

1ST PLACE
RICHARD YATES SHORT STORY AWARD*KERRY JONES

RESCUE EFFORT

YOU KNOW THE TERM “SECRET DRINKER” just as well as you know the AA serenity pledge, but you only know the pledge because your father flirted with AA briefly before he gave it up and sacrificed himself, truly, to the things he accepted he couldn’t change, and you don’t think “secret drinker” applies to you because there’s nothing secret about it. You live alone, and in that case there are no secrets. There is you. There is your life. There are the things you do.

No secrets.

The wine, you know, is not the problem. The problem is going to bed. You’ve tried OTC sleeping pills and then went to the doctor for prescription pills, but they didn’t do the job. You slept, but it was hard getting up in the morning and your head was fuzzy even after the three cups of coffee before ever leaving the house. Your tongue was dry. Your arms and hands were numb and tingly, like you spent the night on top of them. All day at work, sitting in front of the computer, you’d swear that tonight you’d take your melatonin early so it’d have a chance to really kick in, but by then you were up to two or three tablets, and the bottle said to take only one. One’s never enough. You knew they don’t make OTC pills with you in mind, because if it’s going to be a good night, you have to close your eyes and fall asleep right away. If you don’t, you’re in trouble.

So now you’re back to the old remedy, and it helps and you are careful not to overdo it. That’s what got your father. And the old remedy would go away if you could just fall asleep. It’s not much, you think

despairingly as you sigh and pour the chardonnay. Sleep. It's not much to ask.

Most of the time, you don't dream but dreams aren't your worry. It's what you see just before you go to bed. It's what you call the "wide awake haunts." In the bathroom, washing your face, you sometimes look up quickly and send pellets of water flying everywhere—the mirror, the shower curtain, the roll of toilet paper. The tiny bathroom becomes another bathroom that doesn't belong to you, the pale green paint peeling in thick curls from the walls like someone attacked it ferociously with a giant cheese slicer. The toilet is suddenly empty of water, the tank on the back of the john cracked. You often think you hear music, Vivaldi or Bach, but that wasn't part of this other bathroom. It's just one more intrusion that doesn't belong in the reality of your own home. That was the music your father listened to when he was in his darkroom, the room you were allowed in only if you had been a very very *very* good girl that day.

When the bathroom is your own again, you'll go into your bedroom, but even that changes for a moment, and a great many tubs have replaced your bed. When they fade away, you slink beneath the cool sheets and wrap the blankets around you tightly and wait, because what's coming through that open door, around that corner, is no surprise by now, but even then you know it's not real because that wasn't part of the day in Wilkes-Barre. The hospital was empty, had been empty for more than ten years. It did not happen because it could not have happened.

Still.

It lasts for only an instant. He comes around the corner swiftly, bent over and running on all fours, like a wild animal. He's naked and breathing hard. But it's that first moment, when you're lying in bed thinking you can hear him running down the carpeted hallway, that's the worst. It's when you can't catch your breath, when you stare at the bedroom doorway and wait for him to round the hamper and hit the hardwood floors. Then he's there, coming at you, and just before he reaches your face, he vanishes. Some nights you wish he wouldn't go so quickly, because maybe he has something to say. But then, what would he say? If he's where your father took you that Saturday afternoon in November, he wouldn't say much. Gibberish. Maybe drool in your face. Throw his own feces at you. Because it never happened, you don't know.

Every night you tell yourself: *This is not real. This is not really happening.*

But even so, even though your imagination has complete control, he never manages to stay. He makes it down the hall, turns into your bedroom, comes for you, vanishes. And then you sigh, because it's time. You can't sleep now. You get out of bed and go to the kitchen. Take a wine glass down. Fill it with chardonnay. Or maybe you take the bottle with you into the dining room. You light a candle, fumble around on the table for the pack of cigarettes. You turn on NPR as long as it's classical. If not you settle for a CD. You sit there in the darkness with the flickering light of the candle, and you smoke. And you drink.

And in the morning, if the bottle's empty, you bury it in the garbage can beneath the empty soup cans and spoiled leftovers, because it can't be real, either.

