

**Treehouse Telephone**

**Selected Stories**  
**by**

**Chase McGuire**

### Brief Interviews at Jenny Lake with Hideous Men

*"Gonna climb a mountain, the highest mountain. I jump off, ain't nobody gonna know"*

Marshal Tucker Band

Somebody talked to me about schooling and reading. "I went to college and graduated magna cum laude. It was a private catholic academy. I majored in philosophy, statistics and psychology. The nuns rode bicycles and when they saw me smoking they'd say, 'Your body is a temple.' I like to read. I like to read Russian Literature. I like F. Scott Fitzgerald. I hate Zelda. She was in the nut house and whining like, 'Oh, my husband stole all my ideas. My husband stole all my ideas.' I hate poetry and I don't read poetry, but I love Sylvia Plath and the Bell Jar."

What the fuck? I didn't drive all they way out to Wyoming to listen to flakes talk about literature.

This story concerns itself with sex and money and liquor. Playing out in some of the most beautiful regions our nation has to offer. A guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do, and I'm so sick and tired of men and their women and women and their men, and who the hell can keep track of all the one-off-it liaisons, and what kind of sociopath would have the patience to do so anyways.

A redhead first viewed behind the register at the Dornan's wine store (offering spectacular views of mountainous regions) when I'd accompanied Harrison Ford to buy a 6er of PBR tall boys. Aside from the fact she bore an uncanny resemblance to the long pale carrot top that was good enough to take my virginity off my hands for me that one time a million years ago, another noteworthy physical attribute was her peculiar piercing: a metal bar through the skin over the bridge of her nose, capped at each end by 2 metal bulbs. I'd never seen a piercing like that. Ringing up a woman's bottle of wine, she looked incredibly bored. I'd seen that before, and was a sucker for beautiful women with peculiar piercings behind cash registers disinterestedly going about their menial labor.

After guzzling Coors for a few hours around sundown, and sipping Old Crow for a few hours after dark, she didn't have to try hard, and she sure as hell didn't. Things came to pass that we were in her room alone together. I was on top of her on the top bunk of her employee housing bunk bed and 2 fingers deep in her vagina. As far as I could tell by the sounds coming from her lips, she found the come-hither curling of my right index and middle finger inside of her to be a pleasurable experience. After a while our bodies collectively had no where to go but

'all the way' and fiddling about with the condom, I had to tragically inform her that I couldn't hold up my end of the agreement.

"Sorry babe," I told her. "I don't know what gets me off anymore." Then I buried my face in the strawberry tuft between her legs and she dug her heels into the small of my back.

I heard the word from the little black birdie that there's a recession going on. Welp, you couldn't prove it by me folks, zipping 'round Wyoming in my car. I felt like a million bucks. I felt like this was the jazz age at the start of the new millennium, and I'm F. Scott kick-ass Fitzgerald taking names.

*The architect could not believe his recent stretch of good luck. He was gifted free back issues of Dwell magazine. He had studied abroad in Florence and organized the photographs taken there in a slideshow with it's own original soundtrack. He'd graduated from Kent State University's architecturally world renown architecture program. He applied for, was offered, and subsequently accepted a job at an architecture firm in Ann Arbor Michigan. That's quite a step up from working on the sales floor at a Best Buy in Akron Ohio. C'mon man. Ann Arbor Michigan. That's a pretty hip little town. The architect went up to Ann Arbor to scope out apartments, but here's the best part! He had a sweet little honey to take up there with him. She'd been engaged, but not to him, and broke it off, and ran away with the architect to Ann Arbor. Her cell phone was turned off the entire trip. She worked at Best Buy too. The architect and his little honey lied to their co-workers about where they were going. Think about that forbidden romantic getaway the next time you approach that cuddly Blue Crew at the BBY to inquire about the latest iPhone or schedule a time for the Geek Squad to set up wireless internet at your house.*

**XXX-XXX-XXXX:** hey. its \_\_\_\_\_. im really sorry about last night. im a huge jerk. i hope you don't hate me. we should hang out some time.

