe the ceiling at the store is too low. I'm not sure. But, either way, I continue walking around town in my Kloompy fashion.

"Apples for sale!" This is what a man on the street selling apples is saying. He has a moustache. I don't like his moustache.

"How many apples do you have?" I ask. It looks like he has a lot of them.

"I couldn't tell you." I'm not sure why he wants to keep that number a secret, but it makes me like him less.

"Do you have one apple? That's how many apples I would like." I figure an apple is a better gift for Sally. She doesn't eat books about fish.

"I'll see if I can find one apple...Yes, here is one apple." He gives me the one apple. It is red, like the brick that was Sally's eyebrow. It is also red like all the bricks that are not Sally's eyebrow.

When I arrive at the library, Sally is behind the check out desk at the library eating a tuna salad sandwich. I am standing in front of the desk tossing my apple up and down in the air.

"What kind of sandwich is that?" I have already decided the sandwich is tuna, but I don't know what she has decided it is.

"A good one."

"Oh my! Oh my!" I have not even thought of that possibility—"good" can be a type of sandwich! "You must be a Kloomper! I knew it!"

"No, my name is Sally Dargensmurg." She points to a nametag I have seen before.

"Do your shoes tickle the ground like a Kloomper or stomp on it like an elephant? Surely you do not stomp!"

"No, I do not stomp."

"Then you tickle?!"

"I will show you what my shoes do when I move." I wait for her to stand up. Instead of standing up, she squeaks. The squeaking makes her face go further away from me.

Her chair is singing a song that says, "REEK REEK! WAH!" So, I show her the song my shoes sing—"Looly Dooly!" while I Kloomp behind her desk to understand the secret squeaker.

Her chair is a shoe. She is a foot. Or maybe her chair is a sandal, but it rolls and squeaks and brings her to places.

"Your squeaking can massage the bricks while my Kloomping can tickle them." Now I know of three movers—the elephant foot, the Kloomper, and the squeaker. Yesterday the world only had two movers. My brain doesn't have time for giraffes and zoos and women who look like bricks anymore.

I leave Sally in the library and eat my apple while staring at the lawn. I wonder how many ants are hiding in the grass.

Without Time

Cris Ritchie



Eighty-two years old. That's a lot of life. I've seen a lot of things in that time. Mostly, I just saw myself. I'm dreaming now of course. I know this because I'm happy right now. Happier than I've been in some time. I'm not alone and I'm with my wife, Kimberly. She's wearing a pink dress and her dark hair is bouncing and flowing in the wind coming off the valley walls. The tall wildflowers sway back and forth as she kisses me. Nearly losing myself in her eyes I see a log cabin, our cabin, with firewood in the front and a pipe coming from the roof where a wood burning stove is connected. An ax leaned against the wood pile, gloves on top. A young boy trampling through the short grass with parents in tow. I dream of times when things were good.

I wake up two hours after lying down to sleep. My bladder has become out of control as of late. Last night I woke up in a puddle of piss with my nurse looking down at me like I could have and should have caught myself. I stood up and the nurse changed me like a newborn that has yet to find control over bodily functions. If only my fellow writers could see what I'm reduced to now. But they're all in hell now, so I guess I got the good end of the stick on that one. I get up and piss and lay back down to sleep.

The next morning I light a cigarette and sit in a chair facing the north lawn and the main road. They let me have two cigarettes a day. One in the morning and one in the night. That was the deal I cut so I could smoke inside the building. I like to stare out the window when smoking and remember the old days. I look at the grass outside or the cars whiz by and remember what it felt like to be behind the wheel of a car and taking a curve at sixty miles an hour or to lay upon dewy grass and soak up the morning sun.

I finish my cigarette and the nurse takes the butt and throws it into a waste basket beside my bed. She never says anything to me anymore. I've been here since I was seventy-eight, and for the first two years she spoke to me quite often. I guess after five years we have nothing to talk about.

I sit in a chair beside the window and hold a bottle of water in my left hand. I hear the door to my room swing open and a small, squeaky voice that I know belongs to my neighbor cry out.

"Johnny. I got just the thing for ya," says old Frank as he struggles in on his cane and I turn my head and watch him hobble. He hands me a blue jar.

"Noxzema? What am I gonna do with this, Frank?"

"I reckon its for face washing," he says, lips fluttering in the air of his speech where teeth

should be. "I like to use it for breathin'. Just rub a little on your chest and you'll be all right in the morning."

"I breathe fine, Frank, but thanks anyway."

"You breathe good? Eulanda told me you had troubles breathin'."

"Not when I'm not moving. Must be somebody else."

