



*B65*

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Early one Wednesday morning, six and a half years after graduating from the university, Jerome woke up hung over from a dream in which his old friend Wilson was rolling on the floor, throwing a temper tantrum among a scattering of empty wine and beer bottles. Jerome was more hung over and depressed than on other days. He decided that he didn't feel well enough to work. He picked up the bedside telephone. The store manager,

whose name was Fat Steven, answered in a voice that had the texture of wet gravel. Fat Steven probably wasn't feeling well either. Pillow's Hardware, he said, we don't open for another hour. Would you mind calling back?

No, this is Jerome. Listen. I'm feeling sick today. I'm feeling really sick.

Fat Steven was quiet. When's the last time you didn't come in?

This made Jerome nervous. Three months ago was the last. I don't know, he said. It was last year.

You plan on coming in tomorrow?

Sure. Yes. I will most certainly be in tomorrow. I can work extra hours.

I think it's important that you come in tomorrow, said Fat Steven.

I don't feel good, he thought. Then he said it out loud as if to validate it. Camp B65 was on the outskirts of his mind. It had been growing larger recently, a brown vague assortment of squat brown buildings with milky windows. And a barbed wire fence with a hole large

enough that one could escort an elephant through it.

When Jerome was a second-year student at the university, the government of the ideological awakening erected Camp B65 to serve as a holding tank for the emotionally debilitated. The growing population of young people who were giving up too quickly was perceived by the authorities as a sign of decay that could in no way convey a sense of confidence. The young people were *cared for*. The broken economy and thinning job market were reasons, but there was also a more ominous, metaphysical reason, a historical influence of turning one's back to the absurd notion of a future, which can be nicely illustrated by a short anecdote from old royal Bellehoppe. Jerome had hoped to be a Bellehoppean scholar.

The first son of King Samuel of Bellehoppe, Prince Lee, was alone one afternoon in the deep forest surrounding the kingdom, learning to track mammals, when he was startled by a thin whistling that sounded like wind blowing through a metal pipe. Prince Lee lifted his

sword and turned slowly, fearing an ambush by thieves, and found instead an angel with a child's head. He recognized the face that had once belonged to him ten years before, when he was a child and only pretended to be a hunter on the floor of the royal nursery. That was his face, preserved. The softness of the angel's eyes caused him sadness. The angel whistled again. Prince Lee remembered a time he had enthusiastically chased an imaginary elk into one of the seldom used drawing rooms and ran into the mantle of the fireplace, cracking open his head. He had fallen unconscious and awoke snug in his mother's arms, his face buried in her heavy bosom. This was the first time Prince Lee had suffered euphoria. The angel with his own face of time past whistled once more then turned into an elk. The elk stood before him and it did not attempt to run. Prince Lee, overcome by sadness, was unable to slaughter it. He lay down in some leaves and quietly sobbed until a search party found him that evening. He never took his father's place at the throne, and all record of Prince

Lee's life after this strange encounter in the forest is either lost or had never been recorded.

While he was approaching his twentieth birthday, Jerome began to witness a new world in which hopelessness was outlawed. Whistle-blowers (office staffers and business professors) reported several students as emotionally debilitated after they missed consecutive days of class or work without reason. In self-interest, Jerome became a member of the young opposition. He once hatched a plan, along with his companions, Lila and Wilson, to free the inmates from Camp B65. Except when they arrived at the camp with several feet of rope, a few kitchen knives, a box of matches, and lighter fluid, they were struck by a curious stage fright. There were gigantic holes in the surrounding barbed wire fence. And the guards in the watchtower, who were shadows and smoke that rose through the search lights, waved and whistled at them in a fashion that may have been celebratory or may have been condescending. The inmates were allowed to

escape. They could run away whenever they wanted. It never happened.

He went into the kitchen and took some ice cream from the fridge. He sat at his kitchen table and made space for himself by pushing away an old newspaper on which he had been copying down phone numbers he had collected from a handful of sluts in the bars. On the wall behind his head were illustrated pictures of King Samuel of Bellehoppe he had torn from a middle school text book. The pictures featured the king in a bottom-curved bright-red cloak; his beard was golden and pointed. In one picture the king held the staff of will-exertion. In another, he was shadowed by a green angel that resembled a dragonfly with the king's own bearded head; this was the angel of good fortune, who granted the king strength to overcome obstacles of a political nature. Jerome had taped the illustrations there to remind himself what his interest was supposed to be, which was growing fainter everyday he unpacked boxes in the dusty room with the men who had tattoos

on their inner arms.

For his senior dissertation, he wrote a survey of justice and disobedience in old Bellehoppe. He was praised for the conciseness of his thesis, which the academic panel had deemed true enough, but not particularly interesting. After a number of interviews at colleges in and around Tokenville, he finally got the hard talk from an old mentor, who had taken to drink and to the study of politically motivated arson.

The academic job market is suffering like all job markets, he said. You don't have the ideas and you don't have the will-power. You're not the ideal candidate. They want someone with more optimism. Optimism about life, progress, and the like. Someone burning with ideas.

But I want it, said Jerome.

So do two-hundred other young men who wrote a survey of justice in old Bellehoppe. I suggest you don't think too much about it and don't take it so hard; find another line of work and keep yourself out of a damned

camp. If I may make one final recommendation, the drinking helps. I would say, the drinking keeps me chipper.