Sent: Jun 28

**ME:**Hey \_\_\_\_\_. Nah, I don't hate you. I'd like to hang out again too. Keep in touch. Let me know if you come to Yellowstone.

Sent: 7:27 AM

Stating earlier about how sick I was of men and their women and women and their men, what I was getting at was that out in Wyoming I'd arrived clean shaven with a smug sense of entitlement on a clear and blue sunny day. The mountain air had added a radiance to my complexion, and that same radiance was added to the complexions of my 3 friends I'd gone down there to visit. My 3 friends were all looking for surrogate mothers. Consequently my 3 friends are all little sex-fiend slutbags. I got so sick of men and their women and women and their men, cuz

the lovely ladies on staff were stacked to the chuckwagon ceiling, bused in from places like Pennsylvania and Michigan. Flown in from countries like Russia and Bulgaria. Displaced from home and vulnerable down in Dorny Land, the dramatic and erotic mountains always in sight, prevalent and excessive consumption of alcohol gets everyone's blood running a little hotter. It adds an extra tingle to everyone's crotches. It adds an extra swell to everyone's genitalia. On top of that, one could have an easy lay on hand for a few months, and when the summer season is over, walk away and never have to see the beautifully sad loser again. Out back of the employee housing were some chairs circled around a bucket filled with beer cans and cigarette butts. When the shifts let out everyone congregated there drinking and smoking and it was worse than a dating bar filled with singles on ecstasy.

Me and the Redhead at round 2 were feeling good. We were feeling good because we were on top of a mountain. We were feeling good because all the stars were out, and all the stars were kind enough to look the other way. We were feeling good because we were by a clump of trees. I was feeling good because I was standing with her legs wrapped around my waist and my arms hooked over her thighs while my hands ran around her lower back. She had her arms wrapped around my neck with her hands on the back of my head pulling my face to her face and suctioning her lips against my lips and rubbing her tongue against my tongue. All the stars that were kind enough to look away were also kind enough to go "la-dee-da, la-la-dee-da-da." The mountain we were on top of was called Shadow.

Her plans were to go to South America. There's some Mayan stuff there. Next year, 2012, the last year on the Mayan calender. She's ready for it to be over. She wants to see how it will all go down.

She kissed another boy, then I went to sleep in my car. I said, "Ouch. That hurt" (pause) "Ouch. That hurt," I said.

In the morning I found someone had pulled the rubber blade from my left windshield wiper.

The redhead had graduated from college with a degree in anthropology. A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

*The rubber factory's Chief Executive Officer had a smug sense of entitlement after 30-some-odd years at the helm of the rubber factory. She had a son who was working in Yellowstone and fooling around with redheads in Wyoming. She had a daughter who was working at Best Buy, and her daughter's coworkers were lying and going on secret romantic getaways. The Chief Executive Officer was selling her dirty old rubber factory for a six figure sum. She was getting out while the getting was good. The ink had*

*dried on the deed. The ink had dried on the check. The Chief Executive Officer planned to be drunk on Korbel for months. She was going to be laughing and stumbling and dancing all the way to the bank - PNC bank. There was one sour note though, there was one cloud in the silver lining. Her sister was speaking to attorneys, preparing a lawsuit against the Chief Executive Officer of the rubber factory.*

No automobiles were on the road during the drive to Jenny Lake. There were no automobiles or picnickers or people in the parking lot either. Walking between the trees I didn't pass a single person. At the lakeside, suddenly the air was very still and the slats of sunlight ceased all movement. Ripples arched over the surface of the water. A rowboat approached. Inside sat Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Sylvia made a megaphone of her hands and called to me "Is that you? I thought it was you. Stay there. I'll row to shore. You can get in."

"Better not Sylvia," Ted Hughes said. "There's not enough room in this boat."

"Fuck you Ted," I yelled. "I've always thought you were kind of an asshole. Why don't you go back to England and fuck yourself or read some birthday letter or something."

Sylvia pulled an oar out of the water. "I agree." She held the oar at a slanted angle in the air. "I always thought you were kind of an asshole too."