IT WAS NOVEMBER, JUST BEFORE Thanksgiving when the clouds were hanging low looking like snow, but Pennsylvania winters are always early or late, and that year, 1977, winter was holding back. Not a flurry from October to November; the first snowfall wouldn't be until just before Christmas. But oh, the cold. The clouds hanging low and dark. The whispers: *This year's gonna be a bad one.* And it was, but not until January when your grandmother had to bring out the cinder pail after the New Year's festivities so your father's Maverick could manage to grind away from the curb. School was closed for a week because of a blizzard the night before it was to begin again, and then just as the plows got the town out another one hit. Your neighbor's father turned the hose on in his backyard and you ice skated for days with his daughter. You came home shivering and your mother made real hot chocolate with Hershey's syrup, not powder packets. February was brutal and March was in like a lion and out like a lion that year. And then the spring arriving in mid-April when everyone forgot until the next year, when winter was early but not nearly so bad. *It won't be like last year,* everyone said, and it wasn't.

The ice skating was good and so was your mother's hot chocolate, but it wasn't enough. As you skated with Kim, the two of you laughing and trying not to get your blades caught in the divots, breath hanging thick in the cold air so that it was more like milk than fog, you knew you were running. You knew even then it would never be the same. You didn't want to be a very very good girl anymore. You didn't want to go to the darkroom anymore. You didn't want to see the pictures he'd taken that day. The fumes from the darkroom smelled like vomit now. You wanted to gag. You were never your mother's girl and you didn't want to be daddy's girl anymore. So you laughed and skated and drank your mother's sweet hot chocolate, the goodness of it filling your stomach like secret love.

And you knew you belonged to no one.

HE WANTED THE BEGGING TO STOP, that's what you tell yourself now, and it's probably true. *Where are you going Daddy?* you'd ask. *Can I go? Please? I promise I'll be quiet. Please, Daddy. Please take me with you.* And he'd laugh and whisk you up in his arms, pull you close, your cheek brushing his coarse whiskers, the smell of Old Spice and vanilla tobacco deep within him.

Finally there was that day in November with Thanksgiving just four days away and the turkey in the refrigerator beginning its slow thaw. You didn't even ask that morning. It was breakfast, and he always loved to make breakfast. Danny was a slow riser and always missed it, but not you. He made eggs that morning as always, sunny-side up because you preferred them to scrambled or poached. Two eggs, bacon, and light toast with plenty of butter. A glass of orange juice because he believed it helped with digestion. He knew you hated it but you drank it. Anything to please him. When you were through with the eggs and toast and munching on a last piece of bacon, he'd winked at you. He was just starting on his own eggs and your mother had just wandered down from the bedroom. *Go get dressed*, he'd said, and your mother, eyes bleary and hand unsteady with the coffee pot, had said, *Do you think it's a good idea?*

Of course. She always wants to go.

But it's where you're going that bothers me.

She's a good kid. She'll be fine. Maybe I'll even show her how to use the camera.

Fat chance, you heard her say, even though you were already halfway up the stairs. *Dress warm!* your father shouted. *Make sure you put on a turtleneck and a heavy sweater.*

He hated the way people drove on the new bypass, so he took the old back roads out of Tunkhannock, and for that you were grateful. You liked autumn best, the way the sun seemed to light up the yellow and red leaves. Every year, as you walked to school, you'd watch the mountains carefully, and when you spotted the first tree to turn, you'd come home and announce it. He always laughed, but one year he called you the Harbinger of Death, and you frowned at him, which meant he had to explain: fall meant the leaves were dying. *But they're so pretty when they're different colors*, you'd said. *And they always come back green in the spring.* He'd smiled and said you had an artist's eye, that sooner or later you'd be the one picking up the camera.

Most of the leaves that day were already on the ground, and there wasn't much sun, but you still liked the way the landscape looked: the trees bare and stark, the sun breaking through the clouds in brief intervals, the iced edges of the creek that ran parallel to Route 6. You had the camera case on your lap, arms wrapped around it protectively. Every now and then you'd look over at your father, and he'd see your smile and smile back.

Where are we going? you'd asked, and he replied, *You'll see. You'll see.*

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO, the one that's now in the MOMA in New York City, was unaware that her picture was even being taken. It's black-and-white, as most of your father's pictures are, and the girl is smiling with joy as a bird flies out of her mittened hands. She sees nothing but flight, freedom, the joy of flight and freedom, and the camera captured that. Not the second before or after, but the second in between, and that was what made all the difference.

Your father took lots of pictures of you, and a good many of them appear in his photographic collections that line the shelves of bookstores and even university libraries, but either you posed for those pictures or were aware that he was lurking about and snapping away. But not this one.