On the wall directly facing the pictures of the Bellehoppean king was a black-and-white poster from the film *The Big Chill*: Kevin Kline, with his smiling, wide-open face, wearing shorts and running shoes. He had hung the picture of the character because he wanted to be ironic. His attitude toward Kline's character had changed over the years. Now the poster embarrassed him: whenever he was afraid that the warehouse guys might show up after the bars, he would pull out the tacks and roll the poster up.

I'm a few steps away from Camp B65, he thought. Oh my god, I'm turning into Wilson. And he thought of how he, Wilson, and Lila used to watch *The Big Chill* together and laugh. They found it so ridiculous, this concept of a person spending his young adulthood as an intoxicated social activist then waking up one day with money and a career and feeling as if he's missed a deeper meaning.

What I wouldn't do for a career, he thought. One night, however, Wilson didn't find the movie funny anymore. This was the first time he rested his head in Lila's bosom; this was also the first time Jerome felt jealous of Wilson for what he considered no reason, other than that he was feeling horny. But Lila had always been too big for him. She was a big woman.

Around ten a.m., Jerome's phone rang. He figured it was someone from Pillow's calling to tell him that an inconveniently large shipment had arrived, and that if he couldn't prove that he was sick, then he might just become suspect and -- you never know -- he might just end up in a camp. Then he would have no choice but to go in and pretend to be *under the weather*, fake coughs, and find inopportune times to sit down on a crate.

Answering the phone, he attempted to sound as if he'd been asleep. There was a woman's voice. It was a familiar voice and it took him a moment to place. It was Lila's voice. They hadn't spoken in months. He stood at the window and watched a skinny brown squirrel

perched atop an aluminum garbage can. Some leaves floated down from above.

The last time they had seen each other, they had gotten into a fight. Lila and Wilson had come to Tokenville to visit him. The two friends still lived in their old college town, Spokes. The three of them had gotten drunk together, and Wilson delivered a harrowing monologue about the uselessness of going on in a world where happiness was impossible. Jerome was annoyed and told him that he had entitlement issues. Lila said that Jerome was just as miserable, except that he was an alcoholic, so he didn't feel as much pain. Then she comforted Wilson by bringing his head to her massive bosom.

Why don't you guys go upstairs and screw and get it over with, Jerome had said.

Our relationship is much deeper than that, said Lila; you're jealous.

Jealous, said Jerome. Okay. Sure. I'm jealous of this. You're both sick. You should go to B65 and get a bunk

together. The two of you. And at night, Lila, you can escape through the fence while your boyfriend cries in his sleep.

Wilson had passed out on Lila's chest and didn't hear a word.

Lila, he said. Jesus. It's been, like, forty years.

No, it hasn't. Don't you have a full time job? I thought I was going to leave a message. I'm glad, though.

He didn't like that she admitted to him that she was glad that he was home. I took the day off. I wasn't feeling well. Physically not feeling well. Emotionally, I'm fine.

Listen, she said. When's the last time you talked to Wilson?

I haven't really talked to him much since he started getting serious with the girl he found on the street. I can't remember her name. Is it Donna?

It still felt strange talking about Wilson's girlfriend. Wilson met Donna a little over a year ago when he was in downtown Spokes to pick up a new inhaler. He had

been feeling more depressed than normal. He tortured himself with the question of why he spent his days in a call center, selling credit cards over the telephone, instead of looking at peasant rugs through a magnifying glass. Sometimes, when he was depressed enough, he considered handing himself over to B65. To show up at the camp one day with a blanket on his shoulders and to declare that he would like it better there. Then he saw Lila from behind, looking at a window display for neon stockings, which had become an important accessory in slut fashion. Wilson found this strange, since he knew Lila's opinion of slut fashion: it was an affront to good taste. She favored a modest, earthy look.

So Wilson, who depended on Lila to comfort him, stood behind her and asked in a playful manner: Are you thinking about changing your style? To which Lila had turned around and revealed herself to not be Lila. But she had looked so much like her from the back: the boxy figure; the big, matriarchal legs; the yellow-brown hair running down in waves past her shoulder blades;

the fall-brown scarf thrown loosely over her shoulders. Once she turned, Wilson was horrified by her scent (a melon-esque perfume) and covered his mouth with his hand. He apologized for bothering her. But she told him to hold on. It would turn out that Donna was the kind of woman who liked to be approached; and it was only accidental that Wilson was able to approach a strange woman. It wasn't until the end of the afternoon, as they were finishing their coffees, and she had listened to him nervously ramble on about the astounding contemporary aesthetics of some Bellehoppean-era peasant rugs, that Wilson realized she was wearing a neon blue skirt that Lila would never consider wearing because it was a staple of slut fashion, and that he had conveniently managed to overlook.

I've never met anyone like you, she told him. Most men just try to sleep with me.

I've never actually tried to sleep with anyone, said Wilson, but that doesn't mean I won't try. I promise.

She thought this was charming. Let's be an item

together, she said. You and me.

Jerome was supposed to have met her once. There was supposed to have been lunch and a walk in the park one afternoon in the early, wet, chilled spring, but Jerome had been hung over and called to cancel after Wilson and Donna had already waited for half an hour. This had created a rift in their friendship. He had been hung over, true, but the more honest reason he missed the lunch was that he couldn't stand to see Wilson succeed. He felt that their roles had been reversed. So humiliated was he by Wilson's relationship with a woman who wasn't Lila or his mother that he never considered the likelihood that the relationship could just as easily crash and burn. She was a slut, after all, and Wilson was the most easily defeated person he had ever met who hadn't ended up in a camp yet.

He's not doing well, said Lila

In his body or in his head, said Jerome.