He shuffles his feet over beside me again and reaches out his hand. "Then give that blue jar back. I gotta find somebody useful to give this to, Writer."

"Fine."

He hobbles back to the hallway and I hear him yell out for anybody that has a breathing problem. He leaves the door open. I'm too tired to get up and close it. I look through the window pane again and stare out into the green field in front of the home.

"I'm gonna play in the majors. I'm gonna be just as good as Eric Davis," I said to my brother, throwing him my version of a curve ball, but it failed to break.

The ball smacked his mitt with a loud crack. "Yeah. Sure you will, Johnny. You'll be Davis and I'll be Strawberry," replied my brother, Mark, sarcastically. "You're gonna be just like pap, and you're gonna go down in the mines. That's what I'm gonna do."

"Just because Will went into 'em don't mean I will. I'll never be a coal miner."

"You just wait and see." He threw me the ball and I examined it slightly before throwing it back. It was an old homerun ball my oldest brother, Will, had hit when he was in high school. He had written the date on the ball: March 30, 1987.

I caught the ball in my mitt after Mark whizzed a fastball in sharply.

My nurse comes in for her last time this morning to check up on me. "You need anything, Johnny?"

I fail to reply and the nurse walks out. I stand up and groan at the creaks in my back and knees. Walking out the door to my room I listen to my ankles pop loudly and my breathing become harder.

Outside all of the regulars are around. Walking with walkers or canes with tubes in their noses releasing oxygen or intravenous injections in their arms dripping happiness or relief on a five second timeline. The happiness or relief part depends on how much pain you're in.

I shuffle my old feet down the hallway and stop in the lounge. The television bolted to the ceiling displays the news, complete with stock quotes scrawling on the bottom of the screen. I sit

in a green chair in the corner and watch the screen, trying my best to be oblivious to the people around me and I manage with great ease until an elderly woman we all call Flo is wheeled beside me in her wheelchair by a nurse. Damn.

“Here, you are Ms. Stillman. Right beside your old pal Johnny,” the fat male nurse says before walking off; most assuredly in the most satisfied manner possible. He has hated me ever since I told one of the female nurses he was married.

“Hi, Johnny,” Flo says, wrapping her fingers around a bead necklace her grandson had made and sent to her for her birthday.

“Hello, Flo.”

“What are you doing for lunch?”

“Eating.”

She lets loose one of those old smoker’s cackles and says, “That’s so funny, Johnny. I was wondering if you could wheel me to the cafeteria and maybe eat with me. Did I tell you that my baby boy is a major accountant on Wall Street?”

I watch the television and try to focus.

“When my Robby was alive, we used to go to Wall Street, that’s in New York, and visit with our boy in his huge office. He has a computer and everything.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Does he watch the news?”

“The news?”

“Yeah, the news.”

“Oh, he works on Wall Street,” she says smiling at me with a blank stare.

“I was watching the news this morning,” said my old writer friend, Hank Kilbourne, as he lit a cigarette with a match. “When this plane lost control of its landing gear.”

“What? Like a jet?” I asked, sitting in a green chair my girlfriend had bought for our apartment.

“No, like a single engine one.”

“Did they die?”

“No, that’s the messed up part. It was flying around.” He paused to flick the ashes into a small glass ashtray I had stolen from a fast food restaurant. “And it just did this belly land and they got out and ran off.”

“That was it?”

“That was it. I watched that damn newscast for twenty minutes waiting to see something happen.”

Flo finally breaks the silence and grabs my hand. “I wish you would go with me to lunch. It’s already eleven thirty and you won’t answer me, Johnny.”

“Go away, Flo,” I say, my eyes still on the screen even though for the past hour I had seen all that this program is going to tell.

She motions for a nurse and is wheeled off in to her own room.

I never feel bad for being rude to the people in here. Tomorrow I’ll tell her all over again when she’s forgotten being told to leave the day before. She has Alzheimer’s. Not very much longer to live I would guess. No need to get attached to people like that. We’re just gonna die anyway.

I finish the news program and focus and walk around the home for a little while. The windows are uncharacteristically open, and a small robin sits upon a window seal, turning its head back and forth in quick jerks. The sun is very bright now and its beams flow in, hitting the slick tile floor and warming up small sections to the touch of my bare feet.

I don’t need my cane today, but I still like to use it all the time. It goes well with my home edition pale blue robe and pants. I get to the end of the hall and say to myself, “To hell with it,” and fire up my second cigarette outside of the door with the exit sign above it.

Immediately outside I recognize Jimmy Wilson. I walk over to the bench where he is sitting and light the cigarette.

“Howdy, Jimmy,” I say, taking a drag into my lungs.