And this is the one that made you famous.

He was talking to two security guards who would accompany both of you, initially, for safety reasons. You were bored standing outside listening to adults babble away and wandered along a sidewalk. There, on the ground, a young bird was trying to hop away from you, but seemed to have trouble getting itself into the air. Carefully, so it did not get away, you walked up to it slowly and bent down, gently cupped it in your mittened hands. You did not see your father break away from the men and follow. The bird chirped weakly in your hands, so you cooed at it. You walked to a nearby bush, smiling at the bird to assure it you meant no harm, and then released it and watched as it fluttered furiously to safety. But it was at the moment of release that you heard a snap and the flicker of a shutter.

The caption beneath the photo in the MOMA: *Rescue Effort. Wilkes-Barre Memorial State Hospital. 1977.*

DOWNTOWN WILKES-BARRE WAS BUSY, even though it was before noon, with people buying last-minute things at the grocery stores for Thanksgiving or getting a head start on their Christmas shopping. Traffic was bottlenecked on certain streets, but you'd still begged your father to drive down Main Street so you could see the giant stone eagles atop the Market Street Bridge. It wasn't a problem; he had to go in that direction anyway. After a few blocks, he turned and headed up a long driveway lined with trees. You passed a sign that read *State Hospital*, and beneath it, another sign: *Closed*. The car came to a stop and you looked and saw a man unlocking a huge gate. The man waved your father through.

But Dad, you'd said. You know I hate hospitals.

Three years before you'd done time at the General Hospital because of bacterial pneumonia, and there was nothing more you wanted than out of that place. All night long there was crying on the children's ward, and while you'd refused to cry, you also refused to be nice. For one thing, you didn't want the damned spaghetti they kept trying to feed you because it was stringy and watery, not at all like your mother's, and when the nurses wouldn't bring you something else, you pitched the green plastic bowl clear across the room. It had worked. The doctors didn't keep you any longer than necessary.

Your father had explained that this, the State Hospital, was a different kind of place. For one thing, it had been closed for nearly fifteen years, so there were no patients. Or for that matter, no nurses, no doctors. Your father hesitated for a minute or two before adding it had been a mental hospital.

You mean for crazy people? you'd asked. You were interested now.

Sort of, he'd said, uncomfortable. *Mainly people who had lots of problems.*

Why's it closed?

There wasn't enough money to keep it running, he said.

Where'd the people go?

IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME when you go home, and you don't go home often. When you do, it's Bill you spend your time with, even though the two of you were done with each other shortly after high school graduation. He's divorced now and has a daughter in the first

grade, but he doesn't see her as often as he'd like. He's always happy to see you, though.

You flirt with each other in a harmless way, although sometimes you wonder what would happen if you pushed it just a little more. Once, after a few shots of Wild Turkey, and this was on top of his beer and your scotch, the two of you kissed madly in the parking lot of the Corner Pub. His hands up under your sweater, his breath hot in your ear. And all that night he'd been smiling and saying, *You haven't changed, you haven't changed at all. It's amazing.* First you reminded him that you were both thirty-four, and later, after all the kissing, you'd told him that he had to take you home now, just like a schoolgirl would.

The last time home you ran into some of the old gang, and they, too, said, *You haven't changed a bit.* It bothered you, and then you got to thinking about the pants and dresses in your own home, how they're either the same size you wore in high school or a size or two smaller. Your hair has changed, thank God. It's shorter and straight. Those glasses that once branded you as a smart girl are gone now, too.

Things do change.

But on the first night back in your own house, you went into the bathroom and stared at you face in the mirror. You stared and stared. You realized the change hasn't been all that significant, like you're stuck in time.

You stared until you became transparent.

AT LEAST AT THE GENERAL HOSPITAL, riddled with pneumonia, there had been real people. You didn't like the doctors because they'd prodded you, the nurses because they all seemed fat and old and indifferent, and the other children because they were whiny and sniveley. The girl in the bed next to you was about your age and a chronic bed-wetter. *Unbelievable*, you'd thought, trying to hang on to nine-year-old dignity.

But the State Hospital had been stripped of its dignity. The first thing you saw was the empty admittance desk, and you'd reached up involuntarily for your father's hand, but he already had both hands on the camera; there wasn't room for you, too.