It's so bad. I think he might really be camp-bound this time, said Lila. And that new girlfriend, she has a

lot to do with it.

Jerome smiled. It made sense that Lila would be jealous of Wilson's first girlfriend.

She told Jerome that she had recently met Donna for the first time.

How is she, Jerome asked.

I don't like her, said Lila, but it's complicated.

The three of them, Wilson, Donna, and Lila, had dinner at a restaurant in Spokes called German Palace, where one could order twenty-dollar sausages; the professors ate here; and students often dined at German Palace when their families were in town. The atmosphere was dark and warm and bathed in the soft glow of candlelight. Lila had been the first to arrive, and when Wilson entered, holding Donna's hand, she observed firstly that Donna was almost a foot taller than Wilson; secondly, that she was dressed as a slut in neon colors with a scarf thrown loosely over shoulders, which was an oddly tasteful accessory; thirdly, that there was an uncomfortable distance between them, as if Wilson

had only just picked her up.

I wanted to take him aside and tell him he was making a mistake, said Lila. They didn't belong together. Nothing could have been more obvious. She is going to sleep with at least three to four other men before they've been together half a year. But you know how he is. You have to be careful with Wilson. She was impressive though. She was big. As big as me.

Donna made an impression on Lila. It would have taken her the whole dinner, perhaps even the remainder of the night to realize why, except that Wilson was being strange. He was sheepish and quiet, high-strung, as if he were afraid of being found out. Found out how? Lila didn't know. The conversation was labored, it churned -- small talk mostly: where did they go to school, what did they study, how unhappy were they now that they had been out of school for half a decade. Camps were alluded to, but the conversation never turned political.

Lila, who was normally talkative and opinionated,

stood with one foot out of the discussion because she was trying to figure out the root of Wilson's discomfort. Then at a lull in the conversation, she caught Donna with turned head, perhaps trying to catch her reflection in the mirror behind the bar and absent-mindedly pulling on her bottom lip. This is when it occurred to Lila that, my god, you know, we actually looked a lot alike. Resemblance, she told Jerome, wasn't even strong enough a word. There were some differences. Donna wore a perfume, for instance, that Lila would never wear; and, her scarf aside, her clothes were atrocious. Yet the similarities were undeniable. And that pulling on her lip, she said to Jerome, don't I do that? I know I do it, she said, because I first picked it up as a girl watching *Ladies in Crowns*. That television show. What's her name -- I can't remember her name -- the brunette used to do that. Pull on her lip and look distracted. I thought it was very womanly.

This was in early summer, so after dinner, Lila suggested the three of them take a stroll downtown

and admire the pink and peach hues of the waning day before a night of forecasted thunderstorms. Wilson was absolutely miniscule walking between the two women. Like we were guards escorting him away, said Lila; people on the street gave us funny looks. A pair of wafer-thin college girls sneered and whispered to one another in the spiteful way young women will when they're afraid they are being upstaged by women with better features.

At one point, Donna stopped in front of a window display of neon shoes, and Lila stopped too. She stood beside Donna and feigned interest. The store's backlighting was off, and as a result, Lila could see their reflections. Side by side, they could have very easily been sisters. You know what I was just thinking, she said to Donna: I was just thinking that you and I look alike. Don't we, Wilson? It's so weird to be with a person whom you resemble. Don't you feel like people keep looking at us? I'm not angry; I think the attention is nice.

Wilson all of the sudden suggested ice cream and grabbed hold of Donna's hand as if to rescue her from an embarrassing situation. Was that wrong, Lila asked. Apparently so, she told Jerome, because for the rest of the evening, Donna answered everything I said with sarcasm, like she was a pissed-off teenager.

They parted in front of the ideological monument to will-exertion (a marble statue of a man in a suit with his fist in the air) in a fizzled-out ceremony of weak handshakes. As Lila walked towards her apartment, she turned back once and saw that Wilson too was turning back and looked so distant and small, she suffered the impression that he was being swallowed up; not necessarily by Donna, she added, but by something inside of him. Maybe he wanted to apologize to me, she said, but not for his girlfriend's behavior. For something else, something deeper.

Things are so bad now, she said. If you're not working today, you should come to Spokes. It might actually help.

I can't help. Besides, I can't risk being seen. I called out three months ago.

By the time Jerome hung up the phone, he had given in to Lila. It excited him that she called him because Wilson was suffering a mysterious crisis. Lila had never called on him for anything. He agreed to drive east to their old college town of Spokes, where Lila and Wilson still lived and where she and Jerome would meet around one at The Mannequin. He walked in circles around his kitchen and paused in the bathroom to examine his face in the mirror. He shaved. Once he was safely out of town, he picked up a six-pack of Chutney beer to sip while on the road.

It took Jerome two hours to drive from Tokenville to Spokes, and this was a fine fall day. The sun was white and high and gleamed through the barren trees, which created a remarkable openness on the horizon. He rolled down his window and tossed out his last empty and pulled over into a rest stop. It was about eleven-thirty in the morning, and he had been on the road for a

little over an hour. Jerome needed to urinate and pick up a few more bottles, which he took back out to his car. He spit up a little in the dirt and sat on the trunk. He squinted in the sun and surveyed the brown and yellow nothing land and the road that cut through the land. Some ways down the road, half-obscured by an incline, he could see the tops of the squat brick buildings of Camp B65. He had already passed the campus maybe ten minutes before and hadn't noticed. He raised his bottle to the buildings, to the distant watchtower, the barbed wire with holes, the sleeping bodies inside, unsure if he were being ironic. Maybe, he thought, I really like that camp, I like that there's a camp to go where I am not.