For such a mousey woman, Sylvia sure packed a hell of a wallop when she swung the oar and cracked Ted Hughes's skull open. He slumped to the side then fell overboard. The splash didn't make a sound as he quickly sunk to the bottom out of sight.

Sylvia rowed to shore. I got in the boat and grabbed the oar handles. "Take a break Sylvia," I told her. "I've got this." I rowed and rowed until I had rowed the row boat to the middle of the lake.

"I've got some personal issues, Sylvia. I'm sure you can relate. I haven't read your poetry. I read one of your novels. You didn't stick around to see how the whole thing played out, but that book has been kind of a big deal for a while."

"I wrote a short story about Yellowstone."

"I know. I haven't read that either. I work in Yellowstone."

"I know."

"Maybe you can help me out Sylvia."

"Like how?"

"Tell me my aim is true. Tell me my heart is in the right place. Tell me eventually there will be some peace of mind. Tell

me we're all in this together. Tell me we're all doing the best that we can do."

"Silly boy," Sylvia scoffed. "I can't do that." She pointed at the zipper of my hooded sweatshirt. "What's, what's that?"

"What?"

"That, that right there." She leaned in closer to examine what she was pointing at. "You've got someth - right there."

I looked down.

Sylvia quickly lifted her curled index finger up. The middle knuckle tapped against the tip of my nose. Sylvia smiled and didn't say a word.

## Boxing Day

The boxing gloves were tied together at the laces and draped around M's neck. They looked silly and out of proportion with his little body. He stood at her front door shivering. The snowflakes dusting his raven black hair. It was the day after Christmas. He was on winter break from Paullina Elementary school. She answered the door brooding and with an air of cynicism that was far beyond her nine years of age. M beamed at her with his bright glinting eyes.

"Hello Thursday."

"Walk with me to my mail box."

"Could I just wait right inside by the door? I walked all the way here from my house and I'm kind of cold." She just closed her front door and walked towards the mail. M dashed along behind her, trying to catch up. The boxing gloves bounced up and down against his chest as he walked. He noticed the red velveteen dress she was wearing. It glimmered as she moved between the flurry of snowflakes. Her dark brown hair was pulled back and tied with a ribbon. "You look very pretty today Thursday. I mean, you always look pretty, but you look very pretty today. I gotta say though, you're a little over dressed for the occasion. You didn't have to get all dolled up just because I was coming over this afternoon." They had reached the mailbox by now. She opened it up and looked inside. M milled around beside her on the curb, shuffling his feet in the slush.

"I didn't get 'all dolled up' just because you were coming over." She pulled a brown package out of the mailbox and then started walking towards her front door. Again M dashed after her, trying to keep up. "My mom got me this dress for Christmas and it was so pretty and I looked so good in it that I couldn't wait to wear it."

"Is that package for you Thursday? Did one of your relatives that lives in another state send it to you as a late Christmas present?" They were standing on the front stoop, but Thursday didn't open the door, she stood for a moment staring at M.

"Why do you have those boxing gloves?" She asked him.

They were up in her bedroom as she sat Indian style on the floor, and tore open the brown paper that was wrapped around her package. M leaned against the wall, by her door. Although M lived in the same neighborhood as her and they had been enrolled in the same third grade class together at Paullina Elementary School for the past few months, he had never seen her room. It had wood paneled flooring with a black rug. On one wall there was a picture she had drawn with a black magic marker. It was of

a ghost in a cemetery rising up from a tombstone in the shape of a cross. On the other wall was a poster of an animal M didn't recognize.

"Thursday, what's that animal in that poster on your wall?"

She continued to dig through the inside of her package and answered him. "It's a raccoon."

"It looks sad."