I don't know if I can keep my eye on her every second, you'd heard your father say. *Any trouble she can get into?*

Not really, one of the security officers said. *There are six floors, and the doors have been opened for you except for the sixth. There's a large attic above it, and the roof hasn't been looked after, so things on the sixth floor are pretty bad. There are places where it's caving in to the fifth. We haven't shut the fifth off, but the sixth's a no-go. Sorry.*

So if she takes off on her own? your father said.

Not too much to worry about.

How's that, puss-puss? your father had said, addressing you directly for the first time since passing the admittance desk, since he'd snapped the camera. *Want to run free and explore?*

Already you were angry; you'd felt deceived. Your father had been everywhere: Paris, France, Rome, Italy, China. Sometimes your mother went with him, and you and Danny stayed with your grandmother. There were always presents when they got back, or if he got back having gone on an excursion alone. Danny would get a present or two, but even if you only got one present, the present outshone what Danny got. Your father always took more care with you. When he went to China, he brought back yens for Danny's coin collections, but you'd gotten a beautiful silk kimono. It was a stupid gift, you'd realized later, years later, a gift you would outgrow within months, yet with the proper care it was something you could eventually give your own daughter one day if moths didn't get it first. You didn't wear it often because your mother hadn't liked it; it made you look too old, she'd said, and she was right. Every time you stood in front of the full-length mirror attached to the back of your bedroom door, you saw a ghost, an image of the woman you would one day be. And you didn't like her.

But of all the places he'd been, why did the first place he decided to take you have to be a hospital? That was what you would spend the rest of your life wondering. He could have taken you many places, and they didn't have to be far away places, exotic places. Why a hospital that had been closed for fifteen years? He knew, he just *knew* you hated them.

You'd looked at him and smiled, though.

I'll be fine, Daddy.

That was what you said, and he'd smiled back at you and started down a long, dark hallway lit only by patches of sunlight. You watched him go, still loving him as his back drifted farther and farther away from

you, and while something inside of you said you'd never be fine again, somehow that was all right.

Be careful, honey, one of the security guards said. If you see anything on the floor that looks dangerous, don't pick it up.

I won't, you'd said, and you were glad you didn't have a gun.

THERE HAVE BEEN BAD TIMES, but they're mostly a thing of the past now. You've gotten a handle on things. For a while, sometimes you'd know the man sleeping beside you and sometimes you wouldn't. You'd go to this bar down the street from your house during the lonely times. For a while, there was a man who sat at the far end of the bar and watched you. He was perhaps sixty, maybe a little more. You closed the bar every night and were amazed to find, in the morning, that you'd parked the car straight against the curb in front of your house, as though you'd just gone out for some groceries and had come right back.

But it wasn't groceries you'd gone for. You'd left the house at seven in the evening and had come back at two, full of white wine, usually chardonnay, and a few shots of scotch. Mornings at work were hell, especially if your editor had an interview lined up. If it was somebody important, you made sure to call and reschedule, if that was possible. If not, you took a tape recorder for a less haunting day when you could play it back and begin a decent story. Wednesdays and Fridays were non-headache days, thinking-clearly days.

The old man at the end of the bar had been working on you for a while. He'd be there at seven and watch you carefully as you took your time working your way through those first two glasses of wine, then begin his casual slide closer toward your stool. After a while, your money on the bar table would disappear and you'd let it, let him pick up your drinks in exchange for talking to you.

His wife had died of cancer four years ago, you'd learned, and he was lonely. They'd had one son who died of a drug overdose in the early eighties, and that had nearly killed her. She was just starting to come around when the tumor was found in her breast, and she'd spent the next several years fighting. She was a lovely woman. He'd shown you a picture one night, a picture of Elsie Furry at a USAO dance in 1944, before he married her, and you'd commented that she looked a great deal like Joan Crawford. This pleased Mr. Hiram O'Neil, who had always thought that his wife could have taken Hollywood by storm. On this night you told him the story of Peg Entwistle, the

Hollywoodland sign girl who, depressed and saddened one evening about her stagnant career, climbed to the top of the H and jumped to her death in the summer of 1932.

Really? Mr. O'Neil had said.

Oh, yes, you'd slurred with determination. I wouldn't make a thing like that up.

A few weeks later you'd woken up with Mr. O'Neil sleeping soundly beside you in the wee hours of the morning, panicked, and ended up driving through Philadelphia clad only in a bra and panties. You'd belted into morning rush hour traffic and called your boss from your cellphone, claiming a migraine deterrent until midday. When you returned to your townhouse at around eleven he was gone, and you'd scrambled up the stairs to the second floor, stripping away your bra and panties as you went, and in the shower washed away the sex you didn't remember, vowed not to go back to *that* bar anymore. And you haven't.