And he reflected, for only a moment, on an evening some months after the night he, Lila, and Wilson traveled to B65, believing they could rescue the emotionally disenfranchised. It had been he and Wilson alone on this evening. Lila was with some girlfriends. The men got very drunk. They had each already vomited when

Jerome insisted on driving Wilson's old beater to the camp. Wilson floated in and out of consciousness on the passenger side. Jerome laughed now, reflecting on what Wilson must have felt, coming deeper into consciousness (lit up - dark - lit up - dark: the rhythm of the searchlight), to find Jerome dragging him through a hole in the fence, laughing all the way.

Hey-Ho, Jerome had yelled to the guards in the tower. And though the guards didn't yell back, one of them rolled a friendly tat on the floor of the watch stand with the butt of his gun. It's a joke, Jerome had said to his friend; that's all, Wilson, a lousy thing to do for a laugh. Lila's not going to think it's funny, not like we do. So don't tell her.

And Wilson had fallen to his knees and refused to go backwards or forwards. Please don't make me do it, he said.

It's a joke, Jerome repeated; don't you know a joke?

When Jerome entered Spokes for the first time in over a year, he felt a warmth that he imagined as nostalgia,

though it wasn't set off by any memory in particular, and reached its pinnacle during his slow cruise through the quaint downtown as the white light of fall, with no trees to catch it, washed the storefront windows with glare. I feel good, he thought, like a human who has just come to life. His body tingled.

He met Lila at the little diner called The Mannequin where there was a white, headless mannequin in the window, standing in the same pose it had held for at least a decade, legs splayed, the undefined white palms of its hands raised and open to passers-by in the street. He spotted Lila right away. She was in a booth, reading a menu. He almost expected to see the Lila of his college days, and she almost was; that is, she wore a green peasant blouse she may even have owned back then, and her hair was in two buns on either side of her head, and there was a deadpan scowl on her face. But there was more of her. Her face seemed to have spread and succumbed to gravity. When their eyes met, she grinned -- he knew she was *taking him in* and receiving

her own nostalgic stimulation -- but as soon as he was seated, her face aged more with more gravity and more worry.

So that's how you keep it up, she said.

I don't get it.

You smell like booze.

I go to work nearly everyday. Drinking keeps me chipper.

I was just observing.

And how about you, said Jerome, expecting her to agree that, yes, the drinking helps.

I like my job, she said. It's a lot of work, but caring for the elderly is very rewarding.

Jerome didn't ask when she got her new job. He felt stung that she had never told him. She used to work retail. So where's Wilson, he asked.

It wouldn't even be safe at this point to let Wilson leave the house, she said. He's at my place. Sleeping.

Over plates of fried eggs and hash browns and dirty white cups of coffee, she told him the rest of Wilson's

story up to now.

A few weeks ago, Donna broke up with him. Lila wasn't surprised. A woman like that, she said, who would sleep with a whole military parade faster than you could cook a roast, they're careless with people's feelings. They didn't make sense together anyway, she said. Donna dragged him around town, and he worshipped her, did whatever she said. But I don't think they had one warm minute together. I mean, the poor guy never had a girlfriend before, so he didn't know.

Donna cheated on him. She was out with some girlfriends one night, and a will-exerter with a job in finance bought her a fruity drink then another and another. Jerome was free to imagine what happened after the fifth drink. To Donna's credit, she didn't keep the infidelity a secret; on the contrary, she showed up at Wilson's place the next morning. When Wilson, who saw that she hadn't done herself up yet, asked if she would like to use his shower, she announced that she wouldn't be using his shower anymore. They were

through. Wilson said that he didn't mind -- he could deal with an infidelity now and again -- but he was missing the point. Donna didn't want to cheat on him. She didn't want Wilson in the picture at all. It's been kind of fun, she told him, running around town with you, pretending to have an interest in art and all of that, but last night taught me that I haven't been myself lately; I forgot what it was like, being myself, and now that I've remembered, I can't go back. I'm kind of sorry, but I'm kind of not.

Lila rubbed her face with her hands then used a paper napkin to wipe away the smear of grease she left on her cheek. You know, Jerome, she said, I'm working forty hours a week now. I took today off because I just had to. I couldn't deal with the phone calls. He called me every night and whined and whined and whined. He misses her so much, blah, blah, blah. I even told him to call you, just to give me a break. I don't know why I deal with it sometimes. I've always just felt so bad for him.

And why didn't he call me, Jerome wanted to know.

He said you're too icy. You'd probably tell him to get

drunk and do it with someone else or something.

That's true, said Jerome.

Believe me, said Lila. I'm starting to get a little frosty myself.

This struck Jerome as familiar. That's from a movie, he said.

What?

What you just said. That's from a movie.

Lila ignored his observation and continued: He didn't want advice anyway, she said; I was probably tougher on him than you would have been. But I found out what he really wanted.

One afternoon in the middle of the week, Lila had been sitting back, eating a fruit yogurt with her shoes off, after an eight hour shift at the elder center, when the doorbell rang. She expected a couple of zealots, dressed in polka dot bowties and carrying pamphlets decorated in smiley faces. She didn't have the energy to tell them to go. The doorbell rang again. Now she was irritated. She was ready to release her anger on God's

people, even if they had with them one of those little girls in locks and an angel dress, who would sing a hymn and dance like a clumsy ballerina, which was probable. Lila didn't care. She would have yelled at a child: that's the kind of mood she was in. But there were not zealots at the door, she said. Who was at the door? Go on and guess.