"I know. . . Is this all?" She asked as she looked deeper into the brown paper sack. "This is the worst Christmas present he's ever sent me." She pulled out an American flag, folded neatly and properly like a paper football, with a note and a photograph placed on top. She shook the flag loose, and held it away from her like a soiled garment as she examined it, then she tossed it on the floor. "That's the worst Christmas present ever." She looked at the photograph. It was her brother, a thin gangly boy. Thursday thought he looked even thinner when the United States Military made him cut his hair. In the picture he's standing in a desert. He's holding a canteen high above his head, his neck is cocked back and his mouth is wide open, as the water falls onto his face and dribbles down his cheeks and chin. His upraised arm exposes a big moist circle of sweat absorbed into his beige t-shirt in the area around his armpit.

"He looks like such an idiot standing there in that stupid desert. He must be an idiot if he thought I would like an American flag as a Christmas present."

"Maybe that American flag was flown in the desert he was at."

"If I wanted an American flag, I would have stolen the one in Mrs. Holland's classroom."

"You should do it anyway, that way we wouldn't have to say the pledge of allegiance in the morning."

"What are you doing here M? Why don't you go home?"

"I wanted to give you your Christmas present, remember? I'll leave as so as I give it to you." His dark brown eyes glinted with even more excitement. "Hold out your hand." She did so. He reached into his pocket and dug around. "Close your eyes, and don't open them until I say." She did, and sighed heavily, indicating that she was humoring him. M placed her Christmas present in her hand and beamed as he waited to see her facial expression. "Okay you can open them."

"What's this? A paper clip, a stick of juicy fruit chewing gum, a chipped marble, a rubber band and a bottle cap."

"A root beer bottle cap."

"A root beer bottle cap," She repeated, dead pan and sarcastic.

"Yep, merry Christmas!"



"Oh, okay, thanks for my Christmas present M. I think it's time for you to go."

"Thursday, you shouldn't leave that American flag on the floor. It's disrespectful."

"Get out of my house M."

She was holding the front door open, but he didn't leave, and she didn't quite want him to leave yet. They stood there in the cold air as the snowflakes blew in and quickly melted on the carpet.

"Hey, M," she said, "You never answered me. Why do you have those boxing gloves?"

"Because today is boxing day."

"What's boxing day?"

"They celebrate it in Canada." M said. He exited from her house and trudged through the snow. While his back was turned Thursday stepped onto the front stoop. She dug up a handful of snow and packed it into a tight ball. She took dead aim and winged it at him when he had reached the mid point of her driveway.

It hit hard against the back of his head, caking his hair and scalp. He immediately ducked slightly and placed his hand on his head. He stopped and turned back to her apprehensively as he brushed off the snow.

"Ow, Thursday. That hurt."

"Shut up, you little baby. There are things that hurt a lot more than snowballs. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"What are you talking about Thursday?"

"Happy Boxing day M." And with that, Thursday went in her house and shut the door behind her.

This is Graham McFaye Wishing You and Yours a Very Merry  
Christmas

Every idea Graham McFaye had in the past month had been a bad idea. He walked into the Sumnerville Tavern on the evening of December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008. That was a bad idea. He had brought along a 'date' of sorts, Amy Vanderbeak, his old high school sweetheart. That was an even worse idea. All of Graham's ideas had been bad ideas. He was on a hot streak of bad ideas. He took off his red knit skull cap and silently vowed to be belligerently drunk by the end of the night.

The adorably precocious Amy Vanderbeak unbuttoned her pea coat. Always the courteous one, and a little too eager to subvert preconceived gender roles, she looked up at Graham and said, "you grab us a booth, and I'll get the first round. Okay?"

Graham touched her face. He ran his thumb in a circle around her chin and said, "sure kiddo. Whatever you say."

"Don't touch me Graham." She turned and walked to the U-shaped bar in the center of the room.

Graham shoved his skull cap into the pocket of his army surplus trench coat and sat down at a booth against the wall.