FOR A WHILE YOU HEARD ECHOES. Voices ricocheting down corridors, the snap and flicker of your father's camera, the clatter of something knocked over. At first the sounds comforted you, but then, the more distant the sounds grew as you drifted from your father's coterie and they from you, you'd wanted the sounds to stop. You couldn't identify them as belonging to anyone anymore, and if that was the case, the sounds belonged to ghosts.

At every turn you half expected a nurse to appear and whisk you away to your room, or to tell you there was no reason on earth for a girl like you to be wandering the halls by herself. So you hurried until you had to stop, because of the rat.

You've always hated rats, even the large white ones at the spinning wheel at traveling carnivals, rats that will harm no one. *C'mon, let's play this game*, your father always said, and just when you'd trusted him enough to play, there would be a large white rat running its way to safety on the spinning wheel, which had finally slowed to the point where it could find its way into a safe hole. The older you'd gotten, the wiser you had become, wise enough to stand far enough away from him, a plume of cotton candy in one hand and a skee-ball toy in the other. *Is it the rat game?* you'd ask, aloof. Eventually something on your face must have told your father it was no use to play. *Yes, puss-puss, it is*, he would admit. *I do not like rats*, you'd say, and take a bite of the

plume as elegantly as a debutante. *You know I do not like rats. Take me to the Ferris wheel, you'd say, and he would.*

But the rat at the hospital was not a nice, neat, tamed white rat. This had been a rat rat. A brown, plump, dirty rat squeaking along the corridor and ducking away from you as quickly as you'd jumped from it, its fat, obscene tail trailing behind it. That is what you've always hated the most about rats: their tails. Mice are cute, rats obscene. And it's all because of their tails, those fat, bare, obscene tails, revealing bare ribbed flesh as though there was something special about it. You'd stayed where you were, watched it scurry and squeak its way into an empty room. And because there was no getting out, you'd gone into the room. There was, after all, nothing to stop you. The door was partly open, an invitation to visitors, by will, by hook, or by crook. You'd felt like a crook.

Inside: a stripped bed, linoleum floors, windows with bars blocking the view. There were stains on the mattress, stains you quickly registered as urine stains, stains that brought back the hospital you'd been in and the girl in the bed next to you, but at least there had been decency and plastic mattress protectors. The rat was forgotten; you'd spent your time staring at the yellow and brown stains on the lumpy mattress, the holes in the linoleum, the bars on the window. And you knew there was no getting out of this. So you kept going. The rest of the afternoon you had run from the sounds of footfalls and voices. At first it was like a game; you'd never felt so free. At first you'd managed to forget where you were. It was like a giant playground, except that people hadn't played here. You'd realized that the minute you ran into a room with a large table and machine in it, the room that was used for electroshock therapy. A few years before, your father had gone to another state hospital, one that was still in use, and he'd taken a picture of a patient attached to such a machine. In the picture, the woman's body was an arch. He'd taken the picture the second the first wave hit her. Your mother had been appalled; her own sister had electroshock therapy. *How could you do such a thing?* she'd asked. *Richard, how could you?*

Your father had not been moved. He was very careful about the lines separating real life from art. *It has nothing to do with her, he'd said. It has nothing to do with us. This is something else. Don't you see?*

You'd stood in that room for a long time, and later, when you darted from the sounds of footfalls and voices, you played the game, but you took care.

A CALL AT WORK THE OTHER DAY: a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Unhallowed Ground* is being issued by Random House. Will you write the introduction? A silly question. Certainly you will. Why not? The daughter of a famous photographer, famous in her own right as a journalist, almost as well-known as her father but not quite, and certainly the one out of the two of them who will be more quickly forgotten.

You agree to write the introduction and you are demure and gracious to the young woman—it certainly sounds like a young woman—on the other end of the line, but wonder why, as chief executor of your father’s estate, this has not been brought to your attention beforehand. Or has it? You make a mental note to contact the lawyers who handle such details so you don’t have to. That’s why, after all, the estate pays them. Have they mentioned it to you? Have you opened all your mail? Have you forgotten to return a phone call or two? Such things happen.