That would be Wilson, said Jerome.

And he was dressed up, too, said Lila. He wasn't wearing a suit or anything like that, but, for Wilson, he might as well have been going to a wedding: a very soft-looking wrinkle-free sweater -- green, my favorite color -- and a striped collared shirt underneath. And he was holding a bouquet of these strange purple flowers that had these, like, white insect antennas shooting up from the centers of the bulbs. Do you want to have dinner with me, he says.

Jerome had it figured out. He was finished eating and put his fork on his plate. I have a theory, he said; it's like Stephen, the second King of Bellehoppe. His wife died

from consumption -- yes, consumption, I think.

What is consumption anyway?

Lungs, said Jerome. Anyway, instead of going into mourning, what's the first thing he does? He names his daughter, who closely resembles his wife, the queen. He dresses her up in her deceased mother's clothing; they sleep in the same bed; he begins calling her Precious Partner. King Stephen has a quote: Today I have cheated my wife's death; I am the next to wisest man in the world.

And who's the wisest, asked Lila.

I don't know that. No one does. He twisted the wrapping from his straw then tore it in half. Maybe it's just me who doesn't know.

Lila had asked Wilson if he was out of his mind. She explained as calmly as she could that they had known each for almost ten years and not once in that time had Wilson ever expressed romantic interest. I've been more like a mother, she said, or a counselor. Probably more like a counselor.

But why can't it be, said Wilson. That's what he kept saying over and over again. Why can't it be? I tried to comfort him, she said. I tried to show him affection. Like a friend. But it's difficult because, at the same time, I didn't want to lead him on. He had never really been in a relationship before, so he couldn't know how bad it would feel to get dumped. I mean, I've never really been in a relationship either, so I didn't know what to tell him. Then he got angry, Jerome. He got really angry. At me? Maybe. At his life, his situation, because he never became a curator and sells credit cards over the phone instead? I don't know. But this is what he said: it never should have happened, she never should have left me, and the fact that Donna and I look so much alike, that was proof to him that it wasn't actually her he wanted; it was me. He belonged with me. The happiness he was searching for was right here, in his old friend, Lila, who had been taking care of him for years.

But that doesn't even make sense, said Jerome. He's forgetting a significant detail.

I know, said Lila. You don't have to tell me. He never even asked if I was interested in him. And by the way, I'm not. Wilson's always been kind of like a pet to me.

A dog, he said. No, a puppy.

Stop that. It makes me feel good to care for him. I don't know. Now I'm afraid to let anyone see him. I'm really scared, Jerome. We can't let him end up in a camp.

There was something Jerome wanted to say here. No sooner had he opened his mouth than he changed his mind and replaced the unspoken with this: Are you seeing anyone?

Me, she said. No. I mean, I think about it sometimes, but I'm busy. Besides, sex is one of those things.

It's not a thing at all, said Jerome.

I don't think too much about it, said Lila. Maybe I do.

But not with Wilson.

I used to think about that, and I always imagined he would cry right in the middle of it.

Jerome, who was drinking from his glass of water, covered his mouth, laughing. Water dripped from his hand. I'm sorry, he said. But that sounds about right.

It doesn't turn me on, she said; it makes me sad. And that scares me too, because sadness can be addictive. It's really not funny. The same satisfaction I get from working with the elderly -- I swear, sometimes I feel the same exact way with Wilson.

The apartment where Lila had *settled down*, that is, where she had lived for the last few years, was so similar to the kind she would have rented in college that upon entering, Jerome felt he had been there many times before, that this space was an accumulation of the apartments where she had lived during their four years of student life. The arched way into the kitchen; the green plastic wreath hanging high on the wall; the burning candles that smelled a cross between the sea and baby lotion; she'd even kept some of the same posters on the walls: the dancing woman with martini

glasses for breasts, The Stormy Rippers album cover poster that features the band standing on a beach in archaic goblin masks.

So where is he, said Jerome and plopped onto her sofa. It had been several hours since he'd finished his beer and his stomach was beginning to churn. He was on edge.

Upstairs in my bedroom, said Lila.

Your bedroom?

No, she said. We don't sleep together. Never. But he goes up there and sleeps in my bed when I'm at work. He thinks I'm at work.

Okay, said Jerome; whatever. What is Wilson doing for work now, by the way? Is he still at that lousy call center?

Nothing, said Lila. He hasn't been to work for some time.

That's dangerous, said Jerome and rubbed his hands together. So what should I do? Go up there and tell him I'm worried? That I think he'll end up in a camp and that he needs to get his head out of his ass?

He has a problem, said Lila, and you're going to tell him how bad it is. He's in danger of going to a camp. Tell him that. Honestly, I don't know. Maybe it'll give him some perspective?

Do you think he masturbates up there?

What?

In your bed, said Jerome.

Please. I don't want to consider that. Do you have to be tasteless?

It's a real question, he said.

While Lila was in the kitchen pouring a glass of water, Jerome headed up the stairs. Lila's bedroom door was closed. He paused for a moment and realized that he was scared. Why am I scared, he asked himself. Because I'm afraid that could just as easily be me in there, he answered. But that's a stupid fear. It's not me. I go to work nearly every day. Besides, I'm not that weak.

And with this in mind, he knocked, waited. He knocked again then went inside. Wilson was curled in Lila's green comforter. A few of her skirts were strewn

in a corner. A white blouse was folded over a chair back. A pair of Wilson's pants, the belt still through the loops, was on the floor beside the bed. Only the back of his head showed. His hair was brown and clumpy.