The Sumnerville Tavern was not a place that young folks frequented. Graham was 24 and Amy was 14 months to the day his junior. It wasn't just their age, but also their attire that made them stand out. The six or seven haggard men sitting around the bar were almost uniformly dressed in dusty boots, tattered jeans, torn jackets, and baseball caps. Under his trench coat, Graham was wearing a pair of brown slacks and a red and green striped sweater reminiscent of the late Kurt Cobain. Amy was dressed in a blouse, a pleated skirt, red knee-high socks, and saddle shoes. Not only did Graham think her ensemble was pretentious, but also out of character. The Amy Vanderbeak he remembered wore formless corduroy pants and flannel shirts dotted with cigarette burns.

The Sumnerville Tavern was decorated for Christmas. Yellowed paper cut-outs of rosy cheeked Santa Clauses and majestically adorned Christmas trees were stapled into the pressed-wood paneled walls. Plastic snowflakes dusted with blue sparkles hung from the water stained ceiling tiles. The one television over the bar (a relic from 1970-something, complete with rabbit ear antennas) had a string of colored lights running along the circumference of the screen. The jukebox in the corner (its selection didn't extend much beyond Bruce Springsteen, Bob Seager, and Meatloaf) was draped with ratty strands of silver garland.

Amy sat down at the booth with a pitcher full of beer and two frosted mugs. Her hair wasn't like Graham remembered either.

It had been a ruddy brown color that grew in long greasy ringlets down to her shoulders. Now it was dyed black and cut into a crisp bob that curled around her ears. Graham decided that she most certainly was trying to look like Ayn Rand. He filled her mug, then filled his own and immediately took a generous gulp.

"You know, it's funny," Amy said, "I've passed this bar a million times, but I've never been inside. I bet Sterling would just love it."

Graham swallowed more beer and smacked his lips distastefully. "You should have gotten bottles. They let the draft beer sit in the kegs forever at this place. It always tastes funky."

"Well, I bet Sterling would just love it. Even the stale beer." Sterling was Amy's new boyfriend. Whoever the lucky guy was, he must have been doing something right. Amy hadn't shut up about him since they met in September.

Amy Vanderbeak was something of an oddity in blue collar Sumnerville. Her father was an optometrist and non-practicing Jew in a town where most people thought Judaism was synonymous with Atheism. Her mother was a chain-smoking housewife with no particular religious affiliation. She volunteered at the local Humane Society, nursing home, and rather paradoxically, the YWCA shelter for battered and abused women.

Graham took another gulp of his beer and raised his glass. "Cheers."

Amy raised hers. "Cheers."

"Bottoms up to better days." He drank

"Bottoms up to . . . hold on, hold on just a second Graham cracker. I refuse to drink to that."

He swallowed. "Why?"

"I don't know Mr. Doom-n'-Gloom. Guess."

"It's just a toast Amy."

"Well, it's not a very good one. Tell me Graham cracker, just tell me, how can things get any better than this?"

Graham had to admit it was impossible to imagine how things could possibly get any better for Amy Vanderbeak. Aside from being enamored with some guy named Sterling, she was a 4.0 student at a satirically liberal arts school in southern Ohio. She had already spent a semester in Prague, and would study abroad again in Florence before graduating in the spring with a B.F.A. in art history.

Graham hadn't told Amy he dropped out, and didn't plan on telling her either.

She looked especially radiant that night. Her milky skin was practically glowing with pride in some accomplishment still unknown to Graham. She smiled at him. Even in the buzzing red

light from the Budweiser sign above, her teeth shimmered like pearls.

"You're in a good mood." Graham finished his first glass of beer and poured another. "What? Did you win the lottery?"

"No. Better. I couldn't wait to tell you. I almost told you over the phone." Unimaginably, things had somehow managed to get even better for Amy Vanderbeak. "Remember the internship I told you about?"

Graham took the bait. "The one in New York?"

"I wasn't supposed to hear back until February, but I guess my application was pretty impressive."

"You got it?"

"I start in the fall."

Graham drank more. "Amy, that's great!" It came out louder and more enthusiastically than he had intended. "You're right. Things can't get any better than this. I'd like to propose a toast, another toast. Forget about my first one. It never happened. Tonight," he raised his glass, "tonight, we drink to you Amy Vanderbeak. I would wish you all the luck in the world, but we both know you're not going to need it." Graham meant the comment to be only half as sarcastic as it sounded. He drank again, not sure if he was elated or envious.