An introduction. This hasn’t happened before, but you suspect that the future holds more of this. No new editions of your father’s work have appeared, so this is a harbinger. You will be asked to comment on his work, to analyze it, sing its praises, offer kudos.

You hang up the phone and smile. Today isn’t a clear-thinking day, but your head is suddenly remarkably free of throbbing. The desired introduction makes you smile: *My father could be one hell of a son-of-a-bitch for the price of fame.*

NO ONE SAID ANYTHING about the rabbit you’d carried out. Perhaps the two security officers thought it was a bit odd for a twelve-year-old girl to be hugging a stuffed animal so closely to her chest, but if they did, they didn’t say anything. You’d seen them glance at the toy, then look away and continue speaking to your father.

On the way home, your father had subjected you to the country music station. Sometimes, even now, you’ll turn to the a.m. classic country music station and listen to the songs. You don’t remember many of the artists, just the songs. If traffic is bottlenecked on the Schuylkill Expressway on a Friday afternoon and you’re trapped and it’s already five-thirty, you’ll click over to a.m. and listen to the “Inspirational Song of the Day.” Very often these days it’s Lee Greenwood, but sometimes it’s Kitty Wells or Ernie Tubbs. One day you’d cracked yourself up thinking, *Wouldn’t it be nice if they played Loretta Lynn’s “I’ve Got the Pill?”* and you laughed so hard you nearly rear-ended the car in front of you. A Lexus SUV.

Your father was a Jethro Tull and Led Zeppelin man at heart, liked the Mamas and the Papas, the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, the Beatles. You'd loved them, too, just not so much the country music stuff, and you were never sure why he listened to country music every now and then, but luckily he only ever listened to the stuff after a good shooting session, or after he and your mother'd had too much scotch.

You'd seen them drink, and you'd seen them drunk, but never fall-down stupid. Of course, you'd heard the stories—your mother trying to make a very important point and then dissolving into laughter, her body sliding down the wall that was holding her up. Usually you and Danny spent the night at your grandmother's house when they were planning to hoot it up which, as your father's fame increased, was surprisingly often, nearly every weekend. Sometimes, though, your father would talk to your mother about something serious, and the scotch would come out. *Richard*, she would say. *Not around the children*. But after she'd had a few herself, it was never a problem. Whatever they'd had to discuss would be discussed quickly, but the scotch would stay out. *Oh*, your mother would say, and she would smile. *Oh. Oh, but this does taste good. Do we have enough for you and me?* she would ask, demurely, almost shyly, and if there wasn't, your father would go out and get more. Those were good nights. They were Friday nights or Saturday nights or sometimes Friday and Saturday nights, and you and Danny could stay up and watch anything you wanted, even Creature Double Feature, and somewhere around midnight, your father would ask your mother to dance, but first he had to light candles and turn out all the lights. All four of you would laugh, like there was some secret joke that was shared by all, and while you never asked Danny why he laughed, you knew you laughed because you'd liked your mother's teeth: white, straight, perfect, joyously beautiful. Your father would stagger back into the living room laughing, then take your mother by the hand, and the three of you would sing, "I Fall to Pieces" while they danced in wide, uncertain circles throughout the room. Eventually, your father would stop singing, and because Danny didn't know all the words, he would stop and simply bounced up and down on the couch. You'd be the only one left singing, and you sang all the words you knew and hummed when you got lost or didn't remember what came next. When you realized neither of them noticed you and Danny anymore, it was time for bed, so you would take him by the hand and lead him past your parents to the staircase. You both took your time going up those stairs, and you'd liked to pretend that you were in that scene from *The Sound of Music*, where the von Trapp children perform at the ball before going to bed, except in your case you and Danny weren't the performers, and there was no ballroom. In the morning

everyone would sleep late and your mother and father would drink lots of coffee and have nothing else. Your father wouldn't make his famous scrambled eggs and bacon, but you and Danny could have all the Pop-Tarts you wanted.

On the ride home from the hospital your father had barely noticed the bunny, and he sang along with the country music that was blaring and smiled at you every now and then, just to make sure, you'd thought, that you were happy. You'd pretended you were. When you'd reached Tunkhannock, you asked him to stop at Shadowbrook for ice cream, and he did. You had three scoops of raspberry ice cream in a waffle cone and he had soft vanilla ice cream in a sugar cone.

This one's on me, he'd said after he paid the bill. You get the tab next time.

At home, your mother had met the two of you at the front door. She looked anxious.