Wilson, said Jerome. You know who this is, don't you?

Wilson wouldn't lift his head. He grunted and mumbled.

Come on now, said Jerome. That's no way to be. I haven't seen you in a while. Why don't you get up? We'll have some drinks.

Wilson did lift his head, but he didn't turn to face Jerome, who could feel his weight in the room; his sadness, he imagined, possessed its own gravity. What are you doing here, said Wilson.

I came because I'm worried about you. He surprised himself by how easily he said this, and with such sincerity, too. Perhaps he really meant it.

Where's Lila?

Downstairs. Why don't you get out of bed? Maybe we

can have some drinks. We'll drink and watch a movie like we used to. Wait a second, he said; I'll be right back.

He softly closed the bedroom door and ran down the stairs, where Lila was on the sofa, sitting forward with her hands folded between her knees. She turned and looked at Jerome.

*The Big Chill*, he said.

Excuse me?

I'm starting to feel a little frosty myself, said Jerome. That's from *The Big Chill*. We used to watch that movie all of the time.

Great. Be proud of yourself. How's Wilson?

You know how Wilson is. Let's watch that movie, he said. The three of us. We'll get some vodka and watch *The Big Chill*.

Are you serious?

There's a good message in that movie, said Jerome. In Bellehoppe, when a lord or member of the court was accused of sadness or treason, or any such problem, the

king would set up a private showing of a play he thought was relevant to the problem.

Okay, said Lila. What's your point? This isn't Bellehoppe.

The member of the court in question, said Jerome, would end up identifying with the tragic character in the play, which would force him to be introspective.

So you want to watch *The Big Chill* with Wilson? Wait. I can't tell if you're serious.

And we'll have some drinks, he added.

Lila and Jerome took a trip to the local VHS rental and checked out *The Big Chill*.

They stopped at a convenience store and picked up Chutney beer and wine. When they got back to Lila's place, they both went up to her bedroom, woke Wilson and walked him down the stairs, one friend on either side. Wilson wore the green comforter like a cloak. At one point in the movie, Jerome, being fairly drunk, felt he was growing an erection and turned to Lila for no reason other than to glimpse the outline of her

heavy breasts in her peasant top, and saw that she was allowing Wilson to rest his head there. His head was rested on her bosom. He turned back to the television and took another swig of wine. The last scene Jerome remembered seeing before falling asleep was Kevin Kline asking the drug dealer, John Hurt, after John Hurt was almost arrested, if going to jail was another experience he wanted to have; you're stupid, Kevin Kline told him, stupid.

Jerome woke at five o'clock in the morning and put his shoes on. Lila also woke up.

I have to go to work, he whispered because Wilson was still sleeping, curled in a ball with his head on the armrest.

What am I going to do with him, she whispered back.

You're either going to let him live here, he said, or you're not.

You're an asshole.

I'm not addicted to sadness, said Jerome. I'm sorry.

Several weeks later, Lila called him again. This was on a weekend, and Jerome had the day off. He had spent this morning in bed, hung over, but he was not alone. He was lying beside a woman named Maria. Her hair was yellow-brown, and he found himself lost in the waves of her hair as he passed in and out of sleep. When the phone rang at around nine-thirty in the morning, he let the answering machine pick up. No message was left. The phone rang again.

The phone is ringing, said Maria. Why don't you pick it up because it's making my head hurt.

Jerome grunted and went into the kitchen, where there were empty bottles lined up across the counters. He picked up the receiver that was sticky with old beer. There was a woman's voice. It was familiar, and it took him a moment to place. Then he realized it was his old friend, Lila.

It's been at least a year, he said.

No, it hasn't. It's been less than a month. Listen, she

said. Things have gotten very bad here with Wilson.

He's still living with you?

I don't know what else to do. I don't imagine you would care very much, but I think it would mean a lot to him.

What's that?

If you were to see him.

I'm not sure it would mean very much to either of us, he said.

You're an asshole. He's been summoned. To B65. It's finally happened.

Jerome didn't say anything. Perhaps in the back of his head he knew what this meant, to be summoned. But at the time, hung over, confused in the first moments after an oblivion of sleep, he couldn't make sense of the term.

To the camp, she said. He's been found out. It's my fault. I made a big mistake.

Jerome was annoyed. He thought of Maria in the warm bed and the boozy odor of sweat in her armpit,

and he wanted to go back there, lie down and wait for her to wake.

I'm sure you didn't, he said. Just relax.

You're just saying that. Can you please? Just come? Let's try?

Alright, said Jerome. Listen. I'll leave here in an hour or two. When are they coming to get him?

I can't believe we're talking about this. Tomorrow. They're coming tomorrow at noon.

Alright. So I'll leave here in an hour or two. And I'm bringing my girlfriend.

You don't have a girlfriend, said Lila.

I'm not lying. We were supposed to spend the day together. Her name is Maria. I don't think she'll mind taking a little trip, but she won't like it if I leave her alone.

I don't really care, said Lila.

She'll be fine, said Jerome. It could be a nice time.

I seriously doubt it.

It will be nice, said Jerome.

So he went back to the bedroom and shook Maria's shoulder a bit. She lifted her head, yellow-brown hair draped across her face. You can't go into work today, she said. It's our day together.

We're going to Spokes, he said.

Spokes? No. That's your old college town. I have no desire to. She let her head plop down onto the pillow.

We'll have some breakfast and take a little drive.

I wanted to drink martinis, she said.