"Thank you, thank you." She took a birdie sip from her beer. "Oh, but poor little Graham cracker, here I am blathering on and on about me, and I haven't asked anything about you. How was your semester?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?"

"Let's . . . let's just talk about it later." By later, he meant when he was drunk.

Amy shifted her weight in the booth. "What about next semester? Have you scheduled your classes?"

"I don't want to talk that either."

"You don't want to talk about school at all?"

"Nope."

"OOOOOohhhhh-kay." She changed tactics. Maybe Graham would be more willing to discuss extracurricular activities. "What about that play you were in, the one you were so excited about?"

"What play?"

"I can't remember the name. Sterling could. He's got a memory like an elephant, remembers everything. He likes the theatre too, adores the theatre. This very same thing happened with him. I was telling him about you and your big part in the play and he asked what the play was. I got so embarrassed because I couldn't remember. Anyway, you said you had a big part and that the playwright was a favorite of yours."

Graham swallowed more beer. "Beckett's Waiting for Godot," he mumbled.

"What?"

"The play was Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett, and I didn't just have a big part. I was Vladimir, practically the star of the show."

"That's right. It was Waiting for Godot. Sterling will flip when he hears that. He loves Beckett, adores Beckett." Amy took another tiny sip of her beer. She stared at Graham, waiting for him to elaborate. He didn't. He just poured himself some more beer. Amy leaned across the table expectantly and said, "well?"

"Well what?"

"How'd it turn out?"

"I don't want to talk about that either." Despite his many painful faults, Graham had an almost religious devotion to the craft of stage acting. He was also fiercely and emotionally protective of his favorite playwrights. They were not just authors or artists, they were prophets. Graham considered Beckett to be a messiah for the alienated and disillusioned. As an after thought, Graham added, "I didn't like the director's vision."

"What didn't you like about the director's vision?"

"What'd I just say Amy? I don't want to talk about it. I didn't like the director's vision and I didn't like what one critic said about my performance. Let's just leave it at that."

"What did the critic say about your performance?"

"I don't want to talk about it." He pounded his beer mug on the table with each word. "I. DON'T. WANT. TO. TALK. ABOUT. IT."

The bravado didn't sway Amy. She read it as buffoonery and fired back, "quit it Graham, just quit it already. You called me up tonight. You invited me out tonight. Here I am trying to make conversation and now you don't want to talk about a thing. Not a single solitary thing." She sat back in the booth, narrowed her eyes at Graham, and took a sip of her beer.

Graham heard a gruff but joyous voice call his name. He turned in the booth and saw a tubby man with broad shoulders rapidly approach. "I'll be damned," the man said, "it's Sean's little shit kicker Graham McFaye."

"Oh, yeah, umm, hello Mr. Kurchowski." Ted Kurchowski was the second shift supervisor at American Rubber Works Company Incorporated. Graham had worked at his parents' factory part time during the summers and learned from first hand experience the hazards of being recognized as 'Sean's little shit kicker' by often disgruntled, sometimes even terminated employees of American Rubber Works Incorporated. Thankfully, Ted Kurchowski didn't seem disgruntled, and Graham knew for a fact that he hadn't been terminated.

Ted gave Graham three clavicle-rattling pats on the back. "I was just working with your brother the other day. He's doing a helluva job."

Graham shifted in the booth uncomfortably. "Yep, Nole's a real work horse all right."

Ted Kurchowski unzipped his coat. "Hey do you mind if I join you?"

Under normal circumstances, Graham could think of nothing more awkward and potentially dangerous than knocking back a few with one of his father's underlings. But given the circumstances and Graham's mood on that particular evening, he seriously considered the offer.

Ted Kurchowski was staring at Amy. "Aren't you a pretty little thing. What's your name pretty little thing?"

"Amy, Amy Vanderbeak."