He notices me and puts down the paper he was reading before my appearance. “You just now smoking that cigarette? If I was you I would have smoked mine about two hours ago. I don’t know how the hell you can sleep so long.”

“It’s because I never was a farmer, Jim. I never had to get up with the chickens.”

“So you’ve said.” He folds the paper neatly and puts it on the ground. “Nice day. Good day for July. Not too hot.”

“Maybe.”

“Flo was out here looking for you a while ago. That son of a bitch Sebastian was wheeling her around to each and every one of us out here just to ask if you was around.”

“She found me,” I say depressingly.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. She’ll probably hit the road in a few weeks. She’s real bad off.”

“Shit, Jim. We’re all real bad off in here. It’s like a damned prison in here.”

“I don’t know. I kind of like it here.”

“That’s what you say now. You’ve just been here for two weeks. To you, this is just a place where young folks do things for you. To me it’s like a place where young folks keep you locked up and waiting around to die.”

“Yeah, but I can get out and go places. See my boy and his kids and their kids too. I got things I can do. I guess if I couldn’t leave like you, I’d probably hate it too.”

“Anything good in the paper?”

“Not really,” Jimmy replied as he handed me the now damp with dew morning edition of the Hazard-Herald.

I fold the paper and tuck it underneath my arm as I stand. “Well, Jim, I’ll see you around lunch time. I think I’m gonna go in here where the air conditioner is.”

“Yeah, take it easy.”

“Yep.”

“Yeah, take it easy,” Hank said as he left my girlfriend and me in our apartment. As the door shut we stood up and began cleaning the place up, throwing some beer cans in the trash and getting the place as it was before company had come.

Kimberly sat on the couch and I sat down beside her. She leaned her body against mine and relaxed upon me. We sat in silence as the television sputtered out through its half broken speaker. Important but brief moments flew by with nothing but a memory to keep them alive.

“Did you finish your story this morning?” Kimberly said as she broke the silence, lighting a cigarette and repositioning her self at my side.

“No. I threw it away.”

“Did you let Hank read it first?”

“No. It was impossible. I couldn’t do it.”

“You should have let Hank read it since you won’t let me. How can you know if it’s any good or not if no one sees it?”

“I just know.”

“Yeah, you know all right.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think I should get a job. I could go work for James at the store. He said he would pay me in advance so we can pay this month’s rent.”

“I bet he did. Fascist bastard. He’s a Nazi you know.”

“To hell with you, Johnny. If you would finish a story maybe somebody would publish one again and we could get some money.”

“Well, I’ll be damned if it ain’t old Hemingway himself,” says one of the paramedics that are always hanging around the home and waiting for a good looking nurse to stroll by. Standing beside him is one of those nurses in front of the janitor’s closet.

“Damn it, Writer,” she says to me in a frustrated voice. “You know you ain’t supposed to come back in here like that. Use the front door next time. They’re gonna have my ass for you

setting that alarm off again. It’s not like I can act old and senile like you.”

I stop in the hallway and look at her from head to toe before walking off without another word.

“Yeah, go on and get out of here, Writer. Go write us a book and make a million,” the young paramedic says before turning back to the nurse and putting his arm against the wall in front of her face.

I walk off and leave the two as I hear the closet door open and then slam shut.

“Maybe, man, but I never did see a tiger in Kentucky, so I don’t think you got much to worry about,” I said to Hank as he threw his line out onto the lake’s shiny surface. A small plop into the water and tiny ripples flowed outward as the worm and sinker sank in the greenish water, only to be saved by the red and white floater atop the surface.

“Kimberly’s pregnant,” I said calmly as I reeled in my line.

“No kidding?”

“Mr. Lawrence. Did you come through that back door again?” shouts the head nurse, Jan Strange. Her brow wrinkled and anger flying from her tongue.

“Give me a break will you, head nurse?”

“I know you’re not bad off. You don’t have to give me that senile routine. Now quit going through that door. You know the fire department comes and I have to sort it all out every time. So quit it.”

I turn my back and walk off, my bare feet sliding against the slick tile slowly, but with as much energy as I can spare. I walk back to my room, sit by the window and read yesterday’s paper again. The sun hits me and I feel its warmth on my chest and my feet begin to warm. I look them over and grimace at the varicose veins and yellowish distortion of what once were toenails.

It’s almost time for lunch, which means they’ll be bringing the cart around soon. It’s Tuesday and the special for the day is meatloaf. I never have liked meatloaf.

“It’s just meatloaf, Johnny. It’s meat and ketchup. That’s all it is.”

“Yeah, but it looks like a cross section of brain,” I said back, looking down at this thing on my plate.