How was it? she'd asked.

Fine, you said. Can I have a tuna sandwich and eat it in my room?

Of course you can, she said.

But you just had ice cream, your father said.

I want a tuna sandwich.

You know how they eat at this age, your mother had said.

Tuna on top of ice cream? She's twelve, not pregnant.

Richard! your mother had said, laughing, but she went and made the tuna and gave you the sandwich, on toast, just as you liked it best, and you'd gone upstairs. As you made your way toward your bedroom, you'd heard your father set two glasses, not just one, on the living room table.

How bad was it? your mother had asked.

She was fine. She's a trouper. I wanted to see what she was made of, if she had an interest.

But why? Why there?

That was the last question you'd heard your mother ask; that was the last question she would ever ask about that day. Upstairs, in your room, the door shut, you ate the tuna sandwich as though it was your last meal on earth. Then you emptied your pockets.

Out they came, like treasures: the rabbit, the shamrock, the med sheet, the piece of linoleum, the shoelace, the tub stopper, the pen. After you'd eaten the sandwich and licked the crumbs, you went to work. Everything had to have its place. You were determined to give everything its own meaning, its own life. You took all of the stuffed animals off your bed, even your favorite stuffed panda bear from the San Francisco Zoo. You named the stuffed rabbit Puffer because that seemed right, and laid it tenderly against your pillow. That was something that needed the most love, right away; the rest you'd emptied into the top drawer of your dresser and waited for them to find their place.

You wore the shamrock to school every St. Patrick's Day and made sure that was the only green item you wore so it would stand out; the piece of linoleum you used as a bookmark even though it created a slight hump in the books you read. You'd saved it for the books that were your favorites: *Jane Eyre*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Roots*, *The World According to Garp*. Later, you could tell which books had been your favorites at one time because of the myriad humps throughout the pages. *What did I love about that one?* you'd ask yourself as you grew older, and you would re-read the books, using a paper marker instead.

Or the shoelace. That's the only item you still use, as a bookmark. The med sheet you'd used to place scented soaps on in your dresser so the soap wouldn't mark the wood. And you'd simply used the pen until it ran out of ink, and when it did, you'd gone downstairs and gotten a brown paper bag, dropped the pen in it, wrapped the bag up, and placed it tenderly in the far recesses of your bedroom closet. At night you'd hold the rabbit close to your chest, breathing in its slightly mildewy odor, and you'd know that you were comforting it, but it could never comfort you.

Years later, you'd dreamed of how you would give these things up. On the night before your father's funeral, you'd taken the brown paper bag out of your closet and piled everything, except the rabbit, of course, into the bag and had gone downstairs. The escape from the house had been easy — people were much too busy talking and eating to even notice you, although Dan had looked up suspiciously from where he was sitting in the corner of the living room. You drove to the funeral home and sat parked outside for a very long time. The bag was on the

passenger seat. The lights were still on inside the home. All you wanted to do was take the bag and place it inside your father's casket.

And you couldn't do it, just like you couldn't tell your father, as he slowly took his time dying, that the day at the empty asylum had haunted you for years, continued to haunt you. Of all the places he'd been, of all the things he'd seen, he took you to a place you feared.

But the cares of the dying aren't the cares of the living, and the dead, you know, have no cares at all. You'd driven back home with the bag, and a few days later took it to the incinerator, nothing more than a metal trash can, at the far end of the yard, and as you closed your eyes, you could already see the plumes of gray smoke. There was something sacred about the image, something terribly religious, and you remembered watching TV with your mother one afternoon in 1978. You couldn't remember what the program was, but you did remember hearing, "We interrupt this broadcast," and your mother's response: *This can't be good.* The station cut to Vatican City, where the College of Cardinals had just elected Pope John Paul II. A plume of white smoke, similar to the one you'd envisioned as you stood at the incinerator, was billowing lightly out of a chimney and bells were ringing.

You'd walked away from the incinerator and went back in the house, back to your childhood bedroom, where you put the bag back in the closet and then sat on the bed. Then you spent the afternoon wondering who would find it one of these days, and what would be made of it. You decided it didn't matter. People are always making up their own narratives. *That's the fun of life*, you'd thought. *That's the horror of it, too.*

TONIGHT, YOU HAVE AN INTRODUCTION TO WRITE. To prepare, you have pulled all of your father's collected works from your bookshelves, and the books are strewn across the living room floor. The chardonnay has been chilling in the refrigerator all afternoon, and now that the night has set in, you have poured yourself a glass, but you intend to pace yourself. Small sips only, you promise.