Ted looked back at Graham and shot him an exaggerated wink. "I'm sorry to interrupt Graham. I didn't know you were here with such a pretty little thing." He shot another exaggerated wink, as if the first one wasn't sufficient. "Say, it seems like your well has run dry." He point at their empty pitcher. Graham had drank most of it himself. Amy was still on her first glass. "How about another one on me?"

Graham stood up. "That's very kind of you Mr. Kurchowski." He picked up the empty pitcher. "But I owe Amy the next one. I was just about to refill it when you walked in."

In a surprising act of affection, Ted wrapped his arm around Graham's shoulders and escorted him to the bar. "Let me at least buy you a shot while you're up."

Graham eased out of Ted's embrace as politely as possible. "That's okay Mr. Kurchowski. You don't have to do that."

Ted ordered two shots anyway. The bartender set them down next to Graham's fresh pitcher. Ted sat down on a barstool and picked up his shot glass. "Come on! It's all right. I won't tell your old man. Besides, you wouldn't let me drink a shot alone now would you?"

Not wanting to violate some alcoholic code of conduct, Graham relented. "No, I guess I wouldn't want to do that." Ted sent the whiskey down the hatch. Graham did the same, thanked his new drinking buddy, and returned to the booth with his refilled pitcher. As soon as he sat down he filled his beer mug to the brim and drank from it greedily. "I swear to god that they water down the liquor at this place."

No matter how stale the beer was, and no matter how watered down the liquor may have been, both were rapidly starting to take their effect. Graham guzzled down half of the second pitcher in no time while Amy slowly and purposefully nursed her

first glass, and only after much hesitation moved onto a second. The bartender appeared at their booth with another shot compliments of Ted Kurchowski. Graham's speech started to slur.

A Tom Petty song played on the jukebox.

Graham half-listened while Amy talked about Sterling. "He just makes me want to be a better person. Have you ever met someone like that? He's so kind and friendly to everyone. He's so patient too. He volunteers at the Mental Health facility twice a week."

Graham asked, "does he shove lithium down people's throats?"

Amy didn't like that comment. "No. He's studying movement therapy. He leads aerobics classes."

Graham laughed so hard that slobber dribbled down the corner of his chin. He told Amy that a movement therapist named Sterling was exactly what she deserved. She didn't like that comment either. Graham thought he was being very clever.

He went up to the bar and bought a shot for himself and Ted Kurchowski. He sat back down at the booth and told Amy "I'm sorry I'uz nast-tee earlier. I'ma havin' a ruff time right nawu."

Graham kept half listening, which became more difficult as he became more intoxicated. Ted Kurchowski sent another shot to their booth.

There were two moments from that night pristinely preserved in Graham's memory. They left lasting impressions and couldn't be erased or forgotten no matter how much he drank.

The first moment occurred when Graham and Amy were smoking outside of the Sumnerville Tavern. Graham was uneasy on his feet and breathed heavily out his mouth. It was bitterly dry and cold. When Graham flicked his lighter he thought his fingers were going to snap apart. The smoke he exhaled turned blue in the floodlight over the parking lot. He watched the red taillights of rusted pick up trucks driving down the road. Amy didn't say much. She was annoyed and tired and wanted to go home. She smoked her cigarette in deep angry drags. Graham remembered that he had lost his virginity to Amy Vanderbeak at her parents' summer cottage on Lake Erie when he was 17 years old. He later found out that she had already given it up the previous summer to a vacationer from Fort Wayne Indiana in the very same summer cottage on Lake Erie. He never told her she was his first, but assumed she knew based off his poor performance. Amy finished her cigarette first and went back into the bar. Graham looked up. He looked at the black telephone poles and the black telephone wires silhouetted against the frozen purple sky. He thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

The second moment was far less pleasant. Amy was driving Graham home in her father's Subaru. It was a little past last call. Graham couldn't remember leaving the bar. Amy was driving very fast and kept saying, "you wonder why you're so miserable Graham. You bring it on yourself really, and what's even worse, I think you like it. You're a glutton for pain and misery. And you know what? I don't like you'll ever change. You're 24 years old now for Christ's sake." Graham realized that he was madly in love with Amy Vanderbeak. He always had been and probably always would be. His stomach felt sour. He couldn't look out the window for fear of throwing up. The motion of the car was as if someone had hung Graham upside down from his ankles and was swinging him in circles like a lasso.