“Well you can go make yourself a sandwich or something because I’m not cooking anything else.”

I stood up and opened the fridge. “When’s the last time you went to the store?”

"Last week. We haven't had a paycheck since last month. We should move somewhere else. Knott County is no place to be raising a child."

"To hell with that."

"Then I'll have to get a job."

"To hell with that too. You shouldn't have to work."

"What's it matter? I like to work."

"Lunch time," says the nurse's aid from outside before opening the door and wheeling a silver cart into my room.

"Great."

"I know you hate it, but it's Tuesday."

"So you've said for the last year," I reply as she hands me a covered tray. I lift the lid and that same old smell hits me. Smells like old people food, so I guess that's appropriate.

"I'll be back," she says as she goes off to serve the next lucky one.

I eat some green gelatin and fumble through the mashed potatoes, careful not to intermingle with any of the stale and tepid looking meatloaf. It's always the same thing in here. Nothing ever changes and nothing ever will. I cover the tray up and gather enough strength to toss it across the room. The metallic tray slams against the wall with a loud crash. It won't be long before someone comes in to see if I've finally died.

The door swings open. "Writer? You okay in here?" the aid says as she spots the tray and the strewn food. "What the hell, Writer?"

I look at her with a stare and look forward again.

"Nurse Strange won't be too happy about this," she says sincerely enough. She peeks out the door and back again. "I told you, here she comes," she says in a rushed manner before exiting the room in a vain attempt to help me out.

"It's okay, Jan. He just dropped his tray."

"Like hell he did," I hear her reply. She struts in the room with an uppity swagger. "Mr. Lawrence. What happened?"

"I dropped my tray," I say back, lowering my head and beginning to feel weak.

"Don't pull that innocent routine on me, Mr. Lawrence. I've seen it too many times before to fall for it now."

I sit upon my bed for a few moments before saying, "Fuck off, you pompous bitch."

"Mr. Lawrence," she replies in a cocky manner, laced with a bit of a surprised tone. She's been waiting for this moment for a long time, and I've finally provided it for her. "If you want to play it that way, fine by me. Melissa?"

"Yes ma'am?" the aid replies while coming back into the room.

"Clean up this mess and see to it that Mr. Lawrence gets rolled around a few times in his bed because he won't be leaving it for a long time."

"Yes ma'am."

"And make sure he gets the full regiment of meds for the next few nights."

"He didn't do anything to deserve that."

"Young lady," Nurse Strange says. "If you look to keep your job, then I suggest learning to follow orders. That's the second time today you have questioned my orders. In my office. Now!" she screams out and regains my attention. She walks out in a definite fury with the aid behind her. She's a good kid.

"He's a fine young man," my father said as he held my son for the first time, just a few hours after he had been born.

"Yeah, he's a real Lawrence all right," I replied with a smile upon my face.

"What's his name?"

"We don't know yet."

The door to my room closes and locks slowly as the nurse's aid looks at me through the small window with a look of apology and says, "I'm sorry."

I lay down upon the pillow and my head begins to float around.

"They're problem is that they don't have a coach that can recruit," father said to me as we peered through the hospital window at my son in his nursery crib.

"No, he's not the problem. The problem with them is that they have no big man this year. They need somebody physical who can play down low and get rebounds."

"Ah, well." He paused and breathed a sigh. "Son, I just want you to know one thing. When me and your mother had you, we were scared half to death. I worked in the mines and she raised you. That's how it was, but we made good times out of it none the less." He stops for a second and scratches his head, searching for the right thing to say. "What I'm trying to say is that you have it a hell of a lot better than we did. You're a successful writer with some money, but now you have a real life. One that you can really be proud of. You have a family."

"I know," I said as a nurse walked slowly to my side.

"Mr. Lawrence, can I speak with you for a moment?"

"Sure."

"I'm afraid that your wife has developed a complication."

"A complication?"

“She was doing fine, but her blood pressure dropped suddenly and she went into cardiac arrest.”

“Where is she?” I said, feeling that the worst was about to come.

“She’s in the OR right now. Dr. Hanson is about to work on her.”

“Can I see her?”

I look out my room window as the sun begins to set. I wish I had a cigarette. I wish I had a lot of things back that I’ll never see again. Not on this world anyway. I sit up, trying to keep my head from swimming, but it does no good. My eyes and

heart finally fade as I look at the sun’s final glimpse.

I look at my wife for the last time as I hold my son and touch his small hand to hers. I feel the coldness of her skin as she rested still in her coffin, looking as though she was resting like the years before. There were sobs in the background, but I phased them out as I look upon her beautiful face and take one final glimpse.

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