You want to take it all in. You thumb your way carefully through *Solstice in Bethlehem*, hurry through *Summer in the Hamptons* because, for you, there was never anything fascinating about the rich or how they spent their summers, and take your time with your favorite, *Black Lung*, because the pictures of what remained of the mines in northeastern Pennsylvania have always fascinated you, especially the pictures of Centralia, a town that has been slowly smoldering away since 1961 because of the mine fires beneath the town. *What was it like?* you'd once

asked him. He had paused, then shook his head. *If there is such a thing as hell*, he said, *I'm convinced that's what it looks like.*

As you slowly sip your wine, you at last realize why people so love his work. Each picture is a story in itself, in part accident, in part because of your father's keen eye. He'd hated color photography: It adds too much, he always said, his upper lip curling slightly in disgust. We live in black-and-white. The real stuff, the stuff we can define — *that's* color. But, he would say, when we put it all together, we don't know what the fuck we're doing, or who we are. You can put all the red and pink you want to into Valentine's Day, but why? What the hell is it? We don't know, puss-puss. Everything is arbitrary. When people see themselves in black-and-white, they say, *Oh*, like they've never seen themselves before. That's what I want.

And that's what you got, Pop, you say out loud, and realize that your glass is almost empty.

You get another glass, *Careful, careful*, you tell yourself, and then it's time to take *Unhallowed Ground* to the dining room table. You do. The paper is there, because you're going to write this out in longhand first, as well as your cigarettes, a full pack for this job. You touch the cover carefully, caress it, stare at the cover with the photo of The Wilkes-Barre State Hospital on the cover. He'd gone back to take that picture separately, you remember, sometime after New Year's when there was plenty of snow on the ground, and with the snow-covered ground, bare trees, and closed gate, the hospital looks even more foreboding than it did on the day when you went there with him.

But you don't open the book. Instead, you set the wine glass down and go to your bedroom. In the upper drawer of your dresser, beneath all your carefully folded shirts, is a yellowing envelope. Inside the envelope is a Polaroid shot of you and your father. At the bottom of the photo is your mother's neat print in red felt pen: Rachel and Richard, Christmas Day 1980.

It was Danny who took the photo with his brand-new Polaroid camera. Your father was still slightly bristling from your recent announcement that you were going to be a journalist, not a photographer. Trying to lure Danny, he knew, was futile; the boy had no eye whatsoever. He had bought you a 35mm for your eighth birthday. Danny, however, was a Polaroid boy through and through, and your father wore that knowledge like a black armband.

You were sitting next to your father at the kitchen table that evening,

and he was telling you a story. You try to remember the story, but it doesn't come. What you do remember is that your father was drinking scotch and, on this very special occasion, had allowed you to have a glass of wine. But after that glass was finished he'd poured you another. It wasn't very good wine, Pink Catawba, and to this day you hate the stuff and drink it only if you have to. He was sitting there telling a story and you recall listening to him very carefully, and then Danny had come in with the camera.

Your father had let out a roar of glee, plopped his glass down on the table, and hoisted you out of your chair and plunked you on his lap. The two of you were laughing, and then your mother came into the kitchen and was laughing, too. Your father hugged you closely to his chest and you threw your arms around his neck so that your faces were close together. Then there was a flash that blinded everyone, and you all stood around the table waiting for the picture to instantly develop. This is your favorite photograph.

Instantly developed, instant color, instant happiness. None of it is real, of course, but sometimes, on those rare occasions when you take the photo out of your drawer, you pretend it is because you can, and sometimes you pretend that the photograph is your entire life: nothing before it, nothing after it.

You take the photo with you to the dining room table. Tonight it will remain out. Tonight you will not have another glass of wine nor, you tell yourself, will you have one tomorrow or the next day. Tonight, if you hear the sound of the man scrambling his way into your bedroom, you will sit up and wait, because you are sure that he has a name and a purpose, and you are sure he will speak. Tonight, you will write that introduction and you will write everything down just as you remember it because your father was the photographer and you are the one with the gift for words. Tonight is a night for exorcisms on hallowed ground.

You are telling yourself this even as you make your way into the kitchen to refill your glass, and when you return to the table, you are surprised to find that the paper is blank, that you haven't even begun.