Amy parked her father's Subaru in Graham's driveway. She left the engine running. Graham tried to invite her in, but couldn't get the words out. His hands wouldn't work right. It took him forever to take off his seatbelt. "I'd like to go home before sun rise," Amy said impatiently. Graham fumbled against the door, trying to find the handle. First he rolled down his window, then he locked the door, then he rolled up the window, then he unlocked the door, then he rolled the window back down again. Despite his efforts and experimentation, he had yet to open it. Amy was exasperated. She got out and walked around to the passenger side.

Graham saw her profile in the headlights. A gust of wind kicked up. It fluttered the lapels of her pea coat. The two curls around her ears bounced up and down with her deliberate strides. She looked beautiful and strong.

She opened the passenger side door and Graham fell like a hostage from a plane onto the snow and ice. He flailed his rubbery arms and legs in an effort to stand up. He rolled over onto his knees, his chin buried in the snow and his rump sticking up in the air. He felt a bitter churning in his stomach, planted his hands palms down in the snow and raised his chest off the ground until he was on all fours, and then immediately threw up. The warm mucus and bile melted a basin in the ice and collected into a syrupy brown pool. Graham sputtered and coughed for a while, then stood up just in time to see the tail lights of Amy's father's Subaru disappear down his driveway. The gust of wind abruptly stopped. Graham inhaled and exhaled the dry cold air. He could feel it enrich his blood. Silence echoed through the trees.



## The Black Wheat Plague

Bill was trying to write a poem. He had written 'Sorrow is', but was at a loss for what to write next. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, inhaling and exhaling with luxurious swells of his chest. He focused on his heartbeat, hoping to find inspiration in his body's own inherent rhythm.

**tha-dum, tha-dum, tha-dum**

It was 1:15 on a Wednesday morning. Aside from an aspiring poet, Bill was a chronic insomniac, and still dressed as he sat at his desk in the lonesome deadness of night in rural Illinois. He wore a white collared shirt tinted gray with dust and missing its top button, and a red and yellow striped tie tied in a sloppy half-windsor knot that was loosened around his neck, allowing his exaggerated Adam's apple to slide up and down his thin throat with each breath. The sharp knees of his fence-post legs knocked against the side of his improvised desk, a slab of unstained wood laid across two columns of apple crates stacked three high.

A wind kicked up and buzzed through the walls. It was a misty night in early April and speckles of condensation shivered on the window. Bill was a published poet of some renown in certain circles. But he considered poetry little more than a serious hobby, and made his living as a physician. He'd moved from Chicago to the desolate prairies of rural Illinois to provide his services after the area had been hit hard by the Blackwheat Plague. The community was very poor, many families didn't have electricity or running water, and the nearest hospital was very far away.

His telephone rang. He answered it. "This is Bill speaking, how may I help you? . . . Yes, this is Dr. Whilholm, but I'd like it if you called me Bill . . . Oh, don't bother yourself with that, I'm available 24 hours . . . Why, certainly I can . . . No, no, it's no trouble at all, I swear to you." He pulled a small pad of paper out of his breast pocket. "Let me get your address." He scribbled down some numbers. "What seems to be the matter? . . . Twins? . . . fraternal twins, age nine . . . serious fatigue, coughing fits. Is there any discharge, like mucus or phlegm? . . . How long has this been going on? . . . I see, okay Mr. Perkins, I'm out the door right now." He stood up with his neck crooked, cradling the phone against his shoulder as he grabbed his moth-eaten tweed jacket off the back of his chair. "Don't trouble yourself with that sir, we can work something out later . . . I'll have to examine the children before I can make a diagnosis . . . It's no trouble at all, I can assure you Mr. Perkins. We can work something out later . . . I'm hanging up now." He hung up, put on his coat, and grabbed

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