You can drink in the car.

Alright. That will be nice.

He had met Maria in a bar. She was a large woman and had a pretty face that had been tainted by years of copious drinking. He had been feeling depressed that night. The situation with Wilson had depressed him, and he hadn't been able to admit this to himself. Instead, he did a lot of thinking about Lila: maybe I should have ended up with Lila, he thought. Why is it Wilson? Because he's weak? Because he makes himself a parasite and latches himself onto her? He was in a rut

where every night before falling asleep he masturbated and imagined that Lila was bouncing on top of him.

Maria did not look like Lila, not really, but they had the same body type. They were both large women. And on the night he met her in the bar, her hair was in braids on either side of her head. Lila sometimes wore her hair this way.

At some point during the night, he found himself sitting beside the large woman with yellow-brown hair, and he asked if she had ever gone to college.

The woman lifted her glass into the air and said: That's where I learned how to do this so well.

The joke that wasn't really a joke acted as a motif for the rest of their night. They drank together at the bar. They went back to his apartment and drank in the large kitchen for awhile. He hadn't bothered to take down the poster of Kevin Kline from *The Big Chill*. By leaving it up, he felt that he was opening himself to her. They went to the bedroom. They didn't have sex. They made a teepee of bed sheets and huddled in the dark

and shared a bottle. He confessed to her that he had always been afraid that he would end up in a camp. Don't get me wrong, he said. I don't think camps are a bad idea anymore -- I used to be part of the opposition, when I was young -- but sometimes, if it weren't for this (referring to the bottle) I think I might be in trouble.

You're not alone, she said. Life is tough. Who wants to spend it in a bunk in one of those nasty camps? And besides, being drunk isn't so bad.

Jerome agreed. Being hung over isn't so bad either, he said.

That's true. I never minded being hung over.

During the ride to Spokes, he played *The Stormy Rippers* while Maria lay in the back seat so she could feel she was really on a short vacation. She poured glasses of wine from a bottle and sang along with the songs in a voice that wavered from loud to quiet as she slipped in and out of sleep. Jerome didn't think too much about it when he passed the camp in the golden nothing land, sprinkled with an early snow, half-way

between Tokenville and Spokes. And when he arrived in Spokes, surrounded by the playground of his late youth, he was vacant of nostalgia. Instead, he felt that he was performing a chore. Maria's presence in the back seat made him feel that he had moved on. He was proving to himself, to Lila and to Wilson, that one could live perfectly well without problems if one wanted. Life did not have to be painful.

Parked outside of Lila's apartment, Jerome turned around and saw Maria's heavy eyes, and one of her breasts, pale and shapeless, on the verge of slipping from her tank top. She had taken off her coat because the heat in the car was on full blast. Why don't you fix yourself up a little, he said; put on something warm. You'll be meeting some old friends of mine. You should give a half-good impression.

For what reason? You never told me, she said and wiped some spittle from around her lips.

Because one of them, Wilson, is being taken to a camp tomorrow.

I don't want to, she said. People like that scare me.

Jerome was about to argue, but he changed his mind. He kind of liked the idea of Maria being too drunk to come inside.

Well, I'll be right in there, he said, if you need anything.

Got half a bottle left, she said.

Excellent. And it's not even three yet.

It's a day off, she said.

Lila must have been watching his car through the window because she opened the door before he could ring the bell. Where is she, was the first thing she said to him.

Maria? She's in the car taking a nap. Don't worry. She doesn't look anything like you.

You're such an asshole, she said. Come in.

Wilson was curled on the sofa, wrapped in a comforter. His head was down so that Jerome couldn't see his face, only his clumpy brown hair.

It's me again, Wilson, he said. Looks like this has

gotten a little out of hand. Huh?

Wilson adjusted his shoulder, which poked out from beneath the comforter and showed itself to be pale and shiny.

Where's his shirt, said Jerome.

He doesn't wear a shirt anymore. He's pretty much given up on that. He used to shower, you know, but not anymore.

Jerome stared at his old friend. He wanted to know how this was possible. Let my snot drip from my nose, he thought. Let me be hung over, me and my drunk girlfriend. That sort of thing is just fine, compared to this.

What the hell happened to you, he said. Hopelessness isn't noble, Wilson. We were wrong then. We were young.

Lila made a vaguely compassionate gesture by touching Jerome's arm. Her hand was big and cold. He was annoyed and shrugged her off.

What have you been doing with him, he said. Have

you been straight with him yet? Because, listen. I'll be straight with him if you want.

Jerome, she said. Then she exhaled. I've tried everything with him. You know that. Come on, let's go in the kitchen for a moment.

He's not listening.

He can hear, Jerome. Come on.

He paused. His old friend, Wilson, was a sack of flesh. Are you sure, he said.

Come on, said Lila.

He followed her into the kitchen where the overhead light was as bright as a flying saucer. He saw the red splotches of aging on her skin, her unkempt hair, her swollen eyes. It hadn't occurred to him before how hard this was for Lila, and he had a moment -- he wasn't sure what kind of moment -- but his feet felt very heavy on the ground. If the day's hangover had already worn off then it seemed to have returned.

I'm sorry, he said. This is horrible.

I've been taking him out for walks, she said. Just to

wake him up. Walking him around. This last week or so, he's been really bad. And I took him for a walk in Riverside Park. Usually I would wrap my arm around him, so as not to bring too much attention to the fact that he's uh, you know. I hoped people would think he was handicapped. Then one day we saw her.

Donna, said Jerome.

I don't know if she saw us or not. She was alone, but she was more slutted out than you could imagine. Her whole body was in neon, and there were bright red dots on her top to represent her nipples, I guess. She was atrocious. Wilson got angry. I knew he was angry. I felt his muscles tighten. I really did. I thought this was a good sign. I thought sure, he's breaking loose, let's go our separate ways for a bit. But when I caught up with him fifteen minutes later ...

Go on, said Jerome.

He was just like he is now, except he was in the grass in the park. There was a group of people around him, middle-aged, happy people. Professors, probably, and

parents in town to visit their kids. They were all well put together, you know. Outstanding citizens. I think a few of them had strollers. They were just standing around him, staring, like he was a monstrosity.

I wonder why, said Jerome.

But he's not like you. Why don't you understand that? You can be unhappy. It's almost a gift that Wilson doesn't have. What you said is right, by the way. Just now. Hopelessness: there's nothing noble about it.

Jerome rolled his eyes around in his head as if trying to catch a moth of a thought that fluttered back and forth in the front of his head. Maybe he belongs in a camp, he said. Maybe it's the best place. I mean, you can't deal with it anymore.

I can't believe you just said that.

What else are we supposed to do?

Don't you remember? You used to not be this way. You used to have a sense about you, Jerome. Remember that ridiculous plan you hatched, about rescuing the prisoners? At least you showed principle.

None of that was real, said Jerome. I don't like my life either. I don't like Pillow's Hardware. You think that's what I want to do with my life? I drink. I get by.

You're an asshole, said Lila.

Besides, there's one thing you haven't done yet.

What?

Just before, you said that you tried everything, but I don't think you have.

Lila was laughing. It was the stupid, annoying laugh that arises in a hopeless situation. Yeah, there is one thing. I haven't slept with him yet.

Jerome smiled. Do you think it would work? It's just like in *The Big Chill*. When Kevin Kline sleeps with his friend to get her pregnant. Then he goes running.

As soon as he said this, Jerome expected Lila to be angry. Instead a genuine smile lit up her face. She folded her arms and looked him in the eyes. You think that's possible? If I just gave him what he wants? Is that the right thing to do?

Then the doorbell rang. An invisible weight fell

between them. They looked to one another.

Don't worry, said Jerome. It's probably just Maria.

Jerome went to the door. He felt an instant happiness seeing Maria. He liked it when she was drunk. He liked to watch her carelessness, how oblivious she was to good form. He was envious and considered she had a particular kind of strength for which strength wasn't exactly the right word. She leaned against the outside railing, one tank top strap halfway off her arm. My bottle's almost done, she said.

I'll be out in a minute. Would you mind waiting in the car for just a little bit longer?

But I have to pee, she said.

Jerome nodded, he understood. He put his arm around her shoulders and helped her inside. Lila stood in the living room with her arms folded. The bathroom's back through the kitchen, she said.

Jerome introduced the women to one another. Maria pulled her arm away from Jerome and stared Lila in the eyes. Lila stared back. It had not occurred

to Jerome until just now how closely the two women resembled one another. Not their faces, necessarily, but their heights, for one, were exactly the same. They had the same body type. Lila greeted the resemblance with an awareness and a scowl. Maria seemed to be staring into a great light. Confused, embarrassed, she lowered her head and went back through the kitchen to the bathroom.

She's inebriated, said Lila.

I guess you do look alike. I'm sorry.

I've just decided I'm going to do it, said Lila.

What's that?

I'm going to sleep with him. That way, if they come tomorrow, and he's in no better shape, then I can tell myself I tried everything I could.

It's how we get by, said Jerome.

Lila squinted at him. She uncrossed her arms and placed her hands on either of her hips. I'm not sure I understand you, she said.

The drinking, said Jerome. It's nothing to make fun

of. In Bellehoppe, you know, there was a certain breed of sophist who believed that drunkenness was a perfectly acceptable state of being.

Lila ignored this. She mumbled to herself; Jerome couldn't understand the words. She helped Wilson up off the couch, keeping him covered by the comforter. She walked him to the base of the stairs. Wilson's head hung like that of an old, tired horse. Lila petted him like he was a horse. Before going up, she said: You won't be here when I come back down. When your girlfriend's done in the bathroom, you'll leave?

I just drove all of the way here. It's a two-hour drive, said Jerome.

You have what you need. We'll do what we can here, said Lila.

She escorted Wilson up the stairs. A hot wave of anger passed through Jerome, watching Lila escort his old friend to her bedroom. Once they were out of sight, he lifted his arm in the air. And I won't stop you, he said. It's what you wanted all along. The both of you.

Maria came out of the bathroom, trying now to steady herself. She had pulled back her hair and tied it into a ponytail. She had thrown water on her face.

Your friend is really pretty, she said. She doesn't look like she drinks very much.

Who's that?

The girl, said Maria. What do you mean, which one?

Wilson's going to a camp, said Jerome.

Oh, him, on the couch. Well, that's something else. Maria laughed.

They were outside, getting into the car. This time Maria got into the passenger side. All of this worry, she said. But even I know that there's a hole in the fence. Don't you know that? There's a hole in the fence of the camp? Anyone can get out at anytime. I don't see what the big deal is. Your friend is really pretty. She shouldn't worry so much.

I need a drink, said Jerome.

Me too, said Maria. That's the hole in our fence. So have you ever dated her?

*E&F V.V*

Jerome shrugged and started the car.

Because she's pretty, said Maria. That all I meant. I don't see a lot of people like that. I guess she made an impression on me.

